

THE BOOK OF FREEDOMS

ANNE McCAFFREY



The unthinkable has happened—Earth has been conquered, and humanity enslaved on alien worlds. The question is, can the captives survive long enough to fight back?

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Includes *Freedom's Landing*, *Freedom's Choice*
and *Freedom's Challenge*

The Catteni conquerors swooped down on an unsuspecting Earth as they had on many another world. Striking fifty key cities around the globe, they carried off countless human slaves to be sent to the next planet slated for colonization—expendable trailblazers in the expansion of their empire.

Kris Bjornsen was one of a number of deportees from other worlds who were dumped on a nameless planet with limited supplies and no information about how to survive in an alien environment. She and her fellow "colonists" all might have perished that first day, had it not been for Zainal, a renegade Catteni exiled by his own people. With Zainal's help, the colonists learned to thrive on the world they named Botany.

But they soon discovered they weren't its first inhabitants. The world was occupied by machines left behind by Botany's true

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owners—machines that could be converted to human needs. But who were the alien “Farmers” and would they aid the colonists in their quest for freedom? Zainal was impatient to find out. He knew the Catteni were merely the tools of the Eosi, an even more powerful species that had achieved virtual immortality by taking over the minds and bodies of its subject races. It was crucial that the Farmers help the colonists win against the Catteni conquerors, but afterwards, would the Botanists be prepared to help liberate the people of Earth and of Catten as well?

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The Book of Freedoms

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The Book of Freedoms

Freedom's Landing
Freedom's Choice
Freedom's Challenge

ANNE McCAFFREY



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The Book of Freedoms

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*Freedom's
Landing*

*This book is dedicated to the memory
of a special fan/friend,
Judy Voros.
Hope heaven has chocolate (but it must!).*

Chapter One

KRISTIN BJORNSEN WONDERED IF SUMMER ON THE PLANET BAREVI could possibly be the *only* season. There had been remarkably little variation in temperature in the nine months since she'd arrived there. She'd been four months in what appeared to be the single, sprawling city of the planet during her enslavement and now had racked up five months of comparative freedom—albeit a parlous hand-to-mouth survival—in this jungle, after her escape from the city in the flutter she'd stolen.

Her sleeveless one-piece tunic was made of an indestructible material, but it wouldn't suit cold weather. The scooped neckline was indecently low and the skirt ended midway down her long thighs. It was closely modeled, in fact, after the miniskirted sheath she'd been wearing to class that spring morning when the Catteni ships had descended on Denver, one of fifty cities across the world that had been used as object lessons by the conquerors. One moment she was on her way to the college campus; the next, she was one of thousands of astonished and terrified Denverites being driven by forcewhips up the ramp of a spaceship that made the *Queen Elizabeth* look like a tub toy. Once past the black maw of the ship, Kris, with all the others, swiftly succumbed to the odorless gas. When she and her fellow prisoners had awakened, they were in the slave compounds of Barevi, waiting to be sold.

Kris aimed the avocado-sized pit of the gorupear she had just eaten at the central stalk of a nearby thicket of the purple-branched thorn-bushes. The bush instantly rained tiny darts in all directions. Kris laughed. She had bet it would take less than five minutes for the young bush to rearm itself. And it had. The larger ones took longer to position new missiles. She'd had reason to find out.

Absently she reached above her head for another gorupear. Nothing from good old Terra rivaled them for taste. She bit appreciatively into the firm reddish flesh of the fruit, and its succulent juices dribbled down her chin onto her tanned breasts. Tugging at the strap of her slip-tight tunic, she brushed the juice away. The outfit was great for tanning, but when winter comes? And should she concentrate on gathering nuts and drying gorupears on the rocks by the river for the cold season? She wrinkled her nose at the half-eaten pear. They were mighty tasty but a steady diet of them left her hungering for other basic dietary requirements. By watching the creatures of the jungle, she'd been able to guess what might be edible for her. Remembering her survival course gave her the clue to superficial testing on her skin. She'd had two violent reactions to stuff the ground animals seemed to devour in quantity but the avians had guided her to other comestibles. Her term in the food preparation unit of her "master" had given her other commodities to look for—though few of those grew wild in this jungle. Still, there were little yellow-scaled fish from the river that had provided her with both protein and exercise.

A low-pitched buzz attracted her attention. She got to her feet, balanced carefully on the high limb of the tree. Parting the branches, she peered up at the cloudless sky. Two of the umpteen moons that circled Barevi were visible in the west. Below them, dots that gave off sparkles of reflected sunlight were swooping and diving.

The boys have called another hunt, she mused to herself and, still smiling, leaned against the tree trunk to take advantage of her grandstand seat. The jungle had quite a few really big, really savage creatures which she had managed to avoid, making like a jungle heroine and taking to the trees and vines. By dint of hard work and sweat, she had used the useful tools from the kit on the flutter to tie vines to trees that led to and from her favorite food-browsing spots and to the river. Her escape routes were all aerial.

Before she had taken absence without leave from her "situation," Kris had done her homework on more than what was edible on Barevi. She had picked up a good bit of the lingua Barevi, a polyglot language, made up from the words of six or seven of the languages spoken by the slaves and used by the "masters" to convey orders to their minions. She had gleaned some information about those who had invaded Earth, the Catteni. They were not, for one thing, indigenous to this world but came from a much heavier planet nearer galactic center. They were one of the mercenary-explorer races employed by a vast federation. They had only recently colonized Barevi, using it as a clearinghouse for spoils acquired looting unsuspecting non-federation planets, and a rest-and-

relaxation center for their great ships' crews. After years of the free fall of space and lighter-gravity planets, Catteni found it difficult to return to their heavy, depressing home world. During her brief enslavement, Kris had heard the Catteni boast of dying everywhere in the galaxy except Catten. The way they "played," Kris thought to herself, was rough enough to insure that they died young as well as far from Catten.

Huge predators roamed the unspoiled plains and jungles of Barevi, and the Catteni considered it great sport to stand up to a rhinolike monster with only a single spear. That is, Kris remembered with a grim smile, when they weren't brawling among themselves over imagined slurs and insults. Two slaves, friends of hers, had been crushed under the massive bodies of Catteni during a free-for-all.

Since she had come to the valley, she had witnessed half a dozen encounters between the rhinos and the Catteni. Accustomed to a much heavier gravity than Barevi, the Catteni were able to execute incredible maneuvers as they softened their prey for the kill. The poor creatures had less chance than Spanish bulls and, in all the hunts Kris had seen, only one man had been injured and that had been a slight graze.

As the flitters neared, she realized that they were not acting like a hunting party. For one thing, one dot was considerably ahead of the others. And by God, she saw the light flashes of the trailing flitters' forward guns firing at the "leader."

Hunted and hunters were at the foot of her valley now. Suddenly black smoke erupted from the rear of the pursued flitter. It nosed upward. It hovered reluctantly, then dove, slantingly, to strike the tumble of boulders along the river's edge, not far from her hiding place.

Kris gasped as she saw a figure, half-leaping, half-staggering out of the badly smashed flitter. She could scarcely believe that even a Catteni could survive such a crash. Wide-eyed, she watched as he struggled to his feet, then reeled from boulder to boulder, to get away from the smoldering wreck.

With a stunningly brilliant flare, the craft exploded. Fragments whistled into the underbrush as far up the slope as her retreat, and the idiotic thornbushes she had recently triggered sprayed out their poison-tipped little darts.

The smoke of the burning flitter obscured her view now and Kris lost sight of the man. The other flitters had reached the wreck and were hovering over it, like so many angry King-Kongish bees, swooping, diving, trying to penetrate the smoke.

An afternoon breeze swirled the black clouds about and Kris caught glimpses of the man, lurching still further from the crash site. She saw him stumble and fall, after which he made no move to rise. Above, the

bees buzzed angrily, circling the smoke and probably wondering if their prey had gone up in the explosion.

Catteni didn't hunt each other as a rule, she told herself, surprised to find that she was halfway down from her perch. *They fight like Irishmen, sure, but to chase a man so far from the city? What could he have done?*

The crash had been too far away for Kris to distinguish the hunted man's features or build. He might just be an escaped slave, like herself. If not Terran, he might be from one of the half-dozen other subjugated races that lived on Barevi. Someone who had had the guts to steal a flitter didn't deserve to die under Catteni forcewhips.

Kris made her way down the slope, careful to avoid the numerous thorn thickets that dominated these woods. She had once amused herself with the whimsy that the thorn were the gorupears' protectors, for the two plants invariably grew close together.

At the top of the sheer precipice above the falls of the river, she grabbed the vine she had attached there for speedy descent. Once on the riverbank she stuck to the dry flat rocks until she came to the stepping-stones that allowed her to cross the river below the wide pool made by the little falls. Down a gully, across another thornbush-filled clearing, and then she was directly above the spot where she had last seen the man.

Keeping close to the brown rocks so nearly the shade of her own tanned skin, she crossed the remaining distance. She all but tripped over him as the wind puffed black smoke down among the rocks.

"Catteni!" she cried, furious as she bent to examine the unconscious man and recognized the gray and yellow uniform despite its tattered and black-smearred condition.

With a disdainful foot under his shoulder, she tried to turn him over. And couldn't. The man might as well have been a boulder. She knelt and yanked his head around by the thick slate-gray hair which, in a Catteni, did not indicate age: they all had the same color hair. Maybe he was dead?

No such luck. He was breathing. A bruise mark on his temple showed one reason for his unconscious state. For a Catteni, he was almost good-looking. Most of them tended to have brutish, coarse features but this one had a straight, almost patrician nose, even if there was a lot more of it than an elephant would want to claim, and he had a wide well-shaped mouth. The Catteni to whom she had been sold had had thick, blubbery lips and she'd known that Catteni were developing a sexual appetite for Terran women.

A sizzling crack jerked her head around in the direction of the

wreck. The damned fools were shooting at the burning craft now. Kris looked down at the unconscious man, wondering what on earth he had done to provoke such vindictive thoroughness. They sure wanted him good and dead.

The barrage pulverized what was left of the flitter, leaving the fire no fuel. The wind, laden with coarse dust, blew an acrid stench from the wreckage. The man stirred and vainly tried to raise himself, only to sink back to the ground with a groan. Kris saw the flitters circling to land on the plateau below the wreck.

“Going to case the scene of the crime, huh?”

It was completely illogical, Kris told herself, to help a Catteni simply because there were others of his race out to get him. But . . . she backtracked his route, just in case he had left any marks for them to follow. She went as far as she could on the bare rock. Where dirt began, ash had settled in a thick layer, obliterating any tracks he might have made. After all, the Catteni might stumble on her if they did a thorough search, thinking their victim had escaped the crash.

He had got to his feet when she returned to him, dazed, heavy arms hanging by his sides as he tried to get his eyes to focus. She attempted to guide him but it was like trying to direct a mountain to move.

“Come on, Mahomet,” she urged softly. “Just walk like a nice little boy to the river and I’ll duck you in. Cold water should bring you round.”

A sharp distant gabble of voices made her start nervously. God, those Catteni had got up that rock face in a hurry. She’d forgotten they could take prodigious leaps on this light-gravity planet.

“They’re coming. Follow me,” she said in *lingua Barevi*.

He groaned again, shaking his head to clear his senses. He turned toward her, his great yellow eyes still dazed with shock. She would never get used to such butter-colored pupils with black irises.

“This way! Quickly!” She urgently tugged at him. If he didn’t shake his tree-stump legs, she was going to leave him. Good Samaritans on *Barevi* had better not get caught by Catteni.

She pulled at his arm and he seemed to make a decision. He lurched forward, one great hand grasping her shoulder in a viselike grip. They reached the riverbank, still ahead of the searchers. But Kris groaned as she realized that the barely conscious man would never be able to navigate the stepping-stones.

The shouts behind them indicated that the others were fanning out to search the rocks. Urgently she grabbed several fingers of his big hand, leading him to the base of the falls.

“If you can’t float, it’s just too damned bad,” she said grimly. She

dropped his hand, stepped back, and leaping forward again, shouldered him into the water.

She dove in, right beside him, and when he continued to sink, she grabbed and caught him by the thick hair. Fortunately the water made even a solid Catteni manageable. Exerting all her strength and skill as a swimmer, she got his head above water and held it up with a chin lock.

By sheer good luck, they had surfaced in the space between the arc of the falls and the cliff, the curtain of water shielding them from view. As the Catteni began to struggle in her grasp, the five hunters leapt spectacularly into view in the clearing by the pool. Her "Mahomet" was instantly alert and, instead of struggling, began to tread water beside her.

The Catteni were arguing with each other now and each seemed to be issuing conflicting orders to the others.

Mahomet released himself from her chinhold, his yellow eyes never leaving the party on the bank. They watched, hands making as little movement as possible although the falls would conceal any ripples their motions made.

One Catteni, after a heated debate, crossed the wide pool in a fantastic—to Kris—standing leap. He and another began to move downstream, carefully examining both banks and casually surmounting upended barge-sized boulders with no effort. The other three went charging back the way they had come, still arguing.

After an endless interval, during which the icy water chilled Kris to the bone, the refugee touched her shoulder and nodded toward the shore. But when she realized that he was going to head back the way they had come, she shook her head emphatically, pointing to the other side.

"Safe! That way," she shouted at him over the noise of the falls. He frowned. "I've a flitter to hide in." She jabbed her finger in the direction of her hidden vehicle. Stunned as she suddenly realized what she had just said, she stared at him. "Oh, God!"

He raised an eyebrow in surprise, and she hoped for one long moment that he had not understood what she had said. But he had, and now his yellow eyes gleamed at her in the gloom with a different sort of interest.

He's like a great lion, Kris thought and almost choked on fear.

"You have aided a Catteni," he said in a deep rumbling voice in the lingua Barevi. "You shall not suffer for that!"

Kris wasn't so sure when she tried to climb out of the river and found herself numb with cold, and strengthless. He, on the other hand,

strode easily out of the water. He looked down at her ineffectual struggles, frowning irritably. Then, with no apparent effort, he curled the long fingers of one hand around her upper arm and simply withdrew her from the water, supporting her until she got her balance.

Shivering, she looked up at him. God, he was big: the tallest Catteni she had yet seen. She had inherited the height of her Swedish father and stood five foot ten in her bare feet. She had topped most of the Catteni she had encountered by several inches, but his eyes tilted downward to regard her. And his shoulders were as broad as the scoop of a roadgrader.

"Where is this flitter?" he demanded curtly.

She pointed, furious that she obeyed him so instantly, and that she couldn't control the chattering of her teeth or the trembling of her body. He reached for her hand, relaxing his grip a little at her involuntary gasp of pain.

Replace "grubby paws" with "high-gravity paws," she told herself in an effort to keep up her spirits as she stepped out in front of him.

"I'll have to lead the way through the thorns," she said. "Or maybe thorns don't bother Catteni hides?" she added pertly.

To her surprise, he grinned at her.

"It is perhaps fortunate for you that they do."

As she turned, she realized that she had never seen a Catteni smile before. She noticed, too, that he was following carefully in her footsteps. It was good to know that he was no more anxious to disturb the thorn-bushes with their vicious little barbs than she was.

They were halfway to the hidden flitter when both heard, off to the right in the valley, the staccato volley of loud Catteni voices.

Mahomet paused, dropping to a half-crouch, instinctively angling his body so that he did not touch the close-growing vegetation. He listened, and although the words were too distorted for Kris to catch, he evidently understood them. A humorless smile touched his lips and his eyes gleamed with a light that frightened Kris.

"They have seen movement here. Hurry!" he said in a low voice.

Kris broke into a jog trot; the twisting path made a faster pace unwise. When they broke into the dell just before the extensive thicket, she paused.

"Where? Are you lost?" he asked.

"Through those bushes. Watch. And when I say move, move!"

He frowned skeptically as she picked up a handful of small stones. With a practiced ease and careful gauge, she threw in a broad cast to left and right, watching and counting the thorn sprays to be sure she had triggered every bush. To be on the safe side, she scooped up one

more handful of pebbles and threw that in a wider arc. No further thorns showered.

“Move!” His reaction time was so much faster than hers that he was halfway across the clearing before she got to the “v.” She dashed in front of him. “We have five minutes to cross before they rearm.”

An expression that was almost respectful crossed his face. Impatiently, she tugged at him and then began to weave her way among the bushes, following her well-memorized private route through this obstacle. When she made the last turn and he saw the flutter, its nose cushioned in the heavy cluster of thorn-thicket limbs, he gave what Kris assumed was a Catteni chuckle.

She waved open the flutter door and regally gestured for him to enter. He walked straight to the instrument panel, grunting as he activated the main switch.

“Half a tank of fuel,” he muttered and cursorily checked the other readings. He glanced up at the transparent top, camouflaged by the intertwining leafy limbs, at the bed she had made herself on the deck, at the utensils she had fashioned from spare parts in the lockers.

“So it was you who stole the commander’s personal car,” he said, looking intently at her.

Kris jerked her chin up.

“At least I landed it in one piece,” she said.

At that he gave one bark of laughter.

“Dropping it in a thicket like this?”

“On purpose!”

“You’re one of the new species?”

“I’m a Terran,” she said with haughty pride, her stance marred by a convulsive shiver.

“Thin-skinned species,” he remarked. He looked at her chest, noticed the slight heave from her recent exertions that made her breasts strain against the all too inadequate covering and slowly started to stroke her shoulder with one finger. His touch was unexpectedly feather-light—and more. “Soft to the touch,” he said absently. “I haven’t tried a Terran yet . . .”

“And you’re not going to start on this one,” she said, jumping as far away from him as she could in the confines of the cabin.

His expression altered from bemusement to annoyance.

“I will if I so choose.”

“I saved your life!”

“Which is why I intend to reward you suitably . . .”

“By raping me?” She felt for and found a heavy metal tool. Not that such a comparative “toothpick” would do a Catteni much damage

but she was determined to try. A Catteni was not her idea of a candidate for the role of lover.

"Raping you?" His surprise was ludicrous.

"Did you think Terran women would faint with joy to be had by the likes of you?" she said, speaking in a low menacing voice and resetting her grip on the tool.

"None have complained . . ." He broke off, ducking with incredible reflexes to a crouch as they both heard harsh cursing.

In the next instant, he had one large hand over her mouth and was pinning her body to his like a fly to sticky paper. The metal tool dangled uselessly in her hand. Neither of them had closed the flutter door and the *verrh verrh* as the thornbushes released their darts was plainly audible. There were loud exclamations of disgust and further cursings. Screwing her eyes around, she could just see the Catteni's face and his left eye dancing with malicious amusement.

An authoritative voice uttered a rough command, and even Kris understood that it would probably translate "Get the hell out of here. Nothing came this way."

Mahomet shifted her slightly, looking down at her face as he dropped his hand from her mouth, a gesture that was in part a challenge for her to scream. She glared back at him. He knew perfectly well that she stood to lose more if she did cry out.

They stayed like that until wildlife noises were again to be heard outside the flutter. Then he stood her back on her feet and glanced about him again.

"This car has been gone five months. Why have you stayed so long alone? Are there others of you nearby?" He peered out the one portion of the wrap-around window that had a view of more than branches.

"Just me." She still had the metal tool in her hand and was wondering if she could hit him hard enough to knock him unconscious. "Why were other Catteni so bent on catching you?"

"Oh," and he shrugged negligently, "a tactical error. I was forced to kill their patrol leader. He had insulted a brother Emassi," and now she caught the syllables of the strange word. "As I was without allies, I withdrew."

"He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day?"

"The next day," he corrected her absently.

"The next day!"

"Certainly. It is the Catteni Law that a quarrel may not be continued past the same hour of the following day. I have only to lie hidden," and he grinned at her, "until tomorrow at sun zenith and then I can return."

"They won't be waiting for you?"

He shook his head violently. "Against the Law. Otherwise, we Catteni would quickly exterminate each other."

"You honestly mean to tell me that, if they can't find you before noon tomorrow, they have to give up?"

He nodded.

"Even when you killed their patrol leader?"

He looked surprised. "It was a fair fight."

"I didn't know you Catteni fought fair."

"We do," and he bridled at her accusation, then his face cleared of irritation and he grinned. "Oh, you think it wasn't fair of us to take over your planet?"

"Precisely."

He straddled the pilot's chair and rested his heavily muscled forearms on the back of it, highly amused by her indignation.

"Your planet had no defenses. It was pathetically easy to subjugate."

"You do that a lot then?"

"A highly profitable business, I assure you. How have you fed yourself?" he asked, and she heard the most incredible sound, coming from him, and realized that Catteni stomachs could rumble with hunger just like humans'. Oddly enough that made him seem less menacing.

"There's a lot edible in this forest and I fish from the river."

"You do?"

"I come from an ingenious species," she said. "I've had no trouble at all keeping myself well fed."

He inclined his head respectfully. "Have you any supplies in here?"

Deciding that she did not care to come within grabbing distance, she nodded to the basket on the control panel behind him. "Gorupears and the roots of a white plant that I have found quite edible." As he turned, she caught him wrinkling his nose and heard him sigh. "No diet for a Catteni, I'm sure, accustomed as you are to the best viands in the galaxy, but the simple fare will stop your stomach roaring. The noise of it could give our position away."

He did not, as she had observed some Catteni do, cram the entire pear in his mouth. He also picked up one of the roots, which had a sweetish taste, not unlike a carrot, and switched from one hand to the other, taking polite mouthfuls. Finishing the first pear, he turned to her and raised his eyebrows in a polite query.

"Thank you, no. I had just eaten when I saw the dogfight."

"Dogfight?"

"A Terran term, derived from the aerial combat of fighter planes."

"Fighter planes?"

"We had achieved space flight, too," she added, wondering, as pride

made her speak out, if any of the SAC units had been launched when the Catteni had invaded Terran space.

"Ah, yes, so you had. Primitive defenses but manned by brave fighters."

Her heart sank. So often lately the answers she discovered were not the ones she wanted to hear. One of the slaves in the compound from the Chicago area had said that surface-to-air missiles had been fired at the Catteni vessels. Terran national leaders had been slow to take a defensive position, not knowing who or what had penetrated so far into the atmosphere. They had dallied too long to make any difference. Bill had been wearing his Walkman and had heard the broadcasts up till the time he had been whipped into the Catteni ship. By talking amongst themselves, the captives had learned that not all big cities had been attacked and looted: just sufficient so that the entire world recognized the superiority of the invaders. Not much consolation for those who had been abducted but enough to restore some pride.

"We disarmed most of them," Mahomet went on in a matter-of-fact voice, "and grounded the airships. Clumsy but showing some signs of developments to come."

"Thanks."

He raised his eyebrows queryingly. "For what?"

"Such praise for the primitive savages!"

Then he threw back his head and indulged in a loud guffaw.

"Ssssh, they'll hear you. You bray like an ass!"

"And you talk like a Catteni female!"

"Do I take that as a compliment?"

"You may," and he inclined his head in her direction, his yellow eyes twinkling in a humorous response she had never seen in other Catteni.

"You're not at all like the others."

"Which others?"

"All the other Catteni I've met, and observed."

"Of course I'm not. I'm Emassi," he said with a quiet pride, splaying his great hand across his chest in what she could interpret as a prideful gesture.

"Whatever that is."

"A high rank," he said. With a dismissive flick of fingers sticky with gorupear juice in the general direction of the city she had escaped from, he consigned the local Catteni to an inferior status. "I order. They obey," he added, making certain she understood the distinction.

"And those trying to kill you? They obeyed?"

"Their patrol leader's dying words," he said, with a negligent shrug

and a grin, “to make me pay for his death.” Then he frowned, looking down at the floor as if reconsidering their import. “Never mind. By noon tomorrow all will revert. Now,” and as he began to rise from the chair, intent plain on his face, Kris no longer hesitated.

With a karate-style leap, she flung herself at him, both hands on the metal tool, and brought it down with all the strength in her body on the side of his head. With a groan he collapsed to the floor.

Had she killed him? Horrified at taking a life, even that of an arrogant Catteni, she knelt beside him, noting that red blood flowed from the creased skull, and felt his throat. If he had blood, he had veins: and since he was shaped like most humanoids, he ought to have a pulse in the neck to carry blood to the brain she had just tried to smash. He had! It wasn't even faint but a firm throb against her seeking fingers. Which quickly became sticky with the blood that pulsed from his head wound.

Oh, this would never do, she told herself. The little nasty stingers would smell blood and come searching for the source. The flutter would be unlivable. First she bound up the wound with the absorbent material she had found in the lockers. Then she carefully cleaned up the rest of the blood on his face and rubbed the exposed grayish skin with gorupear juice. That had neutralized the smell for stingers on other occasions: a handy survival tip she had serendipitously discovered on her own.

One of his massive legs had caught on the chair as he fell. It looked uncomfortable that way, and the fabric of his pants were caught against his genitals, outlining the size of them in a way that made her acutely embarrassed for him. And affected her in the oddest way. Well, she told herself, she had no reason, really, to offend the dignity of another living being if she objected to indignities herself. Kris had a strong sense of fair play. She might have conked him to protect her virtue, but that done, she felt obliged to make him as comfortable as possible. How long would the blow keep him unconscious? And, once he regained his senses, what would he do to her? Well, she thought, she could always cite the Catteni rule about reprisals! Quite likely that rule did not apply to slaves or non-Catteni. She looked through the lockers to find something to tie him up with. There was a length of sturdy rope but no chains and that was the only sort of restraint that might prove effective against Catteni strength.

She sat down on the pilot's chair and rethought her circumstances. It had been a tiring day. And nearly at its end. Well, what if she returned him whence he had come? With darkness falling, there'd be a fair amount of traffic back into the city, so this purloined flutter might not be recognized: not after five months. How long did Catteni keep up

“wanted” notices? Twenty-four hours? Perhaps for Catteni Emassis but not for escaped slaves—that is, if anyone had even noticed her disappearance. She switched on the controls, reassured that he had said the tank was half full. She couldn’t remember how the gauge had stood when she absconded but the little aircraft was supposed to be economical, which was why there were so many in use.

She knew the coordinates of the city, a good two-hour flight from here, but surely there’d be enough fuel for her to get back. No matter. She had to dump Mahomet. She’d get him to the outskirts where a limp body wouldn’t be that uncommon. Well, maybe not the outskirts where the slaves and hangers-on lived in semi-squalor. But there were all those assembly areas where Catteni held drills and public meetings. She’d been to one or two with the cook, who found such displays helpful in maintaining discipline. One view of a miscreant lashed to death with the forcewhips was enough for her. Enough to revive her desire to get as far away from such a discipline as possible.

Powered up, she reversed the flitter out of its concealing thicket. She really had been lucky in that landing, which had by no means been as planned as she inferred to Mahomet. She hadn’t been watching the altimeter the night of her escape or realized that the plains surrounding the city had altered to a hilly terrain. She’d felt the scrape of something on the belly of the flitter, panicked, and the nose had dipped. She’d been in the middle of the thicket, and plastered with thorns from the angry bushes, before she could correct the error. It had worked out. Kris had a great and abiding belief that things would work out—if you lived long enough to let them.

She headed the flitter southeast, but not before marking again the coordinates of her retreat. She’d have to come back in daylight or she’d miss the thicket. The branches sprang back up again as soon as the flitter released them.

The lights of the city guided her more surely than the directional equipment. Only the altering position of the needle on one dial face informed her that it was a compass. She supposed there was an autopilot but she hadn’t figured which switch for that. She knew as much as she did about flying because she’d had to accompany the cook to the markets for fresh produce every day and had figured out the basics from watching him. Then, when she’d seen the commander’s flitter, she couldn’t resist the temptation it presented. So she hadn’t. Like Oscar Wilde, she could resist anything except temptation. Much good her English Literature was doing her now: it was all the extracurricular stuff, like orienteering, that course in survival skills which her mother had

laughed about, and her karate course that were invaluable. Like downing heavy planet denizens. She glanced down at Mahomet but he hadn't so much as twitched a muscle. The bleeding had apparently stopped.

The city looked rather nice lit up, she thought, with floodlights on some of the more unusual architectural styles: not that the huge looming Catteni Headquarters building smack dab in the center of the hub layout of Barevi City would win any prizes. There seemed to be a lot of lights on in the city, or maybe it was because she was seeing it on an overview, rather than being in the middle of it. There wasn't enough lighting in the outskirts as she approached them for her to find a good landing spot. Well, she'd go on until she found one of the assembly areas. They were ringed by the stumpy tree forms that had been planted to supply some shade for onlookers of Catteni ceremonies. Plenty of space for her to land the flitter. Strangely enough she didn't see many flitters coming into the city from her direction. Well, she *had* come from open jungle lands. But there seemed to be a great number of the larger army type spreading out from the Catteni HQ.

Something was going on, she realized when she opened the door to the flitter. There was a lot of noise, and it had a menacing sound to it. Of course such distant murmurs often sounded more threatening than they were. She'd just hurry and be out of here in next to no time and on her way back to her hideaway.

She got the rope she'd seen in the locker and tied it around Mahomet's feet. Then she looped that about a stumpy tree trunk. She'd winch his body out. She got his feet and most of his legs, but his butt stuck at the lip of the door frame. She was so busy tugging and pulling his posterior over the obstacle that she didn't notice how much closer all that sound was. And lights. Even the dark assembly area was brighter. Peering down the access lanes that led to the area, she could see lights. Torches? And the rumble was definitely intimidating. What was going on in Barevi City?

The sound made her redouble her efforts to haul Mahomet out of the flitter. The trunk of the man must have weighed half a ton, for she could not budge it. The noise was very definitely heading in this direction and so was the aerial traffic. She stepped over his inert body and tried to lift his torso and shove him out the door. He'd only drop a foot and with his hard head, he was unlikely to hurt himself. Grunting, straining, propping her feet against the column of the pilot's chair, she tried every which way to move Mahomet.

Noise and light were erupting into the far side of the assembly area. She'd better get him back in and *leave!* She skipped over his body, undid the rope from his feet, and was starting to angle his legs back in

the flutter when she heard the heavy rumble of big aircraft and felt the compression of air over her. She was panting with her exertions and had no time to cover her nose and mouth as the first sweet, and all too familiar, reek filled the air about her. She collapsed over her victim's feet, wondering why she had been foolish enough to risk her freedom for a Catteni overlord!

Chapter Two

THE INDESCRIBABLE STENCH OF MANY FRIGHTENED BODIES IN A CLOSE confinement and the unmistakable ssssslash of a forcewhip and a scream roused Kris to her recurrent nightmare. She was lodged between two warm and sweating bodies, her cheek against a cold hard surface, her knees up under her chin, in an awkward and uncomfortable position. She wondered she'd remained unconscious so long. Maybe she just didn't want to recognize that she was in a Catteni holding cell. Which was holding far too many right now. It was dark, though not as dark as the hold of the transport vessel had been. She didn't know if that was a blessing or not.

She moved carefully, because she seemed to ache all over and she could feel bruises and scrapes on her uncovered legs, arms, and face. The cold of the wall felt good against a sore cheek.

But there was movement now her eyes were open and adjusted to the semi-gloom. It was a low-ceilinged chamber of crowd-containment size: she could barely make out the perimeter. The place seethed with bodies but then she saw that there were two openings and bodies were being pushed out into a brighter space beyond.

Catteni whips sssslashed out again and those around her got quickly to their feet, following the example of those in the outer ranks. Rank was right, she thought, breathing shallowly so as not to taste the disgusting air she had to inhale.

She got to her feet by supporting herself against the wall. The person on her right groaned in pain. Kris found herself trying to help the woman, for it was a female, one of the Deski, so slight and spindly-limbed that she was afraid even her helping hand would break a bone.

They must be a lot tougher than they looked, she thought, or they'd never survive the usual callous treatment accorded all species by the Catteni.

The whiplash sang dangerously close to her and she ducked. One of the disadvantages of being tall, but she'd got the Deski to her feet and supported her swaying body. Automatic reflexes of the Good Samaritan were also a disadvantage, she thought. *I can't help everyone. So help the ones you can.* She put both hands on the Deski's stick-thin shoulders to keep the creature upright as they moved away from the wall, in the general direction the Catteni wanted them to move—the doors.

So she—and Mahomet—had been caught up in the Catteni crowd-control. Well, he was probably out of it since they could scarcely think he was one of the mob that they had quelled with their gas sprays. Her timing was as usual faultless: right back where she'd started. Well, not quite but near enough to make no nevermind. Still, if she'd escaped once, she could do it again. She had to cheer herself up.

They moved close enough to the door now to see that the next room was full of spraying water. One of those mass showers the Catteni used to cleanse captives. There were occasional short pauses as the Catteni guard at the door stripped clothing off. She gritted her teeth. The procedure had overtones she didn't like but she'd been through this sort of line in the slave pens and had come out the other side alive—and breathing fresh air. Anything was better than the stench behind her.

Disrobing her was simple. The Catteni simply ran the cutter down the front of her tunic, pulled at the back, and shoved her forward, naked, into the hot spray. It felt good, battering her from below, above, and all sides. It smelled slightly better than the room she'd just left but the disinfectant was undoubtedly a wise and sensible addition. She walked as quickly as she could, her eyes front and unfocused so she wouldn't see anything. The water was hot enough to cause a misting, so there wasn't that much to see but bodies, green, gray, and other shades of pale, moving through it. Then they were in the drying room and assailed by jets of air almost too hot on skin roughened by the disinfectant, but she was dry by the time she had traversed that chamber. A slight pause at the exit and she was handed a bundle and peremptorily gestured to move quickly forward. She found enough space in this dressing room and clambered into the coverall. How her size had been estimated, she didn't know, but the garment fit. The lumps that constituted Catteni-style footwear folded around her feet and took the shape of them in the first few moments. Handy enough if masses of different size and shape

feet had to be covered. There was one of the thin thermal blankets which she rolled up and tied over her left shoulder with the strings attached to the ends.

When she was clad, she joined the line going through the next entrance where she was given a cup and a package about a handspan square and about eight centimeters thick. As others did, she tucked the package behind the blanket. She was pushed along to where hairy brindle Rugarians were ladling a steaming liquid into cups and then she was allowed out, thank God, into fresher air and a huge force-field netted assembly area. Catteni marched along a catwalk above it, sending their whips in random directions to remind the prisoners that they were there and *watched*. Having noticed that the perimeter walls were occupied by the early comers, she worked her way deeper in the center: the other area generally safe from forcewhip lengths. And started to sip the soup. It was hot and it was liquid, both of which her belly appreciated, but it was the tasteless sort of filling food that was definitely mass-produced prisoner issue. She noticed that some people had opened their packages which contained the sort of ration bars that had been handed out in the slave quarters. The way the rations were being wolfed down, it was fairly obvious some folks hadn't eaten regularly. And if the Catteni gave them rations in advance, she rather suspected she'd better hang on to hers. They did nothing out of charity: always expediency.

Metallic clangings echoed over the silent throng as the doors through which people had filed were shut. She wondered what was going to happen next but getting clean and being fed was somehow encouraging. Talking was never encouraged in such gatherings and, while Kris had noted that there were representatives of all the common species she'd seen in Barevi City, and she was currently in a group of Terrans, no one had spoken to her. And everyone was avoiding eye contact.

A second series of metal clangings and once again the forcewhips slashed out over the assembled. This time they were driven toward eight apertures which, when she reached the one nearest her, gave access to a ramp. She'd seen such a ramp once before and she started to tremble with apprehension. Where were they being driven this time?

A low terrified murmur arose from those already going up the ramp, and occasional cries of distress, but no one could have backed out: the rampway was narrow and barred. Catteni appeared with the short force sticks that ensured the prisoners would keep moving. The sticks hurt more than the forcewhips and both could be lethal.

As she was pushed toward the ramp by the press of bodies behind her, her height gave her the clearance to see over heads and into a dark

place. Closer, she could also smell the combined acrid odors of metal and fuel and realized they were being packed into a transport of some kind that was adjacent to the processing area. She had to give the credit to the Catteni mind-set that they sure knew how to get the unwilling to do what they wanted them to do and go where they wanted them to go. No Disney World this!

She was halted by a Catteni force stick barring her way. She sucked in her guts so it wouldn't touch her. A hatch slid shut in front of her. The ramp which had been aimed at a lower level now purred softly and moved level with the walkway she stood on. A second hatch slid open, the force stick was lifted, and she ducked into the ship. She, and those emerging from the seven other entrances, moved quickly across the low-ceilinged compartment to the far wall. As she sat down to claim her space, she had a chance to look at the others piling in. A gasp of astonishment escaped her as she saw the unmistakable figure of Mahomet ducking through the low door. She had very little time to be surprised, even less to get comfortable and tuck her food package inside her coverall for safer keeping. Suddenly she was having trouble keeping her eyes open and a strange lassitude spread to her arms and legs. Looking around her, she realized that others were obviously feeling the same way. So the soup had been dosed. Why did she not feel surprised? Some of them sort of folded as they entered and had to be pushed out of the way of the rest of this consignment. Some crawled a few feet to stretch out in a clear space. *Here we go again* was her last conscious thought.

KRIS WOKE, FEELING AS IF EVERY MUSCLE IN HER BODY HAD BEEN wrenched out of alignment and every bit of soft tissue bruised. She had a headache, a very dry mouth, and her stomach was so empty she was nauseous. Once again she felt the press of warm bodies against her. But the air around her was fresh, free of stench, and her lungs welcomed it. Her eyes felt glued together and she had to fight with her eyelashes to part her lids. What she saw made her close them quickly and speak sternly to herself to recover from the shock. She was lying in a field of bodies, bodies front, left, right and center. And she certainly wasn't anywhere on Barevi. Not with that lavenderish sky.

There was an argument going on somewhere to her right, at least, loud male voices and some odd snorts and grunts. There was also a lot of low moaning and groaning in the background. She wasn't the only one coming round after that damned soup.

Forcing herself to move, she managed to raise herself on one elbow, ignoring the twinges of abused flesh and stiff muscles. Blinking to clear

her eyes of grit, she carefully turned her head toward the sounds of dispute. A group of males were evidently contesting the possession of a line of crates. Several were standing atop them and sunlight flashed on knife blades. The ones on the ground were mainly aliens: the goblinesque, squatly Turs, never very pleasant to deal with and given more to grunts than words, some hairy Rugarians, and the green-skinned Ilginish.

Well, knives certainly hadn't been issued before this voyage. Why were they available at the destination? So the prisoners could dispatch enough souls to have more for the victors? That wasn't a likely supposition. Even for a Catteni procedure. Unless there weren't any Catteni around here.

She pushed herself to a sitting position, noting that others were conscious but evidently very unsure of how to proceed now. There were no Catteni anywhere in sight. Not even Mahomet, though he'd have to be here, too, she thought, since he'd also been aboard the transport.

"You only got two hands," the shouted words drifted to her and were repeated in lingua Barevi. Unmistakable gestures emphasized the next words. "You've got three knives now. Go on. Get out of here. Take off. Beat it. Go away!" That last was said in English.

Americans! She grinned with a fatuous pride in her compatriot. She watched until the knot of aliens finally moved off, up the hill and out of sight. That led her to another discovery. Not only was the sky the wrong color, the trees lining this field were of unfamiliar shape. They didn't have leaves, not that she could see, but sort of bottle-brush tufts of a not-quite-green shade.

The desiccated condition of her mouth and throat could no longer be denied, especially when her survey of the area included half a dozen people kneeling down at what must be a stream, for they were dipping their cups in and then drinking. That was when she became conscious that the fingers of her left hand were sore from the death grip she had on her cup, still bearing traces of the drugged soup.

She'd rinse it real good before she did any drinking. And she wouldn't drink too much at first go, she told herself, remembering her survival course again. No one of those drinking seemed to be suffering any ill effects as she watched. And watching them drink became unbearable. She had to moisten her mouth and throat and guts.

She struggled to her feet, still holding the cup and lurching against the person lying sideways to her. She saved herself from falling on her face by propping her free hand on a cocked, bony hip.

"Sorry," she said automatically but the body didn't so much as twitch.

It also felt cold and rigid through the coverall material. Startled, she peered up at the gaunt, odd-cheeked face—a Deski, and from the open mouth and staring eyes, another casualty to Cattenti mass productions.

“You poor devil,” she murmured, shaking spasmodically. She got up in the next try, as much to get away from the corpse as to get to the water. That was her first priority.

She started in a direct line to the stream before she noticed what some people were doing in and around the water and veered uphill. As she neared the stream, she saw that it bordered this field, coming from beyond the oddly formed tall vegetation and cascading in almost steps down past the field and beyond the trees on the lower edge. The sound of the water rippling spurred her stumbling steps into a firmer stride. Only the severest self-control kept her from dropping to her belly and burying her face in the clear stream. The water was divinely clear, running over a rocky bottom. Such a stony bed would filter out most impurities. Besides, the Catteni had put them close to water so they'd probably tested it. No one farther down the stream had yet showed ill effects, although the way in which they were contaminating the stream disgusted her. Still, the water before her was clear. She dropped to her haunches and rinsed the cup, doing a bit of polluting herself as a film of the residue in the cup was carried away. She only allowed herself to scoop out enough to cover the bottom of the cup. She sipped once to moisten dry lips. Sipped again and rinsed the cool, sweet water around in her mouth, letting the parched tissues absorb the moisture. Her throat demanded its share. She swallowed slowly, attempting to trickle the water down drop by drop. They landed coldly in the pit of her stomach and her system insisted on more of the same. By then her taste buds had revived enough to appreciate the taste of the water, better by far than any designer water she had ever drunk either at home in Philadelphia or in Colorado. Good, simon-pure, mountain spring water.

A loud altercation started among the people downstream of her. Well, maybe not an unpleasant argument for there seemed to be cupsful of water thrown about. A few people moved away, out of the range, content to watch as they drank from their cups. She watched and sipped. She was not about to get embroiled in any group, not until she had figured out a few details: like where were they? What were they doing here? Were there any Catteni in discreet guard over them? What besides knives were in those crates and who had taken control of them? She intended to get at least one knife. Preferably two—one to hide in her boot. That once-derided survival course had included instructions on how to sharpen, use, and throw a knife. And the guys on the top of the crates *were* humans.

Thirst eased somewhat, her stomach started growling. She reached in her coverall and took out the package, carefully opening it. That was why they'd been given food ahead of time, then. To eat at this destination. Water laid on. As she'd also no idea how long she'd been without eating, or drinking, she broke off a third of the bar and carefully nibbled at that, interspersing it with more judicious sips of water. By the time she'd finished her portion, she felt considerably better.

She rose and looked around her with a keener interest. More bodies were moving among those laid out like disaster victims, row after row. The field must be a couple of acres at least and it was covered. Here and there were empty places where people had roused. There were more empty spaces—she counted—than the number of upright people she could see. How many had been chased off by the guys on the crates?

She dipped her cup for one more draught of cold, pure Adam's Ale and sipped as she hiked slowly around the bodies, toward the crates. When she could see both sides of the crates, she realized that there were quite a few people lounging on the far side: mostly Terrans and some of them female. That was reassuring.

"Whatcha guardin' there, fellas?" she asked when she got close enough, giving a friendly wave with her free hand.

Kris was accustomed to reactions to her tall lanky self. It never hurt to be blonde and moderately attractive. Until the men got past the usual trite remarks and innuendoes, she kept her smile intact and kept sipping her water a few safety lengths from the nearest one.

"Anybody sussed out where we are or what they've done with us?" She directed that query to the men on top of the crates. She could see now that most of the containers had been broken open to discover the contents. She saw other items besides knife blades of which there seemed to a great many.

"Knives, hatchets," the man said. He was a heavyset man in his mid-to-late thirties and had the unmistakable air of the military in his stance. He had two knives tucked in his belt, one in each boot to judge by the way his pants bulged out at his ankles. His thermal blanket was stuffed with other items for it bulged across his chest. "Some medical kits with basic bandages and that orange stuff the Cats poured on anything that bleeds."

"You in charge then?"

He made a gesture with one hand and a second Terran jumped down, a knife on his open palm, the handle toward her. He was as well equipped with extras as the first speaker.

"Can I show you how to use it, beautiful?" the guy asked, leering at her.

"You mean—like this," she said, taking the knife from his hand, hefting it a moment to get its balance before she flicked it into the nearest crate, which it penetrated enough to hold it firm.

"Whoa!" The man jumped back, hands up in front to fend her off. Above her she caught sight of a blade in the military man's hand. "Didn't mean no offense, sister."

"No offense taken," she said airily and retrieved the blade, checking the point to be sure it hadn't been nicked. "Good steel."

"It's not steel," the military man said, hunkering down so he was on a level with her. He held out a weaponless hand. "Nice to see a woman who knows the value of a knife. Chuck Mitford."

"Army?" she asked.

"Marine," he replied firmly and correctly as marines generally did after such a question.

"Kris Bjornsen. Where'd you get taken?"

"Recently?" He spoke with considerable bitterness. "Or do you mean on good ol' Terra?"

"Both," she said and went back to sipping what water hadn't spilled out of her cup when she'd shown off her knife skill.

"Some damned fools started a riot at one of the discipline assemblies," he said in a growl and in the southernish drawl that had become military standard among American forces. The other man looked about to erupt. "Okay, okay, some of the poor dumbheads they were whipping to death were Terrans, too, but damned stupid to attack Catteni even if there were a helluva lot more of us than them." He made a throat noise of disgust.

"We've taken enough from them, sarge," the other man said, his resentment boiling over.

Mitford acted like a sergeant, too, Kris thought and decided he'd be a good ally.

"And look where it got us," he barked back. "Arnie here's never been against a superior force. Thinks being brave is all there is to overcoming dictators." He ignored Arnie then. "I was on leave from my unit in Lubbock, Texas, when we got pearl-harbored. Haven't found a trace of my family." He shut his mouth tight then.

"Denver," Kris said. She turned to Arnie. "You?"

"DC."

She hadn't encountered anyone from the Philadelphia area so maybe the rest of her family was still safely at home. If that was a safe place to be with Catteni overlords.

"Could I have some of those medical supplies, if they're going begging?"

“Sure,” and Mitford walked along the top of the crates while she followed on the ground. Arnie stayed a discreet step behind her. “I figured someone had better take charge of supplies like these,” and he pointed down to yet another crate of knives. At the next one he stooped and came up with a hatchet, which he handed to her. “Here. Might as well have one of these, too. There aren’t more ration bars so make the ones you got do until we can figure out what’s edible on this effing planet.”

“I’d planned to,” she replied, tucking the hatchet in the belt at her back. She’d hack off a piece of the thermal blanket to make sheaths for knives and hatchet. Mitford handed her a compact kit, already supplied with a broad shoulder strap.

“Hasn’t got much medicine. Cats don’t use it, seems like. Tough mothers!”

“Hey, sarge,” yelled a man, running full tilt toward them, and pointing back over his shoulder. “There’s a Catteni! He’s waking up. Let’s kill the bastard before he does.”

Roaring out an order for others to join him, Mitford jumped down, a knife already in his hand.

“Wait a minute,” Kris said, holding up her hands. “If a Catteni’s here with us, he’s as much a prisoner as we are.”

“Who cares? He’s a Cat and Cats should die,” Arnie said, moving around her.

Kris started after them, running to catch up with Mitford, who was the leader.

“Sarge, I saw one Catteni in the same hold as I was. And he’s a good guy.”

“There’re no good Cats!” Mitford said in a snarl, chopping at the air with one flat, finger-braced hand.

“There are,” she said just as fiercely. “And if it’s the one I think it is, don’t kill him.”

“You’re asking too much, girl.”

“Not right away at least. Use the sense God gave you, Mitford,” she said. “If it’s the Catteni I think it is, he’ll know a lot we have to find out about this place. Unless there were some guide books in those crates.”

Mitford halted so abruptly, the three men right behind him bounced off his back. Narrowing his eyes, he glared at her.

“And how would you know that about him, girl?”

“Because I watched him being hunted by other Catteni. They blasted him out of the sky, and then blew up the crashed plane and searched all around until they were damned sure he’d been blown up in it.”

"Then how come he's alive and here?" Arnie wanted to know.

"Because I thought he was an escaped slave like me and hid him under the falls until the hunters left. Only then we got captured together," Kris said, which was true enough. "When I came to in the prison, I assumed he'd been released. Cattenis can't hold grudges past twenty-four hours, you know." Mitford gave a curt nod of acknowledgment. "They must have hated him real bad to dump him in with us. Besides which, you'd only be doing the Cats' dirty work for them." Mitford scowled at her and she realized that she'd been clever to bring that up. "Hell's bells, man, they'd *expect* us to waste him, wouldn't they? So let's find out—first—what he knows. Then you can kill him." She said that cheerfully, hoping to God and little green apples that Mahomet would be able to show himself useful enough so that they wouldn't kill him. She found it odd in herself to think that way about the Catteni but he wasn't like the others . . .

"We sure could use some gen about this place," Mitford agreed reluctantly, glancing around. He gave a convulsive twitch. "Place is too neat for an unsettled world and I'd rather know what we got to contend with *now* before we stumble into big kimchee with only knives and hatchets."

He strode on then, to the man who'd discovered the Catteni. He pointed in the proper direction and then followed them. It was Mahomet all right, and she bent down beside him, turning the heavy head to expose where she'd belted him with the tool. A scar was there but it was well healed.

"Ohho," she said.

"Ohho, what?" Mitford asked as the other men ranged themselves around Mahomet. Their expressions were unfriendly and most of them had knives in their hands.

She pointed to the scar. "I clobbered him there. And it's healed. We were a long time getting here."

"Kill him now before he wakes," Arnie said in a snarl, leaning over, knife hand raised.

"*No!*" Mitford's word snapped Arnie erect. "The girl's got something in keeping him alive, and able to talk. Don't tell me he speaks English?" There was a little more respect for her in Mitford's eyes now and Kris realized that he'd been thinking she'd been Mahomet's toy.

"Enough lingua Barevi for us to understand him."

She splashed the little water that was left in her cup over the Catteni's face and he reacted by lifting a hand to his face and moving stiffly from side to side. When his foot connected with someone's leg, she could see him tense. He drew his leg back and, in one quick lithe

movement, was on his feet, arms held slightly out from his sides, alert and ready to defend himself despite the knife-carrying odds against him.

“Easy there,” Kris said, stepping in front of him. “Remember me?”

He shot a quick glance at her but his eyes went right back to Mitford. Though the Sergeant wasn’t holding a knife, Mahomet had immediately taken him as the leader. Kris gave him full marks for quick appraisals.

“Yes. You stole the commander’s flitter,” he said in *lingua Barevi*.

“*You did?*” Arnie exclaimed. “*You bitch!*” And he shoved his face right up at her. His breath was vile but she held her ground and glared down at him, once again glad of the extra inches that had made her adolescence a trial. “I got force-whipped because of *you!*” He jerked his coverall off his shoulder so she could see the weals still purple on his skin. “So did fifty others at the discipline assembly they called because of *you!* She’s as bad as he is. No wonder she wasn’t for killing him.” Arnie glanced at the other hard faces, willing them to join him.

“Stuff it, Arnie,” Mitford said, holding his right arm up in a karate-chop position. “We can deal with her later, too, but let’s first find out what this mother knows.”

Kris’ mouth was dry all over again and she was scared cold. But she couldn’t have let them just kill Mahomet out-of-hand. She owed him, if only because she’d put him in jeopardy before the twenty-four-hour moratorium had passed. She was sure that was why he was stuck here with the rest of them. She’d inadvertently told the truth. Cattenis had hated him enough to make sure he came to a dead end.

“Hey, sarge,” someone yelled across the field and they looked over their shoulders. In the interval quite a few people had roused and were now homing in on the crates. Reinforcements were needed.

“C’mon, you,” Mitford said to Mahomet and jerked his head to indicate the Catteni should move with them. “And you,” he added coldly to Kris.

Kris briefly considered a belated apology to Arnie and decided not to make the effort. Arnie didn’t seem the forgiving type and she might even make matters worse. Mahomet had not moved and when two of the men swiped at him with their knives, he ignored them and gestured for Kris to precede him. Quickly she fell in behind Mitford, hearing the surprised exclamations from the men.

“See how well he knows her,” one of them said in a salacious tone of voice.

“She conked him, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, but before or after, Murph?”

“Before, Murph,” she answered for herself, making her voice as

strident as she could. That wasn't too difficult considering how scared she was. The situation had turned very ugly. "And that goes for *anyone* with the same dirty ideas." Looking straight ahead, she strode as confidently as she could back to the crates.

Once there, Mitford signed two of the men to take her and Mahomet behind the crates until he was finished with the new arrivals. He jumped up to his vantage point and, arms cocked on his belt, began his spiel. "I'm here to see that these supplies get doled out properly. So one at a time." He repeated the advice in *lingua Barevi*, speaking with a fluency that Kris hadn't expected.

Arnie was helping Mitford on the crates but some of those who had been lounging on the ground behind the barricade got curious and wandered up to Kris and Mahomet.

"What's with the Cat?"

"Mitford's going to question him," said the lankier of the two, a good head taller than Kris and nearly as tall as Mahomet.

"Okay, Murph, give Arnie a hand with the supplies now," Mitford said, jumping down. "Now, Cat, tell me why we should keep you alive."

"What is needed to know?" Mahomet asked in *Barevi*, his voice even, his manner diplomatic.

Kris let relief flood through her. Thank God he had sense enough—for a Catteni—to know how dangerous his situation was.

"Where we are. Who lives here. Any bad animals. What can we eat that won't kill us." Mitford tapped the blanket where his ration bars were stashed. "These won't last long."

Mahomet let out a dry rasp, tried to clear his throat to form words. Kris knew he'd be as dry as anyone else but she didn't dare ask for the favor of water for him. She mustn't be seen to favor, much less help, him.

"Here, give me that cup, Bass," Mitford said, snapping his fingers at one of the onlookers who had a cup in his hand.

"Huh? Give a Cat a drink?"

"If that helps him tell us what we need to know. Give it. You've been guzzling water for the past hour."

"I like that!" But Bass handed over the cup. "I want it back."

Mahomet held up his own cup and, with a nod of his head toward Bass, accepted the water Mitford doled out. He took a small sip, rinsing his mouth, and then a longer one.

"I remember some details. This planet surveyed. I did not read all."

"What did you read then?" Mitford demanded.

"Longer day, mild climate, some . . ." He frowned, trying to find the words, "species not other found. Three types deathly." He paused

for another sip and then circled the cup to indicate the field. "Better go from here soon. Open field dangerous."

"Then why was we put down here?" Arnie demanded from his vantage on the crates. "So we could all get killed?"

"No." Mahomet shook his head, a rueful grin on his lips. "To live, to fight what is here. This how Catteni settle planets—the not easy ones." He finished the water then, knocking it back in his throat, tapping the cup on his teeth to be sure he had received the last drops. Then he stood there, his eyes going slowly from one face to another and coming back to Mitford's.

"How'd you get sent off with all of us?" the Sergeant asked.

Mahomet gave him a long look, a slight frown on his face. "Say again?" He surprised them by asking in accented English.

"You are here, too," Kris said, rephrasing the question. "Why?"

He didn't look in her direction and shrugged. "I kill. I escape. I am . . . took. Day not over." He shrugged again.

"You killed another Catteni?" Mitford asked and when Mahomet nodded, "And they deported you for that?"

"Day not over."

"That rule you were talking about?" Mitford asked Kris and she nodded. "Why'd you kill a Catteni?"

Mahomet gave a little snort, and the expression on his face suggested that they were not going to believe him. "He insulted Emassi and he kill four strong slaves no reason."

"Slaves? Like we were?" Mitford turned his thumb against his chest.

Mahomet nodded.

"Guy's too clever," Arnie said in a growling tone. "Clever enough to lie his way out of being killed."

"I don't happen to think he's lying," Mitford said slowly. "I heard something the day of that riot. Some Cats'd been hunting another Cat captain who'd killed their patrol leader."

"Patrol leader," Mahomet repeated, recognizing the words and nodding his head. "I kill. Not wise . . ." His lips twitched and then he added, "Cat."

Suddenly everyone was aware of a weird noise.

"Down. All down, still!" Mahomet said as he dropped flat to the ground. The urgency in his voice and his tone of command was compelling.

"You heard him," Mitford said and gestured furiously at those on the crate. "Get down, you fools. Lie still."

The noise got louder and louder, piercing eardrums. Some of those in the process of getting up lay back down, covering their ears. The two

Deskis who had been issued their knives moaned and cowered against the crates.

A shadow out of the west preceded the shape that overflowed the field while the weird sound became an ungodly whistling shriek. Whatever it was was big and it swooped suddenly. Some unfortunate let out a terrified scream which trailed off as the flying monster departed with its prey. Kris saw brief struggles of outflung arms and legs and then all movement ceased. The weird noise cut off as abruptly.

"What the . . . was that?" Arnie cried.

"Deathly," Mahomet said. Then he pointed to the tree shapes at the upper edge of the field. "Watcher?" he both asked and suggested to Mitford. "Alert by call?"

"Many of them things around?" Mitford asked.

"Don't know. One is not enough?" Mahomet asked in a droll tone.

"Yeah, one's enough. Murph, you got a loud voice, you and Taglione, get up there and play sentry. Anyone see who it got?" he called up to those at the far end of the crates who would have had a better view.

"Didn't see. Looked like one of us."

"Would be. We got more meat on our bones than the Deskis," and Mitford looked over to the spindly creatures who were still cowering and moaning against the crates. "Do you Deskis know what those are?" he asked one of them in *lingua Barevi*. They both shook their heads but lowered their hands from their ears.

"Sound hurt Deski ears," Mahomet said, rising to his feet and dusting himself off. "They hear faster. Send them watch."

"Good idea, Cat," and Mitford issued the orders. The Deskis both tried to slink away until Mitford called Murph and Taglione to escort them.

Mahomet said one brief spate of sounds at them and they instantly obeyed.

"You speak Deski?" Mitford asked the Catteni.

"Deski, Ilginish, Turski, Rugash," Mahomet said. "Ang-leesh not many verds," he added in English. "Unnershtan better talk ssslow."

"Well, now we're cooking," Mitford said. He looked around at his allies, nodding especially at the recalcitrant and dissatisfied Arnie. "I don't think I got across the message to some of the aliens here."

Mahomet nodded. "Easy to say not unnershtan . . . doan like order."

Mitford barked out a laugh. "Damned well told, Cat. I think we keep you alive a while longer."

"Thank you." And Mahomet briefly inclined his upper body toward Mitford.

“Name? Rank?” the Sergeant asked the Catteni, ignoring the mutters of disapproval at that decision. When the mutter grew louder, he turned fiercely around. “Look, you sorry lot asked me to take command. Don’t buck me when I make a command decision. Someone’s got to. I say this mother is worth more to us alive—until he proves otherwise. Already saved somebody’s neck from the flying thing. You don’t like it, go it on your own. Get me?”

The human protest subsided and Kris felt her knees wobbling with relief. She was also dry-mouthed again from stress.

“So.” Mitford turned back expectantly to Mahomet. “Name. Rank.”

“Zainal, Emassi,” he said, but Kris knew that wasn’t the Catteni word for captain.

“Mitford, sergeant. I outrank you,” he added in such a bland-faced lie that Kris coughed to hide her guffaw.

“I’m going for some more water,” she told Mitford and walked off without waiting for any permission.

“Water good,” Mahomet Zainal remarked in an even tone.

“All right, but I’ve some more questions for you, Emassi Zainal.”

“Zainal now.”

Kris grinned as she heard the correction but Zainal kept right on walking to the stream.

“You shouldn’t’ve let him go off like that,” Arnie said in a whine of protest.

“Like what? He’s only going for a drink. Where else can he go? Now, let’s get back on the job. Be glad I didn’t ask you to go get water for him.” He ignored Arnie’s curses and continued. “Here come some more customers. Let’s get this done before those flying things strafe us again.”

“I dunno why you’d believe anything that Cat says . . .” Arnie said to Mitford. “And you let that bitch get away with . . .”

“Stow it, Arnie.”

Kris took two slow cupsful of water before she started back to the crates. Zainal, an interesting name, she thought, was ahead of her, but at a tangent, aiming for Mitford, who was looking out over the field of bodies still lying motionless. He’d handled a very difficult situation deftly and gotten her off the hook at the same time. She saw him look out over the body-strewn field. He paused briefly to examine those nearest. Shamelessly she cocked her ears to hear what he said to Mitford, his rumbling bass carrying easily.

“There are dead.”

“Do Catteni expect casualties?”

“Kaz-u-all-tees?”

“Dead ones.”

“Long trip here,” and Zainal’s hand went to the scar on his head. “Some too weak. They feel nothing.”

“I guess they didn’t.”

“Unwise to stay here near dead,” Zainal added. “Not only flying danger.”

“Just how much *do* you know about this place?” Mitford asked, slightly suspicious.

Zainal gave a long sigh. Kris could see the regret in his expression: at least he permitted his expressions to show—not many of the Catteni she’d encountered did. Of course, that was one way to communicate when language failed.

“Not enough,” he said with visible regret, “now I am here, too.”

Mitford gave a short bark of laughter. “Shoe’s on the other foot, huh?”

“Say again?”

Mitford waved his hand. “So we should leave the dead here . . . I’d better get a head count, just in case. Most of the goblins have gone and I can’t say I’m sorry about that. Those mothers were dangerous all on their own-i-o! If the Deskis got good hearing, I’m for including them. What else are they good for?”

Kris noticed that Zainal had listened very intently to Mitford’s words. He nodded once as if he had caught the gist.

“Deski good for much. You name Turs goblins? Ah! Good for hardest works. Hate all but Turs.”

“That’s the truth,” Mitford agreed sourly. “The Rugs at least try to get along,” and he gestured to the Rugarians, who had clustered together, drinking water and chewing away at their ration bars. “Don’t mind the Ilginish, but they sure stink.”

“Stink?”

Mitford held his nose. “We got a mixed bag left. And kids.” He pointed to the half-dozen youngsters huddled together behind the crates. Too intent on what was happening to Zainal, Kris only noticed them now. “A rough detail to get organized and moving. And where do we go? D’you know that?”

“Safer in hills,” and Zainal pointed to what could be considered the north. The sun of this system had not yet reached its zenith.

“Is it? That flying thing came from there.”

“Places in rock to stay best. Creatures in . . .” he reached down and tapped the ground, “come in dark. Very bad.” He shook his head from side to side to emphasize that caution. “Don’t see.”

“Stuff comes out of the earth at night?”

“True.” He made the motions of a sinuous track upward with one hand and then pinched his fingers closed to indicate biting. “Day long enough to go. Find rock place.”

“D’you know if there are caves—safe rock places—on this planet?”

“Rock right kind,” Zainal said, kicking at one that looked like limestone to Kris. “Will make me remember more.” He shook his head as if to free up more information.

“I’d rather move into some sort of a defensible position anyhow,” Mitford said and jumped to the top of the crate. “Listen up, you hairy lot,” Mitford bellowed in a parade-ground voice that made the Deskis clamp hands to their ears and cower to the ground. “This place won’t be safe at night. We’ve got to move to the hills, find caves to shelter in.”

“You’re taking his word for this?” Arnie demanded, running up to Mitford and tugging at his pant leg. “You gonna listen to a Cat?”

“I’ll listen to anyone who talks sense, and as the Cat’s the only one knows anything about this planet, I’m not about to ignore any local info I can get, Arnie. No one’ll force you to do anything now you don’t wanna. Hear me?” He raised his voice again. “First, you lot,” and he pointed a thick finger at Bass, Murph, and some of the others who’d been lounging behind the crates, “take a body count. Team up and cart any that are breathing—and I mean *any*—back here and we’ll try to rouse ’em. I wouldn’t even leave my mother-in-law to what walks at night. Now move it. You, too, Kris, and take the Cat with you.”

“If we had a canteen or something to carry water in,” Kris started.

Zainal tapped one of the empty crates. They were fashioned out of some sort of plastic and were capacious enough. He tipped it over and shook out some packing debris.

“I carry,” he said and nodding at Kris to follow, started down to the stream.

“Good idea,” Mitford said and got the two nearest Deskis to start emptying another half-full crate. “Useful.”

“Sarge, what do we do with cups and blankets? Leave ’em on the stiffs?” Bass called.

“Strip ’em,” Mitford yelled back. “They won’t need ’em. We might.”

Remarkably everyone, Deskis as well, fell to and by the time Zainal had brought back the filled crate—without so much as puffing from the trek uphill—the count was complete and only the dead remained behind in the field.

By the time the sun had reached its zenith, everyone living had been revived and informed of the current situation. There was one more flying

attack, but Deski ears had heard the three creatures approaching long before they were seen and everyone was able to play dead. The creatures, still whistling their unbearable noise, caught nothing on that run.

By tearing strips from spare blankets, crude carrying straps were contrived to make crates easier to transport, for Mitford intended to leave nothing behind that might later come in handy. He even ordered the dead stripped of footwear and coveralls. He got some resistance for that decision but in the end, the unpleasant task was done and garments stored.

When the columns were ready to move off, Kris had acquired considerable respect for Mitford. She was equally glad she'd made the effort to spare Zainal for he had more than talk to use to placate dissenters. The added benefit to his show of strength was that few would have tried to take him on even if they hated his guts for being a Catteni, like Arnie. Some of the more recently revived were weak, so Mitford assigned each a buddy and announced that he intended to take skin off anyone who might happen to "lose" his or her buddy as they moved out.

"How many bought it?" Mitford asked Bass, who had kept a tally.

"Eighty-nine didn't make it," the lanky man said. "Mostly Deski and some older humans and two kids. That'd make about a ten percent loss if you figure a hundred bodies in each of the eight rows. Live head count's five hundred eighty-two: haven't sorted 'em out by race yet."

"Forget race," Mitford said with a snort. "We're all in this together. Operation Fresh Start."

Bass snorted good-naturedly. "You military types with your operations this and that."

Mitford raised his eyebrows in surprise. "It's good for morale."

"So's a fresh start. And being free again," Bass added with a sideways glance at Zainal.

Mitford walked to the top of the field and, fists on his hips, roared for attention.

"Listen up. We're moving out. You lot," and he pointed to a bunch of humans, "form up in a column, four abreast. We got nine water carriers: distribute yourselves along the line of march. You with buddies, sing out if you got trouble but *try* to keep up. Don't be shy asking for help if you need it. Bass, you be rear guard. Take Cumber, Dowdall, Esker, Movi, Tesco, and you three." He held up three fingers at the nearest group of Rugarians and gestured them over to Bass. "We're all in this together, remember!"

"Yeah, sarge, Operation Fresh Start," said Bass, evidently having thought the designation appropriate: "Okay, now move it out."

Mitford motioned for Zainal to join him and they trotted out to where people had begun to form up the column. At the front he swung in his arm the wide gesture that meant advance.

“MOVE OUT OPERATION FRESH START!” His parade-ground voice reached all ears.

Chapter Three

KRIS WAS BUDDIED WITH A FRAIL-LOOKING REDHEADED GIRL WITH THE delicate complexion that often accompanies red hair. Patti Sue had been one of the last to rouse. She did a lot of coughing but she didn't feel feverish so Kris decided she must have had some kind of allergic reaction to the drug they'd been given in their soup. Patti Sue spent a lot of time apologizing for being a burden. Such self-effacement bothered the hell out of Kris, who was naturally self-reliant and positive: she tried not to be curt with Patti Sue. The only other information the girl gave was that she'd been taken in Detroit. Every time Kris tried to open a conversation or asked a question, Patti Sue would take a coughing fit. The fifth time that happened Kris got the hint Patti Sue had been giving. She wondered if Patti'd survive until they made it to shelter.

She inserted herself and Patti in column right behind one of the water containers, carried between two Rugarians. There were Rugarians all around Patti and herself and, at first, Patti kept so close to Kris she almost stepped on Kris' feet a couple of times. Rugarians were sturdy, was Kris' reckoning, so if she did need help with Patti, she'd have it at hand. She'd also seen how some of the human males had looked at the redhead. Hope springs eternal, she thought with amusement, but she was reasonably sure Patti would have repelled any offers of male assistance.

She felt the pull uphill in the muscles of her calves and thighs but when they reached the tree shapes, she saw that the next bit of march would be downhill, along another field. The panorama bothered her but it wasn't until she was halfway down the slope that she realized exactly why. This new field was exactly the same size as the one they'd been dropped in. Tree shapes marched along the borders, and in adjacent

fields of the same size. It was *too* even. Everything was laid out so neatly, far too neatly for a supposedly unoccupied planet. Only Zainal had not said the planet was unoccupied, had he? He'd definitely said it had indigenous dangers and he couldn't remember what types, only that there were "deathly" creatures. At the bottom of this field was another stream. Brooks created on demand? And another field on the other side, identical to all the others in this area. On the entire planet? Where were the browsers? The ruminants for whom these fields were made? Were they some of the "deathly" creatures?

She looked ahead and saw distant foothills. God, they were a long way away. She looked over her shoulder and saw the four-wide crocodile stretching out behind her. Safety in numbers? It said much for Mitford's leadership ability that he had managed such cohesion from such a diverse group. Well, some of the obedience had originally been inculcated by Catteni forcewhips. A lot of people wouldn't have had time to recover from their enslavement and be able to start thinking for themselves. Mitford was obviously counting on that. Whatever saved as many souls as possible, she thought to herself.

During that long march, she found herself resenting Patti Sue's frailty. She'd've preferred being up front with Mitford and Zainal, able to see where she was going: scouting ahead even. She liked being first, not tamely following others. But she'd accepted the responsibility of buddying with Patti Sue and she'd see it through.

By the time the sun had reached a halfway point down the sky, she was supporting more of Patti Sue on the way up the hills. Downhill was easier except that Patti tended to stumble, always apologizing for the trouble she was making Kris, and telling Kris how good she was to put up with her. Kris had to clench her teeth to keep from telling Patti Sue to shut up and just do her best.

Every hour they got five minutes to rest and get watered, or whatever, although how Mitford knew when an hour was up was beyond her. Maybe his military training gave him a built-in watch or something. Whatever, she welcomed the brief respite.

The Catteni sure had a good footwear design in those shapeless fold-about. Body heat had molded hers so faithfully to her long narrow feet that, although her feet were tired, she hadn't raised a single blister or rub. Her leg muscles were complaining about abuse, but after an unknown period of time doing sweet fanny adams, what else could she expect? The spring had gone out of everyone's step, especially the water carriers, although Mitford had seen to it that those were rotated every rest period.

Then the word was passed back that they'd take an hour's break to

eat. And if anyone had eaten up all their bars, tough titty. They weren't breaking out any spares today.

Kris had had another third before the trek, so she munched out on the last third and had half another one. She got Patti Sue to eat all of a bar by feeding it to her bit by bit. The girl's fatigue was not put on. Her cheeks were gaunt and her breath was shallow. Kris thought she heard rales in her lungs, but it might have simply been exertion after long idleness. There wasn't much more travel in Patti.

When the call went back to start again, they were on the edge of a fairly dense plantation. And plantation was the appropriate word because the vegetation—trees, whatever—had been set out in rows. There were several different specimens, judging by what went for leaves on this world; different sizes, too, and a soft mulch underfoot that was a welcome relief from the harder surfaces of the fields, despite their grassoid ground cover. While she could approve of forestation, it was real queer to find it on a planet that wasn't supposed to be inhabited. Although Zainal hadn't exactly said it was *uninhabited*, had he, she reminded herself yet again.

Kris got Patti Sue to her feet. The girl was so tired she didn't even have the strength to apologize. Kris draped one lax, thin arm about her waist, holding it to her with her right hand while she tucked her left under the girl as support. Kris gave a half-hip lurch and carried Patti forward step by step.

At the next rest stop, Kris herself was panting and sweaty. She'd draped Patti's blanket, cup, and ration package across her own to free the girl of any burden. Now she rearranged her accoutrements and when the order to move came, she hoisted Patti pickaback as the easier way to deal with the problem. Kris had good strong shoulders and a strong back and it was much easier, in some ways, to carry the girl than try to keep her on her own feet.

She was moving along at a better clip—they had fallen back from the water carriers some time before. She felt someone touch her shoulder and looked a human straight in his blue eyes. He had straight blond hair.

"Hey, there, ma'am, I'll take her. You shouldn't have to pack her."

"Why not? She ain't my brother but she ain't heavy," Kris replied, moving right along, but she smiled gratitude for the offer.

"Naw," the guy said, reaching out to take Patti. "You take my gear and I'll lug her."

Patti felt his hands on her and whimpered fearfully, clinging with what strength she had left in her arms to Kris. Kris moved out of the column.

“Tell you what, you carry my gear and that’ll make it easier. But I don’t think Patti Sue wants any guy around her. You know what I mean.”

The guy looked shocked for a moment, resenting the implication that he might have an ulterior motive to his offer.

“She won’t tell *me* more than her name and where she came from,” Kris said, “and you must have heard how popular us Terran females were with the Cats.”

“Oh, gawd. Didn’t think of that.” He flushed with embarrassment. “Jay Greene,” he identified himself. “Denver.”

“I’m Kris Bjornsen and Denver’s also where I was caught.” She had eased Patti down to the ground. Patti clung to her legs, still whimpering and mumbling unintelligible pleas. “It’s okay, honey, it’s okay. I’ll carry you. You’re my buddy, aren’t you?” She divested herself of the blanket rolls and her ration bars but kept the cups and Patti’s food.

“Hi, Patti Sue,” the man said, leaning down to her. “I’m Jay Greene, and I’m just going to lift you to Kris’ back. Save her a bit. Is that okay?”

“Just do it, Jay,” Kris said and was nearly strangled by Patti, who almost sprang from Jay’s hands to Kris’ back.

“Wow!” Greene said softly. “Rough.”

Kris shifted the girl to a more comfortable position, feeling bones grind in the slender body. “Let’s get back in line. We’ll be the tail that wags the dog pretty soon.”

“Don’t fret, ma’am. I won’t leave your sight.”

“Not while you have my rations, you won’t.”

The last part of that heroic march was uphill, scrambling on a rock-strewn surface where Greene often had to grab Kris to keep her balanced. She was concentrating so hard on not falling that Kris didn’t really see where they were going until they got there. A wide ridge with—when she had a moment to look—a fantastic view of the patchwork of fields and hedging that seemed to stretch out for miles and miles into the twilight. The column also stretched in front of her, and there weren’t that many behind, they’d dropped back so far. All along the way, marchers were sitting down where they stood, too tired to move much farther or worry about the hardness of this night’s accommodation.

“I don’t think much of this as a campsite,” Greene said, looking about him. He pushed a spot clear of rocks and pebbles and pointed it out to Kris. “This is as good as any.”

This time Patti was too exhausted to even whimper when Greene very gently lifted her off Kris’ back. Kris gave a loud sigh of relief.

Scuffed a second patch clear for herself and sat down with a “whoof” of relief. Greene handed her the blankets and the food as he swept a place clean.

“Gimme the cups and I’ll get us all some water,” he said and she handed them over, realizing that she was done! She hadn’t the energy to get her own water.

When he came back, they managed to prop Patti Sue to a sitting position while Kris fed her again, and used some of the water to wash her face and then her own.

“Hey, we got a Prometheus in this ragtaggle group,” Greene said, pointing toward the front of the column.

Kris cried out in surprise and relief. Somehow the torches bobbing along the ridge in their direction reassured her as nothing else could have. Tears came to her eyes and she bit her lip and averted her face from Greene. She didn’t want to spoil the impression that she was a survivor type.

It was a long time, and darkness had fallen, before the torchbearers made it to the rear where she was. Patti was asleep, her head pillowed on Kris’ thighs. A few people seemed to have enough energy to talk, or complain: the Deskis were emitting their odd susurruses from the tight little circle they had created. The Rugarians had curled up in hairy balls, blankets hauled over their faces. Kris was too tired to sleep, her back muscles aching from the day’s strain and her neck taut. She rotated her shoulders and waggled her shoulder blades, trying to ease things. Then she felt Greene’s hands begin a massage for which she was intensely grateful.

She was drowsing when light roused her to attention. Mitford, Zainal, Taglioni, and two others she didn’t know were checking on the column.

“You okay, Bjornsen?” Mitford asked, one hand lightly resting on her shoulder.

“She carried her buddy here half the afternoon,” Greene spoke up.

“Shut up,” Kris said in protest. “She doesn’t weigh much.”

“And she’s your buddy,” Mitford said, nodding. “Know this is a lousy campsite. . . .” Beyond him, Zainal was talking to the Deski that had been awakened by the torch. It was a male, his eyes wide with an anxiety which abated when Zainal had finished speaking. “Best we can do. Zainal and a couple are going to scout forward to see if there’re any caves near enough. He thinks we’ll be safe enough on the open ridge tonight. You’re Jay Greene?”

“That’s me.”

“Can you hang awake awhile?”

“Sure can.” Greene got to his feet, stiffly, but made it upright.

“Okay, you keep an eye open here. You’ll wake Bass . . . you know him? Good, at second moonset,” and now Mitford pointed to the moons just rising, one much larger and ahead of its smaller companion. “This planet has five. Useful for lack of any other markers.” He turned his head toward the lanky figure of Bass, who was coming into the torchlight, the rest of the rear guard clustered behind him. “You hear that? Greene here will relieve you. Cumber, Bass’ll get you up and you’ll be on until the fourth moon goes down, then you wake Movi. Don’t cheat and mix up your moonsets, now hear me!”

“We hear and obey,” Bass said, according Mitford a fancy eastern salaam.

“I leave you the torch,” Mitford said and handed the one he held to Jay Greene. “It won’t last all night long ’cause the nights here are long, but it should help.”

“Gotcha.”

Mitford started to retrace his steps to the front. Zainal favored Kris with a long look and then pivoted to follow the Sergeant and the others.

Kris wrapped herself up good in the blanket, moving Patti until she got as comfortable as she could—after digging up a couple of rocks. The Catteni also did a good line of warm blankets, too. She finally got rested enough to fall asleep.

AS MITFORD, ZAINAL, TAGLIONI, AND THE OTHERS TIREDLY RETRACED their steps to the front of the column, the Sergeant reflected on the wisdom of keeping the Cat alive. For starters, he liked the guy’s style when he had to brave it out among folks who had no cause to like his species. Of course, Mitford knew that the psychological moment to waste Zainal had passed back in the field, when the Cat got to his feet. He was one big mother and no one, not even Mitford, would have taken him on single-handed. Guys like Arnie, who’d had too long a taste of Catteni whips, might just organize a lynch party at some auspicious moment. But there were ways of avoiding murder, if you knew who victim and murderer were. Mitford defused a couple of similar situations. Then, too, the big guy kept coming out with damned useful gen: like the five moons. Was he deliberately parceling out these gems or was he putting on an elaborate act? Years in the Army had taught Mitford how to spot liars and malingerers. Zainal was neither but he knew exactly what sort Arnie was.

For most of Mitford’s life, in particular since he’d enlisted as an enthusiastic, lying sixteen-year-old, the sun had ruled Mitford’s days:

from boot camp to his one tour in Nam, through his two jaunts to Kuwait, until he'd been nabbed, by aliens, in a hammock on his dad's veranda.

Idly, his thoughts ranged to wondering if his old unit had seen any action against the Catteni on Earth, but reports from the old world were few and far between. All the more reason for making the one they were stuck on now better. And if keeping the Cat they had alive was one way of doing it, Chuck Mitford would see he lived. He wondered exactly how that tall blonde Bjornsen had met the Cat. She hadn't been lying, but she hadn't told all the facts. Whatever! She'd been clever in handling the situation and keeping the Cat alive. She had class, that one. And she was good people, the way she'd lugged that poor scared kid all day long.

Taglione stumbled again and this time didn't throw off the Cat's hand when it went out to steady him. Maybe they could integrate him, though Mitford doubted it. Too much feeling against Catteni right now. He'd have to figure out some way of using the Cat without keeping him about all the time. That was easy: he'd send Zainal out on reconnaissance: they'd need to know the terrain wherever they finally came to roost. Send Bjornsen with him, and keep two potential problems out of his hair. He'd have enough. Not that he hadn't made a good start but oh, lord, how did he get in this situation in the first place? Mitford, he told himself, don't you know the first rule of Survival? *Don't* volunteer!

"You were telling me you *work* for the Eosi? The Catteni are not the overlords?" he asked Zainal in Barevi.

"No, Eosi. Emassi take orders. Eosi order the galaxy."

That chain of command didn't seem to sit well with the Cat either, Mitford thought, reading the way the guy set his jaw as resistance, if not downright rebellion.

"'Emassi' is not the word I heard for 'captain,'" Mitford went on in a bland voice.

He caught the gleam of Zainal's eyes in the moonlight as the big Cat glanced down at him.

"'Emassi' one word for a captain," and Zainal's lips curled up. "Special captain. You have heard 'Tudo' more. And 'Drassi.'"

"Yeah, 'Tudo' for ground and 'Drassi' for space? Right?" So, as Mitford had thought, this Catteni was a couple of cuts above the usual individual the Sergeant had met. "So which was it set us down here? Tudo, Drassi, or Emassi?"

"Drassi by order of Eosi," and that didn't sit well with the Catteni either.

"You killed a Tudo, then . . ."

“As I have told you,” Zainal said quietly but with an edge to his words.

“Just checking.”

Zainal chuckled. “Know that Emassi have no reason to lie.”

The first moon was now well above the hills and shining hard into their faces, lighting the rocky track so that they didn’t inadvertently step on sleeping bodies. For a big guy, Zainal was agile. Course he was used to a heavier gravity, but that didn’t keep some Cats from being damned clumsy, squashing bystanders in their brawls.

“We’ll be left alone now to get on with the job of settling in?”

“That is the way.”

“How soon before anyone checks in?”

Zainal paused, walking in silence, then held up two fingers. “Depends. Drop more prisoners if we live. Then check in half a year, year. See how we do.”

“You’re part of ‘we’?” Mitford wasn’t sure if he liked that suggestion of solidarity. The Cat hadn’t been in the same boat as the humans: figuratively, that is. Or maybe he was.

Zainal snorted. “I drop. I stay. I am not against you. I am *with* you.”

“Fine by me,” Mitford said, waited a beat, “but you won’t find everyone exactly welcoming.”

Zainal chuckled. “Emassi are also not welcome everywhere. I will survive.”

Somehow Mitford didn’t doubt that a moment. And he intended to keep this Catteni alive. Mitford could think of several ways, easy, that this Zainal might be of use to him, especially if he was also discontented with these Eosi overlords who ordered everything. “Then if we can keep alive, they unload more rebels?”

“Rebels?”

“Yeah, rebels,” Mitford said, “people like us who protest Catteni rule.”

Zainal grinned. “Good word, rebels. I like it.”

“You wouldn’t be a bit of a rebel yourself, perhaps?”

“Perhaps.”

Mitford caught the edge on that mild rejoinder and wondered.

“We must talk about this at a later date,” Zainal said. “You speak Barevi lingua well,” he added in a louder voice.

“I’m a survivor, Emassi. And learning the local lingo fast is essential to survival. I got enough of five-six languages from Earth to get around the world: Barevi wasn’t hard to pick up.”

“No, it is not.”

“A simple language for simple folk?”

Now Zainal gave a soft chuckle. But that was the last either said because fatigue was getting the better of both as they neared the head of the sleeping column of rebels. *Yeah*, Mitford thought again, *I like that rebel bit.*

After checking that the sentries he had set were still awake, Mitford gratefully spread his blanket on the ground.

"If you think of anything more from that report, Zainal, lemme know," Mitford said as he lay down.

"I will."

Chapter Four

MORNING WAS NOT FUN! ONCE AGAIN KRIS ACHED IN MANY PLACES AND knew that pebbles had moved under her during the night to make tender spots where she didn't need them. Patti was still flaked out when Kris rearranged the girl so she could get up. She had to go. She made her way down the hill to a boulder that had already been used for this purpose although someone had had the courtesy to sprinkle dirt on what they'd done. She did the same. Greene was waiting for her with full cups of water.

"Gawd, what I wouldn't give for a cuppa coffee," he said, grinning at her over the rim of his cup.

"Never said a truer word," and Kris rather liked his grin. Why was it she had to be dropped on this godforsaken planet before she met any decent fellas? She could notice a few more details about him, too. He looked awful thin, and his hands showed lots of healed cuts and nicks and the palms, when he gestured, were heavily calloused.

"Did you really steal the commander's flitter?"

Kris groaned. "I did but I wouldn't have if I'd known the sort of reprisals the Catteni would take."

"Don't distress yourself over that, ma'am," he said, grinning more broadly. "The very idea that one of us could, did, and had gave us all heart."

"Except the ones who had long interviews with forcewhips." She shuddered, her back muscles writhing in sympathetic reaction. The twice she'd felt that sort of nerve-paralyzing lash had been quite enough.

"The Cats looked for any excuse to intimidate us Terrans," Greene said. "We were more than they expected, in case you hadn't heard. Did they recapture you er something?"

"No," Kris said, drawling the negative out to emphasize her chagrin. "My timing was bad. I'd snuck a trip into the city just when the cruisers started spreading gas to quell that riot. And what was that riot about?"

"Oh, we tried to break up another one of their little discipline sessions. One thing led to another and we ended up a mob. No sense, no reason, just rushing about breaking up anything to hand!"

She nodded, finishing the last of her bar and licking her fingers.

Word was passed down to get a move on.

Patti Sue managed the morning on her own feet and then collapsed again. She apologized to the point that Kris was grinding her teeth not to snap at her. It was a little difficult to avoid the apologies and self-deprecations when the girl's lips were a few inches from her ear. Greene did what he could, chatting about this and that because his talking silenced Patti. His buddy was a Rugarian who said nothing, stopping and starting when Greene did, and seemingly oblivious to every other stimulus.

"What were you back on good ol' Terra?" Kris asked, to while the time.

"Ahha, computer technician. So, of course, they had me digging, shoveling, and sweeping on Barevi. At least they weren't prejudiced. Anyone big got that duty." He made a muscle in his arm and pulled the coverall tight across it so she could admire the result. "Actually, it beats a sedentary life in front of a screen. I've never been this fit." And he cast a critical eye on Patti's frail body. "You're sure . . ." he began for the third time since lunch.

"I'm sure."

Patti Sue had either fallen asleep or retreated into a comatose state. The only thing that reassured Kris was that her skin was cool, not hot with fever. She soldiered on. However, she told herself that next time buddies were assigned, she was going to choose.

The afternoon became one long struggle to keep upright and put one foot in front of the other. They had to make three climbs up rock faces . . . Kris did hope that Mitford had had accurate reports from his advance scouts, because she sure didn't want to come back *down* the last one. They'd had to rig a blanket sling to get the limp Patti Sue up it. Kris ended up with scraped shins and lost some fingertip skin. The items that hadn't been in the Catteni survival crates were legion. Decent gloves, pitons, rope, pickaxes, backpacks, a bar of chocolate were among those she dreamed of. Needles and thread! Band-Aids.

There were three falls, one broken leg. The Deskis, for all their fragile looks, had almost glided up the rock face. That could be a useful

skill, she thought, amazed that she could think of anything other than being able to continue walking.

When her courage was beginning to peter out into utter despair, the word was passed back that their destination had been reached by the first elements.

They'd had one? That amazed and heartened her.

WHEN SHE GOT THERE, SHE DIDN'T KNOW IT. ONE, SHE HAD STUMBLED and had to lean against the cliffside to steady herself. She'd had a terrifying, if brief, look at the drop she'd nearly plummeted down. Two, she was too exhausted even to care that she would now be able to stop walking.

"I'll take her," a male voice said and the burden of Patti was lifted from her back.

Someone put a hand on her arm and led her from the cliff, pushing her head down so she wouldn't crack it on a low entryway. The darkness a few meters inside was suddenly alleviated by—of all things—fires. They didn't *smell* like fires should but the rosy glow *looked* like the real thing. She later found out that Zainal had experimented with various types of wood, for lack of a proper description of the material he gathered from the vegetation, until he found a combustible substance. He found other things, which included dried dung, to augment what "wood" could be gathered as they marched. The dung smelled but it gave off heat and light, which were essential.

Someone took her cup—she protested, but before she could get violent about the matter, the cup was returned to her, full of water.

"Keep moving," she was told and a hand gently guided her in the direction she was supposed to go . . . a narrow path through outstretched legs and boots. She went left, then right, then left again as guided and had her head pushed down to enter a smaller cave. There was a small fire, one that didn't smell too badly, in a circle of glinting stones in the center. Smoke went straight up and she tilted her head, nearly falling over backward since her balance was as tired as the rest of her senses, and couldn't see the ceiling.

"Over here," and she was guided to one side of the fire where there weren't any legs or boots. "Sit." A gentle hand pressed down on her shoulder and, quite willing to obey, she sat.

When she felt someone fumbling with her blanket, she tried to push the hands away.

"Sleep in blanket."

The odd phrasing caught her attention and she blinked to focus on

the face in front of her. Zainal it was who was untying her blanket. No one else was that big. That was all right then. She owed him. Or did he owe her?

“Lie down,” he said, an order that she was only too happy to obey.

She worked her way down to a recumbent position and felt the blanket tucked around her. What odd behavior for a Cat . . . no, she must not shorten the name. Catteni. Maybe “Teni” would be less egregious than “Cat”?

That was the last thing she remembered for a very long time.

MITFORD WOKE SUDDENLY, HIS WELL-DEVELOPED INTERNAL CLOCK rousing him after his customary six hours' sleep. It was dark as the inside of a pocket and it took him a moment to establish where he was. He rose cautiously to one elbow, identifying the sleeping forms around him: Taglione, Murphy, Dowdall, and yes, the dark mass of the big-shouldered Catteni.

Fit as Mitford tried to keep himself, apart from that enforced sleep on the prison ship, he felt some twinges of yesterday's exertions. Well, today would be another bitch and he'd better start it, what with all he had to do.

He berated himself once again for setting himself up in command of this chickenshit outfit, but who the hell else in this misassorted herd of humanity, and aliens, would have organized anything? It had made his blood boil to see them quibbling over how many knives they should get, and who'd have the blanket concession. Just chance that he'd known a couple of the looters from being in the same barracks with them on Barevi so he'd been able to inveigle their support with a hint and bit of verbal persuasion. No need for anyone to get greedy over the goodies. There looked to be more than enough to go round. He couldn't stand greed and he hated bullying. Some might not believe that, but it was the truth. So he'd waded in and got the supply situation organized to his satisfaction and doled out the hardware in an orderly fashion. He should have known one thing would lead to another. But no one had contested his authority. Or them that had, had taken themselves off.

And hell's bells, after twenty-seven years in the Marines, he knew how to get a motley crew to act as a unit. He trained up enough raw recruits into good fighting men. Even women. Then he had a couple of advantages, too. For starters, everyone here had been taking orders they couldn't buck so he'd just continue the practice, gradually easing them back into a more democratic government when he had everything suitably organized and independence was feasible. Right now, they'd better

stick together, and keep the useful aliens handy. He was glad to be rid of the Turs, sullen argumentative bastards, and the Ilginish had always been difficult to deal with in the barracks at Barevi. They'd taken themselves off, most of them, and that was fine by him. Humans he could handle any day of the week.

So they were in a defensible position, even if he still didn't know what he might have to defend against. They had a good source of underground water in that cave like his scouts had found. The Cat—Mitford reproved himself—how he treated Zainal, the Catteni, would go a long way to establishing how most of the others would regard the alien. And, if he wanted to make contact with the Catteni at a later date, he'd need someone in his ballpark to hit the homers. Right now the only one available was Zainal. At any rate, Zainal had found time to hunt as he scouted ahead with Tag and Murph and had clubbed some local fauna. He proved it was edible by eating a hunk of it raw. Mitford preferred his meat cooked but, to him, the gob which he had chewed and swallowed had tasted just like raw meat usually did. The critters just squatted on the rocks in droves or herds, didn't move when humans approached—which suggested to Mitford that they hadn't seen any humans to know to fear them—so they were dead easy to bring down.

So there was one source of protein to augment the ration bars. Water, shelter, food. Not bad going for two days on a new world. Mitford was optimistic, even though he rarely allowed himself that option.

He'd had a chance to talk to nearly a hundred or so men and women yesterday on the march and was much encouraged by the fact that quite a few had specialties that would be damned useful. Automatically, his hands went to pockets where he usually kept pencil and pad. Once again he cursed under his breath. A cup, a blanket, a knife, and a hatchet were not much to work with. He'd had less when set loose on a survival course but he was accustomed to privations. This lot weren't. He missed paper and pencil. He was a visual man and committed facts to memory when he could first write them down. Gerry Capstan had been a surveyor in the Colorado Park Service: he was sure they could find something to write with and he'd already seen slate along the rocky way. *Helluva way to write orders of the day*, Mitford thought, *but what the hell?* The old granary foreman in Lubbock still used chalk and a slate as a notice board for his drivers.

Murphy had been a machinist, knew welding, and he'd assured Mitford that all he needed was a decent hot fire to reshape some of those extra knives into a bevy of useful tools.

A woman near Murphy in the line of march perked up a bit when she heard the two men talking.

"I'm a potter . . . Sandy Areson. Yeah, I know what you're thinking," and she grinned at the dubious expression on Mitford's face, "arty-farty stuff you'd call what I used to produce. But I know how to make up pitchers, mugs, plates, and useful things. That is, if this planet has produced clay."

"We'll keep that in mind," Mitford said, knowing that something as simple as pitchers and plates could be a morale booster.

Now, in the cool predawn, Mitford began to plan the day's activities. A good hot meal in everyone's belly would make them optimistic, too. So hunting was the first order of the day. A detailed search of the immediate area and the rest of the cave system was next. And torches to light the corridors that had already been explored.

That herbal guy could see what he could find edible in the vegetable line. There might even be berries.

There were two miners and they could go look for ore deposits.

He'd send out patrols, keep everyone busy, and Arnie could do latrines. That made him smile. And anyone who complained about anything would join Arnie in that duty. With so many people, proper hygiene was of prime necessity.

One of the few pluses was that they were all healthy: the ones who weren't had been left on the field.

He set about waking up men he had tagged the day before as those with some hunting experience back on Earth. He'd have them look out for any wood that could be made into bows, arrows, and spears. And slingshots. Mitford grinned as he pulled on his boots. He'd been a crack shot as a kid: could stun a jackrabbit at forty yards.

And what was the name of that paramedic? Ah, Matt Dargle. Damn, he'd be glad to have writing materials.

Mitford shook Taglione, Murphy, and Zainal awake and started handing out the orders of the day.

IT WAS THE STINK THAT WOKE HER. SHE STARTED COUGHING AND couldn't stop. She wasn't the only one coughing, either. Everyone around her was. Then a whiff of cool, clean air wafted across her face and she tried to go back to sleep again. It was much too soon to wake up. It was still dark outside.

Outside of *where?* That question did it: she pushed herself to a sitting position to find out "where" she was.

Inside a cave. The fire in the center was down to embers although someone was trying to revive it by putting lumps—smell-producing lumps—on it.

“I think I’d prefer the dark to the smell,” she murmured, realizing that folks were still sleeping around her. In fact, she recognized Patti Sue’s frail body next to her. Kris was chagrined. She hadn’t even made sure she still had her trek buddy when she’d gone to sleep. Zainal? Zainal. Hmmm. She looked around but she couldn’t find his body among those in here with her. She considered going back to sleep and then realized that first she’d better find the latrine.

“Where’s the latrine?” she asked the figure feeding the fire.

“From here?” The man paused briefly. “Hmmm. Go left, take the third right-hand opening.”

“Can I see where I’m going?”

“Oh, yes.”

Although torches had been spaced out along the walls, she found the right cave as much by a certain smell as by following the directions. She was amazed at what had been accomplished. Or, how long had she slept? A toothbrush! When she thought of those handy little pouches handed out by airlines if you went Business Class, she wished she’d had one to hand: toothbrush, comb, and nail file, not to mention toothpaste, breath neutralizer, and facecloth would be very comforting right now. And something to eat. She passed by “her” cave on her return because she smelled something scrumptious—well, by comparison with what she’d lately had to eat.

She followed her nose, passing other side passages and peering into caves, filled with sleeping bodies. She took a wrong turning and ended up in a cul-de-sac which smelled not at all appetizing, but nasty, old-moldy, dead.

Her nose led her to the source, and the largest of the caves. It was a-bustle with activity, men, women, and aliens—Kris was glad to see the resurgence of whimsy in herself—coming and going. Though what they were going to and coming from she wasn’t sure until she saw a group of men, each triumphantly brandishing their spoils. They’d been hunting and, although the creatures resembled oversized rats without tails, if they were what was being grilled over the fires, she’d forget the resemblance.

She went over to the nearest griller and paused by the rock on which two cooked fragments had been laid.

“How do I get in line?” she asked the dark-skinned cook.

“I wouldn’t stand on no ceremony was I you,” he said with a grin. “Don’t mind what they look like: they taste good and that Cat said they wouldn’t kill us.”

“He did,” and Kris tried to act casual as she reached for the meat?

Food? It wasn't too hot to handle and she brought it to her lips, inconspicuously licking the part nearest her to get a taste. The taste confirmed the notion that her stomach needed this no matter what else happened. She took a good bite, inhaling air to cool the morsel, hot against her teeth. But she chewed it good—she had to; the meat was tough. It chewed good and tasted great and fell into a grateful stomach.

"Only one a customer," the dark man said, carefully inserting his knife point to check the state of the portions on the spit.

"Understandable. I've got ration bars to fill in the spaces, but this hot . . ." She paused, not only to take another bite to follow the first one, but also to give what she ate a proper designation.

"We're calling it meat," he said, grinning.

"Well, whatever it's called, it hits the spot. Thanks . . ." And she left her voice on an upnote for him to supply his name.

"Bart," he said. "You're Kris."

"How'd you know that?"

"'Cos you carried that girl fer two days and you know the Cat."

"Oh!" Such glory was unexpected. She looked around, then, rather embarrassed. She saw neither Zainal nor Mitford. "Where's the Sarge and the Cat?"

"Out. Hunting, I think, and seeing if there're more caves." He wrinkled his nose. "This place isn't really big enough for us all. Good idea to spread out anyhow, iffen you asked me. Only nobody did." He spoke amiably.

"Better if we had running water."

"Oh, we do, but the way down to it's no picnic."

"Oh?"

"Underground lake and river. Probably feeding some of the streams we passed."

Kris licked the thick bone that had been covered with meat.

"Crack it open. Marrow makes good eating, too."

Kris scrutinized the bone with reluctance to take his advice.

"Marrow's got a lot of good in it, Kris," Bart said solemnly. "Crunch down quick to break it open and then suck."

Rather than appear squeamish, she did so and the marrow was not at all unpleasant. She made sure she had cleaned both halves and then looked around her.

"In the fire," Bart said. "We burn everything we can find."

"So I'd . . . smelled," she said with a grin.

"Yeah, do get kinda rank, don't it."

Depositing the bones on the fire and hearing them snap as the flame

caught, she also got a whiff of the “burned bone” smell. She licked her fingers so she’d remember better the way the meat had tasted. Then she untied her cup from its place on her belt. “Where’s drinking water?”

“Over there,” and Bart nodded his head toward the side, where she could recognize the symmetry of the water crates, stored against the cave wall.

She had no sooner taken a drink than a woman, with her dark hair roughly chopped to a short length, tapped her on the arm. “You wouldn’t know how to skin and clean a dead animal, would you?”

“Yup,” she said with considerably more willingness than she actually had for the task. But she’d skinned squirrels and rabbits on her practical for the survival qualification and *now* was a much better time to display her abilities.

“I’m Sandy and I got put in charge without knowing doodly squat. I used to be”—and she gave a droll grin—“a potter.”

“I’m Kris . . .”

“Yeah, I know,” and the woman grinned at her. “You know the Cat and you carried your buddy for two days.”

Did everyone know those two facts about her? Kris wondered as she followed Sandy outside the cave. She hadn’t noticed that the hunters had brought their catch outside again. Half a dozen people were busy skinning and gutting, using large stones as worktops. Two men and two women appeared to be dissecting entrails at another and arguing about anatomy.

“Guts are guts and I don’t see why we can’t use these,” said the woman, holding up a long, stringy, gray rope. “Ought to be as tough as any cat’s.”

“That’s what Indians used to use to make bowstrings, wasn’t it?”

“Think so. They sure didn’t have nylon.”

Kris was not squeamish but she didn’t want to lose her breakfast. It had tasted so good going down, but coming up? She’d rather not find out.

Finding herself a space, she caught the beastie that Sandy tossed her. Limp, soft, but firmly packed. The hide was unexpectedly pleasant to touch though the muted gray-brown was an unearthly color. It wasn’t a furry hide, rather a suedey covering. Turning it around on her slab to examine it closely, she couldn’t see what had killed it until she noticed that one half of the “head” had been mashed. Too small to have been done by a club and certainly not a blow from the broad-edged hatchets they’d been issued. It did have four legs, a chunky rounded body, and not much neck before the blunt end that was its “head.” She gave a sigh and, giving a quick glance around to see how others were tackling the

job, she flipped it to its back and, tipping the head up, began the job of dressing it.

It had more meat on it than either rabbit or squirrel, having heavy haunches and well-developed shoulders. Her knife, while large enough to be a shade unwieldy for precision surgery, was sharp. She made a bit of a hash of stripping the hide off the legs, but hell, you didn't lose much below the "knee." She had just finished when Sandy appeared with another one and thus she spent her morning. There seemed to be endless quantities of that beastie and another, also suede-covered, with membranous wings that felt slimy. No meat on such wings but she was told to save these, too.

"Did you get something to eat?" Sandy asked her at one point.

"Yes, something from one of the squatty things, I think."

"If we had a pot to stew in, we could make everything go further," Sandy said with a rueful smile. "Bob the Herb," and she grinned back at Kris' startled expression, "well, he knew Terran herbs and he found some root sorts of things that oughtn't to poison us. And some rather delicious sharp-tasting berries. At least, the Cat thought they'd be edible. He ate 'em and didn't get the trots but Cats can eat a lot that'd give us the green apple two-step."

Kris paused, another trick coming to mind. She sat back on her heels. "We got any natural holes anywhere? I mean, holes with floors so they wouldn't leak?"

"Why?"

"Well, they'd make a self-contained stew pot. Fill one with water, then drop in clean heated stones. That'd boil the water and whatever else you had in it."

"It would?"

"I haven't done it, but the theory's sound. A pot's only something you can move around."

"What heathen country did you get that from?"

Kris laughed. "The old Irish used to do that. I saw the places in the south of Ireland. Great tourist attractions but the guide swore that was what field workers used when they didn't want to trek all the way back to their homes."

"Well, I never," Sandy said and went off, cocking her head this way and that.

"Hey, gal, you made it up," a cheerful voice said and Kris looked up from the animal she had just eviscerated to see Jay Greene making his way to her. He had a brace of avians in each hand. From the angle of their heads, their necks had been broken.

"Hi, Jay. Say, just how are these things being caught, or killed?"

"Snares work as well on this planet as any other," he said, looking pleased. "Probably better. Fortunately for me, these fowls are stupider'n turkeys and will eat anything edible, especially ration bar crumbs."

"You knew about snares?"

"*'Semper Paratus,'* like the Boy Scouts used to say," he said modestly. "I worked one out and Mitford showed us how to use a slingshot. A crack shot, too." He was properly respectful. "Haven't got any elastic, but with a little practice and the right flick of the wrist, you can aim pretty accurate. The rocksquatters haven't got sense enough to be scared, so they sit there and die young! Hey, you're pretty good with that knife!"

"Yeah, I am," she said blithely. "Yours next?" She reached for his burden while she honed the tip of her knife on the rock of her table.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, and, pretending extreme caution as she sharpened, deposited the bodies on the other side of her table.

The heat of the sun made her stop, mop her sweaty forehead on her sleeve, and realize that she'd been working steadily for long enough to get a crick in her neck and more blood than she liked on her coverall. Blood always attracted insects. At least on Earth and Barevi it had.

She finished the rocksquat she was currently cleaning and stood up, taking the result to the next in the line of preparation.

"I want a wash, a drink, and some time off," she told Sandy.

Sandy gave her directions to find the underground lake. More torches had been installed, so the path was well enough lit to keep Kris from stumbling down the uneven levels of the path. When she reached the end, she saw the viney rope, with knots in it to help you shinny up. Peering over the edge, she saw that there was sand to cushion the shock of the jump, which was roughly two meters down. The torch showed her the perceptible movement of the water flowing past this point. But she remembered that stillish waters could run deep. Sandy hadn't told her not to dunk herself in, but she also hadn't said she could. She bellied down to the edge of the water and took a quick sip: it had a soda-ish aftertaste but it wasn't bad. She buried her face in the water, then, sucking in a longer drink. That was when the desire to be rid of the sweat and dirt of the past few days became irresistible.

Kris was first prudent enough to see if the vine rope reached far enough into the water so she could hang on to it for her bath. It did. She sloughed off the wrap-around boots and the coverall and, keeping the vine rope in one hand, eased herself into the water. It was cold: no doubt about that, but it felt so good. She gave herself as thorough a scrub as she could with one hand—and no soap—in probably the fastest

bath she'd ever taken. Using her blanket, she dried herself as well as she could with the nonabsorbent material and rinsed out the bloodied sleeves of her coverall and the front of it where blood had spattered. She was back in her clothes, despite the dampness, and putting on the boots when she heard voices nearing. She hauled herself up to the top and started back, much refreshed by the respite.

She kept close to the right-hand wall as the group descending passed her.

"We gotta keep hold of that rope," one of the men was saying, "'cos the current's fast according to the Cat."

"God, what I wouldn't give for a razor!"

"Sharpen your knife, buddy," someone else said with a laugh. "That's what pioneers did."

When Kris found her way back to her sleeping place, she saw that Patti Sue was the only one there, and still asleep. She dithered to herself about bringing some food back and making sure the girl ate, but maybe sleep was more important. The way the hunters had been bringing in game there'd be some for her when she did wake up. Only how long would the game remain stupid enough to hang around and die? There were a lot of people to be fed.

That was when she heard a lot of noisy shouting and glad cries. She made her way to the main cave again and tried to figure out what all the shouting was about. Everyone seemed very pleased. Bart was grinning like he'd just drawn a lotto number.

"What's up, Bart?"

"They found food. A mountain of it." Then he recalled himself to his duties and turned the pieces cooking at his fire before they were reduced to char.

"Where? Things we can eat?" Kris found herself regarding the French-browned food hungrily.

"I guess so—or why roar so much?" he said with a shrug.

Kris took herself where she could hear what was being roared.

"Mountains of food!" "Some kinda storage cave. Like a silo." "And other doors we couldn't open . . . yet!" "They'd have to be saving for centuries." "No one near, no footprints, just cracks in the stone like something real big stood there."

She worked her way through the excited people toward the front of the cave, hoping to see someone she could ask for specifics. The "storage" cave bit worried her. It suggested that Zainal's information had been incorrect. You don't store things, especially food, where there're no bodies to eat it.

“... Scratch tests will give you a quick idea,” an Asian was saying in a firm voice. “They worked on some of the game you guys caught as well as the roots and berries.”

“Can we use the same method for the Rugarians and the Deskis, Matt?” she heard Mitford’s voice ask.

“Gee, I don’t know, Sarge. I was paramedic for human types.”

“Zainal, can you ask ’em?” Mitford switched to Barevi.

“Yes. I will ask,” and Kris saw a movement among those crowded around Mitford as Zainal left to make his inquiries.

“Okay, listen up!” Mitford’s voice assumed parade-ground volume. “I need some volunteers—you, you, you and you. Roll up your sleeves. We got samples we need to test.”

Suddenly the press of bodies thinned out as many decided not to be “volunteered” for any other bright ideas Mitford had in mind.

“Was food all that was found?” Kris asked as she moved toward Mitford.

“Isn’t that enough?” a woman asked in an irritable voice.

“It’s a help, surely, but we need so *many* things to set up a habitable place . . .”

“Habitable? That’s a laugh,” the woman said and moved away from Kris.

“All that food could be a laugh, too,” Greene said, appearing at her side, “if we can’t stomach it.”

“Anyone got any idea why there are such stores?” Kris asked him. “And what will happen if the three bears come home and find Goldilocks?” She gestured to indicate they were cast as Goldilocks.

“Nope. Zainal hadn’t any idea either. He insisted that the Catteni survey said the planet was uninhabited . . .”

“With sentient life forms?”

“Mmmm. Yes, he did make that distinction,” Greene replied and then grinned. “Scared the hell outa even the Sarge when they came across metal doors, fer God’s sake, across the cave entrances.”

“How’d they get in, then?” Kris asked.

Greene chuckled again. “We got guys in this outfit with some very interesting skills.”

Kris grinned back at him. “Where are these sesame caves?”

“A good half day’s trek from here, so don’t worry. And no road in or out. How’d they get crops in there without making some kinda tracks is puzzling.”

“Stray mechanical things are more nervous-making than some honest-to-god alien creatures,” Kris said.

"If you say so. Only the Sarge has sent a detail to scout about and see if they can figure out how and from where the silos get filled. He's calling a meeting this evening anyway, to explain everything. We might even have more to eat this evening, too." Greene licked his lips and Kris found herself doing the same thing as the tantalizing smells were wafted toward them on the breeze. "I could've eaten a whole one by myself."

"You didn't finish off your bars, did you?"

"Hell no, and watch yours, will ya? As I said, we got guys, and gals, with taking ways as well as interesting skills."

"Oh, lord, Patti Sue," Kris said and, ducking around Greene, started back to where the girl still slept. She paused long enough to ask Bart if she could take Patti's share to her.

"I can count on you give it to her and nobody else?" Bart said, fixing her with a stern eye.

"Yes, you can," Kris said solemnly, and found herself a rock on which to carry the hot meat.

Patti Sue was still asleep. Her food packet was gone. Someone had rolled the girl over to get at it. Kris fumed and then decided that Patti Sue would just have to take some responsibility for herself. She leaned over, careful not to tip the hot meat onto the dirty floor of the cave, and shook Patti Sue's shoulder. The girl's reaction—flailing about with hands and kicking out with her feet—was so unexpected that Kris ended up juggling the hot meat from hand to hand, trying to keep it from dropping to the floor.

"Hey, Patti. Easy now, gal. Don't make me drop your food. It's hot," she cried, trying to duck away from the girl's windmill of limbs.

"Kris?" Patti's voice broke and she stopped her battering. "Ohhhh, you scared me."

"Didn't mean to. Sit up, will you. This's hot! Use your sleeve . . ."

Patti rolled down the overlong cuff and using it as a pad, took the piece from Kris who set about licking her fingers as Patti regarded her portion suspiciously.

"Don't ask what it is 'cos no one's named the thing yet, but it tastes pretty good and it *is* hot."

"I don't think I could eat anything . . ." Patti said and held it out to Kris.

"No way, gal. You eat it. Think of it as the fried chicken your mother used to make . . ."

"No'm, I won't 'cos she couldn't cook worth doodly," Patti said in the only personal comment yet to pass her lips. Eyes closed, she then

pulled her lips from her teeth and took a tiny and tentative bite. "Oh! It isn't bad, is it?" And opened her eyes, eating with more relish. "Or maybe it's 'cos I'm so famished."

"Patti, you didn't think to hide your bars, did you?" Kris asked gently.

Patti looked up at her and her face fell. "No, why should I? No one would . . ." And, with one hand, she felt anxiously beside her and under her blanket, her face falling into tragic lines as she realized that her packet was gone. She started moaning and nearly dropped the meat. Kris propped her drooping hand back in the direction of her mouth.

"So eat that, and we'll share. It's not the end of the world, because they've found a storage cave with food in it."

"Cave? Food?" Patti seemed to shrink in on herself with fear. "There are Catteni living on this world, too?"

"No, not according to our live Catteni expert . . ."

Patti's eyes got wider with her fright. "A Catteni . . ."

"Eat!" Kris said urgently. "There was one Catteni dropped along with us and he's not a bad guy. He won't bother you . . ."

"Oh, oh, oh," and Patti moaned all the time she nibbled at the meat.

Kris had heard about dainty eaters but Patti took the prize.

KRIS STAYED WITH PATTI SUE THEN, AS MUCH BECAUSE THE GIRL WAS so preternaturally frightened of every footstep in the corridor outside, every shadow that interrupted the torchlight into their cubby, as because she was also tired. Her hands and arm muscles ached from her stint at dressing meat and she had a couple of little nicks from knife cuts which were annoying. Then she remembered her first-aid kit and dabbed them with the orange liquid. It stung briefly but she knew that the Cat disinfectant would reduce any chance of infection.

She suggested a dip to Patti Sue, but when she had to tell the girl how to get there and the primitive conditions, Patti just curled up, hugging her knees to her chest, and moaned.

"You're going to have to stop moaning, girl," Kris said, driven to it. "I don't mind but there are others who will. We're all in the same condition, smelly, scared, and suspicious. So you're not alone."

"But . . ." Patti Sue began, her eyes wide and distressed as she once again began to either apologize or explain. She shut her mouth for a long moment. "You're right. I am chicken-livered. I always have been and I guess I always will be. And I won't say I'm sorry. I am what I am."

Kris began to regret her outburst. "Honey, we all are. Scared, I mean."

"Are you still my buddy?" And the piteousness of her tone and the beseeching look in her eyes touched Kris the way the constant stream of apologies hadn't.

"You got raped, kid?" Kris asked, hunkering down beside her.

A convulsive shudder swept through Patti Sue's slender frame and she shot Kris an anguished look. "It shows, doesn't it?"

"Not like a birthmark or a scarlet letter," Kris said as kindly as she could. "The giveaway is how you flinch whenever you hear a man's voice or see a shadow or someone, totally harmless, like Jay Greene, who only tries to *help* you. I won't say there aren't guys in this group who wouldn't like to . . . well, you know . . . because you're a very pretty and appealing person. But right now, hon, there isn't anyone with much extra energy. They need it all to stay alive on this crazy world. So why don't you buck up a bit? I'll stick by my ol' trek-buddy as much as I can, but I think I'm going to be getting some work assignments . . ." *or go nutty looking after you*, Kris added to herself, "that'll take me away from you, so let's introduce you to a couple of other people . . . women . . . who keep an eye on you when I'm not here."

Patti Sue had become more and more agitated as Kris explained the situation and Kris could see that the girl visibly fought, and subdued, her immediate reaction to such news.

"Now, c'mon . . . and take your blanket with you. Not that we don't have others but it's wise to keep your things together here."

With nervous hands, Patti managed to roll up her blanket and draped it over her shoulder as Kris had. Still anxious, she followed Kris out of the cave, glancing nervously about when she heard voices issuing from other openings and almost treading on Kris' heels, she was so much her leader's follower. She hesitated, gasping, when they entered the main cave and she saw so many people moving about on errands, or squatting by fires to cook, chatting with those waiting on the hot meats. Others were making their way to the entrance.

Surprised, Kris saw that the exit looked out on a darkness broken by the flickering light of torches and a fire. She was somewhat reassured that Mitford felt illumination was safe.

"We're safe here, Patti," she said, motioning to the opening. "Outside's all lit up like Christmas. Let's go grab some fresh air and get a good seat for the meeting."

Not only did the main cavern reek of cooking odors but others which were not as savory and certainly not appetizing.

“Oh . . .” Patti moaned, cringing.

“You might as well, honey, unless you plan on immuring yourself forever in the stink.”

“If you say so . . .” Patti Sue was not going to venture anywhere even with Kris’ assurance.

“C’mon, I think I know where we can sit,” and Kris hoped that the darkness would be enough to conceal the evidence that part of the ledge had been an abattoir.

She walked, Patti so close behind her that she hoped the girl wouldn’t lurch into her and knock them both off the ledge, to a point just above the fire: a fair-sized one, its flames reflecting off the faces seated around it.

“Hey, we’ll have a balcony seat to the events,” Kris said. “Front and center.” Kris sat herself down while Patti Sue edged to Kris’ right, with no one beyond her. Yet.

Kris tried to identify the faces in the firelight: she spotted Zainal easily, sitting beside Mitford; Bass, Murphy, a Rugarian, and two Deskis just beyond them and then faces she vaguely recognized from the march but couldn’t put names to.

Patti Sue’s fearful gasp alerted her to an approach and the girl gripped her arm with surprisingly strong fingers.

“Easy,” Kris muttered under her breath for she recognized the newcomer. “It’s only Jay Greene and he’s decent. Hi, Jay. Don’t know if you’ve met my buddy yet. Patti Sue, this is Jay Greene and he’s a veritable Nimrod with Boy Scout snares. Join us. You can be our body-guard.”

Kris regretted that flippancy the moment it was out of her mouth, for Patti Sue tried to get inside Kris’ skin she sat so close. Kris sternly told herself that she might be as nervous if she’d been raped repeatedly, too. After all, that imminent possibility had prompted her to dare to steal the flutter and secrete herself in the forest, hadn’t it?

Greene sat down a couple of good handspans from Kris. She took the moment to turn to Patti Sue.

“You’re about choking the circulation off in my arm. Relax!” she murmured and felt the clutching fingers ease their stranglehold. She could almost feel the effort it took Patti Sue to remove her hands from Kris’ arm. “What’s the scam, Jay? You heard anything?”

“Yeah,” and the firelight glinted off his white teeth as he smiled. “I hear that we are not alone!” He spaced the words out so that they sounded like the voice-over of a video trailer.

Patti Sue’s hands returned to crush Kris’ upper arm.

“I knew that,” Kris said and this time just peeled the fingers off,

putting the girl's hands back in her lap and giving them a final pat to stay there.

"No, I mean, we're not the only flotsam that got planted on this planet," Greene said.

"Really? Hmm, makes sense, though," Kris said in her most nonchalant tone. Why had she been saddled with such a nerd like Patti Sue! "There were only—what—five-six hundred plonked down in our field. I wouldn't call that an efficient disposition of redundant personnel. That ship they herded us into could handle who knows how many more. I know there were two levels, if not more. Maybe they did a clean sweep of all the holding cells on Barevi. That would make the journey here economically feasible. Any more humans?"

"Well," and Greene shrugged, "I'm not sure anyone could tell."

Patti Sue let out little whimpers.

"Look on the bright side, will you, Patti Sue?" Kris said. "You weren't one of them and you're safe with us. Isn't she, Jay?"

"Safe as houses," he said in a warmly reassuring tone for which Kris gave him a broad smile and a thumbs-up with her left hand which Patti couldn't see. "In fact, the more the merrier. So long as we can exchange information and band together to solve the problems this place poses."

"Any other scuttlebutt?"

"Like what?"

"Did that scouting party Mitford sent out find what brings in the grain harvest?"

"No," Greene said, shaking his head. "They did find other storage caves, all hollowed out of solid rock. And more valleys of fields and stuff. That's where . . ." Kris gave him a quick flash of her hand to stop him saying anything that would set Patti Sue off again. ". . . Where they could see other heavy vehicles had been parked," he finished off.

They all heard the murmur of voices and saw that people were emptying out of the cave now and either making their way down to the bonfire level or finding spaces on the ledge.

"Do we start off with a national anthem, or a prayer?" Kris quipped to Jay.

"I doubt the good sergeant is religiously inclined," Greene remarked.

"For which I am deeply grateful." Kris felt Patti Sue's body stiffen with resentment of her flippancy. "We need a realist."

"I second that!"

Chuck Mitford had now stood up and raised his hands for quiet.

"This is Mitford speaking in case any of you can't see me," he said

in his gravelly parade-ground voice that echoed slightly in the ravine. “We’ve had several teams out on recon—reconnaissance to those of you who don’t know military slang.

“We’ve found storage caves with enough grains—which we humans, at least, can digest—to supply us for years. We don’t know who—or what—stored the stuff but they’re unlikely to notice what we have taken, and will take, once we get our commissary organized. We’re lucky to have some botanists among us who’ve figured out what we can and cannot eat of the local stuff, berries and roots. As you’ve all found out, the water tastes pretty good.

“We’re also looking for additional quarters so we won’t be jammed in like sardines . . .”

“Like those transport ships, maybe?” a man added with droll bitterness and got a laugh.

Mitford’s grin was visible in the firelight as he held up his hand. “We’ve also discovered that there were other parties . . . landed here. We haven’t made contact but if anyone does, send your buddy back here for assistance. *Don’t* lead anybody here. Even other Terrans.” He paused to let that warning sink in. “We’ll be safe sticking together with folks we’ve already got to know on the trek here. We’ll integrate anyone who wants to, but I think they ought to be vetted first.”

There were murmurs of agreement there.

“No more aliens . . .” a voice said.

“That’s a no-go,” Mitford said sternly, glaring in the direction of the comment. “I make that plain right here and now. I don’t know where you were on Barevi, but I learned that some of the aliens got just as many smarts as I do.” He jerked his thumb against his chest. “And some have skills I don’t. We get to make a fresh start on this planet so let’s leave that sort of crap behind us. Huh?” He had a wide murmur of support for that suggestion. “For those of you who didn’t know, it was the Deskis who found the caves for us. I doubt we could have. They climb like the spiders they resemble, only they’re humanoid like us. I don’t want to hear them called spiders anymore. Hear me? Well, hear me good. They were ripped away from their planet same as we were. So we treat them the same as we treat one of us—because they are one of us. Have I made that point clear enough?”

The response he got was vociferous from most, which reassured Kris. She tried to spot those who were reluctant to grasp that announcement.

“A Deski carried May Framble’s kid on the trek and never made a single complaint.” The look on Mitford’s face chided those who had bitched. “So remember, they’re in this, too, and pulling their own weight

... what weight there is of them. The Rugarians are part of us, too, by the same principle. They accounted for more of our catch than human hunters did." He grinned. "Crack slingshoters!

"Another thing we gotta get straight like right now!" He pointed downward to emphasize the immediacy. "Any nasty individual caught stealing someone else's ration bars—or in the possession of more than a fair share—loses any he or she has on him or her and does latrine duty for a month. Understand?" He glared around the fire and up at the ledges. "We don't have much to steal, but this colony isn't going to tolerate any pilfering. Not no how, no way!" He sliced both hands across his body to indicate the finality of that statement. "You all got that straight?"

"Who made you boss, Mitford?" a male voice demanded irritably.

"You did!" Mitford jerked out his chin and glared in the direction.

Kris thought the voice sounded like the same one that had protested including aliens. She wondered if it was Arnie the weasel-faced, but on second thought, Arnie wouldn't have the guts to speak up about anything. He was the kind to go behind your back. And steal a sleeping girl's ration.

"You want the job? Have it!" Mitford made as if to leave the bonfire.

There was immediate loud and vehement protest from human voices and, Kris was glad to hear, a waving of arms and hands from the Deskis and Rugarians.

"I've had years of knowing how to get even more ill-assorted bunches of bods working together than you possibly could, buddy..." and Mitford's tone made that noun a dirty epithet, "so unless you can beat my twenty-seven years—fifteen of them as a master sergeant—close your mouth hole. Anybody else got some complaints about how I run this chickenshit outfit? No? Well, that shows you've some sense upstairs. I don't like the assignment any more than you do. But I took it on and I'll see it through until we know what's what on this planet. So listen up now.

"We've got a base camp but we need to check out the area so we don't get any surprises. We weren't the only ones dropped, you know, and some might like to move into our own choice piece of suburban development." That provoked some laughter. "Not much, right now..." and his pause suggested that he had many improvements in mind so there were a few groans. "But we'll do well—if we're let alone. So, two points..." And he held up his fingers. "First, we have sentries—with their eyes open—round the clock, even if we weren't issued one. Second, when you hear me or a sentry bawling *red alert*." And he

cupped his hands around his mouth and roared the phrase, the sounds reverberating even as the people nearest him flinched back, with sheepish grins. “You come running as fast as you can, knives ready for action. Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, my friends,” and his expression became very solemn. “We lost out back on Earth but you may be damned sure I don’t intend to lose out here. When we were dropped on that field, we got liberated again and I intend to stay free and make a great start! So anytime you hear *Red Alert*, whaddya do?” He cocked his head, hand to his ear.

“We come running, daddy,” the wit from the shadows beyond the fire yelled.

“You better believe it! We also got to stay healthy, so that means latrines and they need digging where we haven’t found long-drop holes. And throw in some sand every time you go. Keeps the smell down. We need hunters out every morning and we need volunteers to try foods and others to cook ’em. I talked to a lot of you on the way here but now I need to know which of you have specialist training like medics or chemistry or even survival courses. Everyone’s going to work at something here to make this go. And I don’t want any bitching about taking your turn at the dirty jobs. You’ll be rotated. Now, you individuals with special training that I haven’t had a chance to talk to, come to this side of the fire when this meeting’s over. You hunters, get your assignments from this Rugarian—he calls himself Slav—and he’s got the best throwing arm I’ve seen since Lou Gehrig.”

“Sarge, you weren’t born when Lou Gehrig played,” some wit yelled.

“Nope, but I sure saw enough footage on him in his prime. So hunters with Slav. I’ll need more scouting parties tomorrow, so if you want some exercise”—and there were guffaws at that—“see Zainal here.”

“You trusting that Cat?”

“Until hell freezes over,” Mitford said in a tone that brooked absolutely no argument. “He got dumped here just like the rest of us and I’m not brave enough to ask him why.”

Again a ripple of surprise but Mitford went on. “I want twenty individuals to make another run to get more grain . . . lemme see a few hands before I volunteer you.” The hands were raised, far more than twenty. “Now, one last thing. There’re more males than females. Some of our women got raped by the Catteni. We’re humans! No one bothers a woman in this camp.”

At the first mention of rape, Patti Sue moaned and tried to burrow

into Kris. She was trembling all over as Kris put a protective and reassuring arm about her.

"What about a gal raping one of us?" the same wit called, and got snarling reactions from the women nearest him.

"If that kinda rape's inevitable, relax and enjoy it . . . buddy," a woman's voice called out, a distinctly bitter and contemptuous edge to her words.

"I'll personally stake out any *man* forcing a woman," Mitford said, holding up his big and capable hands. "The same goes for any female dick-teasing." He paused a beat and then gave a wry grin. "That is, if anyone has any energy for anything after a long day here."

"You see, Patti Sue," Kris murmured soothingly, patting the nervous hands clenching and unclenching on her arm, "and he means it."

"*He* can mean it, but what if . . ."

"No what-ifs, Patti Sue," Kris said as firmly as she could. But Mitford's call for explorers would give her the freedom to leave this clinging vine tomorrow and do something more noteworthy than gutting squatters. "You heard and he means it."

Patti continued to moan, despite her earlier promise not to.

"Now, I'll listen to *intelligent* questions, preferably ones I can answer," Mitford said. "I'll keep an open office but if I'm busy, talk to Bass here. Zainal, you just got appointed our alien liaison man, only because you speak better Barevi than I do. Dowdell—stand up there, and you, too, Murphy. They're acting as corporals. Got any complaints? Bring 'em to them. I assure you they'll be looked into and remedied . . . if humanly possible."

"Sergeant Mitford?" A man called, standing up so he could be seen, "Any ideas *why* we got dumped here?"

"Zainal says Cattenis do this to settle some planets. They come back at intervals to see if anyone's still alive and breathing."

"Then we won't get off?"

"I didn't say that," and Mitford's voice was grim. "But they have to land to take a look-see, don't they? There's no guarantee it's them'll take off in the ship, is there?"

That comment brought a lot of hopeful murmurs and muffled remarks.

"And one good reason to be friendly to the one Catteni we got on our side," Mitford went on. "Any other questions?"

"Then who's farming this planet?"

"Good question and I don't know the answer."

"Does the Cat?"

“Our Catteni ally,” and Mitford paused to be sure everyone caught his use of the full name, “does not, as his knowledge of this planet is almost as spotty as ours . . . except he’d heard that some of the indigenous specimens are dangerous. Outside of this camp, you keep your eyes and ears open. Or live long enough to tell us what you saw or heard.”

“Gee thanks, sarge,” and a ripple of laughter ran through the crowd.

“Everyone’s in remarkably good spirits,” Kris said to Greene.

“Amazing how a full belly improves your outlook.”

“Some bastard stole Patti Sue’s rations,” she added.

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Greene replied in a low voice. “We can get her more. Or should you keep them safe for her?”

“After what Mitford said about having more than my fair share? Thank you, no.”

“Oops! Hmmm. Well, I don’t think she’ll lose ’em again. Maybe you should trade buddies with Sandy.”

“A thought,” Kris replied, knowing even as she spoke that she’d be conscience-stricken if she did. “Why should I saddle her with Patti?”

“She’s one tough lady and will watch out for the girl,” Jay said. “And someone’s going to have to watch for her because she’s sure one nervous kid.”

Kris sighed. *Decisions, decisions.* But she wasn’t going to be tied by Patti Sue to the cave and not get some “exercise.” *And* she’d survived on her own on Barevi so she was confident she could be useful as a scout or food hunter here on . . . wherever they were.

She cupped her hands to her mouth before she could think twice. “Hey, sarge, does this planet have a name?”

Mitford looked up, trying to see her in the darkness beyond the firelight.

“Bjornsen? Zainal, you guys name your planets?”

Zainal stepped into the firelight. “Only numbers,” he said in Barevi, shrugging.

“What about ‘Bounty’? Like in *Mutiny on the . . .*” a woman called.

“Alcatraz?” “Be positive—El Dorado.”

The exchange of names and opinions stirred an uproar which Mitford let go on for a while before he held up his hand.

“Murphy found some sort of chalk. He’ll put it by the cave entrance and those of you who can write”—there were laughs—“can put up your choice of name. We’ll settle the matter tomorrow right here,” and he pointed to the fire, “when we issue tomorrow’s progress report. Got me?”

"Gotcha!" was bellowed back at Mitford from every corner and the word bounced about the ravine.

"Okay, then. Sentries, take your positions. You'll be relieved at first moonrise. Dis-MISSED!"

Despite the military order, Mitford was grinning as he stepped back from the fire and into the darkness beyond it.

"C'mon, Patti Sue," Kris said, rising to her feet. "I want to find Sandy and see where she's sleeping. That way you'll know who to go to tomorrow."

Patti Sue was clutching her arm again. "Tomorrow? You'll be going? Where? You can't leave me!"

"Honey, I can and I will," Kris said. "You'll be all right. You heard Mitford. No one's going to mess with you."

"But supposing . . ."

"Shut up, Patti Sue," Kris said firmly, giving the girl a shake. "I can't baby-sit you every minute of the day."

"Oh," and Patti sank back in on herself.

"Now, Miss Patti," Greene said in a soothing voice, making no move toward the frightened girl, "you *will* be safe. Sandy and I are supposed to inventory the supplies we've got and what's been brought in. We may have to use the walls for our records but I got some of the chalk Murphy found and you can be our secretary. Is that what you did on Earth?"

"Secretary?" Patti's voice took on a little substance. "Yes, I was secretary. A good one, but . . ."

"You've just been promoted to the job here," said Greene so kindly that Kris could have kissed him.

"You heard Mitford, we all have skills that he can use, Patti Sue," she said and, with one hand around the girl's waist, eased her along the ledge to the entrance. "We'll just find Sandy. We'd better move along now or we might miss her. She's good people."

"But *you're* my *buddy*," Patti Sue said in a quavering tone.

"Yes, I was," Kris' conscience forced her to say, "for the trek, but that's over and we're here. Besides, Sandy's a good cook and it's a smart idea to be on the right side of the cooks, you know. Now let's find her."

They did, grilling the last of the day's catch.

"Sentries get what's left over," she said, taking in Patti Sue's terror-stricken face and smiling reassuringly. "Patti Sue, you just sit here, right by me." And she physically manhandled Patti Sue into the space she wanted her in. "You go on now, Kris, so Patti Sue and I can get acquainted."

Give the woman her due, Kris thought, she didn't even blanch at the idea of having Patti Sue hanging on to her. As Kris hastily departed, Greene on her heels, she heard Sandy telling the girl that she had a daughter about Patti's age and where had she come from on Earth.

"You can't be saddled with that one any longer," Jay said as they made their way down to the bonfire.

" 'And there's no discharge in the war,' " Kris chanted out, resorting to Kipling.

"Huh?"

"Nemmind. Can you see Sarge or Zainal?"

"Beyond the fire, I think."

It was an easier climb down than up, so she realized that wider, better steps had been carved out of the cliffside at some point during that day.

They had to wait their turn to speak to Mitford as there was no lack of volunteers for the scouting and hunting parties. Maybe another day Kris could go to the caves to see the stores with her own eyes.

"Got room for me on a scouting party tomorrow, sarge?" Kris asked when he looked around and saw her. When he spotted Greene behind her, he scowled. "Oh, I left Patti Sue with Sandy but I've got survival skills."

"Yeah, you did well on Barevi," Mitford said, but she thought, for a moment, that he had other plans for her.

"The skills're good anywhere...in the universe..." And she grinned. "'Sides, I had a good rest today, gutting beasties."

Mitford hesitated until he saw Zainal watching him. "Go with our ally. You're safer with him."

"I am?"

"You better believe it." That came out as a growl. "Rendezvous at last moonset. Same cave? Good, Zainal'll know where to find you." He started to turn to those waiting behind her.

"Sarge, someone stole Patti's rations while she slept."

Mitford nodded to Jay Greene. "Mark a package with her name then, Greene, and keep it in stores. At best, she'll get used to dealing with a male again. Next?"

And he looked beyond them to others waiting patiently for his attention. Kris and Jay moved off.

"I don't know if that was an insult or not," Jay murmured drolly.

"Well, I'll know it's safer in your care and she'll get fed."

"Patti Sue'll always get fed," Jay said cryptically.

KRIS COLLECTED PATTI SUE FROM SANDY, TRYING TO IGNORE THE LOOK in the girl's eyes which suggested she had doubted that Kris *would* return for her. Sandy asked which cave they were stashed in and she'd just change her bedroll into it.

Kris escorted Patti to the water containers for a drink, and then to the latrine cave and showed her how to take care of that basic problem before they retired. There was one woman fast asleep and snoring along the inside wall. So Kris directed Patti Sue to lie next to her, then she stretched out and there was space left for Sandy, at least, and probably someone else. Because her noise would keep everyone awake, Kris leaned over and, shaking the woman, suggested that she turn on her side. Sleepily the woman complied and then Patti sighed deeply in appreciation as she made herself as comfortable as possible.

Not that Kris needed any help getting to sleep. She didn't even turn once—that she remembered.

Chapter Five

THE PANORAMA FROM THE TOP OF THE CLIFF WAS BREATHTAKING—AND Kris needed to get her breath back after the climb Zainal had led his squad on. Before them stretched in a westerly direction—as far as the eye could see—the large neat fields, punctuated by streams that glistened as sparkling ribbons in the morning sun. Some of the fields were occupied by grazers whose form was difficult to decipher at this distance. Off to the south there was a huge body of water, but whether it was an ocean or a lake could not be ascertained.

This party was also told to hunt and Zainal had said tersely that it was best to hunt farther from the camp. To this all the experienced hunters agreed. There was little grumbling from the humans about the Catteni—or none after they'd been on the way an hour, for he set them a bruising pace and sheer human perversity required the eight members of her species to keep up with Slav, the Rugarian, and the two Deskis, Zewe and Kuskus—or that was what their names sounded like.

Mitford's claim that the Deskis were useful was borne out when the spindly creatures seemed to ooze up cliffs. They didn't have suckers on their feet, but that was the impression you got, Kris thought. They stood firm behind the ropes they let down for others. So did Zainal, who was the first humanoid to follow. Some way or other, in the five ascents made, Kris always seemed to get hauled up by Zainal, who grinned each time he handed her safely onto the next level. She felt oddly pleased by his continued attention . . . considering the fact that it was all her fault he was on this planet anyhow.

A day on Botany, which was what Kris privately decided to call the planet, was longer than Earth and Barevi, so they'd been going quite a long time before the sun was at zenith, which was when Zainal called

a meal-break halt on the summit. The ration bars would have gone more easily with some water to soften them though they'd all had a good drink at the last stream. Kris, dangling her legs over the edge of their vantage point, munched away and looked at the view, trying to figure out what crops were being grown, and for whom. As far as she could see, the land was cultivated or used as pasture, yet Zainal had repeatedly said the planet was not inhabited. So who was nurturing it and why? Considering that the harvestings were stored in caves, could the consumers be cave dwellers, residing deep within the planet? That would explain why there were no cities or visible occupants. Not that Kris was eager to meet troglodytes.

The range of hills, of which this was an outcropping, loomed behind and around them, spreading to the east. Mitford had marched them northward from the field on which they had been dropped by the Catteni, up the ravines until the caves had been found. But those had showed no signs of occupation, past or present, even by the local wildlife, which apparently favored forested and vegetated areas. Curiouser and curi-ouser, Kris thought.

Just then the Rugarian, Slav, uttered an odd cry and pointed, his oddly jointed furry arm directing everyone's attention to the northwest. Kris could see nothing but more rolling fields in their neat patchwork arrangements.

Shielding his eyes, Zainal peered out and jabbered something to the Rugarian, who gave his head a sharp affirmative nod.

Zainal turned to the others. "Slav has seen what is different . . . not animal." He made a cube shape with swift gestures.

"Any people?" Kris asked, thinking that the presence of geometrical objects might indicate another drop point and more castaways. Not that she really wanted more people whose needs had to be considered.

The field was a fair distance away, though there were two little forests to traverse and in each the guys with slingshots brought down some of the alien birdy-like things and enough rocksquats to make the hunt worthy of the name. Kris had coaxed one of the hunters into letting her try her hand with the sling when he didn't need it. By the time they had reached the second woods, she was getting closer to the target she aimed at.

"Wait'll you see a covey of the critters," Cumber suggested, "and then, if you miss what you're aiming at, you might hit something else."

"You're encouraging," Kris replied.

"Are you?" and Cumber cocked his head at her, his eyes bright with suggestion.

“Well, on that score, no, buddy, not encouraging,” she said bluntly but with a smile.

She would have liked to stride forward, right up on top of Zainal’s heels, but that didn’t seem a good idea either so she shortened her stride and dropped back with the Deskis, who were ambling along, both festooned with necklaces of the rocksquats which their unerring aim had downed. They were as good as hunters as they were as climbers.

The cubes were indeed Catteni-issue: one was even unopened and contained blankets which Zainal parceled out among the hunters to be carried back. There were dried brown puddles in an irregular pattern across the field but little else. Kris felt a wave of regret for those who had lost their lives here from “unknown assailants,” as a news bulletin might say.

Reassembling her clutch of blankets, Kris saw the Rugarians quartering the field while Zainal had several others spread out and searching the borders.

“Think those flying things got ’em?” Cumber asked, returning to her.

“Could be. But all of them? When the crates have been opened?”

“Or what comes out of the ground in the dark and sucks corpses dry,” Cumber went on, waiting to see the effect his words had on her.

“This world does its own recycling,” she replied. “No waste, no debris, no Coke bottles or dead aerosol cans.”

“Huh?” Cumber was plainly a literal-minded man and her facetious remark did not register with him.

Then one of the border patrol let out a shout and everyone, of course, had to go see what he’d found: a clear trace that some large objects had pushed their way through the bushy hedge.

“Looks like something stampeded through there,” Cumber told Kris.

She could see the line of retreat, or flight, through the foot-high crops in the next patch. At that point one of Rugarians shouted.

“Quiet, he says,” Zainal said in his deep-voiced Barevian that carried just loudly enough so that the entire group heard him.

Slav was gesturing with his knife and then Kris clearly heard the Barevian word “hot.”

“Hot metal?” she asked, making her voice carry as she strode toward the knot of people clustering about Slav.

“Hot metal?” he was asked. Someone else pulled out their knife, pantomiming a hot blade.

“Yissss,” and the Rugarian pointed downhill and inhaled deeply.

“He smells hot metal,” Kris said.

Zainal took charge, directing everyone to hide behind the hedges and for Slav and a human male to go investigate.

“Hot metal? The people who farm this planet coming to see who’s messing up their fields?” Kris asked of no one in particular.

“’Bout time someone came to have a look-see, if ya ask me,” Cumber said in a pessimistic tone.

“And all we got is knives!”

The returning scouts were not much ahead of the “thing” that lumbered after them. Only it wasn’t *after* them: it was following a course to the fields above. It was gliding along on an air cushion, for it negotiated the hedges in a smooth hop and, while Kris and everyone else watched in fascination, it reached one of the crop-bearing fields and immediately went into a different mode: spraying the field.

“Willya looka that!” The speaker rose to full height in his surprise. Immediately those on either side of him pulled him back down behind the screening hedges. “Ah, it ain’t got no eyes. It’s just a farm machine. An’ I think I saw another one down below, spraying another field.”

He was correct, as everyone immediately discovered by the simple expedient of taking a careful look.

“Close look now,” Zainal said in Barevi and pointed at not only Cumber but Kris and Slav to take the detail. “Stay down. Stay quiet. Don’t know what these machines can do.”

“Wal, I doan mind restin’ my dawgs,” was someone’s response. “That Cat can sure trot the clicks.”

Kris was rather pleased to be singled out as someone whose opinion on the machine might be useful. Crouching low—and indeed Zainal moved as close to being on all fours as she’d ever seen a man move, even in Rambo pictures—they traversed the field where another group of whilom settlers had been deposited. They could see the top third of the machine, diligently switching back and forth, spraying evenly.

“That’s why the fields are so damned regular,” Cumber muttered beside her. “So the machines don’t have to do corners or nothin’.”

“Work-efficient,” Kris replied in a whisper.

Zainal’s hand flagged at them, and they saw him put his finger to his lips for silence. Kris grimaced at having to be reminded. Machines who came all on their own to do even methodical tasks might be programmed for other actions.

When they got closer to the farther hedge, Zainal motioned them to get even flatter to the ground. Kris suppressed a groan as she fell to her belly and inched along like the rest of them.

They found gaps at the base of the hedges, between the thick trunks

of the vegetation, and peered out at the machine, which was now on the far side of the field. It was still balanced on its air cushions, still spraying, and the only mechanism that it reminded Kris of was a Dalek from old *Doctor Who* videos.

“Exterminate. Exterminate.” The Dalekian cry echoed through her head and she wondered just how apt it was. Was the thing spraying fertilizer or insect killer? It was nearly finished, whatever. When it got to the last corner, however, it turned and came toward them.

Zainal signaled for them to make themselves as unnoticeable as possible by squinching up against, under if possible, the thick hedge. Kris heard the thing nearing just as she also damned near gutted herself on a pointy root. Grimacing, she endured the discomfort for what seemed to be hours.

She heard a clicking, whirring, and other such noises that were so much like the sounds of that old *Doctor Who* series that she was also close to laughter. Except this wasn’t a laughing matter.

Then the machine “jumped” the hedge and they all got a blast of hot, smelly, metallic air before it swept across the field, not touching any of the debris but certainly, Kris felt sure, checking it over.

Another hopscotch leap and it left, fortunately never getting into the field where the rest of the hunters were, hopefully, making themselves as scarce as possible.

“That thing’s dangerous,” Cumber told Zainal, who merely nodded.

“We get the others and leave,” he said, emphasizing the last word significantly.

Slav, who had been listening carefully to the Catteni, now raised his hands to his lips and emitted a shrill sound that wasn’t birdcall or dog call or anything.

It was answered by a similar call from Zewe.

“Tell. Go,” and Slav pointed uphill, the way they had come.

“Good!” And so they started on the way back, joining the rest of the hunters by the time they reached the next field.

The Deski then gave one of their warnings, quick gestures indicating flying things, and everyone froze in their tracks. A formation of five fliers came gliding in from the east, swooping down over the field and then quartering it. As nothing moved, the predators were balked of their reward and, with squawks of complaint drifting back to the breathless waiting hunters, they proceeded on down the slope.

“Wow!” Cumber said in a low and respectful voice. “That damned machine called in an alarm.”

“We weren’t seen by it,” Kris said thoughtfully, “so it must have some sort of sensors, because it sure knew we were there. Like a Dalek.”

"A what?" Cumber clearly had never watched the old s-f serials.

"A robot with deadly intentions."

One of the other men grinned and said in a nasal falsetto, "Exterminate! Exterminate!"

"Hey, mac, keep it down!" someone else ordered in a nervous whisper.

"What is said?" Zainal quietly asked in English.

"The machine reported our presence," Kris said, pantomiming the actions of her words. "It may be heat-sensitive. Knew we were in the hedge because of body heat."

Zainal nodded. "Take good care. We go to caves now. Hunt. But watch always." He tapped Slav and Zewe and gave them some rapid orders. "They hear best," he added to Kris.

The two Rugarians moved to the sides of the main group and then, on Zainal's signal, everyone moved out again.

The return home was even rougher, with all the descents to be made while they were laden with the rewards of their hunting. No unusual hazards were encountered. On the plus side, the six-legged grazers which they had spotted in the field bled red blood when nicked. Two were slaughtered and dressed right there in the field so that their meat could be portioned out among the hunters to carry home. The additional blankets were put to good use. And very helpful later when the insects began to rise after the sun went down.

Deskis evidently had a sharp homing instinct because they led the way back in the semidarkness. Kris had never been so glad to see the campfires of home!

There was certainly applause for the hunters when they returned so well laden. No sooner had she divested herself of her burden than Zainal touched her arm and gestured for her to join him in reporting to Mitford. Cumber and Slav were there, too.

"Cumber said you identified these machines, Kris," Mitford said. He looked very tired.

"Me? No, not really, only that they're some sort of robots."

"Cumber said they didn't even touch the ground."

"Air-cushion propulsion?"

"Hmmm. High-tech. And heat-seekers?"

"Well, the machine must have called in those flying predators," Kris said. "And there were five of 'em so I'm extrapolating that the machine sensed our five bodies hidden in the hedge. But anyone's guess is as good as mine," she ended modestly.

"But yours is a tad more educated from watching all those kidvids. I'll buy it, Bjornsen, I'll buy it. G'wan now, and you as well, Cumber.

We've got a sort of bread tonight, soda bread." He grinned. "One of the chemists found a deposit of sodium bicarbonate. Bread doesn't taste half bad—if you're hungry enough and you ignore occasional grits from the grinding."

No sooner had Kris reached the main cave, to stand in line for her hunk of bread, than Patti Sue discovered her. The girl threw her arms about Kris' neck and howled with tears of relief.

"Hey, now, Patti Sue, I was perfectly all right," Kris told the girl, trying to calm her down to mere hysterics.

Sandy came to her rescue. "There now, Patti, I told you Kris can take care of herself."

Patti Sue was persuaded to release her death hold on Kris. As she stood back, she looked down at her front, now smeared with what also covered Kris' garment.

"Oh, my gawd, what's that?"

"Probably blood," Kris said, for the meat she had lugged back had dribbled down her, attracting the insects.

"Oh, my gawd!" And Patti Sue backed away from Kris as if she had turned leprous.

"Guess I need a bath," Kris said cheerfully and, taking her portion of bread, ate it on the way down to the underground lake to make herself more presentable.

She wasn't the only one to want to get clean. There were quite a few white bodies splashing in the water. Someone had added more ropes. Pausing only to add her wrap-on boots, food packet, and blanket to the row of similar belongings awaiting the return of their owners, she grabbed a spare tether and plunged into the water. Twisting the rope about one wrist, she then winkled herself out of the garment and rinsed it thoroughly. The water was invigoratingly cool and somewhat restored her energy level. She got out, drying herself on her blanket and then wrapping it sarong fashion. She squeezed the water from her coverall and then made her way back out of the lake cavern. She was sure she'd sleep that night.

She did. Until Zainal roused her. It had to be the middle of the long Botany night because everyone around her was fast asleep, especially Patti Sue, who would have had a knicker attack if she'd awakened to see the Catteni so close by.

There was just enough light supplied by the flickering torch in the passageway for her to see Zainal touch his lips for silence. Groaning involuntarily because she was stiff from yesterday's exertions, she had trouble rising. Zainal put out a helping hand and—zip—she was on her

feet. She grinned up at him as she followed him out. He didn't release her hand and she was content to let it stay in his strong mitt. She had to entertain the thought that she was definitely attracted to the Catteni, and not just because he was taller than she was. He had conducted himself with such dignity and tact during the past few days that surely even those who hated the Catteni violently couldn't fault him. Certainly Mitford had made it plain to the motley crew that Zainal was a large and useful entity in their continued survival. Once the euphoria of the past few days settled into boring routine and less exciting uncertainty, she suspected there would be problems.

"Trouble?" she whispered in Barevian once outside the room. "Don't you ever sleep?"

"Not in danger," he murmured back and led her.

It was third moonset when they got outside. Kris could see faces lit by the campfire in the ravine; one of them was Mitford's.

"Sorry to rouse you, Bjornsen," he said with a grin and gestured for her to hold up her cup. She didn't realize until that moment that she had unconsciously gathered up her accoutrements—her blanket, the cup, and her ration bars. "As far as my internal clock is concerned, this is well past dawn."

"And you're a creature of habit?" She grinned at him, accepting the warm liquid. It was some sort of herbal tea, which was an improvement on bare, naked hot water.

"Pull up a stone," he added and she sat on the one just to his right. "I want you to go with Zainal, here, and Slav and the Deski Coo, and suss out what other surprises this place has in store for us. No sense in thinking we're safe in this ravine. One of the eggheads mentioned that there are indications this," and he waved about the walls of the ravine, "may get flooded in spring. High-water marks and scrapings of trees on the sides, higher up than we can stand, and I ain't that good at treading water."

With a start Kris wondered if he was quoting an old Bill Cosby routine.

"I want you to circle around," and he gestured, "as far as you can go in a day's march, and map. Zainal here says he knows how to map. He's picking up English real good. Officer material for sure." This last Mitford said in a lower voice and with a grin meant for Kris alone. "Seeing as how you know him, and seem to be able to charade things to Slav and Coo, you'd be the human in the team. Unless you got any real objections to the duty."

"Is there going to be trouble for the . . . ah . . . aliens, sarge?"

"Ain't there always?" Mitford said in a cynical tone. "I can trust you, Bjornsen," he added in a dark low tone. "You've proved you can hack it, too."

"Thanks, sarge," and Kris felt a good deal taller for that unexpected praise.

"And with the Catteni along he'll see you don't come to harm."

"Thanks, sarge," she said, this time wryly. Build 'em up to knock 'em down, but she grinned to show she had no ill feelings. It was enough that the Sergeant wasn't as misogynistic as some career soldiers she'd heard about.

"I want you to draw additional rations from Greene for all of you. Seems like the Deski can't stomach the red meat and they need somethin' in their diet, though what it is I haven't been able to figure out." He sighed. "That's another reason I'm sending one along with you. And you're to eat!" He shot one thick index finger at her so suddenly that she rocked back. "We've got enough to supply patrols away from camp. That stuff may be less tasty than field rations even, but it's got all the nutritional crap you need to march on. Get another issue of blankets and an extra coverall. Got it?"

"Got it, sarge," she said, her hand halfway to her brow to salute when she realized that might not be appropriate even if it was an instinctive reaction to his manner.

"Good," and he grinned in the firelight, having caught that abortive gesture. "Zainal, get the rations and supplies and move out at your leisure."

"Leisure" in army parlance meant right smart. So in next to no time they were making their way in dawn's early light up the ravine, and into undiscovered country.

Zainal led at a spanking pace that didn't seem to alter whatever the terrain they had to traverse. But, like Mitford, he did call a halt when full daylight lit the skies.

The first thing Zainal did was tie a knot in a thin strip of blanket, of which he had quite a few tucked inside a thigh pocket. A tally rope? Well, they had no writing materials and Zainal, strong as he was, couldn't exactly carry a sheet of rock with him to chalk up the miles. Or should she say "clicks" since she was on a military operation?

"What are you counting, Zainal?" she asked.

"Steps, so I know distance," he said in Barevi.

"Oh . . ." And that steady pace now made sense. "What's the Catteni word for miles, or kilometers? How do you measure distance?"

"My . . . step . . ." he said tentatively in English.

"'Stride' is the better term," she said.

"Stride is one Catteni *pleg*."

"*Pleg* for the leg," she said, using her own brand of *aide-mémoire*.

"Make a stride for me, please?"

"Hmmm," and he complied.

Stretching her own long legs to their limit, she could just about make the same length. "Hmmm. Over a meter then. Hmmm. Well, I could almost spell you on a level surface so you could have a break."

"Hmmm," he said again, blinking rapidly as he sifted the meaning of her words.

So she "charaded" what she'd said and then he understood with a grin.

"One *pleg* is almost dead-on a meter. One *pleg*, one meter," she said.

Slav and the Deski were watching, too, their expressions keen enough to show they were interested in the demonstrations. So she pointed to the Rugarian, gestured for him to take a stride. His was the same length as hers but the Deski's was much longer since he had spiderlike, long leg bones. Although Kris tried to get Slav to tell her what a *pleg* was in his language, and attempted to extract the same information from the Deski, she had no success. Both kept saying stolidly, "*Pleg, pleg*."

A *plague* on it, she thought but smiled and patted each in turn before she sat down again to get the good of the rest period. She wasn't sure if they didn't care to have a language lesson or if they had some obscure reason for sticking so perversely to the Barevi words. Both Rugarian and Deski had rather flat, inflectionless voices, but then what she knew of Catteni was flat and inflectionless, too. The lingua Barevi had had more rhythm and tone to it than the languages in which Zainal had spoken to both Slav and Co.

As they hiked on, they reached another plateau, where a second break was called: another knot in the tally string. When Zainal told her how many *pleg* each knot represented, she realized they were traveling at slightly better than four miles an hour . . . that is, if Zainal was stopping every hour. So, in the next onward push, she counted the minutes while he counted his paces. She thought she might have lost a few minutes because she got sidetracked watching the Deski check the vegetation on the plateau—what there was of it because there were no fields or hedges or much of anything. But just when she felt they had been marching for an hour, Zainal called a halt.

"Gee, man, you got a clock in your head?" she asked as he made a third knot.

He raised a querying eyebrow at her. It made his face seem more humanish, less Cattenish.

“Lordee, how do Catteni tell time?” she muttered to herself, trying to remember if he’d had some sort of digital device on his wrist, like good spacefarers should, when she’d first encountered him.

“Time.” He picked up on that word and tapped his skull. “Time kept here. Good time.”

“Now don’t tell me your home world has long days and nights like Botany?”

The two spent the rest period explaining and understanding that concept.

“Full turn of planet is not as long as here,” he said in the best English sentence he had so far made.

“Boy, you sure learn fast.”

“Is ‘boy’ a good thing to say of me?” Again that quizzical expression.

“Well, yes,” Kris replied, grinning, delighted with his sense of humor: something she hadn’t thought Catteni possessed. “But you are a man, I am a woman. Boy is a young man. I’m using it in the context of a slang expression, so it doesn’t mean the same thing as the word should.”

He grinned in such a polite way that she wasn’t sure if he understood her explanation at all before he gestured them to take up their journey again.

The day grew warm on the plateau, which had no shade at all on its sandy and gritty surface, only the wiry plants with their odd-shaped leaves that didn’t look like anything on any Earth deserts—and Kris had been in the Las Vegas and Salt Lake City scrubland areas. Coo kept tasting plants, and even different-colored patches of soil as they went: usually spitting the samples out so that Kris wasn’t sure what verdict was being rendered. She was becoming so thirsty that her tongue felt swollen, so on what was the midday rest stop she didn’t have the desire to banter with Zainal. The others took out “lunch,” chawing off good hunks from their bars, but she didn’t think she had enough saliva in her mouth to chew, much less swallow.

“You bite, you chew, be better,” Zainal said kindly and rolled his mouthful about to show that he wasn’t swallowing either.

She tried a small piece and discovered that something in the bar helped generate some moisture. She didn’t eat as much as the other three but felt better for what she did put in her stomach.

They traveled on, then; the plateau was gradually sloping down to a lush sort of terrain. And a stream. She had to restrain herself not to

prostrate herself *in* the stream but carefully reeducate her mouth and throat to wetness.

"God, what I'd give for a canteen."

"What is this 'god' so many call on?" Zainal asked. "Another 'boy'?"

Coming as the question did in Zainal's rich guttural voice, it sent Kris into a fit of the giggles. She'd often been told that she had an infectious laugh—and had proved it from time to time by setting a whole classroom off—but it pleased her no end that the effect extended to another species. The Catteni's chuckle sounded very human. Slav cocked his head at her and frowned while Coo merely looked at her in consternation, as if the Deski thought Kris was having a fit or convulsion.

"I won't answer that question now, Zainal," she said when she had reduced giggle to grin. "'God' was never a boy! I will explain another time when we have several years at our disposal."

Zainal frowned, not having understood all she said. Which was about par for the course, she thought. And just as well.

Having drunk sufficient water to revive her, Kris now pulled out the rest of her lunchtime bar and finished it. She was ready to go then, but Zainal did not urge them away from this pleasant spot: as much because there were new varieties of plants along the stream bank which Coo was sampling with great eagerness. He came back with something which he showed to Kris, the first time he had done that.

"Looks like a kind of watercress to me," she said, testing one of the stems and a leaf. "Can you eat it?" she asked, gesturing to her mouth with the sample.

The Deski nodded and popped a stalk into his mouth and chewed with every indication of pleasure. Kris nibbled carefully and, feeling her lips and gums go slightly numb, buried her face in the water and gargled vigorously. She felt Zainal's hands on her shoulders supporting her. She rinsed and gargled, being careful not to swallow, and rinsed and rinsed until the sensation was washed away.

"Thanks, Zainal," she said and then saw how concerned all three of her companions were. "Oh, I'm fine. I didn't swallow any of it. All yours, Coo, all yours."

The Deski nodded vigorously and made a show of clutching the rest of the sample plant to his chest.

"No more try," Zainal told her sternly.

"You bet!"

His concern altered to a glare of frustration. "More 'boy' words?"

"Well," and Kris rocked one hand back and forth to indicate neither

one nor another. Oh, lord, but she'd never appreciated how complex English was. Or did she mean "idiomatic American"?

They went on then, until Kris wondered how much longer she could ignore the swelling of her feet which the wrap-around boots were not compensating for. And she thought she'd been fit! Ha! She had dropped behind the two aliens . . . two of her companions, she amended quickly . . . and found herself watching the rippling of the hairs on the Rugarian's legs. His feet did look funny in the wrap-around Catteni footwear and he didn't seem to have "muscles" where humans did: but depressions came and went with each stride sort of laterally instead of up and down the way calf muscles did. And in front of him, Coo seemed only to have leg bones, no muscular movement at all, only the tendons—or what passed for tendons on a Deski—on either side of the one leg bone, lifting and lowering it, like the shaft of a crane. She tried to imagine the anatomy of her companions, sans their skins, and failed utterly. Biology had not been one of her stronger subjects. Oh, the gaps in her education. *Well, there's nothing like on-the-job training*, she thought, or whatever it was they were now doing.

Some place and time later, she was able to stop moving her legs and sat down on a rock. There was a small fire enclosed in a circle of rocks and around a cairn of rocks. *Odd formation*, she thought bemusedly. Then, as the buzz of fatigue allowed it, Kris could hear the babbling of a brook nearby. Water! She half rose and then was pushed back onto the rock and a big leaf presented her.

"Drink!

She grasped the leaf, feeling the thickness of it, and found a "lip" from which to drink. The water was ever so cold and tasted ambrosial. Real Adam's Ale!

"More?" asked Zainal, looming over her.

She struggled to rise. "I can get my own water . . . Ohhh, no," and her voice came out just this side of a wail. Zainal's big hand pushed her back onto the stone just as she realized how weak she was.

She sipped this time and was able to take in more of her surroundings. Someone was chipping rocks?

She looked around and saw Slav and Coo hammering a hole out of the slab of rock not far from the fire. They were on a slab of rock, an outcropping that edged yet another of the fields, a meter above ground level. Large-leaved plants formed a bit of a canopy over the portion of the cliff, affording them some shade. Beyond this small campsite she saw the spray from a little cataract that spilled off the rock and into a pool, then on down across the field. A crop field, she noticed.

Looking back, she realized with a start of amazement, the men were

making a rock caldron. On the far side of the campfire were the limp carcasses of rocksquatters and some other smallish beasties she hadn't seen before: six-legged which, she thought idly, would make skinning them tedious. Then Zainal knelt to perform that task. Rather deliberately, she thought, he gathered up the entrails and threw them off, onto the field below.

"Zainal," said Slav, and pointed to the now sizable hole they had chipped into the rock.

"Water," Zainal said, and Slav and Coo, reaching up to pluck more big leaves from the trees shading them, made several trips each.

When the hole had been filled to within a handspan of the top, Zainal threw in the dissected joints of the animals and Coo added some roots, similar to the ones already in use at the cave. Then Zainal, deftly using a forked stick, started transferring hot rocks into the improvised stew pot.

Kris was delighted and clapped her hands that someone was making use of her suggestion. She reached about her and gathered up more stones, which she piled in the center of the fire. They'd probably need a lot to get the stew cooked enough.

Full dark and first moonrise had occurred before they were able to eat, using twigs like chopsticks to get the pieces from pot to leaf. A little salt would have made it even more palatable, but hot food in the stomach was enough of an improvement in itself over dry, hard rations no matter how nutritious.

When they had eaten as much as they could, Coo covered the "pot" with a flat rock, wiping his hands as any human would, for the finish of a good job.

"Slav, first moonset," Zainal said. "Then Kris, to second moonset. I third, Coo, final."

No one argued but Kris was just as glad to have a long enough sleep to restore her energy. She visited the waterfall, drank, and then, unfastening the boots, presented her swollen, tired feet to the cascade. She had to set her teeth against the pain but shortly enough the abused flesh was too cold to send any other messages to her brain. She stood the cold as long as she could before she minced her way back to the fire. She thought her feet's flesh had been reduced but she couldn't be sure, they were so numb. Coo and Slav had been off on a necessary absence, too, so they all arrived back to settle down for the night.

She unrolled her blankets, spread them, and settled herself on the rocky surface, her cooling feet toward the fire. A good pile of dead material had been piled near at hand to feed the fire all night. What primeval holdover made her feel better for having a fire?

It also didn't matter that there was no way to cushion her hips and shoulders on the hard rock: she was too tired to care. Briefly her mind dwelt on the distance they would have traveled that day, but she hadn't really noticed how many tally knots were on Zainal's string. Well, a good night's sleep mended many aches.

Slav woke her and the first thing she noticed was that the first moon was still visible in the sky. But it gave enough light for her to see that Slav was agitated . . . all the fur on his head stood up. He had also roused Zainal. He pointed down, to the field, and gestured for them to come. Whatever it was did not require either stealth or quiet.

Slav just pointed and looked at them for their reaction.

Kris wanted to throw up. Zainal simply watched the . . . things: things with long tentacles and writhing hairs, and seemingly no body unless the body was still underground: the things were crawling over the intestines that he had discarded onto the field. There wasn't that much left of the entrails, for whatever was feeding on them absorbed the matter quickly, and before many minutes had passed, there was only the grassy covering left, no trace of the refuse. Maybe she had just imagined the squirmy, wriggling roundnesses that had feasted.

Zainal was nodding his head as if this was what he had expected. Kris swallowed. Was that what had happened to those who had bled on the other field? And bodies that had been left on the one she had awakened on?

"Neat," she said softly. "An internal garbage collection! Sure keeps the neighborhood clean. And those are not 'boy' words."

In the moonlight Zainal's teeth showed whitely.

"You knew?" she asked him.

"A thinking."

"Thought, you mean."

"Think, thought?"

"Right."

"Sleep now. Show's over."

Now where had Zainal picked up that one? Kris wondered as she returned to the warmth of her blankets. She sighed; maybe she should stay awake and give Slav just that much more uninterrupted rest. But she was asleep again so quickly—and without a single dream—until Slav roused her to a moonless sky.

She stood her watch, walking the perimeters of their rocky outcropping. Was that why Zainal had picked this camp? Or was it because they could make a stew pot in rock? Not that she didn't put it past this planet to have rockdwellers of horrific abilities, too. There was no sign of any further activity on the ground, however. And she was a little

tempted to throw another piece of garbage down there to see what happened: the sort of compulsion one has to be sure that what one saw was just as horrible the second time as the first.

Nighttime and silence were great aids to imagination and she had to keep her mind firmly on the positive things: she *was* alive, her stomach *was* full, she was as safe as anyone else in the camp, even if this planet had too many anomalies and mysteries to give anyone peace of mind. So, to keep from thinking of the wrong things, she reviewed all the camping trips she'd ever made—the stone pot was a good notion—to see if she could remember any other “doables.” A knife, a hatchet, a cup, and a blanket were not much to survive on, with, by. Not that they hadn't been doing pretty well with just that basic equipment. But there were so many “things” they lacked. A pail to carry water in, a frying pan to cook food in, a fork or two would be right handy. Why, when she needed it the most, did she not have her Swiss Army knife? Boy, that item would be worth its weight in platinum!

Of course, there were spare blades back at the main caves. Wasn't there someone at the camp who thought he could manipulate blades into other useful tools? Her stomach began to rumble. Damn this planet! Even mealtimes were skewed. She slowly ate half a ration bar. Nowhere near as tasty as that stew.

Despite such a positive bout of thinking, she was glad enough to rouse Coo to take over sentinel duty.

THE NEXT MORNING ZAINAL HAD ALREADY HOTTED UP THE REMAINDER of last night's stew for breakfast and a hearty one it was to fill night-empty stomachs. They cleaned up the leftovers, sopping up the last of the juices with another ration bar. Kris was stuffed but she'd work it off soon enough.

She asked Zainal how far they had traveled the day before and he showed her the tally string. She whistled appreciatively: they'd made forty clicks, no mean feat when you considered the ups and downs they'd had to negotiate. Her feet, which she had bathed again in cold water, certainly knew they'd walked that far. Maybe she shouldn't have asked. It made her feel tired to think she'd trekked that far.

Zainal kicked out the fire and used the stew-pot rocks to make a cairn before he signaled them all to move out.

“Where are we heading for today?”

“Circle,” he said, gesturing a wide arc, and ending with his finger pointing to the cairn. “Find what is find.”

“What we can discover, find, see, know.” Kris had never thought

of herself as a pedagogue but she had this intense itch to correct Zainal and improve his language skills. Thank goodness he was amenable to learn-as-you-go.

They jumped down off the outcropping and made their way across the field. Zainal moderated his pace from yesterday's stride but not by much. Maybe his feet hurt, too? How much walking did a space trooper get to do?

Coo found some green globes in one of the hedges that he gobbled juicily, humming happily to himself, but Slav curled his upper lip in distaste, a process which fascinated Kris as Slav really did *curl* his lip up and into a fold above his uneven set of teeth. She wondered again how Rugarians kept from seriously biting the insides of their lips with such dental equipment.

Everyone kept their eyes open, surveying behind them and above them, especially when they were out in the open. A rearview mirror would have been right handy, Kris thought. Dead things got sucked into the ground at night but clearly the avian critters patrolled daily for their sustenance on things that moved.

The fields were endless on this gently rolling terrain. Streams were laid on at such intervals that Kris' earlier wish for a canteen was redundant. There were no roads, no bridges, no overpasses, nothing more serious than rather abrupt little hillocks of stone that seemed to rise straight up out of the ground. She'd seen something similar somewhere on Earth, but it took her time to dredge up Ethiopia from her memory. Most of the hillocks were bare, but a few seemed to have caught enough soil to support bushes and one or two were crowned with the almost-trees that baby bushes became, if they had a chance to live long enough.

Then they came to a whole series of fields that had recently been harvested. No track to tell them in what direction the harvesters had come from or gone to. Although the direction would take them out of the circular loop Zainal had proposed they make, they followed the harvesting signs.

They heard it before they saw it and only had time to take cover before the mechanical gadget floated over the intervening hedge in the very next field.

"Do we stand or run?" Kris whispered hoarsely to Zainal. He shrugged, but he was stuck as far into the hedge as he could get, and stock-still. She imitated him, wincing as branches dug into the softer parts of her.

They could smell hot metal, combined with odder smells that must have been fuel—only that begged the question in Kris' mind: *Who manufactured the fuel, not to mention the machinery?* They waited in this

position until she got a knotting cramp in one side and grimaced, trying without moving much to relieve the spasm.

When is that mechanical going to move on? Or, and the thought pierced her with a good deal of fright, is it waiting for reinforcements? Does the machinery on this planet learn? Very carefully craning her neck up, she could see through the funny-shaped foliage of the hedge material that the Dalek hadn't moved a smidgeon: it just hovered there, on the other side of the hedge.

She poked Zainal, who was also watching for movement, and when he carefully turned his head to her, she raised her eyebrows in query. Just then Coo came alert: not that the Deski hadn't been tense with the waiting. He turned his glance down the field and very carefully pointed out a direction. Something was coming for them? The fliers always seemed to come out of the sun at them. What would be coming up the hill? And should they leave? If they could, with the mechanical monster an arm's length away. And if they did make a run for it, where would they go? There wasn't even a hillock close enough that they could scramble up.

Kris didn't like this at all.

She liked it even less when Coo let out a whimper and pointed with more agitation down the hill.

The things moved so fast that Kris barely saw the glint of them in the sun when they were upon them . . . and shooting their little darts. She felt the prick and she lost consciousness from one moment to the next.

Chapter Six

A HAND ROCKING HER SHOULDER ROUSED HER FROM THE STUPOR caused by the drugged dart.

“Kris, wake up.” Zainal’s voice.

“Lemme sleep.” She ached and she was soooo tired.

“No, we go now or not.”

That brought recent events back and she shot up so fast she nearly cracked her head on Zainal’s as he knelt beside her.

It was dark all around but she could make out both Slav and Coo, and then the odd stamping and heavy breathing, as well as animal smells, gave her another clue. They’d been dumped in a barn? Classified as animals by the mechanical? She didn’t know whether she was amused or indignant.

“Water?” And Zainal handed her a full cup, which she sipped to revive her parched mouth and throat.

“Thanks.” She got up as she finished and, when she would have handed him back the cup, he pointed to the empty loop on her belt. “Oh! Yes. Thanks again.” Then she felt for the important parcel of ration bars and her blankets. All in place and accounted for. She breathed a sigh of relief. “So how do we get out of here?” she asked, sensorily aware of the size, as well as the darkness, of the building.

“This way,” and Zainal cupped one big hand under her right elbow and turned her in the proper direction. “Care . . .”

She just avoided tripping over a sleeping beastie of some kind: one of the creatures that made a liquid looing sound. She blinked furiously to accustom her eyes to the gloom and took a couple of quick and careful steps to catch up to Zainal, Coo, and Slav.

“The main door, of course,” she murmured when she realized that

that was their destination. A very large set of doors. And how were they to open them, when there was no apparent handle or lock or knob. . . .

She heard a little snick, a click, and a pleased mutter from Zainal and heard the rumble of a door moving on a track as he replaced his boot knife.

"Come," Zainal said and she and the others wasted no time in slipping out. Zainal carefully closed the door behind him and it snicked once more when shut.

They were by no means clear yet, for their temporary prison seemed to be only one of many such buildings, set in a long line, visible as a greater darkness against the lesser one of the sky. For she could see stars above but none of the moons.

"Hold," and Zainal took her hand in his and then she felt Coo's dry fingers closing around her left hand.

Slav, with better night sight, was their leader.

They must have completed a full circuit of the immense yard before they halted again.

"Place to hide?" Zainal asked Slav. The Rugarian shook his head.

Coo said softly, "Up?" and pointed in the direction of the stack of crates that had been halfway around their exploratory circuit.

"Maybe we can see more when a moon comes up," Kris suggested.

Zainal nodded and they made their way back to the tall crates. Once again, Zainal's height and heft made the difference as he boosted each of his team up onto the first level of the container stack. It took the three of them to haul him to their level. The process was repeated until Zainal decided they were high enough up not to be immediately visible from the ground.

Visible to what? was Kris' question but she didn't voice it. They had at least reached enough space for all of them to lie down, which is what seemed the best idea although Zainal just sat, propped against the crate, obviously intending to stand the watch.

"Wake me to spell you," Kris told Zainal and made to lie down on the hard surface. *How odd*, she thought, *that a simple convenience like a mattress was a distant memory.*

Then she felt hands pulling at her and, quelling her immediate resistance because the only hands that were that strong were Zainal's, she allowed herself to be pulled around, her head resting on his thigh. Not quite as hard as the crate, and warm, so she made herself comfortable. He shifted her briefly and gave her a sort of a pat before he crossed his arms. She was obscurely glad that there were only Slav and Coo to witness this coziness. Well, hell, she didn't care. She rubbed her head into his leg, wishing the muscles were not quite so firmly packed. There

was rather a lot of Zainal that was commendable. *Slow down, girl*, she warned herself. *Why, then, do I feel more comfortable with him than with anyone else, even Jay Greene?*

THE SUN SUDDENLY BLAZING RIGHT IN HER EYES WOKE HER MORE speedily than any alarm. She was facing into it, unlike Coo and Slav, who had carefully put their feet in that direction. Zainal's head had dropped to his crossed arms and he was breathing heavily enough for it to be called snoring.

She was about to wake him when sudden activity below startled her. Machines were whirring, grinding, revving, and there were all kinds of noises, except those of intelligible speech of any kind. She eased away from Zainal . . . *Has he moved at all since he volunteered himself as my pillow?* . . . and crept to the edge and looked down: shuddered and then took a grip on herself. They had climbed considerably higher than she'd realized last night: there was only one more tier of crates above them. And the crates looked fairly well used, scraped along the sides and dented in places: the usual result of careless packing and unpacking. Only what packed and unpacked them? Where did they get emptied? With what were they now filled?

One building now gushed forth smoke and another stench that was unmistakable. Kris had only encountered it once before when she passed a meat-packing company on a detour through a grotty area of Denver. The abattoir? And it was opposite buildings that resembled the barn they'd been in that night. To confirm her hideous surmise, the double doors of one of the barns now opened and its inhabitants, comprised of the six-legged grazers and some other smaller and different types, were being herded to the abattoir by a curious mechanical which had long extendable "arms" and which spat electrical sparks at laggard beasts. All unconscious of their imminent demise, the beasts jogged into the building. Kris steeled herself but heard nothing and saw only the animals entering the building. The doors slid closed and noises she didn't want to describe issued forth, making her clamp her hands to her ears.

"They gather meat, too," Zainal said right beside her. Instinctively and desperately wanting some comfort for the harrowing so near by, she burrowed against him. He was warm, alive, and nearly human. To her surprise, he embraced her, soothing her with his hands and thus restoring her courage. It struck her as very odd that a Catteni could be comforting.

It was when the doors of the next barn opened and its occupants were driven out that matters changed abruptly. For there were recog-

nizable humans staggering out into the light, shielding their eyes from the bright sun that poured, almost obscenely, down the passage between the buildings. They, too, were being herded by a long-armed, spark-spitting machine. They were not, as the beasts had, amenable to such herding.

Even as Zainal reacted, rousing Slav and Coo, some humans were trying to evade the machine's extensions. Which was obviously unaccustomed to any sort of protest. In fact, all the humans seemed to be trying to escape, as if they had figured out the fate which awaited them.

"THIS WAY! HERE!" Zainal yelled, waving furiously and glanced toward Kris to shout directions.

One human spotted them, pointing upward and calling to the others. Although Kris couldn't imagine how they could manage to help others escape when they didn't even know how to themselves, that was not as important as getting humans out of the clutches of the mechanicals.

The four scrambled down the big crates they had so laboriously climbed the night before. At least, *down* was easier than up. But it was *up* they'd need to do again.

The humans pelted down the alleyway to be met by Zainal, who had halted his three companions on top of the ground tier with an imperious hand. He gave Kris the unmistakable order to stay where she was. But, as she saw him link his hands, she realized what he was going to do: throw the people up onto the first crate. Kris, Coo, and Slav then pushed them to the next level, urging them to get higher up, out of any possible range of the mechanical's extendibles. So they formed a human "lift" system for the escapees, humans, Deskis, and Rugarians, three green Ilginish and two Turs, the goblins who were so short that Zainal was slinging them up.

In the panic of the effort to get everybody off the ground and started up the crates, Kris got bruised, cut, and had her right wrist wrenched so badly that she had to rely on her left hand. Then there was Zainal to get up to safety because the mechanos were now aware that something was distinctly out of order. Kris wondered if they had counted bodies coming out of the barn and had now discovered that the appropriate number were not being processed. A shame to put their production figures out. But they'd rescued more than twenty from slaughter.

Zainal had to jump to reach the helping hands that would take him off the ground. A funny little clicking machine was now quartering the passageway.

"Climb!" Zainal said to those on his level. "Seek heat. We go to cold."

They climbed and climbed until they reached the top with the others

and then they all stopped in awe. As far as they could see, there were crates stacked to the same height. Acres of them to the horizon.

“Now this is one mother of a stockpile,” a human muttered with an understandably hysterical edge to his voice.

“And we damned near joined it,” someone else said.

“More down there?” Zainal asked and Kris noted him breathing heavily for the first time since they’d started this reconnaissance.

“Hell, all we saw was that one stinking barn after those flying turrets darted us. Are we going to hang about to see?” Clearly that was not his preference.

“Hey, you’re a Cat!” the first speaker said accusingly.

“Cat or not, he just saved our lives. Thanks, pal,” the second man said to Zainal, holding out his hand. He was filthy and the slight breeze on the top of this incredible stockpile wafted a stench off him that nearly gagged Kris.

Most of the escapees now sank to their butts to rest after their scrambling retreat.

“Zainal is my name. These three and I explore. You are?”

“Speaks good English for a Cat,” the second man said.

“Kris Bjornsen, Slav, and Coo are us,” Zainal continued the introductions. Then he paused for the others to identify themselves.

Their stories were similar to the experiences of Kris’ group except that they hadn’t had the benefit of a Sergeant Chuck Mitford to marshal them out of danger. The field they had been dumped on had been attacked by the fliers in spite of Deski attempts to warn of incoming danger. Everyone had scattered in twos and threes and small groups, only to be rounded up when they were spotted the second morning by a harvester unit. They’d been in the barn for several days but had survived on their food parcels, which were now almost gone. Several of their number had been trampled to death in the barn when the animals had, for some reason, panicked the second night of their incarceration.

“That’s why we all smell like this,” said Lenny Doyle, a slightly-built, dark-haired man with a pleasant, open face and a nice smile. Dick Aarens had been the first speaker and still regarded Zainal with frowning suspicion. He was taller than Kris, but he had a dreadful slouch and a mean slant to his mouth as well as deep scowl lines.

“Zainal got dumped down here along with the rest of us,” Kris said with an indifferent shrug to relieve the sudden tension among the newcomers, “and I don’t know why he’s here, but he is and he was ready to risk his neck to get you out, so cool it, mac.”

Dick Aarens reluctantly subsided but Kris caught him more than once glaring at either her or Zainal.

"So do we go back and see if anyone else's stuck in those barns?" Lenny asked Zainal.

"Why should he risk his neck for us humans?" a stocky man of apparent Italianate origin demanded in a surly voice.

Zainal had his head down in what Kris was beginning to know as his "thinking" pose. He looked up at the sun and then did a slow circle, squinting against the glare of the sun. He said a few brief words to Slav, who nodded.

"Slav leads to camp," Zainal said. "The machines learn . . ."

"Yeah, but do they have something that climbs crates like a spider?" Aarens demanded.

"You have food?" Zainal asked.

"What's it to ya?" Aarens wanted to know.

"Oh, cool it, Aarens," Lenny said. "The machines didn't search us. We got cups, knives, and bars."

"No water," and again Zainal glanced sunward.

"I take the point," Lenny said. "Look, I'll volunteer to go back to the edge and see what's up with the mechanicals." He grinned at Kris for his description of their captors. "They must've . . . processed . . . another group yesterday. We heard screaming a coupla times." He shook himself convulsively. "So we figured we might have to make a break for it."

"There're a lot of barns down there," Aarens said, shaking his head.

"We go back," Zainal said. "See."

"Now, wait a minute . . ." Aarens said, holding up one hand in protest.

Protesting to the idea as well as the spokesman, Kris thought, marking Aarens as troublesome.

"Then go with Slav," Zainal said, shrugging his indifference. "There is much to see and know." This time his gesture meant learning as much as possible about the machines and their operation.

"Can you open barn doors from outside?" Kris asked.

Zainal nodded. "Easy," and now he grinned. "Animals do not unlock doors. Humans, and Cats, do."

Lenny laughed out loud at that and nudged the hostile Aarens. "Sense of humor, too. Shall I go back for a look-see? I had a long drink just before we got ejected from our happy home."

Zainal nodded and Lenny trotted back the way he had come.

"Hey, bro, I'm coming, too," and a second man followed.

"The Doyle brothers stick together. I'm Joe Lattore," the stocky Italian said with a grin, nodding at both Kris and Zainal. "So what do

we do if there are a lot of other humans, and aliens, stuck in with the cattle?"

"We get them out," Zainal said, and hunkering down, unrolled one of his spare blankets and, taking out his knife, began to rend the blanket into strips. To make ropes, Kris immediately realized.

"Yeah, a rope would be real handy," Lattore said and took a blanket as Zainal handed them around.

It wasn't easy to do, given the sort of indestructible fabric it was. Kris had to stop: her wrist ached and was next to useless. But hauling folks to the top of the crates with the help of a rope would be a lot easier. That is, if the mechanicals hadn't figured out where the escapees had gone—which was possible. By the time they had acquired several lengths of sturdy rope, the Doyles returned. They had seen no more except smoke from the processing plant.

"Yeah, machines operate on logic, and our escape—since they classified us as 'meat animals'—would be inconsistent," Kris said, as she worked. "Somehow I don't think their programming would extend to coping with inconsistencies. We came up as heat sources where heat sources shouldn't be, in there messing up their crop fields. That was easy for them. So they dumped us in with the other animals they were collecting."

"I don't think I like that," Joe said, shuddering. "Bad enough to be mistaken as food. How come they don't recognize people?"

"Does sort of beg the question, doesn't it?" Lenny said. "I dunno how they figure it all out. We were there four-five days without anyone taking a blind bit of notice of us, or even opening the main door. When they did, we couldn't get out for those six-legged things being crammed in. And suddenly there was only standing space. Then—whammy! We're scheduled for the chop. They must have started . . . well, processing . . . yesterday if what we heard were human cries. . . ." Lenny gave another shiver.

Kris watched Zainal thinking over this information. She wondered how in heaven's name the Catteni scouts hadn't noticed such installations on their exploratory pass of this planet. Surely they would have spotted such a vast number of crates? Unless, and she thought of the evidences of scrapes and bad handling, these were new, and the last lot had been collected? By what? For whom?

"We see if there are . . . more people," Zainal said, having reached a decision. "You help?" He looked around at the recently rescued.

Ten decided to remain and help, including the two Doyle brothers and, oddly enough in Kris' estimation, Aarens. The others were led off

by Slav, who once again assured Zainal that he could find the cave campsite. He kept pointing to the north and east. The two Deskis went with him, to keep a listen-out for the fliers and any roving mechanicals that would need to be avoided at all costs. If nothing else, this recon had taught Kris, and the others, the sorts of hazards that had to be avoided: sleeping on bare ground, avoiding the harvesters, and freezing when fliers were spotted. Simple, homey rules, Kris told herself facetiously. She was glad she'd had a good drink of water before they'd set out. Still, maybe they could sneak back down to the vacant barns.

Which is what they did when Zainal and his stalwarts reached the yard. The fact that no one had been searched, much less stripped, was discussed.

"They didn't search the six-legged critters," Lenny said. "Why would they search us?"

"But we're . . . we're humans," Aarens said and Lenny's brother, Ninety, snorted.

"Did you introduce yourself? Well, then, how would the machine know we're different?"

"You mean they thought we were animals?" Aarens was outraged.

"Not very flattering, is it?" Lenny said drolly.

"Just another warm body, bro," Ninety quipped back with a grin. "Any warm body'll do. If it registers."

"That is how the machines know," Zainal said. "Heat."

"I'll buy that," Lenny said. "And movement."

"There are no . . . people . . . on this planet," Zainal added.

"Yeah," Lenny said thoughtfully. "Think you're right. I thought robots were supposed to protect humans." He glanced slyly at Kris.

"Not if they're not programmed to."

"So who, or what, programmed 'em?" Lenny wanted to know. Kris could only shrug her ignorance.

Having made their way across the crates and to the nearest barn, they had climbed the roof and now looked down through one of the ventilator slats into the nearest barn. It was empty. Empty and smelling of some kind of a disinfectant which had its own unmistakable reek.

"What a stink," Lenny said, wrinkling his nose.

"Could there be such a thing as a totally mechanized farm planet?" Kris said, wondering out loud. Then she turned to Zainal, who was lying on the roof beside her, still looking about the empty space below. "How many continents are there on this world, Zainal?"

"Four. Two large, one not so large, one small."

"Which are we on?"

Zainal shrugged.

“How come he knows so much?” Ninety asked, jerking his thumb at Zainal and addressing Kris.

“He once saw a report on the place. He just didn’t look hard enough to remember everything we’re dying to know,” she said, grimacing. “What he has recalled has already saved us a couple of times.”

“Who’s us?”

Kris told them, and Lenny grinned at his brother when she described Chuck Mitford.

“They never quit, those old soldiers, do they?”

“Mitford’s not old,” she said defensively, “and we were very lucky indeed he was there, because we stayed free.”

Lenny gave her an odd look. “Can you be sure of that?”

“No surer than I am of anything else on this planet.”

Zainal rose. “We look at all.”

As soon as a quick peek proved that there was nothing moving in the yard below them and the smoke was no longer coming out of the abattoir building, they checked the other barns: twenty in all, half of which reeked of the disinfectant. Three of the other ten they examined held nothing but animals. They would call down the vent, tentatively at first, but then with more vigor until they were sure there was no one there to answer. The graziers kept making their stupid “loooooing” sound in response to all questions.

“All the same,” said Lenny in disgust, “never did like cows.”

“These aren’t cows,” Aarens said. “Nothing like cows.”

“So? They’re loo-cows instead of moo-cows,” Kris said, a comment which brought chortles from Lenny and Ninety.

“They’re still not cows,” Aarens said. “Cows give milk. Those things don’t have any equipment beyond two extra legs.”

The next barn produced astonished and glad cries and a jumping about of obvious people-shapes in among the loo-cow forms.

“Keep it down, will you?” Aarens called urgently, glancing nervously around.

Lenny Doyle crept to the edge of the barn, looking up and down the quiet avenue and gestured an “okay.”

“What do we tell ’em?” Aarens asked, not looking at Zainal.

“We come at night. They keep quiet now,” Zainal said, ignoring being ignored.

“Night’s a long way away,” Aarens said.

“We watch.”

“We could let down those ropes we made and haul ’em up?” Aarens suggested.

"It's much easier to open the door at night and let them out," Kris said firmly, knowing that she wasn't up to hoisting who knew how many heavy bodies. "Like we did."

"Night best," Zainal said, nodding.

"Why? Machines don't care if it's night or day. Machines don't need to sleep." Aarens was persistent.

Zainal muttered something under his breath. "Do not run at night. Can't."

"Why not?" Aarens was getting belligerent, deliberately, Kris thought, trying to find fault with Zainal.

"I think the machines are solar-powered," Kris said, grasping at an explanation that fit. "Sun power?" she asked Zainal who nodded, smiling that she had grasped the correct explanation.

"Yeah," and Ninety's eyes widened. "Yeah, they got those funny panels. At least the harvester did. Makes sense. There hasn't been any rain yet."

Zainal grinned. "Rain very bad here. In places. We see who is where," and he gestured toward the other barns waiting to be searched.

Four more contained humans and the message of imminent release was repeated, caution urged, and the prisoners were told to get as much rest as they could because the escape route was a rough one. There was some protest, but Kris, speaking for Zainal—as that seemed diplomatic—assured them there were reasons for the delay.

They returned then to the roof of one of the empty barns. Prying open one ventilator slot, Lenny Doyle, as the slimmest of the men, crawled through. He was going to check to be sure there were no interior sensors. They let him down far enough so that he could peer around, swinging on the end of the rope.

"Looks clean to me. Sensor eyes can't be all that different," he said in a loud whisper to those waiting on the roof. "Lemme down. I need a bath as bad as I need a pee. Begging your pardon, Kris."

She chuckled and watched as he was lowered to the floor. She was sent down next and heard them ripping away enough of the slot to permit the heavy frame of Zainal to pass. The thin blanket rope was rough on the hands and she slipped a couple of times because her wrist wasn't functioning, but all of them made it safely to the floor.

There were a dozen or more watering troughs to service the animals the barn usually held, so a few on one side were designated as baths. Piles of some sort of dried fodder had been placed in wall mangers, and Kris looked forward to sleeping a tad more comfortably on a hay bed until moonrise.

Zainal, with Aarens and the Doyles, did a circuit of the empty build-

ing, checking for any other sort of sensors that might tell the mechanicals one of the barns was inhabited again.

While most of the men decided to bathe, Kris was more interested in piling up enough fodder to make a decent sleeping surface. She hadn't liked the leer on Aarens' face when he looked at her. He struck her as the sort of devious personality who'd peep if given the chance. She wasn't going to give him one. . . .

At that, he sought her out, his longish hair still dripping. She couldn't really hold that against him, but she disliked the proprietary way he made as if to join her on her pile of hay.

"You find your own, buddy," she said as discouragingly as she could.

"Hey, lady, just thought you'd like some quality company. Can't say I approve a nice girl like you having to be paired with a Cat. Or is it voluntary?"

"I volunteered for the patrol, if that's what you mean." And her tone implied that had better be.

"Are there more like you back at this camp of yours?"

"Aarens, get lost. I'm tired and I want to sleep . . . by . . . myself," she said, emphasizing her wish for solitude. "Git!"

"The fresh stuff is over there, Aarens," Lenny said, pointing to the manger, his expression pleasant. But there was no doubt that he wouldn't move until Aarens had.

When she was left alone, she lay down on her pile, so comfortable that she fell asleep despite the muted voices of the men.

MITFORD SURVEYED THE CAMP, WELL PLEASED WITH THE IMPROVEMENTS of the last two days. They had plenty of game and some of the women had thought of sun-drying the overage into a sort of jerky.

"Waste not, want not," was the theme for the day.

Scouting parties kept coming in with little treasures throughout the long day: fine sand that could be used for a timer.

"Like you use to time your boiled egg."

"No glass."

"Well, there're these nut husks. Cut a teeny tiny hole in one, let the sands run through. Turn it over. Couldn't be simpler."

"You lose a couple seconds turning the damned thing over."

"Complaints, complaints."

"Hey, what about a sundial? There's that flat place at the top of the rock just below the sentry post."

"Yeah, and how do we time it?"

"Hell, you're the mechanical engineer. You figure it out. One one-hundred, two one-hundred, three one-hundred is still a second even here."

A commotion midafternoon brought fifteen angry women and one bloody-nosed Arnie to Mitford's office. Noticing that all the women had wet hair, it didn't take him more than a minute to figure out that Arnie had been peeping again.

"He didn't stay warned off, Mitford," an irate Sandy Areson said, pinching the man again. "He's a dirty pervert, is what he is. And with him doing latrine duty only makes it easier for him to know when we're going to bathe. Chain him to a rock or by God, I'll sharpen my knife and . . ."

Mitford had begun to chuckle, as he'd had a sudden inspiration. "I think we can provide restraints for our little Arnold Sherman. And provide an object lesson at the same time. Jack Lemass, front and center," the Sergeant added in a bellow.

"Yo!" And a man who had been carving at various types of the woods available in the nearby copse loped over. "You rang?"

Most people were in good spirits, Mitford decided, and proving ingenious in what they could contrive. They didn't have nails, but Jack Lemass, who'd been out early in the morning on a hunting party, was sure they could fashion chairs and tables and other useful items from the larger trees.

"Yeah, d'you think you could construct me a pair of stocks?"

"Stocks?" Jack poked his head forward on his neck in surprise.

"Stocks?" Sandy exclaimed and then burst out laughing. "Hey, that'd be great. And we could belt him with rotten eggs—if we could find any rotten eggs." She gave the cowering Arnie another swat but she, and the other women, began to grin in happy anticipation of his future discomfort. "Make 'em as uncomfortable as possible, will ya, Jack?"

Jack went through a little routine of pretending to measure the quivering Arnie so that he moaned in apprehension.

"Okay, ladies, as you were," Mitford said. "Sorry you've been pestered."

"Thanks, sarge," Sandy said and took his hint, shooing the women out of the "office." "We've got work to do, too, ladies."

"Better yet, Jack," Mitford said, "take him with you to cut the wood, Jack, and make him help you build it. To fit him because I think he'll be in the stocks a lot. Won't you, Arnie?"

"I was only looking," Arnie whined in self-defense. "I wasn't doing more than that."

“That’s enough. Shut your face and be damned glad I don’t get Jack to put a stake and whip you at it.”

“You wouldn’t *whip* me?” His voice cracked in terror and his whole body trembled. “You’re human, you’re American. You can’t,” and Arnie ended on a note of pure panic.

“Be grateful then, because the next step for someone like you, Arnie,” Mitford said, raising his voice loud enough for everyone working the area to hear, “is being staked out on a field for the scavengers. And don’t think it can’t happen. It can!”

Jack’s eyebrows were raised almost to his nonexistent hairline and he whistled softly.

“Okay, Arnie, we go walkies now.”

Old-fashioned stocks wouldn’t really hurt a man, or a woman, Mitford thought as he picked up another slate to record their construction as a deterrent. But it would prove his administration had teeth and wasn’t afraid to bite. So far, people were far more interested in how they could turn their skills to improving their living quarters. And that was what settling was all about. Living off the land you were on and getting the best you could.

Late that evening, long after the second serving of the evening meal, two more patrols reported in: one had found rock salt, which could only improve the taste of food, and the other—geology and mining types—had located deposits of iron and copper and had brought back samples. Murph had bent his ear about all they could do with iron and copper. So Mitford said that he’d organize a squad to help Murph mine and refine. Murph went off, muttering happily to himself.

“Every day in every way, we are getting better and better,” Mitford muttered to himself, able to see one more step in their adaptation. Another few months and no one would recognize themselves as the dispirited dregs they’d been waking up less than a week ago.

WHEN NIGHT CAME, KRIS WAS ROUSED WITH THE OTHERS WHO HAD rested. Zainal showed the Doyles and Aarens how he had manipulated the lock with his knife blade.

“The ol’ credit card trick, huh?” Lenny remarked, then added when he saw the confusion on Zainal’s face, “I’ll explain later.”

“More boy?” Zainal asked Kris, his teeth white in the dark as he grinned.

“More what?” Lenny asked.

“I’ll explain later,” Kris replied, chuckling. She wondered what Aar-

ens would say if he knew she'd prefer the Catteni to his company any day of the week. Or any night, come to think of it. *Down, girl*, she told herself, but having said that, the notion came back often enough to tease her.

They slipped out of the barn, Zainal closing the door carefully until they heard the lock snick. Then they went to the first of the inhabited barns and Zainal opened it, too.

"Oh, my god, I thought you'd gone and left us," cried the man, his voice sounding loudly in the quiet night. He was only one of many crowded close to the door.

"Sssssh," said the relief team as a chorus.

"Damn mechanicals might hear ya," Aarens said. "Follow me and fer gawssake, be quiet."

While Kris was asleep, the rescue had been organized. Two men would lead each rescued group down the road to the crates and start them up the ropes hanging in readiness. Zainal and Kris took the last group since Zainal was the only one who knew the exact trick to open the doors.

In the group she and Zainal released, there were two women, one of them heavily pregnant and awkward in movement, and the other one older and limping badly. The pregnant woman was also slightly hysterical with the relief of being rescued.

"It's bad enough my Jack got killed on Barevi, but I thought I'd at least have my baby to cherish," she said weepingly. Not that Kris blamed her, but this was neither the time nor place for true confessions. "Then that awful discipline meeting and I wasn't doing a thing but standing where I was told to stand and then I get gassed. I prayed that, somehow, God was with us still and we'd be rescued. And we are, and I simply can't believe it. Oh, you're so good to risk your lives to save ours."

Kris couldn't seem to stem her flow of talk. At least Patti Sue would shut up when told to.

"How're we going to get her up the crates?" she asked Zainal in a tense whisper as they started the people down the road.

"I carry. Not heavy. Big."

"Just don't let her see you're Catteni," Kris said, glad that the poor light hid the telltale gray of his skin tone.

The pregnant woman, Anna Bollinger, presented less of a difficulty getting up on the crates than some of the others. Fumble-footed and-fingered, some of them, and four, besides Anna, had to be hauled up because their shoulder muscles gave out on the third "lift."

Eventually, all thirty-five were on the top and moving off north by east as Slav had. Not moving very quickly either as if the release and climb had about taken all the physical energy they had left in them.

Sometimes, Kris thought as she trudged along beside Zainal, *you can do the right thing for the wrong reason*. Her hands were stinging, her wrist ached despite the strip of blanket she had wrapped about it as a brace, her shins were scraped and raw, her toes hurt, and she was sure her arm and shoulder muscles would never recover. She would have loved to have a trough to wallow in.

By the time the first moon came up, they had not yet made it to the end of the crates. Again she wondered what was in them, if it wasn't halves of loo-cows, and for whom the machines gathered the supplies.

THEY HAD TO CALL A BREAK THEN, TO REST THE LESS ABLE OF THEIR number. Anna, in particular, and Janet, the older woman, were totally unequal to a steady march. When it was discovered that most of them had eaten the last of their ration bars in preparation for escape, Zainal immediately gestured for the patrol to share out the extras they had brought along. Chewing the dry bars without water to soften them made eating a chore. One of the Turs gobbled his down as if he hadn't eaten in days.

"He didn't know the Cats had packed us rations," Lenny said. "Ninety and I have been sharing with him."

"That was damned good of you," Kris said, "considering you wouldn't have known where your next meals were coming from."

"Oh, I figured something would turn up," and Lenny grinned impishly at her.

"Why, may I ask, is your brother 'Ninety'?"

"Aw, now, we're Irish, you see . . ."

"I had noticed."

Another grin. "And we've this saying in Ireland—that the crack, the fun, is ninety."

"And we don't mean the cost of the stuff," Ninety said in an irritated voice. "I like the crack . . . pubs and all—god, wouldn't a Guinness taste good about now?"

"I told ya, don't, Ninety. I can stand anything but your mentioning Guinness," Lenny said, an edge on his usually cheerful voice for the first time in a very trying night. "Sorry, Kris."

"So I'm Ninety because I look for a good crack," Ninety finished up and gave the final bite of his ration bar a wistful look.

"Damned micks," Aarens muttered. He had positioned himself near Kris, she noticed, on her other side, away from the Doyle brothers.

"Let me straighten you out on one detail, Aarens," Kris said, not that she cared if she saved him some knocks for his attitude, but his comments grated against her sense of rightness. "We're *all* in this together: humans, Deskis, Rugarians, Ilginish, and Turs. And especially the lone representative of our former captors. He got dumped on this godforsaken place just like the rest of us and he's in command of the patrol that just saved your skin, bones, and meat. So cut the bigotry out. Understand?"

"You know him *well*?" and the man's tone was lewd and his suggestion unmistakable.

Lenny and Ninety both reacted, but Lenny was nearer. He leaned forward until his face was right up to Aarens'.

"If Kris here says the Cat's a good guy, we'll take *her* word for it, Aarens. Now cut your bellyachin'. He got you free and, if you want to slope off now and do your own thing, we'll never mention we ever met ya."

Aarens subsided as Kris inched closer to the Doyle brothers.

"Where's the Cat . . ." Ninety began, looking about him.

"His name is Zainal," Kris said, as ready to insist on that point with Ninety as everyone else.

"Okay, where's this Zainal leading us?"

"To the camp our clever Sergeant Mitford established. A series of good-sized caves with an underground lake. It's a pretty good place. Hunting's great. How good are you with slingshots?"

Lenny chuckled. "You see before you one of the great rabbit hunters of the Blasket Islands."

Ninety snorted. "You used a two-two," and then he leaned toward Kris, grinning from ear to ear, "with a telescopic lens and a silencer."

"That was so I could get in a second shot without the little scuts hearing me on the odd time or two I missed my first shot. Once I got my eye in, I didn't need either silencer or 'scope."

"We've also found a huge grain store," Kris went on, "so we should even have bread when we get back."

"How far is it?" and Lenny glanced over at Anna and Janet.

"I don't know . . . Wait a minute. . . ." Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Zainal suddenly rise to his feet, looking pointedly in one direction. Peering in that area, she made out several figures moving in the moonlight down the slope above the crates. "That's Slav come back. He either made damned good time or our camp's not far away."

Slav had brought two other Rugarians and four humans with him—and cold roast rocksquat, some unleavened bread, and earthen water bottles that were leaking slowly but still contained enough for everyone to have a drink. They also carried ropes and more blankets.

“Sarge says go. We come,” Slav said in Barevi, grinning his jagged toothy smile which included Coo and Kris.

They had to split the meat portions further to give everyone a piece, but Lenny and Ninety were definitely impressed.

Anna had to be coaxed to eat—mainly because she was exhausted, Kris decided, but Janet said she would have eaten anything on six legs. They were both given two cups of water as a special concession.

That was when Zainal noticed Kris’ bandaged wrist.

“You hurt?”

“Just a sprain. Nothing to worry about,” she said, feeling a little foolish at having strapped her wrist.

“You go with Pess. Lead walkers. Report to Sarge.”

“I’ll bet he’s full of questions,” Kris said, glad that Slav had arrived with humans to give Mitford a verbal report. “But I should stay to help the women.”

“No,” Zainal said firmly. “Much help. *You*,” and he cocked his finger at her, “better to report.”

“All right,” and she conceded as gracefully as possible. There were more than enough men to assist the two women, and Deskis and Rugarians to help with portages.

Although Lenny and Ninety protested that they were more than willing to help, Zainal ticked them off to go with Kris. She wasn’t surprised that he sent Aarens back with her as well as Joe Lattore and some of the other men who were all too eager to see this great camp that had been contrived.

Revitalized by the meat and the water, Kris went to reassure Anna and Janet that they weren’t all that far from the safety of the caves.

“We’ve got medical personnel, too,” she reassured Anna.

“Medicines?” Anna asked hopefully.

“If they’ve found bread, they’ve got the start of penicillin, now don’t they?” Kris said jokingly, but she had the feeling Anna was hoping for analgesics to take the edge off her imminent delivery. Kris left quickly then, not wanting to have to face any further unanswerable questions.

As there wasn’t a damned thing wrong with her feet and ankles, Kris set the pace, right behind Pess. Aarens started out beside her but she didn’t fancy him for company and she gave him grunts for answers to his conversational gambits until he got her message. Muttering curses

about ungrateful bitches and butchy women, he dropped back to the rear of the group.

Kris wondered if she had been wise in discouraging him. But he was the sort who'd need a lot of discouragement and his attitudes irritated her. Better discouragement than an all-out brawl.

A couple of good long climbs were successfully negotiated in the light of the second moon, Aarens bitching about night maneuvers. By third moonset, even Pess was slowing up. But, when the Rugarian hit the beginning of the ravine, he brightened and so did Kris, surprised to recognize the terrain she had first walked in a semi-stupor, carrying Patti Sue. But a landmark that led you home—to any home—was always heartening.

"We're nearly there, guys. Home stretch now," she called over her shoulder and worked her shoulders out of a tired slump.

By sunrise they were back in a camp amazingly altered in the four days of her absence. As she turned the final curve, she stopped short, noting all the improvements. And the sight of Sergeant Chuck Mitford more or less where she had last seen him, at his "command" post.

That, too, had improved. The hearth had been enlarged, obviously to be used as a barbecue site, and a fire burned cheerfully in the center. Blocks of stone had been moved to form a semicircle around Mitford's central "desk," which had also been enlarged. On one side he had a pile of thin slates, bearing chalk marks, but he was working on something thin, like paper, with a sturdy wooden affair that near as nevermind looked like a pencil.

Sentries topped the higher points around the camp ravine: the stairs to the main cavern now boasted wider risers and a handrail. On the opposite side of the ravine, she couldn't fail to notice what looked like medieval stocks. Two of them, one occupied, though she couldn't see the face of the stockee since his head was hanging. The thin frame looked like Arnie's. She wondered what he'd done to rate that sort of incarceration. And what a novel idea for discipline!

The ravine floor had been swept clean and she really couldn't take in all the other improvements because Mitford had seen her. He grinned as he beckoned her to join him.

As she did, she saw him lean to one side and lift a creditable pottery pitcher. It seemed to be clad in some sort of odd matting, and a little steam escaped its lid.

"Pull up a rock, Kris, and tell me what you and that Catteni have been up to," he said, gesturing for her to present her cup so he could fill it. "It's hot, at least, and doesn't taste too bad. I've been in places with worse coffee."

"Didn't the first group tell you?" Kris asked, blowing on her drink.

"I'm debriefing everyone, Bjornsen," was his reply, emphasized by a slight frown at her objection.

She covered her embarrassment at questioning his methods by taking a sip from her cup.

The heat of the beverage was not its only recommendation, for it had an oddly minty flavor that knocked the dryness out of her mouth. If she hadn't had the cup in her hand, though, Kris would have been tempted to salute Mitford.

Ignoring the fatigue that made it difficult to find the words she needed, she gave what she felt was a concise report of the patrol. She emphasized the dangers of nighttime scavengers, of crop-filled fields, and the notion that the mechanicals were solar powered. Mitford nodded at that, making a short notation on the thin stuff.

"You've a source of paper, sarge?" she asked, interrupting herself.

"Bark, don't know how long it'll hold the lead . . . even got a pencil. . . ." And, grinning, he held up the thick shaft. "One of the geologist types found some carbon lead. The bark's a lot easier to handle than those slates. Doesn't break and flake. Tell me more about this solar-power notion?"

"You've heard it before?"

"Patrols at the granary mentioned 'em on the machines garaged there. Nothing moves at night so it's safe to haul in supplies then. Go on. Tell me more about the rescue. That first contingent were too damned wiped out to do more than say they got rescued." He poured her more of the hot drink.

"Remind me to tell you how glad I am to be in the same outfit with you, sarge," Kris said with a grateful smile.

"Ah!" and he dismissed her remark with a flick of his hand, turning his head briefly away in modesty. Then he grinned at her. "Wait'll you hear what I got in mind for you tomorrow."

"So long as it's tomorrow, sarge," she said, managing to produce a cocky grin despite her present fatigue. The drink was helping but the stimulation it provided wouldn't last very long.

"We got thirty-five more refugees." She looked about the camp. "Can we handle them?"

"Handle as many as we can find. Picked up a few more coming south from another dropoff. They either picked the right sort of fields or were plain lucky. They were right glad to find our camp. We'll need all the reinforcements we can get to start our offensive."

"Our what?" She peered numbly at Mitford.

"You don't think I intend spending the rest of my life on this mud-ball," Mitford said with a growl.

Kris shook her head. Mitford seemed so sane. And he was planning to get off this world?

"But that's for later. Any new useful recruits?" he asked, bringing her back to her report.

"Well, I suppose so, but I didn't think to quiz 'em. We've got one very pregnant woman and an older one who's not too spry. Zainal made me come on ahead." Mitford nodded and Kris looked back over her shoulder to see the rest of her group straggling in.

"The two guys in front are good people, Irish, the Doyle brothers. Right behind them is Joe Lattore and he's okay." She paused, seeing Aarens stumping in behind the Italian.

"And the tall individual?"

Kris hesitated long enough for Mitford to raise his eyebrows. "Name's Dick Aarens," she said as noncommittally as she could.

"I'll debrief him myself," Mitford said with a grin for her reluctance. "You go get yourself some rest, gal. You're off duty for the next twenty-eight." He pointed above his head at what she then recognized as a sundial. "Took the team three days! All the way from counting sand particles by the second to hourly divisions. Rough still, they say, and Greenwich mean time it ain't, but it's an improvement." His tone was prideful.

"All the comforts of home and time, too," she said, grinning at such a clever device.

"Not that a twenty-eight-hour planetary revolution is an improvement on what we're used to."

"And the stocks? Your idea?"

Mitford chuckled, without even looking up from the notes he was jotting down. "We got too many individuals," and by separating the word into syllables, he made it sound like an epithet, "to deal with who won't make life easier by disappearing when they don't like the way this outfit is run. Get some rest, gal." He gave her a good-natured buffet to her arm and jerked his head toward the cave.

She was halfway to the steps when he called the newcomers over, the Doyles startled to hear their names and Aarens giving her an accusatory glare.

At the top of the steps, she noted other signs of organization—workstations along the ledge and the legend "Home Sweet Cavehome" scrawled in chalk across the entrance. On the space where people had written their choice of name for the planet, "Botany" was underscored and all the others erased. She grinned. Home now had a name.

Inside, the early-morning crew were busy stoking fires, putting earthenware pots on trivets to heat, setting out slightly misshapen bowls for cereal. She noticed bowls of what looked like coarse salt by the hearths. On the ledges were other pots and pitchers: Sandy Areson had been very busy.

“Kris!” a voice shrieked and she was enveloped in Patti Sue’s arms before she had a chance to evade the girl, who proceeded to weep all over her.

“I told you she’d be back safe, Patti,” said Sandy, coming over and prying the girl off. “Now she’s tired, and dirty, and you don’t go moaning all over her. She’s been just fine, Kris,” Sandy added. “She was certain Mitford had put you in danger.”

“No, we got people out of danger, Patti,” Kris said, “and there’s a woman who’s going to need your help especially: Anna Bollinger. She’s very pregnant. Sandy, who’s the medic to see to her when she gets in? They’re a couple of hours behind us.”

“I’ll see to that. You hungry, Kris?”

“Had a bar not long ago but I’d sure love a bath.”

“I’ll get a clean coverall, and do yours while you’re sleeping,” Patti said, gushing with her efforts to be helpful.

“Now, Patti, you’re on breakfast detail.”

“I know, I know,” the girl said on her way to a pile of material stacked on one side of the cavern. “I’ll just be sure she knows the latest improvements.”

Sandy raised both hands, grinned reassuringly at Kris, and went back to stirring the pot. Leakage sizzled into the fire, but even that primitive attempt at a pot was an improvement over no cooking vessels at all.

“No chance at building a kiln for you, is there?” Kris said, realizing that the pottery must only be sun-dried.

Sandy’s grin was beatific. “Mitford knows his priorities. Got the ‘specialists’”—and she grinned—“working on a beehive type. Murph made bellows for me as well as for his own forge. Jack the Nail found a nice hard wood that ought to burn hot. So we’re cooking. And I am until I get that kiln up and firing.” She gave Kris a humorous grin as she waved smoke away from her face. “Go bathe.”

Patti danced about Kris all the way down to the lake, telling about finding the clay and that she’d managed a cup or two that had been fired, and they needed a proper kiln for best results, and they had discovered a nearby crop field of some very tasty root vegetables that were almost like potatoes only the Deskis couldn’t eat them at all without getting violently ill. Kris grimaced as she hadn’t remembered to tell

Mitford that Coo had found a plant that was Deski-edible. The tunnel to the lake was now well lit. When she and Patti reached it, there were also wooden steps down, a well-lit area, and a rack of pegs to hang clothing on and a rough reed basket of cattail-like seed pods.

"Where'd you find reeds?" Kris asked, noting the construction of the basket.

"Oh, Bob the Herb did. He finds all sorts of good stuff. Has two patrols under his command."

"And what're these?" Kris picked up one of the pods.

"You'll see," and Patti Sue giggled with anticipation of her surprise.

Then Kris saw that a raft had been anchored securely for safer bathing and there were even steps fastened to the side of the lake. So Kris stripped off the smelly, grimy coverall and slipped into the water.

"Here," and Patti handed her an oval pod. "It's not exactly soap and it'll ruin your complexion but it gets the dirt and . . . smells . . . off your skin."

Kris would have welcomed a Brillo pad, which was what the pod felt like. There was an odd herbal—almost astringent—smell off it and that was quite welcome after what she had been smelling like. She rinsed well and then clambered out of the water.

Patti, with an air of great accomplishment, then broke open one of the cattails, which puffed up into a white fiber.

"Your towel, madam?" She grinned at Kris' surprise. "It works, too, soaks up all the water. Then we put the used ones over there, in the other basket, and once they're dry, they're good fire-starting material. Clever, aren't we?" And she giggled as she handed Kris the fresh coverall.

"I think we need the twenty-eight-hour day to get everything done," Kris murmured.

Considerably refreshed and cleaner, Kris was quite ready now to get the rest her body urgently desired. She yawned all the way to the cave. That had improved, too. With beds made of mounds of branches and, she thought, filled in with more of the cattails.

She stretched herself out, turned to her right side, sighed with relief to have her sore hips cushioned, and never even felt the blanket which Patti lovingly spread over her.

Chapter Seven

THE AROMA OF ROASTING MEAT ROUSED KRIS, ALTHOUGH HER STOMACH was probably sending the message. It was empty. She could hear muted voices, pleasant voices; and, encouraged, she angled herself up out of the flattened bed. One other sleeping accommodation in her cave room was occupied by a sleeper and she slipped into her footwear as quietly as possible and left.

Neither Sandy nor Patti Sue were in the main cave, but she spotted Bart and approached to see if she could scrounge a meal off him.

“Hey, Kris,” the man said, smiling a welcome, “you did great!” and he dished up some of the food he was cooking onto a nearly round clay plate.

“Me? At what?” she asked with a cautious grin. When he also handed her a wooden fork, she exclaimed in surprise, “All the comforts of home.”

“We’re improving. And I mean the rescue of all those folks trapped by the mechanicals.”

“Oh, that. That was Zainal. He knew how to open the doors.”

“Yeah, but I ask myself, *how* did he know how to open them?”

“Aw, c’mon now . . . Bart!” And Kris quickly donned her public relations hat. “He knew how, so what? Maybe I could have opened it, given a hairpin or a credit card which I didn’t have. Door catches are door catches: there are only so many ways to lock one. He figured out the mechanism and opened it. The important thing is that he *did* know how and we could get all the others out before they got slaughtered.”

“I heard . . .” Bart began uncertainly.

“What you *heard* and what happened could be two different things entirely. Who did you *hear from*?”

Bart shifted uneasily. "One of the guys that came in with you."

"Wouldn't be named Aarens, would he?" Kris asked, letting her tone drip with scorn. "Next thing you *hear*, he'll be saying we oughtn't to listen to Mitford 'cos he's a slave driver, a martinet, endangering us, who does he think he is, when he was only a sergeant at that, and what does he know?" Kris waved her arm around, at the well-organized kitchen area, the pots and pottery, the water crates, people moving about at assigned tasks. "Well, Mitford knows enough to organize us to an amazing degree of self-sufficiency, I'd say. Aarens is a troublemaker and he started almost the moment we hauled him out of that barn."

Bart glared at Kris, resenting her tirade, so she smiled at him.

"You're too smart to fall for that kind of drivel, Bart, and this smells too good for me to let it get cold." She sat herself down on a convenient rock and started to eat. "Now, can I give you the facts, nothing but the facts, about the great slaughterhouse rescue? I'd hate for you to have a bad opinion of me because I stuck up for the guy responsible for saving forty-five people, forty-six if Anna has her baby."

The expression on his face told her it wasn't her he had a bad opinion of, which meant she really needed to put the record straight.

"Well, maybe what I heard was a bit garbled . . ."

"Scariest moment in my life was waking up in that barn," she said, giving a shudder, and was still answering his questions when Jay Greene spotted her.

"Sarge needs you, Kris," he said.

"Great meal, Bart," Kris said, standing up and then looking about her for the proper place to dispose of her plate and fork.

Bart grinned as he pointed. "Outside, to your left. Aarens himself is on kp."

"No better man," she said and left the hearth with Jay.

"I'll take that," Jay said, removing the plate from her hands. "You don't need to meet Aarens."

"Why? Is he bad-mouthing me? Or Zainal?"

Jay snorted. "Don't worry. Mitford has his measure."

"Does everyone else?" Kris asked urgently. "Hell, he'd've been better off—*we'd* be better off—with him as sausage meat after all," she added callously.

"He'll spend some time in the stocks if he keeps up."

"Which will only confirm his opinion of this chickenshit outfit."

"Who cares?"

"Speaking of caring," and they were now outside in the bright sunlight. Mitford was precisely where she had left him a good—she checked the sundial—nine hours ago. "Does he never rest?" Her ques-

tion was hypothetical, for she went on, "How's Anna Bollinger, our pregnant lady?"

"Doc says she'll be fine. Although she's grieving for her husband." He paused to click his tongue over that tragedy. "Janet's making her her special assignment . . . Janet and Patti Sue. Was that girl raped?"

"I suspect so."

"She never said anything?"

"It'll take a long while before she's able to talk about whatever it was happened to her."

"Oh?"

"You like her?"

"She's a sweet kid," Jay said, shaking his head, with a "gone" smile on his face.

"Go as slow as slow."

"I figured that."

Kris went down the steps while Jay turned left toward the crates where Aarens was clumsily drying cups with cattail fibers. They must have found a humongous supply of the things for them to be used in so many different ways.

The man in the stocks was gone and Kris wished she'd thought to ask Jay what his offense had been. Was that why he'd asked had Patti Sue been raped? Mitford had meant what he said about punishing harassers.

Kris heard steps on the stone behind her and, looking over her shoulder, saw Zainal with Slav and Coo right behind him. She wondered if they shared a cave. All of them looked clean and rested.

"What are you guys doing up so early?" she demanded.

"I slept much," Zainal said, grinning back at her, his marvelously weird yellow eyes echoing his good humor. "Slav and Coo well rested. Lot to do."

"Lots to do," she corrected him absently, then hastily added, "but you're real quick to learn."

"Need to learn," he replied, his smile broadened.

"Ve all learn," Slav said in his liquid voice. "Hi, Krissss," he added, emphasizing the sibilant.

Just then the Deskis on the heights let out the whistling alarm and slid, as suddenly, down out of sight.

"Fliers?" someone cried anxiously.

All activity in the camp was suspended. A beat later, everyone out in the open made for caves. Kris looked skyward, pivoting as Zainal, Coo, and Slav were, to scan the horizon. So was Mitford, in his exposed position on the floor of the ravine.

Coo gave an odd and earsplitting cry, which was echoed from above.

“Large thing,” the Deski said, spreading his arms to their farthest extension, indicating great size. He rolled his eyes. “Baaaaaad. Bad, bad, bad, bad,” he repeated, shaking his head and then covering his ears tightly. But that was as much to mask the noise, which was becoming very, very loud—like half a dozen subway trains converging on you and every one of them clanking and grinding and needing full servicing—as to stress the approaching danger. Kris thought the intensity of the sound was comparable to standing in a continuous sonic boom. Her bones began to vibrate right up to her teeth. Even the stone under her feet reverberated.

She wanted to ask where was the noise coming from and what made it, but she wouldn't be heard above that racket.

The shadow of it came first . . . longer and wider by far than the ravine: even the hill the ravine dissected. The shadow came on and on, and then they saw the blunt prow of the leviathan that growled and rumbled and still made the very stones shake.

It was coming in, prow definitely aiming downward, on a descending slant: several thousand feet above them, Kris estimated, blotting out the sun like an island-sized umbrella. A big island, with all kinds of protuberances, long and thin, squat, rounded disks, with all kinds of sticklike rods planted here and there, even on the massive belly doors that were acres long and wide. It seemed to take hours to pass overhead. By then, inured to the noise it made, people were outside again, peering up at the monstrosity. Their curiosity was stronger than their initial panic.

By then Kris had followed others to the nearest height—Mitford, Zainal, Jay Greene, Slav, Coo, the Doyles led the way, joined by half a dozen other men and women who wanted to get a good long look at this vessel.

“It's heading in the direction of the slaughterhouse,” Kris yelled above a slightly diminished noise.

“Yeah,” Mitford said thoughtfully, rubbing his hand over his mouth, his expression very thoughtful indeed. “Recognize it, Zainal?”

Zainal shook his head slowly, never once dropping his eyes to look at Mitford.

“Catteni have no ship that big.” He seemed as impressed by the size of it as everyone else. “Strange . . .” He rolled his hand, trying to find the appropriate word.

“Configuration?” Jay asked.

Zainal shook his head, made shapes with his hands that looked like the protuberances and spokes jutting out of the ship.

“Oh, those things. Yeah, the ships you took Earth with weren’t anything like that one.”

“No,” and Zainal grinned down at Jay. “Too big, no good.”

“Well, there’s that aspect of big, I suppose,” Jay replied amiably.

They watched until it was out of sight but not out of earshot. On the noon air, they could hear it changing gears . . . or whatever it did, causing the sound to alter.

“Hovering?” Mitford said, disbelieving what his ears reported. Then he shook his head. “I sure wouldn’t want to have to *lift* that dead mass from the ground.” He sighed. “How can they?” He looked queryingly at Zainal, who only shrugged again and shook his head. Kris saw anxiety for the first time in Zainal’s expression.

Kris swallowed. “If we hadn’t got those folks out yesterday . . .”

Mitford nodded. “You did great, Bjornsen.”

“Zainal did all the work, sarge,” she said quickly.

Mitford’s chuckle was audible to her and he patted her shoulder in approval.

No one moved from the uncomfortable height, human or alien. Then, to their listening ears, came a second change of engine sounds. They also heard the powerful blast of rockets, or whatever powered the great ship, as it headed skyward again. It burst into view, nose angled up now. Kris was awed by the technology that could produce such power. It wasn’t a beautiful craft, the way the *Discovery* and *Challenger* had been, delta-winged and shingle-clad. But it did have a triangular shape to it, blunt-nosed as it was.

“You guys willing to take a quick run back down there?” Mitford asked. He was looking at Zainal, Coo, and Slav.

“We sure are,” Kris said, and then gulped because she hadn’t intended to volunteer.

“Not you, Kris, you’re off duty.”

“If I am, they are. Only I’m going. I got just as much curiosity as the next one. I can’t believe that ship just gulped up *all* that was there and then calmly took off again.”

Mitford put his hands around his mouth to shout down to those on the ground. “Dowdall, send a team out to the granary. See if that got emptied.”

“Oh, lordee,” Kris said in a groan. She felt vulnerable again. And she’d brought in more mouths to be fed, too.

“Don’t worry,” Mitford said, “we’re stocked up, all things considered.”

So the two teams set off. Kris thought their return to the abattoir didn't take half as long going back as it had coming in. When they got there, the acres of crates were all gone. In their place were stacks of what looked like collapsed units. *That would account for some of the dents and scratches*, she thought, still rather numb at the sheer volume that ship had lifted. Did they have matter transporters? *Beam it up, Scotty*, was the facetious thought that bounced in Kris' mind until she gave a slightly hysterical laugh to stop it.

"It's all right, Kris," said Zainal, his accent improving all the time. He must have a terrific ear for language. Somehow that reassured her more than his words or the arm he laid briefly across her shoulders. "We check the barns."

"How?" And Kris gestured broadly at the empty space that had once been conveniently bridged by a pyramid of crates. There was a drop of six or seven meters to the first of the piles of collapsed crates. She suddenly felt oddly disoriented by the alteration.

Zainal pointed to the rocky terrain. That was when Kris first realized that the mechanicals had sliced the crate storage out of the cliff side: the barns as well. From what she'd been told, the granary was also stored in natural rock. No arable land was taken up by even such essential facilities. If this was the condition of the entire planet, it was a remarkable achievement in its own right. *And here come humans*, she thought dourly, *to mess it up*.

The barns were empty, disinfected and ready for the next batch of occupants. Had the prisoners been dumped down on this planet at harvest and culling time? How often did that monster arrive to collect? Monthly, bimonthly? Semiannually? What season of this planet were they currently in? The weather was mild enough to be spring, but the crops in the fields were more mature than springtime growth. And she'd heard that grain had kept pouring into the storage caves, which suggested fall harvests.

The other salient fact was that the machines' masters were probably as omnivorous as humanoids. And needed so much food that they went to the expense of developing highly specialized machinery to nurture and cultivate food crops and meat animals: and had sufficient planets available for their use so that they could devote all?—most?—of this one to food production. The collection vehicle as well as the mechanicals meant an extremely high technological level. And yet Zainal, for all the Catteni were well traveled and doing a lot of exploration on their own—did not recognize the type of craft used, and his exploratory service had registered the planet as uninhabited. Of course, if there were nothing but machines on the planet, that figured. Only why hadn't the

Catteni seen the machines on their appointed rounds? The Catteni hadn't surveyed the planet in the night only, had they? Or maybe during an infrequent downtime during the "winter" months. Kris' knowledge of farming suggested there were few "down" times on a farm: something or other had to be tended all year round. And what would winter on Botany be like?

Then Zainal blithely insisted that they have a look at the "garages" where curious vehicles with a variety of strange attachments awaited recall to duty.

"They do not recognize humans. No problem!" he told Kris and she was so flabbergasted that he had acquired the "no problem" slang that he was in the garage before she could protest.

One machine, standing inside, was hooked up to a framework which blinked and blipped. A servicing mechanism? Kris wished that they had someone with engineering training along. But then, who'd've thought they'd have a chance to inspect so thoroughly? Oh, for some of that bark and a pencil so she could make diagrams of the various types of mechanicals parked in the several garages. The last of the big barns contained sacks and sacks of what? Logic told her seeds or possibly fertilizers, more than likely. Had they been brought by the leviathan that had collected the meat? She used her knife to get into some of the bags and got samples of everything. Seeds, definitely, over half the shipment and, by the smell of it, fertilizer in the others.

The patrol got back to the camp by first moonrise. She didn't feel quite so wimpy when Coo and Slav showed signs of wanting to rest, but she and Zainal first had to report to Mitford.

"They didn't take the grain, Bjornsen," was Mitford's first comment, but she thought he seemed depressed. "What did you find?"

While Kris told him, including her surmises as she passed over the samples she had secured, Zainal had taken several large sheets of the papyry bark and was quickly sketching on them. A couple of times Kris lost the thread of her report when she saw his accurate depictions of the various types of machinery they had seen in the garages. Mitford stole the odd glance, his eyes switching to Zainal's face as the Catteni's pencil flew over the surface, but his sketches looked remarkably accurate to her eyes. Zainal regarded his handiwork and then calmly made necessary emendations, correcting occasional lines. They'd had an engineer along all the time, hadn't they, thought Kris. Zainal had rather more talents than anyone had realized.

"These," Zainal said, handing over the sheaf to Mitford.

"Hey, Bob the Herb, Mack Su, Capstan, Macy, front and center and bring those granary sketches," Mitford roared in his parade-ground

voice, then grinned approvingly at both Zainal and Kris. "There's quite a range of these things. Now we got to figure how to disable them."

"Why?" Kris blurted out the question.

"Like you, Bjornsen, I think there are humanoids bound to be involved in this kind of food production, seeing as how they seem to need the same sort of foods we do. However," and he went on briskly, "we're obviously dealing with a very high-tech race." Kris nodded her head vehemently. "That ship confirms some sort of periodic check. So there's got to be some sort of ongoing monitoring, even if we haven't found a central control point."

Kris wondered just how much of this Zainal understood, but he was *listening* with every ounce in his big frame. She could feel the tension in the thigh next to hers on the wide rock they were sitting on. Odd that she didn't mind tactile contact with Zainal, but he was so subtle about it, unlike some guys with impudent, wandering paws she'd encountered.

"So, if we start lousing up the machines, someone will come look," Mitford concluded.

"And we just overpower them?" Kris asked, aghast at the mere thought of invading a ship the size of the collector. Especially since the only weapons they had were knives, hatchets, spears, and bows and arrows. She let out a burst of laughter.

"Don't laugh, Bjornsen. There's more than one way of infiltrating a spacecraft. And I'm more or less counting on the fact that the investigatory ship would be smaller and have a live, not a mechanical crew. Machines are good enough for routine jobs but evaluation requires brains."

"Then what?"

"First things first. Get the investigator here."

Those Mitford had called for arrived and then he roared for a cook to bring two plates of food. He must have heard Kris' stomach rumbling.

"We've been tossing ideas around while you guys were investigating, so I'll bring you up to speed, Zainal, Bjornsen," he said and nodded at them both before turning to the other patrol members. "Coo, Slav, get some grub. Go eat." He pointed to the main cave. "And thanks. Oh, Coo, Bob the Herb harvested more of that green stuff you like."

Coo nodded and, with the Rugarian, made a beeline for the main cave. Mitford's eyes followed him.

"Ration bars are now reserved for Deskis, Ilginish, and Turs, folks. The rest of us can live off the land. They can't."

"Really?"

"Not until we find something their stomachs don't reject." Mitford

gave the sort of resigned sigh that meant he was worried about the problem. He was leader enough to want to preserve all his troops, especially those with abilities like the Deskis'. "The cooks are busy whipping up a sort of pemmican for patrols to eat so you don't upset the mechanicals by reducing their herds." He grinned. "What did you call those critters, Kris? Loo-cows." He chuckled.

"Sarge, I thought you *wanted* us to upset the mechanicals," Kris said, wanting clarification on that point.

"We *plan* the upsetting"—he grinned again—"but I don't want any of our guys to get darted out in the fields. So we disable the mechanism. Okay, fellas," he said to the newcomers. Capstan and Macy were new faces and names for Kris, but they seemed to know who she and Zainal were. Mitford passed Zainal's sketches around. "Zainal's drawn the sort of mechanicals that are housed at the slaughterhouse. Seem to me to be different from the ones at the granary."

"Highly specialized equipment," Su said, leafing through the drawings, pausing briefly to scowl at several before he switched his lot with Capstan. Kris found out later that the older man had been a designer of highly specialized production-line equipment.

"Look, all of 'em are solar powered!" Su said, flicking his fingers at various flat surfaces on the individual machines. "Like I said, they had to be. Ecologically sound, using renewable energy. Small wonder the Catteni scouts thought the planet was unoccupied. They'd probably been scanning, or whatever they do, for life forms and those mechanicals aren't alive. Now, they have to have collectors and storage batteries, too, and where'd they . . . ah, yes, possibly these units. Hmmm."

"And if there's no sun? Do they all just go down when it's overcast or rainy?" Kris asked, making a mental note of the solar panels on each variety of machine.

"Hasn't rained yet and we've been here ten days," Mitford said with a sigh, his glance going up and down the ravine that had experienced floods which had left visible high-water traces on the walls.

Zainal also looked around the camp and smiled. "Much done in ten days."

"Good for morale," was Mitford's terse reply, but he added a brief smile at the compliment. "Now, we got individuals who've got real expert with slingshots. Can take out a rocksquat at twenty-five meters. Stones'd take out those solar panels, wouldn't they?"

Su thought about that but Capstan shook his head.

"We'd have to know what sort of material they use in the mechanicals' panels. But it would follow that, if enough of the surface was

marred, it might not collect sufficient solar energy to perform efficiently."

"Perhaps," and Kris adopted an ingenuous look and tone to her voice, "we should practice some creative mudslinging? I didn't see a carwash in that Dalek barn."

Zainal flicked her a quick glance because he didn't understand her allusion so she charaded it and then he smiled, nodding. Su seemed to like the idea and even Capstan gave a droll little smile.

"There're sure enough brooks where we'd need 'em to make mud," Su went on with enthusiasm. "And if we got enough on the panels, the sun would dry it hard in place."

"Mud at night. No machine runs in day," Zainal suggested with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Good idea, Zainal," Mitford said, grinning. "Decommission them at source."

"Well, now, hold on a moment," Capstan said. "There would have to be storage batteries to keep them ticking over and start them off in the morning. Or there should be something like that. We'd have to disable those as well, you know."

"So we do," Mitford said cheerfully. "I wonder how many we would have to knock out for someone to come check the situation?"

That question was tossed around but they all agreed that they would first have to locate more installations for the plan to be effective. Kris, Zainal, and the two aliens had not been the only patrol which Mitford had sent out and one group, Mitford told them, was still missing. He wasn't worried about them—yet—because they'd gone north, away from the slaughterhouse. He admitted that there would need to be a lot more such facilities to service all the land they could see cultivated and grazed. Enough hills could be seen from the sentry posts: each range could hide more mechanicals, farming nearby arable land.

"Zainal," Kris said after a brief pause in the exchange of ideas, "how many would the prison ship have dropped in one journey?"

Zainal's shrug was almost apologetic. "Don't know. No need for me to know."

"Well, they landed more than us and those you just freed up," Mitford said in sudden anger. The others nodded solemnly. With a sigh, the Sergeant went on. "One of the recon patrols tangled with a savage bunch of individuals: only two of our guys got away and one was badly sliced up. Estimated there were close to thirty in the lot that jumped them. So it'll be more important than ever for any patrols to post sentries at night. Esher was smart enough to hide himself, and Barrett, who was

injured, until they could be sure they weren't followed back here. And that," Mitford's thick index finger pointed at each one in the circle to emphasize his warning, "is what no one does! I'll tell you one thing: they really hopped to it next time I called a Red Alert. And Murph made us a triangle out of metal that would wake the dead."

"But we could hold off hundreds here, sarge," Kris said, startled. The mere thought that the camp was vulnerable, and to renegade humans, depressed her. As it must have depressed Mitford.

"You better believe it," Mitford said so resolutely and with such a knowing grin on his face that Kris relaxed. Mitford had obviously been busy placing safeguards as well as amenities. "Do they ever check up on the job lots they drop down?" he asked Zainal who nodded.

"Not soon," he said. "In half a year," he added, dropping into Barevi to express the time.

"Half a year," Kris murmured in English and he nodded again as he accepted that new word.

"Would they bring in more prisoners?" Mitford asked Zainal, who nodded.

"Drop people many places," and he made a spreading gesture with his hands. "Many times to seed planet."

Kris wasn't the only one who received that information with a sinking heart. How many did the Catteni expect would survive? And if none did, was the planet written off? What a way to colonize! While she hadn't even thought to estimate how many prisoners had been in that holding area prior to being forced aboard the transport, there had been a lot more than the few hundreds ending up in this camp. They knew of at least four other deposits now. How many had there been in the initial load? At that, they might be better off making first contact with the Mechano Makers.

"Well, we deal with what we can," Mitford said staunchly. "And we'll explore as thoroughly as possible under the circumstances. Zainal, any more information on how they seed the planet?"

"I was in space more," he said, spreading his hands wide open to express his ignorance.

"Huh, so the Catteni operate just like any other army?" Mitford said in a droll tone. "Left hand doesn't know what the right hand does."

Kris had a time explaining that remark to the puzzled Zainal, who grinned when he did understand.

When Mitford finally dismissed them, Kris made her way down the ravine and over to the stairs. The kitchen cavern walls were now decorated with outlines of vegetations. These were divided into several sections: one marked "Human," with those plants to avoid and those to

gather; another had "Deski" in elaborate Gothic lettering as a caption and the enscription "potassium? calcium?"

"Hi, there," a cheerful voice said, and Dick Aarens moved to intercept her.

"Not now, Aarens," she said, altering her direction to avoid him.

"Hey, gal, I'm only trying to be friendly." He stepped in front of her.

"So am I, but right now all I want is my bed."

His eyes, a pleasing shade of blue for all she didn't like the man who wore them, widened. "Why, so do I!" And he attempted to put his arm around her as if to lead her off.

She ducked out from under. "By myself, Aarens."

"Kris . . ."

She was both relieved and concerned to hear Zainal's voice behind her. She turned, took a step toward the Catteni.

"Yes?" She hoped her response conveyed her relief at his timely arrival.

"We talk tomorrow's patrol now?" he asked.

Behind her, she heard Aarens mutter something and then the crunch of his feet on the sandy floor as he moved away.

"Thanks, Zainal. You saved my life."

Zainal regarded her with a thoughtful expression. "You do not like him?"

"No," she said, shaking her head for emphasis.

"I think so."

"Watch him, though, Zainal. He's dangerous."

"How?" Zainal was amused at her response.

"He doesn't like you."

"Because you do?"

She shook her head. "Because first you're Catteni and second he fancies himself better than you. And irresistible to me."

Zainal shook his head, lightly gripping her on the arms, a tacit request for explanation.

"I'm not sure I can explain the nuances," she said, grinning up at him. Yellow eyes were much nicer than plain old blue. And she liked Zainal's hands on her whereas Dick Aarens' touch made her skin crawl.

"Nu-an-ces?"

She put her hand on his chest, felt the faint pulse of his heartbeat—Catteni had hearts after all. "I'll explain later, Zainal. Right now, I'm so tired I can't."

"Go," and he turned her toward the corridor. But when he gave her a little push, she grabbed his hand.

"You come, too. I don't mean to have Aarens jump out at me."

"I like to come," Zainal said and there was a decided glint in his eyes that made Kris wonder how she was going to dismiss this courtier. And, if she hadn't been so tired, she might—just now—have considered . . . She shook her head. The timing was wrong. She was so tired.

So, her hand tucked into his large one, they walked to her cave.

"Sleep well, Kris."

"Don't you just know I will," she said fervently.

To her utter surprise, he cupped her head briefly, tousling her hair before he let go. But he was off down the corridor before she could react.

"Too damned tired even for a goodnight kiss," she said ruefully and gratefully sank onto her bed of boughs.

THE NEXT DAY, HER PATROL CONSISTED OF ZAINAL, COO, SLAV, AND the Doyle brothers. Their main objective: to find and disable as many mechanicals as they could, starting with those at the abattoir. The optimum, according to Capstan, would be to dismantle the solar panels if they could do so. Smashing the panels or smearing them with mud were equally viable, so long as the mechanicals were disabled. The secondary aim was to continue the interrupted reconnaissance of their immediate vicinity. They started out better equipped than ever, with ropes braided of vines which didn't burn the skin as the tough synthetic material of the blankets did. They each had slingshots, a pouch of suitable small rocks—that was one of the duties for the few youngsters in the camp—a flint-tipped lance, and bags of the new trail food. Kris had sampled it when Jay handed over the ration and it was definitely an improvement over the dry compressed Catteni bar as far as taste was concerned. Coo and Slav were given ration bars, Patti Sue doling them out with thoughtful care. The girl evidently had no trouble serving the alien males, though she never once looked at Zainal.

"We don't know if the pemmican supplies all your daily nutritional needs," Jay said, "but you can hunt to augment protein."

The Doyle brothers made cheerful companions, asking questions of both Kris and Zainal. Kris wondered if they had been chosen because, being Irish, they seemed to get along with anyone.

THEY MADE GOOD TIME, ZAINAL SETTING A COURSE DIAGONALLY WEST of the patrol's earlier trek, the one which had resulted in their capture. They found a hillock and made their evening camp on its crest . . . until

the rain came. It wasn't a soft rain: Kris figured that it was comparable to standing under the waterfall in her Barevian refuge. They huddled under an improvised tent made from their blankets, which gave them some protection from the driving force of the torrent. It rained hard for what Kris and the Doyles decided was probably an hour, though battered as they were, it seemed an endless period. Then, as abruptly as it started, it stopped.

"Like someone turned the shower off," Lenny said, peering out of the damp shelter. "And hey, not a cloud in the sky and it's only the first moon. I'd recognize her anytime by her craters."

They shook the blankets out: the synthetic seemed to shed the water—the outside a trifle damp to the hand but the underside dry.

"Amazing fabric," Ninety said, crushing the edge of his blanket in his hand. "Give credit where it's due. Those Catteni make good survival gear."

"Durable," Kris agreed and looked over at Zainal, who was staring about the land below their retreat. "What d'you see?"

"Nothing."

"That bothers you?"

"Yes," the Catteni said and then lowered himself to the ground. "You take this watch, Kris. Wake Slav. Slav, you wake Co. Co, wake Doyles. You wake me." Feeling which was the dry side of his blanket, he then pulled it around him and pillowed his head on his arm. "I sleep, then think better."

Whatever he had feared at least kept them all alert on their separate watches. Maybe, Kris thought as she woke Slav to take his turn, that was what Zainal had had in mind: sneaky so-and-so.

They were all awake before the sun came up, still not yet adjusted to the longer days and nights. They had saved enough dry droppings to make a fire to heat water from a nearby stream in their cups, adding the dried herbs that became a fragrant tea to sip while eating their pemmican. There were worse ways to break a fast.

When they came to the next ridge, Zainal climbed to the highest point and surveyed the distances before pointing to their right.

"Hills," he said cryptically.

"Can the mechanicals have built into every hillside?" Kris asked, half running to keep up with his long stride as he marched downhill again.

"We see," Zainal said, grinning at her, his yellow eyes twinkling.

They made the new destination by noontime, striding along the crest of that hill complex until they came to the bare rock and another silent, but full, garage.

“D’you think they take a lunch break and oil and grease themselves?” Lenny asked as they all looked down at the closed doors of the anonymous facility. “Another granary?” He gestured toward nearby fields, straw brown and shorn of whatever crops they might have sprouted.

“We look.”

“And smear?” Ninety asked, mopping his perspiring forehead, for the last several clicks had included considerable climbing. “I could moisten a hill or two with the sweat I’ve raised.”

The storage barns were empty, not so much as a grain of whatever they had held.

“That was one busy mother of a ship,” Lenny said, “if it cleared this, too.”

“Long time,” Zainal said, showing dust on the finger he had drawn across the floor.

“Oh? Cutting back the farmers’ subsidies here, too, huh?” Ninety asked facetiously.

Zainal gestured for the patrol to check out each building of the fifteen in this complex. The last one was the garage where the mechanicals were standing in motionless lines. They didn’t look dusty, but just as Ninety started to enter the building, Zainal held up his arm and then pointed to the long rectangles on the eastern overhang of the garage.

“Sun power.”

“Yeah,” Ninety said, gulping. “D’you think they’d registered us as thieves?”

“Doubt it,” Lenny said. “What’ve they got to guard against on this planet? They don’t even know we’re here. And dangerous!”

Zainal chuckled. “We are. To them.” Then he gestured to Ninety, made a cup of his two hands, and waited. Ninety, shrugging at the thought of his not inconsiderable bulk being hoisted by the Catteni, put his foot in the hand and climbed to Zainal’s shoulders where he was now high enough to examine the panels.

“Hey,” he said after a moment’s scrutiny, “I think they come off.” He grabbed one, rocking a bit on Zainal’s shoulders, but the Catteni compensated easily and Ninety unclipped the panel from brackets. “Easy to install, replacements in stock, no waiting, no problem!”

He handed each of the four panels down, then examined the links to wherever the power was collected. “Wish I’d seen the specs of the solar-power stuff they were bringing into Dublin before we left.”

“You weren’t taken in Ireland?” Kris asked, somehow having assumed that they had.

"Naw, we were working on a construction site in Detroit. Pay wasn't great but better'n getting only fifty quid a week on the dole."

Then he jumped neatly down from Zainal's shoulders and joined his brother, Slav, and Coo, who were peering suspiciously at the units. Zainal seemed to be waiting, his attention on the unmoving machines.

"How much power would these things store up?" Ninety asked him. "Do we have to wait until dark? We wouldn't be able to see then."

"Maybe they're on standby anyhow," Lenny suggested. "They're not armed er anything."

"Darts," Zainal said and peered into the garage to see if he could locate the little aerial menaces.

"I don't see anything set in the frame," Lenny said, running a hand down the side of the opening. "No sign of security devices. Not as if I'd recognize any if I saw 'em. There has to be some . . ."

Coo broke the thoughtful silence by walking right in and straight to the back of the dim garage. Turning around, he raised his long, spider-fingered hands in a "so there" gesture.

"Okay," said Ninety, brushing his hands together. "Let's see if we can't disable these fecking mechanicals."

He jumped to the flange of the nearest big farm machine and, finding footholds, climbed high enough to reach the canted solar panel surfaces. "And these come off with a twist of the wrist, too," he said, after yanking first one, then the next panel out of their brackets. There were seven in all. Having done that, he looked down at Zainal.

"Okay, boss man, whaddawe do next?"

Zainal stepped up on the flange and then on tiptoe to look into the opening left by the removal of the panels. Kris held her breath, hoping nothing would turn on and knock him out, or off. She couldn't remember, from her brief glimpses of them, what sections of the machinery lit up when in use.

Zainal began tugging at a section which came away in his hands. He grunted, handed this down to Kris, and he and Ninety began dismantling the exterior sheets. Even Slav looked pleased as he, Coo, and Lenny handled the pieces.

"Simple," Zainal remarked after a good look at the innards. "This"—and he touched a cube the length of his spread hand—"is the power collector." He pulled it loose.

"Hmmm, a regular pop-tool," Ninety said, grinning. "Handy dandy mechano set."

"Well, if other machines had to service it, it might as well be easy to disassemble," Lenny said, changing his voice on the last word to sound more like Short Circuit Number Five.

The wires and connectors plugged into the power cube also came away easily, and Zainal, with yet another grunt, removed the cube.

“Could we use that back at the camp?” Kris asked.

“For what?” Ninety said with a snort. “We haven’t anything to power up.”

“We could if we had power . . . and maybe some of the engineer types could rearrange all those parts into something useful for us.”

“For what?” Ninety asked.

“What’s the matter with you? Don’t you like technology?” Lenny wanted to know, dismissing his brother’s attitude.

“Mitford will want,” Zainal said. “We bring on later back to camp.” He looked around again, his eyes narrowed.

“What’s wrong?”

“No dart thing.”

Coo suddenly pointed up, chattering in the way of Deski laughter. Craning their necks, they finally saw the aerial unit, high up in the ceiling.

“No wonder we didn’t see one in the slaughterhouse garage. We never looked *up*,” Kris said. “Well, now we know where it hangs out, we can get that one, too.”

“Already half-launched like that, isn’t it?” Lenny said. “That thing has to be programmed by a machine, doesn’t it? I mean, it can’t go off in here, can it?”

“I hope not,” Ninety said.

They had to do a circus act: Ninety on Zainal’s shoulders, with Coo on Ninety’s, to get enough height to reach the thing. In trying to remove it from the brackets that held it in place, the human ladder swayed alarmingly back and forth, with Lenny and Kris doing a dance around Zainal, ready to cushion any faller with their own bodies.

Coo ended up swinging on the thing, to break it loose from its mooring. So it and he fell, Coo uttering amazing cackles as he plummeted, clutching the mechanism to his thin chest. Lenny and Kris smacked into each other as they reached out to catch his spider body. But they did break his fall even if Kris got clouted across the nose by one wing extension of the flying device. She saw stars but managed to hang on to the frail Deski body until they could ease him to the ground.

When they separated, Kris gasped, for the wicked points of the anesthetic darts were visible along the leading edges of both wings, pointing right at her. She could so easily have been pricked. She sat down and then had to tip her head back to stem the nosebleed.

The men were all for breaking up the evil device.

“No way,” she said with muffled urgency because she only had her

sleeve to use to stanch the blood on her face. "Let's find out if there's a reservoir or well of that anesthetic they use," she said.

"Why?" Lenny demanded. "I'm not a vindictive sort, but when I think about what happened to some bodies who got darted . . ."

"I'm thinking of a medical use for the anesthesia, Lenny. It put us to sleep. And that could be useful."

"Oh, yeah."

So they were even more careful as they disassembled the unit.

Then they disabled all the other machines in the garage, making neat piles of the various components.

"Don't fancy lugging all this back," Lenny said, eyeing the lot thoughtfully.

"We get more people to carry. Aarens is strong," Zainal said, grinning maliciously in Kris' direction.

"He'll love you for that," she said with a snort and a laugh.

"Lugging's about all that gobshite's good for," Ninety said as he regarded the piles dubiously. "But, hey, is it safe to just leave the stuff lying here?"

Zainal shrugged. "No machine has power!"

"That's true enough," Ninety said, still worried.

"No power in the garage either," Kris reminded him.

"Suppose they have got some sort of security patrol that comes around checking to be sure they're on duty er something?" Ninety wanted to know.

After a moment, Zainal grinned. "That is what is wanted."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," and Ninety scratched his head. "So, shouldn't we break all this up so it can't put them all back together?"

"We hide," Zainal said decisively after a moment's thought.

They had to haul the panels and cubes quite a distance to find someplace that would be secure from an aerial or surface inspection and that task took the rest of the day. That night they camped inside the inoperative garage, safe from the torrential rains that once again pummeled the ground. The rocksquats they'd hunted—Kris had surprised herself by stunning one in her first attempt to hunt with a slingshot—were roasted over the fire they made. The patrol ate, watching the rain sheeting down.

IN THE COURSE OF THEIR SEVEN-DAY PATROL, FOR THAT WAS THE TIME given them by Mitford for this tour, they found and rendered useless four more installations, including another empty abattoir. They camped there that night, more comfortably on fodder bedding, while outside the

hour-long rain pelted down. It rained every evening, hard, for approximately an hour and they preferred to be undercover during such onslaughts.

“This sort of rain can’t be natural,” Kris said the fourth night. “Not rain at night, when all the machines would be safely back in their garages.”

“They got the farming so well organized here, I wouldn’t put it past ’em to organize the weather, too,” Ninety said. Then added thoughtfully: “Sure would be nice not to have the soccer games rained out.”

“You would think of soccer,” his brother said with amiable asperity.

“Then there’d have to be a central control facility somewhere on this planet,” Kris said, turning to Zainal. He nodded. “Only where? We aren’t going to be able to cover a great deal of distance on foot and we don’t even know which continent we’re on. Do we?” she asked Zainal.

He shook his head, sighing again and indicating his own frustration over insufficient data.

“Well, if we keep on the way we’re going, disabling garages, we may meet our landlord soon. Maybe sooner than we’d like,” and unconsciously her hand went to the knife at her belt. “Comforting a knife may be, but it’s not really sufficient to combat the kind of technology we’ve seen.”

“No intelligence on this planet,” Zainal said with a shrug.

“D’you mean anything that comes after us would be a machine?” Kris wasn’t at all happy with that notion. “Or more flying darts?”

“We were trapped in that place,” Zainal said, but he was obviously turning over the possibilities in his head and then gave a convulsive shrug. “We are careful. We keep watch.” He delivered a short series of guttural barks to the Deski, who was chewing a mouthful. Coo nodded and pointed to his ear flaps. Then, to Kris’ surprise, he held up one of his two opposal digits in the “gotcha” gesture.

“They catch on quick, don’t they?” Lenny murmured as he beamed at the Deski and made the thumbs-up with both of his hands. Coo nodded enthusiastically but kept right on chewing.

Kris, watching the Catteni’s face during this exchange, decided that he had also noted the alteration in the Deski. Though the alien kept up with the patrol, climbing was no longer as effortless for him and, to Kris, he seemed even more spidery and insubstantial than ever. And he was constantly trying out some new greenery, root, or the nutlike objects he found in the forested areas. Some of the vegetation sprouted sort of nuts, or fungi, on the trunks. Coo tried everything and, when the others chowed down on rocksquat, he ate slowly of his ration bars. Twice Zainal had evidently told him not to save the bars: there would be more

back at the camp. At least that's what Kris *thought* Zainal was telling him.

On the morning of the sixth day, Slav pointed out their homeward direction. Kris was suitably awed by the confidence he displayed, since they'd done so much up-and downhill travel, so many detours around impassable rock faces, that she had no idea where the home camp was.

Chapter Eight

AT FOURTH MOONRISE THREE DAYS AFTER MITFORD HAD SENT OUT FIVE teams to search and disable, the Sergeant was reviewing plans: renovations made by the three architects among them for the abattoir barns. The processing equipment in the slaughterhouse had been completely dismantled although they'd have to have serious overcrowding before anyone who knew what had happened in that plant would live in it. However, there'd be more folks who hadn't a clue.

He heard one of the sentries hiss at him.

"Sarge, something's coming."

"Well, don't tell me. Challenge them," but Mitford reached for his spear with one hand and eased the knife out of its sheath with the other.

"Who goes there?" the sentry yelled.

Yells answered him but not the passwords. He ducked.

"Shit, sarge, they ain't ours," and he ducked behind the prominence on his height. "RED ALERT!" He clanged fiercely on the metal alarm triangle set on the height.

"WHICH WAY ARE THEY COMING, GODDAMMIT, RAINEY!" Mitford roared. "ATTACK! ATTACK! TAKE YOUR STATIONS!"

It was fortunate that, even with many out on exploratory patrols, there was usually a handful of people awake at any hour of the twenty-eight.

"COMING DOWN THE RAVINE, SARGE! Omigod," and Rainey ducked as a spear clattered on the rock beyond him. "They're shooting at *me!*"

More spears came spinning out of the darkness. Aimed at the source of light which was the "office" fire. Crouching to make a smaller target,

Mitford dashed forward. In the stocks, Aarens was shouting to be released as two spent arrows and another spear fell close to him.

"C'MON," Mitford roared at the men and women rushing out of the main caves, spears and knives ready, just as they'd been drilled. With grim satisfaction, Mitford knew there'd be no complaints about his drilling them after this. Only how many were attacking? he wondered as he pounded up the ravine and grinned as he saw the first attackers appear on the edge of the lighted areas. A good fight, that's what was he'd been missing. Seeing a target, he paused long enough to launch his spear at an oncoming body. It pierced the chest of the leader, who dropped like a stone. Now the sentries on the heights were using their weapons, firing arrows and launching their spears into the crowd. Then the next of the attackers was howling as he charged at Mitford.

The Sergeant met the frenzied attack: the man had a knife in each hand but he hadn't the first clue about effective fighting, slashing the air in the hopes that one knife would connect. Mitford ducked, side-stepped, and then plunged his knife into the attacker's ribs. The man screamed, an awful wailing desperate sound, knives falling from strengthless hands as he fell back. Mitford remained in the crouching position as he quickly jerked his knife free and then tackled the next attacker. He was peripherally aware that his force was pressing in behind him. Then a stone, thrown from the heights, bounced off his shoulder, and he staggered against the wall of the ravine.

"HEY, WATCH WHERE YOU'RE AIMING," he roared as he saw Bart, Taglione, and quite likely Sandy Areson swarming past him.

It was over quickly: the attackers had obviously had no real plan in mind. They'd seen lights and smelled cooking, then attacked at a time when they thought everyone would be asleep.

There were fourteen bodies to be buried and three whose wounds could be sewn up. They were starving, and even their Catteni-issue clothing was torn and incredibly filthy. When the sun came up, three women crept in, begging for help. They were in dreadful condition, not only starved but beaten and repeatedly abused. Mitford approvingly watched Patti Sue gently leading one of them, little more than a child, into the kitchen for probably the first real food she'd eaten since being dropped.

Only five of the defenders had been wounded: two of those by "friendly fire" from stones thrown down into the ravine. Mitford's shoulder was sore but he didn't mention it to Matt Dargle, who was busy sewing up knife cuts. Another man had tripped in the dark and broken his leg and was cursing his clumsiness while the bone was set.

"Sorry about that, sarge," he said when Mitford walked around the infirmary to check the damages.

"Weren't you right behind me up that ravine, Bart?" Mitford asked as he watched Matt Dargle sewing up the nasty slice on the dark man's arm. "Teach you to keep your guard up."

"Naw, they was aiming at you," Bart said, grinning.

"Saving my skin, were you? Good man!" Mitford gave his uninjured shoulder a quick squeeze of appreciation.

The battle had roused the entire camp, so the cooks made an early breakfast for everyone. Mitford took advantage of the meal to drive home the lesson that they had to maintain vigilance.

"Good reaction, quick response time, folks, but they never should have got as far as the ravine at all. I think we'll move the guard perimeter out a bit."

"What about traps, sarge? Maybe we could rig some on the approaches?"

"Draw me a plan," Mitford said, nodding approval.

"You know, with so many out on patrol, didn't we leave ourselves a bit thin of fighting men here?" Sandy asked.

"Not when you were right in the vanguard yourself," Mitford said in blunt approval.

"It's my home, too," Sandy said with a shrug. "Besides, you drilled all of us!"

"Didn't I just?" Mitford said with a grin.

"All right, all right, we bitched," she said, flapping her hand at his inference. "You knew what you were doing. I guess we've got a bit cocky."

"We all know better now, don't we?" Mitford said, glancing around him. "Hell, they didn't even get as far as my office, did they? Now I need a disposal patrol."

"You mean burial party?" Dowdall asked, looking up from honing his blade.

"No, disposal. I want those bodies dumped four fields over at least, Dowdall."

"Aw, sarge," Dowdall groaned in protest to being tacitly assigned the duty.

"Don't want that carrion stinking up our camp, do we? You, you, you, you, and you," and he ended up with a full squad. "Take care of it before the sun warms 'em too much."

As soon as he got back to his "office" to write up the incident, Aarens began his complaint.

"You'd've let me die here, unable to defend myself! And you call yourself civilized! Think you're such a big leader."

Mitford walked straight up to Aarens, jerking him by the hair of his head so Aarens couldn't evade his eyes.

"Look, you sorry piece of shit. You keep on this way and I'll stake your living body out right beside the others."

Aarens gasped. "You wouldn't dare?"

"Oh, wouldn't I? Just give me an excuse. Just give me one!"

Mitford knew that his rage was fueled more by a reaction to the stress of the surprise attack and the runoff of adrenaline in his system. He oughtn't to lose control by taking it out on Aarens but better him than anyone else.

"Hey, sarge, take it easy. Take it easy," and though there was a quaver in the man's voice, his conciliatory manner caused Mitford to let his hair go. "You don't want to waste me, sarge. Not now. Not when you're going to need me."

"Need . . . you?"

"Yeah, me, sarge," and Aarens actually grinned. "Like I told you when I got here, I'm a mechanical genius. I can make machinery work when no one else can. I don't even need manuals to tell me how things work. It's a knack I've got. I used to make big money back in the States, just telling executives how to improve the efficiency of their production lines. Look, I heard what you were discussing with Mack Su, Capstan, and the others. They're all desk jockeys. Me, I'm the guy on the floor who carries out their notions. And makes 'em work. You don't want to waste the one real talent you've got who can give you lights for the caves? Hot water! Distant early-warning devices."

"DEWs? How could you do that?" Mitford was suspicious but certainly willing to use Aarens—if the waste-of-space could produce the goods.

"You could mount solar panels—and their collectors, of course—all around the camp," and Aarens gestured with his stocked hands, "with a circuit, say of a lighter wire. Anything breaking that wire and the alarm sounds. Simple."

"At night?"

Aarens shook his head, denying that qualification. "Collectors should save enough of a charge to be functional all night long. Or how do those mechanicals start up? I mean, it's simple enough."

Mitford thought there was no harm in running the idea past Mack and Spiller.

"Yeah, simple enough. Now shut up for a while."

“Yeah, but I’m supposed to be out of this contraption today,” Aarens complained.

Mitford gave him a long look and then pointed to the sundial. “Not until the sun’s on the first division. That makes it exactly a day since you got sentenced for harassing the little Chinese kid.” Mitford gave the man one more long stare before he turned to pick up a sheet and his pencil.

He almost regretted the fact that Mack, Spiller, and Jack the Nail thought Aarens’ idea had enough merit to make a prototype from materials that had been brought back to camp from the abattoir buildings.

Zainal’s team made it back to camp, just before the evening rains, by jogging whenever the terrain permitted, and were met with a stern demand from the sentries for the password.

“Password?” Kris yelled back. “What password? You know who we are: hell, it’s Kris Bjornsen, Zainal, the Doyle brothers, Coe and Slav. Damn it all, Tesco, don’t be so hostile.”

“Well, it’s my duty, Kris. We got attacked while you was all gone.” His grin gave her the immediate good news that the attack had failed and no one in the camp had evidently been killed or badly hurt.

They passed Tesco’s post by and hurried down to the caves, eager for more details about the incident.

When Kris saw that the Sergeant wasn’t in his office, she grabbed the first person by the arm, a youngster she remembered rescuing from the barns.

“Pete, where’s Mitford?”

“Inside,” the boy said. “Didja hear about us being attacked?”

“Yes, but we could do with some details.”

“Who? What?” Lenny demanded.

“Aw, just some starving renegades. Sarge led the counterattack—he was something else.” The boy’s eyes shone with admiration. “Bart and Sandy Areson right behind ’im. I missed most of it,” and Pete’s face fell in disappointment. “The sentries rained down arrows and stones and clipped a few of our guys.” Pete grinned irrepressibly. “Friendly fire, the Sarge called it. And they had fourteen bodies to dump—over that way,” and Pete made a wild gesture that indicated a considerable distance, “to keep the scavengers happy.” He gave an expressive shudder. “So you see, you missed a lot!”

“Were any of our guys hurt?” Kris asked urgently, glancing at the empty “office.”

“Aw, a broken leg and a couple of cuts is all. And the Sarge took in the ladies the bad guys had messed up bad.”

Inadvertently, Kris’ glance went to the stocks. They were empty.

Could both Aarens and Arnie be on good behavior? Had the attack scared manners into them?

"Death to all invaders of our Camp Ayres Rock!" And Pete shot his arm up in a clenched-fist salute.

"Camp Ayres Rock?" Kris repeated, stunned.

"Sure, why not? The rock that protects us."

"Well, you *are* named Peter."

"Huh?" The kid screwed his face up.

"'Peter' means 'rock,' honey."

"Oh, I never knew that."

"D'you know where the Sergeant is right now, Peter?" Kris asked.

"Sure. Follow me," and he gestured them after him. "He's rigging distant early-warning devices."

"He is?"

"Yeah, that Aarens guy did 'em. Not bad. And they work."

"Aarens?" and Kris turned in amazement to Zainal.

"Wonders will never cease," Lenny said, grinning at her, appreciating her surprise. "So he isn't a total waste."

"Takes all kinds to make a world," was all Mitford said when they met up with him on his way back from the perimeter.

"But Aarens?"

"Surprised me, too," Mitford said, leading them to a small cave that was his "inside office"—since the rains came, he said. "Did Pete there tell you all about the raid?"

"Can we debrief you, sarge?" Kris asked, laughing.

"Later. Give me the report on your findings, first. You do all right?" He glanced around at the others.

"Fine, sarge, we did great," Lenny answered him.

"Coo's gotten much weaker though, sarge," Kris said quietly, not glancing in the Deski's direction. Mitford grimaced. "Has anybody else found something to help?"

"Matt Dargle has narrowed it down to the lack of vitamin C, potassium, or calcium, and we're looking for sources of those two," and Mitford looked dour. "Right now there're only three Deskis strong enough to go out with foragers to search." He turned to Zainal. "You got any good ideas?"

"Deskis always need special foods. Bring in to Barevi. I do not know what." And Zainal sighed. "Good guys, Deskis!"

"S'more'n I can say for some," Mitford said in a low disgusted growl. He went on in a more positive tone. "Believe it or not but Aarens is the mechanical genius he told me he was!"

"So we heard."

“Well, he cobbled together some perimeter circuit warning devices in case some other individuals think they can raid Camp Rock . . .” He grinned when he realized they’d heard the location had received a name. “He and Spiller believe we can even get adapt the panels to make water hot and maybe even internal lighting and heat. D’you remember anything in that report about the winters here, Zainal?” There was a hint of deep concern in Mitford’s eyes. “Like snow or floods or what?”

Zainal looked down at his big hands as if they might hold the answers. Then, with a sad sigh, he shook his head. “My people did not explore well. They did not see a lot we have now seen. But this planet has air to breathe and food for most to eat.” His voice held a tacit apology for the shortcomings of that exploration team. “The basic are here. Air, water, food needed to survive. And we survive well now, thanks to you.”

Mitford nodded in acceptance at that approval.

“Well, then, since the farm machinery seems to be shutting down after harvesting everything, and the farmers among us say that those loo-cows of yours, Kris, haven’t been rounded up in a wintering environment, looks like we all can expect to survive whatever the winter season brings.”

“Say, sarge, if the machines are all shut down, either by us or their programming, couldn’t we move into the buildings? We’ve found enough to accommodate all of us,” Kris said.

“That’s being considered as an alternative,” Mitford said. “Some folks are scared of the possibility of more marauders and feel safer here in Camp Rock. They’d resist leaving. However, those barns would be equally as defensible. Now lemme talk to the Doyles, will ya, and you two get some rest.”

The rain was still pelting down when Kris and Zainal stopped in the main cavern for the hot soup and the rather tasty form of soda bread that was available. It was so good that she didn’t even spit out the hard bits.

No one she knew was on duty there so she ate with Zainal. She tried not to, but she couldn’t help notice the sideways looks directed at them: some quite speculative and unfriendly. Well, it didn’t surprise her that there would still be animosity leveled at Zainal. Maybe that was why Mitford kept sending them out of the camp on patrol. Out of sight, out of mind. She sighed, a little sound, but Zainal caught it and looked inquiringly at her. She smiled dismissively and broke off a piece of her bread to scrape the last of the thick, tasty soup out of the rather lopsided pottery bowl. Zainal followed her example, grinning back at her.

They washed out their utensils and returned them to the storage racks.

"I go see Coo," Zainal said.

"I'll come . . ." But when Zainal shook his head, she decided that a dip was the next order of business for her. "Give him my regards."

"Regards?"

"Warm greetings."

"Oh! Not a 'boy' saying."

"Nope!" She grinned at him.

"One day you explain the 'boy' thing?"

"Any day now, m'friend," Kris said with a laugh. "Your English improves in leaps and bounds."

"Leaps and bounds?" He frowned as he tried to figure out the meaning of what she had said.

"I'll explain that, too. Me for a bath," she said in farewell.

The water in the underground lake was cold enough to curtail any lengthy wallowing. She was out and blotting herself dry beyond the main lights when she heard voices.

"Aarens had a point. How do we know that Cat isn't a spy? How do we know he doesn't have a comunit of some kind? How do we know he hasn't left messages with those machine-things in the garages?"

"Come off it, Barker," and Kris, hurriedly dressing, recognized Joe Lattore's thick voice. "What would the Cats need to spy on us *for*, for God's sake? And he's no ordinary Cat anyway. I saw enough of the upper-class dudes and he's one of them."

"Then why's he here with us?"

"That Bjornsen chick told me he'd killed a patrol leader and they caught him before the day was up."

"Yeah, and who goes everywhere with that Cat? Huh?"

"You also heard the Doyle brothers same as I did, and they said there's nothing doing between 'em."

"They was careful, is all."

"Oh, stow it. The Cat's risked his neck to save us and I'm going to be grateful to him until I find a damned good reason not to be. And Aarens isn't good enough. I know *his* type and I tell you what, was I hiring, I wouldn't hire Aarens no way no how."

Kris stepped as far back in the shadows as she could, a frisson of fear for Zainal running up her back. Did Mitford have any idea that such feelings were running against the Catteni? Probably, and that's exactly why Zainal was sent out on constant reconnaissance—to reduce the possibility of reprisals against him.

“When’s Mitford going to ax him, then? Said he would when he found out all the bastard knows. Seems to me he’d’ve done that by now.”

“Maybe that’s why he keeps sending him out of the camp? Get something else to waste him?”

“Next time he might just not come back,” a new voice said with a malicious chuckle. “We don’t need no Cats here.”

“Ah, you guys make me sick. He’s one man, and he’s been useful. You don’t have to like useful people but you *can* use them. That’s what Mitford’s doing.”

Conversation altered when the first man got in the water.

“Keeeee-rist, but that’s cold! Freeze m’balls off, it will.”

“You have ’em?”

Kris grimaced and stopped listening as the comments became more personal and derogatory. Men were worse gossips than women. She hunkered down in the shadows, her back against the cold stone, and waited. Fortunately the group was not any more inclined to stay in the cold water than she had been and they were shortly out of it and dressing. She waited another long moment until she figured they had reached the upper corridors of the cave and then she left the lake.

She stopped by Mitford’s “office” but he had a crowd, all talking and pushing diagrams at each other, so she went to her own cave. Sleep was the next order of her day.

DURING HER LATEST TREK, SOMEONE HAD TAKEN ADVANTAGE OF HER absence and stolen some of the brush which formed her mattress, so she didn’t have quite as comfortable a night’s rest as she’d hoped for. Still, she woke rested before dawn. When she got to the main cavern, hunters were grabbing a cup of the hot herbal tea before setting off to check snares or to hunt. With her cup in hand, she wandered hoping to find Jay or Sandy. They’d level with her about Zainal. At this point in time, Kris couldn’t really see Mitford executing the Catteni for any reason. And there was no way Zainal had been “planted” among the prisoners. He was here because other Catteni wanted to get even with him. Sandy was absent, as was anyone else with whom she had some acquaintance.

Finding an unoccupied rock near the front of the cavern, she seated herself and kept watch of those coming into the cavern for their breakfast, waiting for Zainal’s appearance. She wondered how Coo was doing. They really shouldn’t have let him fuss with that flying thing: that

fall had not been good for him, even with Lenny and Kris cushioning his landing.

She heard the rumble and the warning yell from the sentinels at the same instant. And darting to the outside ledge, tried to see what was making the noise. Whatever it was, it was still some distance, but it sounded awfully like the harvester vessel: big! Only everything had been harvested. Hadn't it?

"Where's Mitford?" was the cry and several of the hunters took off to locate him. Kris went for Zainal.

She met him, head-on, bouncing off his hard body and cracking her head against the rock on the rebound. His hand grabbed her upper arm to steady her.

"Another big ship, Zainal," she said, pointing outside. Still holding her arm, the Catteni drew her along with him, and others who had been roused by the general furor.

Once again, this time in the dark, everyone who could clambered to the nearest height and peered in the direction of the oncoming airborne vessel.

"Think they've come on reprisals?" someone asked. "With us messing up their mechanicals?"

"Zainal?" Mitford called.

"Here."

"Any ideas?"

Kris could see that Zainal had cocked his head, listening intently to the sound.

"That is Catteni engine sound," he said. Then pointed as a bulk, outlined by running lights, materialized out of the dawn gloom. Even Kris could see the basic difference in design between the first enormous vessel and this one, which was not as large, if the lights indicated its perimeter. Zainal watched a moment more and then pointed in the direction of the abattoir. "That way."

"Jaysus . . . what're they doing?"

"Any chance they're landing more prisoners, Zainal?" Mitford asked.

"Yes. Good chance." And he began to climb down. "Who comes with me?"

"I didn't say you should go, buddy," Mitford said in a tense voice.

"Only fast runners," Zainal said, ignoring Mitford. "They must unload."

"Yeah, but *you'd* get there fast enough to take off with them, wouldn't you?" Mitford said in a hard tone, coming out of the darkness to grab Zainal by the arm.

Kris caught her breath. Maybe, after all, Mitford wouldn't object to a summary execution of the Catteni, and Kris did not, definitely did not want to see Zainal killed. She *liked* him too much!

"Don't do anything foolish, sarge," she said. "I'll go with him."

"Of course you will," Mitford said cryptically. They had to pause now because the noise of the overflying craft drowned out any conversation. Zainal kept his eyes on the vessel, then nodded.

"Transport. More people. We must *try*. It is night still," Zainal said and, pulling Kris by the hand, hauled her with him down from the height.

"Try what?" Mitford called out in the same breath that Kris echoed his question but Zainal was already sprinting down the ravine in the direction the long ship above them was headed, dragging Kris along with him.

She was aware of some conflicting and confused orders behind them as Zainal ran onward. In the first few strides, she wondered why he was so keen on having her along, but then she had to concentrate on her footing to keep up with him. The fact that she could was a plus. She was sure fitter on this crazy planet than she'd ever been. She could hear others following, cursing at the dark and the bad footing, but she concentrated on watching Zainal's movements and the track in front of them.

They were well ahead of those pursuing when Zainal allowed her to pause for a few moments. They were on the downside of the ridge, the lights of the vessel obscured by the lay of the land. She quickly recovered her breath enough to speak.

"Will they stop the same place they dropped us off?" she asked.

"That would be good," he said. "Nothing there."

She took that to mean that the field would be empty and thus a good spot to dump more unconscious bodies. She wondered how long it would take, or did the Catteni have some way of just rolling bodies out of the ship's hold that didn't require individual handling? Then she remembered, all too vividly, what happened to living creatures lying on fields on this fecking world. No wonder Zainal was in such a hurry. Dawn was still far away. Would they get there soon enough to prevent slaughter?

He started off again and she followed, all too aware that it had taken them two days to reach the caverns from that site. Even at the pace Zainal had set, would they make it to the field before the ship took off again? Well, they *had* to try. Or maybe he was hoping to attract attention from one of the hill points overlooking the field? They clam-

bered up a slope now, and Zainal stopped, so abruptly that she ran into him.

"Hey, warn me, will . . ." Her voice trailed off as she realized that the running lights were higher than they should be for a ship that might be landing. They hadn't seen its gradual ascent. Zainal cursed, whirled, and looked back the way they had come, running his hand and arm along the line the ship had traveled as if trying to impress the direction in his mind. He started back up the slope they had just slid down, digging his toes in and slipping in the urgency of his passage.

Shaking her head, Kris followed him, pausing only briefly when the roar of engines told her that the ship was boosting out of planetary gravity. The flame of its propellant was as vivid as she remembered launches from Cape Kennedy. She would have liked to watch but had to keep up with Zainal.

They met up with the others in moments, due to the pace that Zainal was setting.

"The ship's already dumped its load," she told them, clinging to someone as support as she gasped out an explanation. "Back that way. We gotta get there before the scavengers murder 'em all."

"Was that why the Cat was in such a flaming hurry?"

"Hell, he wanted to catch up with them and get off this bleeding planet," another man managed to gasp out.

"Think what you will, but are you going to help?" Kris cried, shouting the last of her challenge over her shoulder as she took off after Zainal.

They did gather more help as they went back through the ravine again. Dawn was brightening the sky, so it was easier to see where to put your feet. Where the track split, right down into the ravine, or left to continue on the upper ridge, Zainal signaled for Kris to report to Mitford, who was standing in his "office," fists on his belt as he saw them emerge on the height.

"Need Slav badly," Zainal added and then charged off again.

"What'n'ell's going on?"

Kris stopped, hands on knees, catching enough breath to speak. "We need Slav. Ship took off. It's already dropped its load. We gotta get there or the scavengers will."

"Right on!" And Mitford snapped into action, yelling for Slav, Pess, Tesco, Su, Dowdell as she took up her chase of Zainal.

She finally caught up with him when he stopped by one of the many streams to rinse out his mouth. The sun wasn't up yet and the air was cool, but she was hot from her exertions and wondering if she would last the distance.

“Mitford’s organized more help. Is it far?”

He shook his head. “Ship climbing.” He looked up at the lightening sky. “Lucky.”

She hoped so, but how long did those creatures scavenge? Would this half-light be sufficient to send them wherever they spent the daylight hours? She had her breath back and now dropped to her belly, burying her hot face in the cool water, intaking a mouthful to moisten her throat and letting only a little trickle down to her stomach. She was on her feet when he was.

And they ran on.

Actually this wasn’t a bad pace, she thought, now she had her second wind. She tried to keep her mind off what scavengers could do to a field full of nice juicy warm live bodies. Now that wasn’t productive thought! At least it should now be clear to everyone at the camp that Zainal had been motivated to “save” people, not get himself off this planet. Though she wouldn’t blame him if that had been his goal. Would he have taken her with him? That, too, was not a productive thought, but she was beginning to appreciate how much the big man meant to her. She’d never found anyone else who treated her as a competent equal, had never once tried to come on since the day she had floored him in the flutter. She knew from comments made back in the kitchens at Barevi that, while the Catteni were equipped, to put it discreetly, much the same way as human males were, only more so as one woman had said dryly, the two species were incompatible as far as propagation was concerned. No Catteni-Human offspring would be forthcoming. But, since the day she had clobbered him in the flyer back on Barevi, Zainal had never visibly lusted after her. And she was quite familiar with that sort of look. Zainal treated her not quite as he treated the male members of their patrols, but with a courtesy she found unusual and maybe even special to her. Even when he knew that it was her fault he was stuck with this bunch of suspicious, unappreciative, and sometimes intolerant mixed bag of humanoids. Oddly enough, though the Catteni were the “subjugating” race, the Deskis and Rugarians didn’t seem to feel any animosity toward Zainal . . . certainly not as much as the Terrans did.

This was not terrain she was familiar with and Kris was relieved to see the sun coming up and clearing off the shadows, so there was less danger of her stumbling on the rough ground. That was the one thing she did fear—an injury that their meager first aid supplies could not remedy. Or unfamiliar infections that were life-threatening. The Catteni antiseptic lotion was not a specific cure for everything that could happen to the unwary. And the anesthesia from the darts could be a boon.

Zainal was bounding up the hill in front of them now, then switching to a zigzag on the steeper parts. He waited on the height for her and pointed. Two fields over she could see the cubes of Catteni supply crates and the fringes of space occupied by inert bodies. At this distance, she couldn't tell if they were being beset by scavengers yet.

Zainal cupped his mouth and hollered a weird cry. It was answered, she thought, by one of the aliens following. He nodded satisfaction and began the descent. This hillside was covered with some sort of thorny growth that clung to the fabric of their coveralls with a tenacity which made her glad it wasn't her flesh that was bared. Zainal, caught on a thick limb, hauled out his hatchet and hewed the limb. Even separated from the mother bush, it still clung.

"Careful," Zainal said, holding up his free hand to warn her back. "Chop first," he added, pointing to the bushes in her way.

"Can I help you?"

"Go down. Hurry," he said, gesturing emphatically to the field, now out of sight behind the next rise. "Stamp, yell."

She hesitated a brief moment more but the flash of his eyes when he glanced up from disentangling the thicket branch from his coverall was enough to send her on her way. She used her hatchet to slash and bash a way in front of her and succeeded in reaching clear ground, covered by a stubble of harvested crops, with no delays. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw him finally free of the branch. So she ran on, across the field, neatly leaping the low hedge on the far side and down into the next. She thought she heard cries rising from the drop field. That made her run faster, shouting, giving the cowboy yells she had practiced as a tomboy. She paused long enough at the separating hedge to pick up handfuls of stones. Then she leaped that hedge and almost landed on someone's face. A human. In fact, every body near her was human. Some had already been attacked by the scavengers.

First she threw her rocks in as wide an arc as she could, shouting as she did so. Then she stomped her way up the long side of the field, sometimes running and jumping down as hard as she could on landing, yelling and yodeling as she stamped until she reached the upper boundary. There were no signs of the scavengers in the center of the field, so she continued her progress around the outer edge, stamping, yelling, pausing only when she had to get her breath and try to moisten the dry tissues of her mouth. She'd completed two sides of the big field when she saw others arriving and yelled and gestured at them to square the field in the other direction.

Then she spotted several people rousing from their drugged sleep and went to assist them. Once again the Catteni had dropped people

comfortably near water and she borrowed cups from belts to give people that much comfort in recovering from their ordeal.

Dowdall was opening the crates, going first for the first-aid kits and blankets while the others did what they could for those the scavengers had attacked. She was so busy she didn't at first realize that Zainal was not among the rescuers.

"Tesco, where's Zainal?" she asked when she did notice his absence.

"Saw him back there," and Tesco pointed vaguely over his shoulder before kneeling to give water to a groggy woman.

Reassured, Kris moved to the next group, who happened to be De-skis. A glance around the field gave her the irritating information that none of the rescuers were doing doodly to help the aliens, so she concentrated on them. Not that she found herself kindly disposed toward the Turs, who regarded the water with great suspicion until she took a sip herself and deposited the cup on the ground beside them. They could do as they chose. Three Ilginish had been badly chewed and before any one could stop them, they suicided, evidently by swallowing their own tongues and suffocating. Their face skin turned from a normal dark green to almost black. Other Ilginish came to view the dead, then piled the bodies to one side under the hedges. Ilginish "faces" did not register any expression, so Kris didn't know if they were upset or not, but as quickly as she could, she doled blankets and knives out to them, and indicated the first-aid kits.

More people arrived from the camp, including Mitford. She was surprised to see him away from his "office" but glad of his presence. That's when she realized she still had not seen Zainal.

"Sarge, you seen Zainal?"

"No, I haven't," Mitford said, frowning as he looked about the field where more and more of the latest arrivals were regaining consciousness.

"Did you come down the thorny hill?"

"No, Su was there to warn us away from it. Why?"

Kris didn't answer but, grabbing up a first-aid kit and a handful of blankets from the nearby crates, she started off at a fast trot, dodging around groups and leaping over still-sleeping bodies. She flew across the intervening field, now entirely visible in the full morning light, hurdling the low hedge without losing her stride, and pelted to the thorn-bushy hill. They weren't like Barevian thornbushes, but where she was damned sure she had hacked her way through was now as solid a vegetation patch as if she hadn't cut it back. There was no sign of Zainal.

Scared now for him, because Zainal of all people should have been

able to free himself unscathed, she looked anxiously around. Since he wasn't up at the field, he had to still be around here, somewhere. And, if the thorns had been toxic enough to slow down a Catteni, he'd have sought water. The thornbushes were not tall enough to have hidden his big frame, and anyway his brown-gray coverall would have made him visible even in the dense undergrowth. Water!

There was always water on these damned mechanically cultivated fields. While this field had been harvested, there had to be water nearby. She listened hard. Her ears finally caught the unmistakable sound of running water. Downhill there was a small copse of some of the diamond-leaved bushes. Those seemed to grow near the streams.

She heard a low groan, the sort that would reluctantly escape tightly closed lips. With a new awareness that the bushes on Botany could be dangerous, she parted the branches of the diamond-leaf and saw Zainal, half-in, half-out of a little brook which welled up from the rocks around which the diamond-leaves clustered. A boot had been cast aside and his right pant leg was rolled up over his knee, exposing the injury.

"Oh, lord," she breathed, seeing the massive inflammation on the outside of his wide muscular calf. The thorns of Barevi had been dangerous in a nuisance way, but this injury looked serious. Bending over him, she checked first for any signs of blood poisoning. Not that gray Catteni flesh might exhibit such a trauma. He had blood, as red as any human's, and it had clotted almost black where it had run down his leg. That was when she realized by the size of the wound that he had evidently carved the thorn out of his own flesh.

"Ouch!" she murmured, shuddering convulsively. She sorted through the first-aid supplies for the Catteni antiseptic. *That* was definitely in order. And it would sting like billy-be-damned when she poured it in that open wound but what other choice had she? She took a deep breath and *emptied* the entire vial of the solution into the crater he had made in his leg.

"Rorrrrrrgh!" Zainal shot to sitting position in protest to the treatment, his right hand cocked back to strike, his left arm up in guard.

Kris lurched backward, away from him.

"It's Kris, Zainal. I'm trying to help!"

His eyes focused on her face, wild in reaction to the pain and alarm, but, in that brief instant, he recognized her.

"You came," he said in a barely audible voice before he seemed to collapse inward and fell back on the ground. His eyes rolled upward, the lids fluttering as well as any southern belle flirt could have done under different circumstances, and then he passed out again.

"Did I do the right thing, Zainal?" She shook, or rather tried to

shake, the massive shoulder to rouse him. She retrieved the first-aid bag, which had fallen off her lap, and tried to think what else she could *do* to help him. Swollen tissue could respond to cold compresses. With all the antiseptic in the wound, there wouldn't be much in the water that could exacerbate the wound.

There were sheets of some sort of material in the kit, so she soaked those until they were cold and placed them on the wound. He moaned a little but didn't writhe in pain so she felt it was safe to continue with that treatment. She made a pillow of one of the blankets she'd brought, brushing the leaves and pebbles off his surprisingly fine, soft gray hair, and covered his big frame with another.

It was Mitford himself who came looking for her. She emerged from the brush in response to his calling. Beyond him she saw the lines of the newest immigrants starting the trek back to the camp. He hadn't lost any time deciding to take them in, even if another four or five hundred souls to tend must be the lowest option on his agenda.

"What's the matter, Kris?" he said, trotting up to her in an effortless lope. How he kept so fit with all the sedentary work he was now saddled with, she didn't know, but he rose another notch in her estimation.

"Warn people off those thornbushes," she said first, pointing urgently to the slope. But the line seemed to be taking the less direct route, around the inhospitable-looking incline. "Zainal's down, with a thorn wound. He carved the thorn out of his own leg but it was toxic enough to knock him out. We'll need to make a litter to carry him back."

Mitford winced and scratched his head, half-turning in the direction of his new charges.

"I know, you gotta get them back first, but considering how much Zainal has done . . ." And she was surprised at the bitterness in her voice.

"Now, now, easy does it, Bjornsen, I'm not about to abandon him. He *is* too damned useful." In the Sergeant's voice, she caught the nuance that Zainal might be useful, but not popular, and knew that some of the gossip about him was true. "We're all in the same boat or," and Mitford gave her a wry grin, "on the same planet, but this new dump isn't going to help!" He sighed deeply.

"Don't mean to add to your problems, sarge," she said apologetically.

"Dammitall, Bjornsen," and now he was angry at her apology, "*you're* not a problem and I won't *let* him be. Can you hang on until I see this bunch installed?" With one hand, he gripped Kris' right arm, emphasizing his intent while he hauled his blanket over his head and

dropped it beside her. Then he handed over the other sack he carried. "Food, firing, and other stuff. Now, where is he?"

She led him to where Zainal sprawled. When Mitford lifted off the temporary dressing, he curled his lip and recoiled slightly at the look of the puncture, then carefully replaced the bandage.

"Nasty, all right. Hope he got all the thorn out, but probably he did," and there was approval in the Sergeant's tone for the measure of the man he knew Zainal to be. "Hell's bells, he can't be comfortable like that," Mitford added, so the two of them pulled the big body out of the water. Then, when Kris had hurriedly cleared a space and spread two more blankets, they managed to roll him into a more level, comfortable position.

Mitford stood then, surveying the area, kicking at the roots of the bushes. "How'd they find enough soil to grow in?" he muttered. "Rocky enough so those scavengers can't come at you."

"They come out at night," Kris began and then realized that it might indeed be nighttime before help for a Catteni arrived.

"Firing's in there and some of those matches Cumber made. We found sulfur, y'know."

"No, I didn't," and she wondered if sulfur had any medicinal qualities.

"Look, I'll send a litter back for him as soon as possible. Get some more firing when you can." He surveyed the massive Catteni's prone body. "Hope he doesn't get delirious on you or something."

"I'll manage, sarge," she said, gritting her teeth.

"'Luck, Bjornsen, but you're the kind who can handle things."

As Kris watched him make his way out of the little copse, she was somewhat heartened by his confidence in her. Mitford didn't often praise, and while that might be a bit backhanded, she appreciated being thought capable.

She went back to her patient, resigned to a long wait, knowing that Zainal's welfare would be low on the list of everyone else's priorities. She wet the compresses again, glad of the almost indestructible quality of Catteni materials, and then she moistened Zainal's lips.

You had to keep people from getting dehydrated if they'd been poisoned, didn't you? His lips parted as if the moisture was what he needed, so she managed to dribble water down his throat and he swallowed eagerly. A good sign. His forehead and cheeks felt warm, but not hot-hot. She couldn't remember from her previous contacts with him just what a normal body temperature for a Catteni would be. She

also couldn't tell if his skin had altered as a human's would with fever. While one part of her was glad that Catteni were not totally impervious to natural hazards, she was damned sorry Zainal was laid low by as silly a thing as a thorn.

Chapter Nine

JAY GREENE, SLAV, THE DOYLE BROTHERS, A MAN SHE DIDN'T RECOGNIZE and, surprisingly, Coo, returned by second moonrise. By then Zainal was sweating copiously and she tried to cool him off with the compresses. There was such a lot of him to cool! He was restless but not so energetically that she'd had any trouble keeping him prone. But she was getting more and more worried. Faint slithers had caused her to fear that the scavengers might be bold enough to penetrate the rocky dell. She'd taken to periodic stampings about the small clearing, hoping to scare them away. It was only quiet victims they went after, cowardly as they were.

She nearly cried with relief, though, when she heard her name called. She heaped firing on the little campfire to show the way to them.

"This is Dr. Dane, Kris," Jay said, urging the medical man through the thicket. "He's even treated Catteni back on Earth."

"Thank God!" Kris breathed, anxiously urging the doctor to his patient and whipping off the latest compress to show the ugly wound. It looked even worse in the flickering firelight.

"G'day," Dane said in an unmistakably Australian accent, giving her a keen look before he knelt by the patient. "Did a proper job on himself, didn't he?" With deft fingers he pressed the sides of the gaping wound mouth. "Got it all, I'd say. Tough bastards, these Catteni. Pour the whole bottle in, did you?" and now he grinned at her. "Fair do."

"It was all I had and it *is* Catteni issue," she said, noticing that she was wringing her hands.

"Did the right thing, all right." He felt Zainal's skin, placed a hand over the chest and then to the large neck vein. "Not so ragged after all. Right then, let's get him back. Hey, what?" He had straightened up after

his examination and saw Coo coming to crouch in the firelight, something in his hand which he wanted to inspect.

The Deski's hand was trembling—with fatigue, Kris wondered, deeply grateful to the alien, in his own debilitated state, for wanting to help an injured Catteni. What Coo was examining was the lighter gray crown of a thornbush, the new growth, since vegetation even on this godforsaken planet seemed to follow certain botanical precedents. Then, before she could say anything, Coo had popped it in his mouth and was masticating with every evidence of enthusiasm and relief. In the act of springing upright, the Deski also turned and, with more energy than he had shown in days, plunged toward the hillside.

“What was that all about?” the doctor asked, in surprise.

“I think Coo's located something to take care of his dietary deficiency,” Kris said drolly.

“One man's meat's another's poison,” the man replied philosophically. “Now let's get this poisoned boyo back to civilization. Quite a setup Mitford's organized,” he added with approval.

“Good ol' Yankee know-how,” Jay said with a grin.

“What about Irish improvisation?” Lenny Doyle said, pretending offense as he unlashd the ties on stretcher poles.

“Ya think this is strong enough to hold 'im?” Ninety asked, measuring Zainal's bulk against the litter design.

“Those blankets are indestructible,” Jay said.

It took all of them, with Kris holding up heavy Catteni feet, to get the unconscious Zainal onto the litter. Strips of torn blanket secured him for the arduous journey back to camp.

Kris kicked out the fire and stored the remaining firing into the sack Mitford had given her and followed them. In the bright light of the big rising moon, Coo was busily, and carefully, plucking the very tops of the thornbushes and stuffing them into the open blouse of his coverall.

“Is that what you need, Coo?” Kris called. “Can I pick, too?”

“Noooo,” Coo said, shaking his head emphatically. “Baaaad for oomans.” With one hand he kept fanning the air to reinforce his warning for her to keep back while he kept nipping the crowns with the other.

She tried to recall how many of the newest “immigrants” were Deski but, suddenly, thinking was beyond her strained and tired mind. She fell in step behind the litter bearers, relieved that her long and anxious watch had concluded.

WHEN SHE TOOK HER TURN AS A LITTER BEARER, FOR SHE INSISTED ON that, Leon Dane gave her some interesting and oddly welcome news:

Earth was fighting back against the Catteni invaders—an evidently unprecedented reaction.

The Catteni method of subduing a planet by swooping down and carrying off whole cities of people generally cowed a species totally. Not so with Terrans. Despite the invasion, resistance began almost as soon as the great Catteni transport ships began loading hostages. Leon Dane had remained in Sydney, using his position as a physician to relay important information to a very active unit in the Blue Mountains. On orders, he had volunteered to treat Catteni for, despite thick hides, they broke bones and had “accidents” that would have killed humans.

“If you know your invader’s weaknesses, you have a better chance of striking back.” He turned a grin on Kris as they moved across the second field. “That was my job. Unfortunately there isn’t much that gets a Catteni down and they seem impervious to any of the Terran toxic materials I tried on ’em. To see the clinical reactions, of course. But, oh my word, they can mess each other up on their little twenty-four-hour vendettas!” He whistled appreciatively. “I spent a lot of time sewing ’em up. They don’t break easy but they sure do lacerate a treat.”

“I guess I’m glad you were willing to help Zainal. He was a victim of one of those twenty-four-hour vendettas.”

“Was he? And they dumped him in with you lot?”

Kris nodded, finding that talking and keeping up her corner of the heavily loaded litter was tiring.

“How’d you get caught?” she asked the doctor.

“Ha! We had orders to riot at a certain time and place and I was sent from my hospital to officiate. I got gassed along with everyone else. The Cats don’t ever ask questions. They’re effective that way. But sending one of theirs to colonize . . .” He shook his head in surprise. “Whaddid he do?”

“He killed a patrol leader,” Kris said. “I watched the pursuit from where I was hiding.”

“You were hiding?”

Kris grinned. “On Barevi.”

“Barevi?” He shot her a quirky smile. “Sounds Aborigine.”

“Does, doesn’t it—Catteni Aborigine, at least. Barevi’s one of their big distribution and R and R planets. Only one big city and spaceports. Slave trading’s the biggest industry there. And resupply of Catteni ships. I figured out, from watching the guy who owned me, how to drive one of those little flitters of theirs and appropriated it one evening.” She grinned at Leon. “Managed quite handily in the jungle there until he,” and she jerked her head back at Zainal, “dropped in on me. I was taking him back to where he belongs when I got caught in a riot-gassing, too.”

“Hmmm.”

“He knew a bit about this planet, enough to save a lot of us from getting eaten by those scavengers or caught by the avians.”

“The Cats didn’t leave much for us to go on with,” he said in a gloomy tone.

“Zainal says that’s how they’ve colonized a lot of places.” She shot a look at him and wondered if she’d offend with her next comment. “Sort of like you Aussies were. We voted to call the planet Botany.”

“Did you now?” And Leon Dane shot her a startled look, but he grinned. “Well, it fits. Australia—well, the Sydney area at least—was settled by convicts.”

“Made a good job of it, too, didn’t they?”

“I take the point, Kris Bjornsen. And they had as little as we have. Maybe less. We at least have a lot of specialists.”

“Many aliens? Deskis, Turs, Ilginish, Rugarians?”

Leon shrugged. “I was working more on the human injuries. But I noticed some strange-looking creatures in the hospital cave. Stick-thin, like the one that came with us to fetch you.”

“The Deskis. They’re not doing well here. Missing some essential ingredient in their diet.”

“Is that why that bloke was picking the thornbushes?”

“Hope so.”

Then Lenny and Ninety declared they were rested enough to take over. Kris was quite willing to give up her end of the litter, guilty though it made her feel for the rest of the way back to the camp.

LIT BY MANY TORCHES, MITFORD, MURPH, GREENE, AND DOWDALL WERE still interviewing new arrivals when the rescuers arrived by third moonrise. In spite of the late hour—or was it early?—there was a great deal of activity and the smell of freshly roasted meats.

Instead of going into the main cavern, however, the bearers swerved to one of the lesser caves.

“Hospital,” Lenny said when Kris wanted to know. “Quite a setup now.” But there was something about the way he wouldn’t meet her eyes that bothered Kris.

“I’ll stay with him,” she said firmly. “He’ll need . . .”

“You”—and Leon Dane prodded her chest with a firm finger—“need rest.” In the better light of the torches, she realized that he was a good-looking man in his mid-thirties, spare as so many Australians seemed to be.

“I’ll rest better with . . . my buddy,” and she added that designation

with defensive pride. Dane was looking at her now in a way that made her refer to him in that fashion.

"That way, is it?"

"NO! Not *that* way," she said, fiercely now. "But I got him into this mess and I'll stand by him."

"Good on you, sheila," Dane said, and squeezed her arm in approval. "But he'll be tended while you"—and he prodded her chest with one finger—"sleep."

It was a small cave and anyone entering had to stoop or risk a crack on the skull. Inside there was more headroom, sufficient even for Zainal when he recovered. She said "when" as positively as she could to herself though he lay far too still to suit her when his litter was placed on the waiting mound of blanket-covered boughs. There was another bed on the other side of the den and she looked longingly at it. Then turned back to see Dane checking the wound again and Zainal's pulse.

"He'll do. Tough bastard," he said. "You," and he pointed at Kris and then the bed, "get some rest. I'll check in during the night." He gave her a grin. "Haven't lost a Catteni patient yet." Then, when she did not immediately obey his injunction, he hauled her the step to the bed and pushed her down on the boughs, spreading the blanket over her. "Sleep."

She did, rousing once or twice when she heard movement, but it was always caused by Dane, checking on his patient.

When she finally woke up, she stretched luxuriously, knowing that she had slept herself out. But a low moan brought her alert instantly and scrambling to Zainal's side. His injured leg, bare of covering apart from the compress, was twice its normal size well up into the thigh. The flesh when she gingerly touched it was almost burning to the touch. The compress was dry and clung to the suppurating flesh when she tried to check the wound.

"Oh, lordee," she murmured and then banged her forehead on leaving the den. "Ouch!"

"Gotcha, did it?" said Lenny sympathetically, rising from a stool by the entrance.

"What are you doing here?" she said, inhaling against the pain of her scraped forehead. Her hand came away with dots of blood.

"Being careful not to bang my skull open like you just did," he said, grinning. There was that in his quickly averted glance that told her he was there for another reason entirely.

"Was I supposed to leave him out there to die?" she demanded.

"Don't jump on me, Kris, I like the big guy," Lenny said. "Mitford just doesn't need any trouble."

“Mutiny on Botany, huh?”

“Huh?” Lenny echoed, totally nonplussed by her cryptic remark. “Look,” he added hurriedly, “Dane’ll be around again soon. Go get some breakfast. I’ll be here till you get back.”

“It’s ridiculous with all Zainal has done for the camp that he has to have a guard.”

“Now, look, Kris, I’m not so much a guard as I am a sort of orderly,” and Lenny looked embarrassed, “in case he needs help. You know what I mean?”

“I’m paranoid, I guess,” she said, relaxing a little. “Dane said anything about his chances?”

Lenny shrugged. “Didn’t ask. I just volunteered. I’m on duty for them, too,” he said and gestured to the opening obliquely across the tunnel. “We got a lot of patients. Oh, and that Missus Bollinger had a baby boy while we were gone. Fine big lad.”

Kris smiled through her sigh of relief. “That kind of good news is very welcome.”

“Don’t worry. Mitford’s got everyone organized already,” and Lenny’s grin was mischievous. Then he gave her a little push toward the tunnel entrance. “G’wan. Eat. You’re off duty today, anyway, with your buddy on the sick list.”

Kris didn’t hear any nuance in his use of “buddy” so she relaxed. She could safely leave Zainal in Lenny’s charge.

“G’wan,” he said, smiling kindly, and gave her a half turn toward the entrance. “Eat. Bread’s getting better now the chemist lads’ve got a good yeast going.”

She took her time, peering in at the various units in this “hospital,” noticing a lot of unfamiliar faces, some obviously in a good deal of discomfort, to judge by their expressions.

She saw Anna Bollinger, sitting up in her “bed,” nursing her infant, and would have passed by but Annie saw her and waved her in.

“How’s the Catteni? I heard he was badly hurt,” she said. Then added in a hard voice and with a scowl, “How?”

From the “doorway,” Kris answered, wondering about the change in her voice. Anna had good reason to be grateful to Zainal. In a neutral voice she said: “On his way to keep people from getting scavengered in the dark, he got a thorn in the calf of his leg and had to carve it out.”

Anna shuddered. “Ooo, nasty. Give him my regards,” and she looked lovingly down at the swaddled mite in her arms. “I’d never have had my baby if he hadn’t helped me get here.” She sighed. “I’m just glad it was . . . I mean . . . He’ll be all right?”

“Yes, Anna, and thanks for your good wishes. I’ll tell him. And

thanks,” Kris said and strode the rest of the way to the outer ledge feeling that perhaps, after all, she’d been imagining things.

The sundial indicated the time as near Botany’s noon and, for a wonder, Mitford was absent from his “office,” though there were others, busily bending over the desk-stones at their tasks. There were other people, the newest arrivals since she didn’t recognize any of the faces, evidently revived enough to take part in the business of the camp. There was also a handful, just sitting in the sun, eyes closed: a mixed bag because she could spot some Asians as well as the dusky skin of the East Indians. Above their heads, tacked to the south-facing wall of the ravine, was displayed a veritable mural of rocksquat hides, indicating the continued prowess of the camp’s hunters. How much farther were the hunters having to go to catch enough to feed the multitude now here?

She shivered and not so much because the air felt cool to her despite the sunshine but because she worried about the tactical problems of supply. For instance, would there be enough hides to give everyone a warm coat this winter?

And, if a Botany day was twenty-eight hours long, how long were their months? Years? How long till spring? How many more loads would the Catteni drop down on this unsuspecting planet? How would they cope with this influx, much less *more*? She was hungry and that always made her attitude negative.

Sandy hailed her as she came into the cook cavern.

“Hi there, gal, got something just out of the oven for the likes of you.”

“The likes of me?” Kris said in a low voice as she hunkered down by Sandy. She’d glanced quickly about the cavern and saw welcoming grins on other faces: people she did recognize.

“Yeah, you’re a heroine, didn’t you know?” Sandy winked as she held up the pitcher, waiting until Kris hurriedly undid her cup from its belt loop. “Right up there with Mitford, charging down the ravine like a berserker.” She put a pottery plate, almost a perfect circle, on the rock nearest Kris: it held a browned piece of rocksquat, a slice of nicely toasted bread, and some fried circles. “Not quite potatoes but as near as nevermind,” Sandy told her, passing over a gracefully carved fork.

Kris grinned, looking down at the utensil and turning it over in her hand.

“Chantilly silverware it isn’t, but better than risking sharp knife points in your mouth.” Sandy poured herself a fresh cup and settled close to Kris. “How’s the Cat—’cuse me, Zainal—this morning?”

“I don’t know. His leg is swollen awful big.”

"The medics are trying a bread poultice. Penicillin it isn't, but my grannie was big on a bread poultice for boils and things." Sandy patted Kris' knee encouragingly. "They're tough, Catteni. Imagine him, cutting the thorn out of his own leg!" She clicked her tongue at such courage. "And we got quite a board of medical men now." She chuckled. "And other specialists. Most of 'em seem to have been taken from Sydney. From Botany Bay to Botany," and she chuckled again.

"Hey, this is good," Kris said, having tried a fried tuber. It was not unlike a sweet potato in texture and taste. "Say, are those thornbush leaves doing the Deskis any good?"

Sandy nodded. "Made a tea when Coo explained what he wanted and we've dosed even the sickest." Her expression altered. "We lost three, you know, while you were out on that last patrol."

"No, I didn't." Kris stopped chewing. "They look so frail . . ."

"They are if they don't have the right food." Sandy remained grim. "Their bones break if you so much as touch them hard. You know who helped nurse 'em? Patti Sue!"

That did surprise Kris.

"She's not much heavier than they are and has a light touch. She volunteered." Sandy grimaced. "She feels safe with the Deskis and even the Rugarians, you know."

"Jay Greene?"

Now Sandy chuckled. "He's going slow but it was him who suggested she'd be good at tending the Deskis. She has been, but it damned near kills her to lose one."

"Look, they got the same rations we all did back on Barevi. I thought the ration bars were enough," Kris said.

"Ah, Coo says they were allowed 'plursaw,' too, and that's what they have to have in their diet to keep their bones from going soft. A kind of calcium additive, I guess. There isn't an equivalent here . . . unless that thornbush junk fills the gap. He looks better, I know, but he's a young one."

"I didn't know," and Kris was remorseful. "I never asked either."

"There now, Kris, don't take on about it. It isn't as if you've had *time* to be social, you know, in and out of camp as you are." Sandy reached over for a covered pot set to one side of her hearth. "Made this special for Zainal. It's sort of a broth and the nearest thing to chicken soup I can put together here. It is nourishing and it doesn't taste too bad. Maybe you can get some down him. Leon says injured Catteni sometimes have a problem with dehydration. 'Bout the only thing that can debilitate them."

Kris thanked Sandy, deeply touched and much reassured.

"Would you know Aarens?"

"Yeah," and there was no joy in Sandy's reply.

"Is he around?"

Sandy gave a malicious chuckle. "Him! Boy, didn't he luck out. Seems there's some good to him after all. He's a genius with gadgets. Don't worry about him."

"I don't worry about *him*. I worry about his mouth."

"Don't."

Kris thanked Sandy again and then made her way back to the hospital. She paused briefly when she saw the line of laden hunters returning to camp. She grinned to see the loaves and fishes that were being supplied to the multitude. She should have asked Sandy how many had been on the latest drop. And her patrol had found yet another nest of empty barns.

Lenny was gone from his post and the small room was crowded by those attending Zainal: Leon among others she identified as medical personnel. She made herself small and inched in, carefully ducking under the lintel and looking for someplace safe to put the pot of broth, which was hot. Leon rose to his feet just then.

"Certainly unsophisticated but the best we have to hand. Ah, Kris," and she could see how tired he was, though his hazel eyes were very much alive and keen in his saturnine face. "We're using a bread poultice to draw the infection. Now that providentially you lot have rediscovered bread on this godforsaken planet." He grinned. "Great bunch of improvisors here. She's the one found that anesthesia . . . if we could only figure out how to dilute it without losing its effectiveness." His grin extended to his colleagues, who acknowledged her appearance with smiles or nods. "Are you available to watch him? Lenny's off duty."

"I am," she said. "Sandy gave me broth for him."

"I'll be right with you," Leon said as the others moved out of the den, all being careful to duck on their way out. "Good-o on the broth. When I was treating Catteni in Sydney for wounds, dehydration was the big danger. See you get as much in him as he'll swallow, even if it's only water," and he pointed to a condensation-beaded covered pitcher on the floor out of Zainal's immediate reach. "But he'll need the nourishment in the broth, too. Catteni are big, strong, and tough but they need to keep their internal economy turning over."

"I'll see to him."

"Good," and Leon glanced down at a slip of the bark paper. "Who's next?"

"That leg fracture," one of the men said, also consulting a slip.

They all left and Kris got a good look at Zainal's now poulticed

leg. She could smell the yeast of the hot bread as she bent over him. He was motionless, his breath slow and steady, but his skin, when she touched one broad flat cheek, was as hot as ever.

She rinsed out the fluff that was being used as a compress and cooled his face. Then, taking a spoon—the bowl of this utensil was deep enough to hold a respectable quantity of liquid and the rim was smoothly polished—she dribbled water onto his lips. Automatically he licked and swallowed. She got maybe half a cup down him with patience and then bathed his hot face, moving down to his chest and arms. His coverall had been removed at some point and a decorous and swift peek of curiosity showed that he'd been given some sort of a modesty cloth to cover his private parts, relieving her of embarrassment. He wasn't quite as heavily muscled as she'd thought, with the bulky coverall disguising a body that, by any standards, was beautiful. She shook her head at that wayward thought. *What the hell's wrong with admiring a beautiful bod on a guy? Nothing, unless you also think of that body next to your own! Whoops, girl. Down!* she told herself sternly. She allowed herself to stroke his skin, softer than its grayness looked. And exhaled, trying to shake off a sensation in her gut. *Lusting after a Catteni, girl? You are the pits!*

Nevertheless, the opportunity to touch him in more than a nurse-patient relationship was too much to resist. She smoothed back his silky gray hair, as fine as a baby's. In repose his features were even more patrician, when she compared him to some of the other Catteni she remembered. Yes, decidedly he was several castes above the average male mercenary. She was so accustomed to the look of him now that he didn't even seem alien anymore. Hmmm. Well, that attitude was better than rampant xenophobia!

Between her sessions of watering him—she also got him to take some of the broth, which had cooled enough to be dripped into his mouth—she rested on her bed, drowsing occasionally. She wondered if he knew they were trying their best to help him, because he lay stolidly unmoving, even when the poultice was still hot. The only response he gave was to swallow when moisture was offered.

Time to water him again.

MORE NOISE OUTSIDE, MUTED THOUGH IT WAS, WARNED HER OF INCREASED activity in the hospital. Lenny popped his head in.

“He may not be eating but you should.”

Until he mentioned it, she hadn't realized how empty her stomach was.

"So, what's for din-dins?" she asked facetiously.

He grinned and brought a plate from behind his back, complete with pottery-domed lid.

"We're getting quite fawncy, this weather," he said. Then he lifted the top.

"My god, it looks human," she said in pleased surprise. For the meal consisted of more tubers, boiled by the look of them, a section of avian, to judge by the configuration of the wing, and two portions of greens.

"Just what the doctor ordered! Leave you to it! Oh," and he reappeared in the doorway, "mass meeting this evening at the sound of the gong!"

"Gong?" she asked but he was out of earshot.

She ate with good appetite and the food was delicious. The ration bars and the travel meal had doubtless been nutritious, but real food of differing texture, now *that* was civilized.

Leon came bustling in when she had finished, and he was looking rested.

"Got some sleep, did you? Report?"

"He's been taking both water and broth whenever I offer them and I've cooled him down in between. But he doesn't move much," she ended lamely, looking expectantly at Leon Dane.

"Hmmm. They don't. Real adherents of the grin-and-bear-it brigade. They suffer in silence. I suspect he's more conscious of what's going on than you realize. Zainal?"

Leon leaned over the Catteni, hand on his brow and then on the main artery on the left of his neck. He proceeded downward, checking the temperature of the skin and then palpating the thigh tissues. "Hmmmm."

"Your 'hmmms' are getting longer," Kris remarked sardonically.

"When in doubt a thoughtful 'hmmm' is reassuring."

"To whom?"

"Whommmm does it as well, y' know," and Leon was now delicately prodding the wound area, having lifted the poultice. It had turned an obnoxious shade of gray/orange/green. "Yes, indeed. I think that's doing it."

"You do?" and Kris leaned over to see what he could possibly have taken as encouragement. The ghastly hole did look . . . healthier was the only word she could find. Nicely red instead of raw red, and the swelling had noticeably subsided so that the kneecap was once again visible. "I think I agree."

“Keep on with watering him. Ah, you’re with us,” Leon added suddenly when Zainal startled them both by opening his eyes.

“I need to lose water,” Zainal said clearly.

Laughing, Leon collected a cleverly shaped pottery utensil at the end of the bough bed which Kris hadn’t actually noticed before and she beat a hasty retreat while Leon attended the patient.

He came out with the utensil in his hand, chuckling to himself. “He’ll do fine. Just fine. Don’t forget the meeting tonight, will you?”

“How long have you been awake, Zainal?” Kris asked in a diffident tone of voice.

“Off and on,” he said, his eyes closed, but he held out his hand and when she took it, his eyes opened. They held a look which made her chest swell with some unidentifiable emotion, so strong that her eyes began to water. His grip was very delicate and his skin still more than warm. “I knew you were here. You were there, by the water, too. Good of you, very good of you.”

“Not at all,” and she covered his hand with her free one. “You’re . . . we’re buddies. We look out for each other.”

His eyes flicked open. “Buddies?”

“For lack of a better term, yes. I won’t let you down.”

“That I know.” Then he released her hand and dropped his arm to his side, closing his eyes again. “Water? I am no longer full.” And his lips lengthened in a slight smile. “The tasty water.”

“We call it broth.”

“Good.”

She fed him and felt good about it.

THE MEETING WAS VERY WELL ATTENDED THOUGH KRIS MISSED SOME of Mitford’s usual satellites, the Rugarians, as well as the Doyles. Even patients who could be moved out to the ledge in front of the hospital were present: Anna and her baby, the fracture cases—everyone except Zainal.

Kris was obliquely offended by that but talked herself out of indignation: plainly Zainal was too ill to be moved and she could report to him—and defend him if necessary. Now why was she feeling so defensive about the Catteni?

Jay Greene had Patti Sue on one side of him. She joined them, leaning against the rock face on Jay’s left side.

“What’s up?”

“Oh, a Mitford morale-building session and the latest news.” Jay grinned.

"What latest news?" Kris demanded, knowing he was baiting her and giving him an ingenuous grin.

"The batch you and Zainal discovered weren't the only drops that night. Mitford sent off an exploratory patrol to see how many fields got seeded in what we believe is the typical Catteni drop pattern."

"More people?" Kris gave a frantic glance around the cave system, certainly overcrowded by the latest group of refugees. How *were* they going to cope? Then a rattle of the alarm triangle brought a wave of hush over the congregation. Mitford stood up, waiting until he had complete silence.

"Okay, folks, listen up. There're more drop-ins . . ." He paused until the mutter—Kris thought she heard resentment as well as surprise and concern—had subsided. "I take it as a good omen, considering what debriefing I've had." He chuckled. "The Catteni aren't finding it as easy to subdue good ol' Earth as they expected." A cheer went up. "And they've just increased our specialist department by four doctors, eighteen nurses, nine computer specialists, fourteen engineers, some good ol' hunter types from Australia, and a bunch of other real useful individuals, including some professional cooks, so we oughta be eating even better in the near future."

"Even with so many mouths to feed, sarge?" a woman shouted.

He waved off that concern. "We got a whole planet to hunt and plenty of grain stored where we can get it."

"Winter's coming . . ."

"So's Christmas and we'll have heating units from those solar panels long before. Now settle down. What we're going to do to relieve the housing shortage here is move into the buildings we know are empty and already plumbed for our benefit."

"But all those machines . . ."

"Have been decommissioned," Mitford said, raising his voice to parade-ground volume. "The Botany Hilton or Sheraton or whatever, is safe, sound, and has," he paused, "space available. Our local home decorators have been busy designing alterations, so I think you'll be surprised at how comfortable you're going to be."

"I'm not so sure I wanna live near *machines* . . ."

"Quietest neighbors you ever had, I'll betcha," Mitford said and got another ripple of laughter. "Good chance of us having an intercom system, too, now we got more technicians. All that machinery's going to be recycled for *our* benefit!"

"Yeah, and what happens when their owners find out?"

The man spoke with a slight accent but Kris couldn't locate the speaker.

“As I understand it, Doctor Who always managed to evade the mechanicals and so can we,” Mitford said with great good humor and got more laughs. “Seriously, though, folks, our population’s growing and,” once again he paused, “everyone’s welcome. This is an equal opportunity situation. Let me make *that* plain. D’you get me?” He waited for the response and, to Kris’ relief, got a fairly hearty cheer. “For one thing, there’s safety in numbers, especially when you can recruit a lot of specialists who can improve our conditions. And we do. Hell, sixteen days since we got dropped to freedom on that field, we’ve even got decent spoons and forks, and better rations than we landed with. Furthermore, we’ve sorted out some basic problems our allies were having since Zainal and Kris Bjornsen found the nutrient plant that seems to be helping the Deskis. Even if Zainal found it . . . the hard way.”

Applause and good-natured laughter acknowledged that announcement and Kris was well pleased by both elements: that Zainal was getting the credit and that the Deskis were stabilizing.

“We Yanks have a reputation for making something out of nothing, and now that the Aussies have joined us, we’ll do even better. There’ll be duty and housing rosters up on the bulletin board,” and he pointed to the location on the main cave wall opposite him, “in the morning, so be sure to check. We’re going to try and make space here in the headquarters to process incomers and as general hospital. Tesco’s in charge of quarters, Dowdall’ll take work assignments. You need to see me, check with Cumber. That’s all for now, folks. Dissss-MISSED!”

There was good-natured laughter at his military salutation and he disappeared into the darkness beyond the main campfire.

“Hi, Patti Sue,” and Kris leaned around Jay to speak to her. “Heard you’ve been a real Nightingale to the Deskis.”

Patti Sue linked her arm through Jay’s in such a proprietary fashion that the gesture indicated her improvement from terrified refugee to self-confident young woman.

“Do what I can,” she said, her drawl more pronounced than ever.

“You’ve done marvels, and you know it,” Jay said, stroking her hand.

“D’you know if you’re moving from the Rock?” Kris asked Patti Sue and then looked at Jay.

He shrugged. “Dunno yet. COQ’ll be up tomorrow morning. We’ll all know then.”

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, KRIS WAS ROUSED BY CONSIDERABLE noise in the corridor. Even Zainal was awakened, propping himself up on one elbow and trying to see out.

"Don't you dare put a foot on the ground," she said, pressing him back down. She felt his cheek and he was considerably cooler than he had been when she had last checked him. "You're better. Don't mess up. I'll go see."

She'd told him about the meeting and also that Mitford had given him credit for finding the remedy for the Deskis.

"Even if you had to do it the hardest way possible," she'd said with some acrimony. He'd only snorted. "At least they know one Catteni's a good guy." Maybe others wouldn't. She didn't add that, but that sentiment naggingly lingered at the back of her mind.

She folded on her shoes, the only thing she took off before going to bed, and went out into the corridor.

"Good!" One of the new Aussie medics grabbed her by the arm. "We need all the help we can get."

The newest arrivals had not had a Zainal or Kris to stamp the ground and dispatch the scavengers, and there were many with mangled arms and legs. Most of the victims spoke languages she didn't understand but which sounded Slavic or Scandinavian. Only a few had some English.

When she was sent by Leon to get more supplies and rouse additional helpers, she saw that the ravine was crammed with bodies, draped wherever they had stopped, too tired to move another step. But the cook cavern was ablaze with lights. Sandy, Bart, and half a dozen others were busy at their hearths, and the "store" was busy with Jay and Patti Sue doling out supplies. Jay instantly filled the hospital order and she returned.

The third moon had set before she was released, and when she got back into the tiny den she shared with Zainal, she had to step carefully over the three other bodies bunked in there during her absence. Fortunately they were fast asleep, though she thought she saw Zainal's eyes glimmer in the corridor light as he checked out her arrival.

So no one was able to follow the carefully detailed rosters that were up on the camp's main bulletin board. More parties were sent out to help stragglers, to hunt, to collect additional supplies of grain from that supply depot. Jay complained that folks had to search fairly far from Camp Rock to find firing and brush for bedding.

By high noon, all the new arrivals had been fed a decent meal and had someplace to lay their blanket.

The Rugarians, led by Slav, finally returned, bearing the crates with

the basic supplies that had been left with this new group. Class C was what Mitford decided to call them. All morning had to be spent extracting information from those who could speak English among the Russians, Norwegians, Swedes, Danes, Bulgarians, Romanians, and some Greeks who comprised this drop. The fact that so many different nationalities were resisting the Catteni on Earth gave the entire camp a morale boost.

“But why’d they have to dump ’em here when they don’t even speak English?” one man complained in a wail.

“Who asked?” a wit demanded. “We’ll manage. Hell, I know five Deski phrases and nine in Rugs. I’ll manage another few lingos. Well, at least, until they learn English.”

By evening the population had increased by a thousand and fifty-two: far more than the camp could accommodate even by crowding into all available cavern space.

Of Class C, those that could speak English and had not been injured or had suffered only minor hurts were sent off with Sandy, Joe Lattore, and Tesco to organize quarters in the abattoir buildings.

“They don’t know *what* happened there, and I don’t plan to tell ’em,” Sandy remarked to Kris when Kris came upon the woman, packing her pots and utensils. “I’ll organize the cooking there. Twenty barns, are there?” When Kris nodded, “Ah, we’ll probably be able to accommodate a lot more than we’re taking with us right now, but it’ll sure ease the crush.”

There was no longer sitting room in the cook cavern and every single hearth was going full-out all the time. The smell from unwashed bodies exuding fear as well as sweat quite masked the more appetizing odors of grilled meats and fresh bread.

When Sandy and her contingent had left, Kris couldn’t see where space had been gained and went back to the hospital with the broth she’d gone to collect. Zainal was more eager for any news she had than the food she brought him but he ate that hungrily enough. His leg was nearly back to its normal sturdy size and the wound was healing cleanly. But it was still crater-sized and Leon had made it clear that Zainal was not to move about much.

Zainal did, though, helping with patients who had to be lifted when their dressings were changed or were being moved to new accommodations. He did more than he should, but she couldn’t keep her eyes on him all the time and there was a lot to be done to make the injured as comfortable as possible with no pain relief or more anti-infection medication than the harsh Catteni fluid. The merest drop of the powerful anesthesia tended to render a patient unconscious for a full day. Medi-

cally that was imprudent, however much relief it afforded the injured party.

"Whatever those critters are that scavenge, at least they bite clean," Leon said later that day when Kris helped him bandage an arm wound. Flesh had been excised as cleanly as a scalpel would cut, but the patient had lost muscle as well as flesh and, from the extent of the injury, Kris rather thought the man would lose the use of his arm entirely.

"They bite big, too," she murmured under her breath, after looking to be sure the victim was unconscious.

Leon only sighed and continued his repair. Kris was rather surprised at her ability to regard hideous tears of flesh and muscle with an objectivity she didn't know she possessed. She hadn't been nauseous once, though others on the temporary nursing staff were.

The dressing complete, both she and Leon finished the current round and walked toward the front of the "hospital." A breeze was blowing in and freshening the air of the "emergency room," which, for the first time in several days, was empty of patients.

"You," and she took Leon by the arm, "need food and rest, not necessarily in that order, but I can see to it that you eat!" She gave a deep sniff of the incoming breeze. "Smells good, too." Hauling him by the arm, she marched him out and down the ledge to the cook cavern.

"I hate managing females," Leon protested, but weakly, as she maneuvered him past those busy with chores on the ledge.

Below, in his "office," Mitford was still debriefing the able-bodied of the last batch though, from the expressions on his face and Esker's, he was making slow work of it with two blond Scandinavian types sitting there.

"Most Scandinavians speak English," Leon remarked.

"The ones you've met in Sydney, or the ones in Oslo, Bergen, or Copenhagen?"

Leon laughed wearily. "I always wanted to take a travel year."

"Well, guess what? You're on it."

Already Kris missed the presence of Sandy at her hearth, but Bart was present, and evidently in charge of the catering.

"Never been in a job that was so damned constant," Bart said when they presented themselves at his hearth. He rolled his eyes and then mopped the sweat off his forehead with a pad of fluff which he then dropped into the fire. It hissed. "I'm cooking all the hours the good Lord put in this crazy day. What's your pleasure? We got soup for starters, soup, and then, for the main course, soup. We even got crackers," and he offered a square of unleavened stuff, "'cos we ran outta bread and the new baking hasn't risen yet."

“Why, I think I’ll have soup,” Kris said, getting herself a clean bowl from the stack at the hearth.

“I’ll have a taste adventure, then, and try the soup,” Leon said and Bart grinned as he ladled out their portions.

“Don’t ask what’s in it, will ya,” he said as a final caution when they moved out to the ledge to enjoy their meal.

“That’s a promise,” Kris said with a laugh.

The soup was tasty, with a tangy bite to it, as well as unidentifiable shreds of meat. The satisfying warmth in the stomach revived her. That was, until she saw Zainal carefully making his way down the steps to Mitford’s office.

“What the hell does he think he’s doing?” Dane demanded.

“Something other than lying in bed doing nothing,” Kris answered Leon’s complaint. She nervously shifted her feet, knowing she shouldn’t follow the big man, but wanting to be sure he didn’t open that leg wound. He very carefully negotiated his descent, so she made herself relax. The question was: what urgent business could Zainal have with Mitford that he’d risk opening that wound? Something he couldn’t trust her to do for him? *Down girl*, she told herself firmly. She might be his keeper but she was not his conscience. Whatever he was saying to Mitford, the Sergeant was listening very hard. Zainal was still there in the “office” when she and Leon had finished eating and had to go back on duty.

THAT EVENING ESKER FOUND HER, SETTLING THE OTHER PATIENTS—none of whom had any English—in her den.

“Mitford needs to speak to you, Kris. And you, too, Zainal.”

He was gone before Kris could question him but, thinking over the tone in which the summons was delivered, she felt no apprehension. After all, Zainal had had that intense discussion with Mitford. Had the Sergeant reached a decision? If one was needed?

Mitford was, as usual this time of his long workday, sitting by the fire, the pottery pitcher of beverage by the side of his rock, the half-full cup in one hand. In the other, he had a stick and was prodding a chunk of wood to a better position in the fire.

“Zainal has some cockamamy notion of sending a mayday to his people next time they overfly us,” Mitford said, narrowing his eyes as he looked up at Kris. “He feels we haven’t had the last of these drops.” Mitford gave a little sigh for the problems yet another influx of people would provide. “Now, fer starters, I don’t know as how I want to appeal

to them for any help, but it's the truth we need some sort of medical supplies as well as the proper nutrients for the Deskis. That thornbush junk is not quite enough, not for the older Deskis, though it's helping Coo. I just don't like to lose anyone, human or alien." He scowled as he delivered that remark.

"How could we possibly contact them?" Kris said, turning to Zainal.

"Make this message on field," Zainal said, and unfolded a slip of bark on which were written, or maybe drawn was the proper term for the four complex hieroglyphics Zainal had inscribed.

"How? We haven't rediscovered paint yet here."

He gave her a brief smile. "Ground is dark under . . ." and he wagged his hand to try to find the appropriate word.

"Stubble? Grass?" she supplied.

"Whatever. Take off covering, leave ground bare."

That was a good idea, only somehow Kris shared Mitford's obvious reluctance to make any contact with the Catteni.

"We put message many fields off," and Zainal gestured to the north. "They know we live. They bring more they don't want."

"They know we're here?" Kris asked, more disturbed by that than she liked, though a quick look at Mitford showed him more sanguine.

Zainal nodded. "Heat sensors." Then he stretched his lip in a humorous grin. "That's why they fly over."

"Humph, thought that might be it," Mitford said. "Bastards!"

Then Zainal's grin altered to one of amusement at the Sergeant's acceptance and once again Kris was amazed at how that smile transformed his alien cast of countenance. He looked almost human, except for the white of his teeth contrasting with the gray of his skin. "Know we live so send more."

"Yeah, but they still don't know about the existence of the Mech Makers!"

Zainal shook his head. "Sensors find warm bodies, not machinery."

"Hmmm," Mitford said, stirring the fire with his branch.

"Coo still weak but young. Older ones worse and get worser," Zainal said urgently in English, then, in his concern, resorted to Barevi. "Catteni take captives everywhere, but they take good care of them. Of Rugarians, Deskis, Turs and Ilginish, and Terrans. Healthy bodies work better. Asking for proper food is acceptable."

"Won't they find it strange that we ask in Catteni symbols?" Kris asked, pointing to his bark message.

Zainal grinned broadly again. "They know humans are smart," he said in English. "Too damned smart so they drop them here. No trouble

here. Coo and Pess good folks. Can't lose." Now he turned his earnest expression on Mitford. "I work with Deskis and Rugarians before. Good folks. We save them?"

"You sure have learned English quick, Zainal," Mitford said in a drawl, temporizing, Kris thought. Then he regarded Zainal for a long moment. "And the Deskis deserve saving. Your guys'd just drop the supplies?" Zainal nodded. "They wouldn't come down to find out?" Zainal shook his head. "Why not?"

Zainal now laughed. "You make trouble. They . . ." He paused and Kris could almost see him trying to sort through his head to find the right words. "Play it safe. I play it safe, too."

"You mean, you wouldn't take the opportunity to get off Botany?" Mitford asked that in such a mild tone that Kris hoped Zainal would see he was being deftly interrogated.

"They don't take back what they put down," he said with a philosophical shrug.

Mitford grimaced. "So there's no chance we *could* commandeer one of their transports?"

Zainal considered this and finally shook his head. "They be careful where they drop." He grinned. "Especially near you Terrans."

"How do you know that?"

Zainal's teeth gleamed in the firelight when he smiled. "Know it before, back on Barevi. Lots of talk. Hear it now from the new ones. Believe it, too. I see how you work."

"Thanks, buddy," Mitford replied sardonically but amused by Zainal's approval. "Why would they do us a favor then?"

"I tell you why." Now Zainal seemed to tense and Kris felt Mitford was pushing him too much, as if he didn't quite believe Zainal was on the level. "Keep healthy to . . . improve this planet."

Suddenly Zainal held out the slip of bark with its symbols and, with one thick fingertip, explained them.

"This says 'drop,' " and he pointed to the intricate hook in the center of the first glyph. "This says 'food,' " and he ran his finger halfway around the next curlecue. "This Deski creatures. This means"—and he moved to next glyph— " 'danger to the death surrounded by urgent.' Fourth one says 'medicines for infection.' Four only. Easy to make, easy to read from distance." His tone was cold and firm.

"Okay, okay, man, I believe you," Mitford said. "Just had to ask."

"These my people, too, now," Zainal added, straightening his wide shoulders as if he, too, would assume some of that burden from Mitford.

"We are one people now, or by god I'll know why!" Mitford said so fiercely that Kris almost recoiled. The Sergeant saw her reaction and

gave her a quick grin. "I could even get to like being in charge of this motley crew. So when will you be able to travel, Zainal?"

"Sunrise . . ."

Kris started to protest but Mitford held up a hand to silence her. "If he thinks he can, he can. Those Deskis need the right food. And we can use the Deskis' abilities. You go with him, Kris. How many will you need to carve the message, Zainal?"

The Catteni waved his hand to indicate he'd go alone.

"Stuff it, buddy, man," Mitford said irritably. "You'll need help making those figures large enough to be seen from that altitude. I know. Had to do it in Nam once. Even SOS takes time to make." He turned to Kris, an almost wistful expression on his face. "You don't happen to speak any Scandinavian language, do you?" And when she shook her head, he sighed. "New guys are all I have to send with you, but you can break 'em in to our new ways at the same time. And I'll pick you one that speaks English and the rest'll be told what to do. Got it?"

"Got it, sarge," and she rose, recognizing a dismissal when she heard it. Zainal extended one hand to Mitford, which the Sergeant took readily enough and shook.

"You will not be sorry," Zainal said as he rose.

"I sincerely hope not," Mitford replied. "Esker will have a patrol ready at first light."

Chapter Ten

THE NEXT MORNING, THOUGH ZAINAL WALKED SLOWLY, HE DID NOT appear to favor the injured leg. But, as they left Camp Rock, Kris realized that last night both men—maybe unintentionally—had avoided discussing what would happen if the Mecho Makers appeared first. Of course, with winter approaching . . . but it struck her as unrealistic to think that everything mechanical went down with the close of the growing season. Surely there was some sort of supervisor, or superintendant or overseer on the planet? Maybe on one of the other continents? Nevertheless, some *thing* must be in overall charge. When there was no response from the garages now that the solar panels were disconnected, some *thing* must register the lack of response. And check up.

And response was what they hoped to get. Or had Mitford's objectives changed now he was getting accustomed to being the top man here on Botany?

Well, as her grandmother used to say, why borrow trouble? It finds you soon enough.

DESPITE A BROKEN NIGHT'S SLEEP—SINCE TWO OF THEIR ROOMMATES were so restless that any long period of sleep was impossible—Kris and Zainal were up well before dawn on Botany. They'd eaten—Bart was absent, asleep, one of the other cooks said, yawning—and were getting their travel rations when Esker came in with six people, five men and a woman who was nearly as tall as Kris. She seemed relieved to see that Kris was in the party.

"I speak English," she announced. "I am named Astrid. These are

Ole, Jan, Oskar, Bjorn, and Peter. We lived near Oslo. Esker has told us we go with you to dig?"

"Yes, dig," Kris said, with a reassuring smile because she obviously thought it an odd job. She shook hands all round. "This is Zainal, our leader."

"You have Catteni as leader?" Astrid asked in a startled whisper.

"Good one, too, or you'd all been eaten."

"Pardon?"

"The scavengers? The things that go bump in the night on this planet?" And Kris made a mouth of one hand and bit her other arm. Astrid reacted to that, jerking back and away from the demonstration.

"I do not always understand," Astrid said apologetically. "We are still alive. We keep others alive?"

"Exactly! To help the Deskis keep alive we send a message."

"Someone will read?" Astrid was clearly amazed. One of the men shot her a quick sentence in the oddly liquid Norwegian language. She answered him as quickly and turned back to Kris. "I don't believe."

"Believe. We will carve the symbols on the ground to be seen in the air," and she pantomimed the actions.

"Oh," Astrid said and explained to her compatriots, who nodded in vigorous understanding.

"Kris?" and Kris recognized one of the Australian nurses, hurrying into the cavern, waving a sack made from part of a blanket, the ubiquitous material used for anything from aprons to tents. "More fluff dressings for Zainal's leg." Then she shot an accusing look at the Catteni. "I knew you'd go off without them—and that leg still needs support and dressings every day. I don't care if you are some kind of superman, you bleed red like the rest of us. Here!" And she jammed the sack into Zainal's hand and whirled about and ran out again.

With a half-grin, Zainal managed to look slightly embarrassed as he stowed the sack into the larger one he was carrying.

"Now we go," he said. Whether he had seen Mitford's gestures on their first trek or not, he raised his arm above his head and brought it down in the direction they were to travel.

Reassured by his manner, Kris motioned for the rest of the patrol to follow her and they left, as a good team, she thought.

While Zainal was not setting the pace he had on the first patrol Kris had done with him, he certainly didn't amble. By the first rest stop, Kris knew that the Norwegians weren't going to slow them down. Probably skied all winter in Norway. She kept her eyes on Zainal, though, to watch for any signs of an unconscious favoring of his injured leg. Then she became aware that he was watching her watch him.

“You tell us names of things?” Astrid asked during the break.

“I don’t know as we’ve named much, Astrid,” Kris admitted, taking a swig of water from her pottery bottle. Sandy’s kiln worked and she’d found a glaze, so the canteen, while still breakable, didn’t leak. She even had a proper pouch for it, now attached to her belt. “There’re botanists going about checking plants to see if they’re edible and stuff like that, but I can’t say as I’ve kept up with what they’re doing.”

“You are out on patrol?”

“Most of the time.”

“What are these machineries?” She looked puzzled.

“Ah, yes, well,” and Kris explained, pausing while Astrid made quick translations to her compatriots until Zainal gestured for them to take the road again.

“You have done most well,” Astrid said when Kris finished her brief history of Botany. “We are glad we drop here.”

“Got dropped here,” Kris corrected automatically. “Ooops, sorry, Zainal has me helping his English.”

“Oh, help my English, too.”

“You . . . teach . . . us?” one of the other men, Ole, Kris thought, asked her. She hadn’t quite sorted the guys out yet.

“Might as well. English lessons on the march.”

“We have no Deskis to hear flying danger,” Astrid said, her eyes wide with apprehension now. “We were told that there is danger that flies,” she added when Kris regarded her with astonishment at her knowledge.

“The nearby garages are all disabled, so I don’t think we’re in danger of any avians swooping down on us.”

“Pardon?” Astrid’s English was not up to Kris’ comment.

“My pardon,” and she rephrased the remark in better English.

“Explain ‘boy’ now,” Zainal suddenly said, dropping back so that he was abreast of the two women.

“Oh, yes. Well,” and Kris floundered briefly. “‘Boy’ can mean several things. No, I guess many. A boy,” and she held up one finger, “is a young male person: too old to be a baby and too young to be considered a man yet. Okay?”

“‘Boy’? Is only that?” Zainal twisted his face into a perplexed expression.

“We have what we call slang in English: patois, idiom, in other languages,” Kris continued determinedly. “‘Boy’ used as slang is an expression of amazement, amusement, pleasure, and it’s usually said as ‘oh, boy!’ or ‘oooo, booooy!’ ‘Oh, boy!’” And she emphasized the different emotions with exaggerated gestures and tones.

"All boy?" asked Zainal. "I don't understand how a boy, a young male person, can be surprise, funny, good times."

"I think you do, Zainal," Kris said, suddenly realizing that he was teasing her. "G'wan with ye now, m'boyo!"

Astrid translated to the others, grinning and laughing and saying "oh, boy" in different tones of voice.

"Oh, boy, and isn't this getting out of hand," Kris said, shaking her head at her predicament.

"Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy," Zainal said and, to nonplus her further, he put one arm around her shoulders and gave her a hug.

"You've been talking to other people," she said, throwing off his arm and stalking ahead of him. Then she realized she was overreacting. Why on earth, when she really wanted to get close to him, had she repudiated his friendly gesture? Regretting her behavior, she slowed up and caught his hand, holding it while they walked.

At the second rest stop, Zainal struck off northerly, pointing to broad fields of golden stubble that spread upward to a rocky summit. If, as Zainal had suggested, the Catteni kept to the same line to make their drops, those fields would be visible if they were going to buzz Camp Rock again.

They reached their objective by midafternoon. Zainal sent Kris and two of the men off to hunt for rocksquats sunning themselves. Oskar and Bjorn were proficient with the bows and arrows they had been supplied with, while both were congratulatory when she brought down four creatures with well-placed slingshots. Of course, she'd missed six so she didn't think that much of her accomplishment.

The men were obviously accustomed to good hunting practices because, as soon as they found the next stream, they skinned and dressed down the meat without directions from her. They washed all the carcasses and pelts well before going back to Zainal's field. They were setting about to bury the entrails when she indicated they should leave them.

Kris spotted some nourishing types of greens in the hedgerows and harvested them. She kept her eyes out for the tubers, which also grew wild at the edges of fields. Fried, they'd be a good addition to the roast meat and the travel'rations.

Zainal had had the others helping him outline with rocks the glyphs that they would have to hack out of the soil. He was pacing out the second huge pattern, putting down the bordering rocks while the others gathered more. Kris could also see, at the top of the field, a circle of stones with a nice fire burning in it, fueled by the loo-cow droppings collected on the way. They'd be only a step away from the safety of

the rocky height, which was just fine by Kris. The scavengers foraged in crop fields as well as pastures, and only the stomp-stomp of the loo-cows' six legs kept them from being fair game. Was that why the loo-cows had six legs? More to stomp with? But the scavengers were no doubt the reason why Kris had noticed that the loo-cows seemed to sleep during the daylight hours. Those loo-cows probably had to do an all-night stomp to stay alive.

The hunters displayed their spoils, and Kris set about finding the right size of flat rock to cook them on. She'd been warned to be careful about overheating her newly issued cooking pot, since it was after all only glazed clay, but she'd been assured by Jay Greene that it would bring water close to the boil . . . and that would mean she could cook the greens. She took them to the ubiquitous stream to wash and fill the pot, and very shortly the stones were hot enough to start cooking rock-squat.

By then, Zainal had outlined all four huge glyphs. After a good dinner, he suggested that they start hacking out the soil to bare the dark ground.

That was tougher work than they had anticipated, for the ground cover had deep, tough root systems and Kris found these had to be cut out: the roots wouldn't just pull away like any well-behaved Terran weed would. Her arms and shoulders ached from her labors and she was quite glad to break off to heat water for the nighttime beverage.

The medics had come to the decision that the herbal-type tea that had been concocted contained useful trace elements, so a bedtime cup was standard issue. A nice homey touch and no reason not to continue it out in the rocky wilds of Botany. With warmth in the belly, it was easier to sleep.

The turf-cutters made themselves as comfortable as they could on the rocks and those who had later watches had no trouble falling asleep.

IT TOOK THEM FIVE DAYS TO COMPLETE THE GLYPHS: FIVE DAYS OF fingernail- and back-breaking, arm-bruising and blister-making toil, since the only tools they had were hatchets and knives. They'd been issued with spares of each tool and had needed them to complete their task, resharpening the dulled edges every night. Then, determined that his message would be seen, Zainal had them outline the cuts with the sparkling white stone that comprised this rock outcrop. The full sunlight that fell on the glyphs caused the mica in the rock to glint. Almost as good as neon. Exhausted as she was, Kris had to admire the final result.

"Do all Catteni read?" she asked Zainal.

"Those on watch do," he assured her.

His leg was a bit swollen from his unremitting labors, but the flesh was gradually filling in and he took a brook-shower night and morning. Cold as the water was, Kris liked the new type of ablution. She and Astrid bathed upstream of the fellows, but the rivulet was deep enough for a person to lie down on the sands and let the water cascade over her in a horizontal shower. The sand was very fine and provided a rough but effective cleanser. Besides, you were so cold you didn't feel the abrasions. Or so Kris told herself.

The rocky height was home—or had been home—to a huge colony of rocksquats. The patrol took some time out each day to hunt and cut the excess meat into strips to dry on the hot rocks the next day. Kris was very pleased to be so productive—especially since there were so many more mouths to feed.

Each night, however, reminded them that a colder season was approaching and Kris did worry about how cold that would be! Fortunately the Catteni-issue thermal blankets were efficient in containing body heat inside them. The evening showers blessed them on schedule but those were no longer as violent as they had been: more like a gentle watering than torrential rains.

On the sixth day they started back to camp, hunting when they could, for additional protein was always welcome. Zainal set a faster pace this time, to allow for interludes of hunting, and they reached the caverns to find them still crammed with people. Bart took their offerings with profuse thanks and then asked Kris if she'd take a hearth and cook what they'd brought in. As she certainly couldn't refuse the man when he looked so harried, and the cook cave was obviously pushed to the limit, she obeyed. Astrid lingered, as much because she didn't know where to go as anything else, and Kris was a familiar face. Until a messenger came for Kris to report to Mitford.

"I watch you. I now know to cook," Astrid said, taking the long-handled fork Kris had been using and pushing her on her way.

Zainal and Ole, who did have some English, were in Mitford's "office." The pile of bark sheets was higher than the stone he used as a desk and was weighted down by what looked like a gold nugget, a lump of iron, and a greeny mess that had to be copper.

"Gold in them-thar hills?" Kris asked when he motioned her to a seat.

"That and more. We've been busy while you've been carving that mayday."

"You're never not busy, sarge."

"Patrol found the remnants of another drop and nine survivors. Eight

Deski and a guy from Atlanta, Georgia, who had the sense to stick with the aliens. Damn it,” and Mitford’s face was suffused with anger, “I shoulda had you put a PS on that message: make the drops in daylight. I hate it when I lose people like that.”

“But they weren’t *ours*, yet, sarge,” Kris said, trying to be conciliating. Mitford gave her a dirty look. *Hey, she thought, he’s really into this Leader bit. Well, it’s not as if anyone else had volunteered for the responsibilities—and the headaches. And look at all that Mitford had gone and done.*

“They could’ve been. And another garage was found and deactivated. Twenty more barns to be made into domiciles.”

“Now that’s good. And the supplies?”

“We put them in the barns. Easier that way, but I’d rather have the people to go with them.”

Zainal had been constructing another glyph and now held it off to inspect the result. He made a few more strokes as adjustments, then turned it to Mitford and Kris. “That should do it,” he said.

Mitford reacted to that almost unaccented remark. “You learn quick, doncha?”

“I have to,” Zainal replied. “Take two three days there and back.” He rose, glancing up at the sundial. “Have enough light to travel.”

“How’s your leg?” Mitford frowned at it as he could see nothing past the bulky pantleg. Then he caught Kris’ surreptitious headshake. “No, better start fresh tomorrow. The others are only Terrans, not as tough as you Catteni.” His little snort took the sting out of that remark as he looked up at Zainal towering above him. “You think your guys’ll listen?”

Zainal nodded solemnly. “They don’t know the dangers here. They don’t know scavengers. They wish this planet . . . col-on-nized. We have survived,” and he shrugged, “so they think all can.”

“But even the report you saw said there were dangerous animals down here.” Mitford’s scowl deepened.

Zainal shrugged and grinned broadly. “We have survived. Water, air, animals, light gravity, better than Catten!” As if that answered the necessary criteria.

Mitford snorted, shuffling several pieces of scribbled bark about on his worktop. “As far as we know, they made three drops this time. We were one of four. And three weeks between trips. That right?”

Zainal cocked his head thoughtfully. “Could be. I was space, not col-on-y.” And he spread his hands in a very contemporary human gesture of ignorance. “You know the problem: one group does not know what other does.”

"Yeah," and Mitford's drawl spoke of much experience with such inequities.

A woman, face red, hair messed, coverall opened halfway to her waist, came stamping her way up the steps to Mitford's office.

"Mitford, either you cut his libido off at the root or I'll do it myself with a dull knife."

"Arnie?" and Mitford rose, gesturing authoritatively at two men lounging to one side, playing some sort of game involving pebbles. "No questions, no answers. Bring 'im. Put 'im back in the stocks. And he'll stay there till he rots or we can think of something else to do with him."

"Tie him out in a field for scavengers—and even that's too good," the woman said, closing the fastenings on her coverall and then smoothing her hair. "Horny pervert! I'll give you a full report of this latest trick of his when you're done here," she muttered as she politely took herself to one side so Mitford could finish with his current interview.

"At least the ratio between male and female evened up a little in the last drop. But I don't need guys like Arnie," Mitford said when the woman had settled out of earshot. "He's been in the stocks four times for peeping and twice for stealing."

"Stealing what?"

"Food! Extra blankets, a sharper knife because he's too lazy to hone his own." Mitford made a noise of disgust. "I need him like a boil on my ass. Don't ever feel sorry, Kris, that he got force-whipped. He just got his in advance."

"Tie him out for the scavengers," Zainal said blandly. "Good idea."

Mitford grimaced, showing his teeth and expelling air through them. "Can't, but I may yet. . . . You get food and rest, ya hear, Kris?" When she dutifully nodded, he added: "And make sure Dane sees his leg."

Over Zainal's protests that's exactly what Kris did, roundly scolding the Catteni because he hadn't reported in to Leon Dane when they reached camp. He was at first amused by her tirade and then frowned as she grabbed him by the arm, to lead him to the hospital end of the caverns, when he did not turn in that direction immediately.

"Now listen here, Lord Emassi Zainal," she said, "you were given an order by Mitford and, if you plan to go out tomorrow, you'll obey it or you won't go! And no one will go with you to help dig that message."

"Then no message." He shrugged as if it were all the same to him.

"Ohhh, you make me so mad . . ." Kris tried to keep her voice down because she knew she sounded shrewish. But he was being so unreasonable. "Just because you're a Catteni doesn't mean you don't bleed like us frail Terrans, and that you didn't damned near die from that

thorn toxin, and I don't want to go through *that* again. You're too important to me to be stupid about your health."

He grabbed her by the finger she was shaking at him, looking around because he had noticed just how much attention her accusation had focused on them.

"I go. I see Dane," he said far too docilely and she watched to make sure he did.

Lordee, you'd think a man as old as Zainal would have the sense to take care of himself. And she didn't like it when he got all compliant. *That wasn't Catteni of him.*

THE FIFTH GLYPH TOOK THEM MOST OF THE CLEAR DAY BUT WENT MORE smoothly since they all knew how to do it. They immediately started cutting sod at the top as Zainal laid it out and they were well started when he finished the design. They didn't even have to find more mica rocks since there was a still a pile left over from their first job.

"Shropshire Man this isn't," Kris said when they retired to the next field to get an overall view of their labors.

"Man? Another 'boy' thing?" Zainal asked, one eyebrow quirked upward in amusement.

"Yeah, you can if you wish substitute man oh man oh man, for boy oh boy oh boy. It's how you feel."

"Young or old? Small or large?" Zainal asked, his eyes twinkling down at her.

"I think," she said in a severe tone, "that you're kidding me."

"Ah, kid, a small goat," Astrid said with an unexpected display of humor. "Oh, in slang a 'boy'!"

"Right!"

Ole asked her a question and she replied, laughing when he grinned in comprehension. "Baby, kid, boy, man," he said with just a hint of the liquid Norwegian in his tone.

"Kidding? Can one having boying, too?" asked Zainal.

"Yes, actually," Kris said. "But it's spelled differently and means a floating object in the water to warn seamen off underwater dangers."

"See men?" Zainal asked, gathering his brows slightly, which made him look quite ominous.

"We have a lot of words in English that sound the same but mean different things."

"How do you know then what each means?"

"Context—how the word is used in the sentence. Hey, is this a language patrol?"

"Why not?" and Zainal grinned. "Work is done. Now we . . . play?"

"Ha! You wouldn't know how to play," Kris retorted.

"Wanna bet?" he replied.

"You've listened too much to the Doyle brothers," she said, wagging a finger at him.

He grabbed her finger and she tried to pull away, which resulted in a tugging match, then turned into him chasing her, trying to recapture the finger while the Norwegians watched this juvenile display with unsmiling dignity.

Kris was quicker on her feet than the heavier Catteni, so she eluded him, ducking under his grasping arms and hands and taunting him to catch her. When he did, he held her tightly against him. She could barely move, but she scrunched her hands behind her back so he couldn't recapture the finger. It was all very silly, since inevitably his superior strength would win out, but she found she enjoyed Zainal's surprising playful side. Inexorably, he recaptured the right hand, and, with amazing gentleness considering the strength he applied to the task, he drew her hand up and, recapturing the finger, kissed it. Then the palm of her hand.

A spurt of something ran through her at the touch of his lips on the softer, if blistered, skin of her hand. Startled, she caught his eyes. The twinkle was there, for the success of his recapture, but some other emotion darkened his odd-colored eyes and made her catch her breath.

"Happy now?" she asked with some asperity.

"Yes," he said simply and immediately let her go.

ON THE WAY BACK TO CAMP, IN BETWEEN FORAGING, ASTRID AND HER compatriots kept up quite a lively discussion until Kris finally asked them what was so interesting.

"The land," Astrid said with a sweeping hand. "It is beautiful country for growing and for animals who eat grass. Very well done, too. Oskar and Peter are raised on farms. They say very well done."

"It is, and wait till they see what the farmers are," Kris said.

"Pardon?"

There was a brief delay in the conversation while rocksquats were added to the day's bag. Throughout the rest of the day, Kris heard about the ecologically—the word was the same in Norwegian but sounded different—sound fashion in which Botany's agriculture was done. Proper drainage, available water, copses of vegetation where land was not arable used as windbreaks, even the hedging that separated the fields was approved. For what it was worth. Kris did not want to be the ones

to tell them what farmed the land here. But she began to have more respect for the acumen of the absentee landlords: whatever they were besides omnivorous.

GREAT EXCITEMENT BUZZED ABOUT THE CAMP WHEN THEY RETURNED and she didn't report that observation to Mitford. The Sergeant was sitting with what looked to Kris very much like a hand-held phone. He was talking into it, so unless Chuck Mitford had flipped his wig, and she wouldn't have blamed him if he had, he was talking to another unit of the Botany Colonial Establishment.

"Great, huh?" Bart said when Kris, Bjorn, and Oskar brought the results of their hunting into the cook cavern.

"We've got a phone?"

"Yeah, but more importantly, now the technies know what chips do in the mechanicals' circuitry. Real breakthrough."

Kris allowed as how it must be since everyone was so happy about it and she supposed she should be as elated, because it was one more step back toward sophisticated living. She was oddly disturbed by the breakthrough. And certainly couldn't figure out why. She'd probably been enjoying this atavistic hunter-explorer life more than she should—considering it also involved lots of discomfort and uncertainty: as well as enough hazard to get the ol' adrenaline flowing freely most of the time. Camp Rock would really benefit by some modern conveniences. On the other hand, was instant communication *really* a benefit?

"Put another toggle on my belt," she muttered under her breath, "for the hand-held!" Then she added: "Say, Bart, where do I find out where I'm bunking tonight?"

Bart pointed to the irregular opening that led to most of the dormitory facilities as well as the lake. "List right there."

Her name had a big fat P beside it: so did Zainal's, and, as she looked down the list for the Norwegians, they were P's, too. P for Patrol?

"Bjornsen?" someone sang out at the front of the cave.

"Yo!"

"Sarge wants you."

Muttering about being homeless, Kris made her way to the "office." There were three handsets on Mitford's "desk."

"Latest in recycling mechanicals," Mitford said in great good humor. "We can keep in touch with our outposts and our scouts. You gotta get some height to boost the signal . . ." and he jerked his thumb over his shoulder to the top of the cliff behind him where, of all things, an

aerial now swayed in the evening breeze. "But don't seem to have any trouble with range. Anyway we'll know soonest when the Catteni make another drop. We've got a network of lookouts—and not just for the Cattenis' next move." He rummaged briefly through the sheets on his worktop and flipped free a large one—no, it was quite a few sheets neatly glued (?) together. Well, the loo-cows had hooves, so someone had remembered to boil 'em up for glue. A map had been drawn on the big sheet—or, the beginnings of one, for only the center showed contour lines, streams, fields, forestry. The map gave Kris a much better idea of the terrain in and around the main camp, and the siting of the various mechanical facilities.

"Neat," she said.

"We got a bona fide surveyor," Mitford said proudly, tapping the map. "Pretty good, huh? Even got relative distances."

"Nat Geo Soc would be proud to claim it," she agreed, grinning at Mitford. "You don't waste time civilizing us, do you, sarge?"

"Not much," he agreed amiably, "but then we got lots of Yankee know-how—and Aussie." He noticed her jaundiced expression and cocked eyebrow so he cleared his throat as if he'd had to do that before continuing. "Alien allies, too," he added. Then he surprised her by hefting one of the units and plonking it down in front of her, all businesslike again. "I want your patrol to start examining this area," and his thick index finger wandered down to easterly uncharted areas. "I'll need to keep in touch with you in case we want Zainal."

"Sarge?"

"Yah?"

"Are you keeping Zainal out of camp for a reason?"

Mitford regarded her steadily, his gray eyes not avoiding hers.

"You might, at that, think I am, and I am. He's too valuable a resource to be wasted . . ."

"Then I haven't been wrong—there's feeling against him."

"Can you honestly blame people for resenting him as Catteni?"

"Even if he was dumped down like everyone else?" Kris asked plaintively.

"Even then, because he's still Catteni and no weapons but a knife, and alone."

"He's *not* alone," Kris said staunchly.

"I know, Bjornsen. But there's this thinking that there must have been a good reason he got dumped, other than killing another Cat . . . Catteni," Mitford said and, when she started to protest, he held up a hand. "I've seen and heard all about Catteni one-day vendettas, Bjornsen, and if it was only for killing a patrol leader, he'd've been released

from the slammer the next day. He sure the hell isn't like any other Catteni I ever met or heard about."

"What about the latest drop? If it hadn't been for Zainal . . ."

"Kris!" Mitford's hand on her arm and sharp tone stopped her. He didn't look around to see who might be near enough to hear their discussion, but there was something about his manner now that suggested to Kris that he didn't want her blowing her top right now. "There are a lot of folk who should be grateful to Zainal. But they aren't. And that's the long and short of it. I can't change human nature, you know." And he sounded sincerely regretful. "And I *won't* run him out of the camp." He blinked and then said softly, "He's too useful a resource. Now, girl," and carefully he began to fold the map. He put it into a flat envelope made out of the ubiquitous blanket, complete with shoulder strap. He laid that alongside the comunit, then added a thick carbon "pencil" and fidgeted until he had them aligned to his satisfaction. "I want you and Zainal to go walk about with Astrid. She's chosen Oskar to go with. Zainal says she's competent and can keep up. I've a pair of Australians who swore blind they could keep up with Aborigines, so they oughta be able to keep up with you two. They were in the last drop and are grateful to Zainal. Though half the time they act like this was some great joke. Possibly it is." He paused, musing on that theory. "One of 'em has medical training and did botany in the Outback Down Under. With this hand-held, you can keep in touch with me. Esker, Dowdall, and a new guy, ex-Anzac major by name of Worrell who did some military governing so he knows more than I do . . ." He waved off Kris' immediate disclaimer. "I'm glad to have him aboard. They call him 'Worry,' and he does, so I don't have to anymore. He'll be at the other end if I'm not. That clear?"

"In a way, yes," she replied as civilly as she could, for she was seething with indignation that Zainal should be exiled and with relief that she was going with him. "Your friendly roving reporter!" She rose.

"Good girl, Bjornsen, I like your style," Mitford said, peering up at her. "I gotta defuse the situation, you understand."

"Yeah, I guess you do. Only why," and she nodded her head in the direction of the stocks where Arnie was constrained, "can *he* be tolerated and not Zainal?"

Mitford snorted. "Takes all kinds and he's . . . supposedly . . . human. One more complaint lodged against him, though, and we take punitive measures he won't like at all. Especially as we wouldn't use anesthesia." Then he looked over toward the main cavern. "That's your patrol, Bjornsen. I told Zainal, too. Report in every day, will ya? So we

know the equipment's still working. The code here is 369," and he grinned.

"Sir!" she said, stamping her feet up and down, coming to attention and saluting him in the manner of a British soldier.

He waved her away and three people vied to take her place, eyeing her map case and handset. She strode off, head high, looking neither to right nor left.

Zainal was leaning against the wall, arms folded across his chest, watching her progress. The other four members of the patrol were talking quietly. She nodded to Astrid and Oskar, then looked at the two new folks. She held her hand out to the woman, whom she liked on sight: almost spare in build but wiry, with a complexion that had been roughened by hot Australian summers, and faded, short, curly hair of a ginger shade. But she exuded an air of competence, a characteristic of so many Aussies. At her feet, beside her travel gear, were a first-aid kit and a light bow with a sheaf of arrows.

"M'name's Sarah McDouall," she said, giving Kris' hand a firm, hard shake before letting it go. "This here's Francis Marley. We made a good team in the resistance 'fore we got caught. I'm your medic."

"Call me Joe. Anything's better than Francis," he said, giving Sarah a mock glare for her introduction. He spoke in a slightly nasal tenor voice which seemed to have a lilt of quiet laughter to it. He was tall and lean, with sun-creased eyes, an open face and smile, and dark hair growing gray at the temples. One hand kept going to his head as if to adjust a missing hat. The gesture developed into a scratch of his skull. "Stockman—I know a bit about plants." He had a sling tucked in his belt, a blanket pouch that bulged with pebbles. He sort of leaned against the three light lances he was armed with. They had, Kris noticed, metal tips. *My, she thought, the Arsenal is improving, too!*

"Anyone know where we're bunked?" Kris asked.

"Zainal knows."

"I lead, you follow," Zainal said, pushing himself off the wall and moving off, past the hospital cave.

Kris wondered if he was annoyed that Mitford had given her the comunit. His expression did not give her any clues.

It was more a 'dugout than a cave, but it would shelter them from the evening shower and the colder winds that now blew during the night. There was just room enough for six bodies, but there were hooks for hanging and even a ledge.

"Rather snazzy," Kris said. "Did Zainal tell you our mission?"

"More or less," Joe said with a grin.

“You don’t mind a Catteni patrol leader?”

Joe’s eyebrows raised slightly and Sarah gave her a sharp look.

“Well, now . . .”

“Zainal here leads,” Kris said firmly. “I’m signals,” and she tapped the comunit.

“Gotcha!”

“I need a bath,” Kris added, carefully stowing the map case and the hand-held on the ledge. She turned to Astrid. “You coming?”

“Wash?”

“That’s what we call it,” Kris said with a grin, easier now she’d made her point, and turned to Sarah.

“Had one. I’ll get our grub. Smells good. C’mon, Joe, Oskar. Don’t take too long,” Sarah said to the bathers.

“You better believe it,” Kris replied, and then, with Astrid on her heels, retraced her steps to the cook cavern and then down to the lake.

Astrid had no problem with cold-water bathing but then, if she was accustomed to saunas in Norway, she wouldn’t be. But the temperature did not encourage one to dawdle and they were washed, dried, dressed, and on their way back to their quarters about the time their evening meal was ready.

“I do miss a beer,” Joe said plaintively, sopping up the last of the gravy from his bowl with his bread.

“I miss a cigarette,” Sarah said.

“I, too,” Astrid said with a smile, and translated to Oskar. He raised both hands skyward in longing. “You know plants?” Astrid asked Joe. “Find us one like tobacco.”

“Now there’s a right good idea,” Joe replied. “Do my damndest, I will.”

Chapter Eleven

EACH MORNING KRIS CHECKED IN AND USUALLY SPOKE TO MITFORD, giving him an all-clear. Each evening, around the fire, she got the others to help her add the terrain to the map they had covered that day. The fourth day they came upon another mechanical garage and spent the day dismantling it. Kris added that detail to the map with a certain amount of pleasure.

Joe Marley pushed back his nonexistent hat, scratched his scalp as he viewed his first mechanicals. Oskar, examining the first large harvester (Kris thought last out, last in) rattled off a long sentence to Astrid.

"He want to see it work," she said, eyeing the large mechano dubiously.

"Maybe next year," Kris said airily, "if we decide to put 'em all back in operation. If there're any with full parts by then."

Zainal had already unfastened the solar panels on the top of the garage. Then he went after the flying-dart dispenser. Leon had asked particularly for them to collect any they found, for the anesthetic.

"Oskar asks how machine go with no wheels," Astrid said, peering under the skirt of the biggest farm machine to check on that lack.

"On an air cushion," and Kris mimicked the sound and the method.

Oskar nodded approvingly, still walking about the mechanical-beast. He also examined the flying device, carefully, since Kris warned him about the darts peeking out from the leading edge. Oskar seemed to approve most of the harvester design. Then made a roller-coaster motion with one hand and said something to Astrid.

"His farm is on hill. This thing," and she kicked at its flange, "fall over," and Astrid demonstrated something losing its balance and tumbling downhill.

Joe had moved to the storage areas, hunting for something.

"They left no tools behind them. These things self-repair?"

"We saw some working on others," Zainal said and stepped up to the face of the harvester to start removing its solar panels.

"Oh, my word, this planet's odd," Sarah said.

"You can say that several times," Kris agreed. "They'll want panels and storage batteries back at the camp, or wherever. There's quite a herd of them here." She peered into the shadows of the garage to the dimly seen forms parked there.

"Could we bed down here tonight?" Sarah asked with such a lack of expression that Kris almost grinned.

"I think so," she said. "I wouldn't mind being out of that wind for a night, myself."

"There're rocksquats back away . . ." Sarah said, picking up her weapons.

"Kris, go with her," Zainal said when the woman started off on her own.

"I can handle myself," Sarah said indignantly.

"You go *with*," Zainal said. "This planet has dangers. Kris knows dangers."

"Yeah, but I don't hear as well as Coo," Kris said, carefully setting down the comunit and the map case.

"Is he always like that?" Sarah asked Kris when they were out of earshot.

"Like what?"

"Don't bristle," Sarah said with a grin. "He's not half-bad for a Catteni. Not that I've met that many. But I heard . . ." and she let her tone rise up, a subtle prompting for Kris to expatiate.

"As Catteni go, he's pretty good," Kris said noncommittally. "And he's saved a lot of folks. . . ."

"Oh, my word! You don't need to defend him to me. I came to on the outside of that bloody field and the guy next to me was being chewed up. I would have been next but for you stomping about like a brumby. Anyway, it's only good sense to go out *with* someone. Believe me, you do where I come from!"

They came back with rocksquats and some of the tender-fleshed little avians, brushwood, and a pile of droppings from the next field over. They had spotted only distant fliers but Kris pointed them out and told Sarah how to avoid becoming a meal.

"Are they after one now?" Sarah asked, squinting at the aerial menaces.

"Who knows?" Kris didn't particularly want to find out. "Now, if

you were back on Earth, you'd probably jump into your four-by-four and go investigate."

"Probably, but we're not on Earth now, are we?" and there was a world of regret in her tone.

"Sorry," Kris said in a rueful voice. She hauled her gaze away from the distant avians and they walked on in silence for a while.

They reached high ground, where Sarah stopped and looked out over the vista of neatly squared, hedged fields and sighed. "Oh, my word! My da would go spare. And no one is in residence?"

"Haven't found any *one* yet. And that's why we're dismantling the garages, to sort of give notice."

Sarah's eyes bulged. "You mean you *want* to find out who made those . . . machines?"

"Did anyone tell you about the ship that collected the harvest?" Kris grinned down at the slighter woman, the braces of rocksquats swinging from the stick she carried over her shoulder.

"I heard something—a ship as big as a city?"

"Small city," Kris said with a laugh.

"You *want* to go on it?" Sarah's eyes went wide again but from respect.

"Not me, personally," Kris replied, though if Zainal were involved in the adventure, she'd probably be right there with him. And he probably *would* be in the boarding party. "It'd be interesting to see what species set up this planet, made it self-sufficient, self-repairing, yielding so much *food* . . ."

"*Food?*" Sarah gulped and a brief panic almost made her drop her stick.

"That's what this planet does—makes food—and we don't know for whom. Or what. Except that they're probably omnivores like us."

Sarah gulped again. "I hadn't thought about that aspect of it."

"Well, it's easier to concentrate on making out day-by-day at the moment," Kris agreed.

"Yeah, there's that all right," she said as they came around the bend of the smooth-domed rock that housed this garage.

The others had dismantled what could be taken back to the camp for recycling. Oskar had shown himself particularly adept with the disassembly and the others had started to defer to him. As he worked, he asked for English words for various items and cheerfully muttered them under his breath, committing them to memory. Joe was almost his equal but then, he said, from the time he was old enough to lift a screwdriver, he'd been taught how to do repairs on his father's sheep station.

"You're looking at a heap of future hand-helds and other useful

gadgets,” Joe said, gesturing to the neatly stacked things, including wires, connectors, linkages, and all kinds of curious gadgetry that had been inside the mechs. “A DIY’s treasure trove.”

“Would you know how to make something out of this?” Kris asked.

“Depends,” Joe said cheerfully, “on what’s needed.”

Zainal came up then, Kris’ comunit in his hand. “You are asked to call home.”

“E.T.?” Kris asked with a grin but only Sarah and Joe caught the reference. She shrugged and tapped out 369 and a strange voice answered.

“Worry here.”

“Worry?”

“Ah, I’d be speaking to Kris?”

“You are, and you’d be Worrell.”

“Since I landed here, it’s been worry, miss, so ’elp me. Report?”

She gave it to him and he expressed pleasure in the discovery of yet another garage and its reusables.

“Mitford’s all right, isn’t he?” she asked before she signed off.

“Never better,” Worry said and even over the line his voice sounded sardonic. “A truly amazing man.”

“No sign of any fly-bys?”

“You’d be recalled on the double if there were!”

“I can believe that!”

There was a laugh at the other end and then Worrell signed off with a reminder to register the approximate location of the new garage on the map. Zainal assisted her, as he was able to give her the relative distances from their previous camp and what he called a good guess as to the contours of the day’s travel. Although Kris knew her legs could testify that they’d traveled far that day, her legs only knew they’d traveled, not how far uphill and down.

THE NEXT NOON THEY REACHED THE TOP OF A HIGH RIDGE AND SAW the unmistakable shine of sun glinting off a large body of water. Large enough so that a farther shore was not discernible even from their vantage point. Then, to their right on the shoreline, the obvious square outlines of an unnatural formation bulked large.

“A place for boats? They fish, too?” Astrid asked, shielding her eyes with one hand.

“Could be. They’d hardly let the wealth of a sea just sit there without harvesting it,” Kris said.

"Too right," Sarah murmured, also peering ahead. "Would it be a salt sea?"

"We'll find out," Joe said.

"Zainal?" Kris asked, since the Catteni had said nothing but was staring hard at the building.

"We go careful. Fishing year long."

"True, but how could a machine fish? I mean, the sea doesn't follow any program, does it? Storms and stuff . . . unless they can control tides as well as the rain. Not that I wouldn't put it past them," Kris said, mildly bitter.

"They do not control us," Zainal surprised her by saying. "Tell the others."

"About the flying darts and stuff?" She did and then turned back to Zainal. "However, if there are machines, surely they'd be specialized for use in the water. That building seems to be right on the edge. I don't think we have much to worry about them charging inland at us."

"Famous last words?" Joe said, nudging her with an elbow and grinning.

"I hope not. One trip to an abattoir is quite enough."

"Canning factory is what this'd be," Joe said, still teasing.

"Hmmm." Then Kris giggled. "Imagine him in a sardine can," and she tilted her head irreverently at their patrol leader, still looking intently at the building.

"We go slow. We do not approach until second moonrise. . . ."

"If you say so, boss," Kris said flippantly.

THERE WERE TIDES ON THIS WORLD, JUDGING BY THE HIGH-WATER marks and the flotsam deposited along the beach.

"With so many moons, tides would be complex," Joe remarked.

"Swim?" Astrid wistfully asked Kris, though she peered at Zainal for permission.

They approached the beach a kilometer or so from the building. Hiking through the white sands had been hot work, for the shifting surface made the going difficult even where it was somewhat held in place by tufts of a sturdy grassoid and, in one place, a plantation of reeds. Joe took samples of each plant in case one or more of these supplied trace elements that would help the Deskis. The sea might be several days' journey from the main camp, but not inaccessible. Another stumpy-branched growth which reminded Kris of wind-stunted cedars bore a hard fruit of some sort. Joe stuffed the harvest from two bushes in his pack.

Zainal swung his glance right to the building, which now seemed to be hovering above the sandy ground, an optical illusion, Kris was sure. Then, for a long moment, he watched the sea itself and finally shrugged.

It'd be ironic, Kris thought, to have survived all the dangers the land was providing to get drowned by some sea creature, but she couldn't see any disturbance on the lightly rippled sea: certainly nothing that would indicate underwater denizens. Then Zainal strode down to the edge of the water, and scooped up a handful from the next incoming ripple. He smelled it, then stuck his tongue into the liquid. "Salt. You swim first," and his finger pointed from Sarah to Astrid to Kris. "We watch."

"Us?" Sarah piped up impishly but she was already walking down to the water's edge, opening her coverall.

Kris had lost a great deal of her conditioned notions of modesty over the last few weeks so she followed Sarah, Astrid trotting ahead of both of them, shedding her coverall with haste and nearly tripping as she removed the right pant leg. She threw the coverall away from her, where the sand was still dry, and then ran the rest of the way into the water.

"Don't go too far out," Joe called, and then he and Oskar hunkered down on the sand. Zainal remained standing, scanning the sea constantly.

The sea wasn't as salty as Kris remembered the Atlantic on her eastern seaside vacations, though there was sufficient to make it quite buoyant as she settled into a crawl. Sarah was whooping and splashing.

"Hey, I like this. A sea I can swim in without worrying about sharks."

"Don't go so far out," Kris called, all too aware that Botany was quite likely to put up a few seaborne surprises. She was a bit surprised that Zainal had let them swim at all. "Let's keep close enough to shore to get there before anything out there," and she waved at the innocuous spread of water, "can get us."

"Good thinking, mate," Sarah said and paddled back toward her.

Astrid swam with studied economy of stroke, Kris noticed, while Sarah thrashed about with little expertise. They didn't stay in long, out of deference to the men who were keeping watch and who probably wanted the refreshment of a swim as much as they did. But Kris felt better for the bath and waved to the men that they were coming out now. Zainal was still watching, but not the three nude women emerging from the ocean. Joe and Oskar had politely turned their heads as the girls came out.

"Okay, guys," Kris called when they were dressed again. "Your turn." She went up to Zainal. "I'll keep watch."

He shook his head. Then, with a wide sweep of his arm, gestured Joe and Oskar to go in without him.

"Don't you swim?" Kris asked, amused.

"Too quiet," he said cryptically and continued his scanning, not just the horizon but the beach on both sides of them.

"On Earth—Terra—fishermen usually go out at dawn, or on the tide," she said conversationally. "So the machines, if there are some, *would* be quiet this time of day, I think."

"I have never been to sea before," Zainal replied in the same tone.

"You look a bit like a lighthouse, though," and Kris giggled, "standing like that."

"Light house?" He frowned but didn't pause in his vigilant and careful scrutiny.

"Hey, I think this planet has clams," Sarah cried. She went down to her knees and starting digging with her hatchet. The next little wave ripple flooded over her legs.

"Didn't know you had clams in Australia," Kris said as she strode down to Sarah.

"Biggest clam beds ever outside of Sydney. And oysters."

Kris' one seaside vacation had included hunting for quahogs on a Cape Cod beach, so she recognized the little holes left where mollusks had opened an air passage. She began to dig, too.

"What you do?" Astrid asked, joining them.

"Dig and . . . oh . . ." Sarah closed her fingers around something and hauled it out of the wet sand. "What on earth?" She rinsed the rest of the sandy mud off the shelled creature and showed it to the others. It was oblong with a shell obviously "built" around it, rough like an oyster, not smooth like a clam.

"Well, it's like both clam and oyster," Kris said. "And with no claws it's not a crab. Oysters are good for you, and so for that matter are clams. Might even have the trace elements the Deskis need. Sea stuff is full of minerals and junk."

"Yeah, I know," Sarah said, rolling her eyes. "I drank enough cod liver oil as a kid. Hey, Joe, c'mere a minute, will ya?"

Joe, totally unselfconscious about his nudity, joined them and took the "clam" from Sarah.

"We will have to go the empiric route, I suppose," he said without real enthusiasm. "At least it won't eat us first."

He took Sarah's hatchet, held out his hand for Kris' and, using one as a counter, hit the shell with the other.

"Oops, hit it too hard," he said, looking down at the mashed stuff that oozed off the side of the blade. "Get me another one."

After the capture and dissection of three more mollusks, Joe decided the "flesh" might indeed be edible. He dressed and they all went to find something burnable. No one quite had the courage to try the mollusk raw, though they all thought it smelled as seafood should. Joe was game enough to be the guinea pig when the first one turned brown and a prod with the knife point went easily into the meat.

"A bit chewy but rather tasty, chums. Rather tasty."

Sampling another morsel, Oskar agreed and immediately went out to gather more shells. Zainal only smiled and, although he put a piece in his mouth, did not swallow it, shaking his head.

"You don't have things like this on Catten?" Kris asked him, teasing.

He shook his head. "Eat land animals only."

"Fish has better protein content and less fat," Kris said, enjoying his reaction.

Zainal went back to watching.

Making a camp in the dunes, out of sight of the building and shielded from the light breeze that had sprung up, they ate a meal that began with clams broiled on the half shell and then cold rocksquat. Joe suggested that they wait and see if any of them had a reaction to the mollusks before they went on a binge of them. Oddly enough, they all wanted to eat more.

"Probably they contain some trace elements our present diet is not supplying," Joe suggested. "Sometimes our bodies know better than our heads what is required. But let's give it the overnight test. If no one's had diarrhea, vomiting, nausea, or dies on us, the clams should be fairly safe to eat."

"Fresh," Kris added.

"By the seaside, by the beautiful sea," Joe warbled.

Then the talk shifted to the point of whether or not scavengers lived in the sand dunes.

"Maybe something even worse," Sarah suggested, shuddering.

"I'd kinda looked forward to making a sandy bed," Kris said wistfully. "At least you can get it to conform to your bumps and lumps, which rock won't."

Joe whistled. "Yeah, great contours!" and he made a show of leering at her. Sarah pinched his thigh, calling him to order.

"I do miss mattresses," Kris said, sighing. "I honestly don't miss much else. Most of the time, that is. But I'd really, truly, deeply give my eyeteeth for even a pneumatic camping mattress," she said, hugging

her knees to her. She caught Zainal's amused glance where he sat opposite her, his eyes twinkling in the firelight.

"Eyeteeth?" he asked.

She bared her lips and showed him.

"What good are your eyeteeth to anyone else?"

"They aren't. It's just a saying."

The remainder of the evening was spent in language lessons. Oskar was picking up more and more English and Astrid's was becoming more fluent. She was also picking up some of Kris' pet phrases though such flattery made Kris just a little uncomfortable.

When fatigue made longer and longer pauses between conversations, Zainal announced the watch roster. He suggested that the sentinel stomp, and that was the word he used with a grin at Kris, around the perimeter from time to time, just in case the sand did harbor a species of underground scavengers. The others were to bed down in the sand around the fire, which the sentry would keep going.

"In between stompings?" asked Sarah irrepressibly.

"As you say," Zainal agreed, nodding.

The long night passed with no alarms and Kris, comfortably positioned on the sand, slept deeply and well. As usual everyone roused well before the Botany dawn. Since no one had suffered any alimentary reaction to the clams, a beach party was organized. In the dim predawn light, they dug clams and when they decided they had enough for a good feed, they took a quick dip in the sea to wash off the clinging shore mud.

Rather a festive breakfast ensued. Then Zainal suggested they use the last of the night to approach the building and scout it out. No one had yet figured out how long a day's charge of solar power lasted in the collectors since the mechs were usually inactive during darkness.

The building was bigger than they'd originally thought and seemed to expand as they approached it. Zainal, whose night vision was superior to the rest of the patrol's, discerned some curious superstructures on the front of the building and a railed runway leading down into the water.

"A launch site?" Joe suggested.

"On Terra, fishing is done in the old ways," Astrid said. Joe and Sarah agreed.

"Do they have an automated boat, then?" Kris asked.

"Maybe they whistle the fish into their nets," Joe murmured.

"Haven't heard a mechanical make any noise apart from 'clank-whir,'" Kris said facetiously.

Machinery did not need windows, either, and the building had none. It looked as if the entire front of the building opened to permit the exit

of whatever machinery was stored inside. The largest solar panels they had yet seen occupied the roof, held up by a heavy stem, which implied the panels altered direction to accumulate as much of the sun's rays as possible. That was a new wrinkle in the mechanicals' technology.

Zainal could find no exterior slit or lock or anything that would give them access within. He even had Joe up on his shoulders, searching the seaward walls as high as he could reach.

So they waited at a discreet distance to see if the building would open itself up once daylight had arrived. They waited until the sun was at its zenith, and occupied themselves by trying to fish, using the thinnest possible strips of blanket attached to a pole, and a piece of thin wire bent into a hook with a portion of clam attached as bait. When they caught nothing from the shore, they waded out as far as they could without losing their balance and finally caught some flatfishes. These they grilled for lunch, taking cautious bites.

"What I'd give for a testing kit!" Joe sighed wistfully. "You miss mattresses, Kris, I'd give my eyeteeth for just a magnifying glass." He paused. "And a few odd chemicals to test for toxicity. I'll not even dream of having a microscope. . . ."

"Don't!" Sarah said.

"Look, why put such tools past our panel of talented DIYs," Kris said, "considering what they've managed to produce so far," and she tapped the comunit.

At high noon, when no activity emanated from the building, Zainal said they would take measurements of this, the biggest facility they'd yet seen.

"Maybe it only goes after certain types of fish that aren't running right now," Joe suggested.

"Or maybe there's a satellite up there," and Sarah pointed skyward, "that tells it when to go fishing."

Zainal shook his head. "No satellite or Catteni do not explore."

"Are you *aware* then," Kris asked, startled by the concept, "that there *are* other sentient space-traveling species?"

Zainal gave her a slightly patronizing look. "Space is very big. Many planets can be settled," and he added with one of his engagingly broad grins, "not always this way." Then he added, "It is a mark of honor, not unhonor. . . ."

"Dishonor," Kris interposed.

"To be transported."

"I could have done without the honor," Sarah said drolly, then added quickly, giving Zainal's arm the briefest touch: "But then I wouldn't have met you, or learned that we Terrans are pretty damned good!"

"You are!" Zainal gave his head one of his quick affirmative nods. "Honor to me to be here."

"Well," Joe remarked, obviously gratified.

"Now we go search more," he said, and raising his arm over his head, gave the move-out signal.

Kris was gratified, too, by that little exchange. She was even pleased that Sarah had touched Zainal: up until that gesture of conciliation, no one had made any physical contact with Zainal—except herself. And Leon, medically, but not socially. *Touch him, he's real live flesh and bleeds red blood*, she thought sourly as they moved out, matching his easy jog pace: a disciplined squad, fit and able to cope with anything Botany had so far meted out.

Joe paused a couple of times to collect samples of berries or hard-shelled tree and shrub fruits. The soft ones he sampled or had someone else sample; judiciously, of course. Some of the soft berries were so bitter the merest morsel caused the mouth to pucker. A good rinse with water helped dissipate the effect. One, a dark green, was sweet enough to encourage the taster to try more. The green fruit was gathered but not eaten until the samplings proved there would be no ill effects.

They spent the rest of the day on the shoreline, noticing the flotsam pushed up by high tides, mainly seaweeds. These Joe thought might have nutritional value so he gathered specimens. They also noted the abundance of mollusks along the coast by the frequency of the blow-holes. Toward evening they dug out a quantity and, along with a plump rocksquat, tuber roots, and greens that grew in abundance, made an appetizing stew, to which the seawater was added to provide the salt they were all beginning to crave.

They found another sandy camping spot on a height above the shore, which stretched out in both directions as far as anyone could see. Just visible in the dim light were the lavender blobs of a spattering of islands which made them wonder, around the evening campfire, if this was an inland sea and there might be a distant shore. They considered continuing along the coast as far as they could go.

"We come again. Mitford will evaluate the situation first," Zainal said.

"Hey, now, listen to him," Sarah said, grinning. "'Evaluate,' huh? That's a fifty-dollar word, mate."

"I listen, I learn," Zainal said, grinning back at her.

MITFORD HIMSELF GOT IN TOUCH WITH THE PATROL THE NEXT MORNING to call them in.

“Getting too close to the time the Catteni might come back,” he said. “Swing wide but start back now.”

Zainal had them strike obliquely back to camp and they came across two more agricultural garages and an abattoir, empty and waiting. They disabled everything, stacking the various useful parts for later pickup. Scratching his head, Joe regarded the piles.

“I wonder has anyone reinvented the wheel yet,” he said. “Sure save packing that stuff out on our backs.”

“If you have air cushions which hop over obstacles, a wheel is backward step,” Kris said. “Hence no need for roads . . . a waste of good arable land, if you ask me.”

“Too right, mate.”

Oskar nodded approval. He was having to rely less and less on Astrid for translation.

“Just so long as I’m not around to carry the can when the bosses discover what we’ve done to all their facilities,” Joe said, washing his hands and flicking his responsibility away.

“What if it’s only more machines?” Kris asked, for she had considered that possibility. “At least machines don’t get angry.”

“Machines also don’t eat meat or make bread,” Sarah said staunchly. “The bosses have to be humanoid or why all of this?”

“Yeah, but I’ll bet they use machines for all their dirty, boring chores,” Joe replied thoughtfully. “I mean, the technology level that went into the design and manufacture of these mechs is phenomenal. We don’t have anything its equal. Not even you Yanks with those great combine harvesters you have in your midwest.”

“But machines have to be designed by . . . something else. They might be able to repair themselves—but design?” She shook her head. “There are intelligent sentient beings somewhere at the end of the line of machines.”

Sarah and Joe snorted in chorus. Joe, with a grin, added: “So long as they’re friendly.”

“They are earth-friendly,” Astrid said, speaking brightly.

“Are they human-friendly? That’s the big question,” Joe said.

“I like this planet,” Oskar said. “Now we run it, not machines. Not bureaus or men who do not understand the land.”

“Anything different in this lot?” Zainal asked Oskar as he added a coil of wire and a handful of connectors to the pile in front of the young Norwegian.

He shook his head but looked at Joe for confirmation. Joe shook his head.

"Nope, Zainal. Nothing that can't wait, as far as I can see. And I've got the anesthesia darts wrapped up in my pack."

"Good!"

They settled down for the night in one of the barns.

"So Kris can cushion her bones on straw," Zainal said with a grin.

"Too right," she said, having picked up that Australian phrase from Sarah.

First the girls retired to second barn for the privacy of their evening baths in watering troughs. When they returned, straw was piled in outrageously high beds.

"Deep enough for you, Kris?" Zainal asked, sweeping a sort of bow toward her accommodation.

She made a big show of spreading her blanket and then hesitated, not sure how she would get *on* to it. Zainal picked her up and, with a deftly controlled throw, deposited her, squealing in surprise, in the exact center of her "mattress."

"Ohhhh," and she drawled the exclamation as she wiggled her shoulders and hips deep into the soft mass. "Heavenly."

"And I do not ask for your eyeteeth," Zainal said, stepping back to take a brief run to launch himself onto his bedpile.

"I wonder," Kris said as she settled down to sleep, "what the mechos will say when they find six piles of battered fodder in these barns."

"Probably check the programming of their mechs," Sarah said sleepily. She was the last to speak that night.

THEY MADE IT BACK TO CAMP ROCK LATE THE NEXT AFTERNOON. KRIS and Zainal made their report to Worrell, who said Mitford was out inspecting the latest gadget to be put together from "all those spare parts you blokes keep finding." Worrell was a balding chunky man, more barrel than leg, with a flushed complexion and many small red veins on his cheeks and chin. He had a habit of hitching his coverall, and the leather belt of worked rocksquat hide that circled it, as if he were afraid it would slip around his hips. Kris wondered if he had once had a beer belly, though he was thin enough now: an effect of being long aboard a Catteni transport ship.

"Anyone with any claim to mechanical skills has been drafted," he said, grinning, and then, losing his grin, pointed to the empty stocks. "That Aarens fellow's organized quite a production line at Slaughterhouse Five." Worry blinked at their exclamations. "Publicly we're calling it Camp Narrow for the narrow escape I hear some of your blokes

had from a processing plant. So,” and Worry gave another hitch to his pants before he motioned her, and just as politely, Zainal, to take a stone seat.

These had been improved by a reed-woven cushion, probably filled with fluff seed: much more comfortable than plain stone. *My, but I've become soft*, Kris thought, *wanting mattresses and cushions to put my sit-upon upon.*

Although Worrell looked first at Kris, it was Zainal who gave the report in an English that was almost as unaccented as Kris'. He even managed the tinge of a drawl she was in the habit of using. She drew out her map and showed Worrell the distance they'd covered—which drew an appreciative whistle from him—and the new garage locations.

He was particularly interested in the shoreline building.

“Think Mitford'll want that inspected and entered.”

“Anything else exciting happen around here?” Kris asked, noting that the main camp did not seem as crowded as it had been when they left.

“Well, we've set up two more camps besides Camp Rock,” and he grinned broadly at Kris, who chuckled. “Camp Shutdown's one of the garages you lot found on your last walkabout, and Camp BellaVista's the other side, which Cumber's patrol found,” and he waved his hand to the east. “The miners've got living quarters in their adit, Ironclad.”

“How many patrols have gone out?” Kris asked.

“At the moment, four others.” Worry pulled a sheet from under a pretty agate used as a paperweight, checked that it was the one he wanted before he showed Kris the small-scale map with its lines indicating patrol directions. “We'll know this place as well as the mechs do.”

“Is something burning?” Kris asked, aware of an acrid metallic stink in the breeze that was blowing across them in the “office.”

“Ah, yes, we got us a forge here, too. There's another one at Ironclad. Found us a real top grade of iron ore, plus copper, zinc, tin, gold, and bauxite.” He winked at Kris with a grin on his face. “You'll note how far down the list gold is. Any road, mines are over thataway,” and he waved a hand northward and then northeasterly. “Got us two farriers, a wrought-iron fabricator, and nine welders. We've screwdrivers, now, and screws, all kinds of other tools, nails and hooks; soon maybe even needles and pins and I dunno what all else. Skillets, kettles, and pots are being turned out of the sandpit daily. Pretty good stuff considering we're back to reinventing essential equipment.”

Kris grinned back at him, amused. “The mechs didn't mine any metals on the planet?”

“Nary a nugget, as far as we can see, and some of the ore was just lying around like they couldn’t be bothered shoveling it up.”

“So they bring in all their equipment,” Zainal said thoughtfully, fingering his lower lip.

“Looks like. Leastwise we haven’t found any garage or building or mine adit or anything suggesting the alloys they use in the mechos were indigenous. And oh my word, some of our engineers would give their eyeteeth” (Zainal shot Kris a quick amused look) “to know the composition of the alloys used for the chassis of those mechos.” Worry whistled again.

Kris was wondering if this was an Antipodean habit—whistling for emphasis. Joe Marley was prone to whistle, too. Well, it made a nice change from swearing.

“And the computer guys are right beside ’em, wanting to know where the crystals used in the motherboards came from.”

“So no one reinvents the wheel here?” Zainal asked, astounding Worrell again.

“I thought you didn’t speak much English, Zainal,” he said, giving Kris a suspicious glance.

“I learn languages easily,” Zainal said. “I learn”—and he paused briefly, touching his fingers in his counting—“fifteen with English.”

“Some people got a real talent for it, that’s the truth. I still have trouble with the Queen’s English.” Then Worry gave a big grin. “You mentioned the wheel, well, I want to tell you, we have gone beyond the need for something as primitive as a mere wheel.”

“We did?” Kris asked.

“One of the engineer blokes got one of the air-cushion mechos working. Only *now* they gotta reprogram it to work when *they* want it to.”

“Boy oh boy oh boy.” Zainal startled Worrell into an open-mouthed stare. “Then we don’t have to carry all those parts back here.”

“You bet!” Worry’s smile was prideful as he shuffled to find another sheet of paper. “Ah, here we are. Your patrol’s bunked in Mitchelstown. You got tomorrow off and I think they’ll want you hanging about here a bit.”

“Mitchelstown?” Kris asked.

“Yeah, we started naming the caves. Makes it more homey. So the main cook cavern’s now Cheddar. We even got name plates so you’ll know when you get to the right one. Mitchelstown’s quite roomy. Second turn on the left past Cheddar. Near the johns, too.”

“Where is the Deski, Coo?” Zainal asked and Kris was annoyed with herself that she hadn’t thought to ask after their comrade.

Worry looked his nickname. “Not good. Leon says he’s holding his own but the thorn greens are not enough. Something, but not enough. Sure hope that message gets read soon.”

“We found a lot of stuff on our patrol: maybe edibles that might be good for the Deskis,” Kris said. “Clams, berries, nuts.”

“Clams? No oysters?”

Kris shook her head.

“I *liked* oysters,” Worry said emphatically. Then he slapped both hands on his knees, rose, and shook hands first with Kris and then Zainal before turning to Joe and calling him over. “So, Marley, pull up a stone and show me what you brought in.” His gesture included not only Joe but Sarah and the two Norwegians.

CHEDDAR HAD IMPROVED ALMOST BEYOND RECOGNITION—NOT THE least of which were the solar panels, like chevrons, above the entrance. There were tables and stools, and brick hearths replacing circles of stones, and ovens ranged on one wall. Bread racks showed the day’s produce, which was not limited to large, economy loaves, but featured small ones as well. The supply area now had a front counter and shelving behind on the wall to display goods, which proved ingenuity was rampant. A neatly curved doorway gave into a storage area beyond the main cavern but the door was closed. Store shut!

Someone had also been successful in blowing glass, Kris realized, noticing that the corridor lighting had glass shades: sort of lumpy and blurred but glass nonetheless. Mitchelstown not only boasted a carved name plate, the letters outlined in black against the lighter stone, but also some rough bedsteads and mattresses, covered by the ubiquitous thermal blankets and probably filled by the fluff. At least it wasn’t raw dirt or stone. Little alcoves had been cut into the wall for shelf space and there were thick wooden pegs hammered into the wall for hanging things. As if they had something to hang. But Kris did now—the map case which Worry had told her to hang on to for their next patrol and the comunit, which she carefully put on the pegs.

“Well,” Kris said, settling tentatively down on the nearest bed, “all the comforts of home. What?”

“You did not give eyeteeth, Kris,” Zainal said, his eyes twinkling at her.

“Didn’t have to,” she said, lying down fully but starting upright so quickly that Zainal looked around anxiously to see what had startled her. “Muddy boots,” she said and unfastened hers, kicking them off. “Definitely the comforts of home.” She lay back again.

"What was your home on Terra like, Kris?" Zainal asked, removing the accoutrements from his belt and neatly bestowing them on the shelf above the bed next to hers.

"It wasn't a cave, that's for sure," she said, unexpectedly irked to be asked such a question. Suddenly she had a glimpse of why others could dislike Zainal simply because he was Catteni: his presence reminded *them* of what they had been taken from. She pushed down that irritation and, as civilly as she could manage, described the split-level ranch-style house she, her parents, and her brother and two sisters had lived in: her neighborhood, her friends. She rattled on, unable to stop talking about her black-and-white cat, about the dormitory she'd lived in at college, until Joe and Sarah appeared in the opening, Astrid and Oskar just behind them.

"Is this our home from home?" Joe asked in a bright voice.

"Yes, it is," Kris said and was suddenly impelled to *leave*. Rising from the bed, she stamped back into the boots she had removed, left the room, and half-ran across the cook cavern and out, taking the steps as fast as she could without any caution, and across the ravine and campfire site, beyond the stocks and up onto the heights, down behind them and off up the next rise, where she was away from anyone.

There she sat herself down and, burying her hands in her face, cried. She didn't know why she'd react in such a childish way unless it was just that "loss" had finally caught up to her. Up until the moment Zainal had asked her, she hadn't *allowed* herself to *think* about home, her family, and all the things that were dear and familiar. She had forced herself to concentrate on first surviving, and then on the challenge of patrolling with Zainal, of proving herself useful on this crazy world. She'd kept up, she'd done all that was asked of her, but that didn't make up—at this moment—for the future she had once planned for herself.

She sensed, rather than heard or felt, someone near by. Whirling around on her bottom, she saw Zainal.

"It was all your fault . . ." The moment the words were out of her mouth, she cried out, "*No!* I didn't mean that, Zainal. I didn't mean it! Don't go."

He stood where he was, rock solid and unsmiling, but apparently concerned enough to make sure she did herself no harm.

"Sarah says to cry is good."

"How did she know I'd cry?"

A twitch of one huge shoulder. "She is woman, Terran like you. She was right, wasn't she? You cry."

"Don't blab it all over the mountain, damn it," she said, blotting her cheeks so she had a reason for keeping her head down. She didn't

want Zainal to see her crying: she really didn't. "Do Catteni women cry?"

"Yes," he said so stoutly that she knew he was lying.

"You're lying in your teeth." The knowledge that he would prevaricate made her feel better.

"My eyeteeth?" And the rumble of his voice under her ear was tinged with laughter.

"You're laughing at me . . ." she said in an ominous tone.

"I am laughing at the thought of teeth with eyes as if teeth can see."

"Yes, that is a bizarre concept, isn't it?"

Zainal had eased himself closer to her and his proximity was comforting. He had a different body odor than human males, she realized. It wasn't an offensive stink, not oniony like most guys, but she couldn't identify what it did smell like, except that she liked it.

"I rarely get silly," she said briskly. She didn't want a sentry to come by and see her: this meeting could be misconstrued and she didn't want any more rumors about Zainal scooting about the camp. "What is your home like—or will that make you sad enough to cry?"

The notion of a Catteni in tears made her giggle.

"You are better now," Zainal said and, putting a hand under her chin, tilted her face up.

Kris was nearly unbalanced by the unexpected tenderness in his warm yellow eyes. Why had she ever thought them an odd color?

Then he slid an arm around her shoulders. "Are you better now? Food is ready. Are you not hungry? Hungry brings tears, too."

She shot him a keen look. "I won't blame tears on hunger. I got homesick."

"Home sick?" He was puzzled.

"Yes, sick for the sight of familiar things and people you love."

"I don't think Catteni understand 'homesick,'" he said at his drollest. Now he eased her toward the cavern. "Why do they call this Camp Ayres Rock? Joe laughed."

Kris grinned again. "That's a big landmark in Australia." She glanced about her. "Much bigger than this, but I guess the outline might be similar. The Aussies must have padded the vote . . . if they even took one."

"That does not make them home sick?"

"That wouldn't," she said. "Do you never miss home?"

"Not my home world," he said so emphatically that she wondered if it was the planet itself or the people on it. "We go see Coo and Pess. Tell them about the new foods."

"Yes, we should," she said, now ashamed of her weakness when good friends were in desperate case.

Coo and Pess, and the other ill members of their species, were all together in one hospital cave. Weakness lay on them like a palpable cloak, turning their skin a pale, sickly green. They were lying on plump pallets, but to Kris it seemed as if it was an effort for them even to breathe. Pess looked nearly transparent: he was the oldest of the Deskis. It was their bones, wasn't it, that were weakening? Not their lungs.

All the Deskis seemed happy to have visitors and they all gabbled in their own language to each other when Zainal and Kris told them about the foodstuffs that they had found on their latest patrol.

"You think good, you do good," Coo said, looking from Kris to Zainal and nodding. "Coo walk with you soon."

"Learning more English, too," Kris said, shifting her feet and slightly uneasy in the face of such a wasting illness. She remembered how indefatigable Coo and Pess had been on their first patrols together. To see them in such poor condition really disheartened her. If she wasn't careful, she'd start weeping again.

"Do you have seas on your planet?" she asked Coo.

"See?"

"Large waters, salty."

Comments were exchanged and Coo, as spokesman, shook his head sadly. Then Kris tapped the water jug. "Big water, you can't see across it."

"Oh." Both Pess and Coo responded to that and vigorously nodded. "Big water good."

"Good for Deskis?" and again Kris was rewarded by a nod. "Maybe the clam things will help."

Then Leon put his head around the doorframe. "Don't overtire them, but I hear you found some possible nutrient sources on your latest trek."

All too relieved to have an excuse to leave the Deskis, Kris was happy enough to describe what Joe had found.

"I'll catch him later."

"How are they, Leon?" Kris asked in a low voice.

"Holding their own and the female's pregnant."

Kris glanced over her shoulder. "Which is she?"

"The one next to Pess. Her mate. We're hoping he can last until she gives birth but it's doubtful. His age is against him. He's not as resilient as the others. If they were humans, I'd say they had rickets and they'd need vitamin C. I've ordered a microscope," and he gave a brief grin, "from those engineering blokes, who say they can make anything we need from mecho scrap. Wish they'd hurry up."

At that point, Zainal joined them in the hall but he didn't need Leon's diagnosis to know how serious the Deskis' condition was.

THEY MADE A GOOD MEAL THAT EVENING, THE HIGHLIGHT BEING A fermented beer that was being brewed in Camp Rock. It had a kick to it, all right, but the taste was weird.

"We'll get it right. We'll get it right," said Worry, who had joined them at the table with his cup and the pottery pitcher that held his ration of beer. "Castlemaine XXXX or Foster's it ain't, but we'll have a respectable pint by the time winter comes. We'll need it then."

"We will?"

"Hmmm, meteorologist bloke says he thinks winters are bad here. Sees signs on the trees and stuff. We'll do a good business in rocksquat furs."

"Business?" Kris asked. She seemed to be asking a lot of questions.

"Sure, worker's worth his hire—in privileges. Mitford won't allow gold used as barter or we'd never keep people at their chores. They'd be out gold-digging. Working on some wine, too, out of those green berries. Right tasty. And a cordial for them who don't like the taste of beer."

"There are such people?" Kris said, her expression bland. "How do you like it?" she asked Zainal, who was cautiously sipping his beer. "Is there anything like this on Barevi or Catten?"

"Yes! Not as good as this," Zainal said, a comment which did his credit no harm.

The beer might taste odd, but it had the same effect as anything brewed on ol' Terra. Two cups and Kris was ready to sack out. Zainal remained behind with Joe and Oskar who was, perhaps unwisely, getting his cup refilled too often.

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, IT WAS CLEAR THAT HE HAD, AND ASTRID, with Joe and Zainal's assistance, took him down to the lake for a remedial swim. Having nothing better to do, Sarah and Kris tagged along. They had the lake to themselves at that hour, it was still full dark outside. So they were all together when Kris' comunit bleeped.

"Sentries report something big coming in," Worry said. "Get out here."

"But it's still dark. They won't *see* the glyphs," Kris said in a wail, once again feeling the muscle-aching labor of making those marks in the hillside.

"I stay with Oskar," Astrid said, taking his limp arm from Zainal's grasp.

The five of them ran back up the steps, glad of the light from the glass-covered lamps that made a fall less likely. They ran along the corridors and through Cheddar Cave, where the bakers greeted them cheerfully, then they erupted out, onto the ledge.

Listening intently, they could indeed hear the distant rumble of an airborne vehicle.

"Riding lights passing over," said a voice just beyond them on the ledge and Kris recognized it as Worry's. "I've notified Mitford. He's alerting the local sentries. Is that Zainal there?" Worry swung a lantern. "Could you possibly tell . . ."

"It slows for landing," Zainal said.

"I suppose there's no way of knowing where it *will* land?"

"No," and Zainal shook his head. "A guess would be where it landed before," and he pointed in that direction.

"Cor! We can't make that before it lands."

"We make it before they depart," Zainal said, and pivoting on his heel, passed Joe and Sarah as he made for the steps.

Kris followed, beckoning for the others to come, too. She made a quick detour into Cheddar. Grinning at the bakers, she held her hand over the loaves just out of the oven.

"We gotta run but can we take some bread?"

"Sure . . ."

And she tossed a loaf each to Joe and Sarah, who had paused to see what she was about. Then they went after Zainal. The rumble was getting louder, like a swarm of very angry, very large insects.

Once they were off the Rock, Zainal set a bruising pace. When they stopped for a breather, the ship was passing overhead.

"Transport," Zainal said, peering up at the dark mass, outlined in blinking running lights.

Kris begged the stitch in her side to stop but when Zainal took off again, she was right on his heels and the others behind her. Despite the darkness, they managed to get over the rough ground with few stumbles and no falls. Something in the sound of the alien airship seemed to rev them up to the effort. Pictures of the wounds scavengers made on unresisting bodies plagued her when the stitch in her side returned and she ignored it again. If only she could keep from stumbling. . . .

Zainal vaulted the first hedge, for once not considerate of those behind him. But he wasn't showing off his physical superiority so Kris suppressed the surge of resentment as she trailed farther and farther

behind him. She stood at the hedge that was too high for her to vault, Joe and Sarah coming to a halt beside her.

“Well, let’s borrow an army trick,” Joe said, observing the problem, and threw himself on the vegetation, making a way through the branches. Kris and Sarah carefully crawled over his body, then helped him through, and they were away after Zainal, who had reached the other side of the field.

“Damned Cat,” Kris muttered under her breath but put her best effort into shortening his lead.

By now, the ship was well ahead of them but she could make out by the running lights that its stern end was swinging round. Did it land on its tail? How did it disgorge its unconscious passengers? The mass of it disappeared below the hill down which they were pelting, faster than was wise in the light and the conditions underfoot. In the growing light of day, they could see Zainal plunging through a gap in the hedging and they altered their hellbent pace in that direction and through to the next field.

Was this the one on which they’d been spread out, all unwitting of the dangers that lurking underneath them? Kris wondered but all the big fields looked similar. The main concern was that, even if the ship landed several fields onward, they would be close enough to prevent loss of life and injury. The skies were brightening. But, dammitalltohell ’n’ gone, the Cats weren’t at the right angle to have seen the glyphs in the dark—even with the sparkling stones to outline the figures.

And—she nearly lost her balance at the thought—what if Zainal left with them? She whimpered, once, twice, but hadn’t breath for more as she pumped her tired legs harder to keep up with the man.

Underfoot she felt from one pace to another the big ship’s mass settle to the ground. *Its mighty engines roaring*, she thought irreverently. Oh, god, what if the Cats captured them again? She was halfway to halting while she briefly considered that aspect of rushing to rescue unknown folks. The thought of Coo wasting away, of those of his species who had already died, and the baby that should be born, spurred her on. *Aren’t you the altruist!* But such considerations lent the requisite energy to her legs.

Joe and Sarah nearly ran into her when she stopped at the next hedgerow, stunned by the mass of the landed vehicle. No wonder they’d had to use the larger Botany fields.

The ship had put down in the uppermost third of the space available. Suddenly lights came up, illuminating the field with beams so bright she had to shield her eyes.

"They don't . . . do things . . . by halves . . . do they?" Sarah said, panting, as she looked out through spread fingers at the scene, but she sounded cheerfully impressed.

Kris was quite willing to catch her breath until she saw Zainal, clearly outlined in the spotlights, running uphill, toward the ship. That alarmed her so much that she found herself holding her breath and getting funny bright lights on her peripheral vision. So she made herself breathe long and deep. Now a wide ramp was emerging from an expanding hold aperture.

"Damn him," she muttered and pushed her way through the hedge, ignoring scratches on face and hands and wrenching her coverall free from a snag.

Just then Catteni started to unload their cargo, three and four obviously unconscious bodies at a time, two limply draped on broad shoulders and two, equally flaccid, hauled out by the fabric of their coveralls. The fact that the Catteni then lined them neatly up in rows seemed oddly incongruous. Lots of Catteni and, despite her urgent need to be near Zainal, Kris felt her pace slowing.

"Oh, god, do I . . . know . . . what . . . I'm doing?"

"If . . . you do . . . let us . . . know," Joe said, coming up beside her: his stride faltered and his breath was labored. He bent over, hands on knees, to restore himself.

Two Catteni paused in the unloading as Zainal approached: both covering him with hand weapons. With the ship still wheezing steam and interior parts of it clanking, she couldn't hear what was said, even if she understood Catten, but Zainal was plainly acting authoritatively and both Catteni seemed to recoil. They hurried back into the ship but, now that the hold was wide open, Kris saw that one veered forward while the other merely resumed his labors.

The Catteni worked so swiftly that there were two full rows of unconscious bodies already spread out. Two cartons, presumably the usual knives, hatchets, and blankets, were in place at the side of the field.

Not quite brave enough for a closer confrontation with Catteni soldiers, Kris, Joe, and Sarah, struggling to get their breath back, halted of one accord, just beyond the first two cartons, half-hidden in the shadows beyond the bright spotlights. Zainal swiveled slightly to his left, nodded at them, and then turned back. The other Catteni ignored him as they continued to unload.

Suddenly, those going back in the ship snapped to an attentive halt and three Catteni strutted into view. Two stopped at the edge of the

ramp while the third continued on to Zainal. They were of a height but Kris loyally thought Zainal was just a shade taller, and broader, and prouder.

She heard bits and pieces of the staccato language the Catteni spoke: the newcomer began to gesture impatiently, she thought. Then, with less vigor, he turned his head from side to side. Body language was not all that different, Kris thought. He didn't like what he heard or he didn't know if he could comply. Zainal seemed to stand even taller then and crossed his arms on his chest as if he had delivered an ultimatum.

That the other man was indecisive was now obvious to Kris. Suddenly, he gave an abrupt nod and, doing a snappy pivot on one heel, marched back up the ramp, his two guards falling behind as an escort. Zainal just waited, arms crossed, allowing the stevedores to make their way to either side of him.

"Why didn't he go aboard?" Joe asked.

"He didn't seem to receive an invitation to do so," Kris remarked. "Then, too," and she recalled what Zainal had mentioned once, "he said that what was dropped is never picked up."

"Did he mean himself? I mean," and Sarah was surprised, "he acted like he outranked the captain or whoever that was. And whatever it was he asked for, I think he's going to get it. They didn't seem surprised to have another Catteni come out of the dark just like—" and Sarah snapped her fingers—"that either."

"Not that I've ever seen Catteni soldiers," and Kris paused to make it plain she didn't consider Zainal in that category, "display surprise or any other emotion."

"Just doin' my job, man," Joe murmured.

"They said Zainal was an Emassi," Sarah said, "so he wouldn't fraternize with the likes of those stevedores anyhow."

"He was a spacer, any road," Joe added, "not ground force."

"You've been hearing things about Zainal?"

"Don't get antsy, Kris," Sarah said, patting her shoulder placatorily and grinning in the darkness. "We *like* Zainal. He's good stuff."

"Us Aussies appreciate a chap like Zainal," Joe put in. "Hell's fire, we're all in this together. Operation Fresh Start, m'girl."

The unloading continued inexorably and the skies lightened.

"Should we, ah . . ." and Joe nodded his head toward the hedgerow.

"No way. I'm not hiding from the likes of them."

"Atta girl," Sarah said, chortling. "You tell 'im."

"'Sides, they can't do any more *to* me than they've already done, dropping me here," Kris said firmly. She wet her lips and tried to suck some moisture out of her cheeks to ease her dry throat. There'd be a

stream nearby somewhere . . . when the Catteni had lifted off again. She wasn't moving until they did. They *could* just decide to cart Zainal off with them.

The three watching were startled to hear low mutterings and swearing behind them. Swinging around, they saw dark figures pushing through the hedge and the next thing Kris knew, a somewhat breathless Mitford came to a jarring stop to her left. He'd brought quite a mob with him to judge by the numbers of white faces in the gloom, straggling onto the field. Though what men and women, armed with the primitive weapons they had, could do against the Catteni, she didn't know. A show of resistance might bring out the forcewhips, and the skin on her back crawled at the very thought of that deterrent.

"What's happened? What's Zainal doing?" Mitford asked in measured gasps.

"I think he's asked for stuff for the Deskis. That's what we need, isn't it?" Kris replied.

"He been inside yet?" someone asked from the anonymous crowd.

"No, and I don't think he got asked."

Someone snorted in disbelief.

"Look at the way they're unloading those poor slobs," another man said. Kris thought it was one of the Doyles from the rueful lilt in the voice. "Poor bastards."

"Well, they'll be made welcome," Mitford said emphatically. "Won't they?"

"Sure, sarge, sure."

Now Mitford snorted, having set matters straight on that score.

More cartons were placed and the Catteni, seeing the observers, grinned and exchanged comments with each other.

"Not flattering, I'm sure," and that was Lenny's amused voice. "The same to you, m'bho!" he said in a louder tone, although he was instantly hissed silent up by those around him.

The Catteni looked back and one made a long forward step as if to see the reaction. No one moved a step, but Kris saw bows come up with notched arrows and spears readied to throw. The Catteni seemed surprised, but a shout from the ship had them speeding up his return.

It seemed they had to wait forever. But the sun was up and the urgency that had prompted their arrival was now irrelevant. But, and that thought sent a surge of pure panic through Kris, the Catteni made several drops in a trip, didn't they? Had they landed beyond Camp Rock? No, Zainal had said that they were coming in at a landing angle. This was their first drop? *Couldn't Zainal have them drop the whole load here and save us from running all over the planet, picking up*

survivors? Kris thought irritably. She tried to moisten her throat again and then felt Mitford press something against her: his water bottle. Well, he hadn't run off at the drop of a hat as she had but kept his cool long enough to bring necessary supplies.

She swilled the first sip around in her mouth and then finally swallowed it, taking a larger drink before she passed the bottle to Sarah beside her.

And they waited: Zainal had not visibly moved a muscle since the captain, or whoever, had left him. He was like a statue, bathed in the very white white of the glaring spots, making the in-and-out traffic go around him. At length, Kris decided that was funny and began to chuckle to herself.

"I'd like a laugh myself," Mitford muttered.

"He's like a traffic island. He's making them go around him but he's not moving an inch. See," and she pointed out a pair who were forced to divert, "and wouldn't you think, being Catteni, they'd push him out of the way? If they could? If they dared?"

"Yeah, you're right," Mitford answered in a pensive tone. He raised his voice a little louder so the others would hear. "Yeah, our Zainal's showing them, that's for sure."

Kris thought how clever of the Sergeant to broadcast his observation. And if Zainal really did . . .

Two Catteni came out with a largish carton which they placed to one side of Zainal. Four more came with smaller packages. At that point Zainal raised his left arm, gesturing broadly for them to approach.

"All right, let's pick our parcels up," Mitford said and called out five names.

"I'm coming, too," Kris said, stepping forward beside Mitford, and found Joe and Sarah in step with her. When the Sergeant gave her a frowning look, she added, "We're *his* patrol."

Mitford grunted. Then, as a phalanx, they approached the ship, Mitford in front. Kris could feel herself trembling at being so close to a Catteni vessel, much less the creatures themselves. Two passed them, with their loads of human bodies. She'd already noticed that this drop was a very mixed bag indeed. She'd noticed Deskis, Rugarians, more Turs, and some odd-looking troglodytes she hadn't ever seen on Barevi.

As they neared the hold opening, she became aware of the stench emanating from the cargo: sweat, excrement, the stale odor of bodies long enclosed in an inadequate space, and the acrid tang of whatever was used to keep people in stasis for the length of the journey.

"What a pong!" Sarah said, fanning the air in front of her.

So they did not dally as they collected the crates. It took four men

to manage the big one, and the Catteni laughed to see their struggles with the mass and the weight, so it was as well that Zainal's patrol elected to come along. Even the smaller crates were heavy, and Kris felt her back muscles strain as she picked up hers.

"You coming?" she murmured to Zainal, who had resumed his crossarm pose.

"Soon. I have not all I want."

"You'll stay with us?" It was extremely important to Kris that he did. She was in a panic that somehow she'd lose him, now when she had suddenly realized how much he meant to her.

"I stay."

On the way back to the sidelines, she held herself to even slow steps, determined that she would not give the Catteni any chance to laugh at her.

"Janiemac, what did they put in this?" Lenny Doyle exclaimed as he helped ease the crate to the ground. "Careful now, it might be breakable."

"Naw, Lenny, but we sure are," Ninety said, groaning, and he made a big display of rubbing the small of his back.

"Is he coming?" Lenny asked Kris, gesturing to Zainal.

"Says he is. They haven't given him all he asked for."

"Let's hope they give him more than he should get," and, with a sudden spurt of fury, Kris recognized Dick Aarens' nasty voice.

"Why 'n' hell bring him along?" Kris demanded of the Doyles.

"Only way to be sure he does his share," Lenny said. Then he added, "He's getting far too cocky, showing off to everyone that he was the only one who could figure out how the mechos work and what parts'll work for us. You don't suppose the Catteni would take him back?"

"Fat chance of that . . . My God, look at the piles of folks," Kris said, for the original, fairly neat order of the rows had altered and bodies were being crammed close together.

"That's more than were in our drop," Mitford said, obviously doing a body count. "Many more. Maybe they're doing us a favor after all, putting the whole nine yards down in the one spot."

"Yeah, but sargè, where'll *we* put 'em when they're awake?"

"We'll make room. A lot of 'em are ours!" the Sergeant said in a determined growl.

"Yeah, but enough's enough. We've just got comfortable and now . . ."

"So we share. We remember, don't we, what it was like. So we dammitall *share!*" There was no further argument as the unloading con-

tinued. "I'd rather have them with us, where we can see 'em, than turning wild and causing our camps no end of trouble."

Fatigue from the tearing run to get here, as well as from hefting that heavy carton, began to take its toll of Kris' energy. Wearily, she sat herself down on the carton.

"I've a loaf of bread to share," she announced, suddenly remembering that she had, and reached into the map case. She broke off a piece and passed the loaf to Mitford.

"Good idea," Mitford said. "At ease, men . . . and women. Let's watch the big fat smelly Cats at work."

So everyone assumed lounging positions, on the grass, seated on the line of supply cartons or just hunkered down. Joe and Sarah shared their loaves and many in Mitford's group had thought to bring food, which they distributed.

"'Lift that bale, tote that barge,' " sang Lenny's tenor voice softly.

"I could sure stand getting a little drunk and landing in jail," another male voice said and sang the final word down to the bottom of his voice range.

Everyone laughed and the Cattenis heard.

"They're twitching."

"Let's not lay it on too thick."

"Ah, sarge!"

"Easy does it. You do remember forcewhips, don't you?"

"They're not carrying any."

"Only because everyone's unconscious."

"Are you counting, Tesco?" Mitford added.

"I would if you . . . eight hundred twenty, one, two, and three . . . don't interrupt me allatime."

"Let's not make them too mad, blokes," Joe Marley said. "They're taking it out on 'em."

Everyone shut up, now that Joe had pointed out the rough—rougher—way the Catteni were depositing the unconscious bodies. Almost slamming them into the ground.

"Zainal, can you tell them not to mash the cargo?" Mitford said, raising his voice to parade-ground level.

Zainal swiveled at the hips and, seeing one Catteni doing exactly what Mitford protested, snapped a savage bark. The erring Catteni made a big show of placing his burden down more carefully. The others, under Zainal's watchful gaze, behaved more circumspectly.

"Is Zainal going to stay there until they finish?" Lenny asked, leaning down to Kris, his expression anxious.

"I think so. At least he can curb their boyish bad habits."

"How does he get away with it?" Lenny asked.

"Because he knows how to give orders," Mitford said almost admiringly.

Idle conversation continued among the watchers' gang, but no more bursts of laughter to annoy the Catteni. Tesco had got up to a thousand when Mitford gestured for Dowdall to take over. Then more cartons were brought out which the Catteni stacked on the other side of the field, in a sort of farewell gesture of bad feelings. Still Zainal waited.

All the soldiers had disappeared within the ship and the silence was broken only by noises from the vessel itself, metallic complaints and emissions of liquid and steam. Suddenly the watchers could all hear the sound of boots on metal and a second delegation, five Catteni this time, appeared in the opening. Two stayed inside, three came down, and two stopped partway. The remaining Catteni, dressed in a more elaborate uniform and shorter by a full head than Zainal, came right up to him and presented first a sheaf of what Kris thought had to be printout, and then another folder. These were presented most punctiliously. Kris thought for a moment that the officer was going to click his heels together and bestow a Teutonic military bow on Zainal.

Zainal accepted the offerings, almost diffidently, said a few words in a low voice, and casually sauntered away from the ship. The blinding blue-white lights went out, the ramp was retracted, and they could hear warm-up engine sounds from the ship.

For a moment Kris feared that the exhaust from its engines would fry the nearest bodies. But, whining at a pitch that made everyone cover their ears defensively, the big transport lifted vertically in a slow ascent, then edged forward. When it was several fields beyond its landing site, the rear engines glowed from yellow to white to a blue actinic light that made Kris and the others cover their eyes.

The wind of its passage was enough to knock several off their feet: the bodies of the latest victims fortunately were low enough to be under the blast path.

Kris could no longer contain herself but rushed out to Zainal, who had begun to walk more briskly, undisturbed by the takeoff wind.

"Did you get what you wanted? What *did* you want that took so long?" she cried as she neared him.

"I got the explore report," and he held up the folder, "and medicals on Deskis." He held up the sheaf. "Treatment for Deskis . . ." and he pointed to the carton Kris had lugged over. "Medicals for humans and Rugarians," and he indicated the others. "And testers."

"How come they snapped to for you, Zainal?" Joe asked.

Zainal grinned. "I may be down but not out."

Kris giggled nervously at his casual use of the slang. *Go to the head of the class*, she thought.

"I am still Emassi and they *know* it," he added, snapping out the "know."

"So what's 'Emassi' when you're at home?" Joe demanded, cocking his head to one side.

"A . . . born rank." Zainal shrugged it off.

"Birth rank," Kris corrected automatically. She wanted Zainal to speak English properly.

"I understood him," Joe said in tacit reprimand.

Kris firmly closed her lips to a smart retort. Now was not the time to bicker.

"Look at it this way, folks, we've almost doubled our population—the easy way," Mitford announced when he jumped to the top of the crate.

"Back at the old stand, huh, sarge?" someone shouted.

"Yeah, and we'll follow the same routine. Only this time we're ahead of the game. We know the drill. Dowdall, get back to Camp Narrow and organize beds and food. Send me at least twenty more people. Bring some buckets and pitchers so we can water 'em. We'll start sending folks back as soon as they're able to walk. It's not that far and that's a blessing. You, you, you and you, start moving among 'em and pick out the injured—those Cats really banged some of 'em down hard—and any d.o.a.'s. Lenny, Ninety, break open these cartons. Su, Jay, start distribution. Then, Jay, you lead the first group of fifty back to Camp Narrow." Mitford jumped down again and stood by Zainal. "It looks to me like they emptied their entire load on this one field. That right, Zainal?"

Zainal nodded.

"Is that report readable?" Mitford peered at the glyphs, which resembled those that Kris had helped carve in the hillside.

"Yes. I also told them that this planet is occupied by others of high-tech skill."

"Did they believe you?"

"No." Zainal's grin was bleakly amused. "But they will tell to those who need to know."

Mitford gave him a sharp stare. "Why didn't they believe you? Did they think you were lying or something, to get off planet?"

Zainal shook his head. "I told them, first, that I am dropped and I stay." He did not look in Kris' direction but she knew, definitely, that he was saying that for her benefit and her heart did a little painful jump.

Stupid! But she was so glad that he hadn't gone. "They believe report says this planet . . . empty."

"Lord," Joe Marley said in a groan, "how'd they miss the garages?"

"Garages do not show warm-blood life forms," Zainal said and grinned.

A nearby groan from one of the bodies interrupted the conversation and they sprang into action. Actually, Kris thought as she took Mitford's own canteen to the nearby stream to fill it, Zainal, she, and the others needn't have run so fast or risked broken bones to get here. It had taken the Catteni several hours, at least, to unload. They could've walked, or waited for breakfast, but she was damned glad they hadn't. She'd have missed Zainal standing there like a Gibraltar Rock. Would he have continued to stand there all day, if they hadn't been willing to accede to his requests? Or demands? Being an Emassi certainly granted him privileges, even if he had been dropped.

Chapter Twelve

THEY WERE SO WELL ORGANIZED, AND MITFORD HARANGUED SO EFFECTIVELY, that the “indigenous personnel,” as he referred to them, were served hot, revitalizing drinks from a hastily erected camp kitchen before the sun was halfway up the sky, and later sandwiches for lunch. The newly awakened were kindly advised to stick to water at first and then slowly chew down a third of a ration bar: gorging on empty stomachs led to unpleasant reactions.

Mitford had immediately sent the medical crates—all but one tester kit—on to Camp Rock with news of this new drop and a request to Worry to send Leon and other medical assistance. The Catteni had broken a few bones for those they had slammed down so hard. Some of the new lot would have to be accommodated at the Rock, as people were beginning to call the cavern camp, almost affectionately. Kris felt considerable gratification at the thought that Leon would now be able to treat Coo, Pess, and the pregnant female and to keep the newly arrived Deskis healthy.

By the time the first batch of fifty moved slowly out on their way to Camp Narrow, Mitford had taken Kris off wake-up duty and put her onto debriefing: getting names, occupations, origins, and lastly but just as importantly, what they might know of recent events—recent to them—on Earth. The mere fact that people were resisting the Catteni continued to boost morale. Today’s encounter on the field also ranked as a major plus.

“Getting something out of the Cats without having to pay for it,” was the happy summation.

When she took a few moments to eat her lunch, Mitford approached her for a synopsis of her findings.

"So far the humans I've got originated from North America, Canadians as well. Then there seems to be a whole raft of English, French, and German. Resistance," and she grinned, "is increasing and the Catteni have had to call in reinforcements to deal with stoppages and sit-downs and all kinds of passive movements. There's also active sabotage, too, blowing up Catteni supplies or shipments destined for Catten or Barevi."

"Shipments? Arty things?"

"Not that I heard. Somehow, sarge, I don't think our artistic tastes would parallel Catteni."

"Hmmm. Possibly. Any useful professionals?"

"Two Canadian dentists, nineteen teachers—it seems the Catteni emptied a private school for one reprisal. They took . . . all the girls away," and the words came reluctantly out of her. "Some of the teachers are nuns. They resisted the kidnapping. One said she had had her arm broken. It looks a bit crooked, and I can feel the excess calcium where the break was, but basically it's completely knitted."

"A long time coming here, then. What *do* they use for this stasis junk?"

Kris shrugged as she flipped over her sheets to pick out the more interesting occupations. "Five hairdressers, two masseurs, a reflexologist . . ."

"A what?"

"Makes your feet happy."

"Argh."

"You should try it, sarge, it can really relax you!"

"I said *useful occupations!*"

"How about two chemists, five pharmacists, a structural engineer, nineteen housewives, three with kids still attached, and . . . you know, there's not a single person over fifty among those I've talked to."

"Don't give me nightmares," Mitford said.

"Two jewelers, three ex-soldiers, and a detective-inspector." She came to the end of her report on the morning's interviews.

It took the rest of the long Botany day to process everyone. Zainal talked to the new Deskis and sent several up to watch for fliers, but Mitford felt that, having disassembled the garages, whatever mecho summoned the fliers had been disabled, but he was quite willing to post sentinels, "just in case."

Three hundred and two dead were left on the field. Some could be identified by others who had been captured with them at the same time, so their names were recorded. Kris had to look away from the small

bodies of the children. Those under five could not endure the stasis. Their deaths, so needless, so terrible, distressed her.

“You never know them,” Zainal murmured to her when he saw the tears in her eyes.

“No, and no one will now.”

She turned away, fighting with the fact that Zainal was Catteni, too, and a member of the species who had caused the deaths. She told herself firmly that Catteni or not, Zainal had done all he could to help and certainly he had been able to reduce unloading injuries. They should also give thanks that he'd been able to ensure just one drop site. Even Mitford's talents as an organizer would have been stretched to mount multiple rescue operations and get everyone under cover before the scavengers emerged from the night ground.

Zainal touched her arm gently. “We go now. Night falls.”

“Yes, it does,” she said, heaving a sigh against the stresses of the very long day in which she had been going all-out most of the time.

THE RESCUE TEAMS WERE SOMEWHAT CHEERED BY THE HOT MEAL awaiting them at Camp Narrow. Having so many barns available for housing—since the resident population of the camp was only a few hundred—made the difference between total chaos and mere confusion. Many of the newly arrived did their best to help, either settling their injured comrades or lending a hand with the chore of feeding the multitude. Leon and his medics had set up an infirmary for the injured and the weak. Kris saw Zainal and Leon examining the contents of the tester kits, Zainal carefully translating the properties of the various vials to the doctor.

Since there were a number of totally frightened aliens in that category, Leon had Zainal stay on to translate. Slav could at least reassure members of his own species who, Kris noticed as she ate, seemed quite cheerful. They were certainly inspecting Slav's weapons and even trying to pull his bow, hissing in the Rugarian equivalent to laughter. Several of them were females, which might account for Slav preening as much as he did. She hadn't really thought about how the other species would manage, either in relationships or propagation. If what was dropped on a planet stayed down, at least mating would be possible for all five species. But not Zainal. She put that exclusion to the back of her mind.

Mitford was everywhere, encouraging, detailing jobs, trying—it seemed to Kris, watching him from the corner of the kitchen barn where she had wearily slumped—to make himself known to all the Terrans. To her surprise, she even heard him speaking a few words of German

and French to representatives of those nationalities. She knew French well enough to tell that his usage was rudimentary, but he was trying. And the folks responded with a little more hope in their manner. Then she saw Aarens, hunkering down by a very pretty girl and chatting her up in what sounded like extremely fluent French. She was clearly flattered and, as clearly, recovering from the shock of the journey. Aarens, who wore a vest of many pockets and a belt of tools, including an assortment of screwdrivers of all sizes, was making her laugh.

"Come," and Zainal held out a hand to her. "You sleep. Tomorrow is another day."

Grinning at his unwitting use of the famous Scarlett O'Hara phrase, she extended her hand and let him haul her to her feet. She couldn't help but notice that many eyes followed them out of the barn. Maybe she should paint "one of the good guys" on his forehead. Then she flinched, remembering her own recent and less than charitable thoughts. But she'd been tired and upset when she'd thought them. And she'd had the grace not to voice them. She was even more tired now and where on earth was Zainal taking her? Halfway to the Rock? He turned her in at the last barn which, she noted, was relatively empty. Others were already sacked out—or would that be strawed out? She giggled.

"Soft bed," Zainal said when he had gently herded her to the far corner, where a huge mound had been carefully prepared.

"Oh, thank you thankyou thankyou," and turning, she just let herself fall backwards into it. She was faintly aware that Zainal was tucking her against his body and then she was out for the count.

SHE AND ZAINAL BOTH DREW DEBRIEFING DUTY THE NEXT DAY, SHE with humans and he with the various aliens. As they were in the same barn for that job, she saw how he handled the different species: the forty Deskis with dignity, the twenty-nine Ilginish with a cool, diffident manner, and the thirty-eight Turs with a sharp, very Cattenish delivery. Slav had been handling contact with his own species, of whom there were sixty. Since there were over eight hundred humans, there were five other debriefers beside Kris, three of whom could speak other languages: German, French, and Italian.

Late that afternoon, Mitford called a meeting of his aides in the garage of the Welcome Committee to organize the dispersal of the huge addition to Botany's population. Worry and Esker had made the trip over from the Rock; Tesco and the Doyles, who were in charge of Camp Narrow, were on hand; Aarens was conspicuous by his absence. She'd last seen him breakfasting with a half-dozen girls.

Kris was amused to see that pieces of mechos were doubling as stools while the carcasses, in various stages of dismantlement, had been pushed back to allow enough space for the meeting. She noted the veritable snow of sketches, diagrams, and drawings that were tacked up on the walls and hung over different worktops, which were littered with components being reused.

Mitford made a point of having Zainal sit on his right while Slav was on his left.

“First off, folks, I’d like to say that we owe a lot more to Zainal here than we can ever repay. He got us nutrients that’ll keep our Deskis alive and tester kits so we won’t have to risk poisoning to find out what is edible. He got,” and now Mitford held up the folder that the Catteni captain had passed to Zainal, “the ‘official’ ”—and he paused for a sardonic grin—“survey report on this planet. You will be glad to know that we’re on the biggest of Botany’s four continents, the temperate one. Zainal’s translated the report and, frankly, I don’t think much of the exploratory team that landed on this world. Neither does Zainal.”

“Nice to know the Cats aren’t as great as they think they are,” someone said. “No offense, Zainal!”

“None taken,” Zainal said with a cheery wave and a bland expression on his face.

“Zainal will summarize the report to us. Floor’s yours,” and Mitford sat down, gesturing for Zainal to stand.

“The report says that the planet has good air to breathe, good water to drink, and the . . . green plants . . . grow so plants for other worlds can . . . grow well, too. True. The report says two . . . Cats . . .” and Zainal’s use of that nickname in a pejorative tone of voice elicited grins from his audience, “disappeared one night. Guard saw movement but did not go see. He thought men go to leak.” Zainal might not be obviously trying to ingratiate himself, but he was couching his comments very cleverly indeed. “Not found anywhere. Guard tells of strange movement. This planet has dangers. Two more are not seen so all sleep inside.”

“Ah, c’mon, Zainal, how’d they miss the garages and these barns and all?” Esker wanted to know.

“Sensors look for live flesh and ship lands in cold season.” Zainal shrugged. “Sensors register metal but not much for . . .” he turned to Kris, “those who work in ground . . .”

“Miners.”

“Miners and no special metals needed by Catteni.”

“Some of those mecho alloys are very special indeed,” Lenny Doyle said, “very special.”

"I agree," Zainal said, "but the stupids on survey do not know. Take dirt, water, stone samples, and flesh of rocksquats, avians, loo-cows, and critters they find on other lands but . . . they do not see trees for forest."

Ninety laughed aloud at that. "Attaboy, Zainal."

Kris had been watching reactions and, of all there, only Dowdall and Tesco didn't seem to respond in any way to Zainal: they just sat there, eyes on the Catteni. Kris wondered from their attitude if they even believed what he was saying.

"What about winters here, Zainal?" Lenny asked.

"Report of . . ." he frowned and turned to Kris, "what falls from skies, wet, cold, solid but . . . runs like water from sun . . ."

"Snow."

"Ah, snow."

"Deep snow?" Lenny asked.

"Not when here. Oh, hand wide," and Zainal held his big thick hand flat, thumb down, to indicate the depth.

"That's deep enough."

"Longer day than Catten, longer year."

"How long?"

"Report says," and now he held up four fingers, then all five, and finally two.

"Oh, lordee, that's longer by three more months. How're we going to feed twenty-five-hundred-plus all winter long?"

"Find more silos and start breeding rocksquats in captivity," Mitford said. "Anyone volunteer to farm rocksquats?"

"Hell, sarge, don't take the fun out of it for us hunter types," Worry said plaintively.

"Say, Zainal, how long did this team of surveyors stay on Botany?"

Zainal looked down at the report. "Twenty days."

"Hell's fire, we've surveyed better than they did, haven't we?" Ninety said, laughing.

Zainal tapped the sheets. "This has tests done which Leon and Joe Marley need. Useful. Some plants deadly."

"Tell us something we didn't find out the hard way," Tesco muttered.

"That'll help even at this date," Mitford said. "Now, would you mind telling us about your conversation with Catteni ship captain?"

Zainal's wide lips twisted briefly in mild contempt. "Not captain. Below captain. One step."

"His exec?" Mitford suggested.

Zainal shrugged. "Emassi may command, even Emassi who is drop.

They obey. Good habit. They do not believe mechs. Do not *wish* to believe what is not in report.” He gave an amused snort. “They will. They also debrief.” He shot a glance at Mitford. “We will see.”

“Yeah, but they won’t see any mechos if they do a fly-by now, will they, since we’ve disabled them all,” Ninety said, almost querulously.

“So?” Zainal asked. “We *are* here. We can use mechos. Next time Catteni drop, different story. I do not stand,” and he imitated his cross-armed stance at the bottom of the ramp, “and wait.”

“You’d attack one of your own ships?” Ninety asked, surprised.

“Why not?” And Zainal regarded Ninety with amused condescension. “A ship useful when mechos return next year to collect.”

“You mean you’d mount an expedition to follow them to their home system?” Kris asked, amazed by his intention.

Zainal nodded. “Be very good to see who farms whole planet.”

“Hell, I’d be scared out of my wig,” Dowdall said, regarding Zainal with interest. “Wouldn’t they be a bit much for you by yourself?”

“You come with me?”

“Me?” Dowdall was surprised and then he grinned, rather nervously, back at the Catteni. “Man, if you’re willing to go, I guess I would be, too.”

“We have six airline pilots now plus two retired NASA mission specialists,” Kris said brightly. “Maybe we could . . . Boy, I’d just give my eyeteeth to be in a first contact group.”

“No eyeteeth left,” Zainal told her with a big grin.

A rather odd silence followed that remark which made Kris blush though no one was actually looking at her.

“A lot of us here would, not just those NASA blokes,” Worry said, breaking in. “But I think that’s down the road awhile. You didn’t happen to find out if they’re going to dump more people on us, did you?” he asked wistfully.

Zainal shook his head. “Not the question to ask. Captain takes orders. Low captain. Not smart,” and he held up one big hand, rocking it as he had seen Ninety do. “You Terrans make trouble, get put here. Simple.” He grinned in what Kris took as approval. “Terrans make big trouble for Catteni.” His grin broadened.

“And you *like* that?” Tesco asked, an edge to a voice that was louder than it need be.

“Yes, I do,” and he jerked one thumb at his own chest, “other Catteni do not!” And he shook his head. “Good on you,” he added, “to make big trouble. Makes Catteni think.”

Worrell guffawed out loud. “Good on you, Zainal, too. Couldn’t be cast off with a nicer bloke.”

"So we can expect more?" Mitford said, not entirely pleased with that prospect.

"Believe so. But . . ." and Zainal held up his hand, "maybe report changes minds. Maybe . . ."

"But don't count on it, huh?"

"And the Cats would let us take the rap from the creatures who own this planet?" someone at the front of the garage asked in a sharp voice.

"Possession is nine-tenths of the law," Kris said emphatically, having caught the hostile tone in the murmured comments around the garage. "We're here and we're obviously going to stay."

"Catteni are not the highest. We take orders, too," Zainal surprised everyone by saying.

"From those Eosi you were telling me about?" Mitford demanded, scowling, his body tense.

"We work for the Eosi, who own most planets good for humans, Catteni, and others. You do not want to meet them," Zainal said, shaking his head.

"Oh, yes I would if they're the ones responsible for this whole schtick," Mitford said, his scowl black.

"That's what we heard back on Earth at any rate," Worrell said. "Not that we saw any Eosi on Earth. Just their mercenaries." He grinned. "We'd made the planet a little too unsafe even for the occupying forces."

"And all this time I thought the Catteni were our enemies," Dowdall said, trying to digest the information. "While they're just hired hands."

"Now you know," Mitford said, scowling.

"How come we're only finding out about these Eosi now?" asked Dowdall, shooting an accusing glance in Zainal's direction. He wasn't a man who liked surprises.

Zainal grinned. "First I have no words. Second you do not ask. Do not debrief *me*."

The Doyles and Worrell laughed and Dowdall, now no longer quite as hostile toward Zainal, managed a weak grin.

"Eosi make good use of all peoples," Zainal said. "Very clever species."

"Then let's take all the heat off Zainal," Kris said. "Let's make the bad guys the Eosi and spread the word." A second thought struck her and she hurried on. "Do you speak Eosi, if they came to investigate this place again?"

Zainal considered that question. "If report goes high enough, I think they send but not Eosi. High Emassi. But I do speak with Eosi."

He didn't much like to, either, Kris decided from his expression.

"So do we wait until some high muckymuck reads a report sometime this century or what?" demanded Tesco.

Zainal looked briefly at Mitford, who nodded and took over the reply to Tesco.

"We do as we have been, what we can with what we have. If a mecho ship comes to look Botany over, we grab it if we can."

"And go where with it?" Tesco asked sardonically. "Not even NASA got beyond Jupiter."

"I take ship. I am space captain," Zainal said, "but will need crew."

"Well, that's a great idea but how'll you do it? If you Cats don't know about the species which farms this planet, how would you know how to pilot one of its spaceships?"

"If ship has living pilot, we make pilot take us back," Zainal replied, not at all confounded by the snide query. "If mecho, it will return to base: that is what it is made to do. We ride on it."

"And then what?" Tesco demanded surlily.

Zainal shrugged. "First, ship has to come here. Where there is much . . . Yankee in-gen-oo-it-tee."

Kris let out a laughing cheer, seconded by some of the other Americans present.

"Those of us from Oz aren't that bad in the make-do line either," Worry said staunchly.

"Which ship comes first, *then* we make plans. Right?" Zainal said and turned to Mitford, who stood up again.

"That's it, Zainal, right on the nose. So, listen up, folks. We gotta get the latest recruits settled in and let 'em know the score. Worry, you call a meeting at the Rock as soon as you get back and tell 'em what happened. All patrols are to make housing their priority so hunt out some more garages. We'll need to get ready for the next group. I'll get on the blower to Shutdown and BellaVista," and he glanced fondly down at the comunit attached to his belt. "We might even claim Botany as *ours!* And the hell with Eosi or whatever."

"Long live King Mitford . . ." Lenny Doyle said facetiously.

Mitford's expression turned sour instantly and he waved an angry finger at Lenny.

"Can that sort of crap, Doyle. I'm no king nor want to be. Anyone else wants to carry the can on this planet, they're welcome to it!" He glared around him and no one doubted the sincerity of his wish to step down, but no one offered to take over either.

"Ah, I was kidding, sarge," Lenny said contritely. "You're doing great."

"I'll second that," Worry spoke up, lifting his hand to raise a cheer. Which was unanimous.

"Well," and Mitford was only partially mollified, "I didn't ask for it, but someone had to organize you sorry collection of individuals."

"Which you have done admirably," Kris said. "No one else could have! So relax, sarge."

"Ahhhh," and he made a mock swipe at her and then his expression cleared. "Is there any of that beer left?"

The moment beer was mentioned, Kris noticed that the tension oozed out of the air. She was willing for a few pints herself until she saw Zainal edging toward the door. With the general movement and shifting in the room, she slipped after him.

It was full dark out, no moons up yet. She could see Zainal moving across the light shining out of the next barn door, left partly ajar.

"Zainal," she called softly, knowing he could hear an even softer whisper. She saw him pause, saw him stride out a few steps, and then she ran to catch up with him, catching him by the arm. "Don't you dare run out on me, buddy!"

He strode on, making her half run to keep up. "Do they still not understand? We Catteni are not our own masters . . . either!"

"No, I don't think they did understand. I certainly didn't."

"We do Eosi . . . dirty work. Explore for Eosi, fight for Eosi, police for Eosi, *kill* . . ." and that word came out violently, in great repugnance, "when killing needed. People hate Catteni. They better hate Eosi!"

The pent-up outrage within him had carried them well past the barns now and into the openness where the meat crates had been stacked.

"I didn't know that, Zainal. I think it will be easier for you when everyone else does."

"I do not ask easy," he said, angrily whirling toward her, a dark shape, his gray skin making him more invisible in the shadows.

"Yeah, but you don't need hate. And there are, I have to say, a couple of people . . ."

"Couple? More than couple. Couple only two, yes?"

"Yes, perhaps, but they are stupid people who don't like any one not just like they are, So let's make them hate the real villains, the Eosi. Catteni have to take orders, though it never occurred to me you guys were taking orders from anyone." She paused, trying to sense if she was saying the right things. "So what are these Eosi like that they can command tough, big, brave Catteni?"

"They . . ." and there was more to Zainal's pause than a search for an appropriate word. For the first time she sensed fear from him. "They are brains," and he tapped his forehead, "who know . . . everything."

“Brainy know-it-alls,” she began, with laughing irreverence, and he caught her hands.

“Do not laugh at Eosi until you have met one.”

She caught the tremor in his hands and heard it in his voice.

“You have?”

“Yes, as a child, I go with father to be . . . examined by Eosi.” He inadvertently squeezed her hands so hard, it took a great effort not to cry out. The examination must have been a painful process if his response to the memory of it was this fierce.

“You passed?” she asked, more curious than flippant.

At that, Zainal straightened his shoulders and stood more erect. He probably hadn’t even noticed that he had been unconsciously contracting in on himself.

“I am Emassi. We speak to Eosi.” Then she could see his teeth, whiter than his skin, even in the shadows he stood in. And he was not smiling.

Kris thought of the Cabots and Lodges of the old Boston proverb. Well, it was one way of shaking off the aura that Zainal’s fearfulness of the Eosi had put into the atmosphere around them. But that chain of command did explain why the transport captain didn’t dare ignore Zainal.

“Maybe no one will come to Botany and we won’t have to worry about Catteni or Eosi or even the mechos’ makers,” she said soothingly.

Zainal snorted. “No, they will come. The Eosi will send high Catteni.” He paused a moment, evidently considering what he had just said.

“And the mechos will send their representative and they’ll come together in a head-on collision and leave us to get on with our lives.” She spread her hands wide and then banged both fists together, knuckles to knuckles. “Poof! They all disappear in a cloud of smoke and that’s that!”

He had her in his strong hands then, and she was being lifted up a few inches off the ground so that they were eye to eye. He was smiling now.

“Is that how you wish it?”

“Sure, why not? The wheels of the universe turn in mysterious ways,” she said, airily bending several aphorisms to her purpose. “Terrans will make so much trouble that the Eosi will have to give up on our planet. Or better yet, the Catteni will get a dose of the smarts and start collaborating with the irresistible Terran forces and go out against the Eosi domination and free the entire galaxy! You do come from this galaxy, don’t you?”

"We do." He sounded cheerful again. Then his expression altered as he looked down at her. "You like this Catteni?" he asked. "This Emassi, this Eosi-speaker?"

She swallowed for she picked up on his sudden uncertainty.

"Yes," she said, trying not to sound as eager as she was. *Catteni wouldn't scare off easily, or would they?* One kiss, a few hair touslings.

"I go slowly, like Jay," and he grinned. "You are not like Patti Sue . . ."

"I should hope the hell I'm not."

"But you will have heard things about Catteni . . ."

"I know you, Catteni Emassi Zainal," and she jabbed a finger at his chest so hard she nearly bruised the tip. "You're the one I worry about."

"You worry about me?" and if the notion pleased him, it also amused.

"Why, they could have shot you where you stood yesterday morning. My heart was in my mouth the whole time."

"You worry about me?" He caught her by the arms, picking her up as if she weighed no more than . . . than a Deski, her legs dangling.

"Yes, you great lummock. And with me you don't need to go slow. I've been hoping you'd make some sort of a move on me for the . . ."

He kissed her then, and the mere touch of his lips to hers was the catalyst for a storm of emotions within her, emotions and sensations that coursed up her veins and bones so that she had to fling her arms about his neck to be sure she wasn't reeling.

But Catteni don't kiss, she thought irrationally along with some other more sensual observations. His lips were firm and he seemed to know exactly how to kiss with great effectiveness. Oh, lordee, but of course he'd seen Joe and Sarah exchanging affectionate kisses in the evenings. *Oh, lordee, but he'd learned fast.*

With one arm pinning her to him, his other hand made short and devastatingly accurate examinations of her body. But he'd said, back in the flutter—oh, ages ago—that he hadn't tried a Terran before. That was when she'd had to deck him. She wanted to deck *with* him.

"Catteni are good lovers," someone else had told her more recently.

Well, she was going to find out, like real soon. She wriggled a bit to get some space and shoved her hand into his coverall, to feel the sexily smooth skin she had admired during his illness.

He murmured against her lips and then began to move off, taking great eager strides wherever he was hauling her. Wherever could he be taking her? There was so little privacy to be had in any camp, and Kris wouldn't have thought they could find a secluded spot in a place cur-

rently jam-packed with bodies, but Zainal seemed to know exactly where he was going. Had he planned any of this? Then he altered his stride, grunted as he climbed up and over and into something metallic.

By the smell she knew it had to be one of the reconverted mechos she'd heard about and she was now being laid down in the load bed. On piles of blankets. Oh, they were in one of the reconstructed air-cushion vehicles that had collected the stores from the drop field.

She didn't think about much after that because Zainal's hands, gentle for all the size and strength of them, were peeling off her coverall and she was trying to do the same with his, only their hands were entangling.

"Always you must help . . ." he said on a laughing note.

She threw her arms over her head. "So you do it."

Nor did he waste time. He had hauled off her boots and shucked her out of the coverall in seconds. Then she saw him, a gray blur above her, as his hands pushed back her hair and his fingers outlined her face, in such a gentle, tender, lovely fashion that her senses were overwhelmed. Who'd've thought a Catteni could behave like this?

She felt him lean into her, carefully, as if afraid to crush her with his mass. One other fact about Cattenis sprang to mind: they were big! She could feel that he was, too. And she had a pang of fright.

"I do not hurt you," and his voice was no more than a hoarse whisper. "Not you, Kris. Do you believe? I go slow, slow, slow . . ." and she could feel the pressure that was slow . . . oh, much too slow. She squirmed, trying to force herself down and him in.

She heard his gasp but he would not accede to her whispers but kept up the slow penetration until she was moaning for completion.

Never in her albeit brief experience at this sort of dalliance had she been so eager to accept all a man could give her. Not even with Brace Tennemann, and she'd thought he was the best-looking man on the football team in her sophomore year.

"You go too slow, Zainal," she cried, again trying to pull him as close as his firmly propped arms would let her, kissing whatever part of him was in reach, sensuously caressing the marvelous skin of his body.

"Slow makes it better," he said, his tone rippling with laughter, possibly with delight at her urgency. "Slow is better for me, too."

And slowly he continued his seduction of her willing self, until she was so strung out with the incredible sensations he was producing she wondered how she could survive the climax. Then it came over her, and him at the same instant, for they cried aloud in the same instant: cries of joy and immeasurable elation.

Just when she felt she could stand no more of the exquisite relief, it began to ease, and she was able to feel the shudders still rippling through him. They were both gasping for breath and he fell to one side of her, limp with such a massive release.

"You go that slow the next time, Zainal, and I'll kill you," she murmured.

"Slow is better for you and very, very good for me," he said, almost smugly but his hand, running softly down her body, expressed his tender concern for her.

"This is going to be an equal opportunity partnership, buddy," she said. "I get to call the pace now and then."

"Oh, do you?" To her total astonishment, he moved to cover her again.

"My god!" Where did he find the energy so quickly?

He chuckled in her ear. "Like the thorns of Barevi, it doesn't take a Catteni long to rearm."

"Oh, my god!"

"No, oh boy oh boy oh boy?" he asked teasingly.

"No, man oh man oh man!" She paused, taking a deep gulp of breath. "I think we . . . do . . . it your way again. Please!"

Emassi Zainal was only too happy to oblige.

SOMETIME, DURING THE NIGHT, ZAINAL MOVED HER BACK TO THEIR ASSIGNED sleeping places, clothes and all. She grinned when she woke up and found herself discreetly clothed, her boots at the side of the straw mound she was occupying. Zainal was, it was true, on the other side of her, but beyond him were Joe and Sarah, much as they had bedded down all together during the patrol. It was very considerate of him to think of her reputation: if, indeed, he had given it a moment's thought in the midst of last night's ardor. She was, when she stretched, quite sore, despite his go-slow policy, and understood precisely why most human females would have felt terribly violated by their treatment in Catteni hands. *But it does indeed depend on the man!* Catteni or human!

Someone was moving outside in the aisle, rattling each barn door in turn to rouse the residents. Another Botanical day was starting.

This one was filled with sending people on to Bella Vista, Shutdown, or the Rock. The word was that Camp Narrow would concentrate its efforts on recycling the mechos so those with mechanical skills or technical training would be based there. Now that they had the two vehicles, they could collect what they needed from the other garages, including

“body” parts to make more useful vehicles. More comunits were being assembled and more mobile carriers made out of existing chassis.

“Not speedy, but they sure do maneuver the obstacles,” Lenny told her at noontime. “Some of these lads are really clever,” he went on enthusiastically. “They figured out how to short-circuit, or whatever it is you do with programming chits . . .”

“Chips.”

“Chips, then, how to keep the versatility but give control to the driver. Clev . . . er!”

“Indeed.”

“They don’t have much speed, which the lads are still trying to improve.”

“Personally, I’d rather not ride over this landscape at speed,” Kris said.

Lenny just grinned. “You’ve never done it.”

Kris went back to debriefing, but was called over to help Mitford and his aides figure out where best to place the remaining recruits.

“How long does it take a person to become the ‘indigenous personnel’?” she asked Mitford at one point. She was finding it necessary to shift position a lot to ease her soreness. But it was worth it. Zainal smiled a lot today as he went from one group of aliens to another.

“Huh? Oh,” and Mitford grinned, leaning back to stretch his arms and ease his shoulder muscles. “Here, let’s just say until they have to help a new batch in-flow. Say, tell me about this seaside building your patrol found?”

“There’s not much to tell. It was closed up tight even though Zainal tried every which way to get inside. Maybe the fish aren’t running.”

“I do like seafood. Like clam chowder, too,” and Mitford for once sounded a little wistful. Kris was rather pleased that she was audience to that mood.

“With one of those air cushions, we could start at dawn and be back by nightfall with a sack of clams,” Kris suggested.

“You could at that.”

If Dowdall hadn’t interrupted just then, Kris was sure they might have been given a go-ahead on such a luxury run. But the vehicles were more urgently needed for other tasks.

On the third day, she, Zainal, Joe, and Sarah escorted an air-cushion car, carrying some of the less able recruits on their way to BellaVista via the Rock. Worry greeted Zainal and the others effusively from his “office.”

“Your patrol needs to hunt for us,” he told them, “and you’re to

break in some of a mixed bag of the new blokes and sheilas. The Rock's going to be Supply Depot for meats and green groceries."

"Mixed bag?" Kris asked.

"Too right, since you've got Zainal and he can speak Deski, Rugarian, and Turs."

"Oh, that kind of mixed bag," Kris said. If they had Turs to train, Zainal was the right teacher.

"We also need you on short day trips," Worry said more confidentially to Kris. "In case of . . . you know what?" And he tilted his chin skyward.

"Oh, in case we get surveyed again," Kris said, looking at Zainal, who now sported a comunit.

Mitford expected to be back in the Rock the next day but he'd had a private word with Kris.

"Keep pretty close to Zainal, will you, Kris?"

"Why?" she'd asked, glaring at Mitford.

"I don't want to lose our most valuable alien asset."

"You won't lose him."

"Not by his choice, I don't think," and Mitford gave Kris a searching look which she returned without a blush. He nodded, as if he knew more than he would commit to words. "He's Emassi and can deal with Eosi . . . I guess they permit Emassi Catteni to speak to them. We might need him badly to deal, for us, with these Eosi. That is, if one of them ever does see a report on this planet."

"Zainal is sure they'll send some sort of Emassi, higher in rank than he is. Eventually," and then Kris realized she'd reassured the Sergeant on the very point that concerned him.

"There's a lot more going on, on Earth, on Barevi and Catten, than any of us knew," he went on.

"That's for damn sure," Kris said.

"Just so's you know I'm counting on you, Bjornsen."

She gave the Sergeant a level look, noticing the new lines around his eyes, the muddy look in the pupils from the many problems he was dealing with.

"You can count on me, sergeant," she said, and this time she did give him a formal salute.

He grinned as he returned it.

THEY WERE STILL BUNKED IN THE MITCHELSTOWN CAVE AND THE POSSESSIONS they had left behind were untouched. Fresh coveralls and pairs

of boots had been added to each shelf. Seeing these, Kris and Sarah voted on a dip in the lake so they could wash themselves and their coveralls since they now had fresh ones to wear. Not that the coveralls showed any of the hard usage they'd been given over the past five weeks.

A youngster, not one of the rookies, caught them before they left their quarters.

"Kris Bjornsen?" he asked, looking from Kris to Sarah.

"Yes," Kris said.

"Dr. Dane wants you to come speak to him. When you can. It's not urgent, he said."

"Tell him we got his message and will see him shortly. And what's your name?"

"I'm Buzz," and the boy grinned to show two missing front teeth, "because I buzz about the place like a hornet. Mom says I'm too noisy to be a bee and there aren't bees on Botany anyway. My real name's Parker but I don't like it at all."

"Buzz is a grand name for an active boy like you," Kris said and smiled back at him. "See you around."

"You will," he answered cheerfully over one shoulder, already "buzzing" off.

LEON WANTED TO REPORT ON SOME OF THE FINDINGS NOW HE HAD TEST kits. The information would be invaluable to any hunting parties since Leon and his assistants had been able to identify other nutritionally rich plants, berries, and nuts.

"We've put some of the younger members of the Rock out looking for these," and he tapped the nutlike shells. "I've seen them in quantities around here. And these berries are rich in C and A." He pointed to some of the green globes that Joe had thought might be digestible. "We're trying to dry them for storage. I know you hunter types would prefer to go for the meat but these can be just as important to a properly balanced diet."

"Can we see Coo?" asked Kris.

"If you can catch him," Leon said dryly. "That stuff was magical on all the Deskis. I'm keeping a real close watch on Murn, the female. Even Pess is back on duty. Thanks, Zainal." And Leon gave him a comradely clap on the arm. "You saved their lives, you know."

Zainal merely flicked his eyebrows up but Kris had a sense that he was not as diffident as he appeared. Leon was obviously of the same mind.

The Rock was full again. That seemed as it should be to Kris. Further, many more of the "indigenous" personnel waved or smiled at Zainal when they met him.

They hunted the next day, returning home laden with rocksquats and another loo-cow since Bart and Pete in the Cheddar wanted to roast one whole to show the rookies that it could be done and the meat was tasty.

They hunted the next two days, in different directions, and spent part of the day picking the nuts and stripping the branches of every berry shrub they located.

"We'd've had more," Sarah said with a jaundiced glare at Joe Marley, "if more had actually landed up in the sack!"

Joe merely raised his eyes in innocent surprise. Oskar guffawed aloud as he handed over a heavier sack than Joe had.

They did not hunt the next day, although that was the plan. Just past third moonrise a sentry excitedly stamped into Mitchelstown cave and called out Zainal's name.

"Yes?"

"You gotta come. Something's about to land. Not as big as the others but big enough," and with that, the man ran out.

"Wake Worrell," Zainal called after him.

"That's where I'm going," the man cried over his shoulder and was told to keep his bloody voice down as he proceeded down the corridor to Worry's quarters.

"All come," Zainal said, pushing his large feet into his boots.

The sentry's arrival had awakened everyone, but they hadn't moved to dress. Now they did. In a hurry. But when Joe and Oskar reached for their spears, Zainal stopped them.

"No use against Catteni hand weapons and shows bad faith," he said.

"Who do you think it is, Zainal?" Joe asked before Kris could.

"Catten. And early even for them."

It was two-moon time, so the night was bright with them, and clear. When they went up to the height with Worrell in tow, they could see the approach of the ship, its running lights twinkling.

"Small, fast ship," Zainal said. "It is heading for that field, I think," and he pointed to what was the nearest expanse, a twenty-minute hike from the Rock.

"They know where we are?" Worry sounded upset.

"Life-form readings," Zainal said succinctly. "They know where transport landed. The Rock shows many people."

“Not dumb. Well, *these* Catteni at least,” Worry said and started down from the heights. “No offense intended, Zainal.”

“None taken,” was the easy answer.

“Maybe we should let them wait long enough to discover the scavengers?” Joe suggested slyly.

Zainal only grunted but Kris thought the notion held a certain charm for him as well. So it wasn't surprising when Zainal neatly slingshot a rocksquat fast asleep on a boulder and hauled it along with them as they traversed the rocky hillside.

The craft had landed long before they reached it. An open portal spilled light onto the stubble of the field. Light didn't attract scavengers: it repelled them. Just outside the illuminated area, Zainal casually dropped the rocksquat.

“How long does it usually take?” Joe muttered.

“Longer near light,” Zainal said and continued on his way to the ship.

It was a sleek one, Kris saw, and looked like it was meant for speed and maneuverability with its swept-back wings and tapered nose. But it was a large affair, not as big as the *Challenger* had been nor the *Enterprise*, but a fair size—three, four times the height of Zainal and about as long as a Boeing 727 but much wider.

Zainal halted right in front of the door and cracked out sharp Catteni words.

Instantly three Catteni filled the doorway, one of them striding down the ramp toward Zainal. Watching his face, Kris saw his eyes widen for an instant, in surprise, she thought, and his right hand, which she could see, briefly clenched into a fist. Then he seemed to make an effort to relax completely as he listened to what was said.

“My report cause trouble,” he said to the others in a brief aside before spitting out more Catteni phrases.

Kris decided one Catteni was an officer, and of high rank, to judge by the excellent fit of his tunic and the complexity of insignia on his collar and cuff. Zainal didn't seem in awe of him, or even respectful, unless Cattenis always snapped at each other: sort of like the English, who are scrupulously polite to people they do not like and continuously insult their intimate friends. The Catteni language sounded as if it was composed of growls, grunts, gutturals and fricatives, without a single mellowing vowel. However, it might only *sound* vicious. You'd think the Chinese were cursing each other until they smiled and bowed so politely.

“There is other trouble,” Zainal said after a spate of raw staccato

noise. "With Terrans and with Eosi." Now he grinned malevolently . . . at least his mouth looked malevolent in profile.

"And . . ." Worry prompted.

"I am drop. I stay drop. He say it is duty to come. I say I drop, I stay. His loss, your gain." Then he turned his grin on Worry, and Kris thought his look was as mischievous as if he was holding some kind of a royal flush in his hand in a high-stakes poker game.

"Ughh," Sarah said suddenly, moving closer to Joe.

Zainal looked over his shoulder and so did Kris, so they both saw the first tentacular strands of a scavenger feeling its way out of the ground to encircle the dead rocksquat. Zainal said something and stepped aside for the captain to see. Although the tentacles seemed to avoid the lighted area of the body, they gleamed slimily in the shadows. Strips of the squat animal noticeably disappeared at an ever increasing rate as the scavenger decided its victim was tasty.

Then Zainal held out his comunit, pointing to various elements of it, patently displaying irrefutable evidence of alien artifacts that had been recycled. That elicited a surprised exclamation from the captain and the other two, who bent closer to see the device. For one moment, Kris was afraid Zainal would let them have it.

That was when Kris thought Zainal began his own demands, for the captain shook his head vehemently at first but, as Zainal became insistent, he seemed to relent and ask questions of his own to which Zainal replied with a quick shake of his head or an affirmative nod. Then the captain said something to one of the others who went off, down the blue-white-lit companionway to the bow of the ship.

The captain continued his interrogation. Some of his questions Zainal answered. Others he shrugged off, impatiently or irritably or with an amused, superior expression.

The messenger returned with a handful of printouts, some crumbled. The captain barked at him and, with a startled and penitent look, the man hastily reassembled them in good order before passing them over to the captain, who glanced down at the first sheet before he gave all to Zainal. Zainal immediately passed them to Worrell.

"Maps of this world from space," Zainal murmured. "Show mountains, metal deposits, other data. He does not want to give." Kris could see that only the sternest self-control kept Worrell from peering avidly at the material.

Zainal now stepped back from the open portal but the captain followed him a step or two, managing sharp and penetrating glances at the "indigenous personnel," as if determined to store their faces for future

reference. Kris did not like that scrutiny though it gave her a chance to identify this Catteni as another Emassi like Zainal with his fine, almost patrician features. With his gaze still on Kris, the captain asked a short question. Zainal answered with a sort of supercilious expression on his face. Shock registered on the other man's face and he gave Kris a second startled look.

"I tell them you are very smart Terrans, all of you, and I am proud to be in your patrol, Kris."

"Thanks a peach skin, Zainal." If this fellow ever landed on Botany and started looking around for her, she'd make herself very scarce. He must blame *her* for Zainal's decision not to "take up his duty."

Then his look turned knowing and sly. He said two short words.

So fast that his movements blurred, Zainal shot out a fist and decked him, ignoring the weapons which the other two immediately aimed at him. He stood back, arms crossed on his chest—old Stoneface—while the captain, waving aside the guards, got to his feet, rubbing his jaw.

"Nice to know he gets a bit of his own back," Worry murmured to Kris. "What'd the bloke say?"

"How would I know?" Kris muttered out of the side of her mouth, but, from the look on the captain's face, she also decided to get into the act. Zainal had given her the clue—*he* was in *her* patrol. She gave Zainal a stern look as if he shouldn't have retaliated. "Now wasn't that a half-ass thing to do when all we have to defend ourselves with is slingshots?" she said to Zainal in as imperious a tone as she could muster, as if telling him off. Which she was since the drawn weapons had scared her badly. She'd seen them in action and the charge they propelled jerked every nerve in a body unless you were lucky enough to be knocked out first.

"Worth it," Zainal said but he made a subservient nod of his head at her and, stepping back slightly behind her, crossed his arms again.

The captain asked one more question, his tone almost plaintive as he rubbed his jaw.

Zainal gave a "that's impossible" sort of hitch of his shoulder.

The captain said something else, more briskly now, waving at his two subordinates, who moved off into the body of the ship. With a very respectful salute to Zainal, and a crisp but equally respectful bow to her, the captain stepped back into the ship and the portal slid shut, putting them in a darkness lit only by the one remaining moon in the sky.

"Hey, couldn't they leave the lights on until we got safely off this field?" Sarah cried.

"Stamp as you go," Zainal said, turning and trotting away from the ship, coming down hard every third step.

"You'll tell us what we couldn't understand?" Worry asked, trying to pace Zainal but his shorter legs were unequal to it.

"I will."

They were safely away from the ship when it raised vertically, as the transport had done, and then gathered speed in an ascent angle.

"VTOL! Wow!" Joe said. "Do all your ships have that capacity, Zainal?" He pantomimed the action.

"The ones that land, yes. Biggest, stay above," Zainal replied and continued on.

Stamping, even every third or fourth step, jarred her tired body, but every time Kris felt herself slacking off, she thought of the slimy look to the scavengers' tentacles or feelers and that reinforced her step. They reached stony footing and, as one, leaned against the safety of the nearest rock.

"That last bit he said, before you socked him," Kris asked firmly.

"Socked him?" Zainal asked.

He wasn't temporizing, because she realized "hitting" and its synonyms might not yet have come up in conversation. She demonstrated.

"In Catten women lead only other women," Zainal said. "But special . . . ah, rank of women do command even Emassi."

"Why did you hit him?"

Zainal's lips curled in a snarl before he answered. "He put a bad name on you. A wrong name."

"Thanks, but didn't you take a chance? They might have shot us because you hit their leader. That sort of thing got you in trouble before, you know."

Zainal grinned, pressing his thumb against his chest. "The trouble is mine. I do not 'sock' to kill so the others do not fire. They only . . . how do you say . . ." and he crouched, reacting with his hand standing for the weapon.

"Reflex action?" Joe suggested.

"Hmmm," Zainal said although he had not quite understood the term.

"Let's leave the subject of Kris' honor aside," Worry said. "Why did you want these?" He was unfolding the sheets. "Can't even see what they show in the dark."

"Maps of this planet from space to tell us where we are. Where to go. Where . . ." and now he paused, frowning, unable to find words to use, "where biggest garage is."

“Really? Had your blokes found it?”

He shook his head. “Show where metal is. A very . . . oh, funny? No, not funny.” He struggled, turning to Kris to help him out.

“An anomaly?”

“How in hell would he understand ‘anomaly’?” Worry asked.

“Oh, hush, I’ll explain it. An anomaly is something that should not be where it is. A deviation from the normal. A queer difference.”

“Ah, yes.” Zainal became quite agitated. “That is it. More metal than good to be there. Many places. Lots of metal. Not right metal. Anomaly . . . hmmm,” and he almost tasted the word. “Something that is different.”

“They didn’t *want* to give you these maps?” Sarah asked, also trying to discern details from the printout.

“No.”

“They wanted you to go with them, didn’t they?” Kris asked pointedly.

“Yes, they said all was okay,” and his grin was broad with malice, “to come home. More than one day. Catteni drop me here. I stay here. They cannot make one rule for me, because I am useful to them, and one for other Catteni.”

“Man’s got a sense of honor, so he has,” Joe said in mild surprise.

“Why not?” Kris snapped back.

“Why not indeed,” Joe said in a placatory fashion.

“Why didn’t you go when you could? What was the duty they want you for?”

“Emassi duty,” and Zainal’s voice turned inflexible. “Too late for that duty now. Once I wanted that duty. Not now. Much has happened. They drop me. I stay drop.”

“Dropped,” Kris said automatically.

“Dropped. Funny language, English.”

“You’re not the first to think so.”

“Nor will I be last,” and he grinned in the night at her.

“So,” Worry said, “they wanted you for a duty you no longer feel you need do?”

“Right. No one believes what I told transport men about Mecho Makers.”

“So that’s why you showed him the comunit,” Sarah carried on, “because he knows what supplies came with us and that certainly wasn’t included.”

“Right,” Zainal said.

“So you showed him and now they will have to believe you,” Sarah went on, “but why wouldn’t they believe you?”

"I dropped," and he emphasized the final *d* of the past tense.

"So now what?" Kris asked, worried.

"We wait. We see."

"And if the Eosi come before the Mecho Makers?"

"Not Eosi but someone higher than . . ." Zainal jerked his thumb upward indicating the late captain. "We wait. We see."

"I don't like this," Worry said. Then the comunit he wore at his belt bleeped, a curious intrusion in the night. "Worrell here . . . Oh, Mitford. Yes, Zainal did make contact with the spacecraft. Here," and Worry handed the unit to Zainal. "He shoulda called on yours."

The conversation was one-sided but since everyone listening knew what had happened from Zainal's point of view, some of his responses were amusing. Possibly not on Mitford's end, but in the middle of a cold night—and Kris was beginning to feel the chill in the air—the responses held a humorous element. Finally Zainal gave a series of "okays" in response to Mitford's instructions, depressed the off button, and passed the device back to Worry.

"He knows. We know. We say nothing," Zainal informed them.

"Say nothing?" Worry exclaimed. "The whole camp got wakened by that damned sentry rousing you and then me. They'll *demand* to know."

Zainal shrugged and struck off up the next tier of rock.

"False alarm, that's what we'll tell them. It was a false alarm. Ship just flew over," Worry went on.

"Wrong time of night to overfly anything," Joe suggested, climbing behind Worry. "Moons went down early."

"Nonsense," Kris said firmly as she followed Joe, Worry, and Zainal. "We tell the truth, or how will they trust us?"

"Good point," Sarah said, starting up. "We want to build trust, not destroy it."

"Say nothing," Zainal called down to them. "Smile and say nothing. Sarge will tell them what they need to know."

"He's got a point there," Worry said.

"One thing puzzles me," Joe said, spacing out words as he climbed, "why your survey didn't tumble to the fact that this world—well, this continent at least—is all carved up into neat fields? Surely they must have seen the anomaly in that . . . a clear indication this planet was, had been, cultivated?"

Zainal answered. "Loo-cows and rocksquats not smart so planet is not occupied! They do not 'see' the machinery." He added a plainly derogatory phrase in the harsh Catteni.

Then they all had to save their breath for climbing. When they reached the Rock, only the sentries were awake, as they should be, and Worry brushed off their questions with a "Nothing to worry about. Tell you in the morning, I'm bushed."

Chapter Thirteen

MITFORD ARRIVED THE NEXT MORNING IN A REFITTED TRACTOR WHICH had been altered to carry six passengers. Mitford had with him the two NASA Mission Specialists, both of whom, he said, had had training in discerning planetary features from space. Kris, Zainal, and the others had breakfasted, well prepared for a Mitford debriefing. The MSS—a man and a woman with really nothing to distinguish them from anyone else except that they had been in space—took charge of the maps at one end of Mitford's desk which Worry had hastily surrendered to the Sergeant.

"Why'n't you take off with 'em?" was Mitford's first sharp question to Zainal.

He smiled. "I like it here better." Zainal didn't look at Kris but Mitford did and she mildly returned his stare in a "none of your business" attitude. "I dropped," and again he made much of the past tense, emphasizing the *t* sound. "I stay."

She really didn't think it was only her presence that had caused Zainal to stay: he had made it clear to the ship captain that he felt bound by some obscure point of honor, though he might have used that as an excuse, she thought. Still and all, they must have really wanted him back to send a special fast courier to collect him. Hadn't they known where Emassi Zainal had been taken, considering the circumstances of his capture *before* the grace period had expired? The captain had registered surprise, not a pleasant one, either, on seeing Zainal at his portal. Possibly the captain hadn't known who he was going to meet on this planet.

She found it hard to believe that Zainal liked her so much he couldn't live without her. Kris gave her head a little shake of denial but

she couldn't help grinning slightly. Catteni and human were biologically sterile, even if they could enjoy sexual relations and "enjoy" was a pale word to apply to that tempestuous event. She was sort of hoping he'd ask for more: not that they'd had time for any further such . . . enjoyments. She didn't consider herself remarkably sexy—well, until Zainal had aroused her. Even without the sexual rapport, she liked Zainal. He was a complex man. *Man oh man, wasn't he just!* And he had conducted himself with tact and a respect for others during a very difficult few weeks. Back on Barevi, having a Catteni "interested" in you was not what you wanted. Zainal was, in all respects, different.

She had to wrench her thoughts back. The NASA pair were excited about some aspect of the symbols Zainal was translating from the map legend. Craning her head, she could see that not only were there overviews of each hemisphere of the planet but close-ups—if you wanted to call pictures of entire continents close-ups—showing contours, mountains, valleys. There were even seascapes of the ocean floors and their mounts and abysses. Complete! Then she gave full attention to what was being said.

"The position is perfect for a command post, sarge," the man—Bert Put—was saying, tapping an elevation point, almost dead center of this, the main continent. "Not easy to get to but that's only a sensible precaution and here," he pointed a blunt finger again, "is another concentration that matches the same symbol of the abattoir which we've already discovered. Possibly a garage, situated below the main facility. Everything's on remote, so it doesn't matter how far above the garage the command point is."

"That location's not all that far . . ." Mitford said, pulling at his lower lip in a pensive fashion. "Hmmm." He walked his fingers the distance. "Well, a good week's march."

"Not now we have that vehicle," Worry said eagerly.

"We've only got the one big one in operation . . ." Mitford began, "but hell's bells, it'll get a patrol there and back faster 'n' safer than they could trot it. Okay, Zainal, Kris, Bert, Joe as medic, Sarah as hunter, and you'll need a good mechanic." Mitford winced. "He's a pain in the butt, I know, folks, but the best mechanic we've got is Dick Aarens."

"Aw, sarge," Kris began in protest.

"Now," and Mitford held up a placatory hand and stared her down, "he's not going to trouble you with Zainal along."

"He hates aliens' guts," Kris complained.

"He may, but he's proved that he can read the Mecho Makers' schematics and alter them as easily as you'd play with a Lego set. This

is not an outing. This is a patrol! You gotta pass by Camp Narrow on your way so I'll go with you and give Aarens the business. You," and Mitford turned to Zainal, including Joe and Sarah in the same glance, "discipline as and when he needs it. As hard as need be. The trip may even do him good."

"We'll see that it does," Kris promised caustically, but she wasn't at all pleased at Aarens' inclusion in what should have been a great jaunt with good people she trusted. Even if she didn't know Bert Put well, she liked his frank, open face and enthusiasm and the avid way he had examined the alien charts, like a boy with a gizmo he had never expected to own.

Careful inspection of the terrain to be crossed suggested this would take three, possibly four days, at the speed the modified tractor could make.

"We run faster," Zainal said with a little grunt.

"Not over some of the ground, m' friend," Mitford said, pointing out several areas that appeared to be significant heights, also wide rivers. "That thing hops barriers like a gazelle, saves you having to take the long way around. We tested its stability on every sort of terrain and it's better 'n' a tank. Can't tip because it just lifts on its air cushions. More comfortable than the tractors I remember as a kid."

"Sarge, you were never a kid!" Kris said teasingly.

"I begin to think you're right, Bjornsen," and he slipped the map over to Dowdall. "Dow'll make you a copy to take along. The originals aren't going out of my possession. Now, figure out the supplies you'll need and you're to take along some furs. You'll be at altitude and it's bound to be colder this time of year."

ZAINAL LOOKED EVEN LARGER IN THE FUR VEST THAT HAD BEEN MADE for him. But he wore it with an air that made it seem regal ermine.

"Biggest damn rocksquat I ever saw," Sarah said, grinning from ear to ear.

"I am funny?" Zainal asked in mock indignation. He flexed his shoulders. "It fit well. Warm." He slid out of it and, folding it up with care, tied the bundle with a thong.

There were fur rugs as well as vests for each member of the expedition, including Dick Aarens. Kris was still struggling to accept the necessity of him joining the patrol.

"I know he's a horse's ass, Kris, but he helped put this vehicle together and he knows how to get the most out of it. You *will* need him on the team."

"I *will* not like it, sarge, and if he so much as . . ."

"Clobber him. Or better still, let Zainal do it. Only not too hard. You may need him undamaged." Mitford gripped her arm in a firm but friendly emphasis to his orders.

BERT PUT'S PRESENCE HELPED A GREAT DEAL, EVEN WHEN ALL HE HAD to look at was the relevant section of map that Dowdall had competently produced. They let Mitford off at Camp Narrow, reluctantly collected a cockily grinning Dick Aarens, who was still festooned with his belt of tools and vest of pockets which bulged with unidentifiable lumps.

"Ready when you are," he said jauntily, climbing up to the seat Mitford had vacated between Joe Marley and Sarah McDouall.

"Just don't let it go to your head, buddy," Kris said, glaring at him because he was deliberately playing kneesies with her.

"Only trying to be friendly," Aarens said in an almost plaintive whine. "Maybe I should drive. I know this baby inside out."

"I drive," Zainal said and that was that. Mitford had tested his skill on the way to Narrow and this wasn't the first ground vehicle Zainal had ever driven.

Zainal turned the control handle and the Hopper moved forward. It had been so named on the trip down since it invariably "hopped" any terrain that exceeded its preprogrammed optimum angle. They had all learned to hang on to something to be secure against unexpected maneuvers. Generally the air-cushioned vehicle proceeded smoothly.

Aarens' attempts to chat up Sarah failed when she made it obvious—by linking one arm through Joe's—that she was uninterested. Aarens sulked until Bert Put's look of disbelief at such childish behavior shamed him into neutrality.

The Hopper might be faster than the average tank, but it was no McLaren on a Grand Prix circuit. It also "flew" neatly over a wide, meandering river and three narrower ravines they encountered the first day. When they camped for the night on a rock ledge, above a small cataract and pool, Zainal and Bert figured they had covered nearly seventy miles.

Rocksquats and some tasty little fish taken from the stream provided supper. After reporting in to Mitford, Zainal assigned watches and gave Aarens the dog watch. When Kris woke the next morning, she found Aarens asleep.

"What is there to watch for?" Aarens demanded in outrage when Zainal roughly shook him awake. "Hey, take it easy. Scavengers can't attack on rock and no one's even seen fliers out at night."

"There're renegades still unaccounted for," Kris said, "and you know damned good and well they'd want this Hopper."

"We haven't seen *anyone*," he protested.

"Do you think they'd be stupid enough to expose themselves until they were ready to attack?" Kris went on, livid with rage at his stupid arrogance, clutching her hands at her sides because she was afraid she'd deck Aarens. Even as she thought of the joy she'd have in seeing him prostrate on the hard rock underfoot, she realized the unwisdom of such retaliation. They might indeed need Aarens if the machine failed.

"But no one did attack us," he replied in sullen self-defense.

That night he was made to gather firewood and rocksquat dung as punishment for dereliction. Nervously, Kris woke several times that night during Aarens' watch, to be sure he remained awake. Evidently Zainal did the same thing. The time they woke together, Zainal pulled her close to him and affectionately nuzzled her neck but that, unfortunately Kris thought, was as amorous as he got. She was glad of that much, though she ached for more.

It took them six days to make the designated point, and the garage they found was visible for miles above the barren wasteland that spread out before it.

"Strange place for a garage," Joe Marley said, trying to gauge the height of the doors.

"The command post is directly above this, isn't it?" Kris said, peering over Bert's shoulder to check the map.

"It would appear to be . . . up there," Bert replied, pointing and then sighing at the sheer façade of the cliff it topped. Only the solar panels, too regular in shape to be a natural formation, marked its location. "I wonder if we can get the Hopper up there from another approach . . ." and he looked eastward along the range.

"No, we have rope," and Zainal hefted the coil from the storage shelf of the Hopper.

"And pitons," Joe said gratefully, having watched Jay Greene include those recently manufactured items in their supplies.

"If you'll bring the Hopper alongside, I'll just start dismantling those solar panels," Aarens said, speaking for the first time that day. "I wouldn't want anything called down on you guys while you're climbing that cliff," he added with a sneer.

"Too right," Joe Marley said. "I'll help you. We don't all need to climb."

Zainal peered at the sun, already well down the sky.

"Not today. Tomorrow. Today we all help remove panels. Get in-

side, too.” But he did not appear too sanguine about that possibility as he inspected the huge gray-metaled doors. “No crack.”

When they reported in to Mitford, he was glad to hear they’d reached their destination but warned them to go slow if this appeared to be a totally different sort of installation. Since it might well be the control point for an entire planet, the Mech Makers might well have equipped it with safeguards.

Aarens took down the solar panels. “That’s what I’m here for, isn’t it?” he demanded nastily. “What I’m good at. You guys’ll take forever and you . . .” and his hostile gaze settled accusingly on Zainal’s heavy fingers, “. . . might damage the panels. Some were damaged beyond use, you know. You guys don’t respect technology like you should.”

Knowing how the patrol had had to struggle with the solar panels, Kris reluctantly had to admit that Aarens did it faster, and probably better than any one else could. The fact did not endear Aarens to anyone and he had to stand watch that night, too, though he complained about the duty.

“I have big hands,” Zainal said, raising one big fist and examining it as if he’d never seen it before. He smiled and turned toward Aarens, his intent very clear. “Big hand, big damage.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” and Aarens moved around the fire near Sarah, who promptly resettled herself, leaving him all alone again. “You need me as your mechanic. To tell you what’s up there.”

“Perhaps,” Zainal said, “but I have pilot spaceship many years now. I know a thing or two about circuits and more about spaceships.”

Aarens retreated into dour silence again, glaring across the campfire at them.

“Wake me for the dog watch,” Joe said in a low voice to Zainal. “I don’t trust him.”

“Where he go?” Zainal asked, with a shrug.

“Not so much where would he go, but what would he do? Like disable the Hopper for spite or slip some of those poisonous leaves into our morning tea? Hell, I wouldn’t trust him not to usher renegades in and laugh while they slit our throats.”

Aarens said nothing the next morning when he was awakened at dawn with the others. But he had a smug sort of twist to his features as if he’d won a round by not having to stand a watch as the others did. Which he had, Kris thought, disgruntled.

Try as they could, and Aarens was doing his level best to solve the problem, they could not find out how the door opened, and there was only the one.

So, having spent a fruitless morning, Zainal decided to use the afternoon daylight to make the climb.

"Whyn't we start tomorrow, early, first thing?" Aarens demanded in a suddenly nervous twitch. "Get some rest today. Hunt."

"No, we climb," and Zainal slung one coil of rope to his shoulders, "I, Kris, Bert. Aarens, you go hunt greens by river. Joe, Sarah, watch. Kris, give Joe your comunit." When she had, Zainal approached the cliff beside the garage where there were some irregularities providing foot and handholds. At least in the first fifty or so feet.

It wasn't as hard a climb as it seemed looking up at it. Indeed, the rock face was most obliging even though it had an outward bulge that was a trifle awkward to maneuver. Then they came to the area of squared-off, dressed stone which must be the control post. A farther twenty feet, easily scaled, got them to the array of solar panels crowning the cliff top. But, once again, no discernible way into the facility they knew must be contained behind the rock. That is, until Kris, exasperated with the whole thing, climbed well above the panels and discovered the vents.

"Well, they had to have venting somewhere, didn't they?" she said when she had called Bert and Zainal to inspect her find. Then she saw both men regarding her, and she looked back at the vents and realized she was the slenderest one among them. "I knew we should have brought Lenny."

It took a good two hours to pry the grill off the vent with the use of the heaviest chisel of the ones Zainal "borrowed" from a protesting Aarens, who had showered imprecations on them if they nicked any of the blades. When Zainal had chipped enough space for his fingers, he gave one mighty pull and wrenched the vent cover off.

They slung a rope under Kris' arms and, not without scratching herself, she squeezed into the opening and was let down. A long way down into musty darkness.

Then, as soon as she touched the ground with her feet, lights came up: an orangey glow rather than the blue-white of the lighting the Cateni used. She could see the panels that lined the "front" of the facility and then the long boxy rectangles that ranged along the back. There was nothing that resembled seating, nothing that resembled anything she was familiar with, bar the sloping control panels with their regular indentations. There were six rectangles of an opaque material which looked like screens, placed high up on the walls, and one larger like a blank picture window in front.

"I think Bert better get down here or you, Zainal," she said. "I haven't a clue what to do next."

Bert's head appeared in the vent aperture. "Tell me what you have in front of you, Kris. Maybe I can talk you through it."

"Ha!" She ran her fingers lightly over the left-hand group of indentations and, in the next instant, everything lit up. "Oh, lord, I hit something. Hey, and there're sorts of pictograms that even I can read. And one of them looks like doors." She pressed her fingers together, ditheringly, and felt totally out of her depth to be confronted with such technology. She could now feel a humming through the soles of her boots, low and not menacing. She told them about it.

"We hear, too," Zainal said, his voice encouraging.

"How many door pictograms?" Bert asked.

"Five."

"Do they differ in any way?"

"You mean in size? Yes."

"Try the smallest and see what happens."

Reluctantly she put her finger in the depression beside the small door. She heard a whoosh and saw a door panel swing open behind her.

"I've got access to the inside."

"Take a look around, then."

She did and came on to a blind corridor, wide and tall, cut into the rock. She reported.

"Try the next door glyph."

She did and heard a roar from both of them, then Bert's raucous "Open sesame!" She felt the cool air before she realized that she had inadvertently opened the outer door. She was overwhelmingly relieved, however, when Bert and Zainal entered the room.

Bert's face was a study—the eager boy on Christmas morning with all the games he'd asked Santa for—as he pored over the control panel. Zainal was more interested in the rectangles on the inner wall, looking for the way in to their innards.

"Well, here goes on the Big Daddy Bear," Bert said in a tone of decision and pressed the last of the line of "doors."

Immediately Zainal's comunit bleeped.

"Hey, man," and Joe's triumphant tones were audible to all three, "you did it. The main portal's sliding back inside the cliff, smooth as a baby's ass. And, wow!"

"What's inside?"

"Some kind of aircraft: one, no, two of 'em, parked in tandem. Stubby wings, looks like air-cushion jobs as I can't find any wheels, but I'd say they were atmospheric planes. Maybe for the Inspector General to have a look around, see if all the mechos are doing their jobs

right. Hey, now, wait just a sec, there, Aarens . . ." Abruptly the transmission cut off.

Zainal leaped for the outer door, Bert and Kris almost bumping into each other to follow.

Over the bulge of the cliff, they couldn't see what was happening at the base by the garage until Zainal's unit beeped again.

"S'all right here," Joe said. "Sorry to panic but that fool got himself inside one of the planes and I didn't know what would happen."

"We need that fool up here," Zainal said, scowling, and Kris just wished that Aarens could see that expression: he'd take less risks if he had Zainal to account to.

While they awaited Aarens' arrival, Bert studied the panel hieroglyphics, trying to figure out what did what. There were only a few identifying signs that made any sense, the doors being one. Another was a line of six depressions, marked with a blunt-nosed object, some sort of a projectile. One space did not light up.

"Could have fired one off," Bert said. "A probe? Some kind of a capsule?"

"Or a torpedo," was Kris' guess.

"Yeah, could be any of those."

"Zainal?"

The Catteni came in to study the line, shaking his head after a few moments. The comunit beeped.

"He won't go," Joe said, thoroughly disgusted.

"He won't go?" Zainal repeated, blinking.

"He won't climb up. Seems he's afraid of heights."

"Afraid of heights?" Zainal echoed, as if he didn't believe his ears, or thought he had misunderstood the words.

"Wouldn't you know?" Kris said.

"He will climb," Zainal said flatly. The look on his face boded no good for Aarens.

"I'll help," Kris said happily, looking forward to Aarens' reaction when he realized he couldn't pull that sort of an act on a Catteni.

They rappelled down, Kris reveling in the maneuver, for she'd always liked the exercise in her survival course. Joe and Sarah now had Aarens cornered in the garage, behind the two stubby-winged planes, nose-to-tail in the long building. The garage was much higher than it needed to be to accommodate just the two planes. The garage was also lit, so all its functions were controlled from above. Kris wondered if the planes were also remote-control devices. Maybe that was what the screens beside the control panels were for: remote viewing. Zainal now

confronted Aarens, picked him up by the fold of his coverall, and was carrying him, one-handed, to the front.

“No, no, I tell you I won’t go. I can’t handle heights. I’ll faint. I’ll be sick all over you. . . .” Aarens was protesting, batting vainly at the hand that carried him.

“You are needed up. You will go up!” Zainal told him and then gestured at Joe to bring the spare rope.

Without actually releasing the now violently struggling mechanic, Zainal created a harness that strapped his arms tight to his chest, with loops under his arms to lift him. Then Zainal fastened the loose ends of the harness to himself and started up the rock face, hauling Aarens, who was flailing hard with his legs to impede his upward progress.

“You’d better use your legs to keep from bruising yourself against the rock,” Sarah suggested with objective indifference.

“Ah, I can’t. I can’t stand heights. Oh, god, oh, god, oh god,” and he kept up that litany as Zainal inexorably hoisted him, dangling and banging against the cliff face. “Oh, god, oh, god.”

Kris followed behind, not that she could have rescued Aarens, or even wanted to, or would need to since Zainal had the exercise under complete control.

“Oh god oh god, oh god,” Aarens’ voice rose to an hysterical pitch.

“Keep your eyes shut then, you damn fool,” Kris advised. “Don’t look. Don’t look down. . . .”

Aarens did not become sick but he did have an episode of incontinence. Kris was able to move out of the way of it, which was as well, as it left a wet streak down the cliff.

The “oh god oh gods” became piteous and hoarse but Zainal ignored them and then Bert helped haul the terrified man up on to the shallow ledge and through to the door into the control room.

“Pull yourself together,” Bert said with disgust to the quivering mechanic as he untied the ropes. Zainal was shrugging out of his harness. “This complex goes deep into the mountain, Zainal. Care to have a look?”

“No, I stay here,” Zainal said, looking down at the sorry sight Aarens presented. “He must do work.”

Kris was as glad to leave the close confines of the control room because Aarens’ accident was smelling the place up. She didn’t know how Zainal could stand it, but the door was left open and perhaps the wind at this height would clean the air and dry Aarens off.

Bert led her out of the control room, through one door, and then down a short flight of very wide steps with low risers. Lights came up, brightening slowly, as if slow from disuse, to the same orange glow that

shone in the control room. They entered the first room and it was empty of everything but a sort of long pedestal table but no chairs or stools or anything to sit or rest on. The table did look used, with some edges smoothed and some scratches marring its surface. Scratches from what? Bert urged her to the room on one side.

"I don't know if these are beds or what," he said, pointing to large square platforms, built up a foot off the floor surface. "Much less this?" and he showed her an equally large room beyond, which had a square depression in its center with what seemed to be a drain in the middle. "I can't find any water outlets or hoses or anything."

They prowled here and there about the rooms and decided that those that had the same built-in equipment might be sleeping accommodations. The purpose of others was not immediately apparent. Some had large rectangular coffers which defied their attempts to open them. The wall shelving was all above her shoulder height.

"Big creatures? Appendages at this level?" Kris asked, pretending to remove something from a shelf.

"Not been used in yonks," Bert allowed, scuffing the dust on the floor.

"I don't know *what* this is," Aarens' voice said, issuing from somewhere near the ceiling. "No reaction anywhere."

Bert and Kris grinned at each other.

"Maybe we better tell them that they're on intercom," Kris said.

Bert shrugged. "Why?"

"Why are you touching the bullets?" Zainal was saying, a note of concern in his deep voice.

"They're for those torpedo-type gizmos on a rack in the garage," Aarens was saying in a smooth sly tone. "Could be . . ."

"Don't!" Zainal's command crackled.

Just then they heard a rumbling that echoed up from below. With one accord they ran back to the control room.

Zainal was standing over the prone body of Dick Aarens, his right hand still clenched in a fist. In his left hand he held the comunit, its on light glowing.

"I decked him," Zainal said. Then he pointed to the panel where one of the bullet depressions shone red.

Was red always the color of alarm?

"He pressed it. It go off."

"Thanks, Zainal," Joe's voice could be faintly heard from the comunit. "We moved. The right way. Thing launched in a blaze and we'd've been all too close to its exhaust. Wait till I get a hold of that Aarens!"

"You'll have to stand in line," Kris said, pulling the comunit over to her so that she could register her priority. "When he comes to, that is." She toed the prone body. "What did he think he was doing, Zainal?"

"Make trouble," Zainal said.

"Oh!" That was from Bert Put because Kris was shocked into immobility by the very thought of deliberately summoning the Mecho Makers, and having to answer to whatever used solid rock as a bed and ate at a table without sitting and had shoulder-high storage units.

"Oh, my god!" she finally said, leaning weakly against Zainal.

"Maybe good idea after all," he said at length, nodding his head. "Then we know worst, or best."

"How could it be best?" Kris asked, very glad when Zainal put a supporting arm around her, his fingers tightening briefly on her shoulder encouragingly.

"First, best to know. Second, fun to find out who makes mechos." He grinned at her exclamation of protest.

"If the condition of this place is any evidence, no one or no thing has been here in a long time, Zainal," Bert said, shaking his head. "Wish I could have seen it go," he added sorrowfully.

"Ask Joe when we get down again."

"And what do we do with sleeping beauty?" Kris asked, prodding Aarens' shoulder again.

Zainal took a deep breath and then let it out.

"It'd be more fun to lower him down when he knows he's up high," Bert said with a malicious expression on his usually pleasant face.

"And listen to the oh-god-oh-god-oh-gods for hours?" Kris said.

"Well, if I promise not to touch anything, can I stay up here and see if I can figure out any more of what that panel controls?" Bert asked.

Zainal shrugged and looked at Kris. "I don't see why not, NASA-man," she said with a grin.

"First, we report to Mitford," Zainal said.

"He's not going to like this," Kris said, shaking her head. "Especially since I think we were probably supposed to prevent just such a thing happening."

To her surprise, Mitford took somewhat the same attitude Zainal had: he wouldn't have authorized sending a message, if that was indeed what Aarens had managed to do. But he was, in a way, relieved that it had gone off.

"And if your guys are watching this planet, Zainal, it's going to give them a shock."

"There is that," Zainal replied.

"Should we come back to the Rock, sarge?" Kris asked.

"Might as well, but on your way back, check out the other sites on the part of the map I gave Bert." Then Mitford signed off.

IN THE END, ZAINAL LOWERED THE UNCONSCIOUS AARENS DOWN THE rock face, with Kris guiding the strapped body's descent. It wasn't what she'd rather have done with Aarens, but that would have been playing the game on his level. Sarah and Joe loaded up a sack of food, water, and furs which Zainal then hauled, more carefully, up to Bert. He would leave his comunit with Bert so the MS could stay in contact.

"Tell Bert there's no real rush for him to come down," Joe said to Zainal on the com, winking at Sarah in a conspiratorial fashion.

They decided not to untie the unconscious Aarens but put him in the Hopper, between the seats. Sarah flung his fur over him.

"It may stink in the morning but that's his problem," she said. "There's stew for supper," she added. "Just the four of us." Then Sarah smiled, a different sort of knowing smile. It didn't take a moment for Kris to catch on and she grinned back, nodding her head. "We could stand our watches together tonight. Be sort of cozy, wouldn't it?"

"Great idea," Kris said, her eyes wandering over the area to see where she would place hers and Zainal's blankets and furs. Certainly far enough away from Aarens to be able to ignore any complaints from him when he finally came to, and far enough not to impinge on the privacy of Joe and Sarah.

"I hear Catteni make great lovers," Sarah went on conversationally. "You have?"

"Yeah. Back on earth, I knew a couple of girls who took up with Catteni . . . on purpose, to find out what they could," Sarah hastened to add.

"Ah, line of duty," Kris said.

"Well, the word I got was that giving out was not the hard part of the job." Sarah winked at Kris, and waited a moment, evidently wanting some indication of how Kris accepted the information. "In fact, they used to come home smiling. Oh, I know there were plenty yelling rape, and I heard all about Patti Sue, and I know some of the rougher types were brutal. But Zainal's different. Oh my word, but he's different and if I hadn't met Joe . . ." Sarah's smile was enviously wistful. Then her expression changed to her useful forthright candidness. "What I'm trying to say is, don't worry about liking Zainal that way, Kris. And I think you do like him."

"Hmmm. I think I do, too, Sarah. And thanks."

Then, while Sarah went back to the fire to stir the stew, Kris

watched Zainal rappelling down the façade, his movements deft and graceful. But then she was accustomed to his size and she certainly was no longer going to be worried about what other people thought. Still it was good of Sarah to speak up as she had. Especially since a lot of people now on Botany had mentally paired Zainal and herself off a long time ago. She watched while he untethered himself, neatly coiled the rope for future use, and then entered the garage. She watched him have a good look at the launch tube that had released the capsule: at the other four sitting in their tubes. Ventilators had come on when the missile had surged out of the garage so that the fumes had dispersed, but he sniffed, trying to decide what fuel had been used, she thought. Then he inspected the rest of the puzzling cabinets, panels, and equipment. He settled himself on the sloping stubby wing of the last plane and took some bark paper and his carbon pencil out of a thigh pocket. She joined him when he began to make accurate sketches of the interior.

“Is Bert doing the same upstairs?”

“Up stairs?” Zainal asked, puzzled. When she pointed upward, he grinned. “Yes. We get it all down for Sarge. For report.”

Kris liked watching Zainal work, the deft way his fingers moved, big but not clumsy. She thought of how they would move on her, while they stood their double watches that night, and shivered with anticipation.

He had considerable skill as a draftsman because he only needed a quick glance before he sketched in a whole section accurately: frowning as he held the sketch up against the model to be sure he had done it with precision.

“You’re a man of many talents, aren’t you, Zainal?” she said when he had finished the job.

“Not so many,” he said in an abstracted tone. Then he put pencil and paper to one side and, catching her arm, pulled her against him, all his attention on her.

“How about standing a double watch with me tonight?” she asked almost coyly. She disliked “coy” because girls who are five foot ten don’t do “coy” well, but Zainal had changed many of her attitudes.

He ruffled her hair, which was growing long again and would soon have to be braided or get in the way.

“I can possibly do that,” he replied amiably.

“Sometimes, Zainal,” she began, tsck-tscking in surprise, “you sound more American than I do.”

“That’s good?”

“I mean, it’s great you’ve learned English so well so quickly.”

"I like to learn something else quickly and well," he said and nuzzled her neck, biting her ever so gently.

"Are love bites part of a Catteni wooing?"

"Wooing?" he asked against her neck.

"Making love."

"I think so. I have not loved a Catten."

His phrasing made her catch her breath. If he hadn't loved a Catten, did he love her? *Don't be stupid, Kris girl. He's an Emassi where he comes from and has met Eosi. He's too important for a girl like you from ol' backwater-of-the-galaxy Terra.* But her arm, of its own accord, tightened around his neck and she kissed his cheek. His smooth cheek.

"Don't you Catteni ever need to shave?"

She had no idea what possessed her to ask a question like that then, but that was her all over.

He laughed down at her. "Shave? Ah, take off face hair. No face hair on Catteni." Then he rubbed his cheek against hers.

"HEY, YOU HAIRY LOT," Sarah called from the campfire, unaware of the topic of their conversation. "DINNER!"

Zainal slipped his arm about her waist and pushed her off toward the fire and their dinner.

"When we stand watch tonight, I do not think we *stand* long," he said so only she could hear him, "though of course it can be done that way, too."

"Whatever," she managed to reply though the idea fascinated her.

Over the stew, Joe Marley was full of speculation about the prospect of a reaction to the homing capsule.

"Maybe it is not homing," Zainal suggested.

"What else could it be?" Joe replied. "Nothing's been blown up anywhere, if it was a torpedo, or Mitford would have told us. Besides, those mothers are big, complex affairs. It was fueled, too, judging by the stink it left behind. So possibly it could be a homer."

"True."

"And maybe now we've got into this place," and Joe jerked his finger at the maw of the garage, the orange light so dim they could not even see the tail of the first plane, "we might figure out how to get into the seaside facility."

"Not if we have to take Aarens along with us to get it to open," Kris said firmly.

"Bert comes," Zainal said.

"If we have time for it before the Mecho Makers come back at us," Joe said gloomily.

“It could take decades for the homer to reach its destination.”

“Then what good is a homer?” Joe demanded. “No, to be efficient, and these Mecho Makers are damned efficient engineers, it would have to reach home in a relatively short period of time.” He wasn’t happy at the thought of what response would be made.

“Why borrow trouble, Joe?” Kris asked.

“Well, it’s only smart to think ahead, to plan for contingencies.”

“That’s Mitford’s job,” Kris said easily. “And Worry’s. Let him do that for all of us.” Her stomach was full and it was great to be able to lounge around the fire, close to Zainal, and know he was close to her and would be closer once they got Joe and Sarah off to their own bed.

“Honest, Zainal, d’you think we’ll get a response soon?”

“We get one sooner from Catteni is my say,” he said, hands clasped behind his head, his eyes gleaming gold in the firelight. He looked both alien and wonderfully familiar to Kris.

“Why? Would they have put up a satellite er something?”

They had to explain what kind of satellite Joe meant and Zainal agreed that Catteni had such equipment.

“But they do not yet believe in the Mecho Makers. Though maybe since . . .” and he paused, a slight frown creasing his forehead.

“Since that captain came?” Kris said, prompting.

Zainal grinned at her. “He believed and is able to act without order.”

“Was he under Eosi orders to come here, then?”

Zainal shook his head. “He came to get me.”

“But you were dropped and you stay,” Sarah said teasingly.

Kris, who was aware that that had been a far more significant encounter than anyone else could know, glanced quickly at Zainal to see how he reacted.

“I stay,” he said and then grinned.

“But he might have activated a warning device?” Joe asked, getting the matter straight in his own mind.

“That is possible.”

“So they would know something’s been launched.”

Zainal nodded.

“Maybe they won’t drop any more unwilling pioneers on us then,” Sarah said hopefully.

Zainal chuckled. “They had more Terrans to drop in safe place. Many more.”

“Oh, lord, however will we manage?” Sarah cried.

“We’ve done very well so far,” Kris said with some asperity. Sarah and Joe were late droppers-in and acting as if they’d been here all along.

Well, what's wrong with that? Kris chided herself. *At least they want to be part of this crazy colony.*

"So we have," and Zainal unfolded himself from the ground. "We take first watch," he added casually.

"No, you'd fall asleep after all that lugging of bodies up and down that cliff face," Joe said as casually.

"We should do something about feeding Aarens," Sarah remarked with no enthusiasm for the task. "And changing him or that Hopper will sure stink tomorrow."

"He's not awake," Zainal said with a shrug.

"You didn't hit him too hard, did you, Zainal?" Kris asked wistfully.

"Naw," Joe answered. "I've been checking him. Zainal just decked him right proper, that's all. Something we've all wanted to do, I might add."

"Oh god oh god oh god, not you, too?" Kris said mischievously. That brought a laugh from the others.

The comunit beeped and Joe answered it. "Bert . . . checking in, are you? . . . Naw, we wouldn't go off and leave you to explain to the Mecho Makers. We're about ready to sack out now. Found nothing new, all right . . . Oh . . . Well, we have had a day full of surprises, at that. You'll stand first watch? Oh, that's good of you, mate. You got the place to watch from all right. Over and out." Then he grinned at Zainal. "He's first watch. He'll wake me. And I'll wake you. I'll check Aarens again now."

"Just give me a shout," Zainal said. He held out his hand to Kris, who let him pull her up and into his arms as Sarah disappeared into the dark after Joe. In the firelight, his eyes were golden. "I do not know your thought, Bjornsen," he said, "but I am lucky you were in the thorn-bushes of Barevi."

"You think you were lucky? After all that's happened since then?" She leaned back against his arms to catch the look in his eyes.

"You change my life. Not many change a Catteni."

"No, I don't think many do," she could agree wholeheartedly.

"Now, there is a long time before we *stand* our watch." There was devilment in his yellow eyes as he looked down at her. "What shall we do with all that time by ourselves?"

"Hmmm, oh, I think we can find something to do."

And, of course, they did.

L'envoi

SERGEANT CHUCK MITFORD KEPT TO HIMSELF THE NEWS THAT AARENS had sent off what appeared to be a homing projectile. Damn the man! Just like him to act with malicious intent. Before he'd heard who was leading the patrol, he'd been eager for the expedition to the putative control facility. Another chance to show off how clever Dick Aarens was. And the man did have a genuine mechanical bent. All the experts agreed. But that didn't keep him from being a royal pain in the butt! And he'd been equally eager to devolunteer when he knew that he'd have to deal with Zainal. And that the Bjornsen girl was part of the team.

"D'you know about *them*?" Aarens had ranted. "D'you know she's *sleeping* with that Cat?"

"If she is, it's her own business, Aarens, and I wouldn't put on that innocent look were I you," Mitford had replied. "You're quite the lover boy on your own, aren't you? However, I'm warning you, I get one more complaint of harassment and, not only will I put you in the stocks every night so we'll know where you are, I'll get Dane to castrate you. Get me?"

"You wouldn't dare?" That had shaken the mechanical genius because he knew all too well by now that Mitford did not make false promises.

So Aarens had taken the initiative the first chance he saw. But then, there would have been no message *in* the homing device, if that's what it was. Perhaps the Mecho Makers would ignore its return. False alarm.

Mitford sighed and linked his fingers behind his head. He'd hate for all he'd built out of sfa here on Botany to go down the tubes. He was rather proud of what order he'd been able to achieve out of nothing.

And it had been pure heaven to be without any smartass captains and lieutenants with their smartass West Point training to tell him half of what he did wasn't in the Book. Well, it wasn't because he was writing this book himself.

He hadn't wanted the job but he'd come to enjoy it. Starting off fresh and making one world the way it should be. Not many men get that chance.

Tomorrow morning, he'd start on contingency plans. One thing sure, they might be in for some serious trouble from the Mech Makers for messing up their machines. They'd probably have to leave the garages and barn facilities, so he'd better scout for more caves where they could hide and carry on in spite of owner occupation.

And then there were the Catteni. Would they maybe have dumped some sort of a satellite spy eye to orbit the planet? To see if there was any contact with a technically advanced species who had a prior claim on the planet? He'd have to check with Zainal. Mitford had a hunch that more went on in that early morning meeting with the Emassi ship than Zainal had reported. But he respected Zainal far too much to grill him. That guy was honorable and people were beginning to see him in that light. Which was another load off Mitford's shoulders. If the Emassi were up to something that would affect Botany, Mitford was pretty certain Zainal would level with him.

Mitford grunted and muttered to himself, "I drop, I stay." And chuckled. Glad he hadn't listened to those who'd wanted to waste the Catteni on that field.

He wasn't all that happy that the Bjornsen girl had taken up with him, though. He'd've fancied her himself. A leader had a few privileges. Damned few.

He suspected nothing was going to change the Catteni's plans for Botany. This was such a convenient dumping spot for all the troublesome dissidents the Catteni couldn't handle on Earth . . . and Barevi.

Well, possession is nine-tenths of the law. Only what law applied to Botany? He'd make it his if he could. He was getting pretty good at this governing business. Making a better show than either Democrats or Republicans ever had.

Or would they all be caught between two master races . . . the mysterious Eosi and the even more unknown quantity of the Mech Makers? Could be interesting. Could be fatal. Well, he wouldn't worry about that. This was a large continent.

He must remember to get in more bark sheets or have someone start to manufacture paper. They'd need more copies of the maps, geographical and spatial. Surely there was someone among his lot of individuals

who knew how to make decent paper! He fumbled at his breast pocket, got out the slip of bark he kept there and one of the newer, more streamlined pencils and jotted down a note. There! Tomorrow he'd start figuring out how to cope with invasions. Would he, as planetary leader, get a chance to confront representatives of either faction? Hmmm. Maybe he could get them to accept a compromise? They turn the planet over to him. Fat chance of that but Mitford chuckled at his presumption. ASS-U-ME, he thought, remembering the old axiom of assuming too much. Whatever!

He'd get his six hours' sleep first, get his mind rested for the duties of the morning. Operation Fresh Start, as he had facetiously called it on the morning he had "assumed" command of this mixed bag of individuals, was moving into a new phase and he'd better be ready for it. So he turned over, socked the fluff-filled pillow into proper order, and slept.

THE LAUNCH HAD BEEN OBSERVED, THE SPATIAL DIRECTION OF THE torpedo noted, and the report forwarded to those concerned with such matters.

*Freedom's
Choice*

*This book is affectionately
dedicated to
Jan Regan,
who is more like Lessa than Lessa was.*

*Exercising racehorses is the nearest
thing to riding Dragons
on this good earth.*

Prologue

PART ONE

THE SATELLITE LOGGED THE DEPARTURE OF A MISSILE FROM THE SURFACE OF THE planet under observation. It analyzed the components, attempted to correlate the information within its memory banks, and found no match. The unusual speed and approximate direction of the device was also noted as it headed north and east toward the farther edge of the Milky Way. Just as the missile reached the heliopause of the system, it disappeared. A scan produced no debris; no ion or any other trace of what had powered its drive could be detected. The missile had vanished: a fact that was unacceptable to the monitoring program and caused a functional error which required internal investigation and repair. Although its earlier tracking was recorded, the satellite did not, due to the anomalies, immediately forward the data to its server.

Consequently, without a requisite emergency code, the information went through several processings before the anomalies were noticed. It was then immediately reported to the proper authority. A team was dispatched to correct the malfunction. None was found even after a complete overhaul and maintenance check of the satellite. The data was therefore suspect as a malfunction in itself, rather than the recording of an event. The planet was, after all, a penal colony; the exiles were equipped with the barest essentials for survival and no technological equipment whatever. It was only by chance that the report was ever seen by persons with the essential information to realize the significance of the sighting, and the mysterious disappearance of the homing device.

PART TWO

“YOU SAY THAT HE *REFUSED* TO ANSWER THE SUMMONS?” THE SPEAKER scowled at the Emassi captain.

As they were also father and son, the son was accustomed to his sire’s scowls: he almost enjoyed the reaction, knowing that Zainal’s refusal to return and accept the duty imposed on his rank and family would further blacken his brother’s previously spotless reputation in their father’s estimation.

“He was chosen,” Perizec continued, bashing one huge fist onto the pervalloy worktop. “He cannot refuse the summons.”

“He did,” Lenvec said with an imperturbable shrug of one shoulder. “‘I’m dropped, I stay.’ You know the convention.”

Perizec crashed both fists onto the worktop, bouncing everything on it, scattering the files from the desk rack. “An Eosi matter has precedence over any Catteni convention! You know that!” The scowl deepened, pulling down the heavy mouth and jaw, darkening the gray-toned skin. “He has known of this duty since he was presented to the Eosi. Dropped or not, he is to return to accept that duty.” The fists banged emphatically again. Then Perizec’s eyes narrowed to slits through which his yellow pupils flashed with anger. “How did he come to be dropped on that felon planet?”

Lenvec shrugged. He knew that his father was well aware of the whole circumstance but he repeated the report.

“Zainal engaged in a fatal brawl with a minor transport officer. The crew sought vengeance and Zainal escaped in a flitter. It was hit and crashed in the western hunting grounds. No trace was found of him then. He seems to have been picked up along with dissidents who were gassed during a riot, and so was included in the slave shipment. He made his presence known to a second drop crew. Your office was alerted and I made the run to retrieve him. He refused . . .”

“I know, I know,” and Perizec flicked thick fingers to end the recital. “He must return. The duty is required of him. We cannot avoid the choosing.” Perizec frowned, deep in thought. “See to it that the crew who arranged his deportation are sent to the same destination. They will ensure that he is ready to be collected when next you land there.”

“A thought, sir,” Lenvec began. “Catteni would not be popular on the planet and may even be prevented from finding Zainal.”

Perizec regarded him with anger. “Zainal survived. You said yourself that he was a member of some sort of team.”

Lenvec shrugged. “Zainal is, after all, Emassi, sir, and as clever a man as you yourself . . .”

Perizec grunted at the filial compliment. "He is also Catteni and would resist attempts to eliminate members of his own race."

"He might not be in a position to do so. He may also wish to eliminate the crew for having put him on that plane in the first instance."

"They will have to be 'rewarded,' " and Perizec's smile was unpleasant, "for their part in his exile. See to that. And let us find among the Emassi two or three of Zainal's hunting friends. Them he would certainly protect, would he not?" Lenvec nodded. "They will see to it that he is willing to leave when next you land."

"Am I to transport them there?"

"By no means. That would put Zainal on his guard. When is the next mass transportation scheduled?"

Lenvec consulted his wrist unit. "In twenty-two days."

"Choose the men . . ."

"A female, too, sir, if I may suggest it. He's been a long time without . . . companionship."

"An excellent notion," and Perizec grinned back at his son. "You have someone in mind?" Lenvec nodded. "They will all be rewarded." He reached to the files and methodically began stacking them in order as he continued speaking. "This must be completed as expeditiously as possible. I have told the Eosi that Zainal was sent on a special assignment and is unaware of their need of him. We have been granted a respite, but their anger will fall on us all if we do not present Zainal within a reasonable period of time."

Lenvec nodded. Since Zainal had been acceptable to the Eosi, there had been no need for Lenvec to be presented. Nor would he wish to be accorded such an Eosi "honor," since he knew exactly what it entailed. However, he might yet find himself the substitute, if Zainal did not present himself. The honor of the family was at stake. Failure to comply with an Eosi demand brought disaster and disgrace to every blood relation.

"Keep me informed, Lenvec," Perizec told his son by way of dismissal.

As Lenvec saluted formally, pivoted smartly, and left the office, Perizec began to consider how to punish the stupidity of a mere freighter crew who had presumed to place an Emassi among transported dissidents. He enjoyed deciding on the exact and perfect punishment for their presumption and shortly was able to issue the necessary orders. Once the rumor was circulated, few Tudo or Drassi would dare to repeat such treatment, no matter what the cause. That this abrogated one of the main tenets of Catteni discipline did not bother Perizec. His rank had privileges, and he exercised all frequently.

Chapter One

AS HE WAS SUPPOSED TO DO, THE DESKI IMMEDIATELY INFORMED THE camp leader of what he had heard on the height above Camp Rock.

“You heard a ship come down?” Worrell asked, rubbing his face hard in an effort to comprehend what Coo was telling him.

“Come down,” Coo said, nodding vigorously, “not big. Not you-zoo-al,” he added, struggling with the syllables.

“Not usual?” Worrell repeated while Coo nodded with a Deski-style grin which Worrell was now accustomed to. “You mean, not a drop?” Coo shook his head and then nodded, to be sure he was understood.

Worrell sighed with relief. The damned Catteni had speeded up their deposits of “colonists” over the past month to the point where there was barely time to assimilate each new delivery.

“No drop. No long down. Come,” and Coo gestured with his thin, oddly knuckled digits, swooping them down to close with his other hand, pause briefly, before elevating it again. “Go. Soft.” And now he put a hand to his ear and pretended to listen hard.

Instantly Worry began to fret. His nickname was less a contraction of his surname than a description of his chief trait.

“A quick drop, then. A few people at the most. Only what kind?” he asked himself more than Coo. “Nearby?”

“Not near-near.” Coo dropped his head, orienting himself, then shifted his feet slightly to the right, so that he was facing due north. The Deski ability to know where they were was an extremely useful trait on Botany. They could get themselves back to the main settlements, like Camp Ayres Rock, from any point, so it had become common practice to include at least one Deski in every scouting expedition.

Now Coo extended both long, double-jointed arms, kept the right one facing due north, and angled his left arm almost due west. "There. Not near-near."

"Really?" Worry rose and patted Coo's bony shoulder. "Real good, Coo. Thanks."

"Good job done?"

"Beaut job, Coo." Worrell turned up the light so he could see the map hung on his wall. Much of the continent it represented was still blank but, over the past few wintry months, details had been added by scouting teams. "If we're here, Coo," and Worrell put his finger on the cave system of Camp Rock, "how far west?"

Coo extended his head toward the map on a neck that seemed elastic, put one digit on the camp, and then slid it in the appropriate direction. "No more far."

"Really?" Worrell felt anxiety bloom in his gut. The point Coo had indicated was where Zainal and his team had met the scout ship: the one sent to take him back to his duties as a Catteni Emassi. "Thanks, Coo. You'd best get back on duty."

"I go." And the Deski slipped quietly from the room.

Worrell glanced briefly at his timepiece. Dawn was too far away for him to send a squad to check the landing site. The night crawlers would be all too eager to catch anything that traveled aboveground. Not even a large team, stamping heavily, would escape those winter-hungry denizens.

Then Worrell chuckled to himself. If Catteni had indeed landed someone for some purpose . . . like getting in touch with Zainal again . . . they'd've had a welcome they didn't expect.

"Serve 'em right, too," Worrell said, though he was not by nature a vindictive man. In a considerably more cheerful mood, he returned to his bed and went soundly back to sleep.

WORRELL WOULD HAVE LIKED TO HAVE ZAINAL TO SEND DOWN TO INVESTIGATE the reported landing but he and Kris Bjornsen were out with their team on another long scouting trip: looking for more caves, or barns, or rocky terrain to house the settlers continuously supplied them by the Catteni. So he sent for Mic Rowland, one of the Fifth Drop group. He'd been a stuntman for the movies and could be trusted to observe, be discreet, and get himself and a team out of trouble. Worry told him about the late-night landing and where Coo thought the ship had touched down.

"If a Deski said it landed there, we'll find some signs." Mic was far too accustomed to working with all-sorts, as he called them, not to appreciate talent wherever it was found.

"Even scout ships leave a stench behind them," Worrell agreed. "Take a party of those newbies with you. Give 'em a chance to hunt."

"Sure thing," Mic said with a businesslike nod.

Worrell grinned when he saw Rowland tag the first five people in the breakfast line whose new-looking coveralls marked them as the latest drop. He did let them eat first before he took them off.

Worrell knew the trip would do them good. So many got to Botany still full of their Earthside sabotage activities and how many Cats they'd injured or killed and other kinds of derring-do, and they needed to be taken down a few pegs to the realities of Botany. Fortunately more were adapting well to the new world than Worry would have expected.

What worried the Australian, and the other camp managers, was the indisputable fact that the Catteni were making more frequent deposits of dissidents. Zainal had been surprised, too, and had suggested, slyly, that it was because Earth was showing far more rebellion than any other race the Catteni had subjugated. So there were more rebels to be exiled. So far the colony had been able to absorb quantities of both human and alien species, though they had followed Zainal's suggestion to let the belligerent and uncooperative Turs go off on their own in the small groups in which they arrived. However, the population of Botany had risen from the original drop of 582 to nearly 9,000.

Worrell worried all day over what Mic Rowland would find. He also widened the perimeter guard, in case of infiltration, warning them vaguely that someone had seen Turs prowling about. It was possible, in Worrell's view of human frailties, that even some specimens of Mankind could have been brainwashed into cooperating with their Catteni masters, and try to slip into the colony to cause trouble. That actually made more sense to him than a secret landing of Catteni, since they would be instantly noticed. So far Zainal remained the only one of his race resident on Botany. And he had barely escaped being killed that first day. Which was fortunate, since he had proved so helpful in the first days, and ever since: even to rejecting a chance to leave.

Mic Rowland returned with enough game to justify the hunt. Dismissing his weary group, he caught Worrell's glance, jerked his head toward Worrell's office on the height, and moved quickly to join the camp manager there. He dropped the rocksquats with the cooks, but not the sack in his right hand.

Once they were private, Mic upended the sack on the table and grinned at Worrell's surprise.

“Boots?”

“That was all that was left. And not the same sort they issued us,” Mic said, “much better made. And this.” He took from his chest pocket a very thin plate about seven centimeters long, and maybe two thick. “I’d say it was a comunit, or some sort of call device. Maybe even an implant. I rubbed the gore off.” Then he picked up one of the boots, which was scored as if something hot, or very strong, had twined around it, leaving deep grooves. He twisted the heel and the whole lower part of the shoe swiveled free, showing a compact kit of small tools embedded in the material of the thick sole. “There’s something in each boot.” He picked up the smallest pair and opened the sole of one, revealing its contents to Worrell. “This looks like a drug injector.” He opened the other, which contained two small vials. “And the drugs.”

“Drugs? Yes, well, I’ll give that stuff to Dane.” Worrell counted eight boots in an effort to defuse his mounting anxiety. “Dropped a team, did they? To do what?” Though Worrell had an awful suspicion his first guess might prove correct. Would Mic know?

Mic shrugged. “You been here longer. An educated guess would be they were after Zainal.” When he caught Worrell’s sharp look, he grinned. “I heard. Damn few would have stayed if they had a chance to leave.”

“Hmmm. No other . . . remains?”

Mic shook his head. “Some bits of metal, probably from whatever they were wearing but even Catteni material is edible by the crawlers. Boots are just a touch too tough for ’em.” And he flicked his fingers at one. “Big mothers wore ’em. Big even for Catteni. They have goon squads, too.”

“One pair is much smaller. *Would* they have sent a woman with them?”

Mic shrugged. “Who knows what Catteni will do.” He closed his lips on whatever he had been about to add and shrugged again.

Worrell could very well imagine what had been left unsaid. Before his deportation, Worrell had seen enough of the higher-ranking Catteni women to know that Kris Bjørnsen was a lot better-looking than the best of them. Many disapproved of her liaison with Zainal but no one had the gall, other than Dick Aarens, to complain or dispute it.

“Thanks, Mic. Did the others notice?”

“Couldn’t fail to, not with those empty boots scattered around. I don’t think the newbies noticed that the footwear isn’t the same stuff we have. So I’m reporting a missing patrol to you. Right?”

“Too right,” Worrell said, “and I trust you rammed home the lesson?”

“Never miss an opportunity like that, Worry.” And Mic left with a big grin on his face.

Worrell made a mental note that Mic was ready for more responsibility. First he dialed Zainal’s team number for them to report in and then got in touch with Chuck Mitford.

“Well, put ’em in a safe place, Worry,” Mitford said, “until either Zainal or I can have a look-see. Just give the medical junk to Dane. He might know what it is and maybe have a use for it. I suppose you better send those tools down here to Narrow for the engineering types. They could use some high-quality stuff despite some of the new items they’ve been able to turn out recently. I’ll have to figure out a way to explain their . . . ah . . . acquisition.” He contradicted himself a moment later. “I don’t have to explain anything, do I?”

“Sure don’t, sarge.”

Worrell grinned at the comment. In one of the recent drops there had been several ex-admirals, ex-generals, and assorted other brass, most of whom, when they had a chance to recover from the trials of their journey, were quite willing to refer respectfully to Mitford as “sergeant.” Those who didn’t soon learned how much was owed that sergeant, or found themselves settling into perhaps less amenable campsites. No one—except someone on sick call—shirked assigned duties and everyone took a turn at hunting, preparing food, sentry, and whatever other duty they were thought capable of managing. When he hadn’t anything else to fuss about though, Worrell worried that some sort of high-level executive type might try to bounce Mitford out of his current eminence. Of course, if Mitford decided on his own to step down, that had to be entirely his option. So far, Mitford’s management—and he had listened to suggestions from just about everyone in the first couple of drops—had worked pretty damn well.

“Sarge, should we worry about human infiltrators?” he asked, hoping to have such a notion knocked down.

Mitford’s snort made the diaphragm of the portable phone vibrate, and Worrell began to relax.

“Not unless they can run faster than a crawler can grab. And if there were four Catteni, they’d’ve been heavy enough on those big feet of theirs to have alerted every scavenger four fields over.” There was a brief pause. “Worry, you can’t actually believe any human being would work *with* the Catteni, do you?”

“There’ve been traitors, renegades, spies, quislings in every war, sarge. Why not this one?”

Mitford cursed briefly but colorfully. “You could be right. Damn it.

Only why send in infiltrators by special delivery? You could as easily send 'em in a regular drop. Anyway, why mess us up? Zainal says the Catteni prefer colonies to prosper so they can come in and take over when one gets going well." Pause. "Furthermore," and Mitford's tone was adamant, "they'll have their work cut out for them if they try that tactic on *my planet*."

Nor would anyone dispute Mitford's use of the possessive pronoun. "We'd be with you four hundred percent, sarge."

Another brief pause. "I'll tell Easley we'd better be double careful checking IDs on the next drops. Right?"

With that he cut off, leaving Worrell not quite as anxious as he had been: no one was going to take over "my planet." He grinned at the outrage in Mitford's voice. Scouts had come across the remains of several rough camps in the hills, above the level the night scavengers inhabited, and the skeletons of those who hadn't survived. But everything was much better organized now, especially the drops. Peter Easley, a former personnel manager of a huge international firm, had been responsible for that. His second morning on Botany he had sought Mitford out and made suggestions on how to simplify and speed up the influx, and how to catch the signs of those still in trauma, needing counseling. He'd deferentially organized additional men and women experienced in crowd control and personnel handling and passed on recommendations of other specialists that Mitford might want to interview himself. Mitford had turned the whole problem of drops over to Easley. The complexity of resettlement, after another of Easley's sensible recommendations, had gone to Yuri Palit, previously a UN resettlement manager for displaced persons. There were now enough degree engineers, aviation and production-line mechanics, and inventor types to keep even Dick Aarens from getting cocky while speeding up their output.

With enough hand-held communication units available, scouting teams could report in to Mitford on any unusual occurrences, as Worrell had just done, and the sergeant had actually been able to keep "business hours."

"I'll get enough time yet," Mitford had recently confided to Worrell on a trip through Camp Rock to Camp Silo, "to lead a recon group myself."

"Is that what you'd really like to do?" Worrell had asked, since that was the first time he'd ever heard something akin to a complaint from the man.

"All this brand-new world and everyone else is getting to see it

first!" Mitford had flung his hand up in frustration. "Well, I get closer to it all the time." Then he'd grinned. "And I get less and less paperwork to do."

So now Mitford had more time to spend to organize the teams and send expeditions in every direction, trying to locate more bases, especially to replace Camp Rock, which was established just above a deep gorge that showed the scars from centuries of spring flooding. Zainal and Kris Bjornsen were on just such a scouting mission, hoping to find a site that was not an installation of the "Mech Makers" or "Farmers," as many people were beginning to call them because of the agricultural emphasis of the planet.

Worrell packed the boots back into the sack and he peered more closely at the plate. There did seem to be round indentations on one end: possibly touch points. He counted nine—as many as a numeric pad. He was sorely tempted but decided against any whimsical experimentation. He'd sent out the recall sequence, and Zainal and Kris should be back in a few days.

THE TEAM WAS AT THAT TIME IN A STATE OF EXULTATION, FOR THEY had managed to complete a difficult ascent up an irregular cliff mass and now looked down into a long valley that bore no traces of the neatness which typified the land the Mech Makers farmed. Their ascent had been a quick decision, prompted by certain anomalies that both Zainal and Whitby, the mountaineering expert of the team, had noticed. The first was a stream bubbling vigorously from what seemed like a solid rock face. Investigating, they found the stream had bored a channel through the stony barrier.

"That's not the kind of rock that water erodes," Whitby said. "It was carved somehow."

The second curiosity was that the high mound of rubble that barred their way couldn't, in Whitby's estimation, have been caused by a natural landslide or depression, and he called their attention to the top of the cliffs, which did look shorn.

"Could have been an earthquake," Kris had suggested.

"We've seen no other subsidence on our way here," Basil Whitby had said, shaking his head, glancing along the cliffs on either side. "Not a landslide, not with that kind of stone." Then he grimaced at the tumbled rocks of the barrier.

"Don't see any kind of road leading up here," Sarah said, swinging around to be sure.

"As if mechanicals left any tracks with those air cushions," Joe

Marley reminded her, and she made a face at him. "Not even a mark where a big mother would have parked for a time."

"Animals do leave tracks," she replied.

"And we haven't seen many of them lately, now have we?" he said in good-natured sparring.

"There have to be other animals than loo-cows, rocksquats, night crawlers, and those vicious avians. Even I know that much about ecological balance."

"Maybe," and Leila Massuri's tone was cautious, "that barrier's there for a good reason." She and Whitby were the new members of the Kris-Zainal team. Leila contributed more to the pot with her cross-bow prowess than to discussions.

"Keeping something in? Or out?" Joe asked, accepting the premise.

"We find out," said Zainal, and began to pass out appropriate equipment for scaling the barrier. Though the air cushion of their all-terrain vehicle allowed it to traverse very rough terrain, the gradient of the rocky obstacle in front of them was too acute.

They were far better equipped now for explorations than they had been in the initial days after being dumped on Botany. Leila slung her crossbow across her back, and made sure that the quarrel pouch was fastened, while Kris loaded her pouch with pebbles for her sling and slung the rope coil Zainal handed her over one shoulder. Whitby had fashioned himself a proper climbing pick, which he slid into the loop at his belt, stuffed pitons into thigh pockets, and secured the short compound bow and quiver of arrows to the harness on his back. Sarah and Joe had slings as well as boomerangs, a utensil that was becoming more popular: Fek and Slav armed themselves with lances and hatchets. They all carried blanket rolls and small sacks with food and water.

The climb up the irregular and often shifting cliffside had taken most of the morning but the view at the top was more than worth the effort. Below them lay a peaceful valley, obviously undisturbed by the agricultural mechanicals that dominated the slopes behind them. At the narrow end of the valley they could see a distant waterfall, its descent a murmur as it fell into a small lake. The stream leading from it meandered down the far, lower side of the valley and blundered into the cliff, answering the question of its origin. The valley floor was interspersed with flat grasslands and some of the odd-looking thickets that in their season would bear edible berries. But the most unusual feature was the little groves of what Kris called lodge-pole trees: straight tall trunks that flattened at the very top into a thick crest of narrow branches fanning out, and were covered in needles during the warmer weather. Specimens did grow in some of the hedgerows that lined the mechanicals' fields

but only as single trees, not in copses like these, and certainly not as many groves as could be seen from their vantage point. A pungently scented breeze cooled their sweaty faces.

"It's as good as Shangri-la," Sarah McDouall said, beaming down at the valley. "It's lovely. So peaceful, so . . ."

"Secret?" Joe supplied. "I wonder what else we'll find down there."

"Why, there's space for hundreds here," she said, ignoring his implicit pessimism.

"Hmmm," Zainal murmured, obviously sharing Joe's caution. "Slav?" he asked the Rugarian, who was shielding his eyes as he surveyed the valley.

Slav shrugged.

"Fek?" Zainal turned to the Deski, who showed no exertion from the difficult ascent. The Deski were such natural climbers that Kris had wondered if their home planet was nothing but perpendicular surfaces. Actually, their oddly shaped hands and the soles of their feet became slick with a sort of adhesive substance which gave them purchase on sheer surfaces and their unusually jointed arms and legs permitted them to assume postures that would have broken human limbs.

Fek had assumed her intensive listening posture, almost as if her hearing organs were extending themselves from the side of her head, wide open to experience the slightest of sounds.

"Wind. Water. Small noises," she said, shaking her head to indicate a lack of obvious danger. "No livings." Without waiting for Zainal's signal, she started to descend. He shifted the heavy coil of rope he carried, rubbed the sweat off his face, and followed.

Fek found the easiest descent for the rest of the party, zigzagging down some of the sheerer boulders, which she would have managed quite easily with her natural advantages. But she, too, stopped where sheer-sided stone angled sharply outward.

"I'd say that looks like something was meant to stay in there," Kris said.

"Twenty-five meters slanted at fifteen degrees or more," Whitby said. "So we rappel down." He unloosed his pick, found a piton, and started hammering it in, while Zainal removed the coil from his shoulder to rig it for the drop.

Once again, Kris thought as she took her turn at the descent, *That silly survival course comes in handy in my new life on Botany*. All of them, even Fek, grinning for all she was worth as she rappelled, made it safely to the floor of the valley.

"Leave," Zainal said when Whitby would have released one of the three ropes used. "We may need to get out quickly."

Leila immediately armed herself with her crossbow and looked around warily.

"It's full daylight, Lee," Kris said, reassuringly. "So even if our thudding on the ground here aroused anything, we're safe as long as the sun shines. Me, I'm for that stream."

One bend of the meandering water was not far from them and, though Leila did not put up her crossbow, they all approached the stream. Sarah as team medic used one of the testing strips on a cupful.

"Potable," she said, and dipped her cup back in to bring it full to her mouth, though she sipped carefully.

The other humans did likewise, then rinsed their sweaty faces in the cooling water. Fek and Slav, who never seemed to need much water, remained alert, listening and looking for any dangers unseen from the height. Then both knelt to take a sample mouthful directly from the stream, as they preferred to drink.

"This place looks almost too good to be true," Sarah said, breaking off a branch from a nearby shrub and smelling it. "One of the burnables, and growing all over the place," she said with an expansive gesture of her hand up the length of the valley. They could just make out the waterfall through the copses of lodge-pole trees. "Plenty of stone, too, ready to build from," she added, jerking her thumb over her shoulder at the rocks behind them.

"Not bad at all," Joe Marley said, already closely examining a handful of the ground vegetation and discarding the varieties he recognized. He was the team's botanist.

"It is very pretty place here," Leila Massuri said in her careful English, her contralto voice making inflections almost musical. She gazed around her with an almost dreamy smile on her unusual face. She was Maltese by birth, corralled by the Catteni in a demonstration raid in Marseilles. "So why was it blocked off?"

"We look closer," Zainal said, and he pointed at Joe, Sarah, and Whitby. "You go right with Slav. Rest of us go left and meet at falls."

Zainal gestured for Fek and the rest to accompany him as he waded across the stream, not more than knee height at this point. Once on the other side, they spread out in a loose line, checking the ground, noting which of the low bushes would bear fruit in season, and generally sizing up the environment.

"No rocksquats. That's odd," Kris said when they had been traveling a few moments. She pointed to rocky projections where the stupid but tasty creatures would be likely to perch, since they enjoyed the sun.

"There were some," Zainal said, and pointed to a little heap of bones just visible through the branches of a low shrub.

"No night crawlers then," Leila Massuri said with a shudder. She was a Fourth Drop and remembered all too keenly that the person next to her had been absorbed by a night crawler before her horrified eyes just as she was waking up.

"I'm not sure I like the possibility of more omnivores," Kris said, although, in truth, they hadn't seen much in the way of other hostile creatures in their considerable travels, except for the aerial marauders which either Slav or Fek warned them about. They camped in the vehicle or on rock heights to avoid earthbound scavengers.

"Things do die of old age or of falling off high places," Leila suggested.

"This stream gets swollen, to judge by the height of these banks," Kris said, pointing to them.

"Spring melt," Whitby said. They could not see the higher ranges, now hidden by the unbroken line of cliff surrounding the valley; mountains which were snow-clad all year round. Sarah McDouall had quipped that it must have annoyed the mechanicals to have so much unusable uphill land. Whitby's face had had a hungry look on it as he had surveyed the towering peaks.

"Never did get to the Himalayas," he had murmured, "but those buggers'd be great fun."

"Later," Zainal had said, but grinned as if he understood the mountaineer's yearning.

Now the Catteni stopped to squat beside dried dung, partially covered by dirt. Grooves did suggest the claw marks of an animal of considerable size.

"Old," Zainal said, finding a stick and poking the droppings.

"Big," Kris remarked, and looked around the glade.

Zainal picked up the desiccated patty and dropped it into the sack he kept for fire makings. Then they all continued on their sweep, more vigilant now. More dried dung was found but all examples seemed to be old and Kris was somewhat reassured.

"Reminds me of a place I went to once in Yellowstone Park," she said when they reached the far side of the valley, and its stony barrier. Craning her head, she peered upward, looking for cave entrances, but saw nothing, not even a ledge to give access to even the most agile creature. "We could use this wall for backing and build outward," she said. "If we could get one of the vehicles to maneuver through the pass so we could transport all that stone someone dumped across the pass."

"We'd need explosives to move the lower rank," Whitby said. "They were planted there to stay."

"To keep *what* in?" Kris asked with a shiver for whatever that might be.

Zainal shrugged but, by the way he was examining everything, Kris rather thought he could see the valley as a human settlement, too. The valley could accommodate several hundred folks, leaving plenty of elbow room. Of course, first they had to find out why the valley had been so tightly sealed.

Despite that consideration, she found herself looking for likely home sites. Imagine, a proper house at ground level . . . maybe even steps to a sleeping loft . . . one with plenty of headroom. She glanced over at Zainal's large figure quartering the ground ahead, searching, searching. Considering how much time he'd spent in space, he seemed completely at ease on planetary surfaces. He looked over his shoulder and beckoned for her to join him.

More bone, larger ones this time.

"A six-footed animal. Too small for loo-cow," and he held up what looked like a handful of thigh bones, then a smaller one that fit neatly into a clean socket. Rubbing his fingers across the bones: "Chewed, too." He pointed to obvious tooth marks. "Wouldn't want to meet that on a dark night."

Kris grinned, as much for his use of the slang expression as for a sentiment she could immediately share. He fiddled with the bones, making her hold the front set of legs, trying to get a size on the animal. The skull had been smashed into fragments, including the jawbone, although a scattering of molars and pointy teeth did not suggest to Kris that this had been a herbivore.

"That should please the biologists," Whitby said, joining them. Leila and Fek peered over his shoulder. "They said there had to be other carnivores for ecological balance." He picked up a fragment of the cranium and tapped it. "Hmmm. Thick. And yet crushed like a melon. Wouldn't like to meet what did it."

"A sentiment we all share," Kris remarked dryly, letting the bones fall out of her hands. Several smaller ones shattered. "Been here a long time if they're that brittle."

"Hmmm," was the response from Zainal.

"Caves, possibly?" Zainal added.

"Haven't seen any yet," Kris said cheerfully, and then Zainal had them spread out again to search.

Though they came across more scattered bones, some in advanced states of decay, nothing else came to light. They reached the lake first as the other scouts were finishing their explorations of the other side, which was wider at the point.

Suddenly Joe let out one of his earsplitting Australian howls and gestured broadly for them to come on the double to the cliff wall where he was standing. Zainal strode into the stream without a second thought but Whitby pointed to a convenient scattering of rocks and boulders to get the rest of them across the water. Zainal was up to his chest in the center of the stream but he was already running toward Joe and the others before the rest managed to cross.

"I don't like the look of this," Joe said, holding aside branches so that the skeleton, grotesquely draped on the scattering of rocks, could be seen.

"It's human," Sarah said. "Or was." She was pale under her tan.

Kris peered briefly, enough to see that the skull was human but not all the rest of it. No leg or arm bones, just the torso. Slav and Fek looked and nodded.

"Bird," Fek suggested, gesturing the swoop of the predatory avians.

"Could be," Joe cleared his throat and let the bushes fall back.

Suddenly they all were craning their necks back to scan the top of the precipice.

"Ah, they'd have attacked before now if they were nearby," Joe said. "You haven't heard anything, have you, Fek?" he asked.

Fek shook her head and pointed above her head. "I hear high."

"We do know that the avians always come down from the mountains when they attack," Sarah said, her color returning as she, and the others, moved toward the cover of the nearest copse of trees.

"I listen good," Fek added, touching both ear holes.

"We found some piles of other bones, all old, some even partially embedded in the dirt," Joe said. He sighed as he let his gaze rove across the valley. "Too bad. It'd be a great place to set up a permanent headquarters."

Zainal was shading his eyes from the now noon-high sun to look at the straight cliffs that formed the boundaries. He shook his head. "We must know why," and he pointed back to the barred pass. He clapped his big hands together, startling everyone, so he grinned. "There are fish in the stream. Let's catch and eat. We have time."

So far all the brook and lake denizens had been edible with the one toxic exception of a multilegged bottom-hugging worm that appeared only in stiller water.

The dung that had been collected gave off such a stench that they doused the fire with water and started a new one in a fresh place, using windfall branches. Whitby outdid everyone else by catching the orange-gray scaled fish with his bare hands. They all ate their fill and there was enough cooked fish left over to save for the next day.

WORRELL AND CHUCK MITFORD WERE ENJOYING A FEW PINTS OF BEER by the fire when they both heard a growling bark. With no dogs on Botany, the unexpected noise had both of them reaching for their daggers while Mitford roared for a sentry's report.

"Nothing's moving, sarge," the call came back. "And First Moon's bright enough to see clicks in all directions."

A second bark, which had at least three syllables to it, sounded again, with a hint of impatience. Instantly Worrell reached for the pouch in which he had put the thin plate that Mic Rowland had discovered.

"How did Leon say you operated one of these things?" Worrell whispered at Chuck.

Chuck took the object from his second in command and depressed the first button. "Tikso damt. Chouma," he said in a guttural voice as if he were expectorating rather than speaking. He put the unit down on the table beside them and glared at it.

"Didn't know you spoke any Catten, sarge," Worrell said, impressed.

"Whoever it is wants a report. I told him later. And to be quiet," said Chuck Mitford. "At least I hope that's what he'll understand I said. Where's Zainal?"

"Still hunting safe places up in the hills."

"I'll see can I reach him," Mitford said, and connected his unit to the aerial socket that served Camp Rock, high up on the cliff. He let it ring awhile. "Asleep or out of range. Well, let's keep after him until he does answer. Come to think of it, Leon Dane knows more Catten than I do. At least enough to stall them until Zainal gets back."

Leon Dane was on duty, but not occupied, when Mitford and Worrell went to the infirmary caverns. He had already been given the injector and drugs but had put them aside until Zainal could tell him what he might know about the contents of the vials.

"So someone's looking for those the midnight beasties ate up for us," Leon said with a faint grin. "Someone forgot to brief the landing party about Botanical life-forms. Served 'em right. D'you think they were here to collect Zainal?"

"Only reason I can think of for them to send four," Chuck Mitford said with a snort. "That wouldn't have been enough of a guerrilla gang to do doodly against us but sufficient to snatch a man. Zainal did mention that he was wanted back home for a duty of some sort he'd rather avoid. Maybe they want him badly enough to come after him."

"Lemme see the unit," Dane asked, and Chuck handed it over. "Oh,

that's the idiot kind. Already preset to its destination. So what do you want me to report?"

"Do they give a damn if the team landed safely?" Chuck asked.

"I doubt it."

"Then let's say that they're hiding out. Haven't located Zainal . . . no, make it target personnel."

"Emassi?" Worrell suggested, and Chuck nodded agreement to the change.

Leon scribbled what looked like hieroglyphics on a sheet of paper.

"You can write it, too?" Worrell asked, more impressed.

"A little," Leon said with a wry grin. In his professional capacity as a surgeon, working on injured Catteni under the eyes of their medics, he had been in a very good position to pick up the language as well as aid the subversive elements in Sydney. "Most of what I learned is either medical or military. I can't ask for my aunt's pen on the table or order a meal. But I can spout real good Emassi-like orders." He scribbled something else, this time in English. "How does this sound, sarge? 'Emassi not here. Moving to find. Report tomorrow this time. Do not contact.' "

"That sounds about right. They'd hide from our people during the day," Chuck said, thoughtfully. "That'll give us some time at any rate. You can say that much?"

"Too right," Leon said, grinning broadly. "Most fun I've had all week."

They all went outside and up to the top of the Rock for a clearer message. The moon shone down on the trio.

"Right out in the bright light, too," Leon said, shaking his head and grinning. Then he sobered, depressed the appropriate send stud, and, with his free hand clutching at his throat, growled out the message in a hoarse whisper.

He released the stud, counting. He shrugged. Depressed the stud and repeated the message. This time a single word answered his effort.

"What was that?" Chuck asked.

Leon gave him a conspiratorial grin. "'Kotik.' Means 'Accept.' Nothing about doing a good job or anything but Catteni don't expect thanks, do they?" He handed the unit back to Chuck Mitford. They were starting back down when he had a sudden thought. "Hey, maybe I should have sounded feminine. You did say you think one of the victims was a female?"

"One set of boots was much smaller," Worrell said. "But," and he scrubbed his head, "I don't think women lead many Catteni commando units."

"No," and now Chuck's tone was smug, "though they might just have sent along someone Zainal might be glad to see about now . . . as bait."

"Guessed wrong, didn't they?" Leon remarked in a level tone.

IT WAS WHEN KRIS, SARAH, AND LEILA DECIDED TO HAVE AN AFTERNOON swim that they found more skeletons, gleaming white bones in the shallows among the thick water reeds that grew there.

"That does it," Sarah announced, refastening her coverall. "Makes me wonder what the fish we had for lunch had for lunch."

Leila looked slightly nauseous.

"Sarah!" Kris exclaimed. Medics often had displayed a ghoulish sense of humor. She did have to swallow before she added: "We'd better see what kind these are."

Zainal waded in to fetch some of the nearer skeletons, which were identified as loo-cow, rocksquat, Turs, and another human skull, still partly attached to its neck. It was Leila who found the odd scales and quills. No one had taken any more than a glancing look skyward for any hovering avian predators but everyone agreed they didn't seem to be feathered, so perhaps they used the lake for bathing or in a grooming ritual.

"But they could just fly in and out. That barrier wasn't for them," Sarah said, frowning over the puzzle.

"It must have been something real bad for the Farmers to want to keep it contained," Kris said, trying not to shiver. She glanced up to see the position of the sun. "I move we get back to the vehicle and out of here. I don't want my next place of residence to be that lake."

So they put out the fire and retraced their steps to the barrier.

"Start up," Zainal told the others. "Whitby, with me. I look closer at stream . . ."

The two trotted down the other end of the valley. Kris, Leila, and Slav made the first ascent on the ropes. When Kris gratefully reached the top, she could see Zainal and Whitby having quite a gawk where the stream went through the bluff. The water boiled up over whatever outlet there was for its flow and made a wide pond at cliff base. She wondered what Zainal had hoped to learn from scrutiny. As soon as Fek, Sarah, and Joe joined them, they continued on up the cliff, reaching the top just as Zainal and Whitby surmounted the slanted barrier and began to unhitch the rappel equipment. The others started down to the vehicle but Kris waited for Zainal and Whitby.

"Well?" she asked as Zainal pulled himself up beside her.

“Something could swim through underneath,” he said.

“Have to have been damned desperate to take such a risk,” Whitby added, “unless you’ve some amphibious species here you haven’t told me about yet.”

“On Earth large carnivores will swim,” Kris said.

“On Earth,” Whitby agreed, nodding as he mopped his forehead and face. He looked back down at the daunting rock face. “If whatever it was had nothing left to eat, even the fish, possibly it would take such a risk. But I would still rather not meet whatever it was. Let’s take a look at that aerial—”

His words were broken off by the loud buzz of Zainal’s portable.

“Worrell here. You guys all right?” The Aussie was shouting into the speaker.

“Yes, all right. Deep in a valley all day,” Zainal explained.

“Oh. Well, a problem dropped in here the other night,” he said. “And you’re needed back as fast as you can make it, Zainal.”

“What sort of problem?” Zainal asked but Kris thought from the twinkle in his eyes that he had some idea. “They look for me?”

“We think so. Only they weren’t briefed proper.”

“Night crawlers?” Zainal asked, and grinned when Kris shuddered.

“You bet,” and Worrell sounded pleased. “And someone’s asking them questions on the portable comunit that was about all that was left of them . . . barring the shoes. Leon told whoever called that you weren’t here and they were still looking.”

“You want me to give myself up?”

If Zainal hadn’t been grinning like a loon, Kris would have gasped.

“Hell no, Zainal,” and Worrell’s tone was indignant. “Chuck’s got an idea.”

“I wonder if we have the same one,” Zainal said, winking at Kris. “We come as fast as possible.”

“Find anything good?”

“Tell you when we get there.”

Worrell disconnected and Zainal replaced the unit in its pouch, fastening the flap.

“Should I know what I just heard?” Whitby asked respectfully, but his curiosity was apparent.

“Why not?” Zainal said with a shrug, and nodded to Kris to explain.

Whitby had breath for a good chuckle over, “I drop, I stay,” and Zainal’s demonstration about the night crawlers and showing the hand unit that proved the planet possibly had another owner.

The question which Whitby did not ask, nor did Kris volunteer to

answer since she didn't know it, was what duty was so important that Zainal had to be abducted by stealth.

They had reached the ground now.

"We go back to camp as fast as we can," Zainal said.

"We're five days away," Joe protested.

"We took side trips up here," Zainal reminded him. "We take turns. Drive all night."

"Hey, it sounds important."

"Dirty work with cross feet?" Zainal asked.

"Crossroads," Kris corrected in spite of realizing that he was being deliberately obtuse.

"Sticky wicket, huh?" Joe said, and neatly finished recoiling the ropes. "Let's move out. I'll drive first. I've had a breather."

Both Slav and Fek liked to stand up in the front of the load bed of the vehicle, hanging on to the frame, staying alert and watchful. Sarah and Leila sat in the wide front seat with Joe. Kris, Whitby, and Zainal arranged themselves on the bedrolls in the back. Zainal then slid down until he could put his head on Kris' shoulder, folded his arms, and promptly went to sleep in the smooth-riding air-cushioned ground machine.

Chapter Two

THEY ARRIVED BACK IN CAMP ROCK BY SUNSET OF THE NEXT DAY, having pushed the vehicle to the limits of its panel-supplied power. Joe was of the opinion that the two full moons had been bright enough to keep the power levels high but Whitby and Leila had argued the point. It made an interesting discussion during the long hours of the trek, when they halted only long enough for natural requirements and to bag a few rocksquats. Joe turned out to be correct about the power, though the vehicle had slowed down considerably.

The sentry hailed them on their approach and rang the bell so that Worrell and Mitford were awaiting them in the parking area, one of Camp Rock's newer amenities. A big hauler and a small runabout, reserved for Mitford's use, occupied the space.

"We heard the transport," Zainal said as he swung down from the driver's seat. "Another drop?"

"Yeah, another thirteen hundred reluctant colonists," Mitford said with a grimace.

"Your species shouldn't be so difficult to manage," Zainal said with a grin.

"We also had to answer another message," Mitford said, showing his teeth.

"Tell me," Zainal said.

"We'll just unpack," Joe said tactfully, and gestured to the others.

Zainal caught Kris' arm as Mitford and Worrell started up the stone steps that led to the height's office. The two-roomed stone building had been built on a leveled-off area, well above any spring flood that might rampage down the gorge that split Camp Rock. Aerials and solar panels were attached to the slated roof of the good-sized facility. A desk, oc-

cupied as much by Mitford as Worrell in his capacity as Rock's manager, commanded a view down the length of the camp from the main window. From the other, smaller one, the view was across sloping stone to the first of the Farmers' fields.

Mitford gestured for all to sit on the stools and benches provided. "Leon's coming," he added. "Lemme fill you in."

Zainal nodded.

"The unit buzzed off shortly before we heard the transport angling in for a landing."

"Usual field?" Zainal asked.

Mitford nodded. "They've got that much right at any rate. Leon got a message that suggested the commando group was to meet with the transport and deliver your unconscious body. Certainly there was a group hanging around near the hedges doing nothing, apart from peering around and listening to their wrists a lot."

"What did you say back?"

"Leon told them the search continued."

Zainal frowned slightly. "What words did he use?"

"I knew the right ones," Leon said, entering just then and leaning against the doorframe to catch his breath from the climb. "I always had a team watching me operate on any wounded Catteni. I got used to some of the distinctions Emassi made. So I adopted a hoarse whisper in case it was the female who was to report." Zainal shook his head, his expression inscrutable. "I said," and Leon put one hand on his windpipe to alter the sounds he made, "'Mekichak Zainal obli. Tik escag eridi. Tikso tag.'" He removed his hand to speak less growlingly. "Which, I think, translates into, 'Moves Zainal much. Hear he returns soon. Report then.'" Leon raised an eyebrow at Zainal.

It wasn't often that the big Catteni burst out laughing as he did now, grinning broadly and obviously also enjoying some sort of a personally satisfying private joke. "You don't know it, Leon, but I am always moving a lot. You said exactly what they will believe. Where is the unit?"

Leon slid it out of a chest pocket. "Since I'm the only one who knows enough Catten to answer, I've been in charge of it."

The communicator looked much smaller in Zainal's large hands and could be slipped into a pocket or down a boot. He examined it carefully, his smile broadening again.

"This is very good. Very good," and Zainal's eyes sparkled with amused triumph.

"These were found in a boot," and Dane very carefully laid the other three items on the table.

Zainal held one vial up to the light and snorted. "Vikso. In very small doses, it will be useful to you, Dane. Makes muscles weak," and he pretended to sag like a limp string puppet before he handed it back to the surgeon.

"So, they knew they'd have to knock you out," Chuck Mitford said, tipping back in his chair and folding his arms across his chest. "Care to tell us why they'd go to this much trouble over you?"

Zainal chuckled again, still very pleased, and seeming to ignore the question. "This will be useful," he said, and waggled the unit before he replaced it carefully on the stone slab that was the sergeant's worktop. "Now we can set traps. Two would be the most we could get."

"Two ships?" Kris caught on first, though Mitford's chair returned to all four legs as he leaned across the desk, looking so eager and hopeful that Kris caught her breath.

"Two?" Worrell exclaimed, amazed at the audacious prospect.

Zainal nodded, leaning across the table toward the sergeant. "You have captured me. You, Kris, will speak this in a message, but I have fought hard and killed two. You need fast scout before vikso," and he tapped the vial, "wears off. They must land where Emassi scout met us. They must land silent," and he dropped his voice to a dramatic whisper, "with no lights and walk to edge of field to help you move captured Zainal."

"But I don't know enough Catteni."

"You will when you send message," Zainal said, and the look he gave her told her she was in for it now. After all, she'd been teaching him English: turnabout was fair play. "You will have made my capture."

"Me?" Kris looked around the room at the others, grinning at her almost maliciously. "Cut it out, you guys," she said with an edge to her voice.

"At ease, Kris," Mitford said, understanding her flare of resentment, and then focused his attention back on Zainal. There was no question that the sergeant would do much to possess a useful spaceship but he was not totally reassured by such sketchy details. "So you get them out of the scout, and preferably disposed of by the night crawlers, and then what?"

"We have one scout vessel."

"And no reprisals?" Mitford was extremely skeptical.

"No reason because the ship will take off . . ." and everyone exclaimed at that, and Zainal glanced about, grinning again. "It leaves to make them believe what will happen next." He turned to Kris. "You will manage to make one more message . . . and then . . ." He slid one finger across his throat and grinned.

"You overpowered us again?" Kris rolled her eyes incredulously. "Boy, will they buy that?"

"Buy it?" Zainal asked. His command of idiom and grammar was increasing but not yet as good as his accent.

"Believe it," she substituted.

"On Barevi I showed you I am difficult to catch."

Kris laughed. "All right. So I manage a message out before you kill me . . ."

"And I alter course . . ."

"*You* alter course?" Mitford asked, suspicious, narrowing his eyes and staring hard at Zainal.

"Certainly, so that moon hides ship to get back here." Then Zainal grinned again. "I will bring Kris with me . . ." and Mitford glowered more deeply, "and Bert Put and the woman, Raisha Simonova—who flew in space from your planet. They learn to use the ship. It is very simple to fly. You may come, too," he added with another grin and a bow to Mitford.

"Thanks, but no thanks," Mitford said with a wave of his hand and a fleeting expression of distaste. "I'll stick to good ol' Terra Firma. But taking the spacers is a damned good idea."

"I'll go in your place, sarge," Worrell said, raising his hand, his expression avid for the experience. "If I could . . ." he added hopefully. "We don't want too many people in on this, do we?"

Mitford shook his head, fretting over flaws in the plan, then caught Zainal's eyes again. "Your guys won't come looking here for the scout?"

"Scout does not leave much trail and they will not be quick to look around here," and he circled his finger in the air, meaning Botany. "They will start looking where I have friends to hide me. If they come back, the scout will be hidden with other metallic stuff at Camp Narrow. It will not be noticed in a scan." Then, after a moment of silence when the others were thinking the plan over, he added, "The last place they will look for me is here!" He pointed an emphatic finger at the ground as he grinned at them.

"Well, I'll buy that," Mitford agreed in a droll tone with the beginning of a smile on his lips.

"It will work," Zainal said with such conviction that Mitford began to straighten up from his crouch across the table. The Catteni paused, a smile tugging at his mouth. "Then . . ." and he had everyone's attention, "the next transport ship to arrive will be surprised and we will have two to use."

There was a long moment of surprised reflection but Mitford broke it.

“Your people can’t be that stupid,” Mitford began.

“No?” Zainal said, raising his eyebrows with a sarcastic expression. “The transport uses only Drassi. Not Emassi. The transports that come here are all in bad condition.” He grinned again. “Used over often. So if the ship explodes after takeoff . . .” and he spread his hands at such a simple ruse.

“The ship will explode?” Mitford asked, jutting his chin out.

“An explosion can be made with metal left in space to prove accident. That is why it is very necessary to get the scout ship first. It can dump garbage into space. Then, we have two ships.”

“Only one of them is not in good shape,” Mitford pointed out.

Zainal shook his head in denial. “Many people here are trained to work with machinery. I am not just pilot. I know how to . . .” Zainal tapped an impatient finger on the worktop as he searched for a word. “To . . . repair as well.” He grinned. “I have faith in your people, Mitford. Have faith in me.”

“Jesus, Zainal, I do, believe me,” Mitford said forcefully, slamming both palms flat on the table. “And I think that goes for all here.” That vote of confidence was immediately seconded. “And it would be great to know we’re not stuck anymore on . . .” He paused, looked surprised, and then laughed. “You know, I’m not as eager to leave Botany as I used to be.” He brushed away that candid remark. “Won’t the Emassi retaliate on Earth when they’ve lost both a scout and a transport here on Botany?”

“I don’t think they would.” Leon Dane spoke up with a wry grin. “The Catteni I met considered us a short step above aborigines. Our sabotage and revolts are annoyances that will stop when the leaders are all rounded up and dropped here.”

“Or elsewhere.” Zainal disconcerted them all by that qualification. “There are other planets that need to be . . . tested for occupation. Not this one alone. I do have one worry,” and he glanced at Worrell.

“I’m almost glad to hear that,” Mitford answered drolly. “What?”

“That Lenvec, who came for me in the first scout ship, speaks to a higher commander that we have technology not sent with us, that this planet is in use. That is another reason to capture me again.”

“How big are the odds he’s done that?”

Zainal looked dubious. “He can be persuasive but,” and now he gave a snort, “many Catteni believe only what they like to believe.”

“Just like some humans I know,” Leon said in a caustic tone.

"So, we might even have something to defend ourselves with if the Farmers come looking for us," Worrell said, looking relieved.

Zainal shook his head. "Only scout has weapons. But two is better than nothing and there are other uses for a scout."

"Our own exploratory missions?" Mitford asked.

"I myself will like to know who the other owners are. Don't you?" asked Zainal. "Also, it is not the Catteni who are your real enemy. It is the Eosi. Who farms this planet, who left that command tower, may be stronger, wiser and better than Eosi." He leaned back then, watching Mitford's expression changing as he absorbed this concept. "I do not want Eosi controlling my people anymore. Or yours. This is the first time I think there is the chance to end Eosi."

"Well, I'll be fucked," Mitford murmured, dropping his shoulders as he relaxed in complete surprise at Zainal's plan. He began to grin, and a laugh started in his belly, a laugh that was joined by Leon Dane's yowl of approval and Worrell's expression of sheer, incredulous delight.

"So that's what you hatched up on the way back here last night," Kris said, eyeing him drolly.

"Isn't that taking on one helluva lot?" Mitford asked, but the gleam in his eye and the jut of his jaw suggested a measure of approval.

"Yes," and Zainal shrugged, "why not?"

Mitford slapped the table again and gave another burst of laughter. "Yeah, why not?"

"We can *try* . . ." Leon said, swatting his thigh with one hand in emphasis. "By God, I want to!"

"Do you think we should?" asked Worrell, hitching his pants with his elbows. "I mean, they may be mad enough at *us* for what we've already done to their neat agricultural enterprise . . ."

"But who put us here in the first place?" Kris asked. "Only why do you have to pretend the transport explodes? And why do you have to be careful returning the scout to Botany?"

"We must joke the satellite."

"Joke?" Mitford raised his eyebrows, "Oh, fool."

"Satellite?" Worrell exclaimed, anxiously.

Zainal held up the slim unit. "They have one because this relays the messages. A satellite is standard for any colony planet. It sends in reports. It must send in the right ones so we . . . ah . . . fool it."

"Clarify one point for me, will you, Zainal?" Mitford asked, and when Zainal nodded, "Why do they want you so bad for that duty you don't want any part of?"

Zainal gave a harsh laugh. "I was chosen for it by Eosi. They can choose someone else now."

“Just what *is* that duty?” Mitford asked at his bluntest.

The change in Zainal’s posture and face, though subtle, sent chills down Kris’ spine and caused Mitford to recoil slightly.

“Eosi use your body.” Then, with a second almost imperceptible change which emphatically told Kris that Zainal would not elaborate on that subject, he went on. “So, do we take the scout ship?” His expression altered back to his usual bland one as he looked around at the expectant expressions of Kris, Dane, and Worrell before settling his gaze on Mitford. “That much is possible but we must act tonight. Kris must learn what to say. I need Bert Put and woman. Is that possible?”

“Can do,” Mitford said, and reached for the hand-held, tapping out the code for Camp Narrow. “Yo, Latore? Send Bert Put and Raisha Simonova up here on the double, will ya? Something’s come up. We need them before . . .” and he glanced at Zainal, who held up two fingers, “second moonrise. Okay?” Then he paused, his eyes flickering with rapid thoughts. “We’ll call this Phase One, and all of it stays among us.” The other nodded. “Phase Two we’ll talk about if Phase One works.”

“It will work,” Zainal said with absolute confidence.

“Phase Three . . .” and Mitford pointed a finger at Zainal, “is going to need a lot more thinking.”

Zainal was in total agreement.

“Damn it, sarge,” Leon Dane said staunchly, “even the mere notion of . . . Phase Three . . . puts heart in me. Think what it can do to the general morale.”

“I do,” and Mitford’s voice had dropped to a growl, “and I don’t want even a whisper of a happy smile on your faces when you leave here. We’re doing well enough right now, better all the time, and I don’t want to have to deal with false hopes. Let’s take it a step at a time.”

“Don’t you mean a phase at a time?” Kris said.

Actually she wanted to cheer wildly for the surge of hope that Zainal’s master plan had given her. Securing the first ship would be a big enough coup. Hijacking a transport would prove to everyone on Botany that they could get their own back on the Catteni. She wasn’t at all sure about Phase Three, but having two spacegoing ships gave them a positive advantage in finding whoever did own Botany. Would a Catteni scout ship be able to keep up with the monstrous leviathans sent by the Farmers to collect the harvests of Botany? *First*, she told herself firmly, *get it, then dream*. And if *they* were a species that resented having their supply planets taken over by another spacefaring power, maybe Phase Three would happen. And both Earth and Catten might get free of Eosian domination.

"Right," and Mitford gave her an odd smile, "hijacking spaceships sure beats sitting around waiting for the next drop-ins." He caught Zainal's eyes and began ticking details off on his fingers. "You teach Kris what to say to get the scout down here by second moonrise?" Zainal nodded. "So, if the scout buys it, they come down, leave the ship . . . only how'll they know you're there to be picked up? I can't volunteer anyone at night out on a field . . ."

"Air-cushioned vehicles attract no night crawlers," Zainal reminded him.

"On the way back," Kris added, "we found out that the full moon's enough to keep power up."

"Good point," and Mitford went on. "So we've got stand-ins far enough up the field . . ."

"Vehicle will move toward Catteni," Zainal said, nodding. "But not fast because they carry heavy load." He thumbed his chest. "Me."

"Good . . . so there's enough time for the night crawlers to attack. What about the Catteni shooting 'em? That Lenvec Emassi saw what night crawlers do on his last trip here."

Zainal shrugged. "Winter night crawlers are very hungry, very fast, and grab feet. Or we can be humane," and he grinned as he saw the reaction to the word, "and kill before they know. We have fast and silent weapons. Lance, crossbow, slingshot."

"Won't they leave a man on board?" asked Mitford.

Zainal shrugged. "I am drugged. It will take two, three to carry me. If is one, once we open hatch, it is over for him." He tapped the knife at his belt.

Mitford made an approving sort of grimace. "All right . . . everything goes according to plan and you, with your crew, take off and do your disappearing act. One small detail. Kris might be useful to lure the pickup squad down, but if you are overcoming a crew, would you not kill off the female first, the one who drugged you?"

Zainal slowly nodded his head, perceptive enough to know what Mitford did not spell out. "Leon speaks Catteni. I cannot talk because they have record of my voice. Leon can give final message."

"Point," and Mitford looked at Kris. "You understand, don't you?"

Kris did, and did not bother to hide the bitterness she felt for such a suggestion.

"You will go to space another time," Zainal told her, looking from Mitford to her.

"Now, wait a minute, Mitford," Dane began in protest.

"Leon will speak the necessary dying words," Zainal said firmly, his eyes still holding Kris'. "It reassures."

"It had better," and Kris glared fiercely at Mitford. How dare he imply that she and Zainal would be so selfish as to take the ship for themselves if both were on board.

"Why do you need Bert and Raisha?" Worrell asked.

"They need to have a first lesson in flying a scout. More people who know is better." Zainal put an odd smile on his face. "And soon."

"I'll buy that," Mitford said, shifting his eyes anywhere but in Kris' direction. "Phase One is green for go . . . and definitely top-security. Use your team, Zainal, for the driving and . . . the executions. Slav and Fek see well in the dark. I'll send Bert and Raisha to you as soon as they get here." Then, in a complete change of voice and manner, "Did your patrol find anything interesting before you were recalled for this?"

Astonished by that business-as-usual switch, even in Mitford, Kris glared at him.

"A very interesting valley," Zainal said, rising and popping the unit into his pocket before he picked up the sack of empty boots. Leon took charge of the medical items. "Let Joe and others debrief." Then he held out his free hand to Kris. "Now, you must learn to speak like Catteni female."

"After all you've done," Leon Dane muttered, exiting behind them. "Surely he can't doubt your integrity."

"Not to worry, Leon," Zainal said.

"I do all the worrying," Worrell said, but his tone made it obvious that he felt Mitford's precaution of keeping Kris out of space unnecessary.

"Don't worry about tonight," Zainal said, sounding, to Kris' ears, far too cheerful considering what he had just set into motion.

Then Kris found her mind going back to the echo of his colorless voice saying, "Eosi use your body." Small wonder he wanted to avoid that duty. She knew without a doubt that he would have hated possession. And yet, his original comment on "that duty" had indicated that it was considered an honor for an Emassi, and one they undertook with some pride. Had Botany wrought a great change in him, or was it simply that he now had an escape from such a hideous future? Then she began to wonder how deeply the possession went: Was just the body used as a vehicle for these mysterious Eosi? Or did they subsume the entire personality, leaving nothing of the original man? Or . . . what?

"Don't think about it," Zainal said softly, touching her elbow as they reached ground level. "I do not mean Mitford." Then he hailed the other members of their team, obviously waiting a turn to report to Mitford. "Go on up. He's waiting to debrief you."

"We're in our usual abode," Sarah told them as she followed Joe up the steps. "We've already put your gear there."

"Good. We have a small job to do at second moonrise. I tell you later."

Kris knew Sarah was dying to ask why Dane and Worrell had been in Mitford's office for an ordinary scout debriefing.

"We swim first?" Zainal asked as they made their way to their quarters in Michelstown cave.

"You bet. I think better cleaner," Kris said, and besides, not only could she use the immersion in the cold waters of the lake to reduce her anger but she also needed the privacy with Zainal . . . if they had the lake to themselves.

They did, and there were clean overalls in their quarters to change into. Zainal put the Catteni communicator carefully in the pouch with his portable unit in his fresh clothing before they left for their wash.

HE SEEMED EAGER TO MAKE THIS A SPECIAL OCCASION, TOO. THEY SPENT time soaping each other and then swimming exuberant lengths against the lake's deep current within the roped safety area before emerging to dry each other off. That led to a chance to release tension. In moments like these, Kris wondered just how much Zainal really did deviate—no, differ—from other Catteni and even Emassi. She knew that her association with Zainal was not universally accepted. There were incidents of spitefulness with each new drop but gradually, over the past months, that had altered—with very few exceptions—as most Botany settlers learned just how much they owed to Zainal's presence on the planet. Xenophobia was not encouraged by Mitford or Easley or any of those involved in introducing this world to its new residents.

Her pleasurable ruminations were rudely interrupted the moment they started back up the stairs to the main cavern, as Zainal barked sounds at her.

"We're starting already?"

"Second moon rises soon. You must be ready."

"I gotta know what the sounds mean, Zainal," she complained.

"Get the sound right and then I tell you meanings," he said, and repeated the four staccato syllables again. She did her best to imitate . . . though the combination of fricatives was enough to choke her. She'd already noticed that characteristic of the Catten language. Sort of like German with a French accent . . . or maybe guttural French with a very bad German accent, and a little Chinese for seasoning.

She managed to get the first set of syllables to his satisfaction by the time they reached the main cavern. Food was still being served and they stood in line for their portions, which they took to the privacy of one of the lookout levels, out of earshot of those who were enjoying their meal outside in the mild evening. Botany's primary had not yet set but the first moon was already above the eastern hills, a pale ghost in what was left of the sunlight. That reminded Kris that time was a constraint.

Because she had always learned better using visual aids, Kris took a sharp pebble and scratched out the phonetics of what Zainal coached her to say . . . as well as she could. Just when she thought her mimicry was accurate, Zainal would shake his head.

"What's the matter with that?"

He shook his head again but patted her shoulder. "You don't sound . . . mean."

"Mean?"

He growled out the words she now knew meant, "Report. Found Zainal. He fought hard. Two dead. He is drugged. Land where Lenvec did. No lights. Meet in field."

She tried again, as deep in her throat as she could, still realizing that even that wasn't perfect.

"Look, I'll growl a whisper. How'll they know the difference?"

"They might." Then he held up his hand. "What was it that Leon did to sound hoarse?"

"Grabbed his throat," and doing that, she repeated the phrases once again, hoping she wouldn't accidentally strangle herself.

"That's it," Zainal said, bringing both hands together in a clap of approval. "Now, listen . . ." and he rattled off a sentence of which she understood three words, "report," "dead," and "land."

She told him what she understood.

"You may be asked. You must know what to answer to any question."

"What about 'I don't know'?"

"You must sound as if you do know all. So, say first, 'Chouma'—'quiet'—as if you can be overheard. Then 'Schkelk' . . ." and Kris sat upright with surprise because she knew what that meant.

"'Listen'?"

Zainal grinned with surprise as he nodded. "Say as harsh as you can because you are dealing with a stupid person."

"I heard it said that way often enough on Barevi," Kris said in a rueful tone, and then spat the word out with appropriate venom. Zainal laughed and gave her hand an approving squeeze.

“Just use that tone with all the words and they will not argue with you. You sound almost Emassi. After ‘Schkelk,’ you repeat the original message to be sure they heard you right the first time. Next you say, ‘Kotik?’ in the way which means they are not to question you again.”

“Got it.”

He drilled her and drilled her until her voice became hoarse enough without a need to strangle herself. She was surprised to see that First Moon was bright and high when he finally said she was good enough.

He took out the unit and held it up. “Now!”

“Now? You mean, we do it tonight?” She panicked. She wasn’t ready yet. “But Bert and Raisha . . .”

“They are here. I saw them drive in. I brief them, too. So we send message now. All is fresh in your mind. And mouth.”

He pressed the finger pad and, much too quickly for Kris’ peace of mind, a voice responded. Kris gulped and began her well-rehearsed message, overriding one question with as harsh a “Schkelk” as she had ever been given. Zainal nodded assurance, wagging his hand to reassure that the interruption meant nothing. She said, “Chouma,” as nastily as she could, and went right into the prepared speech again. By this time she was so scared that her final “Kotik?” came out every bit as savage as the worst Catteni guard’s.

An almost meek “Kotik” plus two syllables she didn’t understand was the response and Zainal depressed the disconnect button.

“Baby, you were great!” And Zainal tousled her hair and pressed his cheek against hers with great affection. That had become his special caress for her.

“But what was that last bit?”

“Your name. You are, or were, Arvonk.”

Kris made a face. “Awful name.”

“Useful to know.”

“They answered awful fast.”

Zainal considered that. “They want Zainal bad. They are there till they get me.”

“In a bigger ship?”

“The scout is ship enough for this errand.”

“They’re *not* getting you!” she said, jumping to her feet.

“No, they are not,” he agreed equably, and took her hand as they made their way down and across to Mitford’s office.

MITFORD MUST HAVE BEEN WATCHING BECAUSE THE GROUP HE HAD been speaking to were abruptly dismissed. Surprised, they passed Zainal

and Kris on the way up the steps. Bert Put, his lean face alight with anticipation, and Raisha Simonova raced across the gorge to catch up. They didn't until Zainal and Kris entered Mitford's office.

"You got the message through?" Mitford asked.

"They come. Kris spoke like good Emassi." Zainal was grinning with obvious pride as he held the door open for her.

"I had to say it often enough to get it right," she said gruffly, and, with instant solicitude, Mitford offered her a cup of the herbal tea that everyone had come to enjoy.

Bert and Raisha came in and took seats, but so tentatively that Kris knew they had no idea why they had been summoned.

"Have you spoken to your team yet, Zainal?" Mitford asked.

"Not yet. They will do what needs to be done with no problems."

Mitford grunted and scratched the back of his head. He still did not look Kris in the eye. Which somewhat appeased her.

"May I have paper?" Zainal asked, and Mitford quickly supplied him with sheets and a pencil. With his usual quick sure strokes, Zainal sketched what had to be the interior of the scout. Bert's eyes grew rounder and wider while Raisha watched with avid fascination.

"The interior of a Catteni scout?" Bert asked, incredulous eyes on Zainal's face. "How?" he demanded, and Raisha sat right on the edge of her stool.

"You said nothing to them about Phase One, sergeant?" Zainal asked as he continued to detail the layout.

Kris covered her grin with her hand because Zainal had suddenly turned pure Emassi and Mitford reacted by sitting straight up, exactly as a subordinate should. He did spare one droll but respectful look in Zainal's direction before he spoke.

"Bert, Raisha, we mean to catch us a scout ship tonight," he said, and both gawked in disbelief. "A few nights ago a Catteni ship landed four commando types on a field at night."

"Oho!" Raisha said, and turned pale.

"That would have been their first mistake," Bert said with a smug grin.

"Their second was in thinking it would be easy to find Zainal," Mitford said. "Fortunately night crawlers left boots and some other inedible pieces of equipment. So we can lure the scout back down."

"You mean, like tonight?" Raisha shifted forward on her chair, inhaling with deep delight.

Kris couldn't resist jumping in then. "I told them to land silently, with no lights, to meet me and an unconscious Zainal. That I needed help moving him as he'd killed two others trying to escape before I

could zap him.” Raisha looked slightly confused. “One pair of boots was a lot smaller. *Cherchez la femme.*”

“Oh, gotcha!” Raisha said. “Only how do *we* avoid the night crawlers?”

Mitford went through the rest of Phase One and the two gave a small round of applause when he finished.

“Look, I did a lot of training but only one short shuttle flight,” Raisha began anxiously.

“I only had two but one as navigator,” Bert said, though both were clearly dying to go on despite their inexperience.

“You’ll do good,” Zainal said, so convincingly that both demurred. “A scout can carry six at most. Four were set down. I think only two remain. Both can be told to come help Arvonk, the contact,” and he pointed at Kris. “Maybe not. So, if we have to get in fast and kill, inside is like this.”

He walked them through the tight passageways of the scout ship and then using the drawings he had also made of the control panels, talked them through the short preflight sequences. He mentioned the colors of the relevant toggles and drew diagrams of the icons above other controls. They concentrated so hard Kris could almost see them absorb words and drawings into their heads.

“We take Leon, who speaks Catten, to give last warning of trick by Zainal and then . . .” Once again he used his finger across his throat and grinned. “I will show you how to circle moon and glide to land.” He turned to Mitford. “We hide scout and then I work you hard to learn how to pilot Catteni vessel.”

“You will?” Bert’s eyes were nearly popping out of his sockets but Raisha assumed an aura of complete calm confidence and gave a little sigh.

Zainal had certainly made two people very happy. “Study hard now. Kris and I prepare our team.”

Chapter Three

FOR A PLAN THAT HAD BEEN SO HASTILY PUT TOGETHER, IT COULD NOT have gone more smoothly. Kris was shaking badly when the comunit buzzed but Zainal had rehearsed her in two more phrases.

“Arvonk,” she said, hand on her windpipe, and added in harsh Catteni, “See you. Glide in. Chouma.” Which she added on her own.

They could just make out the ship in the gleam of the rising moon as it settled silently in the corner of the field. A brief glint of muted light was cut off as the hatch closed.

Zainal was pretending to be one of his own captors, Kris the other, while Leon, being tall, was plainly leaning against Zainal as if unconscious. Joe Marley, face blackened, hunched over the controls of Mitford’s usual air-cushion machine and eased it forward at a slow walking pace.

The first surprised burst from the Catteni was the signal for Fek and Slav to rise from their crouching positions and dispatch both intruders with silent lances. Then Joe increased the power of the vehicle and they whizzed down the field to the scout. Zainal hit the exterior release and Bert and Raisha bolted through as soon as the hatch was wide enough. It was Leon’s turn now.

“Stolix Zainal,” he called out, trying to sound triumphant but listening to be sure there was no sound of another person on board.

Zainal pushed past, knife at the ready, and strode with no stealth at all toward the bridge in the prow of the small spaceship. Those listening outside heard him slide a panel.

“Were only two,” he called back.

“Permission to come aboard, sir?” Bert asked, not quite facetiously as he adhered to protocol.

"Permission given," Zainal said, and Kris heard the relief in his voice.

"I just want a quick look," she said, and followed Raisha and Bert down the passageway. She wondered if scout crews were chosen because they were physically small enough to maneuver in such enclosed spaces. Zainal certainly had to walk sideways.

Raisha was already seated in one position, with Bert running his fingers lightly across this and that panel as if confirming the briefing Zainal had given them. The look on his face made Kris gulp. He was having a hard time believing that he was actually preparing to go into space again—not as an unconscious passenger this time. She envied them.

"Kris, one last message," Zainal said, turning her toward the controls. "Say, 'Arvonk icts, stolix Zainal. Escag. Klotnik.'"

She muttered them over to herself and then Zainal pointed to the speaker grille and threw a toggle up. She almost forgot to grab her throat but the fact that she could say the words with authority lent a certain vibrant triumph to her tone. "What did I say?"

Zainal ruffled her hair. "'Arvonk here, have Zainal. Return. Out.'"

"Out sounds too much like 'Kotik, accept.'"

"Not to Catteni listener. Now, out. The satellite must record the takeoff." He escorted her down the cramped aisle to the hatch, one large hand on her shoulder. At the hatch, he put his cheek against hers, pressing hard before he hit the open button.

Dazed as she was by the night's success and the prospect of being without him for a day or two, she remembered to step carefully down onto the air-cushion platform. She lifted one hand to her cheek, feeling his against hers. Joe drove off.

He was picking up speed when Fek abruptly shouted, "Stop!" Surprised, Joe braked so quickly his passengers had to grab at each other to remain upright and in the vehicle. Fek leaned over the side, peering down at something Kris was very glad she could not see as clearly as the Deski could. With a grab as deft as Whitby's fishing, Fek wrenched something aboard that clattered as it fell. She reached down again, arm at full stretch and her other hand clutching Joe, and got hold of something else. A ray of light illuminated a field that writhed and seethed, for it was a hand beam she had retrieved. Kris groaned and turned her face away. The night crawlers bumped in futile search at the floor of the vehicle.

"You see, Slav?" she asked, grinning the triangular Deski smile as she focused light on the other side of the vehicle, and the other victim.

"I see. I get." And Slav made two equally speedy retrievals. One

he held up for Kris to see in the light, and his smile was the broadest she'd yet seen on a Rugarian face. "Stunner." And, in a sudden, unexpectedly juvenile manner, leaned the barrel across his arm and made the hissing sound of a stunner blast.

"Can we leave now?" Joe Marley asked in an edgy voice. He didn't wait for an answer, pushing the control bar hard over. "We could have waited until morning. Crawlers can't digest metal."

"I want tonight," Fek said with uncharacteristic firmness.

"And stop shining that thing around," Joe added testily as they sped up a field which writhed and glistened.

Mitford was waiting in the parking area, as if he didn't quite trust the participants to keep the night's event to themselves. Kris knew herself to be on an adrenaline high so his presence had a certain sobering effect on her. He gestured for them all to go through the silent camp, up to his office. He had thoughtfully provided beer and the salty pretzel-like snacks. Rugarians and Deski rather liked beer now and then but they were careful not to drink much or often. It had some sort of an effect on their metabolism—not a hangover, according to Leon Dane, but something similar—that they did not cope well with.

Kris took a long pull on her beer to settle her stomach, and noticed that Joe did, too. Mitford just waited, knowing from the look of their faces that the hijack had been successful.

"I'd say by now I've been killed and Leon is dying," she began. "Otherwise it all worked out just as we planned . . . with a little diversion from Fek and Slav." She shuddered as the two now dropped the retrieved equipment on Mitford's desk.

He only glanced at the hand beams, which Kris thought would have been more useful than stunners. But, of course, weapons would come first with a military man. He picked the stunner up, turning it over in his hand, checking the controls and snapping something shut. "That's the safety on—now—but you guys wouldn't have known." He almost patted it when he put it down, and took up the other to render it harmless.

"Bert and Raisha looked as if they were having Christmas," she went on. "I had a peek around once Zainal said the coast was clear." Mitford nodded. "Rather cramped. Good thing Leon isn't an inch taller." Mitford nodded again. "He will be back, you know." Mitford nodded one more time.

She finished off the beer, took a handful of the pretzels, and stood up. "I'm worn out," she said. "Good night, and thanks, Joe, Fek, Slav. We're the best team on Botany!"

Mitford nodded.

It was only when she turned over in her bed that Kris realized she still had the comunit. A lot of good it did her even if it was a link with Zainal up in the scout ship, faking the next step of Phase One. She slipped it up onto her shelf and then let herself fall deeply asleep.

MITFORD TOOK HER AND THE UNIT DOWN TO DROP FIELD THE SECOND day, when Zainal could be expected to return. Camp Rock vibrated with rumors, although everyone connected with Phase One had done their best to act in a normal fashion. To make sure she gave nothing away, Kris had to pretend she'd sprained her ankle. Sarah kept busy getting cold water to reduce the swelling. Joe, Fek, and Slav worked on servicing their big exploratory vehicle or writing reports. Leon Dane was reported to have gone off with Zainal, Bert, and Raisha to be at some emergency at Camp Shutdown. But the rumors persisted.

"We'll still surprise them," Mitford said as he pulled the little air-cushion runabout up against the hedge. They'd seen a few of the avian predators on their way, so he took what cover there was. "I hope."

"We're alone, sarge, so I'll give you a piece of my mind on that stunt you pulled . . ." Kris had the satisfaction of seeing Mitford flush with embarrassment. "You had no right to insult Zainal that way . . . and even less right to use *me* as his surety. I came awful close to hitting you . . ." She cocked her fist in demonstration.

"Goddammitall to hell'n'gone, Kris Bjornsen," Mitford recovered sufficiently to snarl at her, "I had to! I do trust Zainal, quite likely more than I've ever trusted another human being . . . and he is human to me . . ." Mitford's response was as fervent as hers had been and his eyes were sparking. "But I can't take any chances. With him or you." He let out a deep snort, rubbing his hands through his close-cropped hair in a gesture of exasperation and, oddly, impotence. "And I need *him* more. *We*," and he meant the colony, "need him more." Then, in one of his swift mood changes, he grinned at her, impudent and oddly melancholy. "I would have liked to be where he is now with you . . ." He held up both hands quickly in defense. "Don't take me up wrong, Kris. But you're a fine woman and Zainal's the only man I wouldn't try to muscle out."

It was Kris' turn to be embarrassed. She had vaguely known that Mitford fancied her, though after he kept sending her out with Zainal, she had to decide that she had imagined it.

"I'm sorry, Chuck," she said, all her previous aggravation dissipating. "It sort of happened and you kept throwing me at him . . . more or less."

“More,” and Mitford let a wry expression touch his rough features. “because I shouldn’t. And you were the only one *I* could trust to keep him alive until the rest of them figured out he was far more valuable alive than dead.”

“We owe you a lot, sarge,” she said, and touched his arm lightly and gratefully. “But you still made me real mad yesterday.”

Mitford laughed, stretching his legs out the side of the parked vehicle.

“Yeah, well, sometimes, I gotta do what I gotta do, and there was no time to call in some of the brass we got around here now.”

“Ha!” Kris grinned back at him. “You wanted to do this one yourself without any brass involved. But I strongly suspect you really better let the others in on planning Phase Two . . .”

“And Phase Three,” said Mitford, turning his head slightly to gaze off down the field, its ground cover matted down by the frequent landings of the transport ship and unconscious bodies. He scratched at his head again and looked back at her. “I’d be stupid, real stupid, not to get the strategists in on Phase Two. But this first one . . . That,” and he jabbed his thumb into his chest, “was for me! And you,” he added magnanimously. “In fact, I’m sort of phasing me out.”

“Oh come now, Chuck . . .”

“No, I mean it, Kris. We’ve got nearly nine thousand here now. I knew what I was doing for five hundred and eighty-two, even two thousand, but . . . goddammitall, I want to be the one finding the good stuff, not leave it up to you and Zainal, or the Doyles or that Scandinavian crowd. Me, Chuck Mitford, wants to have some of the fun.”

“Who’ll you have on your team?” she asked, as much to cope with his surprising announcement. She knew very well that the colony had trained men, like Easley and Rastancil and governors like Ayckburn and Chavell, but Mitford had made the colony *work*.

“It won’t be the same without you in charge. Not at all,” she said with deep regret.

Now he touched her arm lightly and winked. “You won’t know I’ve been gone until I get back. Frankly, my dear, I’d rather someone else who really knows how to plan big pushes carried the can on Phase Two and Phase Three. But you can bet your last nickel, I’ll wangle some part in it.”

“You wouldn’t be you if you didn’t.”

“Hell, Kris,” and he was serious again, “I made a promise to the folks when I took command Day One that somehow we’d get free.” He looked off into the distance of morning mist-shrouded fields. “Free, yes.

Leave? I'm not so sure about that now." He looked around him at a landscape that no longer seemed alien and unreal.

"I wondered," she said, encouragingly.

"If we could come to some sort of an agreement with the landlords, either or both, this'd be a great place to build up without all those damned minorities messing up their own landscapes. It'd be a fresh start for everyone."

"We've already made one, you know."

He nodded and knuckled his nose. "That I do. But free. I promised that and now we've got a chance to deliver."

"Phase Three might mean leaving here if the brass does buy Zainal's master plan and free Earth, and Catten, from those Eosi."

He gave her a narrow-eyed look of pure devilment.

"Hell, gal, there's at least one more war in this marine. I'm not at all sure of the combat zone or the weapons and you better believe," and he wagged his finger at her sternly, "that I'm not going to be the only one to debrief that Zainal, article, clause, and all the fine print. There's an awful lot we don't know about the Catteni—not to mention the Eosi."

"And our landlords, the Farmers."

They both heard the faint rumbling sound from above, followed by a more vigorous rustling as Slav, Fek, Joe, Sarah, Whitby, and Leila pushed through the hedgerows just beyond them.

Kris managed one startled glance at Mitford, wondering if their very private conversation had been overheard. He winked and pointed to the team, who were panting as if they'd been running a good distance.

"Fek hear," the Deski said, grinning. "Scout comes."

Slav pointed and they could see the speck in the sky that rapidly increased in size. The noise became not louder but clearer. Suddenly more avians than any of them had ever seen at one time swarmed around it: some bodies dropped as oak seeds might, flittering and twisting groundward; some dropped more quickly as disparate sections, while those left alive did astonishing aerial maneuvers and flew away as fast as they could.

"That's handy to know," Mitford said with an approving grunt, and climbed out of the runabout. He stood, arms crossed on his chest, his eyes narrowing as he watched the ship's steady approach.

Was Zainal piloting, Kris wondered, or had he let Bert? Whoever it was made a very neat touchdown about twenty yards from the on-lookers with a final burst of steamy exhaust from the portside thruster. The hatch moved open and Raisha jumped down, grinning radiantly. She snapped a salute to Mitford, which he returned.

“Mission accomplished, sir. All present and accounted for.” Then she threw her right arm in the air and let out an exceedingly unmilitary yell.

With everyone else, Kris moved toward her, trying to peer around for a sight of Zainal, and Bert, too.

“That Zainal . . . he even let Bert land her,” Raisha cried, shaking hands with everyone, even Fek and Slav, who were now accustomed to that odd human habit. “You should see this place from outer space, sarge. It’s even more beautiful than Earth. I know that sounds like heresy but it’s true! And we know where the satellite is, so Zainal says there’ll be an easy way to avoid it by taking different windows out because it’s positioned geosynchronously for this area. No way of telling how long it’s been up, so it’s possible that, even if it was in geosynch with this landing area, it might not have seen the Farmers’ ships.”

Kris grinned at Raisha, recognizing the high she was on, but Kris also kept looking for Zainal.

“Oh, he’s still explaining some of the finer points to Bert. You’ll have to drag them out of there,” Raisha said. “Sarge, we got good views of the other continents during our landing orbit. It looks like only one other one is being farmed as intensively as this. It’d be smart to have a look and see if it isn’t wiser to transfer everything to an unoccupied continent and just put the farms back to the way they were before we got here. Just think how that’d confuse the Catteni.”

“Easy now, Raisha,” Mitford said, grinning at her babble.

“Oh!” She looked over to the others. “I should just debrief to you, shouldn’t I? But they all know about Phase One, don’t they? It’s . . .” and she stopped, took a deep breath, brushed sudden tears out of her eyes. “It’s just that once the Catteni took over, I never thought I’d make space in a real ship.” She dashed more tears from her eyes and made an obvious effort to control herself. “One helluvan astronaut I’m making.”

“You did just great, ma’am,” Mitford said in military tones, and that did the trick.

“Thank you, sergeant. I appreciate having had the honor to go.”

“ ‘Where no human has gone before.’ ” Kris heard herself repeating the *Star Trek* phrase.

Mitford inched closer to the open hatch but Kris reached it first.

“Zainal?” she called, damning herself for acting like a possessive female.

“On the bridge!” He sounded elated, too.

As Raisha had said, he was still explaining to Bert yaw and roll

procedures and which toggles and handles were used in which situations.

"You landed her on a dime," Kris said, looking from one to the other, and it was Bert who smiled proudly back at her.

"Zainal insisted. Damn near wet myself," he said, but Kris only laughed at him. "There seem to be only so many ways to arrange controls and panels, so it wasn't actually that hard. Not that Zainal wouldn't have taken over if I glitched . . ." He pointed to the right-hand position at the bridge. "Mind you, those predators coming at me like F-88s were scary . . ."

"I don't think they'll be back anytime soon," Kris said. "Those that lived to fly away."

"They don't appear when transports do," Zainal said, thoughtfully.

"The scout makes a sort of whistle . . ." Kris suggested, and he nodded. She wanted to do something more than stand there with both hands at her sides, something to show Zainal how very, very glad she was to see him. She wished Bert anywhere but on the bridge.

Then Zainal stepped to her side, pulled her so that their cheeks touched and his lips brushed her ear before he stepped back. "I go debrief to Mitford." He turned back to Bert. "Go through the sequences. We must put her out of sight before we close her down." Then he pushed Kris around and down the narrow passageway. "We now know much more about Botany that is useful to know."

All Kris could think of was that he was back and Phase One complete and Mitford was willing to go to Phase Two. As she stepped out onto the field where she had lain unconscious and vulnerable nine months ago, she could scarcely believe the change in fortune. And all because she'd rescued a fugitive Catteni.

AS KRIS DISCOVERED, WHILE THE CURIOUS—AND THEY CAME IN DROVES down from Camp Narrow—inspected the scout ship, Zainal's debriefing with Mitford dealt more with the details of what he had observed of the rest of the planet during the landing orbit than with the flight. He had piloted in the initial stages, past the satellite, given the scout some rolls and yaws.

"To look out of control," Zainal said with a grin, "and then I went behind the moon and out of the satellite's range." Of Bert and Raisha, he said, "They know more than they think they do. Well trained. Able to drive while I looked. The scout makes fast . . . sketches . . ." He looked inquiringly at Kris, who supplied, "photos." "Yes, photos, details

of other continents. Got very close on last pass.” Zainal grinned. “Much better than what we were given.” And he paused, twitching one eyebrow in irritation over the earlier reluctant handouts.

“Raisha said something about only two continents being farmed.”

Zainal nodded. “One is empty but greening. Other not too good, I think. But I am not farmer.”

“You want us to shift our living space?” and Mitford waved over his head to mean the campsites the colonists now occupied, “and keep us out of trouble with the real landlords?”

“Land . . .” and Zainal separated the two words in puzzlement, “lords?”

“The race which first claimed this planet.”

“Ah, landlords. Yes. This is considerable. A people who could make a prison of that valley we explored do not act as Catteni or Eosi do. They kept something in there, or kept something from getting in. That is not how Catteni or Eosi work.”

“Nor even humans, if you look at history,” Mitford said in a droll tone, crossing his arms on his chest again.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Zainal gave Mitford a long look.

“Phase Two, sarge?”

Mitford chuckled, dropped his arms to slap his hands on his knees. “You found weapons?”

“Enough to overpower stupid Drassi,” Zainal said almost contemptuously.

“Things are getting more and more interesting, aren’t they?” Mitford said to no one in particular.

Someone nearby cleared his throat and Kris looked over her shoulder at a group of men she vaguely remembered were formerly military and naval brass. Instantly she was alarmed for Mitford’s sake. She didn’t want him summarily replaced by newcomers who figured they knew more about running this world than Mitford. It was Peter Easley who had cleared his throat.

“Sergeant, when you have a chance, we’d like a few words with you?”

“More than a few and your being here saves me sending for you,” Mitford said, stepping down from the driver’s seat. “Have you met Emassi Zainal and Kris Bjornsen yet?”

There was a formal shaking of hands all round, hands which Kris noticed were callused and hardened by “civilian” labors. She noticed that everyone was respectful to both her and Zainal and told herself that she was imagining “hostile takeovers.” The cordiality of all nine did not

seem forced. Their comments ranged from "Well done" to "A terrific boost to morale here."

"What Earth rank is 'Emassi' equal to, Zainal?" Mitford asked, and winked at Kris.

"'Emassi' is captain," Zainal informed Mitford, regarding him blandly. "Emassi outranks sergeant," he added, and grinned.

"Beg pardon," Peter Easley said, leaning forward politely, as if he thought he had missed something.

"Old joke," Mitford said. "Have you been in the ship yet, gentlemen?"

They all nodded and grins widened.

"Might we get filled in on the details?" asked a silver-haired man—one of the generals, Kris thought. His eyes traveled from Zainal to Kris to Mitford and then Easley. "The implications of such a capture are staggering. Rastancil, Major General," and he added with a rueful expression, "retired."

"As I said," Mitford began, "I was going to send for you as soon as I could report that Phase One was successful." He gestured toward the ship, frowned briefly as there was a scuffle at the hatch. Cupping his hands over his mouth, he let out his parade-ground voice. "EASY DOWN THERE! OR NO ONE GOES IN! LATORE, DOYLE, MAKE 'EM FORM A PROPER LINE. Sorry about that," and he turned back to the brass. "It is successful and I think it's time I turned the matter over to Tactics or Strategy or whatever you want to call an appropriate body."

"Sergeant, if you got this much done," Rastancil said, "you've more than earned the right to sit in on a Phase Two, if you mean what I think you do."

Mitford nodded sharply. "A Phase Two and a Phase Three." He gestured to Zainal again. "Yeah, we do need to talk." More sharp yells of protest from the spaceship. "Lemme handle this first," he said, and slipping back into the runabout, his expression ominous, he circled down to the crowd around the hatch.

"Just what had you in mind for Phase Two, Emassi Zainal?" one of the naval men asked. He had a definite British accent, so Kris placed him as Geoffrey Ainger.

"I am Zainal, no more Emassi," he said. "I will tell you about Phase One."

"Then do it up at Narrow, why don't you?" Kris suggested as yet more people swarmed across the field to set eyes on the space vehicle. "I'll wait here for the sergeant."

"We will all wait for the sergeant," Easley said, but he gestured to a point farther up the field, well out of the traffic from camp to the parked ship, where there was a slope up to the hedgerow, providing seating.

If there were one or two men who cleared their throats or raised eyebrows in surprise at that firmly delivered suggestion, Easley was so deft at easing them the way he wanted them to go that they all complied. When they got to the spot, Zainal crossed his ankles and sank gracefully to the ground. Kris sat beside him and Easley on Zainal's other side, facing the others as they made themselves comfortable. He gave a concise report of Phase One, from the first report by Coo to the moment it landed. Kris was particularly proud of his English, maybe not perfectly grammatical, but concise.

When he was finished, a balding, stockily built man with a weather-beaten face and a fine scar from jaw to temple, held up his hand. "Why would you have been the object of such a concerted kidnap attempt, Zainal?"

"How much do you know of Eosi?"

"More than I like but not enough to understand why they'd hunt out one man," was the reply.

"You are the American general, Bull Fetterman?" A nod answered Zainal's question and Kris gave him full marks for having sorted out names and ranks. Zainal kept himself informed of what sort of people had been dropped, and knew, from Mitford's report, of the presence of military and naval officers. "Then you will know that Eosi command Catteni maneuvers." Fetterman wasn't the only one who nodded. "They pick Emassi to make longer their lives."

"Say what?" Bull Fetterman assumed a posture and an expression that had undoubtedly given him his nickname.

"They subsume the Catteni totally," Kris said. "Zainal would have become a zombie . . . or worse. . . . He wouldn't be dead but he wouldn't have any personality left. Like Heinlein's *Puppet Masters* yarn."

"And the first scout came to take you back because you'd been chosen?" Easley asked.

Zainal nodded.

"I heard it was some sort of honor," Rastancil said, though his expression suggested he didn't consider it so.

"It is." And then Zainal grinned. "But I was dropped. I stay." He made a scissors motion with his big hands. "I am off the honors list."

Easley blinked and grinned. Rastancil did, too.

"But it was duty?" Fetterman said.

"Not once I was dropped here," And Zainal pointed emphatically at the ground.

"Someone has to take your place?" asked a black officer—late forties, Kris judged his age.

"Another male of my line. There are several," Zainal said with a shrug.

"What about reprisals here?" another man asked. Kris thought he was Reidenbacker. She'd been reviewing in her mind all the names and occupations on drop lists and was putting them now to faces.

"The last place they will look is here," Zainal said.

"You're sure of that?" Admiral Scott asked, his tone barely civil.

"He's got a point, Ray," Rastancil replied. "If you were deserting, the last place you'd go to is the place you deserted from."

"I do not desert," Zainal said with a slight frown. "I was dropped. I stay."

"Then that's some kind of duty or just a personal preference?" Scott wanted to know.

"Zainal is referring to the fact that no one placed on one of these trial planetary occupations is ever released," Kris said firmly and trying not to glare at Scott. "This is essentially a penal colony, you know. Zainal *refused* the option to leave because that would break another rule: only because it suited his superiors. If they'd retrieved him before he was sent off with us dissenters, it would've been another matter entirely. But they let him get sent." She added that, whether it was true or not, just to make sure Scott wasn't going to call Zainal a deserter or coward or anything like that.

"We concede the issue," Rastancil said, smiling.

"So we can be sure we won't be in for any reprisals because you brought the scout here," Scott added.

"I think we've established that that is unlikely," Easley said, trying to end that topic, "since Zainal deliberately took a course that would take him out of this system on his departure. Ah, here's the sergeant."

Mitford cleared the look of irritation from his face as he stepped down from his runabout.

"Damn Aarens claiming he had rights . . ." he muttered to Kris as he hunkered down beside her. "Finished discussing Phase One?"

"Indeed we have . . ." Easley began.

"Could we have a written report for the record?" Scott asked.

"One's all we got paper for, sir," Mitford said with no apology. "Kris, can you do it for me? So, Zainal, if you'll describe Phase Two just as you told it to me three nights ago . . ."

Zainal suddenly rose to his feet. Even though most of the brass were sitting on a slope, his new position required them all to look up at him, as neat a bit of strategy as Kris had ever seen.

"The transports that make the drops come more often. Your planet is giving Catteni trouble they did not expect. The ships are not in good repair. We have weapons now. We can take a second ship." He held up one hand to forestall questions that goal provoked. The gesture was one of such dignified command that even Scott subsided, scowling. "We take transport. Then scout takes load of metals from mechs and bomb and explode in space far enough up there . . ." He extended his hand upward. "Satellite is geo-syn-chron-ous," and if he sounded out the syllables, he had them in the right order. "Can only see this side. Will see explosion." He made the scissors gesture again.

"Now don't try to tell me the Catteni will let that go without some sort of an in-depth investigation!" Scott said, making no attempt to disguise his skepticism and disapproval.

"Not if crew's last message tells of . . . system's failure." Zainal had to work to find the words, but he found the right ones.

"Two famous last messages and each time a ship disappears?" Scott said, openly scoffing.

"Only Drassi are on transport ship. No big loss," Zainal said coldly. "Catteni . . ." and he laid an emphasis on the word, "do not worry over small casualties. Ship or Drassi. You should know that by now."

"Does that mean you, a Catteni officer, are willing to let *us* kill Catteni?" Scott demanded, watching Zainal with narrowed eyes.

Zainal gave a shrug. "War makes casualties. You know that. I know that. Or," and he let a wry smile play on his lips, "do as Catteni do. Let crew go free, those that remain alive. If they are not found in one whole day," and he lifted a finger, "they live and join us. They are dropped. They stay."

Kris hastily covered her mouth with her hand but she scanned faces to see who understood Zainal's wit. More got it than didn't. These guys were sharp enough. Scott seemed the only hard critic.

"You did know about that Catteni rule, didn't you, admiral?" Mitford asked very politely.

Scott gave him a curt nod.

"With respect, sir, in case no one mentioned it," the sergeant went on, "Zainal was shanghaied aboard that ship in contradiction to that rule. Just in case any of you wondered why he didn't feel he had to comply with any further orders from Emassi."

"Thank you for explaining that, sergeant," Easley said. "I think that should clear up any lingering doubts about where Zainal's loyalties now

lie. To return to Phase Two, what good does it do us to have a ship that may not be useful? Even if Zainal believes we can disregard reprisals.”

“I think of the Farmers,” Zainal said, and all eyes were on him again. “With two ships, we can send one with their transport . . .”

Scott dismissed that notion with a snort and looked away.

“Now, wait a minute, Scott,” Fetterman said. “I’m not entirely clear on these Farmers or Mech Makers or whatever you want to call them.” Then he turned back to Zainal. “You *want* them to know we’re squatting on their land?”

“Squatting?” Puzzled, Zainal looked down at Kris for an explanation.

“Slang for taking over lands or a place that you don’t own,” she said quickly. “Actually, that’s Phase Three.” Before they started arguing over Phase Two, Kris wanted them to have some grasp of the scope of Zainal’s plans. “Forming an alliance with the Farmers against the Eosi because if they can farm a planet without any sentient being in charge, Zainal thinks they may have a sufficiently sophisticated technology to help the Catteni get out from under the domination of the Eosi—and stop being made into zombies and doing things because the Eosi order them to be done. Like take over Earth.”

“Whoa, there, young lady,” Fetterman said, but he was grinning and so was Rastancil, while Scott looked more annoyed than ever. “Pretty ambitious, if you ask me.”

“The longest journey starts with the first step,” she said in a firm but clear voice, and gestured back over her shoulder at the spaceship. “Step number one.”

“Kris has a point,” Easley said, once again taking charge as he seemed able to do almost effortlessly. “Until this morning none of us would have remotely considered the possibility of hijacking a Catteni ship . . .”

“Having a damaged transport’s no damned good . . . for going after Catteni or Eosi or these Farmers,” Scott said, standing up.

“But transport allows us to shift a lot of people to one of the other continents that the Farmers are not using,” Mitford said, beginning to let his irritation show. “It’s another step to owning ourselves instead of being a goddamned Catteni colony they think they can just walk into and take over when it gets on its feet. That’s the usual plan, isn’t it, Zainal?”

Kris watched Mitford winding himself up and looked anxiously in Easley’s direction, but the man was watching eagerly as if he wanted Mitford to sound off.

“Well, a scout’s a start on our Botany Defense Initiative and I’ll

back Phase Two with every man and woman that's been following me the past nine months." Then Mitford caught hold of himself, took a deep breath. "If we pull that off, too, then we can reevaluate the situation. And there's more than just the Catteni to worry about. There're the Farmers and how they'll take to us being dropped here on their prime real estate without their say-so. Now I know I've mentioned to you that most of us are beginning to think we ought to leave the Farmers' installations alone and find our own. That's why I have scout parties out all over the continent."

"Hold it there a minute, sergeant," Rastancil said, getting to his feet. "Thought you dismantled all those mechanicals so that the Farmers would come and see who was vandalizing their planet."

"That was the only option open to us *then*, sir. But we've been having discussions about that," and Mitford gestured to Easley, Fetterman, and up the hill toward Camp Narrow. "Nor was I the only one who wanted to get off this planet *then*." He paused. "I'm not so sure I want to leave now. And I know a lot of others have had second thoughts like me. But that," and he pointed back toward the scout ship, "alters everything. Or . . . hell, you should see that as well as I can." And he ended with his arms at his sides, waiting for reaction.

"Definitely the situation has changed," Easley said, and heard murmurs of seconds to that. He seemed to be appraising the moods around him. "Phase Two seems feasible but, as Sergeant Mitford says, it's going to need some intense planning and good timing . . . even with weapons at our disposal. I suggest that we adjourn and discuss ways and means."

"Scout hides," Zainal said, and pointed toward Camp Narrow.

"You're going to fly it in?" asked a man with a rather rakish mustache as he got to his feet, brushing off the seat of his coverall. "I'd like permission to be aboard, sir. I was mission control on the last shuttle project. Trained as a test pilot. Gino Marrucci."

Zainal looked to Mitford, who nodded. Then Zainal looked to Scott. "You come, too?"

Someone stifled a chuckle but Scott, controlling his expression, stood up. "I would like to."

"Ship only holds eight at the most," Kris said, though she'd hoped to be one. "You have to go, sergeant."

"Then you do, too," Mitford said, jutting out his chin.

"One more," Zainal said. "Air force man?"

"I was air force," the black general said, getting to his feet. "John Beverly."

"That's settled then," Peter Easley said. "Shall I drive your runabout

back to Camp Narrow, sarge? And be sure that garage's . . . or should I say, hangar's . . . ready."

"Good idea," Mitford said.

Zainal pivoted and, without looking back to see who followed, led the way back down the field.

"Always meant to go see the display at Houston but never found the time," Mitford said conversationally to no one in particular in the group walking in step with him. He grinned as Kris made a hasty leg change to match strides with the others. "Happens all the time with us military types."

"OKAY, OKAY," JOE LATORE WAS SAYING WHEN HE SAW THE PHALANX moving in on the spaceship, and gestured for those in line to see the ship to make way. Grumbling started until Mitford swung into view, when it was replaced by cheers for Zainal and Mitford.

"We're gonna fly this baby up to Narrow now," Mitford said. "You'll get a chance to look inside later."

"You mean, the Catteni are goin' to be lookin' for it?" a man asked in a nervous tone.

"Naw," Bert said, appearing in the open hatch. He grinned when he saw the delegation, and jumped to the ground, waving those behind him from the last tour to make a quick exit. "Why would a Catteni in his right mind want to live on Botany if he could get off?"

There was good-natured laughter, as those still hoping to see inside the prize began to drift back up the hill.

"Gentlemen." Bert waved the new group in. "Shall I . . ." he began to Zainal, as if he anticipated being replaced.

"You must watch me do it," Zainal said. "These watch, too."

"I'll bet they do," Bert murmured low enough for only Kris and Zainal to hear as they passed him.

Kris stepped up, into the hatch, ahead of the brass. She wasn't going to be left behind this time. Mitford did give precedence to Scott, Beverly, and Gino Marrucci. When they reached the bridge, Raisha was in the second seat and hastily got to her feet.

Zainal gave her a nod and then pointed to Bert to take her place, while he folded himself into the pilot's chair.

"Secure hatch, Raisha," Zainal said, and looked at the arrangement of those standing in the cramped space of the small bridge. He nodded and gestured for them to stay where they were.

Kris inched closer to Mitford, who was just behind Zainal.

"You watch good?" Zainal said to Bert, who nodded as Zainal's fingers moved in slow sequence over toggles and switches. "Got that?"

"Yes, yes . . ."

A quick glance around and Kris saw that Bert was not the only one memorizing the sequence. Beverly and the test pilot were the most eager but Scott's expression was less critical.

"Ve-ry smooth," Beverly said. He was the first to be conscious of the vertical takeoff.

"It is extremely maneuverable craft," Zainal said in an instructional tone, two fingers of his right hand on the grip. "One of its biggest . . ." He tipped his head back, toward Kris, for her to give him the word he needed.

"Assets," Kris supplied.

"Ass-ets, not asses?" Zainal asked, blank-faced.

"You pick up too much bad language, man," she muttered as everyone else grinned.

"In space as well?" asked Beverly.

"Better in space," Zainal answered, as he depressed a button on the panel in front of him and began a horizontal forward movement, skimming safely above the heads of those moving back to Camp Narrow.

"That satellite won't see the movement?" Scott asked.

Kris wondered if the admiral would ever give Zainal any slack.

"Not that kind. Very basic and geo-syn-chron-ous," Zainal replied, twitching one shoulder. "I use only . . . guide . . ." He craned his head about, for Kris' help.

"Guidance," Beverly supplied. "Thrusters? Or rockets?"

Zainal made a gesture with his free hand as if pressing the earth away from him.

"We'd call 'em thrusters, I think," Beverly said. "Do they move?" and he rocked his hand to indicate different positions. Zainal, flashing a look at the signals, nodded. He was watching the landscape closely.

"Is there much fuel left?" the test pilot said, looking over the gauges and dials. "Which one?"

"This one," Bert said, and tapped it—a needle point just a shade over a halfway mark.

"Reason two for Phase Two. Transport will have fuel," Zainal said.

"How far will what there is take us?"

Zainal shrugged. "Not back to your Earth."

"What sort of fuel do you use?" asked the test pilot.

Zainal rattled out some Catteni sounds and then grinned at the pilot.

"Can't make here." He made another correction, moved a toggle, and the pilot gasped.

"You're gliding in?"

"No need to waste fuel," Zainal said, and pointed his finger just as the entrance to Camp Narrow appeared in the hillside.

There were a lot of people watching now, waving their hands, mouths open though no sound penetrated the scout.

"Fraggit," Mitford muttered, his face pale, as he grabbed for something to hang on to as the scout seemed to slide down a corridor that had once seemed much wider.

"Easy as pie, sergeant," Beverly said, grinning broadly as they headed inexorably toward the target barn's wide-open doors.

"It'll fit?" Mitford asked, taking a firmer hold on the ceiling handle he had found.

"No problem," Bert said.

Kris sympathized with Mitford. She tried not to hold her breath. The flight vanes on the rear of the fuselage must be just clearing the sides of the alley. Then she noticed someone encouraging the forward motion with hand gestures as he backed toward the barn. Zainal held up one hand, caught the man's attention, and gestured him to stand aside. With the slightest possible touches on the thrust handlers, Zainal lifted the ship above the cliffside, and with equally delicate movements, turned the scout around, lowered it, and began backing it into the barn. The ground crew leaped in front and now made pushing gestures, as he stood to one side so he could judge when to wave off.

"No rear mirrors on this thing, huh?" Mitford murmured in Kris' ear, but he had color back in his face now that they were nearly parked.

The wave-off came and, with one final adjustment, they felt the scout ship settle to the floor.

To Kris' surprise, the observers clapped their hands, even Scott.

"You'd've been a great Atlantis pilot," Marrucci said.

Zainal stood up, squeezing up against Mitford and Kris in the cramped space. "Bert, show Marrucci how to shut her down."

"Can we watch?" asked John Beverly.

Zainal shrugged, looking at Mitford.

"Sure, why not," the sergeant said, and eased himself toward the passageway to give the others more space. But he looked over his shoulder to observe that Scott stayed as well.

"Did it go well?" Raisha asked from her position in the passageway. "I couldn't see a thing with all the bodies in the way but I felt it turn around."

Zainal undogged the hatch and stepped out into the barn, giving Kris a hand down first, and then Raisha.

"Can this be locked, Zainal?" Mitford asked in a low voice because the man who had acted as ground crew was loping up to them.

"There are six of these," Zainal said, showing Mitford the small grayish-brown rectangle in his hand. "I have hidden three. Bert and Raisha each have one. Is that right?"

Mitford looked thoughtful, almost sad. "For now but I think the flyboys and the brass will decide who gets to use this baby."

"Baby?" Zainal asked, turning to Kris. "Is that like 'boy oh boy,' and 'man oh man'?"

"Ships are generally referred to as 'shes,' female," she said, grinning. "And special ships are 'babies.' Specially good ships!"

"That's a lot of baby," Zainal said, with suspicious laughter glinting in his eyes as he looked down the length of the scout.

"Hey, Zainal, that was some sweet job of piloting," the crewman said, running up with his hand out for Zainal to shake. "I used to be flight deck officer on the *George Washington* . . ."

"Aircraft carrier," Kris explained.

"Boy, you landed that baby as sweet as if you'd been backing her into this hangar all your life!"

Zainal gave yet another of his shrugs. "I had to learn. And pay for holes made."

"Didja?" Somehow that pleased the man. "Need any more help with her, I'm your man. Vic Yowell's the name." He gave Zainal's hand another shake and then went to prow around the vessel.

"All that brass isn't going to take the ship away from us, are they?" Raisha asked, keeping her voice down and her eye anxiously on Mitford.

"Listen up, you lot," Mitford said, catching them with a stern glance, "that ship makes this a whole new ball game. I know General Rastancil by reputation—he has a good one. I heard good things about General Beverly . . . don't know about the navy, but I do know," and he wagged his finger at them, "that there'll be some changes and we gotta be flexible. So let's go with the flow. Right?"

"Where I flow, you go," Zainal said, poking Mitford in the shoulder with one finger with each word. "Right?"

Mitford gave a short laugh but Kris knew that he appreciated Zainal's statement of loyalty.

"I don't know about you lot, but I need some chow about this time of day." He walked out of the hangar.

"Me, too," Raisha said. "I didn't like Catteni shipboard rations. They tasted like cardboard wadding."

"Healthy," Zainal said as he took Kris by the arm to follow the lead.

"Will we get to Phase Two?" Raisha asked over her shoulder.

"For fuel we must," Zainal said.

"So if I get a chance to learn to pilot the scout, I could pilot a transport vessel?"

"You can now," Zainal said, grinning at her surprise. "Drassi need very simple controls."

"Say, Zainal," Mitford asked, "how many ships do you think we can hijack before they stop landing here or your destroyers come to have a look?"

Zainal just grinned.

THEY HAD FINISHED WITH THE NOONTIME MEAL WHEN BERT AND THE others who had stayed on in Baby, as the ship was unimaginatively called, joined them at their table. Marrucci and Beverly were full of questions for Zainal about the performance levels of the ship, its cruising range, cargo capacity, weaponry, and maintenance requirements. Kris translated terms as well as she could, with help from both Bert and Raisha when she bogged down over unfamiliar words and meanings. Mitford sent someone for paper and pencil.

"Would you have such a thing as a manual?" Ray Scott asked at one point.

"What good would a Catteni manual do us?" Kris asked, almost defensively although Scott's attitude had modified considerably since the docking hop.

"Diagrams," Scott said, and Kris was ashamed to have missed the obvious.

So Zainal told Bert where to find the service manuals in the pilot compartment. The day became a session of terminology and translation. Engineers were sent for to decipher the schematics while Zainal struggled to explain with his inadequate technical vocabulary. For Kris there was only guesswork, but she came up with appropriate ones more often than the others did. Zainal did know the basic maintenance routines and checks required since he had often flown this type of craft and had had to make repairs.

Worrell arrived at one point and took Mitford off with him. Reidenbacker left later on and took Fetterman with him but Kris was far too occupied with spatial and aviation words to do more than register that there were other faces where those men had sat. There was also no question that the capture of Baby was the best thing that could have happened on Botany at that particular moment.

It was full dark before Zainal suddenly shook himself and stood up.

"I can talk no more tonight."

Then everyone became solicitous and grateful and said that by all means he should get some rest.

"You, too," he said to Raisha and Bert. "No sleep last night. Not good. Minds must be rested to learn how to fly Baby." He caught Kris with one hand, Raisha by the other, and gestured for Bert to follow them out.

There was a brief lull in the various conversations as they stood, but by the time they reached the door these had picked up again, and sheets of Zainal's meticulous diagrams were being passed around along with the manual.

All four walked wearily to one of the less crowded end barns. A "people" door had been cut into the larger one and a narrow entry area established before three aisles sectioned off the floor space. Screens of woven reeds divided areas into living spaces, affording a certain degree of privacy. Single pallets stuffed with fluff weed, spare blankets, a rough box to hold possessions, and two stools made up the furnishings of the one Zainal and Kris took. He moved two pallets together. Kris got her boots off, emptied her pockets of the comunit and items she hadn't realized she still had with her, and lay down. Zainal covered her with a blanket, before removing his boots and settling down beside her, reaching out to grasp her hand before he took one deep breath and fell asleep at the end of it. She wasn't far behind him.

STILL UNACCUSTOMED TO BOTANY'S LONGER DIURNAL PERIOD EVEN AFTER nine months, and despite the excitements and exertions of the previous day and night, Kris found herself waking before sunrise. Zainal was awake, too, lying on his back, hands behind his head.

"What's up?" she asked in a low voice.

He released one hand, curled his arm around her head to stroke her cheek. "Thinking."

"Good thoughts?"

He nodded.

"Share them?"

He rubbed his knuckles against her cheek: she could see his teeth in a smile in the dim light. "I must outthink Catteni."

She caught his hand, holding it against her cheek as she turned toward him, her lips closer to his ear. "Then there could be trouble over the scout."

"Not here yet." She could feel his cheek muscles lifting as his smile broadened. "Lenvec may not be . . . fooled. Or it is 'joke' this time?"

"Fooled. Why?" She tried not to stiffen against him in concern but

he sensed it, far too aware of her body language now, and his hand flattened soothingly against her head.

"He does not wish to do Eosi duty."

"Is he the other male you meant yesterday?"

She felt Zainal's shoulder twitch and the rumble of amusement in his chest. "He is next but may not be chosen." That seemed to amuse him even more. "He has life mate and several childs already," Zainal added as if that should be a consolation.

"Children," she corrected automatically. "Don't you?" she heard herself ask.

"No chosen has life mate but I have two males. Too young to be chosen."

"So if Lenvec is chosen, we don't have to worry?"

"He did not say how soon the chosen must go. If there is time, maybe. He will be commanded where to search first." Then Zainal paused, and she sensed he deliberated on whether or not to continue. He stroked her head slowly. "Maybe . . . he gets better satellite over Botany."

"Higher-tech? More sophisticated?"

Zainal nodded. "But even that will take time." And she felt his laugh. Felt him stop, too. "I must be very careful."

"Shouldn't we tell Mitford all this?"

Zainal gave his head one shake. "Not now. He has enough troubles with—what did you call them—the brass? Beverly, Scott, Rastancil, them?"

"Yeah, they're all brass, admirals, generals: Marrucci was a colonel, I think. Watch out for Scott."

Zainal grunted agreement and surprised her by smiling. "I like a good fight."

"You mean, convincing Scott you're all right for a Catteni? Or getting Phase Two and more fuel for the scout?"

"Both." He gave her hand a warm squeeze. "This gets interesting."

"Don't get smug, Emassi Zainal."

"Me? Never. This Catteni bastard watches his step."

"Zainal! Where did you pick up that language?"

"Is it not correct?"

She knew he was teasing and laughed. "I'm damned glad you know as much as you do, particularly right now . . ."

"For the brass-heads."

She giggled, ducking her head into his chest to muffle the sound. "Brass-heads"—she must remember to tell that to the sergeant.

AT LENVEC'S INSISTENCE, WHICH WAS BEGINNING TO ANNOY PERIZEC both as patriarch and commander, he listened to the record tape and replayed the satellite's recording of the scout's takeoff, the suddenly erratic course which straightened into a dive toward the subject planet's second moon, disappearing beyond the satellite's visual limitation.

"But analysis proves that is *not* Zainal's voice. None of them are. What has Personnel said about Arvonk?"

That was the one flaw in Lenvec's arguments. "There is none of Arvonk, who was only a woman and not in service as Emassi. She was used because Zainal had chosen her several times for intercourse."

"There are no other Catteni down there. Who else but another scout could have responded?"

"Some of the Terrans have learned our language."

Perizec snorted. "But not how to operate comunits."

"Zainal could teach them." Lenvec spoke through his teeth with aggravation—an unwise attitude to show his senior and parent, but he had absolutely no doubts that Zainal had somehow escaped capture: had probably piloted the scout off the planet. And then, for reasons Lenvec could not understand in a Catteni Emassi who had been chosen to serve the Eosi, Zainal had returned to the planet. He had not taken refuge anywhere in Catteni space because everywhere he would be hunted: nowhere would he find asylum.

Zainal's taunt "I drop, I stay" was like a pulse in the back of Lenvec's brain. What good did it do Zainal to go back to the planet, no matter what technology had been found there? Could Zainal know the origin of the original occupants of that planet? Was that why he took the scout? What good would such a move do?

"He has somehow made friends with the Terran dissidents," Lenvec went on, desperate to persuade his father to believe him. "Now he has transportation. He has some plan in mind."

Perizec dismissed that consideration as he rose. "For all the good it will do him."

"Sir, for the honor of the family, insist on a second orbital satellite. Geosynchronous does not have sufficient capability to keep a watch on his next moves."

"Next moves?" Perizec regarded his son steadily and with such malice that it was all Lenvec could do not to recoil from such scrutiny. "*Your* next move is to attend the Eosi Selection. No further delay is possible. Is that understood?"

"Maybe the Eosi will not be so blind," Lenvec said in a bitter tone,

and when the nerve whip suddenly appeared in his father's hand, he braced himself for the blow. Despite that, the agony rocked him to his knees.

He had to be helped by his life mate to his quarters, where she disobeyed the protocol that required the recipient to endure a whiplash by administering a nerve block. Clern stayed by his side until the medication took effect. Which was more than she ought to have done but did not, as she had probably hoped, appease his bitter resentment sufficiently for one final sexual interlude. Lenvec could think only what he had been deprived of because Zainal had been the chosen of their bloodline. The opportunities and promotions that Zainal had enjoyed because he had been the chosen. Eosi liked their "subjects" to have rich experiences to bring for them to enjoy, to use as guides in their manipulation of their subject species. Lenvec had had to be satisfied with a circumspect life, learning to manage the family estates and accepting simpler rewards than Zainal gathered. Lenvec had even had to rear Zainal's children with his own, since being chosen kept Zainal from having a mate. That was the one privilege Lenvec had had which Zainal did not. And now Clern had to be set aside because Zainal had escaped.

During those long last hours of his single being, Lenvec toyed with suicide but the dishonor would have deprived Clern of wealth and protection, and his sons of their inheritance, which would be considerable. If he could have also deprived his father of honor by taking his own life, Lenvec might well have murdered himself.

His hatred of Zainal, his sense of betrayal, his keen awareness of the injustice done, consumed Lenvec, even when, supported by a blood pride he had not known he possessed in such depth, he was accompanied by Perizec to the vast complex reserved for Eosi. He entered with the three other Catteni being presented by their fathers, and Lenvec's resentment flared and deepened. *They* had been chosen: *they* had had the privileges Zainal had enjoyed and he had been denied. But he had as large a measure of Emassi pride as any of them and so he went, seething with hatred and the now deeply embedded ambition to somehow get even with Zainal.

That kept his back straight, his knees stiff as he faced the Eosi Mentat who would engulf him, making him no more Lenvec but all Eosi. A fearsome entity even to an Emassi who had seen what Catteni became when subsumed by Eosian Mentats: that shining immensity in a giganticized Catteni form. That one thought, of eventual triumph, sufficed Lenvec as the subsumption occurred. It kept him from screaming as two of the others, previously willing and proud young men, did as they were engulfed.

Certainly the intense emotion intrigued the Eosi as it settled into the strong new body, and the shell it had been using drifted like the dead thing it had been for centuries onto the highly polished floor of the chamber. Quite unusual, in fact, for the Eosi had made such transfers frequently and was delighted by a novel experience as the last of the personality which had once been Lenvec totally dissolved within the Mentat.

The shell, crumbling into dust, was swept into a receptacle and returned with proper ceremony to Perizec, who waited with other fathers to receive the discarded husks. Of them all, Perizec was the most relieved. He had greatly feared that Lenvec would be found unacceptable, and the dishonor to their bloodline would have been catastrophic. But honor had been served and their family would continue to supply young men to the Eosi and reap more worldly rewards than other, less favored families.

However, Perizec must still discover where the cowardly Zainal was hiding and make sure he paid the price of his evasion. Perizec smiled at the thought of a suitable execution. Private, of course, but the event could be enjoyed by Clerm, who had been deprived of her mate, and should be seen by Zainal's sons so that they would have to live with his dishonor as their lifelong penance.

He took the receptacle of his great-grandfather's dust to the family crypt and placed it in the niche prepared for it. He looked at the array of ancestors who had done their duty. Then did his final task: listing first Zainal and then Lenvec as dead. Too bad he could do nothing punitive to Zainal's sons, but that would expose the reason why Lenvec had had to stand in for his brother. There were other, subtler ways to make them pay for their father's defection.

QUITE A CONSIDERABLE GALACTIC DISTANCE FROM THE EOSIAN HOME planet and its expanding sphere of influence, the homing device arrived in the slot designed to receive it on the huge moon installation where such devices were processed. When no message was displayed, the container was routinely overhauled for the malfunction. Such homing missiles were rarely dispatched without cause. No malfunction was discovered. The device had been well engineered and had always operated within its design parameters. The lack of any message was unusual. The container was sent to Processing to identify its point of origin. Since that planet was not one in any sense critical, or even very

important, the errant device was shunted to the agency that, from time to time, investigated anomalies. The appropriate galactic coordinates were tagged for investigation during the next regular maintenance circuit.

Chapter Four

IF THOSE INTIMATELY CONNECTED WITH PHASE ONE SLEPT, IT BECAME obvious to Zainal and Kris when they quietly exited their quarters at dawn, that others had not.

A weary duty cook had propped her chair back against the wall, her head lolling to one side as she caught what rest she could while the knot of men and women at the table farthest from her murmured urgent conversations and passed papers back and forth.

Though Kris and Zainal had entered the mess hall quietly, their arrival immediately curtailed the discussions. Almost every head turned to see who came in.

"Zainal! Kris!" Peter Easley half rose from his seat and beckoned them over. "Grab something to eat and drink, will you? And join us?"

The cook slept on, snoring slightly, so Kris and Zainal helped themselves to the food kept warm in the pans and the tea in the kettle.

Kris identified not only Scott and most of yesterday's brass but others, obviously called in from the other camps for this session.

"You started something, Zainal," Peter said, rising and gesturing for Zainal to take his place, while he hooked over chairs from the next table for Kris and himself.

"Phase Two?" Zainal asked, settling himself, and eyeing the mass of papers and charts and lists that littered the table. He sipped.

"You bet," Easley said while several men at the other end of the table resumed their interrupted debate. "I sent Mitford off to bed at third moonrise. He couldn't keep his eyes open."

"How can *you* then?" Kris asked.

"Oh, I caught a coupla hours before we changed guard," and Easley winked at her conspiratorially.

She was somewhat reassured although she had not previously considered Easley, for all the help he gave Mitford during drops, as a surrogate for the sergeant.

"We have discovered a lot of droppees have had military training, and more than enough have commando, SAS, or similar training in their own countries so that we can have our pick of the force to make Phase Two successful," Easley explained in a low voice. "What is needed now is information from you on—"

"What weapons there are aboard the scout," Scott interrupted, "some idea of the interior of a transport ship and what weapons they'd have so we can properly train our personnel."

Zainal took a sip of the hot beverage and gestured that he be given paper and writing implement.

"Breakfast first?" Kris said in a caustic tone, lifting a spoonful from her bowl of porridge. "Army . . . and navy, I'm sure . . . still function better when fed."

"Miss Bjornsen," Scott began ever so politely.

"Knock it off," Zainal said in a very quiet voice, but he gave Scott a brief, warning look, before he began to sketch the long void of a transport ship outline, sipping as he did so. "Twenty crew, only Drassi armed with weapons. Others have nerve whips . . ." Zainal gave Scott a long look. "You know about nerve whips?"

Scott nodded slowly and it pleased Kris no end to realize that he had had at least one incident of intimate knowledge with that persuader.

"Crew carry on back," and Zainal demonstrated tying the whiplash to a handle and slinging the imaginary item to his back. "People unconscious no problem." He outlined the bridge area, the main crew quarters, where they seemed to sleep stacked nearly as closely together as their passengers would be, and then indicated the engine room, air plant, and other essential elements of the transport, including cargo areas that did not have oxygen. That left an empty midsection across which Zainal now drew a series of parallel lines.

"Sleepers don't need much space. Empty one deck, remove, shift upward, empty two deck . . ."

"We were crammed in like sardines then," Easley remarked with a bit of a shudder. "What do they use to keep us in suspended animation?"

"Asleep?" Kris whispered, because she knew Zainal would recognize those words.

"Eosi make. Not even Emassi know in-gre-di-ents," Zainal said with one of his indifferent shrugs.

"So we would have to get the guards, storm through here to secure the bridge . . ."

Kris didn't recognize the voice, nor identify the slight accent, must less the long nonwhite finger that had done the walking, and looked up. The slender man had angled in beside Scott and Fetterman. He grinned at her and touched a nonexistent hat brim.

"Hassan Moussa, late of the Israeli forces," he said.

"No," and Zainal shook his head. "First they unload, then we do not risk lives. They will not expect attack. With dropping done, they are also tired. We stun those outside, maybe all will be. *Then* we . . ." and Zainal grinned at Moussa, "storm through to bridge and surprise Drassi."

Moussa wasn't the only one who chuckled at Zainal's suggestion to let the Catteni unload.

"I'm reliably informed that not everyone is unloaded with any caution," said the British Ainger.

"I will be there, of course, to see," Zainal remarked.

"Hey wait a minute," Kris said, and she wasn't the only one to see the folly of that.

"Not when the Catteni tried to kidnap you . . ." Rastancil said, frowning.

"Drassi will not know that," Zainal said, "but they obey Emassi orders anytime."

Open disagreement broke out and, after listening a few moments, Zainal began to eat his porridge, ignoring the dispute.

"He tells us he's a kidnap victim . . ."

"A transport was slated to pick him up the first time, wasn't it?"

"Can we really trust him?"

"If it's that easy to take the transport, why hasn't anyone tried?"

"You haven't seen bare hands against nerve whips, have you?"

"So, if Drassi and Emassi never mix, who would recognize him?"

"And the risk is better than the twenty-five percent casualties."

Kris identified Leon Dane's voice. "Leon can make like an Emassi from the shadows," she said, broadcasting her suggestion over the other voices. That stopped them. "It's the tone they respond to, not the figure."

"Good idea," Zainal said, licking his lips. "He sounds Emassi. Could . . . fool . . . me." And he cast a mischievous side glance at Kris as he continued to eat his breakfast.

"We can decide on that stratagem later," Scott said firmly. "If you've finished," he addressed Zainal, who had indeed just emptied both bowl and cup, "let's go through the numbers . . . of the crew . . . again."

"One Drassi captain," Zainal dutifully ticked off on his fingers, "one Drassi navigator, one Drassi com, one Drassi engineer, four more to take turns, and twelve to unload."

"That makes twenty. Do all unload?"

Zainal nodded. "Off-duty help, so sixteen unload. Others relax here," and he pointed to the bridge. "Not much security," he added. "Stand from here," and he put his finger on the portal, "and stun all."

"Stun?" The look on Scott's face was ludicrous.

"Why not? Killing weapons messy."

"And wasn't it decided," Kris got in, "that they'd at least have a chance to run for it?"

"Why?" The mood around the table turned ugly.

"Because then we're not the same as Catteni," John Beverly said, raising his voice above the vengeful babble.

"General, I don't think the population here will appreciate leniency," Bull Fetterman said.

"I don't see why not," Hassan Moussa said with a vulpine grin. "It could provide some sport."

"Now, wait a bloody minute." Kris felt her breakfast roiling about in her stomach. "We are not Catteni. We are human beings . . ."

"They can be tried as war criminals," Moussa said, still grinning, and looked down at Zainal to see his reaction, but the Catteni was adding details to the sketch, apparently oblivious to the moral issue.

"Take a camp vote," Yuri Palit said, standing up at the end of the table.

"That's always assuming that we take the damned transport in the first place," Beverly said.

"Now wait a minute, general . . ."

"Beverly, if we can't overpower twenty—"

"Referendum!"

"Everyone needs to know—"

"Those guys murdered—"

"We don't have to do the same—"

Kris got up from the table, taking her dishes and Zainal's before she heaved up breakfast listening to such vengeful talk. She *did*, she told herself as she stalked to the cleanup area, understand why they wanted to take it out on any Catteni they could, but the slaughter still made humans no better than Catteni and polluted this new world, and this fresh start, with all the old hatreds and prejudices that bubbled just skin-deep and could be sublimated by attacking a new species-victim.

She almost threw the dishes down but spotted the still-sleeping cook and slipped them quietly in the warm dishwater to soak. Possibly, if she had to, she could kill a Catteni in cold blood. She hadn't minded when Fek and Slav had killed the kidnappers but her blood certainly hadn't been cold then—it had been frozen with fear that the ruse would be

uncovered and Zainal taken. All the arguments were specious. It was the principle that was important. And more important here on Botany than at any other time in her life . . . even when she had feared rape by the brutish Catteni steward on Barevi.

“Kris!” Zainal’s voice had not been pitched loudly but he stood at the exit and beckoned to her. The “strategists” were so involved in arguing points of honor, law, principle, integrity that his departure had not been noticed. Except by Easley and Rastancil, who hurried toward him.

“Zainal?” Easley’s quiet voice held a note of apology and Rastancil’s expression was entreating.

“We will see what weapons and other useful junk is on scout,” Zainal said. “That is next step to take to prepare for Phase Two.” He exited first, turned to wait for Kris, Rastancil, and Easley, and added, “You are men of sense.”

He strode at such a pace that even the long-legged Easley had trouble keeping up. Abruptly he stopped, staring ahead as the predawn sky outlined the hangar, which Kris realized had acquired the most peculiar outline. Zainal snorted and walked on.

“What’d they do to it?” Kris asked, though she thought she knew the answer.

“Mitford suggested we disguise the contents,” Easley said. “Just enough in case someone should scan. All they’d see is metal hunks. Roof’ll take the weight. The engineers checked.”

The moment they cracked the inset door, a shadowy figure got to his feet and challenged them: in Vic Yowell’s unmistakable tones. He even had a lance at the ready. “Who’s there?”

“Zainal, Kris, Easley, and Rastancil,” Zainal said, taking him literally.

“Oh,” and Vic let out a relieved sigh. “More damned people poking their noses in,” and he changed his voice to a whine. “I didn’t get to see it when it landed . . .” He altered tone again. “I want a lock on that damned door.”

“No one could get into the ship, Vic,” Kris said.

“I told ’em that but they wanted to see the outside at least if they couldn’t see in.”

“Go get some proper sleep, Vic,” Easley suggested. “We’ll need you later on and I appreciate your taking charge here.”

Vic gathered up his blanket and pallet and grinned as he passed them.

“Never thought I’d have a chance to land anything ever again. Don’t want it messed up.”

Rastancil gave him a genial slap on the back as he went, and when Vic had closed the door behind him, the hangar was dark again. Rastancil cursed but Easley turned on a hand beam. Kris recognized it as one that had been lifted from the kidnappers' bodies.

"You're quick," she said with a grin up at Easley.

"Spoils of war are meant to be used," he said.

Kris wondered if the man was ever out of sorts. He'd been up all night arguing with brass-headed types and his equanimity seemed not the least bit strained.

"You always this way?" she asked.

"Which way?"

She could see his so innocent grin in the light.

"Zainal calls them brass-heads," she added, since he wasn't answering her question.

"Brass-heads?" He chuckled. "Indeed, indeed."

"Lord, I can't even get you to commit yourself to a joke."

"Oh, I commit myself, Miss Bjorgsen. Believe me, I do."

The hatch opened and lights inside came up, surprising an exclamation out of both Easley and Rastancil.

"Do *not*," Easley murmured, lowering his head to Kris' ear, "let them get Zainal's control away from him."

"He isn't planning to let them," she whispered back under the noise of Rastancil stumbling up into the ship. So Easley had committed himself—and to the right people—she thought, hauling herself up inside the ship. It had been easier from the air-cushion vehicle.

A low noise started, and Kris felt fresh air drawn in past her.

"You can vent to the outside?" Rastancil asked.

"Air is . . . old," Zainal said. He made a gesture of a spinning blade. Then he indicated for them to go toward the stern rather than the pilot's compartment. They'd only taken a half dozen steps when he stopped and pulled at handles set flush in the wall.

The closet he had opened was stocked with an assortment of ordnance, much of it unfamiliar to Kris but Rastancil sighed with unadulterated delight and, looking to Zainal for permission, picked up a rifle-type affair with a thick cartridge case and a stumpy muzzle. Zainal pointed and named what each knob or toggle did. "Safety, power up is red, white is empty. Make thin or fat spray of . . ." He turned to Kris.

"Bullets?" She made a space between thumb and forefinger. "Metal? Kill?" Zainal closed the distance to almost very thin. "Needle?"

He nodded.

"Oh, I heard about them on Earth. They started using toxic tips just

before I was rounded up. Nasty.” Rastancil carefully returned the weapon. “Any single-shot, revolver-type weapons?”

Zainal frowned. Kris made her hand into a gun shape and enunciated a single “Pow!”

“Stunner,” Zainal said, and touched the rack of eight. Then he laid his hand on their neighbor, a thick long barrel. “Ground-to-air.” Then nodded toward the bow. “Space stuff up front.”

“What sort of armament do you have?” Rastancil said eagerly.

Zainal gave a little laugh. “Space, air-to-ground, small satellite to mark places. Not much. This is fast, and moves well.”

“So you count on its speed and maneuverability more than its ordnance?”

Kris wondered which words needed translating but Zainal was looking at Rastancil and then gave a brief nod. “Yes, speed and . . . other word . . .” He did look at Kris now, flipping his hand and fingers.

“Flexibility,” she supplied.

“Any telepathy in your family, Kris?” Easley asked.

“None, but I’ve been partnered with Zainal since we were dropped. I know what words he has learned . . . and he’s got a very good vocabulary,” and Kris stressed that, “so it’s less guess and more acting as synonym finder.”

Easley chuckled. “I suspect he understands far more English than people think.”

“I don’t suspect,” Kris replied, and she meant that as a tacit warning. “I know.”

“I shall keep that remark under my . . . hair, since my wardrobe does not run to a hat.”

Whether or not Easley might just be jollyng her along, Kris sensed that Peter Easley was on Zainal’s side and wanting to be considered a friend.

By the time Zainal had revealed the other goodies the scout contained—like very high-powered binoculars with thermal readings and nocturnal settings; a variety of comunits, emergency lights, beacons, maps, and the completed photos that he had taken on the way in; as well as hand cameras, Catteni-style exploratory equipment, compasses, ropes, backpacks, winter and summer gear, thermal suits, and a lot of other gear that would see the scouting teams far better equipped—her head was reeling with such riches. Mitford would go bananas! There was even diving equipment and two watercraft, dismantled and packed for transport.

“Sail! Or powered?” Easley said, coming alive with interest at their

appearance. He diagrammed a sail in the air and made a putt-putt noise for the power.

Zainal grinned. "Both."

"It's Christmas!" Kris said, wanting to clap her hands together.

"Well, to a degree," Easley amended, but he was grinning, too. "You've done so well with so little, don't let all this stifle ingenuity. There isn't even eight of everything."

"There's eight of everything we'd need for Phase Two," Rastancil said in a sober tone, eyeing the weapons cache.

Zainal nodded but he was far more interested in Kris' reaction to the photos he offered her. She wasn't quite sure why she would be interested in mountains and valleys, until his index finger touched first one, then another point.

"Oh, more dead ends, like the valley we found?"

He nodded. "Many."

"All empty?" she asked.

Zainal shrugged one shoulder and grinned. "We go see?"

"What?" Easley wanted to know, peering over her shoulder.

"Our scouting project," Kris said, not wanting to go into much detail.

"Oh, blind valleys like the one your team discovered, which Mitford told me about?" Easley and his face wore a hopeful expression, soliciting their confidence in him.

"Is a thing kept in? Or out?" Zainal said, giving it.

"Out would be my educated guess, considering the nocturnal horrors Botany has," and Easley gave a little shudder.

"You've seen them?"

He pretended a repugnance that was probably sincere. "Don't care to, either, but then I never go . . . went . . . to horror pictures, either."

Rastancil craned his neck, nodding approval at the prints. "Very clear! What sort of camera equipment do you have on board?"

Zainal chuckled. "I let experts tell me. Baxter says he was cameraman on films . . . no, filums."

"Films," Kris said, as clearly as possible.

Zainal grinned. "Whatever. I push button and later," and he nodded to the slot in the wall, "picture comes out. Show these to Mitford, Kris, please."

"We can both show him," she said.

Zainal shook his head. "My duty is here today, showing off."

"Show me around a couple more times, Zainal, and I'll spell you," Rastancil offered.

"Many will want grand tour," Zainal said, his eyes sparkling with such open amusement that Rastancil regarded him with surprise. "I learn much from Kris," he said, dropping a proprietary arm across her shoulders.

"Ah, yes, well," Rastancil said, ducking his head in what Kris thought was as close to embarrassment as a brass-head was likely to get. "There wouldn't be an inventory of what's on board Baby, would there? I know it'd be in your language but we've got a couple of personnel down here now who learned to read Catteni."

"Come," and Zainal beckoned Rastancil to walk forward to the pilot's compartment. "You take a good look around, Kris, Peter," he added, pointing to the other doors along the narrow hall. "Familiarize yourselves."

Easley was shaking his head respectfully as Zainal followed Rastancil.

"He's quite a guy. I'd never have thought a Catteni had an active sense of humor."

"Maybe they just never had the opportunity," Kris said, and slid back the first door. "Phew! This needs an airing. What slob!" Clothing was thrown about floor and bunks while used cups and plates, attached to the surface of the table, had not been collected for washing. There was a blank screen and a hand control unit which Easley picked up, examined, and replaced, as the markings meant nothing to him. There were four bunks, wide enough for Catteni bulk, and all unmade and messy.

Easley did look into the nearest locker, pinched his nose, and shut it up. But he glanced in at the others. "Some of the gear can be useful. Especially the uniforms for Phase Two. Once they've been washed."

There were two more compartments, one with three bunks, and one—the captain's, Kris thought—with one, which also contained command equipment. A viewer plate like the one she'd seen the steward on Barevi use, and racks of the disks used in it. Easley homed in on that. He was familiar with such things, neatly inserting a disk and turning on the viewer. A Catteni voice in monotone added comments to whatever was printed in the glyphs.

"Well, very interesting, I'm sure," he said, clicking it off and absently returning the disk to its rack. "Now where did they eat and wash?—if they did."

One of the doors in the captain's unit slid back to disclose what had to be a shower compartment, complete with what Kris thought resembled a urinal, and another odd opening. Well, Catteni had much the

same alimentary requirements as Humankind. Easley gave a mild grunt when he peered in over her shoulder.

There was another unit next in line down the passageway which would accommodate two at once. The galley was just beyond it, almost the last door in the passage.

"One-butt, at that," she said, looking at the "kitchen" side and its equipment. A table with padded seating around it was evidently where the crew ate, if not in their rooms. But the place was neat and tidy. Even clean. Ah, but Raisha had said that they'd eaten aboard the ship so she had probably also cleaned it up.

"Wonder what's back here, though," Easley said after the briefest glance in the wardroom, turning his attention to the final, large door that took up the end of the passageway. It was dogged tight with large Catteni glyphs in white.

"If empty is white on Catteni guns, would it be caution on equipment?" Kris asked.

The moment Easley put his hands on the toggles, an alarm sounded.

"Don't enter." Zainal's voice issued from an intercom right above their heads. "Please," he added.

"He's not totally assimilated, is he?" Easley remarked. "Let's see what they're up to. Unless you want to clear out those lockers. We might need clean Catteni uniforms."

Kris gave him a stern look. "We might but I think it would count as a morale booster for others to see just what slob the Catteni can be."

"Point!"

"What I really want to do is itemize all that lovely gear I hope we scouts have first pick of," she said, rubbing her hands together. "Damn, I've no paper."

"Voilà," Easley said, taking a wad of small sheets out of one thigh pocket and a pencil from his chest pocket.

"Hey, the comforts of home. Mitford can't operate without a pad and pencil, either."

"Where do you think I got them?"

Sharing a grin over that, Kris and Easley began to take stock. They were interrupted by a clanging on the open hatch.

"Who's on board?" an irritated voice demanded.

"Scott?" Easley called back.

"With Fetterman, Reidenbacker, and Marrucci," and the four men climbed on board, crowding the passageway. "Didn't see you leave, Easley."

Easley smiled, ignoring the implied accusation. “Decided to inventory what’s here before the crowd gathers. Rastancil’s forward with Zainal, doing printouts or something operational. I have six only of what looks like pack frames,” he went on to Kris, and put the first one back in its slot.

When they heard the newcomers moving forward, Easley grinned at Kris.

“Took ’em long enough to miss us, didn’t it?”

“I wonder,” she replied, grinning back at him, “if they ever reached any conclusion.”

“Oh, probably not until they’ve gone over Baby with a fine-toothed comb. The Catteni don’t seem to stock such items, do they? Not even toothbrushes or soap.”

“I found what looks like liquid soap, remember?”

“Oh yes, drawer nine.”

The inventory turned out to be the pleasantest part of the day.

Chapter Five

ONCE THAT WAS FINISHED, KRIS WENT TO MITFORD. EASLEY, WHO HAD initially gone forward to see how Zainal was faring, ran to catch up with her halfway to the barn where Mitford held office in Camp Narrow.

"The compartment's jam-packed back with those who need-to-know. I'll wait for a quieter time," Peter said.

Kris gave a snort. "No matter what he explains, they'll still need him to fly the thing."

"I expect so," Peter replied equably.

Chuck Mitford's eyes bugged out when he spread out the pages of available equipment. He was flabbergasted when he saw the aerial photos.

"Clearest recon photos I ever saw," he said, amazed, picking up one after another and scanning them.

"Look, here . . . here . . . and here," Kris said, pointing out spots on the various photos. One was quite close to Camp Narrow although it was in an area that had been lightly explored. "More of those dead-end valleys. Zainal thinks they have, or had, a purpose."

"If they didn't before, they may now. Especially as we've got enough personnel—and the equipment," and Mitford's voice rang with satisfaction, "so a team could hang around, safe enough, and see what comes up." He tapped the near valley with his index finger. "If we can secure this area—" He broke off as his shoulders convulsed in a shudder. "I want us *out* of the Farmers' facilities. I got a hunch about 'em."

He gathered the inventory sheets into one neat pile and the photos into another one. "Anyone seen these yet?"

"No," Easley replied, "you're in charge of exploration. And were I

you, I would secure these supplies for your teams and start sending them out.”

Mitford grinned crookedly. “Appreciate the advice, Peter.” He turned to Kris. “The rest of your team’s doing KP but they should be finished by now. I’ll just rev up the load bed trundler and secure those supplies. Any weapons?”

“Some but I’d leave them where they are until Zainal drills us in their use,” Peter said. “Some of ’em’ll make right nasty holes in people. You know,” and he scratched his head, contorting his features as the sort of prelude that Kris decided was his way of leading up to utterance of a diplomatic suggestion, “we might take a page from the Catteni book of colonial administration and drop the next bunch of Turs into one of those valleys. Come back in a few weeks and see how they’ve got on.” He paused. “Or better still, dump any Catteni prisoners we take in them. A bit of turnabout’s fair play.”

Mitford stared, frowning at Peter Easley. “You a bleeding heart or something?”

“It was Yuri Palit’s notion, actually,” Easley replied, slightly abashed. “I mentioned that you’d discovered the one. I don’t see the need for gratuitous violence or killing. There’s been quite enough of that. I’d rather we humans fell on the side of the angels than the Eosi. Besides, it rounds things out,” and he made a cage of the fingers of both hands, rotating one around the other, “and they get back a little of what they’ve been dealing out besides supplying us with guinea pigs for whatever might lurk in one of those valleys.”

Mitford was unconvinced. “They want this referendum first, don’t they?”

“I think you’ll have trouble getting the notion of lenience across to any one who’s tangled with a nerve whip,” Kris said.

“I can see it for the Turs, Easley,” Mitford allowed. “I’ve never liked just turning them loose. They’re dangerous and, if there’re enough of them, they constitute a menace.” He rubbed his jaw. “Actually, we could use valleys as a detention facility. That’s less messy than staking a guy out at night for the crawlers.” Then, with a shrug, he dismissed that topic and split his attention between the photos and the inventory.

“The print won’t fade,” Kris said, pulling his sleeve. “Let’s go get what we need before someone else requisitions it.”

“Damn well told,” Mitford replied, and Easley and Kris had to run to keep up with him.

Vic Yowell was back on duty, standing squarely in the inset door, his expression inscrutable until Mitford leaned out of the driver’s side of the trundler.

"Open up, will ya, Vic. I've requisitioned some of the gear on board to outfit my scouting teams."

Vic took no exception to that and pushed the main door back. So Mitford reversed the vehicle right up to the hatch, the load bed almost level with it. With Joe, Sarah, Whitby, Leila, Pete, and Mitford working quickly and quietly, Kris checked off the items they were taking from the inventory list. They soon had emptied the passageway lockers. While the others were stowing the last acquisitions, Mitford took a quick look at the arsenal and closed that compartment firmly.

Temptation, step behind me, Kris thought.

Just then Scott appeared in the forward end of the passageway.

"What're you doing, sergeant?"

"Looking at the arsenal sir. Could be useful."

"Pete and I have just finished the inventory of the lockers, admiral," Kris added, holding up the pad.

"Good idea, Bjornsen. Carry on."

"We will," she said jauntily, and, stifling a giggle at her deception, she followed Mitford out.

"Get what you needed?" Vic asked as the flatbed silently moved out of the hangar.

"I think so," Mitford said, and elbowed Sarah before she laughed loud enough for Vic to hear.

THEY HAD THEIR LOOT ALL NEATLY STORED AT THE BACK OF MITFORD'S office covered with Catteni-issue blankets. The rest of Kris' team went to get some lunch while Mitford called in Judy Blane, who'd been a cartographer. He wanted to match the photos to their appropriate areas on the map. Meanwhile, Mitford called in the recon squads he wanted, ordered travel food from the kitchen, and was ready to equip them as soon as they reported in.

"Before the brass-heads find out where it's all gone to," Kris said when the sergeant paused briefly.

"Brass-heads?" He chuckled. "Zainal?" She nodded.

"Are you going to lead a group this time, sarge, and get out of their way?"

He shook his head with a rueful smile and grimace. "Naw, not this time. I figure I better hang around."

"I can't say I'm not happy you will, Chuck," she said, tilting her head toward the hangar and the "brass-heads" occupying it. "But you deserve to get out of here for a while and clear your head. You've done more than your share. You need some R and R."

"I'll go after Phase Two's complete. And don't you worry, Kris. No matter what they decide in their conferences and brass-headed strategy meetings, they need Zainal more than he needs them. Or us." Then he leveled a cocky grin at her. "With the exception of you . . . Bjornsen."

"Scott doesn't trust him at all," Kris said, perching on the edge of the worktop.

"The admiral doesn't trust anyone," Mitford said with a snort, folding his arms across his chest. "For starters, he's stuck on dry land, which isn't really where he functions best. But distrust's not altogether a bad habit."

A knock on the door, which opened without his permission, disclosed the first of the teams he'd called in, Ninety Doyle's. The Scandinavians arrived, breathlessly eager, before Mitford could brief Ninety's squad on the current situation. Kris left him to it and eased herself out of the now crowded office and went to get some lunch.

Part of the original strategy-and-tactics group were still busy at the end table and those coming in to eat left a sort of no-man's-land of unused tables around the area to maintain their privacy. She picked up her lunch of soup and fresh bread and made her way to where Sarah, Joe, Leila, and Whitby were sitting.

"Are we going to get to use some of that beaut gear?" Joe asked.

"We won't be going out . . ."

"Until the brass start believing Zainal?" Sarah asked in caustic voice.

"Oh, I think they believe him," Kris said.

"It's trust that's lacking," Whitby added when she paused.

"I would rather wait until Zainal comes with us," Leila remarked in her quiet but firm way, and sipped soup.

"Besides which, I wouldn't want to miss Phase Two for anything," Joe added. "Got any update on that, Kris?"

She shook her head and gave a little snort, jerking her thumb toward the earnest knot of men at the end table. "They have to make up their minds first."

"Whaddya bet they'll end up doing what Zainal suggested in the first place?" Joe asked, looking around the table.

"Just so long as they make up their minds before the next transport gets here," Sarah said. "It could come any day now, too, judging by the frequency we've been getting drops lately."

"You'd think they were planning World War Three," Whitby said, entering the conversation, "instead of a minor commando action."

They had just finished their meal when the rumble of male voices was heard, heralding the arrival of Scott, Fetterman, Rastancil, Beverly,

Marrucci, and Zainal. Zainal halted at the door, surveying the room, spotted Kris, and, cocking his finger at her, indicated she was to join them at the strategy table.

"I've been paged," she said, cleaning the corners of her mouth of any traces of soup with two fingers and brushing bread crumbs off her front with the other hand as she rose. "Hang about, will you?"

"Over at Mitford's, dear," Sarah said, also rising. "I don't want to get sucked into another session of KP just because we're all sitting here looking as if we're doing nothing."

"Which we are," said Joe, but he got up, too, and as Kris joined Zainal, they all left the mess hall. Peter Easley passed them on his way in, sauntering in that easy bent-knee gait, pausing to exchange a few words and a laugh.

As he came up, he winked at Kris.

"There you are, Easley," Scott said. "When can the next transport be expected?"

"Anytime now," Easley replied indifferently.

Every one turned around to stare at him.

"They come when they have a full load, evidently," he said, and looked to Zainal, who shrugged.

"Last one was eight days ago. Sometimes there's twenty-one days between drops." He dismissed that concern with a flick of his fingers. "Deskis hear the best. Deskis spread out . . ." and now he waved his big hand, splay-fingered, over the map that occupied one end of the long table. "They hear. They report."

"And they have been using the same field they dropped us in?" Scott asked.

"Lately at any rate," Easley said, grinning at Zainal, "ever since Zainal had a little word with them."

"Can the Deskis be trusted?" Rastancil asked.

"With what?" Kris asked. "Hearing or reporting?"

"Do they *know* how to use comunits?" Scott asked, ignoring her remark.

"The ones we have even your grandmother could manage," Kris snapped back, "begging your grandmother's pardon," she added, making herself grin at Scott's indignant reaction.

"Are they capable of giving a detailed enough report, though?" Beverly asked, slightly more respectfully. "I mean, I've never heard them use more than one word."

"What more is needed? 'Hear ship. Comes down near. Comes down far. Your way,'" Zainal said, and Kris was delighted to hear him effect the odd tonality of the Deski voice.

"A Deski did all right warning us about the scout," she added. "And telling Worrell exactly where it had landed."

"Point," Beverly said. "So we can count on their ears . . ."

"And eyes," Easley added. "Deskis and Rugarians are also blessed with exceedingly acute night vision."

"Send a human along if you're worried," Kris suggested.

"No need," Zainal said, and then took out of his coverall a sheaf of pictures, evidently second copies of the ones now being examined in Mitford's office. He spread them on the table, while some of the other tacticians exclaimed and reached out for one to examine. Zainal found the one he wanted. "This is the line I flew in."

It had been taken at an altitude of the descent well above the cliffs in which Camp Narrow was located but showed the fields leading to what was now called the Drop Field. The scope of the photo included the third drop area, and the boggy swamp where Zainal had lain, wounded by the toxic thorns.

"Drop made here, too." He put his finger squarely on the little patch of field.

"But all the others have been made here," and Easley pointed to the Drop Field.

"Good cover for troops in those hedges. We can improve on it, though," Fetterman said, indicating the three upper sides.

"And move forward when enough crates have been positioned," and Rastancil tapped a pencil on the spot where the supplies were usually unloaded.

"There are some spare Catteni uniforms on the scout . . ." Kris said. "They'll have to be washed first, but I saw them in the lockers. So guys stocky enough could actually get on board easily."

"Catteni don't talk much when unloading," Easley said, having watched the procedure often enough in his official capacity as inflow officer. "Most don't even carry whip or stunner."

The whole procedure was then gone over and over until Kris felt her stomach rolling. She hated meetings where the obvious got repeated and repeated and no conclusions made. Once, when she shifted impatiently, she felt Zainal, who was sitting next to her, press his leg against hers and she settled for a little while longer.

Then orders were issued for Deski teams—Easley, Beverly, and Rastancil backed Zainal's assurance that the aliens would manage such a duty without a human counterpart—to spread out in a wide circle around the sprawling human settlement, equipped with comunits, to report the first rumble of an approaching transport ship. They were given extra rations and blankets and a translation in Deski by Zainal of their

orders, in case they hadn't understood Beverly's. They had grinned broadly enough when they listened intently to the black general but they hiccuped with amusement after Zainal's remarks. Kris saw that he was smiling back at them, but his face was serious as he turned back to the brass-heads.

"Now, we wait," he said.

"No, now we train the assault forces," Scott said, and he marched off with those who were assisting him in that. The others drifted away, gathering up their notes and maps and papers, and leaving, probably to get some sleep.

"You cleared equipment?" Zainal asked Kris as he guided her to the buffet table to get some lunch.

"Everything that looked useful—except the dirty uniforms."

She asked for a cup of the herbal tea and joined him at the table he took, set at the opposite end of the mess hall from the conference area, in an unoccupied corner. All day and night, people drifted in and out of the mess hall, eating whenever their duties permitted. Kris noticed Aarens coming in, arguing with a man she recognized as a senior design engineer. Aarens had lost a lot of his arrogance, though he still maintained a unique position as a clever adapter of useful gadgets from the Farmers' materials.

"By now the sergeant probably has sent most of it out with the scout teams he called in."

Zainal grinned slightly. "Did he go?"

Kris shook her head. "He's got the right to be in on Phase Two."

Zainal nodded. "He is."

"Oh, was that decided in the scout?"

"I believe so." Something else about this morning amused Zainal, and although she tried to get him to tell her, he shook his head.

"Not to worry," he said. "He is in his office?"

"Probably." She stood as Zainal did. When they had carried their dishes to the weary young woman who was handling that chore, they made for Mitford's office.

Although he called a cheery "Come in" when they knocked at the door, he was not alone. A rather officious-looking young man with a receding hairline, holding a clipboard fashioned from a piece of supply crate, was jotting notes down as fast as he could write. Glancing to the back of the office, Kris noticed that the equipment, which had reached nearly to the ceiling when they finished unpacking it that morning, was down to a single level in most places.

"I'm in charge of recon groups and I sent all of them out, properly equipped for the first time. You tell Admiral Scott that we took nothing

else." Mitford flipped an indolent finger at the neatly stacked inventory sheets Kris had made. "All signed out or accounted for. Not a damned thing *he'd* need for an assault force or training. Ah, Zainal, come to brief me on the overall picture? Well, this in-die-vid-jual's just leaving. Aren't you, son?"

"As I told you earlier, *sergeant*," the man said in an icy tone, stressing the rank. "I was Admiral Scott's aide in the resistance . . ."

"And still no doubt an admirable aide in this one," Mitford said, "but, lieutenant, we're all droppees here on Botany, ain't we, Zainal?"

"We dropped. We stay." Zainal held the door politely open for the lieutenant to leave by.

As soon as he was gone, Mitford dropped his chair on all four legs and whistled softly. "Damn fool. Scott, too. Not a fragging thing he'd need, and my teams do."

"Good on you, sarge," Kris said, chuckling as she settled down on a stool. Zainal pulled one up closer to the desk and she let him tell Mitford what had happened so far.

AS OCCASIONALLY HAPPENS WITH WELL-LAID PLANS, AND JUST ABOUT the time everyone in Camp Narrow started to get real antsy from the waiting, a Deski called in to the command post in the dim light of false dawn five days later. Mitford happened to be duty officer on that shift.

"Comes now. Bad noise. Bad smell," she said. "Wrong noise."

"What could she mean by that?" Beverly asked. He'd jumped out of his cot in the duty office and was hunched over the hand unit which Mitford had politely tilted so the general could hear the report, which Mitford asked Tul to repeat.

"Let's ask Zainal." He rose and shook awake the runners who'd been stationed in the office for this contingency. Each of the youngsters knew who he was to waken and where they were bunked. Then he turned to the diagram on the wall which showed the position of each Deski. "Hmmm. Tul's here," and he pointed. "If it was coming in properly, we should have heard from Fek." He moved his finger, and drew it in a straight line down to the Drop Field. "Off course?"

Beverly ran a straight line from Tul's position and wound up clicks away from the usual area. "We'd better get vehicles ready."

He was gone before Mitford could remind Beverly that they had plenty of leeway to get to a different position, and still mount the rehearsed assault.

Narrow was not the only camp alerted. The Deski followed Zainal's orders to contact Narrow first, and then their camps. Worrell called in

to ask for instructions. Even Camp Bella Vista, up in the hills, had been included in the contingency plans that the brass-heads had made. Well, it was something to do to keep busy until Phase Two actually started. It had!

Fek's report came in a moment before Zainal, Kris, and the rest of their team arrived.

"It comes. Noisy," Fek said.

"Where is it headed, Fek?" Mitford asked.

"You," she answered.

"Thanks, Fek. Keep listening. Tul said the noise is wrong."

"Is." Fek agreed, and Zainal nodded to indicate he had heard and understood.

"Kris, find Beverly and tell him it's headed here after all," Mitford said. "He'll be at the main garage. Why would a transport be making a 'wrong noise,' Zainal?"

Zainal cocked his head. "I told you ship's not in good condition. I must hear noise to make a guess. I go up!" He pointed to the roof of the office.

A ladder had been affixed in one of the alleys between barns to reach the cliffs against which they were backed.

Mitford swore but stayed on the comunit desk for any further reports.

Two more Deski listeners reported in, also remarking on "wrong noise." A runner came back and Mitford beckoned him to the desk and the comunit while he went outside to listen. There was so much noise now, with men and women running up and down, seeking their assigned vehicles, getting their gear on, that he gave up and went back inside.

His comunit went off again. This time it was Zainal.

"I hear wrong noise, too. Ship in trouble. Drive is bad."

"Fraggit. We need an operational ship," Mitford said, hopes blasted by the news.

"Not to worry. Attack plan may need change."

"Not if Scott has anything to say about it and he *is* in charge of Phase Two."

"Phase Two is my idea," Zainal said, and the comunit went dead.

IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE EVERYONE COULD HEAR THE TRANSPORT, wheezing and rumbling and giving off hoarse metallic shrieks, landing lights blazing and onboard sirens audible. The surface force made it to the Drop Field, and into their assigned positions, before the ailing transport came into view, barely skimming the lodge-pole trees and skidding

to a stop, rather than landing. As many landings as Mitford had already seen, some bouncing several times, others skidding to a stop, this was the worst. He dreaded to think of the unconscious bodies being thrown around inside the shallow decks.

Steam poured out of the base of the transport. The main hatch opened and Catteni, coughing, sneezing, staggering, made a disorderly descent from the vessel. All of them. Mitford counted twenty, which Zainal had estimated was the usual crew complement. And they were running as fast as they could, away from the ship.

Zainal ran into the light, waving a stunner and barking orders. He pointed to one of the faster runners.

“Get him!” he called in English, and roared louder in Catteni.

The vanguard did not slow and Zainal left off a stun bolt, hitting the Catteni in the head—a mortal shot—and got the next two in the legs. They fell, moaning in frustration. That was enough to halt the others and make them turn around, hands in the air. He barked another order and they reluctantly retraced their steps, their eyes wide and frightened, darting anxiously from Zainal to the hulk they had somehow managed to land.

Zainal called out a question. He got a response and immediately gestured for those hidden in the shadows to come out.

“Ship’s circuitry in overload. May blow. We must get people out. Dane, Chavell, Rastancil, take control of them. Scott, we need every man you have.” He raced up the ramp, Kris and the rest of their team right behind. He went to controls set just inside the main hatch, throwing open the lid, which was hot. He was muttering or cursing in Catteni. “Schkelk!”

She felt herself go rigid with attention at his Catteni “Listen.”

“They will not breathe, Kris. No air. You pull down this type,” he said, pulling the flat lever, “to open the hatch. Push up to close. This one to change decks. Got it? Good! BERT! MARRUCCI! YOWELL! DOWDALL! Come with me! I go to bridge. Things can be done. I need engineers, any mechanics, pilots. AARENS!”

Looking over her shoulder, she saw the deck part its horizontal doors, and lights came up to reveal the pitiful mounds of people who had been thrown about in the landing. She didn’t need to shriek for rescuers: they were already running up the ramp and ducking into the fetid level. The frightened Catteni crewmen were back, too, each encouraged by a settler holding a stunner on him to unload the passengers.

The evacuation began. Catteni managed to lift two or three bodies while their captors managed one in a fireman’s hold. More help arrived as the ship trembled and shuddered and made the most hideous and

frightening of metallic noises while steam hissed out from unlikely places. Kris' right hand was caught in a gush just behind the control board. Whimpering from pain, she licked and then blew on it.

"Got them all out," someone yelled at her.

"No, you haven't," she yelled back. And switched decks. The smell that issued was appalling. Those going in to rescue coughed and gagged but they kept at their grim task.

Men carrying tool kits hurried past her, kits bearing Baby's markings. Then a group raced aft, Zainal shouting instructions about gauges and controls at them. The heat and the smells were almost more than Kris could manage, even as close as she was to the outside, and her stomach heaved in rebellion. Her hand was really hurting. She leaned around the open door, inhaling the fresher air outside. She managed to filter some of the stench by drawing the front of her coverall over her mouth and nose, hunching down in a cramped position to do so.

"Got that lot." Yuri stopped by her side, his face a dirty mask, his coverall blood-smeared. "How many more to go?"

"Two more decks." She worked the controls although, with the noise the machinery made, she wasn't sure if the mechanism would shift decks at all. The metal must have warped in the heat. But slowly the third deck level was accessible. "Have many survived?"

"Others tend them."

"We should salvage the cargo, too," Kris said.

"Cargo? The living first." Yuri dismissed her suggestion with a wave and ran into the newly exposed deck, ducking under the half-raised hatch.

Suddenly the levels of noise from around the ship seemed to abate and some were silenced. More men and women ran around, both aft and forward, some holding tools, carrying hoses and other equipment she realized they must have found in the transport.

One more tremendous gout of steam erupted from the deck plates beneath her feet and she jumped and skipped about, trying to find someplace not burning-hot. As soon as she could get the machinery to turn to the last deck, she darted in to help unload. The heat was almost unbearable. How long had these unconscious people endured such temperatures? Or had they?

She slung an arm over her shoulder and hoisted a body, a woman's, and staggered out and down the ramp.

"That way. Make it to the next field," she was told, a hand turning her in the proper direction. The sun was up and she could at least see where she was going. There were only two bodies in the field, one Catteni, one unidentifiable, and both dead. She staggered along, more

conscious now of the sting in her steam-burned hand and very tender feet. The hedgerow had been cut down and boards put on either side over the ditches. This field was covered with bodies. Many of them, she thankfully saw, were moving and being attended: water poured over them or cups held to their mouths so they could drink. The field was one cacophonous moan, with weeping woven in. She staggered until she could find a free spot to lay her burden down. And seeing the awful stillness in the gray face, she felt for a pulse in the neck. There was none and with a cry of despair she curved in on herself, weeping.

“Easy, Kris,” a familiar voice said, and she looked up at Sandy Areson, who was holding a cup of water to her. “Drink.” Her gentle hand smoothed the hair back from her sweating face and patted her shoulder. “We’ve saved a great many. Thanks to Zainal.”

Kris started to rise. Maybe they weren’t all dead on that level. But Sandy’s hand held her down.

“Oh no you don’t,” Sandy said. “Hey, what happened to your hand? It’s blistered.”

“It is?” and Kris held it out and looked stupidly down at it. “So it is,” she heard herself say as she slipped sidewise into unconsciousness.

IT TOOK SEVERAL DAYS FOR THE EVENTS OF THE MOMENTOUS MORNING to be sorted out. Of the 728 left alive, many were injured; broken bones being the least of the problems for the triage teams that checked over each survivor. All were dehydrated and that was almost the first need addressed. Internal injuries as well as concussions were more serious, due to a rough landing which had pitched the inert bodies of the passengers around the shallow decks, piling up and injuring those beneath them. Severe heat prostration had caused twenty major and minor heart attacks and that had probably been the cause of many more of the deaths. Of those from the lowest deck, only forty-five survived; four humans, nine Deski, twelve Turs, six Ilginish oozing green goo, and fourteen Rugarians, who had almost all their body hair singed off.

Even those who had suffered no major injuries needed reassurance, proper food, and counseling in that order to recover from their ordeal. The only true advantage the consolers had was that they had been through much the same experiences and really did understand how it affected people. Easley worked tirelessly in directing his teams, asking only for the survivors’ names and their origin before turning them over to Yuri Palit’s resettlement people, transporting the walking wounded to calmer surroundings as soon as possible.

The injured were transported by the air-cushion machines to Narrow

for emergency treatment. "Great ambulance service," Leon Dane commented, "nothing to bump or jar 'em!"

The Tur contingent were unusually docile from their recent horrific experience and pathetically grateful for the water and soup passed out to them. The uninjured ones—forty all told—were given such dire and terse warnings by Zainal in their own language about the dangers of the avian predators and night crawlers that they remained subdued as they were driven off to their new quarters. Joe and Whitby headed the expedition with a well-armed guard contingent. The first night out, Whitby also arranged a demonstration of what night crawlers did to a dead loocow, and that had kept them quiet the rest of the trip. They did not even struggle when they were lowered, with cups, blankets, knives, and generous supplies of the Catteni food bars, into the valley.

Zainal also won a second victory, aided and abetted by Easley, Yuri Palit, and surprisingly, Mitford. The nineteen surviving Catteni crewmen were sequestered in the nearer blind valley which Ninety Doyle's team had explored. They had also had an object lesson before their departure. Zainal forced them to watch the night crawlers ingesting the bodies of those who had not survived the crash landing. He had also required Scott, Fetterman, Rastancil, and Reidenbacker to attend. It was a salutary lesson for each group.

"They expected to be thrown into the field last night, didn't they?" Doyle asked Zainal when the biggest air-cushion vehicle was finally free of its ambulance duty and the Catteni crewmen were loaded aboard.

"They expected death," Zainal replied. "They did not expect an Emassi to be in charge."

"Catteni better learn not to underestimate us humans," Doyle replied as he waved his stunner to speed up the loading process. The two crewmen Zainal had stunned were still not very steady on their feet but none of their companions lent any assistance. "Mean sonsabitches even to their own, ain't they?"

"One of their most endearing traits," Zainal said, in such a facetious tone that Doyle nearly missed the sarcasm.

As the vehicle glided silently off, the Drassi captain gave Zainal a look compounded of hatred, fear, and indignation that one of his own species was responsible for this total humiliation.

"He wanted to sear Zainal's skin off him," Sarah told Kris, and gave her shoulders a shake to rid herself of that memory. "Hope it doesn't turn out later that it would have been wiser to stake 'em out."

"No, we'd be no better than they are doing an eye-for-an-eye bit," she said, and then inhaled sharply in pain. Sarah was checking the blisters on her steam-burned hand. There was nothing to treat it with nor

the very tender soles of her feet. The soles of her Catteni boots had melted on the hot deck plates, and had she waited much longer, the injuries might have been even more severe. Leon had seen her injuries, rueful that he had nothing, even from the medical stores of the scout, with which to treat the burns.

"I think there won't be any lasting damage, Kris," he said, gently laying her hand back in the sling. "Once that main blister has popped, it'll ease off and your body will take over the healing process. We do have that salve Patti Sue made up which the cooks all swear by, to keep the skin supple. Might ease the soles of your feet, too."

"I'm not complaining," she said. "Sarah was a little officious, taking you away from the ones who really need you."

"Oh, never fear, m'dear," Leon said, grinning. "We've got quite a list of specialists these days, you know. And a supply of the gas they use. It makes an effective anesthesia." He gave a little shudder. "Thank God. Some of the repair work would have been barbaric without it."

Kris had refused to go back to the Rock, wanting to stay near the hub of activity, and Zainal, and very eager to hear how they had kept the ship from blowing. Sarah and Leila kept her informed and helped her down to the main mess hall, where she could listen to the "hourly bulletins," as Sarah called them, updating those not involved with various aspects of what was going on.

Zainal and the engineers had managed to jury-rig the control board, venting the buildup to an explosion. A pump was found, disconnected from the ship, and dropped into the nearby stream. By combining all the hoses on the Catteni ship, the fuel tanks had been kept from exploding and the reduction in temperature had saved other systems from reacting to the intense heat.

"If they hadn't managed, the explosion would have altered the landscape considerably," Sarah went on, talking to distract Kris from her tender ministrations to the raw sole of her right foot. "But the fuel got saved and there's plenty for Baby now."

"So that's why the Catteni were running away as fast as they could," Kris said through clenched teeth. "Was the ship badly damaged inside? Can we make use of anything?" Granted all she had seen was just inside the cargo area, with bursting conduits and pipes and hot deck plates, but surely something was salvageable.

Sarah grinned up at her from bandaging her feet with sufficient fluff to form a protective layer. "You better believe it! The entire bridge!"

"Really!"

Sarah chuckled in a mock-malicious way. "Well, what there actually is of it. Anyone who's ever flown anything is wondering how the

damned thing stayed in the air, much less made journeys out into space. However, Scott wanted it where it can be used. And the interior of the transport still stinks to high heaven, so it was dismantled and it's been reconstructed in the hangar. They've even got the communications up and running. And solar panels on the hangar to power it.

"Everyone's over the transport like ants, taking it apart. It's nothing but a shell now—which still stinks. The mechanics and engineers are having a field day with all these new treasures, even if most of the loot is secondhand, slightly damaged goods. But it's more than we've ever had to work with.

"Then there's real competition over who can sound more Catteni than another. More learned the language than you might think."

"I suppose that knowledge didn't make you all that popular on Earth," Kris mused. "But why is there a competition? You said the crew was sequestered in a valley." Kris tried to keep her concentration on what Sarah was saying, rather than on the painful dressing of her feet.

"Sorry, luv, I keep thinking you've been in on all the briefings. The Drassi captain sent out a Mayday, or whatever Catteni call an emergency, to another transport, which said, and I quote, they'd get around to picking up the crew when they were on their way back to base. That is, if they survive the crash landing."

"So that's why Scott wanted the bridge operational." Kris grinned, for it was easy to see what was likely to happen next. "So, have they reported they survived?"

Sarah nodded, grinning from ear to ear. "Leon did it. He's still the best but not for long."

"When do they expect this rescue vessel?"

Sarah shrugged. "From what Zainal discovered in questioning the crew—the captain wouldn't say doodly to him—it's a bigger, newer ship, with a longer range and so we have to wait for another message from them when to expect them. So there's plenty of time to prepare, rehearse, and drill for their arrival."

"A bigger, newer ship?" Kris repeated. Then she chuckled to herself, thinking of Admiral Scott's bridge, being run from a hangar. "And we'll have three ships!" She was so proud of Zainal that she wriggled in the bed.

"Scott's even acting as if Zainal's not so bad after all," Sarah said. "And he's got a committee working to find out something that will add the necessary gray tinge to human skin. Those loose uniforms they wear will camouflage who's in them but they gotta have gray skin. Leon's dying to take part but he's really too tall to play a Drassi."

"So is Zainal." Kris began to worry again. Zainal was taking so

many risks. A bigger, newer ship would be better captained and crewed. But then surprise was still on their side.

The dressings were now complete, she glared down at her feet. They'd better be completely healed. She had to be able to be at this second enactment of Phase Two.

Chapter Six

WHEN ZAINAL SPENT MORE TIME EXPLAINING TO THE MECHANICS AND engineers what the salvageable material had been used for, they could more knowledgeably adapt it to their needs. Once the bridge was sited and up and working again, Scott preempted him to translate the data on the transport's log files.

"Much is routine," Zainal said, scrolling at a fast pace through the entries.

"But we need to know where they have been, how long it takes, the protocols they use . . ." Scott said, scowling.

"I think I've found someone from the latest drop who can manage to translate routine reports," Easley said, once again diplomatically inserting his presence. "In fact, several someones who have a good working knowledge of the glyphs. Learned to help decipher Catteni documents captured during raids."

Beth Isbell was the only uninjured member of the three "someones" who were summoned. Sally Stoffers, a petite brunette with an extremely innocent expression, arrived on crutches for a broken leg, while François Chavell had his left arm in a sling. Scott insisted on interviewing them first as to their Earthside activities. Once satisfied, he turned them over to Zainal, who tested their skills by having them read out loud from log entries.

"They read Catten well," Zainal said, passing all three.

Later Easley asked if he'd spoken truthfully or merely to get himself out of a very boring task.

"I said true. They can copy what they do not understand and I will translate . . . if I can," and Zainal grinned from Easley to Kris.

Scott next had him interview every male who had listed some un-

derstanding and speaking knowledge of Catteni in their drop interviews. With Kris' help, Zainal made a list in order of fluency and vocabulary of over seventy men. Scott then had his choice of those he felt would be most useful in the commando unit he was training to stand in for the transport's stranded crew.

"You're certain they're coming back for the crew?" Beverly had asked Zainal at the very beginning of this new venture.

"That was the message," and Zainal had shrugged. "They will not hurry to do so. The crew would be safe in ship, away from us who are dropped."

Scott might not have been certain of Catteni altruism in collecting a stranded crew but he was also counting on it as a replacement for the useless hulk in the Drop Field.

Zainal gave Kris a list of the most frequent commands, which she wrote down with phonetic translations, so that all could learn them, and learn the proper responses of both Drassi and ordinary crew commands. Rank had some privileges.

"Catteni crew don't talk much," Zainal said. "Just obey."

"They must also know what is being said so they can act on their initiative if that becomes necessary," was Scott's reply.

"Not Catteni," Zainal replied, shaking his head.

"So long as the real Catteni obey, there's no problem," Scott said, a stubborn look coming into his eye.

"So the surprise will be even greater," Easley said, smiling at Scott, "and that will work in our favor, won't it?"

Scott gritted out a surly "Yes" and went back to the diagrams Zainal had contrived of what he thought the interior of the new transport should be. He hadn't, himself, had an opportunity to inspect any.

"Designed to carry more with fewer deaths," he said in summary. "Just being newer is improvement."

The engineers and mechanics in the meeting agreed to that.

"Some of the controls were wired together and I dunno what they used to keep the drive units operating," Peter Snyder said.

He'd been a jet-engine propulsion engineer and was fascinated by the Catteni drives: especially how they kept working in the state they were in. By using the schematics in the manuals, he and the other aviation and space-shuttle personnel were trying to reconstruct one working system from the remainders of four.

"To know how it should work, mainly," Snyder had said. He was an amiable fellow, medium in build and height, and usually either whistling or humming, on key, as he and his team worked to rebuild the engine. "We're in sort of no-man's land here, with bits and pieces we

know worked in a high-tech society and should work if we reassemble them right, but we are working with the equivalent of early Iron Age tools. Aarens is miraculous, sometimes—if you tell him what you want a tool to do, he manages to provide one which does it. The problem is knowing what tool you need next and how long you'll have to wait until he can contrive it."

Kris, now hobbling on crutches with well-wrapped feet and a bandaged hand, accompanied Zainal to the various meetings. She still seemed to be the necessary verbal bridge for vocabulary for him. Half the time, she was floundering for technical jargon even more than he was, but she was not about to admit that failing to anyone. Easley probably had guessed, but he was on their side. Kris would be very glad when she, Zainal, and their team could get back to what they were best at: exploring.

Sometimes it seemed to her that Scott resented what Zainal had had no reason to learn—as far as details of his own species' space drive technology went—while he was still forced to include the Catteni in all major meetings because of the little he did know and the insights he could provide on other details.

"Scott's got an incredible mind for detail," Easley murmured to Kris one evening during a long session.

"He comes across ultrasuspicious and snide to me," she whispered back.

"Suspicion is detail, too, you know, but I happen to know that he is impressed by Zainal."

"You could have fooled me," Kris replied, glaring at the end of the table where Scott, Rastancil, Ainger, Marrucci, and Beverly were crouched, heads together in inaudible conversation.

"But I don't," Easley said, his low voice vibrant with sincerity. "He knows a man of integrity when he sees one, and he sees Zainal as one. I don't think many of us had any idea of the role the Eosi play in what the Catteni do. So he's abandoned the position of detesting the Catteni for what was done on Earth, to come halfway to absolving the tool for the work it's been put to. Zainal's responsible for that adjustment without losing either dignity or respect in Scott's eyes."

Kris absorbed that speech, feeling a little better about what seemed like Scott's persecution of her lover. But only a little better.

ONCE AGAIN WHEN THE EXTRA-ACUTE HEARING OF THE DESKI SENTRIES caught the first sound of the approaching vessel, they alerted the camps

before the landing ship announced its imminent arrival on the communication band.

The "bridge" accepted the message with typical Catteni stolidity as Zainal had drilled them, reaffirming the coordinates of their downed ship's position. Though Leon had prepared a report of what had disabled the ship, he wasn't asked for it. Zainal had told him it wouldn't be required but had helped him learn the terms.

The camps in the line of the ship's descent—Bella Vista, Ayres Rock, and Shutdown—cleared away any signs of orderly living. All the air-cushioned vehicles were stowed out of sight and there was some concern over people, scouts and hunters, who might be seen out and about. Narrow, particularly, must appear deserted from the air.

"They will know from heat signs people are on the surface," Zainal had said, "but not what they are doing or what they live in. Wiser for them to see men out hunting."

"You mean they'll be counting noses?" someone had asked.

Zainal laughed at the notion. "No, just the presence of sufficient life signs to suggest survivors down here."

"So they can send us more?" Mitford asked in a sour tone.

"At this point, it's the more the merrier," Easley had said, grinning so infectiously that Mitford had smiled back.

THE INSTRUMENTATION ON THE BRIDGE IN THE HANGAR WAS NOW working with an efficiency it had lacked for many voyages and the descent of the rescue vessel was easily estimated. The assault team, in position from the moment the first Deski alarm had come in, lounged about the downed transport: some were outside, others sitting on the ramp, while the "Drassi" would not appear until their counterparts called for them.

Camouflaged in the hedgerows and up the trees in strategic positions were sharpshooters with crossbows and lances. Zainal had had no information about the crew complement of the new transports. The "Catteni" to be rescued were armed with stunners, which might be all that was needed. Surprise was on their side.

The takeover of the transport ship was even smoother than the hijacking of the scout. The supercilious Drassi of the rescue vessel had been so eager to mock the stranded captain that he had been first down the ramp, the other Drassi staff following, while the crew began to unload what passengers remained. They were laughing and chatting, pleased to be on the last leg of this journey and going home. They were

also looking forward to making the rescued Catteni work while they loafed.

Flat on her stomach in the next field, Zainal by her chuckling softly to himself, Kris watched as the Catteni Drassi strolled arrogantly across to the damaged transport.

The mock-Catteni crew had, of course, jumped to an appropriate alert stance, calling out—in an excellent accent, Kris thought proudly—to those inside that the Drassi captain was coming aboard. They followed in, a respectful distance behind, and one remained at the open hatch, leaning against it as the rescuers finished unloading the latest unconscious droppees. They had no sooner finished than they were called to come aboard the wreck.

“Now what do we have to do?” one Catteni demanded of another as they made their way across the field, or so Zainal translated for Kris.

“Probably dismantle equipment the beasts might use,” the other said.

“Beasts, huh?” Joe muttered on the other side of Zainal. “We’ll beast them.”

Zainal translated the first part of the Catteni response. “‘Let’s hope it doesn’t take too long, then. I need my . . .’” And he refused to translate that rather long sentence to Kris. Considering the nasty way the two Catteni chuckled, she was glad he hadn’t.

After the observers had waited anxiously for what seemed an interminable time, the mock-Drassi captain—actually Vic Yowell, who was not only the right size but had known enough Catteni to handle the necessary interchanges—appeared and with his men strode purposefully across to the newly arrived ship and up its ramp.

There was a brief interval before he reappeared, waving his cap and showing the difference between his Catteni makeup and his own skin color.

“It’s ours now!”

The hedges sprouted humans, cheering and dancing with glee at the success of the second Phase Two assault. Then they hurried to attend to the newly arrived, 114 of them, all from Earth and in far better condition than many of the most recent arrivals. The Catteni prisoners were sent off to join their compatriots in the valley.

Yuri Palit, another mock Catteni with his skin back to its original shade, headed the guards who accompanied the prisoners. On the way they were given an example of night crawler activity and so descriptively warned of other dangers of Botany that they were thoroughly cowed by the time they arrived.

By the time the new transport had been gone over, Scott was actually smiling at everyone. This had been the maiden voyage of the KDL, according to its log and the look and smell of still-new equipment. Zainal, Kris, Bert Put, Peter Snyder, Rastancil, and Beverly were up all night translating manuals and understanding the improvements incorporated in its systems.

Best by far was the discovery of two small ships, capable of short-range planetary flight, and one large well-equipped ground vehicle, suitable for rough terrain, with exterior plating to resist many corrosive-type atmospheres. Looking at its specs on its control board, Zainal said that it was also probably “watergoing.”

“Amphibious,” Kris had murmured, and they had locked eyes and smiled. They would not have to risk using the scout, and being seen, in order to get to the other continents. This craft would hold twelve passengers and three crew and would transport them safely to at least the closest landmass. They’d better pick a day when the channel waters were calm, because she didn’t like to think of being seasick in such confines.

But that sort of exploration was not in their immediate future. The next scenario to be played out was to take off in the brand-new transport, and head back toward Barevi, its base.

As many as could fit aboard entered the KDL 45A—which is how the glyphs on its side translated—and took off, and that about took in everyone who had worked in NASA or on air force jets from various countries. The decks could be arranged in a variety of heights and ways, according to cargo or passengers, awake or unconscious. Rather an ingenious arrangement, Marrucci and Beverly agreed, when Zainal showed them how to achieve various combinations. So the KDL could actually accommodate the many who had some reason, or claim, to make the journey. Some were going to have a chance in space; others had to learn how to manage the transport, and all would help jettison the traces of the sudden and complete destruction of a brand-new ship. Zainal had found log references to several minor incidents with the propulsion unit on the outward-bound journey: one severe enough for the captain to shut down the engines and send an EVA team to clear the tubes. That had been reported to their base, since it had delayed their touchdown at Botany to collect the transport crew.

Pete Snyder headed a team appointed to figure out just what malfunction could now result in a fatal accident. They had plenty of debris from the damaged ship—fortunately the components were all constructed of similar alloys. With a little ingenuity in their messages to their base, each describing further problems and then . . . a delayed-

action explosion, sufficient detritus would be left floating in space to convince anyone who cared to examine it that the KDL had indeed, exploded on her way home. An appropriate outer panel had been taken from the old transport, and paint had been found in the KDL's supply bay to duplicate her glyphs. The bogus outward-bound voyage was scheduled to take a week, since Zainal wished to get beyond the system's heliopause, beyond the satellite's range, before conducting the explosion.

Kris had remained behind, her hand insufficiently healed for her to be useful on the voyage . . . especially when so many, like Raisha and other space-trained women pilots, deserved the chance. Truth to tell, she was tired from late nights and long sessions of translating. And then Mitford had asked for, and got, the land vehicle for his scouting teams. She'd be of much more use familiarizing herself with that piece of machinery than being a supernumerary on a space flight.

"THEY SHOULD BE BACK BY NOW, SHOULDN'T THEY?" SHE ASKED MITFORD as they were storing their equipment on the land-sea vehicle, nicknamed the Tub. When Zainal returned, Mitford was planning a trip, himself as leader, to cross the channel that separated this continent from its nearest neighbor. He was combining two teams for the project and was happier than Kris had seen him since he'd handed debriefing newcomers to Peter Easley.

"Yeah, in fact, they're three days overdue. But the destruction went off okay. You know that."

The link between the old transport's bridge and the KDL was open and all the mounting hysteria, orders and counterorders, as the propulsion system "failed" had been duly followed by those on the ground . . . including the final bang. So that part had gone well.

The Deski sentries were ordered to keep their ears wide open, since their senses were trusted far more than the obsolete and erratic detection system on the bridge in the hangar.

Kris accompanied Mitford when they did a check on the prison valley and found the Catteni alive, but certainly not making any move to "settle" in.

"No initiative," Mitford muttered to Kris. "Just like Zainal said. Not even that pair of Drassi captains."

These seemed to be concentrating on a small space of dirt in front of them, but neither moved.

"Chess?" Kris asked, for they had that sort of concentration about them.

“Chess?” Mitford regarded her with surprise. “They haven’t the wits for checkers, much less chess.”

“Well, there’s someone trying to fish,” Kris said, pointing to the one man poised over the stream with a thin lance in his hand.

“So he is. Even Catteni get tired of those dry rations,” he said, and turned away.

Yuri Palit, in his authority as head of resettlement, had gone to check the Turs and came back with the information that they had already made a few shelters, chopping down the lodge-pole trees. There also seemed to be several wounded lying in the sun: broken legs and arms and one with raw wounds visible down his side.

“Trying to climb out?” asked Astrid.

“How stubborn can Turs be?” Yuri Palit asked of Mitford.

The sergeant shrugged. “Damned stubborn. Leave ’em alone.”

“And let them ruin that lovely valley?” Kris demanded.

Mitford jerked his head toward the photos that adorned his back wall, the ones showing the other closed valleys Zainal had seen on his way in. “They’re others as well as the other continents.”

“Now, about them,” Astrid began.

Mitford held up one hand, grinning at the tall attractive Swede. “Gotta wait until Zainal checks us out on the amphibian.”

Which reminded everyone that KDL was now six days’ overdue. Kris tried to appear unconcerned, but possible disaster scenarios kept her awake most nights.

“What could have happened?” Astrid asked her the morning of the seventh day. “Surely they should be returning now?”

“That bang wasn’t for real,” Mitford said, avoiding Kris’ eyes, but speaking as positively as if he had consummate faith in Zainal’s return.

“There’ll be a good reason, I’m positive,” Kris said so firmly that Mitford shot her a quick look.

“Yeah, there would be, kid. I just can’t imagine what.”

“Asteroids, some technical difficulty, or operational problem, there could be dozens of good reasons.”

“Yeah.”

“It wouldn’t be a good idea for him to get in touch and give it all away since the ship’s been destroyed and that damned satellite would catch any message he sent.”

“You’re right there,” Mitford acknowledged and then went to do something else.

"NEW SATELLITE," ZAINAL TOLD THEM AS SOON AS THE HATCH OPENED to the crowd waiting so anxiously. "We go . . ." and he gestured a circuitous course. He looked for and found Kris at the side of the hatch. "Lenvec's work." He dropped down beside her, touching her cheek just briefly as the rest of the spacefarers exited, exultant in their shouts to the welcoming committee.

The biggest smile was on Scott's face as he came down the ramp, Beverly, Rastancil, and those who were now being called the High Command following closely.

"Mitford, Easley," Scott called out, and added other names, "meeting at nineteen-thirty at Narrow. Beggs!" The officious lieutenant Kris disliked so came running up to meet him, clipboard in hand. "I want all these men and women to make that meeting if humanly possible . . ." and he continued giving orders while proceeding to the nearest air-cushion vehicle and gesturing for it to take off toward Camp Narrow.

Zainal, taking Kris by the arm, steered her off to one side, away from the general jubilation around the hatch.

"Lenvec got them to put up a more powerful satellite spy?" she asked.

"Someone did. We had to time its orbits to sneak back in. KDL is very good at glide."

"You glided? From where?"

Zainal grinned at her astonishment. "Not hard. Your space shuttles did it. Catteni still better space jockeys."

"Jockeys?" Kris had to admit to herself that she didn't like him picking up slang from other sources—and severely curbed her reaction.

"Bert brought her down. Good man, Bert. Now, where can she hide?" Zainal frowned over that problem.

Kris looked up the field at the hulk still sitting there. "Put it there. They expect a wreck in that place. How much detail will the satellite be able to make out down here on the surface? The name glyphs?"

Zainal began to chuckle. "Why not? The KDL masses more but not that much more."

"Hiding it right out in sight always confuses a searcher," Kris said.

"Scott will agree?"

Kris shrugged. "That thing's too big to fit in any garage—except maybe the one we can't get into at the seaside. Who will come looking for it? You had us all excited, listening to orders and counterorders and all the hysterics . . ."

Zainal chuckled louder now, his yellow eyes reflecting his laughter, most un-Catteni-ish.

“And if you guys avoided the satellite’s eyes on the way in, surely we’ve succeeded in deceiving them.”

“Some one of your wise men said once,” and he tipped his head back a moment, recalling the exact words, which he carefully enunciated, “that you can fool most of the people part of the time but not all of the people all of the time.”

She had to smile at him, he looked so pleased with remembering the apt quote. And she was so pleased he was back, safe. “You think Lenvec is that vindictive?”

“Not think. I know. When I was chosen . . .” He paused briefly and then went on, “I was given privileges the chosen have. Lenvec was . . . jealous. If he is now to take my place as chosen, he will feel like he got robbed.” He gave her a sideways glance, to see her reaction to his slang. She grinned at him. He was also speaking with a less guttural tone to the English words. Soon his accent would be indistinguishable from a native-born speaker.

“Hmmm, yes, if he’s the jealous type, he would feel robbed. But maybe he’s been . . . chosen already. How much of *him* is left in the Eosi?”

Zainal nodded his head slowly over that point. “I do not know that. Fortunately,” and now he held his cheek down against hers, holding her tightly, “I was dropped and I stay.”

KRIS WAS NOT THE ONLY ONE WHO THOUGHT OF KEEPING THE KDL RIGHT out in the open. An artistically scorched glyph took the bright new KDL 45’s place but there were, actually, no other options, even if they could find a Farmer facility big enough to house it. The ship was not just a trophy, gathering dust, although how it would be used was yet to be decided. Scott had approved Phase Two but who knew if the admiral, who seemed to have taken charge of the military aspect of the High Command, felt they should attempt Phase Three.

The KDL settled itself on the wreck, compressing its empty shell. The Deski sentries would give enough advance warning of any landings . . . should other transports be sent here . . . so that she could lift and settle down a few fields over, and be camouflaged from casual inspection. The Catteni rarely looked around during the process of hauling out their passengers and what few supplies accompanied them. A certain risk was taken, but Scott had come to agree with Zainal’s assessment of the Drassi: Do as little work as possible and get back to base.

“You know, someone might just think it was odd that there have been three ships blown up in this area,” Leon Dane remarked at the end

of the final debriefing, "and decide it isn't worth visiting this sector of the vast Eosi-Catteni empire and leave us alone."

"I doubt that," Easley said with a sad smile. "According to the latest arrivals, Earth's resistance is growing, and the Catteni are still taking anyone they think might be a saboteur or ringleader into custody. We had a troop of Sea Scouts in the last group and all they were doing was holding their monthly meeting. We may end up with more of Earth's population here . . . and wherever else they've been dumped . . . than on good old Terra Firma."

"I just hope we can maintain a fresh-start approach on Botany and ditch the attitudes that made trouble back on good old Terra Firma," Mitford said, with good reason to doubt the ability of people to forget ingrained intolerance and bigotry. Three men and a woman were serving time in the stocks right now who had revived an old prejudice in an hour-long brawl. The injured would serve their sentences when they had sufficiently recovered. "The more people we get in, the more trouble we acquire."

"We've got four continents . . . well, two, if we leave the Farmers theirs," Leon said. "There's enough space for everyone, isn't there?"

"For some types, there's never enough space," Sarah said.

"Too right," Dane said, exhaling tiredly.

Chapter Seven

ONCE THE EXCITEMENT OF PROCURING AND HIDING THE KDL CALMED down, Scott and others of the High Command, military branch, spent hours debriefing the latest arrivals from Earth, trying to figure out world events from fragmented individual reports. Not much news was broadcast anymore in a world that once had twenty-four-hour news bulletin coverage.

“Disasters every time of the day or night,” Kris had said.

“Do they do that on Catten or Barevi?” Sarah had asked Zainal. They were all sitting around their table after the evening meal in Narrow.

“Tell everyone everything? No,” and Zainal chuckled at the notion. His gray hair had grown so long now that he was wearing it in a ponytail, a style that suited him better than most. Kris had offered to braid it, Amerind fashion, as she did her now much longer hair, but he had declined. “Only need-to-know is told.” Then he gave a shrug. “And evenings of lies about new worlds and brave Catten.”

“Recruiting?”

Zainal considered the word, squeezing Kris’ hand to indicate he was going to figure that one out himself. “Yes, to join space army.”

He got a thumbs-up for accuracy from the others at the table—their scouting partners and those from Astrid’s six-strong team. They spent a lot of time together, learning how to drive the amphibious machine so that anyone could. The mechanics had been all over it, too, familiarizing themselves with its equipment, engines, systems, communications, and life support. While Mitford was ranked a senior in the High Command Committee now governing the settlers, he still had to get

“proper clearance” to take such a valuable piece of machinery. He also needed Scott’s clearance to take Zainal.

“They’ll do anything, any damned thing, rather than let us function as a team,” Mitford had ranted the previous night. “They’ve got both bridges manned, and the KDL working off solar power, and we still have the Deski perimeter listeners. Almost nothing can sneak up on us down here. If they really needed Zainal, Marrucci could fly over in one of those atmosphere planes now that he’s learned how not to kill himself in it. And it doesn’t leave the sort of trail visible to the spy sat.”

Zainal wasn’t exactly reassuring on that count because he didn’t know how sophisticated the new satellite was, just that it was on a full global orbit, checking the surface of the planet once every thirty hours. He was positive that the reconditioned air-cushion Farmer vehicles would not show up on the satellite since they ran on solar power. The amphibious vehicle might possibly be visible—since it was no longer supposed to exist—so he had plotted a course and they would move only when the satellite was at another point around Botany’s globe. It might take slightly longer to reach the coast, but once in the water, he thought, the Tub would be undetectable since water would not only cool its exterior but mask its emissions.

Kris’ hand was still slightly red but her feet had healed, even if she was careful to keep a layer of fluff as an insole. And she dearly wanted to leave Camp Narrow, for Mitford’s sake as well as Zainal’s. She tried to convince herself it was just the wander-itch that made her restless, because she didn’t think she had a trace of precognition in her, but she did very much want to leave. To go explore the neighbor continent.

FULLY ACCUSTOMED NOW TO ITS NEW FORM, EOSI MENTAT IX WAS bored. It had returned to pleasures that its weakening former husk had been unable to perform, and now these no longer satisfied its seeking for unusual experiences. The new form had been relatively circumscribed, not having had the training of the young originally chosen from that bloodline.

That was when it remembered the animosity and bitterness of the Catteni mind when it had been subsumed. Ix accessed the memories. A brief exploration would discover if the entity’s suspicions had been valid. Ix was somewhat startled to discover that a more powerful satellite had been put in position around the subject planet. The entity’s traces grew alarmed within the Mentat as the most recent report was mentally gleaned from those on duty.

The scout ship had disappeared and no trace of it had been found anywhere in Eosi space: it had not refueled at any station, planetary or space. Nor could the satellite find that sort of metal shape on the subject planet. The matter of the wreck of the transport was resolved by the interchange of communications between the KDL and the downed ship. The KDL, the newest of the transport fleet, had taken off after discharging its cargo and had been tracked out of that solar system. By both satellites. And the tape of its final emergency and explosion was on record.

Ix carefully reviewed that tape, the details of the final moments of the ship's life and the efforts of the crew to remedy the fault. Ix also reviewed the fault in the light of the KDL's sister ships now coming on line and found that such a back surge in the propulsion was indeed a possibility, however improbable.

The Eosi Mentat ordered a search for the log of the KDL, which should be found in the space debris. It was. Within the tiny fraction of Ix's great mentality an infinitesimal scream insisted that such events were suspicious.

Ix screened the orbiting satellite's records and found only the wreck that had been left where it had landed. Then Eosi Mentat Ix was called to a meeting of its peers, to determine what must be done with the increasing problems experienced by Catteni occupying forces on the latest planet they had subjugated. Such continued resistance was unique, even bizarre, and Ix was caught up in deciding what punitive measures to take that would completely solve this problem. However, all Eosi found themselves rather fascinated by the scope and originality of the opposition to their benign rule.

THE GENERAL-MAINTENANCE ORB REACHED THE TARGET PLANET AND found its near space occupied by two technological items: one orbiting in a thirty-hour, total global pattern, and the other geosynchronous. These objects were thoroughly examined before the orb descended to a level at which it could investigate why a homing missile had been dispatched from the command facility without a message. The orb discovered some life-forms resident in the facility, for what purpose it was not programmed to discover, but their presence was noted. It proceeded on its orderly inspection of the agricultural facilities placed around the more arable continents and discovered anomalies throughout a large area, suggesting malfunction on an unprecedented scale of the indigenous equipment. Checking inventory against what should have been idle at this time of the planet's growing season, it could discover parts of the equip-

ment but not in the usual form. This abnormality was duly noted. There did appear to be more life-forms than the natural propagation of the indigenous species would ordinarily produce. There was no possible way in which such a bovine species could damage, much less alter the machinery that husbanded it. The orb was programmed only for mechanical devices, inventory and supply: it did not examine life-forms. That was another department.

It completed the necessary circuits at the altitude programmed into it for the maximum efficiency of required investigations, sent its findings back to its home world, and continued on its scheduled maintenance cycle.

THE DESKI WERE COVERING THEIR EYES, COWERING, BUT STILL MANAGED to report in to their bases that there was the most fearful noise in the air. The boards on both bridges reported a spatial object, traveling at an impossible speed, spinning about Botany at what Marrucci stammered had to be damned near the speed of light. Its manifestation on the bridge boards was of a continuous pattern of light, encompassing Botany.

"Then it can't be Catteni," replied Rastancil, watching behind Marrucci. "They don't have that capability . . ."

"Yet," Marrucci added, sotto voce.

The team at the command post reported a terrifying moment.

"I felt like I was being scanned by ETs," reported the generally sanguine Colonel Salvinato in a voice that shook noticeably.

"Well, you're not alone. Something's giving us a real going-over," Rastancil replied, which he hoped would reassure the colonel: his body still tingled from whatever it was that had touched him.

Salvinato reported in later that there were now two homing devices where there had recently been only one.

"Replacements by matter transmitter?" Rastancil said, condescendingly.

"'Beam me, up Scotty,'" Marrucci said, and this time he didn't lower his voice. "The Catteni also don't have anything that can do that."

"That *would* account for how the Farmers' ships managed to load up so fast," Mitford said, when he was called in to give his interpretation of the curious incident. "I felt it, too, like someone going over me with a mild electrical current." And then he smiled. "The Farmers have finally noticed us."

"Do we really want them to?"

Mitford thought that over for a long moment and then shrugged.

“Beats me, general,” he said. The generals had taken control of Botany out of his hands, but he still felt the responsibility. “It was the only option I had at the time. Still seems a good one. Only no one hung around long enough to speak to us. So, what happens next?”

Scott called an immediate meeting of as many of those from Camp Rock as had witnessed the fly-past of the Mech Makers’/Farmers’ spaceship. Rumors circulated and with each lap of the scanner they doubled in improbability, stupidity, and frightfulness. It was now supposed to have infected everyone with a deadly disease that would kill off the entire population in twenty-four hours. Other rumors included the notion that the Farmers had counted them and would shortly come and round them up, process them in the abattoir, and ship them back as delicacies. Or, all of them were “marked” now and would be enslaved or converted into six-legged loo-cows or night crawlers.

There was certainly tension as the First Drop folk gathered in the mess hall at Narrow, late that afternoon. Benches (made of old machine parts, and these were the last places the arrivals sat) and stools formed a semicircle around a table at which sat Jim Rastancil, Geoffrey Ainger, Bull Fetterman, Bob Reidenbacker, John Beverly, Pete Easley, Yuri Palit, and the former judge, Iri Bempechat, who had recently taken over the disciplinary duties for work evasion or inadequacy. Ray Scott, with his insufferable aide, Beggs, taking notes and counting noses, rose when it was evident that all who intended to come had arrived.

“I hope none of you have suffered any repercussions from those ludicrous rumors started after our recent visitation,” Scott began, with a rueful expression.

He looked directly at Chuck Mitford, who sat with Zainal on his right and Kris to his left, with Dowdall, Cumber, Esker, Murphy, and Tesco—his original assistants during the retreat from the First Drop field—ranged along the row: defenders who had made very certain that no hystericals got near the sergeant. Other First Drop took the second row, showing solid support. Patti Sue just behind him with Jay Greene, Sandy Areson, Bart, Coe, Pess, Slav, Bass, Matt Su, and Mack Dargle. More from the First Drop spread out behind them: Janet, Anna Bollinger and her son, the Doyles, Joe Latore, and Dick Aarens.

Mitford sat with arms crossed over his chest. “You and me both know the problem with rumors, admiral, but I’m not going into decline over ’em, scanned or not. Especially when everyone’ll wake up tomorrow in the same shape they went to sleep in.”

“Yes, that will solve the problem, but not the bigger ones we must seriously consider,” Scott said. He looked at Zainal. “I take it that phe-

nomenal display had nothing to do with either Eosi or Catteni spacecraft?"

"Absolutely nothing. The satellites' reports are going to cause a big stir. I know that much," Zainal responded. "The Eosi won't like to see what came. They will be very worried. Finally."

"You were a scout, weren't you, Zainal?" Bull Fetterman asked. "You ever encountered any traces of them in this galaxy?"

Zainal shook his head. "This is new solar system for Eosi and Catteni. Which is why *we*," and he emphasized the plural pronoun as he glanced around to include everyone there, "are colonizing it. What I know is that their technology is far superior to Eosi. I also do not fear them as I do Eosi."

"You don't?" Scott was not the only one surprised by that admission. "How do you arrive at that conclusion, considering what just happened?"

"Because of what just happened," Zainal said as if that should be obvious. "No one was injured by scanning. The homer was replaced. No, I do not fear the Farmers. A . . ." and he put his hand flat against his stomach, "a . . . gut feeling."

"Does anyone else share this . . . gut feeling?" Scott asked, more amused than patronizing.

"After seeing that valley, I'm inclined to agree," Kris said. There was something about the ambiance in the valley that she thought the entire team shared: its tranquillity, carefully saved and preserved by the blocked entrance. "These are not killers, like Eosi. They nourish this planet carefully."

"Why didn't they get rid of the night crawlers, then, I'd like to know," Dowdall said sourly.

"Very efficient in clearing up waste and garbage," Kris said.

"They made safe places to keep something in, or something out. Eosi do not do such things. The Farmers are very different from Eosi . . . and Catteni."

Lenny Doyle raised his hand, grinning. "I'd be a bit more apt to believe him if the Mechs . . . the Farmers . . . hadn't nearly chopped us up for the crates. But Zainal got us out before they could, and besides, the machines weren't programmed to know the difference between us and loo-cows."

Dick Aarens made a low disclaimer.

"Would that suggest the Farmers aren't bipedal?" Scott asked.

"No, it only suggests that the Farmers' machines were not programmed to differentiate between warm-blooded species," Kris said.

“Could the Mechs have been made in the form of their makers?” Janet asked, her eyes flicking around for reassurance.

Lenny began to guffaw at the notion, laughter he tried to stifle when he saw how he offended Janet.

“C’mon, Janet,” Aarens said rudely, “spare us that religious tripe . . . made in their image? Shit, no! Every single piece of equipment on this planet is a masterpiece of design, using renewable power sources and with easy access for self-repair and maintenance. No one’s been able to figure out what sort of alloy was used, but the machinery is practically indestructible.”

“Until you came along,” Janet said angrily, stung by Aarens’ snide manner.

“That does not, however,” and Ray Scott jumped in quickly, waving for both of them to sit down, “give us any insights into what course of action the Farmers might take when that orbiting whiz-ball of theirs reports that all the machinery in a good-sized section of their farmlands is no longer in operating condition.”

Kris covered her mouth to hide her grin. She wouldn’t have expected that sort of wry assessment from the admiral.

“Let us not digress into useless speculation,” Scott said. “Will the Eosi do anything to Botany while they’re studying the reports? Like a blockade?”

“Or at least stop shipping us more colonists?” asked Pete Easley in a plaintive tone.

“That is more likely,” Zainal said.

“What I had more in mind is sending a team to investigate a planet that has been the last point of call for a scout ship and two transports.”

“What about blaming the ETs for disappearing those ships?” asked Lenny Doyle.

“That would be too much to hope for,” Jim Rastancil said, but he looked thoughtful.

“The Eosi do not care what happens to a colony like this one,” Zainal said. “But they will not like what happened today when they see the reports. The Eosi believe that their technology is best.”

“And they’ll find it hard to swallow that it isn’t,” Rastancil said, quite satisfied with that turn.

“So, it’s the Eosi who are your inventors?” Ainger asked.

“Yes. They supply the plans. Catteni build.”

“You’re sure they won’t come after Botany because it has attracted such extra . . .” Rastancil asked, pausing for the appropriate term, “stellar visitations?”

Zainal considered this.

"How the hell can Zainal answer that, general?" Mitford asked with some acrimony. "The Eosi have been supreme in space so far. At least to hear Catteni tell it, and I heard all their tales when I was stuck in Barevi."

"There will be much worry and many meetings," Zainal said, obviously enjoying the thought of Eosian consternation. "You," and he gestured to those around the table, mostly the latest to arrive on Botany, "do not realize how low the Catteni are in their great minds and . . . selves." He looked at Kris to see if he had the right word. "They will spend much effort and time trying to find out who sent that very, very fast space machine. *Not*," and he paused for emphasis, "why it should appear here around their penal colony."

"That's a relief," murmured Anna in the row behind.

"That's some relief," echoed Rastancil, sitting back.

"So we can put the Eosi response to this in the slow lane, then," Scott said, "but I doubt we can ignore the response of the Farmers."

"He thinks by calling them 'farmers,' they won't scare us as much," Janet remarked to Anna.

Kris grinned over her shoulder at Janet but the woman was whistling in the dark: her eyes were scared and her chin trembled a bit. Anna Bollinger, who had left her baby son with someone for this meeting, looked even more frightened.

"I hoped to get their attention, admiral, as the one chance I saw—then—of getting off this planet and back home. Best scenario would be to make *them* notice the Eosi-Catteni combine," Mitford said.

"A bit naïve of you, wasn't it, sergeant?" asked Geoffrey Ainger.

"Now, wait just a minute, Ainger," Kris said, sitting up straight with the anger that bit of condescension roused in her. She was not placated by Easley leaning over to murmur something to the British naval officer.

"My apologies, Miss Bjornsen. I forget how little you had at your disposal in the early days," Ainger said, elevating his butt off the chair. "Sergeant Mitford, no offense intended."

"None taken," Mitford said equably, and waved his hand, accepting the apology. The hand came down on Kris' leg, a reminder that he was well able to defend himself.

"It was at the very least what any noncom should do," Bull Fetterman said. "Establish what escape route is possible to return to his regiment."

"We established a lot more than that," Dick Aarens said, jumping to his feet. "And we've done a damned good job of converting the Mech Makers' stuff to human needs. Give us some credit, damn it."

"We do, I assure you, Mr. Aarens, especially since you contrived so many of the improvements . . ." Reidenbacker began.

"We'd better stop congratulating ourselves," Mitford put in, "begging your pardon, sir, but I'd like to hear what Admiral Scott now has in mind."

Kris privately believed it was obvious from Scott's expression that he had nothing in mind . . . yet.

"What I'd like to hear again . . . friends," and Scott was having trouble finding an appropriately inoffensive group noun, "is exactly your impressions of the arrival of the leviathan you saw, collecting this planet's harvests."

"If you mean, were we scanned then," Kris replied, "no, we weren't."

"Hell, admiral, the ship didn't even know we were there," Jay Greene said. "It just sailed overhead like some sort of . . ." and he waved his hand above his head, "monstrous dinosaur."

"It didn't land?"

"Not that we saw," Mitford replied.

"Zainal led a group of us back here, because we thought that's where it hovered," Ninety Doyle said. "We weren't that far behind it when it took off again. There wasn't a bloody thing left of the acres of crates we had to climb to get out of here."

"So there was nothing in it of the speed and flexibility of what buzzed us?" Beverly asked.

"Nuh-huh," and Ninety shook his head emphatically. "Different thing entirely."

"We sort of thought at the time," Jay Greene said, "that it was preprogrammed to do its job. That there wasn't any life-form aboard it."

Rastancil whistled, impressed. "Totally automated?"

"And a culture which has patently invented matter transmitters . . ." Scott said, clearing his throat.

"That would have been the only way all that stuff could have been loaded in the time it hovered," Ninety agreed. "Just like on *Star Trek*."

"Then it is entirely likely that today's scanner is also totally automated," Easley said.

"We couldn't get any idea of the mass of the scanner," Rastancil said. "I was on the bridge when it began its orbit and the transport doesn't have much in the way of fancy detection devices . . ." He looked over at Marrucci, who had been in the scout.

The pilot shook his head, holding up his hands. "I couldn't figure out what to activate on the board." He looked at Zainal.

"The scout will not track such speed," the Catteni said.

"So, essentially, we must wait until the device sends its reports to the Farmers," Scott said, "and then await results."

"Isn't there anything we can *do* to save ourselves?" Anna Bollinger's voice had a slightly hysterical note in it.

"We can't just sit still and do nothing." Janet added her protest.

A slightly supercilious expression crossed Admiral Scott's face and Kris, who had started to like the man, changed her opinion again.

"If he asks her what she thinks we should do . . ." she murmured to Mitford, who once again clamped his hand on her leg in restraint as he turned around to Janet.

"There's a lot we can do, Janet, and that's why we're here. Now, we've done pretty well so far, haven't we?" he asked, and waited until she gave her head an unwilling nod. "So just hold tight a bit longer, huh?" Then Mitford turned back to the front table. "Since it's a fair bet that the scanner saw that we've altered all the machines that are supposed to be in the various garages and barns we've been using, why don't we start by clearing them out? I'd also recommend that we explore the nearer continent with the view of taking up our residence there . . . that is, if we find the Farmers haven't set up shop there, too."

Scott was nodding acceptance of these suggestions, and even Ainger looked less dour.

"There're all those closed valleys on this continent, blocked to keep something in, or something out. How many did we discover, Zainal?" Mitford turned to his right.

"Several dozens. We must ask the map woman, Sheila, for details."

"The caves are ours," Patti Sue said firmly, the last person Kris would have thought would speak up in such a meeting. "We've made them livable."

"But we have trespassed," Janet said to her.

Kris didn't dare look around at Janet: what she was saying seemed so weird from a woman who was considered basically quite sensible. Maybe the scan had done something to some folks after all. She shuddered. She wasn't going to think there could be the least bit of truth in those asinine rumors, all products of insecurity and lack of self-confidence.

"If we give them back what we took . . ." Janet went on and then, hearing Dick Aarens' contemptuous snort at that idea, she whirled around on him, pointing her finger. "You're the one who started taking their machines apart . . ."

"Janet!" Once again Mitford called her to order, twisting around to face her. "You're not thinking this through and you're not a silly

woman. You've been such a strength to so many who got here confused and scared."

Sandy Areson had discreetly moved to sit on Janet's other side and now put a comforting arm around her shoulders, nodding once to Mitford to indicate she would take over now.

"What was done is done, and I doubt even the best of our mechanical geniuses could put all the parts back together again," Scott said in a conciliatory tone. "Not that that would be even remotely feasible, since we'll need every single thing we've contrived from their machinery to effect an evacuation of their premises. If that is one of our options."

"I think retreat in the face of overwhelming strength is usually considered a sensible course of action," Bull Fetterman said at his driest.

He got scattered laughter for his attempt to reduce the tension in the mess hall.

"Furthermore we can prepare places for everyone," Beverly said with a big smile, "if what I've seen of some of those valleys is any indication."

"The other continent's a better idea, general," Mitford said, rising from his chair. "Especially as we now have the Tub to do reconnaissance. Which I had planned to do anyway."

"Positive action is always admirable, sergeant," Scott said, "and I suggest you complete your plans and get them under way as soon as possible."

"Will Yuri's group start immediate evacuations, too?" Mitford swung halfway around, indicating Janet.

"You better believe it," but it was Reidenbacker who answered the question. He gave Janet an encouraging smile. She made a pathetic little sound in her throat but managed a brief smile, still twisting her hands nervously in her lap.

"They'd better consider that there'll be a lot more newcomers reacting like Janet," Kris murmured to Mitford. He nodded his head.

"Shouldn't we clear out all the things we've made?" Dick Aarens asked. "We need everything if we're going to function. And the scout? Where can we stash that now if we've got to clear the barns?"

Scott held up his hands. "Give us a few hours here," and he gestured to the specialists sitting behind him, "and we'll formulate the necessary plans and set up teams to implement them. Now, I know some of you have been upset by the whiz-ball we had this morning..." His label for the orbital caught everyone's attention this time, and he grinned to see its effect. "But we don't want to start another batch of rumors with those who still feel insecure here on Botany. Let's be careful how we

discuss this meeting outside the mess hall, shall we? I ask all of you, by whatever you hold sacred, not to start a second wave of ridiculous rumors. We'll do as much as humanly possible to rectify our misappropriation of housing and effects. Certainly our first priority is getting people out of our landlords' buildings and to safer places, like the valleys. Equally important is preserving the equipment we need to conduct an orderly evacuation."

Chuck Mitford turned around to those behind him. "Keep in mind, folks, it's taken the Farmers more than nine months to discover we're here. I'd say we had plenty of time to get elsewhere and at least sweep the garages and barns clean before we leave. Right, Janet? Anna?"

"We can do it," Patti Sue said, so staunchly that Kris, remembering how fearful the girl had once been, could have cheered out loud at that vote of confidence. Both Janet and Anna responded to her remark and looked less despondent.

"Of course," Patti added ingenuously, "they might not come until the growing season starts, and we don't even know when winter ends, if this *is* winter."

Zainal got to his feet again. "I like the idea of moving us all to the other continent if it is okay," he said. "I think we should go soon. The airships can look at the other landmass. It may not be as barren as it looks from space. If it is, they can help us search."

Ninety got to his feet as soon as Zainal sat down. "There are a lot of those closed valleys, too, which obviously weren't used by the Farmers. Maybe we can put people in them." When he heard protests arise, he added, "With stairs to get out when you had to. The valleys grow trees and bushes. We could transfer a lot of the stuff we've been growing to feed us to the valleys. And aren't the Turs and Catteni trying 'em out for us?" He grinned broadly with a teasing glance at Zainal.

Mitford rose. "I agree with Zainal, for what it's worth," he said with an unusual touch of humility.

"Sarge, you had the only idea feasible at the time. Don't have a guilt trip over it now," Kris said staunchly, and her remark was quickly seconded by many in the hall.

"We all helped," Joe Latore said, and turning around in his seat, looked straight at Dick Aarens. "Didn't we?"

Aarens noticeably ignored him.

"Yes, but what happens if we move to the other continent," Anna Bollinger said, her face distorted with fear, "and they come after us there?" Janet immediately put a reassuring arm on her shoulders and glared around.

"Hell's bells, missus," Ninety said, "there're caves all over the planet they'd never find you in. And probably caves across the channel, too, wouldn't you say, Zainal?"

Kris turned around, one hand going to Anna's knee. "We know it's really your son you're worried about, Anna, but why borrow any more trouble than we've already got?"

"Which brings me to the subject of the Catteni contribution to our present crisis," Scott said. "Zainal, what will your High Eosi do when the satellite reports that whiz-ball?"

"Worry," Zainal answered succinctly, his yellow eyes glinting with mischief.

Scott allowed a slight smile at Zainal's facetiousness. "Would they come back to inspect Botany or set up a blockade of warships or something similar?"

"First, it will be discussed. Second, the satellite will be checked for faults that what it reported is true. Third, they may send someone to see what happened to us." Zainal obviously doubted his third point was likely.

"Fourth, what if they send us more colonists?" Sandy Areson asked.

Zainal considered that for a moment, dropping his chin to his chest.

"I think no more colonists come for a while now, Sandy."

"Especially since it's been unlucky for them to land on this planet," Aarens said, chuckling.

Zainal went on as if Aarens hadn't aired his wit. "They will not believe the speed of the whiz-ball."

"And they know that it did not originate in this solar system?" Scott asked.

Zainal nodded. "They will think a long time before they do anything."

"Good," Scott said, rubbing his hands together. "Then that will give us time to remove ourselves completely. As I understand Catteni colonial policy, Zainal, they might even abandon the planet as unsuitable. Is that right?"

Zainal nodded.

"So we might be all right after all?" Anna Bollinger asked, her tear-streaked face brightening.

"It is entirely possible," Scott said with considerable and sincere aplomb.

THE UPSHOT OF THE DISCUSSION WAS NOT A REFERENDUM AFTER ALL, but the organization of scouting parties to check out every single one

of what Ninety Doyle tagged "lonesome valleys." Small groups would be quartered in the valleys to discover any unusual denizens, though none had been seen in either of the other two inhabited places. Once Mitford had organized the basics of those explorations, he left a sheaf of instructions with Easley as "the manual" and roused the members of his combined team. They set off before second moonrise since the amphibious vehicle had lights.

It also had excellent suspension. Mitford slept his usual six hours as Zainal drove it over surfaces rough and smooth.

The driver sat in the center of this vehicle with seating for two on either side and control panels across the width of the command position. Zainal gave demonstrations to his relief drivers, Joe Marley and Astrid, conducting a running lesson on the vehicle's potential and what each control was supposed to show, what the various icons on the panel board meant.

"Have we got a periscope?" Marley asked facetiously.

"Third button on right, sun icon," Zainal said.

"Why didn't I guess?"

"We can drive deep, cannot use scope. Says the manual," Zainal replied.

"A man who will read manuals!" Sarah gave a sigh of exaggerated respect.

Joe gingerly tapped the "glass" of the slit window beside him. "How much pressure will this stand?"

"Enough. We will not go deep. Is more built for cor-ro-sive atmospheres," Zainal added. "Which is to close vents, Astrid?" he asked, testing her memory of the functions on the panel in front of her.

"This one," she said, promptly pointing to it.

"Got it in one," Zainal said, and Kris, seated behind him, chuckled. He leaned back. "I learn new ones every day, don't I?"

"I, too," said Astrid proudly.

"You sure do, Astrid," Joe replied, grinning at her.

The point they were headed toward was close to five hundred miles from Camp Narrow, and the intention was to drive straight through to their destination with only brief halts to let air circulate through the Tub. It was such a new piece of equipment that it reeked of paint and oil and other strong odors and needed to have its air system flushed out, especially before they submerged. So they stopped from time to time, to brew tea and relieve themselves.

By midmorning the next day, the sea sparkled ahead of them. Visible without benefit of the binoculars was the irregular lavender coastline

of the neighbor landmass. The water before them was calm, with gentle ripples curling over onto the beach.

“Further away than Dover from Calais,” Astrid said, for she had traveled extensively in Europe in her college days.

Zainal said something in Catteni, flicked up his left hand when the number he wanted refused to come to mind. “Six or seven plus seven tens,” he said.

“Seventy-six,” Kris said. “And how fast will the Tub go underwater?”

“Not as fast as on land,” he replied. “Half the speed.”

“That’s far from slow,” said Joe, impressed, and peered at the sloping shoreline. “Shallow?” he wondered.

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Mitford said. “All aboard,” and he called in Astrid, Bjorn, and Jan, who had been searching for clams on the pebbly beach.

They had no sooner reached the flotation point for the Tub when a quick ping began to echo from Joe’s panel. “Sonar?” he asked, and then saw the gauge that was lighting up. “Or something like it. Are you taking us down, skipper?”

Zainal shook his head. “Distance to bottom.”

Water was reaching the slit windows now and covering two thirds of the main one and the slight movement of the waters could be seen.

“I forgot to ask,” Mitford said, “does anyone on board get seasick . . . besides me?”

“Sarge? You can’t,” Kris said in mock alarm.

Leila, always attentive, rose from her seat and went aft. She returned with a large basin, which she offered to Mitford. He gave her such a disgusted look that she started to apologize. “I was only trying to be helpful.”

“He’s teasing you, Leila,” Kris said.

“Maybe I’m not,” Mitford said, staring down at the basin.

“Are you claustrophobic?” Kris murmured.

He nodded.

“Oh,” she said in a sympathetic a tone as she could manage. No wonder he hadn’t been so keen to fly in Baby.

“The way the Tub is moving, sarge,” Joe said in a very cheerful tone, “we’ll be there in no time at all. No time at all!”

“Just think of it, Chuck . . .”

Mitford put a hasty hand on Kris’ shoulder. “Don’t . . . use that particular word, will you?”

“Ooops, but you are first to cross this channel, or strait, or whatever it is. Can we name it after you?”

"Huh?" and the sergeant regarded her with startled eyes. Then he realized she was trying to divert him and managed a grin. "I'll be all right. There's still some view left . . ." But the waves washed up over the windscreen and he hastily looked away from their activity.

The crossing was completed in just under two Catteni-style hours as marked by the timepiece set in the control panel. The Tub trundled out onto a sandy beach, dotted with the same sort of shrubs that grew on its neighbor.

"Clams, too," Astrid said, pointing to the air holes as they all emerged from the Tub, once again flushing out the newness smells. "We get some?" she asked Mitford.

"There's plenty of time," he said, shading his eyes to glance up the slope that led inland. Then he glanced down at the map he had taken from his pocket and unfolded it. "We're about here," he said, pointing and then cocking his finger due west. "Should be higher ground this way. Zainal, Kris, Astrid, Bjorn, Whitby, let's have bit of a recon," and he strode forward. "Joe, you're in charge of the Tub," he added.

When they reached the first height and had an overview, there were green-covered stretches in either direction and right back to the distant hills.

"Like loo-cow pastures," Bjorn said, pausing to dig a toe through the vegetation to the soil beneath. Little many-legged things burrowed deeper, away from the air. "Good dirt," he added, pinching some between his fingers and letting it sift back down. Neatly, he stepped on the divot he had made.

"Think the Farmers'd notice if we rustled some of their steers?" Kris asked, wondering what else was hidden in the soil here.

"No such insects in loo-cow pastures," Bjorn added. "Maybe no night crawlers, too."

Kris looked around her. "We should be so lucky." She tried to remember what she'd learned in geography about terrain. "This looks exactly like the landscape over there," and she pointed over her shoulder at the distant mainland. "Could there have been some sort of subsidence to separate the two . . . or maybe the gap just hasn't closed as it did on Earth in prehistoric days. Continents didn't used to be the way they are now, you know. Maybe this is a young land . . ."

"No, this is an old planet," Whitby said. "No volcanoes on those space maps at all and a lot of the hills are worn down. But this place does look just like the same sort of terrain that we left."

"Then why it is not farmed?" Astrid asked, her usually serene expression marred by a frown.

Mitford shrugged his shoulders and cleared his throat. "Who knows,

but we'll keep in mind that, if it looks alike, it could be alike and we might have night crawlers here, too. We'll bunk in the Tub tonight." Then he swung his arm in a wide arc. "Let's move out and see if we can find a good place to park."

IN THE FOUR HOURS THEY SEARCHED, THEY CAUGHT ONLY A GLIMPSE or two of small aerial life-forms, but no rocksquats.

"They wouldn't be down here where there's no rocks, for starters," Mitford said when Astrid grew worried about their absence. "Not even any trees for the avians either. Just bushes. Let's split up into two groups. You head north, Zainal, with Kris, Coo, and Bjorn. You, Slav, and the rest, we'll go south."

Several times, Bjorn stopped to check the soil again. It was good, black and moist, but not too moist, full of small creatures to keep it loose. "Plenty good for farms."

"Then why aren't there Farms here?" Kris asked, almost aggrieved.

"We will find the reason," Zainal reassured her, touching her elbow briefly.

"They farm well enough on the main continent. Don't need this one," Bjorn said, but he didn't sound all that convinced.

"And the closed valleys?" Kris asked. "They're even more enigmatic."

"Perhaps," and Bjorn considered his words, "they used them to keep animals in. Safe from the night crawlers."

"Where are the animals now, then?" Kris demanded.

"Eaten?" Bjorn asked, his eyes twinkling.

"We will ask that question, also," Zainal said.

They had gone north and now swung wide on their return to the Tub. Zainal had seen low foothills at a good day's travel to the north but otherwise this coastal plain was covered in low vegetation and bush. Good smells wafted on the evening breeze as they neared the Tub's position.

Joe had wasted no time in digging for clams; Leila and Oskar had caught several varieties of fish and, having tested them in the Tub's small but efficient laboratory unit, found them safe for humans to eat. Sarah contributed some familiar edible roots and greens she found near a stream. Among the Tub's supplies were small cooking units, which were occupied by boiling pots of clams. A grill had been laid across stones for the fish and there was bread from Narrow among their supplies, so when Mitford broke out the beer, everyone was in an expansive mood.

THE REPORT OF THE UNUSUAL ORBITING DEVICE WAS FORWARDED TO the Eosi Mentat Ix, who had registered an interest in everything to do with the colony planet.

Ix snarled each time it replayed the record of the object, for the speed alone suggested a technology worryingly more advanced than the Eosi's. Ix demanded all records, especially those made by its new entity, for within the entity's fading mind was a memory of a visit to the planet. Ix drew forth all the relevant facts, including the presence of the Catteni it had chosen from the bloodline of its present, but not selected, entity. It examined what the entity had dismissed, the gadget that had been presented for inspection as proof that the planet perhaps had been or was occupied by another species.

Ix worried over all the little memories, having them repeated and repeated until every nuance was dragged out for inspection. The Mentat was pleased that Catteni had set up a second, more flexible satellite around the subject planet. Unfortunately this satellite only emphasized the incredibly fast global search that had been conducted by the alien orb, and the anger of Ix increased at the implications of technical superiority over the Eosi.

Logic suggested that the original discoverers of that planet were reevaluating the world. What had it been programmed to discover? And why had this object, too, disappeared just beyond the heliopause of this solar system?

Ix summoned a meeting of those of its fellow Mentats who were sufficiently cognizant of their responsibilities to be useful in formulating a course of action. In lightning exchanges of information—as unlike the torturous communications with their subject Catteni as the orbiting object of the Unknown was unlike their own satellite units—it was decided the matter must be investigated in greater detail. All further shipments to the colony planet were suspended and the great number of recalcitrant Earth people would be sent to the secondary colonial venture.

Since it was the Ix Mentat's idea that the matter must be investigated, its peers decided that it must undertake the onerous journey, forgoing its usual pleasures and routines. Fortunately it could pass the tedium of the voyage in a suspended state but that amenity required some alterations to the newest and fastest Catteni warship. The delay annoyed the Ix still further and it amused itself thinking of ways to punish those beings which had been instrumental in causing its discomfort.

The Ix Mentat had just been awakened by the high-ranking naval

commander of this jewel of the Catteni fleet when proximity alarms jangled fiercely all over the ship, which went into attack alert. The mass approaching the Catteni vessel was so large it could not be contained on the detection screen. Suddenly waves of force rocked the XZ as if it were a pod in a pond. The Ix, in a manner inconsonant with its dignity and size, grabbed for support until the buffeting subsided.

“Report!” it said in its cold and vicious verbal communication form.

“Most High Eosi, an unknown vessel has appeared . . .”

“You keep no watch?”

“It appeared on screen just as we passed the heliopause,” the commander said, not daring to raise his eyes to the towering Eosi, “where other such devices have been seen to disappear.” The commander had been well briefed on the problems of, and connected with, this colony planet, not to mention the extraordinary fact that the Mentat had not received its chosen of record but another in the bloodline.

“What is it?” the Ix demanded. “Can you not show it?”

The commander hastily called up on the nearest screen what had stunned his entire bridge crew. The monstrous ship was ten times the size of the AAI, which itself was three times the size of the next largest spaceship in the Catteni navy. The immense ship was obviously headed inward and at a rate of speed which would bring it to its destination thirty time units before the AAI, for all its vaunted improved propulsion system and cruising speed.

“Can you not attach a tracer to its hull before it gets out of range?”

Even as it spoke, Ix realized that the ship was probably out of range.

“It is already out of range for such an attachment, Great Eosi.”

Ix fumed that the commander would waste its time stating the obvious. How *could* another species have developed such technology without the Eosi being aware of their existence? The Eosi had not bothered lately with anything more complicated than the improvement in propulsion and cruising range, their present navy having been deemed sufficient for all practical purposes. Such an attitude of complacency was no longer permissible.

“Watch it and record it. Do not fail for an instant.”

“No, Most High Eosi, not for an instant,” and the commander, relieved to have escaped with his life, strode as quickly as courtesy permitted away from the Eosi to the relative safety of his own bridge.

No one commented on his arrival or moved an eye muscle from whatever panel their duties bound them to.

Several hours later, the captain was awakened from an inadvertent doze by a stir and excitement, palpable on the bridge.

“Sir, the ship is . . .”

Wide awake, and staring at the view screen, the commander watched, awed, as the strange ship, magnified many times to keep it on the slower warship's screens, dipped briefly into the atmosphere of the subject planet, then bobbed up again and continued on its way to the other side of the solar system. Where, upon reaching the heliopause, it disappeared from even the most sensitive instrumentation.

The commander reported to the Eosi, who was ensconced on a huge chair in the cargo compartment which had been altered to provide it with the maximum comfort. The huge chair faced a large screen which had already shown the Ix everything the captain would have to report.

"The planet is of no importance in the face of this." The Eosi paused. "Return to Catten. At all possible speed," and its tone was contemptuous of such a torpid rate now that it had seen a velocity that transcended the best of Eosi capabilities. "This must be reported—and countered."

As the AAI passed through the heliopause of the system, a faint shock, like a low voltage of electricity, was felt by those awake. Only a nanosecond blip registered the shock on the bridge and it was dismissed as an anomaly.

DESKI EARS FELT THE NOISE IN THE AIR LONG BEFORE THE HUGE VESSEL was visible. But, while frightened people ran for the nearest cover in the caves they still occupied and the valleys they were exploring, the noise did not increase. To those with binoculars the ship was visible more as a scintillating lozenge very high overhead. On the view screens of the bridges, the monster seemed to do no more than skim the very top of the stratosphere, skipping like a flat stone across a calm lake, before altering its course and flying off into space, taking its skull-shattering noise with it.

Scott blinked, cleared his throat, and managed to unclench his fists. He had been in the KDL's bridge, his eyes glued to the incredible astronautic event shown on the detection screen.

No one cared to break the silence, for no one quite believed what they had just seen, until a comunit beeped, an almost impudent noise considering the enormity of the recent event.

"That's about the size of the first one, admiral," said Su. "I think we're lucky it was so high up. . . . What's that? 'Scuse me, sir . . ." and the connection was broken.

Dick Aarens came running full clip down the passageway to the bridge, catching himself on the doorframe to stop, his face ashen and the expression in his eyes as close to awe as he was ever likely to come.

“They did it, Scott. They did it. They’ve replaced every last fri—”

“Watch your language on my bridge, Aarens,” Scott recovered enough to reprimand him. “What has been replaced?”

“All the Mech Makers’ stuff, the farm machinery we disassembled. It’s all back. Back in the abattoir and everywhere . . .”

Peter Easley, who had been just as flabbergasted as everyone else on the bridge, absorbed that news before Ray Scott or John Beverly did. “Good thing we got the main garage cleaned out then, isn’t it?”

“It would have been very messy if we hadn’t,” Beverly remarked, and then he and Peter burst out laughing.

“Yes, but did they take the *parts* back?” Scott demanded.

“The parts?” Aarens was confused.

“I don’t think so, Ray,” Beverly said, holding up the comunit usually attached to his belt.

Aarens ran to the hatch but sauntered back to the bridge, a smug grin on his face. “The air-cushion’s still there. Maybe the Farmer didn’t recognize what I’d done to their material.”

The newly devised com board of the KDL lit up with other incoming calls from Shutdown, Bella Vista, and the other three garage sites that had so recently been cleared of human occupation. Then the caves and the valleys that were now human habitations.

“They don’t know we’re here, then,” was Worrell’s reaction.

“And couldn’t care less,” said Jay Greene. “Hope the satellite caught that visitation!”

“You do?” Worry began to fret over what trouble that could cause back in Barevi or Catten or wherever the Eosi hung out.

THE MACHINERY WAS BACK, GLEAMING NEW MODELS OF EVERY SINGLE unit that had been disassembled by the colonists, in pristine condition and arranged in the appropriate order in each garage, barn, or building. The solar panels that had been taken down and installed elsewhere for the camps’ needs were also replaced and seemingly operational.

“Why aren’t the machines moving?”

“It isn’t spring yet. Not the time to farm.”

“Weren’t we lucky to have moved out in time!”

“No messages with the unpacking?”

“As if we could have read them?”

“Was Kilroy here or his ET counterpart?”

“*What* do we do now?”

Chuck Mitford, having seen the huge spaceship on the Tub’s screen as they made their way back to the headquarters at New Narrow Valley

to report, had one answer to that when John Beverly informed him of the arrival of complete replacements.

"Get into those garages and remove the anesthetic darts from the launchers before those machines are fully charged."

"Won't such interference be noticed?" Beverly asked.

"I sure hope not. We took the first ones out when they were down, but you'd want to do it before they get fully operational. Fill the reservoirs with water. That anesthesia damned near put paid to a lot of us on the First Drop. Lenny Doyle or Pess'll show you how. They've done it before."

"Any other suggestions, sergeant?" Beverly asked at his most respectful.

"Watch out for the avian predators. Those machines can call them down on anything that moves where it shouldn't."

"Anything else?"

"If I think of something, I'll let you know. But check with Cumber, Esker, the Doyle brothers, Mack Su, any of the First Drop who scouted for me."

Mitford had been sending back daily reports on their explorations. Now he turned back to his team.

"I thought for sure we'd have more than three weeks before anything happened," he said, scratching his head in a measure of anxiety. "Can we make a bit more speed on this thing, Sarah?" he asked, since she was the driver.

"Sure, but it's about to get bumpy again."

"We are not far now," Zainal said, peering out the front windows.

"How long would it take the Eosi to do something, Zainal?" Mitford asked, now drumming restless fingers on his knee with his free hand as he clung to a safety strap with the other.

Zainal shrugged. "I do not think they can move as fast as Farmers. Eosi are not automated. Nor do they have matter transmission."

"I sure hope it galls their souls to hell'n'back," Mitford said, grinning. "I sure hope it makes 'em squirm with envy and dismay."

"Just so long as they keep out of our hair," Kris added. She knew that despite Zainal's assurances, she wasn't the only one fretting over the possibility of Eosi reprisals on the colony. He would know better than she, of course, but it didn't keep her from worrying. She daren't even *think* how the Farmers might react in a direct confrontation with their uninvited tenants, though Zainal's point about the valleys' protection barriers was comforting—as far as it went with an unknown species.

New Camp Narrow was located in one of the closed valleys, south

and east of the original cliff installation and itself suitably narrow but longer than most. It had been opened up by the simple expedient of blowing the barrier down with ingredients taken from Baby's arsenal. Zainal had instructed several miners and an ex-ordnance officer as to the explosive capability of the different substances in her lockers. The original notion had been to use such combustibles for mining operations, since the Farmers had apparently ignored the mineral and metal resources of the planet. Inside the appropriately long, narrow valley, Baby and the KDL were parked one beside the other: despite Baby's size in comparison to the larger, oblong transport vessel, she looked sleek, powerful, and far more dangerous. Parts of the wrecked transport had been utilized to make a fair-sized shelter nearby and the returning explorers had no trouble identifying it as headquarters from the flow of people in and out.

Small tents of loo-cow skins dotted the other side of the usual valley stream and the carcass of a loo-cow was turning on a spit over a firepit. The rubble from the opening had been lugged across the stream for use in constructing homes. Several were as high as window height, with masons busy around them. A much larger building was already in use, its heavy stone pillars supporting a roof of slate that overhung to provide shelter from rains while half-built sides of rough timber gave the edifice the look of a forestry preserve facility. Tables, benches, stools, a few chairs, and a neat pile of blanket rolls suggested it was providing several functions, unfinished as it was.

As the explorers swung around to park and dismount from their vehicle, they were hailed by many but no one stopped working for more than a few moments.

"I wonder where they stashed the airplanes and all the air cushions," Kris said, noting their absence.

"This wouldn't be the only valley in use," Mitford said, stretching his legs. "Okay, Kris, Zainal, Bjorn, Whitby, Coo, we'll make the initial report. You got all the maps. Whitby? Yeah . . ."

"I have pictures," Zainal volunteered, showing the mass in one big hand.

"I have soil samples," and Bjorn showed the little case he had made for them.

"And I have the log printout," Kris added, wondering why Mitford was so antsy suddenly.

"Sarah," the sergeant said, turning toward her and Joe, "go see what the drill is here. Astrid, see if we can get some food. Slav, put water in the tank. Oskar, Jan, Leila, air the Tub out good, and maybe even give it a good wash." He waved toward the stream.

If the refinements of headquarters left a lot to be desired as they entered and looked around it, the essentials—including the yet again reconstructed bridge of the wrecked transport—showed it to be in good working order and array. There were even “offices,” cubicles with reed-woven walls to afford some privacy. Old mech parts still doubled for stools, cupboards, shelving, and benches.

“D’you suppose the Farmers didn’t *recognize* their own stuff?” Kris murmured to Zainal.

“Bring your group over this way, sergeant,” called Scott, standing in the opening of one of the larger reed-walled compartments, on the far side of the bridge.

“Even has a ready room,” Kris murmured, this time to Mitford.

“You’re getting far too impudent, ma’am,” Mitford replied, though he was also peering at the equipment. The Catteni who had once operated from this bridge had never kept it in such good order.

“Mitford, Kris, Zainal, Bjorn, Whitby . . .” Scott was solemnly shaking hands as he ushered them in. “Saw you coming,” he added, “so John, Bull, and Jim asked to be in on the debriefing.”

He sat at a desk that was really no more than several planks fitted together, rubbed smooth with some sort of polish to prevent splinters; two woven baskets sat on the surface. For in and out, Kris thought irreverently, but their presence was oddly comforting. Business as usual. The other brass-heads sat on Scott’s side of the desk.

“It’d be a super place to settle a lot, if not all, of our people in, admiral,” Mitford said, pulling the stool closer to his legs. Whitby was unfolding the map indicating the scope of their explorations as Zainal arranged the photos of the sites that looked suitable for habitation. “Though you look like you’ve settled in here well.”

“Thanks, sergeant. It is indeed a pleasant place and there’ve been no indications of undesirable elements in any of the valleys we’re utilizing.” Scott had taken up one photo, and Kris nudged Zainal because she’d had a bet on with him that it’d be the one that took his eyes. “Now this is a magnificent setting,” he said, and passed the picture to John Beverly on his right.

“Thought you’d like the view of the harbor,” Kris said. “It’s deep enough for an aircraft carrier.”

“What would you know about draft, Kris?” Scott asked, but he was clearly in a good mood.

“The water’s real dark down there,” she said, grinning. “Too bad we don’t have any big ships. Yet.”

Mitford nodded to Bjorn to report now. “The ground is fertile, though it had not been tilled in many years.”

“You mean it was, once?” Scott sat forward, dropping the second picture he had taken up.

Mitford pulled the telltale picture away from those overlapping it. “The Farmers always put their facilities on unusable real estate, rocky or sandy, or plain nonarable. Look at the way this cliff has been hollowed out. We could damned near hide the KDL in here. For sure, it’d take Baby and all our converted equipment. This whole area shows sign of previous usage. And we found another section further along that ridge that reminds me of the way the abattoir was set up.”

The four bent their heads to examine the suspect photos and it was obvious they agreed with him.

“We found two more garage-type installations further up here,” and Mitford indicated the positions on the map. “We didn’t concentrate on finding any more because they had so obviously been vacant a very long time.”

“We think we saw some likely spots on the other side of the bay,” Whitby said, “but the terrain was too steep for the Tub, so we didn’t cross the bay.”

“Is it possible that the Farmers have just allowed the land to remain fallow because they have enough here?” Scott asked.

“It has been fallow many, many years,” Bjorn said. “But the soil is rich and would grow everything we needed. Especially if we used the land as wisely as the Farmers do.” He ended on an admonitory note.

“All we need is another shipment of replacements,” Beverly said with a grin.

“Hell’s bells, general,” and Mitford grinned, “we saved everything we didn’t use, so we’ve still got the plows and other farming junk. I’d heard none of the scraps were vacuumed up or beamed or whatever. We only have to mount plows and stuff back on the air-cushions and use ’em for their original function. No big problem!”

“That’s true, though some will not want to give up their runabouts,” and he winked at Mitford, “for plowing. What about the scavengers?”

“Nary a sign of them,” Mitford said.

“And that’s a puzzle,” Whitby said. “We left out our garbage every night we were there—and found it still there the next morning. But the terrain is very similar to what we have here.”

“No night crawlers on that continent?”

“None we could find, t’any rate.” Mitford took up the recital. “We did find rocksquats, whole colonies of them up in the hills—and just as dumb as the ones over here. There were avians where the lodge-poles have grown up into forests. Perhaps the damned crawlers died of star-

vation." He grinned. "We can always rustle a few loo-cows from here and see what happens. There're none there that we could find."

"Many of the same root vegetables and berry bushes already grow there and other vegetation is similar," Bjorn put in, his expression glowing with pleasure. "And fish and clams . . ."

"Roasted corn would have gone so well with them," Kris said suddenly, and sighed. "I'm sorry."

Scott bent an understanding look on her and his lips twitched in a bit of a smile. "You're not alone."

"We may yet find something similar," Bjorn said, his wide face eager to please her. "We don't really have a complete catalog of the planet's flora."

"By the way, Mitford," Beverly said, "we disarmed the darts as you recommended. That's quite a powerful anesthesia!"

"Indeed," Zainal and Kris said in unison.

"That's right," and Scott turned to them. "You were caught and subsequently saved another, more fortunate group." He paused a moment. "If there are truly no night crawlers. . . . There are many valid reasons for shifting our operations to that continent."

Mitford leaned forward, circumscribing the area they had searched with his index finger. "It's great country, sir. It'd take quite a few trips in the transport, but it might be the smartest move we've done since we got dropped here."

"If we could be sure the Eosi aren't watching . . ." Scott murmured, and looked at Zainal.

"They will still be 'considering,' Scott," Zainal replied to the unasked question. "Eosi consider long and hard before acting. Here, we use transport at correct times so the orbital does not see—short trip. If thrusters are used carefully, in short bursts, the geosynchronous one will not show enough to read."

"Besides which," Mitford said with great satisfaction, "they don't even know we've got those ships. And if they've any smarts at all, once they've seen reports of that monster, they'll stay the hell away from Botany."

Everyone looked at Zainal, who looked right back around the table and then shrugged.

NOT EVERY VALLEY BEING USED AS NEW ACCOMMODATIONS WAS AS far along in supplying shelter and amenities as the headquarters establishment. Nevertheless, the thought of picking up *again* and resettling

was met with a certain amount of resistance, especially from the technical and engineering groups who intensely disliked a second displacement. They were already involved in various projects and didn't want to drop tools—even the ones they were making. However, the availability of the massive caverns, when they were having to put together sheds from primitive substances, did cause them to reconsider. Then, all of a sudden, they wanted to be the first to get over there and resettled.

The miners were less happy, especially Walter Duxie, the mining engineer in charge, since they'd already reached a good iron lode and wanted to continue working it. While the Catteni space mapping did show mineral deposits on the target continent, they were loath to leave one that was already showing results. So it was decided that they could continue where they were: they had an adequate workforce, which could take turns hunting and supplying their needs, and the nearby caves were already habitable. Judicious use of the KDL would bring ore to where smelting and fabrication processes would be handled.

"What about the fuel situation?" Beverly asked Zainal at one meeting. "What happens if we run out? We've scarcely the technology to make it even if the natural resources are available."

Zainal grinned. "I know where more supplies are kept. With captured ships, a trip to Barevi would not be too hard."

"You pirate," Beverly said with a laugh, and then had to explain the term.

"I will make a very good pirate," Zainal decided, pleased with the definition. "Not the only one, too."

"Hey, what else could you lift at the same time?" Su asked. He was head of one engineering group who found themselves constantly having to invent the tools that had once been always available.

"Depends on what you want," Zainal said.

"Hey, can I go with you and see what's on display at the store?" Su asked, and Zainal pointed at Beverly.

"Ask him. We will not need to go soon. Not much fuel is needed for short hops."

Nevertheless, Zainal kept a close watch on the gauge on the first trip and, having reached a minimum quantity within a safe trajectory, tried to shave minutes off thruster use to preserve every ounce possible.

Mitford had taken a full load of passengers in the Tub to start up the new location, leaving Zainal and Kris behind helping to organize who and what would go in upcoming KDL transfers. The farming community wanted to be among the next wave, as it was essential to plant as soon as the danger of frost was over. So far "winter" on Botany had

consisted of cold, damp days interspersed with sunny cold days and a lot of early-morning frosts. No real storms, no snow despite cloudy days when the sky suggested blizzards to many who came from cold climates. The temperatures dipped very low occasionally, hampering work outside, but there was always something to be done in what shelter was available from the cold. The people who suffered were those used to tropical conditions and they were given extra clothing and first priority when rugs and long vests of rocksquat pelts were available.

Not long after Mitford had left on the first of many Tub trips, Sandy Areson, who ran the Headquarters Valley camp, came over to Kris where she sat, eating a quick lunch in the Big Building.

"Been trying to catch you alone ever since you got back from the other continent," Sandy said.

"Alone? That sounds ominous," Kris said.

"It is and it isn't," Sandy said, "and I have to agree with the basic logic of it as far as spreading the wealth is concerned."

"What wealth?" Kris asked, puzzled. Wealth on Botany meant hours of additional work for the few "extras" that might be available, above and beyond essentials like food and shelter. Even she and Zainal had done stints of kitchen duty.

Although they were the only ones at the long table, Sandy leaned closer to Kris and said, "Us," pointing to her chest.

"Us?" Then Kris shook her head as she caught on. "Us as in women . . . of childbearing age?"

"You got it," Sandy said, leaning back again and grinning wryly. "There are far more men than women on Botany and as there hasn't been a drop in four weeks, we're not likely to get more. So, if we want to keep up a decent genetic pool . . ."

"You mean, we're operating as if we'll never get off Botany?"

Sandy gave her an astonished stare. "We're dropped, we stay," she said, "or don't you listen to what Zainal says?"

Kris gulped. "I guess I've been naive after all. . . . I mean, we have the KDL. We could get off."

"And go back to Earth?" Sandy looked even more disgusted with her. "You been away from the camps too much, gal, and involved with that hunk of Catteni. Not," and she hastily put out her hand, "that I blame you. I didn't know they came in any variation of 'nice' . . ."

"People are considering him 'nice,' then?"

"Hey, spare me the sarcasm, Kris Bjornsen, and yes, lots of people have got it through their thick and intolerant skulls that Zainal is a lot more Botanical than Cattenical now. 'I drop, I stay.'" Sandy snorted in

amusement. "Especially the brass-heads. But you two can't procreate. You do know that?" When Kris nodded, she went on, "And you're of an age to do so."

Kris felt a total rejection of what she knew would come next and leaned away from Sandy. She couldn't, she really couldn't, go with anyone else, even to increase the genetic pool of a colony she was working very hard to make secure.

"Now don't get all silly about it," Sandy said. "We've got enough doctors here now so you can just be inseminated with sperm at the appropriate time in your cycle. I did. I was one of the first," and now Sandy patted her abdomen. "Mind you, I chose the father."

Kris gulped again, feeling distinctly queasy at the prospect.

"Anna Bollinger's preppers, too, but she got formally hand-fasted to Matt before she did. Janet's too old. Patti Sue also did it the old-fashioned way, but I just wanted to warn you that you're on the list. It won't be like being unfaithful to Zainal at all."

"That isn't my problem," she said in a weak voice. "How can I possibly get pregnant until we're all settled and we know what the Eosi and the Farmers are going to do. What'd happen if—"

"Calm down, Kris," and Sandy captured one of her waving hands and held it firmly in both of hers. "You're one of the last on the list, I should say, because your talents are more valuable elsewhere than in the lullaby line."

Kris couldn't suppress her agitation. She hadn't planned on having kids for years! She was barely twenty-two, or thereabouts, since she'd lost a lot of subjective time on the way to Botany and hadn't a clue what month, day, or year it was. Then she didn't think she'd make a good mother anyhow. She'd never liked baby-sitting jobs in high school or college, unless the kid was asleep. When one woke up and screamed at her, she never went back to that family. She didn't think she had an ounce of maternal instinct in her.

"Anyway, we're going to set up crèches and minders who are maternally inclined, so once a baby's here, you can ignore it completely if that's the way you feel about motherhood."

"That is just the way I feel," Kris said, trapped. Which she didn't add. "When did this get decided? This is the first I've heard of it." She started to get angry now. She hadn't minded or complained of any of the duties she'd been asked to perform on this alien planet. She'd welcomed the opportunities to show her flexibility and stamina and develop skills she'd never have used in a normal life on Earth.

Sandy kept smiling at her. "In case you're interested, you're going

through the same phases that others have—including Astrid—before accepting the inevitable.”

That jolted Kris. She hated reacting in an expectable way. Sandy chuckled now and patted her shoulder.

“It won’t be soon and it won’t be as bad as you expect. But I figured you mightn’t have been told. You’ve been out on scouting parties, so you missed the great debate and no one’s had the courage to tell you about it.”

“Who stuck you with the duty? Did Mitford know?”

“I volunteered. Mitford was too chicken,” Sandy said, grinning. “Look at it this way, Kris. We’ve *made* Botany our own and we’re going to keep it ours and that means having a next generation to bequeath all our hard work to. I like this planet . . .”

“Now!” Kris reminded her wryly, feeling a bit sheepish over her outburst.

Sandy shook her head. “No, I did from the start because I could be myself here and what I knew was damned helpful. Back on Earth,” and she jerked her thumb over her shoulder, “I was considered ‘fringe,’ or ‘weird’ and ‘antisocial,’ nonconformist and definitely an oddball. Hell, here I’m running generals and admirals through my hoops as a town manager. Sure beats the hell out of being ‘tolerated.’ And I’m not the only one has found a real home on Botany. I think you have, too, even if it means giving up nine months to producing a baby.”

“I hadn’t thought of it all quite like that . . . I mean, *your* situation. I mean, back there as opposed to all the things you’ve done here. There’s one matter that hasn’t been taken into consideration, though,” Kris added. “The Farmers.”

“Yeah,” Sandy said in a thoughtful drawl. “But we’ll worry about that when we need to. Right now . . . Oops,” and she stopped, looking in the direction of the entrance.

Zainal was there, looking around, and spotted Kris and Sandy. She got up. “Good luck,” and she left with a wink and a grin.

Kris wasn’t sure she was ready for Zainal to join her just then. Sandy’s disclosure had really shaken her. She’d have to sort this all out in her head. Disregarding the unsolved and unknown Farmers, she had to admit that having kids on Botany would give the colony stability, not to mention a morale boost. She was amazed that even someone who’d been as abused as Patti Sue could now contemplate getting pregnant.

She found very little consolation in knowing that she wouldn’t have to have physical contact with the male parent, although that route struck

her as cowardly, if not downright cheating some guy out of . . . could she call it “a good time”? Isolated from what “society” was available on Botany because of the scouting expeditions, she’d had little contact with other guys. Mostly she and Zainal had worked with other pairs, like Sarah and Joe, and Whitby, who had attached himself to Leila though they seemed an odd couple.

She had known, sort of peripherally, that the Sixth Drop had contained a group of women who had, at first, been totally ostracized by the other women in the camps to which they were assigned. She had noticed and commented on it to Sarah, who took some relish in telling her that these were “ladies of the night” who had been picked up in one of the German cities along with the actual demonstrators. Apparently Germany tolerated brothels but insisted that the occupants have periodic medical examinations to be sure they did not transmit sexual diseases, so these girls were “clean.” With a larger ratio of males to females on Botany, there’d been endless requests of the available women for sexual favors, on any terms. Some of those terms put the offenders up in the stocks to cool off. The arrival of the professionals had been greeted with considerable interest by camp managers. So the women had been given the option of continuing their previous profession if they so chose. When assured such practices would be considered “work hours” for community benefit, all but two had decided to continue. It was stipulated that they would still have to take their turn at the less glamorous chores of the camps, like KP and latrine. They were, however, excused from sentry duties. But they, in turn, had laid down strict regulations about how they could be treated by clients and the number they would be willing to accommodate. Proper respect was the first requirement—from the female population as well as the male.

The puritanical among the Botany women refused to admit that the oldest profession had a place on this planet. But they could not refuse to admit that a lot of guys went around camp in much better humor and with fewer snide remarks directed at the so-called prudes. There were a few intolerant women—like Janet and Anna Bollinger, who studiously avoided them—but the rest did as requested and treated them with due civility.

“You look worried, Kris,” Zainal said as he straddled the bench before settling down beside her. “Isn’t the soup good today?” he asked, noticing her unfinished bowl.

“Yes, it’s good,” and she hastily picked up her spoon, though the soup was now only lukewarm.

“Sandy says something to worry you?” He looked concerned.

“Woman things,” she said, avoiding an explanation.

"Mitford says you will have to bear a child for the colony. Maybe two."

"What!" Kris dropped the spoon in the soup, splashing it, and then became furious at such sloppiness, mopping hastily with a wad of fluff.

Zainal regarded her with a very level gaze, one corner of his mouth twitching. He leaned closer to her. "Was that what Sandy was saying to you?"

She hid her face from him. "So Mitford had the nerve enough to tell *you*? And not me?"

"Man-to-man stuff," Zainal said, and she could just see him grinning at her out of the corner of her eye. "You know you cannot have a child by me. Is that why you stay with me? So you do not have a child?"

She glared at him. "I stay with you because I'm in love with you, you . . . you . . . brass-head," she replied in a low and intense voice.

He covered her hand briefly with his, squeezing her fingers. "You are young and strong. You will be a good mother."

Kris gulped. "No, I won't. I'm not the least bit maternal—motherly!" She blurted the denial out, daring him to object. "I'd make a lousy mother. I'm not ready to have kids. I'm too young."

He gave her a long look. "It is not something all Earth women do? Have babies?"

"Not all by any long shot," she said grimly.

"I see," he said slowly. "It is not because you don't want to offend me?"

"I'm the faithful type. I don't want any man but you. Even if you can't have children," she replied in a tight voice, looking down at the soup, which now had a thin haze of congealing fat on it.

"You do not need to sex another man. Mitford explained it to me."

"That's even worse," she told him with gritted teeth, rolling her eyes.

"I wish to see a child from you. Choose Mitford. You like him!"

"WHAT?"

She half rose from the bench in agitation and those by the hearth looked over at them. She dropped back to her seat, hand over her face. She was as close to tears as she had ever been since coming to Botany. The trouble was she did like Chuck Mitford, very much, and if she hadn't gotten so incredibly tangled up with Zainal, she might have tried to come on to the sergeant. She had never once done so, nor had Mitford come on to her at any time: maybe she hadn't been mistaken that he'd've been interested in her if she hadn't paired off with Zainal. Of course, he had kept her so constantly in Zainal's company that finally sexual tension had been inevitable.

Zainal put an arm around her. "Do not be this way, Kris. It is no big deal."

"No big deal?" She whirled on him, pushing his arm away, and had the satisfaction of seeing him recoil slightly from her expression. "No big deal!" She started to get off the bench but he held her down, exhibiting far more of his strength than he had ever used with her.

"You are not a silly woman, Kris Bjornsen. When it is time, you will have the child and I will help you. Do not make it such a big deal."

Then he got up and so startled her that she grabbed for his hand. Had she lost face in his eyes because she was, indeed, being somewhat silly? If he didn't mind, she shouldn't?

"Your soup is cold. I get you hot."

She was nearly light-headed with relief and nodded acceptance of the courtesy. She was relieved, too, that she had a little time without him beside her, to sort out incoherent reactions and irrational emotions. When she put her hands to her face, they were icy cold. Or were her cheeks burning hot with outrage and embarrassment? Whichever, she needed to cool down and stop acting so stupidly. She started at the point where Zainal had said that he did not mind her having sex with another man. He even wanted her to have a child. Did all Catteni women have children whether they wanted to or not? Then she coped with his choosing for her the man she respected above all the others. That suggested a sensitivity in the big Catteni most unusual for his species. Or was Humanity contagious? She knew *he* admired Mitford, too. Or had he and Mitford discussed a putative father of Kris Bjornsen's compulsory child? Which she doubted. Mitford wasn't that sort of man. And she couldn't really see the sergeant and Zainal exchanging man-to-man topics.

He returned with a bowl of steaming soup and a watchful expression on his face and, oddly enough, sympathy in his yellow eyes.

"Thanks, Zainal," she said, spooning up soup and blowing to cool it. "I did overreact there, I think."

"I love you, you know," he said in a sort of offhanded manner which would have exacerbated her already jangling nerves if her remnant of common sense hadn't made her realize that such an admission was also very un-Catteni. He covered her free hand with his. "It is not an emotion I thought I would live as a man to have."

And that caught her hard, right in the guts. She dropped her head to his shoulder, weeping as quietly as she could. She knew he had had two children; even the chosen had the right to produce heirs on Catten. He'd never said a word about the woman, or women, who had borne

them. So he had not allowed himself to love? Because he knew he was chosen and would not live long "as a man"?

"Why do you cry . . . now?" He was utterly puzzled.

"For you. Because you can love me."

"It is not hard to do."

She could hear the ripple of amusement in his voice and, dashing the tears from her eyes, looked up at him, with as good a smile as she could present.

"Eat your soup. We have work to do soon," he said very gently, and she loved him even more deeply than ever.

Chapter Eight

THE EOSI MENTATS HAD DELIBERATED: HAD EXAMINED THE REPORTS from both satellites with infinitesimal attention to detail. With each fresh review, their agitation grew. Two separate concerns were identified: Firstly, the Eosi were not, as they had assumed, the only highly intelligent species in the galaxy, and why had they never encountered the Others when they had been assiduously exploring this arm of the Milky Way? Secondly, how did the Others arrive at a technology so far superior to their achievements and how soon could they match and then surpass it?

Mentat Ix called to their attention the brief glimpse its shell had had of a comunit. Logically, an investigation should be made of the extant equipment for insights into the construction of the machinery situated on the colony planet.

Mentat Ix was assigned, with two younger Mentats which had technological skills and inventiveness to inspect and analyze the installations. The warship AA1 would take them there and also provide guards against any demonstrations by the indigenous population, who were known to be volatile.

As the superb new warship reached the ionosphere of the subject planet, its new propulsion system developed a fault, an oddity indeed, which resulted in a shock wave passing over the vessel from bow to stern. Gauges on detection equipment went off the scale for a nanosecond, then returned to normal positions, and the engines resumed operation as if they had never faltered. System analyses were run and damage reports undertaken, but no fault was found in any department of the AA1. Even the Ix Mentat was confounded. It liked that no better than the other shocks this wretched backwater system had given it.

The captain activated every safeguard provided by this latest example of Eosi-Catteni engineering and technology as he continued into the atmosphere of the third planet. There were no more life-forms detected than there should be, according to the numbers of prisoners sent there, and the numbers of lesser creatures previously assessed. There were 2,003 fewer humans than the records of removal but there would have been some casualties both in transport and since landing.

The Eosi had stipulated that they land at the point where most of the drops had been made, easily identified by the wrecked transport vessel.

Teams of guards trotted out of the AA1, to make a quick surveillance of the immediate area and the wreck. They were halfway across the field when they were suddenly attacked by aerial creatures. These were shot down with the accuracy for which such crack troops were famed. And identified as indigenous life-forms, previously recorded by the original survey team.

Reaching the wreck, they reported signs of intense heat and fire damage in the propulsion section. That, of course, was consonant with the reports from both the Drassi in command of the transport and the rescuers who had subsequently lost their lives in the second accident.

"Third," Mentat Ix corrected the captain.

"Lord?" the captain asked nervously.

"The scout ship also disappeared after landing on this planet."

"My pardon. I didn't know of that incident, Lord."

"I do." And that was that.

"Odd for three . . ." and the young Mentat Co paused thoughtfully.

"Yes, three is odd." Mentat Ix nodded for the captain to continue his investigations.

The team commander then added that only the shell of the wreck remained. It had been gutted.

The Mentat Ix irritably observed that protocol had not been observed in this instance: even a transport should have been blown up so that nothing could have been salvaged from it. It was unfortunate that both Drassi captains had lost their lives in the subsequent explosion of the KDL.

"There may well have been little of any value left," it finally remarked, dismissing the problem.

"There is a concentration of metals not far from here," the captain said, for that report had been hurriedly brought to him.

Ix nodded and a flick of one finger informed the captain that he was to dispatch a reconnaissance team.

They returned with pictorial evidence of a large installation: barns,

sheds, piles of rectangles that appeared to be crates in collapsed form. And many different machines.

“Farming machines,” the captain said, for he had some familiarity with agricultural procedures.

“What season is it on this place?” the Mentat Se asked.

“The weather is cold but not excessively so. A winter, perhaps?” Co suggested.

“Farm machines are dormant in winter,” the captain remarked.

“Bring one here.”

“Perhaps the Mentats might prefer to see them in their . . . ah . . . normal surroundings?” the captain suggested. That made more sense than hauling large and cumbersome units about.

“The air is pure?”

“Yes, Lord,” the captain said. He was hoping to get a few lungfuls himself and, if he could get the Mentats off the AA1, he had ordered the life-support officers to flush out the ship with the cleaner planetary air.

The Mentats were conveyed effortlessly there in the captain’s skiff, which was commodious enough for three Mentats and necessary crew. They saw nothing impressive in the facilities built into the cliffs. Nor in the machines that dutifully awaited the timely resumption of their preprogrammed duties. In fact, the machinery was almost depressingly simple in design and function when compared with the orbital and the massive ship that had stunned the Ix on its first trip to this solar system.

“None of this suits our purpose or forwards an understanding of the mentality of the makers,” Mentat Ix said, although it found no fault with the sun or the freshness of the air. “When the colony is established, I may even take control of this planet.”

Mentats Co and Se exchanged discreet glances and followed their senior back into the ship. Despite the failure to find anything of technological significance, Ix did not issue any immediate orders, retiring to its own quarters to meditate.

Eventually Ix sent orders to the captain that the skiff must be readied for a second exploratory trip. It took the other Mentats with it. Ix showed the pilot where it wished to land. It also required the pilot to hover when the glyphs carved into the hillside were noticed.

“The message is in Catten,” Mentat Co said.

“Yes, the renegade Zainal was here.” The Ix Mentat gnashed the teeth in its host’s mouth in a most unusual fashion, then peremptorily gestured for the skiff to be landed where once, as Lenvec, it had settled to remind a brother of duty owed.

There was nothing on the site, merely more fields with hedgerows:

nothing certainly that would have accounted for the chosen's escape. And only faded traces of where the scout ship had landed. The Ix Mentat turned its head in the direction from which the humans and Zainal had come.

"Take us there!" and it pointed.

The skiff took off and shortly came to the deep ravine which, at a low hover, not only showed visible evidence of human occupation but easily detected in the intricate cave system a considerable number of life-forms. Several emerged to observe the aircraft. The skiff's detection equipment picked up the use of comunits but on a frequency which could not be directionalized before the signal cut off abruptly.

"They have more of those hand units," the Ix Mentat said superciliously.

"Does the Mentat wish to land and speak to the humans?" the pilot asked, as more emerged from the caves.

"I have no interest in pests." The Ix had been more closely observing the signature of the humans than anyone realized. Primarily it searched for the unmistakable signature of a Catteni-life-reading and that was not visible outside or inside the caves. Deep inside the Ix's mind, one pathetic whimper trembled.

"The humans appear to have moved about a great deal," Mentat Co said, "if these," and it flicked a long nail at the screen where more clusters showed at different locations, "are indeed human pulses."

Ix Mentat regarded Co with some interest. "Moved where?"

"On the smaller continent adjacent to this one. Many human life signs registered there as we overflowed it."

"Return," Ix Mentat said, and sat back, impatient to reach the ship and order it to the second continent. The Catten signature might be found among the other concentration of humans.

As the AA1 lifted, having left a substantial declivity across most of the field with the weight of its visit, the Ix Mentat entered the bridge and stood behind the officer responsible for the life-form detection.

"Set for Catten sign," the Ix said, clicking its long nails together in a tattoo that had the Catteni officer cringing with nervousness.

The AA1 made the next continent in a shallow curve. It had not yet reached even the intended altitude when the screen gave off a brief blip—registering the presence of a Catteni. It vanished so quickly that the duty officer wondered if it had been a legitimate sighting. The Mentat was taking no chances and ordered the vessel to circle the point, a prong of land extending into the narrow channel between the two land-masses. But nothing registered again on the screen.

“An anomaly, perhaps,” the Co suggested blandly, after sufficient time had elapsed to have done several orbits about this wretched planet.

“Perhaps,” the Ix replied irritably, and signaled to continue across the water.

The greatest concentration of the lesser, human signatures was found around the northern bay.

“They’ve infested the place,” the Co remarked as the babble was screened for any sign of Catten.

The Ix pondered a long while as the AA1 held its position, using great quantities of fuel to do so. Then, with an abrupt gesture, the Mentat Ix ordered the captain to return with all possible speed to Catten.

The captain wished to do so as well, anxious to be rid of his Eosi passengers, and he gave the necessary orders. And was nearly bounced from his command chair as the forward motion abruptly ceased. The engines were still running, their pulse beginning to reach up to a whine of frustration, as the ship met an impenetrable obstacle.

“There’s some sort of barrier, captain,” the helmsman said, looking at the opacity which held them motionless. “It’s all around the planet.”

“Destroy it,” the Ix said with an agitated wave of its long arm.

The captain ordered a full barrage of all forward weapons, certain his firepower was sufficient to the task. The ship rocked and crewmen covered their eyes at the resultant flashback.

“I see a lessening in the opacity directly ahead,” the navigator said, trying hard not to think of how futile this brand-new ship’s much vaunted weaponry had been.

The captain called for more power and the ship moved slowly, slowly, slowly, pushing through the barrier it had been unable to destroy. Then, all of a sudden, the ship plunged forward through the obstacle, knocking to the deck many who were not holding on to something, including all three Mentats.

Although several officers sprang forward in an instinctive effort to assist, the Mentats snarled away any help and slowly got to their feet, glaring around them.

“Turn!” the Ix ordered the captain. “I want to know what that barrier is and how it could impede this ship.”

The captain gave the order to the com board to switch to the stern view screen. Nothing happened.

“I asked for the view astern,” he roared but, while the communications officer cringed from his captain’s anger, all his attempts to access the rear views came to nothing.

“There is no response,” he said.

"Damage report," said the engineering officer, "indicates problems with the arrays, sir. It is an external problem."

"Fix it!" the captain said, bringing his fists down on the armrests.

Orders were forwarded. And the *Ix* rattled its long nails with far more irritation than the captain dared show.

"Well, then turn the ship around so that the forward view screens can enlighten us. I must examine that obstacle," *Ix* said, making a small tight circle with one finger.

In getting free, the full power of the AA1's engines had carried them a considerable distance before that maneuver was completed. The captain muttered unhappily when he saw how far they were from the misbegotten Bubble, and an unhappy silence ensued in the bridge until they had returned close enough to examine the phenomenon. During that time, a damage report suggested that every protuberance of more than twenty centimeters and all the more delicate arrays had been snapped off. And indeed, as they neared the opaque Bubble, it was obvious in the forward view screen that every last one of the missing parts was embedded in the Bubble, outlining the less fragile silhouette of the AA1. And the Bubble completely enclosed the planet, just short of the two satellites. The orbital continued its programmed circuits but there would be nothing on its tapes but an endless view of the Bubble.

"It admits sunlight," the science officer said, relieved to find something positive to report, for he had to add that its composition was totally unfamiliar.

"Examine it thoroughly," the *Ix* said, looming over the technician, expecting answers.

The Catteni, one of the top men in his branch of the service, used every technique available to him at a station that was supposed to have all the latest improvements for its duties, and could find nothing further to report. Finally he spread his hands to admit defeat. He dared not look above his head at the Mentat, so he did not see the blow that crushed his skull like a melon.

The *Ix* stormed from the bridge, its juniors behind it, and the captain told the helmsman to return to the original course back to Catten. Then he gestured for the corpse to be removed from the science station.

"HELL, I DON'T KNOW WHAT IT WAS," MARRUCCI TOLD THE OTHERS gathered in the bridge of the KDL. "Never seen anything like it—pushed all the gauges off line and it looked . . ." and he paused, "for a split second, as if deep space got lit up."

“Now let’s not lose perspective here,” Scott began, and then stopped.

Beverly whistled under his breath. “I *know* it can’t be technologically possible,” he began slowly, “but then a lot of stuff we’ve been seeing recently is so far beyond what we’d generally consider science-fictional that maybe we can stretch that a little bit further and think it’s possible to put a barrier around an entire planet.”

“There’s something out there now that wasn’t there earlier,” Scott said, leaning on the edge of the scanner board and staring at it. “Even if it only shows up like a mist or a veil or an opacity.”

“There *was* a *Star Trek* episode I saw as a kid,” Marrucci remarked almost apologetically, “called ‘The Tholian Web’ and it was about building a lattice to keep the *Enterprise* in.”

“So how did the *Enterprise* get free?” Beverly asked without a trace of irony.

Marrucci thought for a long moment and then shrugged. “I can’t remember. But I can see the web being spun around it and they knew they only had so much time . . .” He trailed off.

“So, are the Farmers keeping us in? And why did they let the Eosi ship in and then out?”

“It blew a hole in the web and got out?” Marrucci asked, looking around the bridge for any other explanation. “That might explain that flash, the Eosi blowing it open.”

“There’s no hole in it now,” Scott said, standing up again but not taking his eyes from the screen. “And why was the Eosi ship here in the first place?”

“Looking us over?” Fetterman suggested. They’d all been alerted by the Deski sentries here at Retreat Bay when the ship had overflowed them. Then the group at old Camp Narrow had informed them that the ship had landed in the Drop Field. Discreet observation had followed, and reported, every move, including the skiff arriving at the abattoir and the subsequent removal to the field near Camp Rock, and Worrell had reported the skiff hovering over Camp Rock. And, in detail, what he had seen *in* the skiff.

“I saw three . . . giants . . . in the skiff,” Worry said, his voice shaky. “They were staring down at us and I’ve never seen such nightmares. They were . . . sort of Catteni but no Catteni is that big and glows. The heads are all distorted and the features sort of caricatures of Catteni. Not even Catteni deserve that sort of fate. I’m glad Zainal missed out if that’s what he was avoiding!”

“I concur with what Worry says.” Leon Dane came on line. “I’ve never seen anything like that, not in Sydney or in any of the material

that we commandeered during our operations in Australia. There's a disease—elephantiasis—that causes something that looks similar. But the gross enlargement of the head isn't at all like an encephalic abnormality. . . . No wonder ordinary Catteni are frightened by the Eosi. They scared the shit out of me just now."

Shortly after that report, the warship was seen to pause just over the channel, where it circled for a long time. But time enough for those at Retreat Bay to complete the camouflage around the KDL and Baby, which were now housed in the big cave.

"You don't think they've been looking for Zainal, do you?" Mitford asked. "He'd've been about there," and the sergeant pointed to the area that had attracted the Catteni hover, "in the Tub."

"What effect does several fathoms of water have on Catteni detection scans?" Marrucci asked those around him.

"Zainal might know but let's not call and ask him, huh?" Mitford said.

No one could anyhow, since that was when the Eosi warship met the immovable opacity and the brand-new worry about whether they were sealed in or others sealed out.

HAVING COMPLETED ITS PROGRAMMED TASK, THE BUBBLE-DRONE ASSUMED its monitor facet and observed the approach of a small spaceship which had just taken off from the subject planet. It had, of course, observed the arrival and landing of the same craft earlier but, as it was not programmed to take any action at that point, it continued its primary assignment, extruding the material that would form the protective barrier.

However, when the spaceship did not heed the initial resistance of the barrier, it accessed its emergency instructions. In that brief period of time of adding scope on its activities, the spacecraft displayed force which had to be disseminated quickly through the barrier to diffuse the effect. The further efforts of the spacecraft to pass its confines weakened the barrier. Then the instructions were available and the barrier assisted the expulsion of the hostile craft. The substance of the barrier caught on and held protuberances and smaller exterior parts of the exiting body. But the overall integrity of the Bubble remained intact and the subject planet was now safe from external dangers, of which the spacecraft could now be considered one.

Since there had been an attack, the orbiting mechanism initialized its message segment and programmed it with a full report of the proceedings. Once the message segment reached the point at which its

hyperspace drive could safely function without a backlash affecting the integrity of a solar system, it made its quick passage back to its home base.

This time its purport was quickly examined by entities able to deal with the subject matter.

BY THE TIME ZAINAL AND KRIS DROVE OUT OF THE WATER AT RETREAT bay, they were aware of the excitement of those they passed, who waved vigorously at them as they made their way to headquarters in the big cave. That was where they found Mitford waiting for them in his little runabout.

"The consensus of opinion is that they might have been looking for you," Mitford told Zainal. "Get in, the pair of you. Let the others unpack the Tub."

"We just made it into the channel when the ship passed overhead," Kris said, taking a seat. "We were well started when we heard the reports about the landing in the Drop Field, and Zainal here," and she gave him a little grin, "put the pedal to the metal and headed toward the channel as fast as the Tub would go. It wouldn't have done for them to spot it when it's supposed to be shards in space with the rest of the KDL." She glanced at Zainal.

She'd said nothing to him about her other suspicion, which Mitford had voiced, that the ship might be looking for him. At least, not until the skiff was reported landing where Lenvec had, and where they had hijacked the scout vehicle. That was when Zainal started driving faster than was safe over the rough terrain. He was racing to the channel, to get as deep as the Tub could safely go. That was when she knew Zainal was really worried. Now he seemed amused by the incident and shrugged off Mitford's report.

"Worry saw three Eosi?" Zainal asked, his yellow eyes sparkling with an almost demonic glitter.

"Yeah, and they scared the shit out of him and Leon Dane."

Zainal's smile widened with irony. "They are frightful. It was only with great effort that I did not embarrass my father and all my line by losing water." Then he gave his big shoulders one of his characteristic shrugs. "But only the first time."

"Is that what you would have become if you'd gone back?" Mitford asked, not quite meeting Zainal's eyes.

The Catteni nodded once, slowly. "So they came back? And looked at the machinery in Narrow, and at the field and at Camp Rock, and didn't find Catteni-life signs. But they have gone. There was nothing

on the screen when we got out at the bay. What happened? I wish to hear more."

"There is more to tell, too, that you wouldn't have seen underwater. The brass-heads are waiting for you," Mitford said with a big grin, stopping the air-cushion by the stairs at the KDL's open hatch.

They climbed in.

"Good news, sarge?" Kris asked, remembering those last few clicks before the Tub immersed itself. Zainal's expression had been so grim, so . . . frightened? She didn't like to think of anything frightening Zainal even if she knew very well that the Eosi did. Did he suspect the ship might be searching for him . . . still? Especially if the others did. Could his brother, Lenvec, still be conscious enough to make an Eosi search him out and take revenge?

"Well, sort of good news," Mitford said with an odd twist to his smile. "Tell me, Zainal, could that warship scan underwater?"

"I hope not," Zainal said, and Kris, watching him closely, saw his jaw muscles tighten.

"If it's any consolation, I don't think they can because otherwise they would have found you, if you're what they were looking for," Mitford said. "They did spend a lot of time circling the channel on the other side, about where you would have submerged."

"We cut it pretty close, I think," Kris said, her eyes on Zainal.

"But they have gone away," Zainal said with a satisfied nod.

"They've gone. With a bang," Mitford said. Neither Kris nor Zainal had time to question him further because they had reached the bridge where Scott, Beverly, and Marrucci waited for them.

"Glad you made it here safely, after all," Scott said in welcome, but he gestured for Zainal and Kris to join him at the big screen. "Ginc, replay the Catteni ship's departure, will you?"

Marrucci, grinning from ear to ear, tapped in the necessary keys as if he'd handled Catteni equipment all his professional life.

Zainal echoed the gasp Kris gave when she saw the blip of the Catteni vessel stop short.

"How could it hit a wall in space?" she asked. Only then did she notice the barely visible skin of the Bubble. "That's what stopped it?" She turned first to Beverly and then Scott and Mitford, and finally to Zainal.

He was shaking his head but his eyes were gleaming with intense satisfaction.

"It circles the planet?" he asked.

"We have reason to believe so. But watch," Scott said, holding up one hand, fingers wide to give his eyes some protection from the flash.

“Wow!” Kris said, blinking to clear the afterimage from her eyes. “What was that?”

“The forward blasters of the ship firing at once,” Zainal said in a very odd tone of voice. “And it isn’t enough?” He continued to watch but a half smile turned the corner of his mouth and he began to chuckle. Now he folded his arms across his chest and, still chuckling, watched as the Catteni warship slowly pushed its way through the obstacle and became invisible. “Ah!” He dropped his arms. “That is very interesting indeed,” he said, turning to Scott.

“Yes, we think so,” and Scott settled himself on the edge of the screen control panel. “We think they were looking for you . . .”

“I told them,” Mitford said, seating himself at the next work station. Scott shot him a glance. “Could they have been?”

“For what purpose?” Zainal lifted one shoulder negligently. “I speeded the Tub so they would not see it out in the open. They might have seen it submerging, if they had the scanners in the right direction. If they came, it was to see what their orbital saw. It was in place when the whiz-ball came over, and it was also there when the big one sent down all the new machines. The Eosi looked at those, did they not?”

Mitford’s expression was one of relief and Scott regarded Zainal with a look close to embarrassment.

“They come to see what’s new on Botany,” Zainal repeated, showing his teeth in a full grin. “Not for me.”

Kris allowed herself to relax a trifle. She’d forgotten all about the fact that the Catteni orbital would have sent reports back. Of course that’s what they had come to see! Zainal didn’t enter into the matter. He was dropped and he stayed.

“So, do you think the Farmers erected that space barrier?” Scott asked, his eyes intently on Zainal’s face.

“Who else? Since the warship had to blast its way out,” Zainal said. “The watch did not report anything happening in space?”

“Just that the Catteni orbital seemed to have developed a shadow,” Marrucci said. “I was watch officer when the Catteni arrived. There was nothing, nothing there then.”

“Is the shadow still with the orbital?”

Marrucci grinned. “Can’t see that far anymore.” But he did call up the log for that period and showed them the tiny shadow behind the orbital.

“If that’s the gadget that did the trick, why didn’t it move fast enough,” Mitford said in a low grumble, “to keep the Eosi from getting in at all?”

“Maybe it just took time to spread out,” Beverly suggested. Then

he turned to Marrucci and added, "Even that Tholian Web took time, didn't it, to enclose the *Enterprise*?"

"The *Enterprise*?" Kris exclaimed in surprise. "The Tholian Web? Oh, I remember that episode."

"D'you remember how the *Enterprise* got free?" Marrucci asked hopefully.

"No," she replied sheepishly.

"You're no help."

"Enough," Scott said, making a cutting gesture to stop their levity. "This episode has no happy ending. This planet is now enclosed."

"To keep us in?" Kris asked softly, and knew the others had the same question in their minds. "Maybe they want to be sure their machinery stays intact. Even if they can't differentiate between us and loo-cows, they surely will look at a warship that big with some uneasiness."

"But the Catteni ships were coming in and out of here like yo-yos," Mitford said.

"But the Farmers weren't alerted to the change in . . . tenants, shall I say?" and Scott gave a mirthless smile, "until that homing device was sent off . . ."

"By the way, whose bright idea was that?" Beverly asked, frowning.

"It got a reaction, which is what we wanted," Mitford said, declining to name a name. Which, Kris felt, was more forbearance than Dick Aarens deserved.

"Not for—how many months was it . . ." Beverly asked, "before the whiz-ball arrived?"

"Seven," Zainal said, "and then only three weeks until the big ship arrived to replace the machines."

"What I can't understand," Kris said, "is why that scan of theirs hasn't apparently taken any notice of the existence of a new type of life-form on their planet? Loo-cows have six legs, noticeably, and we have only two. Surely that was noted somewhere?" She raised her hands in a puzzled gesture.

"And the barrier did let the Catteni warship out," Beverly said in a puzzled tone.

"For which I, and I'm certain, Zainal, too, is very grateful," Kris said in an undertone. Beverly shot her an understanding smile, his eyes flicking over Zainal beside her.

"Indeed," Scott said, clearing his throat nervously.

"Very grateful," Zainal added in a low, fervent tone, leaning back in his chair, stretching out his long legs, and giving a sigh of relief.

"But why did it?" Scott asked, pursuing the puzzle.

"Because the ship used weapons against it?" Zainal asked.

"That is a possibility, of course, if the Farmers are pacific by nature," Scott went on. "But we don't know that, do we?"

"We know by the valleys," Zainal said, "which were to keep something in, or something out. But not to kill it. Only now we are kept in and danger is kept out." He pointed to the screen where the Catteni ship's departure was on replay. "I think the Eosi have been given much to think about."

"But where does that leave us," and Scott glanced around those on the KDL's bridge, "in relation to the Farmers?"

"Remember that we all felt we'd been scanned?" Mitford began, making sure he had everyone's attention. "Okay, so the whiz-ball orbital did an inventory and the supply ship dropped off what was needed to fill in the gaps. Let's say that, like all the Farmers' stuff, it was programmed to expect certain life-forms and recorded a great many more of an unidentifiable sort. Maybe that's why there's a bubble around us, until the Farmers can come and have a closer look with something that isn't programmed."

"You're just hoping that's the case, Mitford," Scott said. "It would vindicate everything you originally aimed to do. Attract their attention and their help." When Mitford nodded, he went on. "Only your plan's gone aglae, as the Scotsman said."

"Not much aglae, sir. Not yet, at any rate."

"It would if the Farmers decide that we're some sort of malignant life-form which has contaminated their planet."

Kris glared up at Scott, appalled that he'd say such a thing. Then she paused and amended her thinking: that he'd say what possibly everyone else feared. His expression gave no apology for his blunt speech.

"No," Zainal said into the dismayed silence Scott's observation caused. "No," he added in a stronger tone, and sat forward, clapping his big hands to his knees to emphasize that denial. "The Farmers are cultivators, a race that protects. The valleys prove that to me. The scan could have killed a malignant life-form but did not. The barrier could have destroyed the warship. It did not. But it let it out. We will prove we are cultivators, savers, protectors, too. When the Farmers come . . ."

"You think they will?" Marrucci asked, his thick eyebrows raised in hope of a negative response.

"I think they will but I will not wait until they do," Zainal said with a wry grin on his face. "I will not worry until they do. I will live well until they do."

"I think I agree with you on that, Zainal," Beverly said.

"Me, too," said Marrucci.

"I may have reservations, Zainal," Scott said, "but worry is futile, especially," and now he flung out both arms in a gesture of resignation, "when faced with a far, far superior force."

"This planet has a great potential," Beverly said in a quiet, affirmative voice. "Let us make as much of it as we can and hope that the Farmers see us as cultivators and, perhaps, useful tenants."

"Amen to that," Marrucci added, and made the sign of the cross.

Kris ducked her head respectfully even as she reached for Zainal's hand. He did not mention Phase Three but, by the way he returned the pressure of her hand, she knew that he had not forgotten it.

Chapter Nine

WHILE THE BRASS-HEADS, WITH PETER EASLEY, YURI PALIT, AND CHUCK Mitford, visited the various communal mess halls set up around Retreat Bay and farther inland to counteract rumors and explain what had happened, Zainal and the flyboys discussed a quick run in the scout to examine the Bubble. Bert Put, Marrucci, Raisha, Beverly, and Vic Yowell were dying to see the phenomenon. The argument had been that, if the satellites could no longer see what they were doing on the surface, there was no harm in making use of the aircraft for exploratory purposes. And one of the first things to be explored was the Bubble. "As close as one could get to it."

"Or in it," Kris had added, staying in the background but determined to go along for the ride for a variety of reasons. She'd learned all she could about the new equipment and had driven the Tub often enough to have gotten the hang of the Catteni-size finger pads on the control boards. She might never learn to pilot, but there were always other duties during a flight for which she felt herself well qualified.

She also had a feeling that Zainal had no intention of giving up his plan to "hitch a ride" on the next Farmers' vehicle that darkened Botany's skies. How he could achieve that goal she hadn't a clue, and he was giving her none, though there were times when he stared blindly out at nothing with unfocused eyes, and she knew him well enough to know that he was turning over ways and means of doing it. Considering how quickly the supply ship had made its deliveries, would he have time enough to reach it before it took off again at its incredible speed? The scout was equipped with a tractor beam and she suspected that's what he hoped to use to secure himself to the exterior. But what if he got knocked off when the Farmers' ship accelerated or activated what-

ever it used to travel the immense distances they were now convinced it traversed?

She kept hoping that when his plans were completed she'd be part of them. For all the good friends she now had on Botany, she did not wish to be left here by herself. Especially since Zainal's presence protected her from importunities. Already she'd had several distressing interviews with men who wanted to be on her "paternity" list. They professed themselves willing to forgo a natural conception but they wanted her to bear their child.

She had managed to thank them for their interest—when she really wanted to clout them as hard as she could—and told them she would consider their offer. And made sure to stick closer to Zainal's side than ever, even though it meant stopping work on the quarters they were building. She did what she could without his help—until guys started showing up with offers of assistance . . . and the paternity requests.

Then Raisha discovered she was pregnant and deferred to whoever wished to take her spot.

"I've been up and it was wonderful," she said, her eyes shining with the memory, "but I don't want to whoopsie in free fall, thank you."

That condition was becoming widespread, Astrid, Sarah, and the three girls who had been Catteni decoders all announcing their pregnancies. She kept as close to Zainal as she possibly could, even sitting through repeated instructions at the scout's control board to avoid the "infection." No wonder so many individual quarters were being built in the bay area.

There was no problem filling Raisha's place and Bert magnanimously offered to step down, too. Beverly and Marrucci went over the credentials of all those who volunteered for the flight and selected Antonio Gedes for Raisha's spot, but Zainal insisted that Bert remain, having had some experience with the craft and in space, while two other pilots, Alejandro Balenquah and Sidi Ahmed, were added to the flight list.

"Not that we're ever likely to go far," Balenquah said gloomily.

He was swarthy, with deep-set black eyes that surveyed his surroundings with reserve. Kris wasn't sure she liked his noncommittal posture when here he was being offered what half a dozen less qualified men and women would have killed to get. Well, not would have killed, but definitely envied.

"Look at it this way, mate," Bert Put said, also displeased by the man's attitude, "you never know, do you? Did you ever think you'd drive a ship in space again? Well, you're doing it now, and here."

"I guess," and Balenquah altered his attitude. He was actually the

quickest of the three new men to become easy with the unusual equipment and the finger pad boards.

The flight had been planned in spite of severe reservations from Reidenbacker and Ainger. They were ground personnel, Marrucci had remarked privately to Kris, and suspicious of air and space maneuvers. If the satellites were no longer visible on the screens of the KDL and the scout, then it was two to one that the SATs couldn't see within the Bubble. It was therefore not only safe but a wise precaution to see what the barrier was like up close.

"Not to mention the fact that you're dying to go up again," Kris said, and he grinned, more boyish than ever despite having reached the rank of colonel in the air force.

"You got it, Bjornsen," and he cocked a double-jointed thumb at her, making the rest of his hand into a mock pistol before dropping the thumb. He also had a habit of cracking his knuckles when he was nervous, a routine which fascinated Zainal, who could not, to Kris' relief, duplicate the action. Having one person do it in the confines of a pilot compartment was enough.

Zainal also wanted to see if he could locate a Farmers' satellite, or whatever was controlling the Bubble.

"If they spy on us, it is good. They want to know more before they come."

"That's *your* interpretation," Kris said.

He regarded her with his yellow eyes and a slight smile on his lips. "And what is yours?"

She thought for a moment and then laughed. "Yeah, we could very well be a mouse run."

"A what?" Zainal asked, puzzled, so she suggested they take a break from house building while she explained about laboratory mice and labyrinths to test intelligence and learning ability.

"To add to whatever that scan of theirs discovered about us."

"But we do what we want," Zainal said, still puzzled.

"Maybe we just think we do," she replied, just now identifying that possibility.

"Scott would not like to think someone else commands him," and he chuckled as he got back to his feet and reached for another brick.

"No, he sure as hell wouldn't," Kris agreed, and laughed as she rose to join him. "We've got just enough mortar mixed for another course," she said, scooping up a trowelful. "I'm getting quite adept at this."

Then she remembered Sandy Areson's remark that plastering was like feeding an infant and that she'd use the same skills when she had

one of her own. She tapped the next brick in place with such force that it split in half.

"That's the fourth one tonight," she said irritably. "Maybe they need to bake them longer or something."

Sandy was in fact in charge of the brick firing, so Kris knew it was no fault of the manufacture. Brick making was another chore shared throughout the community. But there was something soothing about shoveling the wet muck into the molds and knowing you were building your own place from scratch—including the ones on your arms, hands, and legs, collected in the process of building.

Still, it would be a nice place, when it was finished. She and Zainal had picked the spot together, on that first trip. They had a splendid view of the bay, with enough clear ground around to plant vegetables and berry shrubs, with a stand of "young" lodge-pole trees behind them. After months of barracks living, nearly everyone on Botany wanted privacy and the bay area certainly afforded that.

The Narrow Valley mess hall had been disassembled, loaded aboard the KDL, and reassembled on a height above the bay. Smaller "offices" clustered around it on the natural terraces and levels below and above it. The hospital was the only other large single structure and Leon Dane announced that the medical staff did not have time to build a separate maternity wing. He was, however, training midwives for home births since he was certain all the babies would decide to be born at the same time.

Private accommodations spread out around the bay in all directions, at first built from the lodge-pole tree timber before the brick manufactory got production up to a useful level. Those involved in cutting timber made the interesting discovery that even the smallest of the lodge-pole trees that had grown down into the plateau were at least a thousand years old.

"They have rings, just like trees on Earth," said Vigdin Elsasdochter, the environmental specialist in charge of responsible logging, ready to show the section she carried around with her. "And tight rings to indicate the climate has not changed much throughout the millennium: no drought, no bad winters, no hot summers. Some of the larger trees may be ten thousand years old."

Once again the question was brought up of how long the Farmers had been in possession of the planet. Especially since the "new forest" of "young" trees had been seeded by the much older ones. Even Worrell refused to worry about it.

"I got other more important things to worry about," he'd said one

night in the mess hall. "Like allocating glass to people who want to have picture windows and stall showers! Of all things," and he'd flung a hand toward the bay, "as if we don't have a great big bathtub out there."

THOSE WHO HAD BEEN IN THE BUILDING TRADES ON EARTH, LIKE THE doyle brothers, were kept busy offering advice, showing novices how to do things he'd learned, Lenny said, "at me da's knee, so to speak." Some of the Asians had the most trouble since they had been accustomed to different building materials. After assigned chores were done and the evenings gradually lengthened, everyone worked on their homes, and lent a hand to neighbors for jobs that required a gang.

While some of the brass-heads were living in the cliff hangar and bunking down on pallets in their offices, all of them had picked out sites but keeping track of work assignments for nearly ten thousand people and aliens took most of their time.

"Someone has to do it," Mitford remarked when Kris complained that the admiral seemed to be the unelected head of everything. "And hell, Kris, I might have run the battalion to all intents and purposes, and managed to whip us into some sort of order there at the first, but he had an aircraft carrier and they carry ten thousand. He's used to dealing with that kind of numbers. I'm not. I was only too glad to hand him the can, you know."

Mitford remained in charge of exploration and mapping, attempting to fill in the spatial map with the details necessary for further expansion of the farming and ranching. "If you can call loo-cows ranch animals."

Knowing that the sergeant was truly happier on reconnaissance in the Tub, Kris decided not to harbor any ill feelings toward Ray Scott. There was no question that he was working all the hours God gave the day here on Botany. And some days he seemed almost agreeable, as if Botany was mellowing him. At other times, she was certain he disliked and distrusted Zainal, and her by virtue of her association with the former Emassi officer. He vacillated between extreme cordiality when deferring to Zainal's knowledge of some matters and total dismissal of Zainal's opinions. He didn't have command all his own way, which somewhat mollified Kris, and she supposed that having run an aircraft carrier, he had the requisite experience. She had occasion to be grateful it was Scott who issued most of the orders, rather than Geoffrey Ainger, whom she didn't like at all. He was *so* British that he was almost a caricature of a ranking officer, and she knew he considered Zainal a dangerous commodity. She got along well with Rastancil, Fetterman,

and Reidenbacker; John Beverly was the nicest of the lot because he always looked straight at her when he asked or answered questions. And Easley, but then he was as his name—easily to get along with. In fact, meetings seemed less tense when he was involved, and often more productive. He had such a knack for gently redirecting tensions and making suggestions that kept discussions going around, instead of stopping at Ray Scott all the time.

Which brought her back to the present and the meeting Scott and Rastancil had called them in for. They wanted Zainal to check the more mountainous terrain that had not yet been explored during the flight. The number of orbits had expanded from a quick flight up to the Bubble and back down to five days of circumnavigating the planet.

“See if there are any blind valleys here on our continent or deposits of minerals. We could use more lead, copper, zinc, and tin, if this continent has them.”

“I believe it does,” Zainal said. “The miner, Walter Duxie, has copies of the original spatial survey maps.”

“Duxie? Do I know him?” Scott asked over his shoulder at his ever-present aide.

“Yes, he agreed to leave the other place and supervise mining here,” Beggs murmured. “Stocky man, balding, forties, English.”

“Ah, yes, get them for me to see,” and Scott turned back to Zainal and Kris.

She wondered what Beggs’ description of Zainal was—and of herself. Then she decided she didn’t want to know.

TWO DAYS LATER, ZAINAL WAS SATISFIED THAT THOSE ACCOMPANYING him on the Bubble Mission, as its participants named it, were sufficiently trained to put what they had been learning into practice. He announced a dawn takeoff and dismissed them, suggesting that they all relax for the rest of the evening. Not that he intended to follow his own advice, because they were ready to put the shakes on the roof on their two-room cabin. Kris decided she needed to be so thoroughly tired she couldn’t stay awake, because she was far more excited about the trip than she let on.

Zainal had just finished setting the piles of shakes in order and was steadying the ladder against the gable end when Mitford, Worry, Tesco, Sandy Areson, Sally Stoffers, and the two Doyles arrived, hammers in hand and with a second ladder.

“Can’t have you breaking something the day before the Bubble,” Mitford had said gruffly.

Kris smiled gratefully. Zainal might have learned the rudiments of construction but she was terrified that he'd fall through the rafters, or break them, and he wouldn't let her go up on the roof by herself to nail the shakes.

"You can't help," Kris said flatly to the two women.

"Heard about your design with my buff bricks," Sandy said. She was puffing a bit from the walk up the hill and had brought along her own stool. She put it down facing the front of the cabin and nodded approval. "Didn't realize we had so much color variation. . . . Maybe it's all you novices mixing your own batches."

"I liked the buff so that's what I made, and then added more buff to the red ones," Kris said, observing the effect objectively. They'd put the darker bricks around the door, window ledges, corners, the chimney, and the hearth surround. They had a back door, too, out of the smaller room, so they had easier access to the latrine. And a sleeping loft, which had become a popular idea, especially among those families that were increasing. "I think it looks good."

"Does at that. I can help hand out nails, too. Brought you my handy-dandy nail apron, too." She handed over the object and, laughing, Kris tied it about her waist, while Sandy started filling the three commodious pockets with the nails. "Is Zainal going to fill that big mouth of his with nails?"

Kris chuckled. "No, Lenny already warned him about swallowing nails. Even a Catteni gut couldn't handle a mouthful. He's got a pail."

Zainal had the ladder in place now, and before he could pick his pail off the ground, she was up the ladder, a bundle of shakes and the hammer in one hand and the other helping her up the rungs.

"Hey," Zainal protested.

"You'd never know he was Catteni," Sandy said conversationally to Sally, "unless you had to look at him."

Sally smothered a giggle as Zainal made as graceful a climb up the ladder as Kris had. Mitford and Lenny Doyle appeared on the roof from the other side and then the hammering began, echoing in the little dell and picked up by the rat-tat-tat of other hammers on other roofs.

With so many to help, passing shakes and replenishing the supply of nails, the cabin was roofed by the time the sun went down. Then Zainal passed around beer while Kris served up tea from the kettle in the fireplace.

"Looks bigger somehow, with the roof on," Kris remarked, glancing up at the rafters and taking a deep breath of the fragrance of the new wood of the shakes. They could have had slate but Mitford thought shakes were nicer and easier to put up.

They lounged about outside until first moonrise and then the guests left.

"We'd better hike to the hangar and get to bed in the scout," Kris said, moving toward the doorway. They had no door yet.

Zainal stopped her. "I want to stay under my own roof, which I have built . . ."

"Helped build," she said, teasingly.

"Tonight," he finished, and gestured toward the pile of blankets which she hadn't noticed in the rush to get the roof done.

"That would make the evening complete."

"Not quite," Zainal said in a low voice, drawing her into his arms. "It is good to have our own place. Very good indeed."

AND THAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN AN IDYLIC TIME FOR THEM. EXCEPT that when she got up in the night, between moons, she didn't want to disturb the soundly sleeping Zainal, and on her way back from the latrine she tripped over the leftover bundle of shakes and broke her right arm.

She was furious with herself for being so clumsy and for losing her chance at going on the mission.

"Why couldn't I have broken the left one? I'm right-handed," she said, weeping more from disappointment than pain as Zainal carried her to the nearest available air-cushion, one of the flatbeds, and drove her the rest of the way to the hospital. Both bones had been broken, although Leon Dane comforted her with the thought that it wasn't a compound fracture. That would have been nasty with their limited facilities.

Then he poured her a tot of the grain alcohol that was currently in use as a painkiller. They hadn't quite got a decent smoky taste to it but she wouldn't complain.

"This is quite nasty enough," she said, as Zainal held her against him while Leon maneuvered the bones back into place. She fainted after, not during, and regained consciousness while he was fixing the last of the bandages into place around the splints.

"I would like to have immobilized it in plaster, only we haven't got that kind yet," Leon said. He poured her a smaller tot, "to help you sleep," he said.

Then he led Zainal, who carried her, to an otherwise empty ward. Zainal set her down gently by the window and then moved the next bed against hers.

"Let's not make a practice of that," Leon said, caught between se-

verity and amusement at Zainal's preemptive rearrangement. But he put out the solar-powered light and closed the door quietly behind him.

Kris could almost have wished that Zainal had let her suffer on her own, but the whiskey had dulled the ache in her arm and the warmth of his body, and his concern, comforted her so that soon enough she was asleep.

HE WAS GONE IN THE MORNING, WHEN THE NOISE OF THE SCOUT'S TAKE-off woke her. The bed had been put back in its proper position. It was dawn and he had blasted off on time. She wondered who had taken her place and then didn't want to know. She tried to go back to sleep but couldn't with the ache, so she got out of bed and, with a blanket draped around her, went in search of someone to help her make a hot cup of herbal tea. Maybe that would help the ache in her arm.

What helped her arm was a more judicious shot of the grain whiskey in the tea.

"I can't spend the next few weeks drunk as a lord," she said to the attendant in the hospital's kitchen.

"Ah, the ache'll ease off," Mavis, the duty nurse, told her, grinning. "At least we've got a decent tippie to help. Now, let's get back to your room and I'll help you dress. Can I bring your old coverall up to your cabin when it's clean? And have a look round it while I'm there? Cumber and I are building, too, and I like to get a notion of what others have done. Did you use bricks or timber?"

Mavis was deft in the dressing and kept Kris' mind off her awkward and painful arm as she helped.

"Stop at the pharmacy and they'll give you a bottle—for medicinal purposes," Mavis said with a grin, and pointed toward the right door. "I'll call for a ride but you may have to wait . . ."

"I can perfectly well walk . . ."

"You can perfectly well not," said Pete Easley, coming in the hospital at that moment. "I promised Leon I'd collect you. Got your bottle of medicinal? Sit there while I grab one. I know where they stash it," and he went into the pharmacy and was out again before Kris could take a seat. Then, with his hand under her left elbow, he escorted her out to the runabout.

"Mitford lent it to you?"

"For you, crippled as you are, Mitford is ready to do a great many things. Besides," and Easley looked down at her with a devilish grin, "he promised Zainal he'd look out for you."

"Hmmm, how kind," she said in an acid tone, knowing just what might be going through Zainal's mind in asking Mitford to be on hand.

"You could take another day in the hospital, you know," Easley said, his eyes intent on her face.

"I'm not sick," she said peevishly, and walked ahead of him to climb into the runabout.

The space on the driver's seat was not very wide, though it usually accommodated two people easily. But not one with an unwieldy cast and a brown bottle of hooch. Easley ended up sitting slightly canted so he wouldn't inadvertently bump her. She felt clumsier than ever and definitely out of sorts. She couldn't be hung over from what she'd had last night but she'd've given her eyeteeth for an aspirin. Then she remembered how Zainal laughed at all the eyeteeth she'd given away, and somehow her mood improved.

"He got off all right?" she asked.

"Right on time. Laughrey took your place."

"Laughrey, the former Concorde pilot?" Her good humor increased. She liked Laughrey and he'd be in heaven, literally as well as figuratively. "At least it wasn't Scott's little pipsqueak . . ." She would have hated it if Beggs had gotten the empty chair.

Pete Easley laughed. "The guy's good at what he does but Scott only tolerates him because it keeps him out of other people's hair. He's a natural yes-man but he's got an eidetic memory."

Early risers waved a greeting at Kris and Pete, some of them pointing to her arm and signaling "Tough luck." She wasn't sure how to respond to the sympathy, so waved back, smiling. She glanced skyward, knowing that Baby was probably over the other hemisphere about now.

"Could I sneak onto one of the bridges, d'you think?"

"Only when you've had some breakfast. You're white as a sheet," he said, pulling in to park at the mess hall.

So she had breakfast, which Pete Easley brought over to the table where he had sat her, one not visible from the door.

"Don't think you need condolences right now," he said, sitting so he blocked her from casual glances.

"Is news of my accident all over the bay?" she demanded, her mood swinging back to annoyance again.

"Well, there had to be an explanation when Zainal showed up with Laughrey. We all know how keen you were to go on the mission," he said. "And you know how news goes through Retreat."

"Hmmm, yes, indeed I do." She grimaced then because even to herself she sounded cranky.

“Don’t worry about it, Kris,” Pete said. “I’d be a lot crankier.” And he escorted her back to the runabout without too many people commiserating with her.

“I think I’ll take you home, Kris,” he said, making the turn toward her cabin where he should have turned toward the hangar. “You still don’t look like yourself.”

“I’m not,” she agreed. “I am definitely *not* myself.”

But she also didn’t want to go to a cabin that was empty of Zainal. She tried to think of the things she could do one-handed and came up with very few. Even dishwashing required two.

“Look, Kris, they won’t reach the Bubble for a couple more hours. How about I drop you off at your cabin and come get you in time for that? Okay?”

“Yeah, that sounds pretty good,” she said as he slowed the runabout right at her front door. She was getting out when she realized the doorway was no longer empty. “Hey, how did that get there?” and she pointed to the brand-new addition.

Pete grinned. “Lenny Doyle brought it down at first light. He thought you might prefer to be miserable in privacy.”

She was delighted with the surprise, and worked the latch up and down.

“If you pull the string to the inside, it’s like locking it,” he said, and demonstrated.

“Like the pioneers used to do,” and she grinned as she experimented, pulling the latchstring in and out.

Pete gave her a gentle push inward. “Get some rest now. And I’ll be back for you.”

He shut the door and she pulled the string in again.

“Thanks, Pete,” she called, and heard his cheerful “No problemo” and then the whispering sound of the air-cushion driving off.

Someone had also tidied up the bedding, and increased the fluff content of the mattress. She blessed whoever had done her that service. She nudged one of the stools across the flagstone floor with her feet, knocked it over and kicked it into place by the bed, uprighted it, placed the bottle on it in handy reach, and sat down on the bed to take off her boots. She wouldn’t sleep, she knew that, but she took a pull on the bottle before she lay down.

A determined knocking and someone calling her name roused her and she sat up, knocking her arm painfully.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” and she discovered it wasn’t easy to get to one’s feet with an arm in a sling. When she opened the door, Pete Easley was leaning on the frame, smiling broadly.

"You did sleep and you look one hundred percent better," he said, but he took a pocket comb, one of those carved out of loo-cow bone, and ran it through her hair. "That's better. C'mon. We've just time to make the hangar before they make the Bubble."

WHEN THEY ENTERED THE KDL'S BRIDGE IT WAS CROWDED WITH AN avid audience, but Scott made peremptory gestures for her to be let through and then installed her in one of the seats.

"You'll be interested to know," Beverly was saying from Baby's piloting compartment, "that the Bubble does not register on any detection equipment. But it's visible . . . as you can see."

Which they did, as from Baby's perspective. They could also see the scout ship on the KDL's screen, with its nose a scant ten meters from the barrier.

"We will poke it," Zainal's voice said, and Baby drifted into the opacity of the Bubble and bounced slowly backward.

"Here, let me adjust the screen a bit so they can see what the warship left behind," Marrucci said, laughter rippling through his voice.

"We'll need a touch of reverse for a proper view." That was in Laughrey's amused baritone. He chuckled openly as the view screen of Baby slowly swung to starboard and then slowly reversed.

"See what we mean?" Bert Put said, and Kris could just imagine the grin on the Aussie's face. "Lost every array they had and every mast they had."

"Outlined forever in the Bubble," said Balenquah. "Madre de Dios, the Farmers make some clever stuff!"

"Can you make any analysis of it?" Scott asked.

"Can't if sensors can't pick up anything," Bert Put said. "Not unless we go out and see if we can cut a patch of it."

"No," Zainal said. "If you wish, someone will go outside but we will not take sample."

"Affirmative to defacing it, Zainal," Scott said. "But I'd like an EVA inspection of it."

"I go," Zainal said, and immediately there was protest from both Baby and the KDL' observers.

Kris discovered her left hand on her lips, to keep from adding her protest. Then she conquered her fear.

"He's the one to go, Ray," she said firmly. "He knows the gear and the ship. No one else has checked out for a space walk, have they?"

"I have," Bert Put said, "but not with this equipment. Zainal'll be just fine, Kris. He's already suiting up."

Zainal's EVA suit also had its own camera, so after a nervous wait, the view was transferred to Zainal's helmet eye and they saw the shimmering veil of the Bubble as he slowly approached it. They could see his hands reaching out to prod it gently, and the reaction of even that light touch as he floated away from it.

"Can you put your helmet on it, Zainal?" Scott asked, receiving a note from the engineers watching the space walk.

Slowly the Bubble filled the camera screen and was placed right up against the material. Nothing of the black space beyond could be seen through the fabric and it was smooth.

"Like a balloon's skin," Kris murmured under her breath.

"That's how I'd describe it," Scott said.

Then Zainal pulled back. "There are no flaws, even around the debris from the warship."

"Could you make it to that spot?" Scott asked.

"He's at the end of the tether right now, Ray," Beverly said. "We've got all the photographic material you need for examination of that flotsam. No need to risk Zainal for it."

"Agreed," Scott said indifferently. "Thank you for effort, Zainal."

"No problemo," said Zainal's deep voice as his helmet turned and took in Baby's bow and the windows into the pilot's compartment.

Kris' mouth went dry. He was a long way from the ship even if he was slowly returning to it. She felt someone's hand close reassuringly on her shoulder and she glanced up at Pete Easley. She gave a sigh and controlled the flutter in her stomach. The break began to throb again but she decided to ignore it: the pain wasn't there. She had no time for it.

Then Zainal was back inside the scout and his camera turned off. She breathed a sigh of relief, oddly echoed around the crowded bridge. Which, she realized, was just a bit too crowded for her and she rose from her seat, glancing appealingly at Pete.

"Thanks, admiral," she said, nodding to the others she knew among those on the bridge.

A way parted for her as Easley conducted her off the bridge and then off the KDL. Her knees were near to buckling as she stepped down the ladder, hanging on with her left hand. And her arm ached despite her efforts to make it stop.

"There're sandwiches and tea," Pete said, showing where a trestle table was burdened with lunch items. "And I know where they keep the hangar's hooch," he added.

"This isn't like me," she said, peevish again.

"No, it isn't," Pete said equably. "But you're allowed. Sit. I'll be right back."

He doctored a cup of tea and brought more sandwiches than she thought was fair, but she polished off two and had two cups of hooched-up tea. The ache in her bones subsided.

"D'you want to go back in and see the next show?" Easley asked.

He was really being very nice, Kris thought, but she shook her head.

"Then I'll take you back to the cabin," and he cupped her left elbow though he'd parked the runabout very close to where they'd been sitting.

He was really quite a nice guy, she thought. She wondered who'd snap him up as the father of a child, or children. He was a good head taller than she was, and rather more athletic than you'd think with that pose of indolence he usually affected. Not bad-looking, either, though nothing as toyboy-handsome as Dick Aarens was. Or Yuri with his Slavic cheekbones and snapping black eyes. Neither of them was a patch on Zainal though.

The comunit buzzed and Pete answered it. "Oh, you have? That's great. . . . I'm taking Kris home. She needs to rest. Okay? . . . Fine. See you. . . . No, they don't know what the Bubble's made of . . . except it's the biggest damned balloon ever made. Over."

"Yeah," and she giggled, "it is the biggest damned balloon ever made and we don't know who blew it up."

Pete grinned at her and she knew she was acting silly, but it was better than being peevish.

"I love that door," she said as the runabout stopped in front of it. "It's the best front door I've ever seen. Zainal will be so pleased. Say, how much hooch did you pour in my tea?"

"Only enough to stop the ache in your arm. It *has* stopped, hasn't it?"

She looked down at the clumsy white extrusion. "You know, it has."

Pete swung the door inward and she had taken the first step before she realized that the inside was different.

"My God, what's been happening with my back turned?" she demanded, swaying a bit as she turned toward Pete.

He took her good arm and led her inside. "Well, we were going to wait with the shivarée until Zainal could be here, too, but with you hors de combat, as it were, Sandy, Lenny, Ninety, Chuck, Sarah, Whitby, and Leila thought maybe now would be the right time to bring the stuff in."

"Stuff?" She blinked, trying to focus on first the table, with six glasses, almost symmetrical in manufacture, and a pottery set—which

looked like Sandy's best designs—two pots, one large, one small, and a cast-iron skillet. There were benches around the table and at one end a chair big enough to fit Zainal. She put her hand to her mouth in surprise. But when her startled gaze flicked past the opening to the smaller room and saw the wooden bedstead with carved posts and the huge puffy fluff mattress that covered it, she burst into tears.

"Now, now, Kris," Pete said in consternation, and, pulling her against him, began to stroke her soothingly, saying a lot of things that she didn't really hear because the generosity of her friends and the team was so overwhelming.

Then he was holding one of the glasses to her lips and urging her to drink. She did because she hated to be such a baby when everyone was being so nice to her. And then her knees seemed to give way and Pete picked her up—as easily as Zainal could—and deposited her on the bed, arranging the pillows behind her and urging her to finish the drink.

"The bed—it's so marvelous . . . and they all know I've wanted a really, really, truly thick mattress . . ." And she clung more firmly to Pete, as the only steady thing in a rapidly whirling world.

She felt arms around her and, out of habit, forgetting that Zainal was off in space, she put her face up to be kissed. And it was. And so were her cheeks, and her neck, just where she liked it, and she was kissing the masculine face, slightly stubbled, which surprised her because Zainal didn't grow a beard but she needed comfort right now and the kisses were very nice indeed and she couldn't resist returning them . . . nor protest, even with her right arm feeling so heavy and not quite hers, when the coverall was slipped off and when she felt the warm skin next to hers. This was all somehow inevitable and, in the end, quite enjoyable.

SHE WOKE UP WITH A TERRIBLE HANGOVER AND DISCOVERED, THE HARD way by accidentally banging her right arm as she tried to sit up, that it was still in a splint, though the throbbing was muted. The struggle just to sit only made her head worse.

She remembered being in the KDL's bridge, and coming back and seeing all the lovely gifts and crying, and sitting down on the bed, and Pete Easley.

She sat bolt upright, collapsing almost immediately with the headache and trying to remember more. And realized that indeed she did remember more. It hadn't been Zainal she'd made love with last night.

It had been Pete Easley! And she'd enjoyed it far more than she should have. In fact, she could almost—not quite but almost—regret that her scruples required her to honor the bond that had grown between herself and Zainal as if it were a legal one. And that meant no jumping in the sack with anyone. Well, there were extenuating circumstances involved last night that would never recur. Furthermore, she'd keep far away from any of that "medicinal," inhibition-destroying alcohol. As much because of the headache she had as to what it did to her self-control.

Well, she thought philosophically, and chuckled. At least I remember enjoying it. Then she sighed. She hoped their next meeting wouldn't be awkward. Or that she'd have to explain to Pete that last night was it! She wasn't about to two-time Zainal. Even with someone as good in bed as Pete Easley. Some girl was going to be very lucky! She made another injudicious movement and thought longingly of a cool compress on her forehead and maybe the back of her neck.

Maybe a hair of the dog? She pushed back the blankets and noticed that Pete had neatly laid her coverall on the stool in easy reach, her boots beside it.

Yes, the bottle of medicinal spirits was on the table, and the glass he poured for her, with a good inch in it. Had he had some before he left? Whenever he had left, and she did briefly worry that his departure might have been noticed. Well, if it had, it had. She lifted the glass and knocked it back, shuddering at the taste. It was remarkable she'd been able to drink any of it.

She made a slow way to the hearth and, holding her head very still, lowered herself, spine-straight, to light the fire laid there. Another considerate touch by Mr. Easley. And the kettle was full of water.

One of these days, they would have water piped into houses, but that was in the future.

She went back to the table, to inspect the gifts she remembered vaguely having seen earlier, now sunlit from the small side window above the bed. Its slightly wavy glass sent a prism of rainbow light onto the table. Then she realized how the sun was shining in, from the east. For they faced the cabin south! Good Lord! She'd slept the rest of yesterday and an entire Botany night? No wonder her arm didn't ache as much.

The headache had begun to ease off by the time the kettle had boiled. She took herbs from the little pot on the mantel and made a cup which she took to Zainal's chair to drink. It was a comfortable chair, and she eased into its contours. It'd need a cushion or two. . . . No, she couldn't see Zainal sitting on a cushion, but the wood, when she felt it

with her left hand, had been rubbed smooth, smelling only vaguely of the vegetable oil that had been used to give it luster. She wondered who had made it.

Then she absorbed the construction of the table—a three-inch slab of the slate which was quarried nearby, set on sturdy, slightly tapering rounds of lodge-pole trees, with notches spiked through the slate at the corners, keeping the top firmly in place.

There was a tentative knock on the door.

“Coming,” she said, and saw that the latchstring was inside. She must have come to long enough to do that when Pete left. She opened the door to Mavis Belton from the hospital, a clean coverall in one hand.

“Oh, do come in,” Kris said. “Kettle’s just boiled. I was having a cup to get over my hangover.”

“How’s the arm?” asked Mavis, with a grin.

“Not as bad as yesterday, that’s for sure. Come in, come in.”

Mavis did, but only after a careful look into the main room of the cabin. Then she saw the furnishings and exclaimed with surprise, running her finger over the surface of the slate slab and admiring the sturdy lodge-pole legs that held such a weight up.

“Not something you could tip over easily,” she remarked, stroking the chest and then Zainal’s chair. “Big enough even for him, I’d say.”

“He’ll be delighted with it. He looks so uncomfortable on stools, with his legs sticking up like Arnie Schwarzenegger on a kindergarten chair. Here’s your tea, and I’ll just steal Zainal’s chair. I can rest the splint on the arm.”

“I just ended my shift but I thought you’d like to hear that Baby’s doing fine in her orbitals.”

“I saw them reach the Bubble and Zainal’s space walk,” Kris said. “That was before Pete Easley plied me with so much liquor I must have passed out.”

“I think we’re going to have to alter the recipe. That particular distillation is double potency. I told Leon and Mayock they’d better cut it more.”

“They should,” she said, rubbing the back of her neck. “My hangover’s hung over for sure.”

“Sit out in the sun. It’s a lovely day.” Mavis rose. “May I look around? Inside and out?”

“Sure, but watch that pile of shakes on the way to the latrine, will you?”

BY DINNERTIME, WHEN MITFORD CAME BY IN THE RUNABOUT TO TAKE her down to the mess hall, she had completely recovered. But she took him to task and demanded to know who had done the furniture she'd found in the cabin on her return from the hangar.

"Whose idea was that table? Not even Zainal could tip it over, and how'd you get it down here?" she asked.

"We were going to do it while you and Zainal were gone, surprise you on your return." Chuck Mitford said with a sly grin at her. "But with you on the sick list, seemed a good idea to put up the bed . . . and then what was a bed without a table and the chairs?"

"Well, it was very, very much appreciated. Especially that thick mattress on that wide bed! Drunk as I was, I appreciated that!" Then she caught Mitford's odd expression. "Oh, yes, Pete Easley got me high as a kite just in case you hear rumors that I was drunk. I was. I slept through an entire Botany night without so much as moving. Mavis came by this morning and said they were going to cut the last batch. I said they'd better . . . it was damned near lethal. Who made the bed?"

"Oh, the Doyles and me. I cut the timber and Lenny did the posts and showed me how to make the joints and stuff. He and Ninety did the table and the chair. Said it was the least they could do for the guy that kept them from becoming frozen steaks in a Farmers' freezer. Joe and Sarah did the mattress and pillows, Sandy Areson the pottery and glassware of course, Whitby the benches. Coo traded for the pots and the skillet. No big deal."

"No big deal?" she exclaimed, and a faint reminder of her hangover made her head ring with the loudness of her voice. "You furnish our cabin and it's no big deal. It's a real big deal to me," and she leaned over and kissed the sergeant on the cheek before she knew she was doing it. "There. And don't blush like that, Chuck Mitford. I do appreciate what you all did and, besides, no one saw me kiss you."

She giggled when the sergeant lifted one hand halfway to his cheek and then dropped it quickly back to his lap. He was still red-faced.

"You finished your cabin first. You'll have a chance to help others furnish theirs when they've built," he said in a gruff voice. "By the way, stood a tour on the KDL and the mission's going a-okay. Not a wrinkle on the balloon as far as they've gone. Seamless. All the tech heads are scratching their arses over what was used."

"What's the general feeling? Or is it too far away to bother the claustrophics?" she asked, trying not to resent her absence . . . and Zainal's.

"I think people are glad. The Deskis evidently had a wild night of

dancing, singing . . . if you can call that warble singing . . . and Coo says there are giants protecting us.”

“Did he see the Eosi?”

“No,” and Mitford shook his head. “And, frankly, I’m just as glad I didn’t. Worry’s still having nightmares and I think that’s why Leon made the latest hooch so strong. Hoooo-eee!” He let out a long whistle. “You can blame them for getting you drunk, not Pete Easley. Which reminds me. Officially you’re on sick leave, Bjornsen, so don’t get any ideas about doing anything with that busted wing until Leon gives you the okay. Got me?”

“Yes sir, sergeant, sir,” she said, saluting repeatedly with her left hand.

The makers and donors of the furniture were saving spaces for them at a table in the mess hall. Kris lavished praise and gratitude on all for making a cabin into a real home, promising to do as well by them, when their cabins were up, as they had by her. Then the conversation devolved to Baby’s mission and Mitford, sipping what he assured Kris was a well-watered jolt of hooch, brought them up to speed.

THE MONITOR ALSO TRACKED THE SMALL VESSEL IN ITS EXPLORATION, especially the examination at the barrier, and followed its progress until it landed safely again on the western continent.

Chapter Ten

BABY RETURNED SAFELY AND WITH SUFFICIENT MASSES OF INFORMATION to keep all the brass-heads, engineers, miners, and Aggies busy. The mission crew took a longer time to get themselves back down to the surface, they were so high on the experience. Zainal's course had used a minimum of fuel and won the plaudits of the aviators and astronauts. Everyone on board had had instruction from him on how to fly Baby and a little chance at maneuvering.

"We may not have flight simulators, but what're they against the real thing?" Balenquah demanded. "Too damned bad we can't go anywhere in the KDL. Zainal says it's much easier to pilot—had to be since Drassis flew that series. That whole caper of capturing the KDL was a waste of time."

"No," Bert Put said, evidently rather fed up with Balenquah's opinions, "it got us extra fuel, a new bridge console, and a lot of tools we'd have a hard time duplicating."

"Oh, yeah, forgot about them," Balenquah replied. "Well, if we have to shift population, it'll be handy enough."

"There'll be flying in the KDL," Marrucci said, "maybe only mine and grain runs, but we're not totally grounded, you know."

"We are for any *real* space work," the man went on, talking himself into a morose state.

Zainal rose then and muttered something about having to see the admiral and took Kris from the table. Glancing back just as she and Zainal left the mess hall, she saw that others were departing from the table, leaving Balenquah on his own.

ZAINAL HAD BEEN STRUCK DUMB WITH AMAZEMENT WHEN HE SAW THE cabin. The door—which he admired even before he opened it, with Kris barely able to contain her excitement at what lay beyond it—had required his attention: admiring the detail, the latchstring, which gave him great amusement, pulling it in and out.

Then he entered the room and saw the table and the chair, the pottery and glasses, which Kris had put on the mantel, having no other place to store things—yet. Lenny had promised to teach her how to do mortise-and-tenon joins in wood and make herself proper chests and drawers. But the table and the chair shocked him, with one knee raised for the next step, and he stared and stared, and then inarticulately tried to ask her who, how, where these things had come from.

As she replied, interspersing the explanation with giggles for the surprise yet in store for him, he examined everything, even trying to lift the slate-topped table. He sat in the chair, got up, turned it upside down to see how the legs had been fitted in, and the stringers, and then righted it to sit in it again, stroking the armrests with his big hands.

Maybe Catteni didn't have tear ducts or never cried but Zainal's eyes were certainly full of fluid and though he tried to speak, he kept shaking his head, speechless.

"I've saved the best for last," she said, and taking a hand that was attached to a body reluctant to leave the chair that had been made to fit him, she led him to where he couldn't miss the bedstead.

He had an immediate response to that: the very devil of a look in his full eyes, as he swooped her up into his arms and carried her, for all the world the way John Wayne had treated Maureen O'Hara in *The Quiet Man*, and demonstrated how much better he could perform on a resilient surface.

MITFORD TOOK HER OFF THE SICK LIST WHEN HE WANTED THEIR TEAM to find a pass through the western hills to the far shore: he let her go along. He knew very well that she'd be better employed marking clicks, which she could do with her left hand, than left at Retreat, fretting that she was useless.

While that was being organized she spent some time making bricks, since she could fill the molds left-handed. She owed Sarah and Joe for their hand in the Great Furniture Surprise. When some loggers were injured—two badly—she sat in the ward with them, checking pulses and temperatures. There were no blood pressure devices and no thermometers, so it was all hands-on. She also fed Boris Slavinkovin, who had broken both arms and most of his ribs when the rolling log took a

shortcut over his body. Being fed by a one-handed aide didn't embarrass him half as much, he told her, because it didn't tie up a whole human who could do jobs other than feeding him. Then he asked her if she could teach him better English since he was now stuck in bed and had to do something.

Ex-teachers had gotten together with an ex-cartoonist and created a language primer for those who wished to learn English. There were fifty copies in print, thanks to supplies on the KDL, and they were well worn by the time Kris snagged a copy for Boris.

Leon and Mayock managed to dilute the potency of their distillation so that it not only had the faint aftertaste of a Botany nut variety but did not cause such speedy and legless inebriation.

The only person whose metabolism could cope with the previous grain whiskey was Zainal, so rather than water down what was left (which Leon felt was a crime), they gave the remaining keg to him. The first time he sampled it, Kris told him about Pete Easley getting her drunk on barely two half glasses of it and the hangover she'd had the next day. That reminded her that she hadn't seen as much of Pete Easley as usual. But she thought nothing of it, going to her stints at the hospital or the brick factory.

Then they were ready to leave on their exploratory mission and it was a great relief to all the team to be back together again and out on their own.

"One can get too accustomed to the comforts of home," Sarah announced, settling back in her seat on the big air-cushion truck. "Though I wish we could have started the cabin before we left. And thanks again, Kris, for all those bricks. Worry's put his name in for a hundred and so has Jay Greene. We should have enough by the time we get back."

"We do appreciate the ones you did for us, too," Leila said in her often inaudible voice. She was holding hands with Whitby, while hanging on to a strap with the other.

She looked a bit white, Kris thought, and wondered if she, too, was pregnant. Sarah was, and was very cocky about it, taking it in her stride like any modern woman.

"Sure thing, Leila. Kept me out of mischief," Kris said.

And actually, kept mischief away from her, for any of the impudent men who tried to charm her found themselves also making bricks, if that was where they caught up with her, or feeding a bed-bound patient, which was scarcely a romantic setting for the sort of offers they hoped to make.

Boris Slavinkovin put in his bid and she had to threaten him with her absence at mealtimes if he kept it up.

“You’ll have to sometime, you know,” Sarah said bluntly.

“Oh, I will, I will,” Kris said airily, and did not meet Zainal’s eye when he glanced at her beside him. “Ah, that’s another klick, isn’t it? We’ve gone one thousand plegs again.” She added a slash to her sheet.

THEY FOUND A WAY THROUGH THE HILLS, THROUGH TWISTING BUT CONNECTING ravines separated by banks which the air-cushion could manage easily. They marked the more accessible routes with O’s in the blue, almost luminous paint that was a recent innovation. (Red and yellow had already been produced from local vegetable dyes.) The cul-de-sacs were marked with an X. For some reason, Zainal found the procedure very amusing and wouldn’t tell her why. They did not find any blind valleys or night crawlers but they did find a new variety of rocksquat and some avians that were almost as good eating as chickens, though some, caught closer to the sea, left a fishy aftertaste in the mouth.

They made their way down the coast until the rocky terrain was impassable even for the remarkably maneuverable vehicle. They were headed back, up the eastern coast, two weeks later when Kris experienced some fleeting nausea first thing in the morning. For a couple of days she was sure it was caused by the ripe soft fruits that flourished in the almost tropical weather that far south. She ignored the minor discomfort until one morning when Joe was replacing the splints and bandages on her arm. The bandage material came from the legs and arms of Catteni coveralls, cut in strips, softened slightly by much washing and use, and adequate for their purpose. Her arm was sweating so much in the heat that she was glad to change the wrappings with the extra roll of bandage that Joe had in his medical kit.

“Arm’s healing well,” he said, feeling the breaks with careful fingers. “I can feel the thickening of the bones where they’ve knitted.”

“Doesn’t hurt anymore either,” she said, though she sighed as he replaced splints and bandage strips.

He gave her an odd sideways glance. “Trip’s done you good. You were looking a little off-color before we left.”

“Which reminds me. . . . Anyone else having trouble digesting that pink-fleshed fruit we had last night?” she asked.

Joe was not only medic but botanist.

“No, but we didn’t gorge on it either. Why? Got the runs?”

“No, a touch of indigestion, I guess,” and she shrugged it off, but Sarah had overheard her query and joined them, peering into her face with an intensely disturbing grin on her face. “So?” Kris demanded when Sarah didn’t explain.

"Breasts hurt? Had your period? How long have you noticed the nausea?"

Defensively, Kris crossed her arms over her breasts and, as if Sarah's comment had been a curse, they were tender. She didn't dare change the position of her arms as her mind raced to the conclusion Sarah had obviously just come to.

"I can't be pregnant," she said, jerking her chin up. "I've never—"
"Never what?" asked Sarah with a sly expression on her face.

Kris closed her eyes, remembering the potent hooch she'd had for her arm, remembering Pete Easley offering more, and more, and enough so that she had . . .

"I'll kill him," she said, meaning it fervently. No wonder he had kept out of her way. Just wait till she got back to Retreat. She'd—

"Is something wrong with Kris' arm?" Zainal asked, and Kris wanted to seep into the ground like a night crawler.

"Nothing, nothing's wrong with my arm," and she shot to her feet, glaring at Sarah and Joe.

"No, but she's pregnant," Sarah said, gleefully.

Kris hauled back her left arm to punch Sarah but Zainal caught her around the waist.

"You had to go blab it!" she shouted, trying to reach Sarah, who had nimbly danced out of her way, with the grinning Joe moving into position to protect his mate, hands out in a placatory move.

"Now, Kris, don't go off half-cocked," he said as Leila and Whitby came running over to see what could possibly have happened.

"Kris is preggers, too," Sarah crowed.

Then Zainal was holding her so tightly to his chest, leaving her feet dangling above the ground, that she had to hang on to him for balance.

"Thank you, Kris," he murmured into her ear, and all the fight went out of her.

She hung limply against him as his arms around her assumed a kinder hold, a loving one. There couldn't be many males on any world that would thank a woman who got pregnant by another man.

"You're welcome. I think," she added, and squirmed to be released. When he put her back on her feet, she apologized to Sarah and Joe with as good a grace as she could manage. "I wanted to be sure," she said mendaciously. "It could have just been the ripe fruit."

"So, tell us who the lucky guy was?" Joe asked with the familiarity of an old friend.

Kris chuckled, deciding on an entirely different course of action that meant she couldn't publicly go after one sweet-talking lothario of

a Peter Easley, but neither would she confirm it to him or anyone . . . unless of course the newborn gave some clue to its paternity. That would serve that so-and-so right. Taking advantage of a girl in her condition . . . and yet. . . . She suppressed any recollection of an incident that would result in a lasting and visible proof.

“That’s for me to know, and you to guess,” she said, delighted to be able to pay Sarah back for blurting out what Kris would rather have kept secret.

THE LONG TREK UP THE EASTERN COAST WENT WELL, ALL OTHER EVENTS considered. Everyone settled down to the fact of her pregnancy. At night Zainal held her against him with a tenderness she certainly had not expected of him: enough to make her eyes water and make her wish, with all her heart, she might have transcended the barriers of species biology and been pregnant by him.

By the time they got back to Retreat Bay, she felt better than she ever had in her life. She had to see Leon about her arm and he was very pleased with its progress. He wanted her to keep the splints on anyway, since she insisted on working, but she could use her right hand now. He also confirmed her pregnancy and had the grace not to inquire further.

“Actually, you’re lucky you’re here on Botany. Doesn’t take as long,” Leon said with a wry grin.

“What do you mean, it doesn’t take as long?”

“Average pregnancy is two hundred and sixty to eighty days. But it’ll only take you two hundred and twelve point eight Botanical days to gestate.” When she blinked in confusion at him, he grinned and added, “Thirty-hour days don’t change the development rate of a fetus but it sure alters the *days* you stay pregnant.”

“Oh!”

“Most of my OB patients find that comforting.”

“I’ll remember that.”

WORD OF HER PREGNANCY GOT AROUND AND SHE COULD FIND ADDITIONAL comfort in the fact that her “admirers” went elsewhere with their persuasions. And when she saw Pete Easley across the crowded mess hall one evening, she merely gave him a cheerful wave and left him wondering. She did like the man, in spite of that dirty trick. He’d been drinking that day, too. Maybe she was assigning his solicitude to exterior motives because he’d been drinking as much of that hooch as she

had. How could she fault him for getting drunk and doing what was natural enough? Pregnancy was also mellowing her.

The temperature was definitely warming up and bushes were blossoming, spreading a heady smell that the inland breeze wafted down to the bay area. The agricultural teams had plowed during their absence and sowed the fields with seed purloined from the now deserted Bella Vista camp in a special trip of the KDL. As no ship had come to collect what was left of the grain, the KDL did, for the supplies brought across the channel were low.

The silos were swept clean for this year's storage.

On the continent that had been evacuated, the machines had been plowing, too, and many of the fields sown. Some wit among the Aggies set up a competition, one-sided though it was, as to the growth and health of their crops versus the Farmers' and the resultant yield per acre. The Aggies had already elected to use fields the same size the Farmers had, since the arable land seemed to divide into such sections: another clue that this continent might once have been farmed, too. The rustled loo-cows grazed the less desirable fields and the hillsides.

About the time the crops were a good six inches high and thriving, a most unpleasant discovery was made: there were night crawlers again. Not many, but enough to let them know that there was a resurgence of the menace.

Astrid put forward the theory that the loo-cows excreted internal parasites that had a second cycle as night crawlers. There were a few who agreed with her, but it made for an interesting argument in the evenings, and had those with wooden floors in their huts replacing them with thick slate or flagstones. And many of those who had not sited their dwellings moved nearer the better-traveled areas. No one walked out at night on any field and the sentinel positions were either made of stone or set high above the ground on stilts.

This was, however, a very minor setback. Compost heaps were hastily shifted to stone tubs, and the disposal of noxious wastes was no longer a problem. Not that anyone wanted night crawlers in a latrine. Since such facilities no longer had to be dug, it became a punishment chore to do the late-evening dumps, far enough from the rapidly expanding community to reduce the hazard of night crawler infestation to the populated areas.

Spring lasted months but the fine weather assured the Aggies of excellent crops, as good or even better than what the Farmers were cultivating. The varieties of tubers and pulses occupied half as many fields as the grain crops, and caves were found to store the harvests rather than having to search ever farther afield for the edibles. The night

crawlers were not attracted to vegetable matter unless it was mixed with bloody substances, so these crops were not disturbed. The rocksquat compound flourished and it was discovered that baby rocksquats were far more delicate in flavor and texture than the adults.

Evening classes in various skills were given. The nights that Admiral Ray Scott threw his first successful pot, or Bull Fetterman completed a set of six dining chairs, or Marrucci managed a creditable mortise-and-tenon drawer for his chest remained landmarks in the assimilation of the disparate ex-professionals into true Botanicals.

There were failures, as Mitford put it: people who refused to do their share of work or felt themselves put upon by "authority" to always have to do the less glamorous tasks. Judge Bempechat gave each offender three chances to redeem him or herself in the eyes of the community. Then the unrepentant had a one-way trip back to the old continent, where they could fend for themselves, with cup, blanket, knife, and hatchet. After the expulsion of the first dozen or so, delinquency was reduced significantly.

Once a month, the two valley prisons were visited. The Turs disappeared one by one until the valley was empty. The Catteni eventually put up shelters, and when they asked for supplies, like nails or meat as a change from a fish diet, these were provided. But nothing that could provide them any assistance in escaping. Zainal doubted they would try.

"They are Drassi and Tudo. They have enough to eat, a place to sleep, and that is sufficient."

"I can't imagine anyone not wanting to better conditions," Marrucci had said, for he was often in the pilot's seat in one of the two small airships that did the run. "I mean, when you consider we're damned near city size with our own distillery . . ." Marrucci was hoping to add wine to the spirits and had already been south for the soft fruits as a basis for his "cordial."

"They like it the way they have it now," and Zainal shrugged.

"D'you think the Turs did escape?" Marrucci asked.

"Who cares?"

"You got a point there."

THE TUB WENT REGULARLY TO THE MINES WITH SUPPLIES FOR THE MEN and women working there, to rotate personnel and bring back ore. The judge often gave a month's sentence at hard labor for misdemeanors, and only one ever found mining an enjoyable occupation. He stayed on.

For evening entertainment, those with any talent provided shows, managing to remember enough of a musical comedy or even a play to

put on abridged versions or invent dialogue and action to add to what they remembered. Decks of cards were manufactured from the heavy wrappings on stores in the KDL and Baby. The cards didn't shuffle well but that didn't keep the players from betting an hour's work or a special bit of scrimshaw to make it interesting.

Gold had been found but it was decided, not without heated debate, that barter made a better system for a small community like theirs where everyone was expected to work community hours, not pay to get out of the labor. Among the diverse trades of the colonists, there were several jewelers. They would contract to produce jewelry for those who found gold, and even a few gemstones, and decided among themselves what was fair payment in grams of the metal.

Iri Bempechat had taken on several assistants as legal advisers in disputes, most of which could be settled by compromise. The ex-military personnel had formed a lower court but their decisions could be appealed, leaving Judge Bempechat to give the final verdict on an issue.

"We don't need a formal government," Beverly had said one evening, when the topic came up again in a mess hall that was more crowded than usual due to an unusually heavy fall of rain. (It was the beginning of many such rainfalls, which limited themselves to night-times.) "Why complicate what has been working rather smoothly?"

"If it ain't broke, don't fix it," Mitford called out, and got a good laugh for the old army axiom.

"We have a form of government, actually, though most of you don't realize it. We just don't have elected officials or a nominal head of state. Nor do I believe one is required," Iri said, his cultivated and mellifluous voice reaching to the farthest corners. "Those of us with special expertise have taken on the duties required to ensure peace and tranquillity. Community hours handle public services, such as they are, and the rest of us work where we can be useful and at our previous professions for the most part, even in the limited fashion due to the constraints of supplies. I suppose we should thank our lucky stars that we have so many skills among us. Practically every walk of life is represented. Our alien associates," and he gestured to the Rugarians, sitting in their usual group, and the Deski, who were more apt to mix in with humans, "have supplemented us in many ingenious ways. I think some of us may have a chuckle comparing what we used to do with what we're doing now, but frankly, I think it's been beneficial as well as instructive. We're all doing very well indeed. And able, for the most part, to do what we do the way we want to. Certainly without any bureaucratic interferences and certainly without a thread of red tape. You don't know how happy that makes me!"

Good-natured chuckles greeted that sally.

“Why indeed should we fix something that isn’t broken?” he added, raising his hands in appeal.

“Yeah, but what happens to our pleasant utopian dream when the Farmers come?” Balenquah asked, glancing around.

“Leave it to Balenquah,” an anonymous male voice said.

“What does *that* mean?” the pilot asked, rising from his chair and staring around, trying to discover the source.

“It means,” Marrucci said, reaching across the table and hauling Balenquah down, “you’re out of order, off course, and being a pain in the arse again. You’re alive, you’re sure kicking, you’re even flying, and if that isn’t better than starving in a Catteni prison for blowing up their freighter, you’re gone in the head.”

“Don’t say another word,” Beverly put in from a nearby table, “if you want to fly again.”

“That’s just what I mean,” Balenquah said. “We need a formal government, so you know who’s got the right to give orders.”

“That’s enough out of you, Balenquah,” Scott said, seconding Beverly’s admonition.

“You’re not an admiral of anything here, Scott,” Balenquah said.

“Oh, boorrring,” drawled one of the “ladies” from two tables over. And she yawned ostentatiously, which made the others at her table howl with laughter.

“You are, you know,” Marrucci said, shaking his head at Balenquah, who had colored with such open ridicule, “a real bore with all this gloom and doom and I’m obviously,” and now he turned to look at the ladies’ table, “not the only one who thinks so.”

Balenquah rose, his right arm cocked, but even before Marrucci could rise to defend himself, Scott had nodded to the man beside him and they rose and captured Balenquah’s arm and were hustling him out of the mess hall and into the rain.

“Add bouncer to my list of new-world occupations,” Scott said to Beverly as the two returned to their seats.

At their table, Kris found herself sharing a bit of Balenquah’s pessimism. The problem of the Farmers *was* just beneath the surface of everyone’s thoughts, despite the fact that most people carried on as if there were not that threat hanging over them. Zainal kept insisting that the Farmers were benign. He could give no other reason for that than the way this planet had been tended for thousands of years, if the new forest of lodge-pole trees was any indication.

“And it has been months since the Bubble was blown up,” he reminded her, as they walked back to their cabin when the rain had

stopped. Flagstone pathways had been laid around much of Retreat Bay now, to hinder night crawlers, although walkers automatically stamped hard every third step.

Kris let Zainal do it for them both as she didn't like jarring the baby she could now feel move, in little flutters, within her: normal activity at five months. Sarah kept complaining that her little dear kicked like a soccer star, but she was eight months along. By now, almost every female of childbearing age, including the Deski and Rugarians, was expecting, which meant that Retreat Bay would have a baby boom of 2,103 new souls. Anna Bollinger may have given birth to the first human baby on Botany but there had since been thirty-four born to women who had been captured pregnant. Now the new crop—which had been plowed on Botany, as someone had remarked in a biblical fashion—were reaching term. Patti Sue was first, and prideful about producing a son for Jay Greene.

Kris didn't know which she wanted, apart from being healthy and not too much resembling its sire. Somehow she couldn't ask Zainal what his preference would be. And yet, he would act in loco parentis to whatever she produced.

Most of the pregnant women carried on in their specialty as long as possible: and Kris, Sarah, and Leila were no exceptions. In fact they had arguments with the sergeant that he was assigning the team the "easy" trips. So he organized Zainal to take Baby to the smallest continent—really more of a very large island than a continental landmass—to circumnavigate it, the coastline being the only part that was green.

"Bit like Australian outback," Sarah remarked as Zainal guided Baby crisscross the interior. "Like Nullarbor. Nothing for clicks! Not even mulga or brush . . . sand and rock," she added in disgust.

"Hmmm, yes, I see," Joe said, without explaining his cryptic remark as he gazed out the starboard side in the pilot's compartment. "Real rock!" He pointed now to a rocky ridge that ran obliquely across below them, like vertebrae, with dips and spires. "Dinosaur bones."

"Hmmm, that's what they do look like," Kris agreed.

Whitby insisted that they land and spend one night at the base of that range, where the spatial maps indicated one of the ore deposits. "We should know where copper and zinc are and that's what is down there. If the lodes are near the surface, it might be advantageous to take a week or so to work up a cargo."

So they landed, and it was hot.

"Just like home in the dry," Sarah said ecstatically, throwing her arms back, her gravid belly out, and turning her face up to the sun.

"Good way to get sunstroke," Joe said, and slammed her reed-weave

hat on her head. "We are not, I repeat, we are not delivering you prematurely in the confines of Baby."

"Having the baby in the Baby?" Sarah was off on a fit of the giggles.

Whitby, Leila, Joe, and Zainal went off to try and locate the ore, laden with bottles for samples and soil. Sarah and Kris, who found the heat especially enervating, found what shade they could in the lee of Baby by digging out enough soil under the landing vanes to sit on blankets. Kris dozed off while Sarah dragged her hands through the scattered rocks, trying to find interesting ones.

Sarah, too, dozed off and they were both awakened by the laughter of the returning prospectors. Each carried some sort of dead animal resembling a large rat.

Kris recoiled when Zainal plunked three brace beside her. The pelts caught her attention because they were mottled in soft sandy shades.

"Camouflage? From what?" she said, venturing to touch the nearest. It was rough with dirt and sand.

"Burrowers," Joe said succinctly, "but they test edible. We thought we'd give them a try. Live on insects, of which this continent has a multitude. I saw twenty-five varieties and caught," and he held up several bottles tied together to prevent breakage, "only a few for closer examination. You never know what might be useful." He grinned wickedly. "Or tasty. And nutritious."

"How would you know? You never hunted outback with the aborigines," Sarah said.

"Neither did you."

"But I did a paper on the ones the aborigines favor," she replied hotly, and they were off again.

The desert burrowers—Kris declined to think of them as rats—were skinned and, after Joe did further tests on the equipment in Baby, were cooked in the galley and served as part of the evening meal. The flesh was different in texture and taste from anything else that Botany had provided: sort of nutty and sleek. Almost difficult to bite into.

Twilight brought out their natural predators, batlike creatures who swooped on long triangular wings from rocky aeries to catch the burrowers. The cooler air encouraged a different set of insects to appear, ones that bit and itched and forced everyone to take refuge in the scout ship. But not before they saw the desert burrowers in action, making incredible leaps into the air to catch their meal on tongues that elongated to make the capture, and seeming to disappear from sight the moment they heard bat wings above them.

"We've some like that on ol' Earth," Joe remarked, watching from the scout.

The men were in general pleased with their prospecting and had marked the areas with the blue paint, though Whitby and Joe argued about its durability in the unremitting sun.

"Well, we'll wear-test it good, then," Joe said, shrugging. "And we've the coordinates anyway."

Zainal made for the coast in the dawn light the next morning and, keeping the Baby at a low altitude, made a touchdown in those spots that looked different. This tropical area displayed fruits and nuts, not unlike citrus and coconut, and samples were gathered of everything, including a different variety of insect life. Kris found the smell of rotting vegetable and fruit unsettling but said nothing until the reserved Leila murmured a complaint.

"There're sort of plateaus up ahead," Whitby pointed out. "Maybe cooler up there, with an offshore breeze to keep the gnats and nits away."

Kris disliked using pregnancy as an excuse to avoid any task, but she was glad enough to let the men rig a shelter of the thick-fronded vegetation on a height overlooking a rather lovely white-sanded bay. (On inspection, the white sands contained particularly vicious biting insects, so the charm of the area was considerably diminished and Sarah and Kris could lounge in comfort above that nuisance.) There were even smaller fronds to use as fans and the breezes were cooling and pleasantly scented with whatever was blooming farther inland.

Leila took off to explore with Whitby but she came back, her face and bare arms blotchy from contact with plants they had had to cut their way through.

"The sap which zapped me," Leila said as Kris and Sarah washed her arms and face, "is very sticky and Joe is hoping we've found a rubber substitute."

"The hard way," Sarah said in a droll tone of voice. "Is this helping?"

Leila gave a little sigh. "Only as long as the wet's on me."

"What wouldn't we give for a decent antihistamine!" Sarah said fervently.

"We've chemists enough . . ." Kris said.

"And only the one microscope, which evidently isn't strong enough to do much, so it's back to old trial and error."

So, since trial wet compresses helped, more were made of bandage strips in the first-aid kit and wrapped around her arms and laid on her face and neck.

That was when Sarah's baby decided to arrive. In fact, did before

his father and the others returned, though Kris immediately called a Mayday for Joe over the hand unit.

"I must've miscounted," Sarah said apologetically to her midwives when she realized her labor had begun. "This business of thirty-hour days and seven-month pregnancies."

"Nonsense," Kris and Leila retorted in the same breath. "It isn't as if we don't know what to do," Kris added, though her mind was revolving in a panic over all the things they didn't have on board the scout that might be needed.

None were as Sarah's fine lusty baby took the minimum of time in arriving. Both mother and child were all cleaned up when the father leaped into the clearing, red-faced with exertion and badly scratched in his effort to get back in time. Then Whitby and Zainal were congratulating him and Sarah, and admiring the baby. Kris had her eyes on Zainal, wondering if human babies were in any way different from Catteni newborns.

"Small," Zainal muttered, knowing some comment was needed.

"Small?" exclaimed Joe indignantly, as his son squirmed in his arms in reaction to the sudden loud noise.

"He's not small at all," Leila said emphatically, and startling the rest of the team since she rarely contradicted anyone. "He's eight pounds and a few ounces. And healthy!"

"And I feel fine," Sarah said. "And it's so good to do this," she added, for she was sitting up, arms around her knees, a position she hadn't been able to assume for several months.

"How big are Catteni babies if you think this one's small?" Kris asked, deciding she'd better straighten Zainal out before he could be disappointed in what she produced.

Zainal measured a distance with his hands.

"I pity the females who have to carry *that* much around," Sarah said, shaking her head.

"Bigger head, quite likely, and bigger bones," Joe said sagely.

"He's healthy, that's what matters," Whitby remarked in a definitive tone.

But young Anthony Marley caused the team to leave the insalubrious area and head back to Retreat Bay. Sarah tried to talk them out of an early return because she and Anthony were fine and the reconnaissance could continue, as far as she was concerned. Joe was having none of it, wanting both wife and child checked over by the medics.

Leon Dane pronounced Sarah in excellent postnatal condition and Fawzia Johnston, the pediatrician on duty when they returned, said that young Anthony was as healthy and normal as any mother could wish.

The Doyle brothers, who now spent more time as carpenters and joiners, instructing others in the art, presented Sarah and Joe with a cradle for the infant.

"Working all the hours God gave Botany to keep up with the demand," Lenny said, after duly admiring young Anthony and congratulating the parents. "You know, this place is getting more like home all the time, with the babies arriving." He looked melancholy.

"You miss your own?" Sarah said, putting a sympathetic hand on his arm.

Lenny's face brightened into a grin. "Sort've, but who's got time to think of what we left behind with so much to do where we are!"

Chapter Eleven

ZANE CHARLES BJORNSEN ARRIVED ON BOTANY AT DAWN EXACTLY 222 days after conception. He was a long child—in that he did resemble his father. He came with fingernails that had to be cut soon after his birth or he'd've scratched his fair face, and a mass of very dark hair.

He was not, as Anthony Marley had been, red, wrinkled, and an object only his mother could love.

“Zane is a perfectly good name,” Kris had told Zainal. “One of my favorite Western writers was a Zane Grey. And I admire Chuck Mitford.”

“But he is not the father.” Zainal did no more than raise one eyebrow at her, tacitly asking the question she had refused to answer.

“No, but I see no reason I . . . we . . . can't do him the honor of being godfather.”

“Godfather?” Zainal's lips twitched. “Oh God, oh God . . . ?”

“Not that sort. The deity that Father Jacob reveres, the real God.”

“There is one?”

Zainal had trouble believing in the Almighty, though the several ministers who had been dropped were trying to establish services. The Protestants had no problems but Father Jacob did, since he had none of the accessories properly required to say Mass. He fretted about their lack and how he should manage without them.

Marrucci proved to be a devout Catholic and did his best to console the good father in one of those role reversals which continually happened on Botany.

“If God is everywhere, then He's here, too, padre, and He'll accept the worship of the sincere, dedicated to Him. The earliest Catholics had

no altar or relics, and communion was bread and wine. We got them. We got the dedication. You say the words and I'll be altar boy."

MITFORD WAS BOTH PLEASED AND ALARMED TO HAVE A CHILD NAMED for him.

"Everyone will think he's mine and he isn't," the sergeant said at his gruffest. "Not that I wish he weren't, Kris," he added hastily. "I mean, I'd've been honored if you'd wanted to but . . . well, hell, you know what I mean."

"Yes, I do, Chuck."

"So who is the lucky guy?"

"Remember that hooch Leon and Mayock made, about the time I broke my arm?"

"Yeah, I do," and Mitford looked surprised, then scowled deeply. "You mean you got raped and never reported it?" His fists clenched as if he held the neck of the offender within them.

Kris patted one such fist gently. "I don't know about any rape. But I do know I was very, very drunk."

Chuck frowned. "Pete Easley took you back to your cabin, didn't he?"

"He may have, Chuck, but I don't recall a thing and perhaps that's as well, don't you think?"

"No, I don't."

"Can't do anything about it. But maybe when Zane grows up, we'll know for sure. Zainal couldn't care less."

"No, he couldn't, and you know, the way he's taken this hasn't lost him any points."

Zainal was at that moment changing his foster son's fluff diapers. The reeds which produced the useful material were being cultivated everywhere they would grow around Retreat Bay.

The sticky sap that had been such a problem on their last reconnaissance trip had been harvested and, poured into a mold, made a reasonable facsimile of waterproof garments for baby use. They could be washed and reused four or five times but gradually dissolved, often at the wrong time.

Mitford grinned, watching the anomaly of a Catteni Emassi acting the nursemaid.

Twenty-one hundred and three new lives had been expected, and all but five made it: two human babies were stillborn; one of the Rugarian young lived three days and died but even the one Rugarian who

understood his species' needs could not give a reason; a fourth was unfortunately strangled by the umbilical cord during delivery; and the fifth, a Deski, was malformed when it hatched and did not survive.

THE PROMISED CRÈCHES WERE OPENED AND EVERY FEMALE HAD THE right to leave her youngling in the general care for her day's work or whatever community service she performed. Sometimes it was crèche duty. Kris started the fad of the papoose board, dredging that up from reading Westerns and historical novels about Indians. It worked well for babies up to three months, and for shorter periods after that.

"I said you will be a good mother," Zainal said with a touch of smug pride, when she showed him how she could carry Zane around.

To Kris' astonishment, she didn't find caring for Zane as onerous as she had expected, and that had little to do with Zainal's enthusiasm for the child. She had never had anything so completely dependent on her, so trusting, and so precious to her. Once or twice, she wondered if she was being unfair to Pete Easley by not telling him. But he and one of the Swedish Aggies had made bricks together, which was equivalent to becoming engaged on Botany. If Kris caught him looking very carefully at her son, she ignored the query in his eyes and babbled on about how good a father Zainal was, until even Pete Easley got bored.

The baby boom sparked a lot of investigations and experiments—a fine powder for talcum, an ointment for diaper and other minor rashes, a way to weave some of the vegetable fibers into cloth for proper baby clothes, and a spinning wheel to make knitting yarn out of loo-cow hairs. The creatures had grown longer coats for protection during the colder weather. These were collected—before the night crawlers could get them—and spun, then washed and/or felted.

The crops grew lush and green on both continents. The Catteni continued to do nothing in their valley. The miners excavated tons of iron, copper, tin, zinc, lead, gold, and silver and occasionally some unusual clear stones which the jewelers thought a variant of tourmaline. But then, no one was looking for gemstones or in the places where rubies, emeralds, sapphires, or diamonds—which would have been useful for their hardness—might be found.

Bone was more useful, and the heavy bones in the four rear legs of the loo-cows were scrupulously cleaned and dried for carving.

ZANE WAS JUST FIVE MONTHS OLD WHEN THE DESKI SENTINEL STARTLED everyone on the south side of Retreat Bay with a warning warble. For

such a slender species, with no great lung space, they could make a god-awful amount of noise. The baby was teething, so Kris was awake, trying to soothe him. Zainal's comunit buzzed and he shot straight up in bed, alert, unit to his ear before she could take a single step to intercept.

"What?" He was on his feet and, hopping about on one foot, listening as he pulled on his coverall. Even in such a ridiculous pose, Kris admired his physique. If only Zane could have osmosed a single gene from his foster father . . .

"It's down," Zainal added as he closed the hand unit and concentrated on dressing himself as fast as possible.

"What's down?"

"The Bubble." He had both boots on now and was starting for the door.

"I'm coming, too," she said.

"Not like that!" He raked her with a disapproving look, for she was draped in a blanket.

She thrust Zane at his father and dressed as quickly as he, retrieved the blanket and two spare reed pods, and was inserting the baby into the sling she usually carried him in even as she settled into a passenger seat of the air-cushion truck. Zainal spun the control wheel and the vehicle charged off into the pale light of dawn toward the hangar. Lights were coming up throughout the settlement and occasionally someone called out, "What's the matter?" when Zainal was identified at the wheel.

"The Bubble is just down?" she asked as they sped along.

"Deski heard something, not like anything else they have heard," Zainal was saying, "and warned the bridge. The bridge watch had already seen something on the screen but couldn't make out what."

"The Farmers?" Kris asked, scared to the pit of her stomach as she jiggled her son. Motion always put him to sleep, even upset with teething as he was, and even this short trip worked its magic on him.

Those alerted were arriving on air-cushion, running as fast as they could and often faster than the basic push bikes that had been developed for short-distance transportation. Pneumatic tires were still to be perfected but the iron rims did well enough on the flagstone and dirt tracks and were speedier than walking.

All the lights in the hangar were on, and the hatches on the KDL, Baby, and the office were open. Runabouts were parked helter-skelter.

Zainal guided Kris to the office, which was nearest. The bridge there would show just as much as the ships' would and there'd be more space

for her and the baby. In such little matters, Zainal always considered her and Zane.

Scott, Beggs, Fetterman, Yowell, and Coo were in the office and Scott waved Zainal in urgently.

“A full orbit already and it’s not large. Not small enough to be a programmed orb but moving too fast for us to get an accurate picture of its dimensions or shape.”

“That,” and Coo pointed to the trail left by the orbital, “is not heard. Something landed.” He spoke with more force than a Deski generally did. He’d probably been repeating it to Scott. Now Coo stabbed his spidery finger at the Farmers’ command post, the one Kris, Zainal, and the others had investigated well over a Botanical year ago: where Dick Aarens had deliberately activated a homing device.

“Then what . . .” and Scott irritably followed the course of the orbital with one finger. Just then its track shifted to a north/south orientation. Even as they watched, it completed several circuits of the large globe of Botany. “What is that?”

“We will know . . .” and Zainal paused, eyes watching the progress of the orbital on the screen “about now.”

They felt the tingling zap of a scan. He chuckled.

“Ohmigod,” Fetterman said, sitting down as if his legs had given out.

Kris had felt it course through her and Zane squirmed slightly against her in his sling. She felt his cheek, wondering if the scan could have been too much for so small a body, and then Zainal’s reassuring touch to her back.

“I will volunteer to go,” Zainal said.

Kris barely prevented herself from saying, “Oh, no you won’t,” before Scott lifted both hands in a refusal, his eyes not moving from the screen. The comunit bleeped and he toggled it open.

“We were just scanned?” It was Beverly’s voice.

“Coo says they landed at the command post.”

“Nothing’s showing up there,” Beverly said.

Coo nodded emphatically, reaffirming his report.

“Fek agrees,” Beverly went on. “Haven’t we established they use matter transmission?”

“Oh, oh,” Yowell said, and he stumbled backward to collapse on the nearest stool, his face a study of conflicting emotions: hope, fear, anxiety, and confusion.

Coo’s head turned toward the office door and he rose to his feet, raising one arm to point straight ahead.

"They're here?" Scott asked.

Kris gulped, her arms automatically tightening on Zane. But as soon as Zainal moved, she was right behind him, ahead of the others who had hesitated just that split second longer before acting. If their destiny was coming to them, she wanted to see it.

As they left the office, she glanced over at the KDL and saw Fek's unmistakable shape in the hatch, then Balenquah's stocky frame silhouetted briefly in the hatch light, followed by Worrell's slightly stooped figure, the tall erect one that was probably Rastancil, and the slight frame of a woman whom she didn't recognize and Slav. From Baby came Mitford, Easley, Yuri, and Judge Bempechat.

They converged, forming a semicircle facing outward.

What happened before their eyes did not resemble anything from a *Star Trek* program. No colored lights or beams or columns. Nor any other special effect Kris remembered from all the science fiction films and videos she'd seen. And yet . . . something was out there, forming a solid mass which moved toward them, a nimbus around a darker interior. Something which even by the dawn light looked larger than the tallest of the waiting humans.

Then it wasn't taller and seemed to spread out. She recognized the distinctive spider-legged form of a Deski. Beside her, Coo gurgled once and stiffened. With her free hand, Kris reached for Coo's long fingers and gripped them. She had Zane's face shielded with the other. Zainal had shifted his body so he overlapped her in partial protection. But most of the forms that coalesced out of the mist, only it wasn't mist, were human in appearance as the details of face and appendages became obvious.

"They're shape changers," she whispered. "They're changing into us?"

Coo sucked breath in, a slow sound. Terror? Apprehension? Defensiveness? Kris tightened her grip, not knowing if she was giving, or seeking support.

"Shape changers?" Scott hissed, eyes never leaving what was in front of him as he leaned slightly in her direction.

"There's a Deski and a Rugarian and the rest are humans. But not as many of them as there are of us."

When the transformation was complete, and there was no doubt that these visitors showed representation of the three species facing them, each group regarded the other.

"There's no Catteni." Kris' comment was barely audible. But the omission caused a little giggle to escape her which she hastily sup-

pressed. If these were the Farmers, and every evidence pointed to that assumption, for who else could have lifted the Bubble, then they weren't all-seeing and perfect. Somehow that gave her a lift of confidence.

But no one was saying anything and the tension was mounting. So, if the visitors weren't showing immediate aggression, maybe they should be treated like visitors, all eight of them. *We outnumber them*, she thought, *though outnumber is all we do, considering what they just did*. It was so silly to just stand there, looking at each other.

"Hello," she said, making the word friendly and inquiring. She stepped around Zainal and inadvertently pulled Coo with her just as Judge Iri Bempechat took a step forward. She knew she had a silly look on her face as she looked at the judge for a sign as to what to do next.

Whether she was impertinent or not she never did find out, but the judge grinned fleetingly at her—so she felt she hadn't done anything really wrong—and he held out both hands, the (she hoped) galactic indication of being unarmed.

"We have hoped that we would meet you, and explain our presence on a planet which you have clearly used for many thousands of years," he said, inclining his upper body slightly forward in a gesture that was as dignified as it was hospitable. "I realize that you do not understand what I'm saying but I hope the sincerity with which I speak will be apparent. We do realize that we have trespassed on your property but we were brought here against our volition and cannot return to our own worlds."

As the judge spoke, Kris felt the very slightest of pressures against her forehead and at the back of her neck. Zane gave an odd little movement and she jiggled him gently, stroking his back in a reassurance that usually quieted him.

"We moved to this continent because you are not farming it now. We did not wish to interfere with your installations here. We wish to stay. With your permission. If it is at all possible, because we do not have sufficient transportation to leave here. Can we try to make you understand? Somehow?" He opened his hands toward them again, with dignity and entreaty.

"It is understood," said a voice remarkably like the judge's.

Whoever had spoken had done so so quickly that Kris hadn't seen any mouth moving. Then she realized no one had spoken. The voice was right in her own head. Zane moved restlessly again.

"We have come to meet with you. Do not be afraid. We do not injure. We do not kill. We do not inhabit. You are very young, all of you."

"Young species?" Iri Bempechat asked, amused.

"Yes," and one of the males used his mouth to enunciate the word, though she still heard it more inside her head than in her ears. "Very young."

Judge Bempechat smiled. "We humans are. I believe the Deskis," and he gestured toward Co, "have lived much longer than humans," and he pointed to himself and then to Kris.

"We have seen the Deski and passed them by. They do well as they are. Why are so many here? Why are three . . . no, five . . . species here on this planet?"

"We were dropped here. We have to stay," the judge said in a wry voice, flashing a glance at Zainal.

"Because the others, like this one," and now the spokesperson gestured a well-shaped hand toward the Catteni, "have put you here against your will to make a colony of this world."

"I see that we will not have to tell you much," Judge Bempechat said. "You read the thoughts in our minds."

"Such as they are." There was a kindness rather than a condescension in his tone that was sounding less like an echo of the judge and more obviously like a reflection of this speaker's personality.

"We try to improve," the judge said, inclining his upper body respectfully.

"A very long, hard process that is eternal. But you are not."

"And you are?"

"In essence."

"Not as the Eosi are," Zainal said.

The entity turned his head to the new speaker. "We are not familiar with either the name or your mental image of these Eosi."

"That's the best way to be," someone remarked softly, and for a moment Kris thought it had to be Mitford. It sounded like him. Or maybe Yowell, since the sergeant was in the central group, and Vic much closer.

"We seek your help to escape from the domination of the Eosi over my people, the Catteni, and these other species," Zainal said, gesturing urgently at those around him.

"Such a process includes species injury, which we do not condone."

"Even if injuries continue to be perpetrated on innocent species who have no protection against the superior force?" Judge Bempechat asked.

"If force is used, there is no reformation of the desires which caused force to be used," and the entity's face now reflected a gentle reprimand.

"How do you avoid force then?" Scott said, speaking for the first time.

"There are ways. Learn them."

The figures began to dissolve.

"How are you called?" the judge asked, taking a quick step forward in an effort to prevent their leaving.

"You have named us Farmers. It is appropriate." The spokesman smiled in the most benign way.

Kris mused that this entity would have been well cast as Jesus Christ.

"He is not among you?" was the thought inserted in her mind.

"Don't leave," Zainal said, also stepping forward, one hand raised, "not yet. How do we avoid force when it is used against us? How do we free ourselves and our friends from Eosian domination?"

"Are we allowed to stay here? On your planet?" Kris jumped forward, startling Zane awake. He let out a yell.

One of the Farmers glided forward. The legs moved but the female—she appeared subtly feminine to Kris as she approached—did not make contact with the ground in an actual walk.

"They observe well." Again a thought was inserted in her head as the being reached her and looked down at Zane. Despite Kris' attempts to soothe him, the first yell segued into soft, fearful crying. Not that she blamed Zane for reacting to the tension, the disappointment, and the fear that clogged the air around him. Certainly those were her feelings.

"We have so much to ask you. So many questions," Easley said beseechingly.

"This is your child!" the female said, and she turned back to Kris.

Kris could no more have refused to display her son than she could have resisted the contractions that had expelled him from her womb. She turned Zane, his face reddening in baby distress, toward the entity. The entity bent over him, slid one graceful, almost transparent hand over his face, and he instantly switched to smiling contentment, burbling charmingly up at his newest admirer.

"There are many new young here," she said, and Kris thought she sounded envious. "We are!"

"Then we may stay?" Kris asked earnestly.

"You stay. We will observe but we do not interfere."

"May we leave?" Zainal asked, making a sphere with his hands.

"It is for your protection," the first speaker said.

"We are grateful," Judge Bempechat said, shooting a warning look at Zainal.

"That is more than the others were." The thought crept into Kris' mind, and the female reversed her glide to rejoin her group.

The instant they were all together again, they disappeared.

Like zap! Kris thought, as her son gurgled happily in her arms.

Everyone started talking at once then, the main argument being that they had learned very little, and who had made the judge the spokesman, and why hadn't more questions been asked while they had the Farmers' attention? And who did Zainal think he was, demanding assistance from obvious pacifists?

Scott called for quiet. Judge Bempechat said in a humble tone that he had certainly not intended to speak for everyone but suddenly was speaking. Balenquah railed at Kris for her stupid "Hello."

"Well, we couldn't ask them to take us to their leader, could we?" she responded, "and keep your voice down around my baby!"

"Were you going to give him to them?" Balenquah demanded.

"Don't be such an idiot. She wanted to look at him," Kris said, and walked away from the egregious pilot. She'd thought Aarens was obnoxious, but Balenquah opened up a whole new category of insufferable.

"NOW LISTEN UP," Scott said, raising his voice over the babble. "We are allowed to stay. That is the most important fact we needed to know, wasn't it?"

As he spoke, the sound of excited voices and the hum of air-cushion vehicles nearing the hangar could be more clearly heard.

"Hey, they came. We can stay," Lenny Doyle was shouting as he jumped from the air-cushion and ran into the hangar. "They just appeared outside the mess hall and—" He broke off, being close enough to see expressions. "We *can* call them Farmers," he finished, his words trailing off. "They were here, too?"

Worrell, Leon Dane, Mayock, and two nurses were next, piling out of the air-cushion flatbed that doubled as ambulance. Their faces were wreathed with the elated grins of people big with news, which faded as they, too, realized that their experience was by no means unique.

"How many shape changers came?" Kris said into the silence.

Then the main comunit was buzzing as all lines into the office seemed to go off at once.

"Rather unusual mass hallucination then," Dane said wryly. "Should we compare notes? We can stay, or so they said, and we can refer to them as the Farmers . . ."

"Since that is appropriate," the judge added in a tone much like Leon's.

"Did we all ask the same questions?" Leon asked, looking at Scott and then Zainal.

"We'd better compare notes," Scott said, "after we've answered those calls. Kris, Yowell, Zainal, help me with these . . ." and he gestured to the busy com board.

“HOW MANY WERE THERE?” KRIS ASKED WHEN THERE WAS TIME TO review the astonishing simultaneous manifestation of Farmers to all major groups on Botany. Even the miners had had a visitation of ten.

No group of Farmers had been larger than those they had confronted. The five people on watch at the command post had been approached by three; those at the mess hall, where the majority of people had been having breakfast, had counted thirty. The hospital had been favored with fifteen.

“All at the same time?” Leon asked, astounded.

“Fifty at least, and they could not all have fit in that orbital!” Beverly said.

“That depends on how much space shape changers need,” Kris remarked.

“If they appeared to all of us, why didn’t someone find out more about them?” Scott demanded, exasperated. “We all had the chance to make the confrontation substantive.”

“We all had the same chance,” Rastancil said, “but I sure couldn’t get my wits to work fast enough, nor did I notice you asking leading questions, Ray.”

Despite the way Rastancil phrased it, Admiral Ray Scott took umbrage.

“Nonsense,” Kris said, “they’ve had a lot more practice with third-kind encounters than we have. We’re young, we are,” and she giggled. “But you really think we’d get direct answers from a species that has the technology they have? We’re far too young to deserve more than the few minutes they spent here with us.”

“Let us look at the positive aspects of that confrontation,” Pete Easley said, holding up a restraining hand to Scott, who seemed to be the one most offended by the lost opportunity. “We now have permission to stay. I got the distinct impression,” and he turned to Zainal for confirmation, “that we may even be able to get through the Bubble but others, like the Eosi, won’t be able to.”

Zainal nodded.

“I’d like you to organize a flight to test that, Zainal. Today, if at all possible,” Scott said, grasping a point he could understand and react to. “I don’t know if that advances your Phrase Three plan but . . .” and he shrugged.

“What did they mean, ‘That is more than the others’?” Kris asked. Scott, Zainal, and the judge regarded her with surprise.

“When you asked to have the Bubble removed, Zainal, and the

judge said we were grateful for the protection, one of them said, 'That is more than the others were.' Didn't you hear it?" Kris glanced around. "Was I the only one?"

"What else did you hear, Kris?" Judge Bempechat asked, smiling at her in a way that suggested that he might have had private thoughts inserted in his mind, too.

"They envy us having children," she said, looking around. And caught Pete Easley's eyes. He smiled at her and *then* she remembered the female's remark: "This is your child!" And the female had been looking at Pete, not at Kris.

The truth will out, won't it? Kris thought to herself, and nodded. She had been mean not to tell him before: depriving him of that knowledge out of spite. He smiled back at her, a really happy smile, before pointing at Scott, who was repeating a question aimed at her.

"I'm sorry, Ray, what did you ask me?"

"What else did you 'hear' that we didn't?"

"I dunno," she said with a shrug. "I never thought I was telepathic. I thought we were all hearing the same things. Did anyone else besides the judge and me get special treatment?"

"I heard plainly that they will be examining this quadrant for sentient species which have developed since their last visit," Zainal said, looking around.

"Last visit?" Pete Easley exclaimed. And whistled.

"They have been at Deski world," Coo said, rather proudly.

"You come off better than we humans do, then," Judge Bempechat said, grinning broadly.

Kris noticed that Scott had been about to speak and the judge had forestalled the admiral with a much more diplomatic comment. Scott closed his mouth.

"I think," the judge went on, reaching for pen and paper, "we had best organize that astonishing interview as best we can recall it. And insert whatever we individually may have heard with the public comments."

"Good idea," Leon said.

"We might have more in the composite than we got individually," the judge said. "We must ask the miners to do the same, and those at the command post. Everyone who met our shape-changing Farmers."

ZAINAL LEFT AT MIDMORNING, WITH MARRUCCI, BALENQUAH, AND BEVERLY, to fly to the Bubble and see if it permitted them to pass.

“More importantly, come back,” Kris said stoutly, when Zainal told her they were going.

It took most of the day to transcribe the various interviews, and more information *had* been exchanged when it was all written down on paper.

“I wonder. Are they doing this sort of rehash on their way back home?” Kris said at one point in the painstaking reconstruction of who had said what, when and where.

“I doubt it,” Rastancil said. “They picked our brains quite easily, so they’d probably all know what went on everywhere else.”

“Probably as it was being done,” Worry said with a sniff. Most uncharacteristically, he had a distinctly unworried expression on his face.

Almost everyone—or at least those who worried about special problems—had been given “private” information. Leon Dane, fretting over medical problems for which he had no treatment and waiting for a chance to ask for advice, had been told which specific plants to find, and, “like some sort of a superblast into my head,” he got the method of refining and the beneficial dosages to use.

“We’ve already tested most of the plants as being either noxious or damned well fatal. But, of course, minute and diluted dosages of dangerous substances have often had therapeutic value if properly administered. I just got a short hard course in the local botanical resources. Seems there’s a shrub, located on that dry continent, that can provide a general anesthetic, but they would prefer us to use our one lone acupuncturist. She’s to teach others her skills.”

“They liked us making bricks,” Sandy Areson said, “and I now know where to get five different varieties of clay . . .”

“And I was told what other bushes have seedpods like the fluff which we can use to spin into cloth,” Janet said. “He was so like Jesus Christ.”

“Who is with us,” Kris added.

“What did you say?” Janet was indignant.

“‘He is not among you?’ was what I heard,” Kris said.

“And you will note,” Janet went on, drawing herself up with great dignity, “that they appeared to us in human form. So we now have confirmation of the Almighty’s appearance. Human!”

“That’s because you had neither Rugarians nor Deski in with you at the time,” Sandy Areson said, but she spoke without her usual irreverence for Janet’s overt religiosity. “We had both Deski and Rugarians because that’s who were having breakfast with us humans.”

The sentries at the command post had been kindly informed that

their presence there was no longer needed. The miners had been assured that the Farmers did not object to the use of mineral and metallic resources. The loggers had been asked not to cut down the oldest trees and were given permission to thin the other varieties grown on the second farmed continent, as these were softer woods, more suitable for "the making of useful artifacts."

Universal had been the permission to remain on the second continent, acceptance of the term "Farmers," and conveyance of the fact that they did not condone "species injury."

"They were sad to see us so far from home," Coo admitted.

"And?" Judge Bempechat prompted when it was obvious Coo had been told more than that. "Did they suggest returning you home?"

"Not now," Coo said. "We are better here." Then he smiled in his fashion. "Much better here."

"We, too," Slav added. "No one safe with Catteni." He drew his brows together and managed to suck his lips inside his mouth, indicating great displeasure. "Farmers not see danger?" he added, looking from the judge to Scott, Worrell, and those still left in the office.

"Not if it causes species injury, which they do not seem willing to commit even on territorially aggressive races like the Catteni . . ." the judge began, and when Kris cleared her throat, "I stand corrected, my dear . . . like the Eosi . . . who command the Catteni subordinates to do so without compunction."

"Hey, he's there, and I think he's doing it," shouted Bert Put.

Everyone in the office crowded around the screen to watch the minute speck that was Baby. The speck disappeared. Most cheered and clapped at this verification of the tacit Farmer permission. Kris, however, held her breath.

"I wouldn't," Easley said, who was standing next to her. "He could be out awhile."

Inadvertently Kris met his eyes and exhaled with a weak smile. She had been trying to avoid any conversation with him.

"So much hooch that day I honestly don't remember what I did, or that I did," he continued in a low voice. "He's a good baby for you?"

"Couldn't be better," she said, looking fatuously down at the sleeping Zane. "Thank you." And then she added, to keep him in his place, "I think."

Pete Easley chuckled wryly at her amendment and gave her shoulder a squeeze before he moved away. She would almost rather that he had stayed because the wait was a long one. She bet anything that Zainal was making sure the Eosi knew he'd been outside the Bubble, probably spinning the scout on its axis around the orbital as well as the geosyn-

chronous satellite. Just like him! Although what she thought he could accomplish, she wasn't sure. She was certain, however, that he did have some sort of a new Phase Three plan. And cocking a snoot at the Eosi was part of it. Of course, that blew the painstaking false trail he had laid to get them to believe he was elsewhere in the galaxy. But wasn't he taking an awful risk for all of them? What if the Bubble would give way to the Eosi warship now?

In her arms, Zane sighed and snuggled closer to her. No, she thought, he would do nothing to jeopardize his son.

"Ah, he's back inside!" Bert let out another loud crow, which caused Zane to stir uneasily. "Heading home!"

Relieved that Zainal had succeeded, Kris decided that she could now leave discreetly. Zane would need to be fed when he woke this time, and changed, and she'd run out of fluff pods. She was tired, too, with all the excitement of meeting the Farmers, and then the rehash of who had heard what and where. Once she fed her son, she'd have time for a rest before Zainal touched down.

THE ORBITAL DULY RECORDED THE EMERGENCE OF A SMALL VEHICLE from the protective veil: its emergence, its brief run around the fixed satellite, and then its insertion. Nothing could be recorded past the obstacle, but this brief flight was enough of a phenomenon for the orbital to send an immediate message to its home base.

The report, when it was received, went immediately to the Ix Mentat, who was enraged. Very quickly the vehicle was identified as similar in design to the scout ship in which Zainal was supposed to have exited the system.

"Removing the markings fools no one," the Ix said. "And if a scout, with limited power, can penetrate that obstacle in both directions, so can we!"

The warship, the AA1, plus its sister ship which had just passed its test flights and been commissioned were supplied and crewed for the fastest possible return to the system in question. Twice the firepower of the previous visit would certainly punch a hole through whatever it was that had impeded their exit and then refused to readmit the AA1.

"This time Zainal will return for appropriate punishment," the Ix Mentat said, turning over in its mind the sorts of physical abuse that would wreak the worst pain and humiliation on the chosen who had failed to present himself at Eosi command. It savored scenes of dismemberment, of flaying alive, of the application of noxious substances to the few tender portions of Catteni anatomy.

Meanwhile, the impetus to reach new heights of technological development extended to every single Eosi. They had been idle too long, complacent in their mastery of seven solar systems, their exploitation of the riches available to them, but with so many worlds still to be discovered and turned to Eosian advancement and enjoyment. They were on the threshold of a new era in Eosian domination! Let no one curtail their pleasure in achievement. The galaxy would eventually be theirs!

WHEN ATTACKED BY THE MIGHT OF EOSIAN NAVAL STRENGTH, THE BARRIER remained impervious to any combination of the missiles, beams, and force available: the attack was useless against the barrier, and the bombardment of weapons of all kinds proved insufficient to pierce it. Only those on the planet remained unaware of the attempt.

Throughout the Eosian-dominated systems, captains and governors were apprised of this unexpected insult. Word filtered down to the suppressed on Rugarian, Deski, Ilginish, Tur, and Terran home worlds and on the compulsorily colonized planets. Hope was reborn! Reborn and thwarted by the savagery of Eosian frustration, which now focused on extracting some means of penetrating the barrier from whatever source that might come. The Eosi had been unpleasant at any time; now they turned vicious. All effort was aimed at combating the first real test of Eosian supremacy since the Mentats had sloughed off their corporeal forms to find a type of immortality by using the strong Catteni bodies.

And still the barrier remained impregnable.

So the IX Mentat sent every available scout out, far beyond previously explored sectors, to find any trace of those whose advanced technology prevented it from achieving the revenge it now craved.

Chapter Twelve

“BABY SLIPPED THROUGH LIKE AN EEL,” MARRUCCI SAID, GRINNING broadly as he wiggled his clasped hands in demonstration. “Mind you, Zainal had us at dead slow and that might be the trick. Come charging at it and it bounces you back as it did the first time we nosed around.”

“I think we were a little speedier reentering,” Beverly said on consideration.

“We could have blasted the Eosi orbital. Baby’s armed. Blown it out of the skies as a warning,” Balenquah said, sullen as ever. “We should have, you know! Proven we can do something positive against their surveillance! And we didn’t get so much as a whisker sensor stripped off.” He added a “Ha!” of satisfaction before he wandered off to grab some of the sandwiches set out on the table and left the office.

“Glad you were along, general,” Marrucci said softly. “That guy grosses me out.”

“He is a good pilot,” Beverly said, but without much enthusiasm.

Scott leaned across his desk, gesturing for the two to do the same. “Is what Balenquah said accurate? You weren’t beyond the Bubble long enough to be seen by the orbital?”

Beverly grinned. “Of course we were. Zainal even booted us past the geosynch sat. That was Zainal’s main object in seeing if he could breach the Bubble, to get the exit, and reentry noticed.”

“Won’t that just make the Eosi madder’n ever?”

“Frankly, I hope so. With Farmers protecting us . . .”

“Now, wait a minute,” Scott sat bolt upright. “What makes Zainal think they will if we pull damn fool stunts like that?”

“If you’re on the top of the pile by many light-years, you don’t need to do ‘species injury’ to maintain the position—not with the tech-

nology the Farmers have. But the Eosi don't. That'll piss them off, according to Zainal, and I think he's right. If they keep trying to storm Botany, won't the Farmers object?"

"Damn Zainal. He's going to get that Phase Three of his started one way or another." And there was a touch of admiration in Scott's tone. "But damnation, he should take us into his confidence on such decisions. We have to consider the good of the entire community. And where is Zainal? I need to do more than debrief him now."

"Oh, he dropped us off and went on to check the Catteni valley, to see if the Farmers visited them. I thought you knew."

"Me? I certainly didn't suggest it." Scott's frown deepened. "That damned Cat!"

"Frankly, Ray, I'd like to know if the Farmers did appear to them. Mind you, I'm comfortable enough here on Botany, but there were a lot of things left undone on Earth and I'd expected to have a major part of their doing," Beverly said, giving a final nod of emphasis.

"A soldier's first duty is to return to his unit if at all possible?" Scott said with a slightly condescending smile.

"You got it. As far as I'm concerned," and Beverly folded his hands together, "I'm not stopping until Earth is free of the Eosi. A lot of us here feel the same way. And I suspect more than you'd guess would back Zainal in an attempt to get active Farmer support."

Scott considered that and sighed. "If we could..." Then, in an altogether different voice and with a rueful smile, he added, "Not that I haven't learned some very valuable lessons here on Botany."

"We all have," Beverly agreed with a wry expression, and he looked down at the calluses on his hands.

WHEN ZAINAL RETURNED, HE IMMEDIATELY REPORTED TO RAY SCOTT that the Farmers had appeared to the Catteni and scared them so badly, two were still in shock. The others refused to believe that they had not been visited by Eosi and pleaded with him to take them to a safer place.

"I told them these were not Eosi but the true owners of the planet and if they tried to leave the valley, worse would happen to them."

"What would be worse than Eosi?" Scott asked with a snort.

"What they do not know is always worse," Zainal said with one of his shrugs. "They will never leave the valley."

"Had they been trying to?"

Zainal gave another shrug. "No. The Drassi has authority over them only on the ship. They will do nothing."

“You stayed long enough outside the Bubble to let both satellites have a good look at you?”

“As John told you,” Zainal said.

“Tell me, Zainal,” and Scott made himself lean back, as if totally at ease, “is it wise to aggravate the Eosi this way? How can we be sure the Farmers will protect us if we taunt our enemy? We know very little of their philosophy and society, or their technology, except that it is superior to everything any of us have seen.”

Zainal grinned, and the look in his eyes was menacing. “Right now, the Eosi are very worried. Some other group is more advanced than they are. They will not stand for that. They will be doing two things: searching for the Farmers and trying to take as large a technological leap forward as they can.”

“Yes, but are they capable of it? I mean, matter transmission such as the Farmers used is a huge step forward, I would think,” Scott said.

“Wars have a habit of improving technology,” Beverly said. “We should know that better than most, Ray.”

“A lot of good our improved technology did us when the Catteni landed,” Scott said with a bitter laugh.

“Did they ever track down the subs?” Beverly asked.

Scott glared at him, tilting his head at Zainal.

“Whose side is he on, Ray?” Beverly said.

“My own,” Zainal said with a grin. “I go home now.”

KRIS WAS ASLEEP AND SHE ROUSED BRIEFLY WHEN SHE FELT HIM SLIDE under the blankets beside her.

“You’ve planned Phase Three, haven’t you?” she murmured, and before he could admit that he had, she was asleep again.

Zane woke them as night was falling, ready to eat and play awhile.

“Well, you have, haven’t you?” she said, nursing the baby by the fire while Zainal sat in his big chair, watching the process as he idly stroked one chair arm.

“I have what?”

“Planned Phase Three.”

He grinned at her. “It is only logical to complete what Mitford started. To get the Farmers to notice us and come to see what we have done to their world. That Eosi came is very good. We upset *their* plans and that has needed doing for many generations.”

“Don’t tell me other Catteni have wanted to do away with the Eosi?” That surprised her.

“It has been talked of, privately,” he admitted, and the stroking

turned to a drumming of his fingers. "I was on Barevi to speak to . . . a group about a plan."

"You were? And I ruined all that for you?" Kris flushed with chagrin. "Did you mention that to Chuck? Or anyone?"

Zainal shrugged. "No reason, until now."

"Is that why you wanted to be able to leave the planet?"

"I am thinking that to have a base for those who resist the Eosi would be a very good thing."

"More Catteni here?" Kris could think of several hundred people who would object to that. Or maybe they wouldn't, now that it was pretty well established in people's heads that it was the Eosi who were masterminding Catteni activities. The problem with that was that so many Catteni *enjoyed* far too much what they did to subject races.

"That would cause trouble if it was known," Zainal agreed, instantly following her thought. "There is that desert continent. No one goes there."

"That's true. And if folks didn't know there were Catteni . . . but you can't keep something like this from the brass-heads, Zainal. They trust you now. They wouldn't—"

"Do not worry, I respect their trust. I will tell them if I think I can do what I wish now to do. I would need much assistance from Beverly, Scott, Easley, Yowell, Bert, Raisha. We must rescue more from Earth, too."

"The transport ship?" She startled Zane and had to comfort him.

Zainal nodded. "On board the KDL is much we would need. The star maps, the codes . . ."

"Wouldn't the Eosi change codes? Just in case you get loose?"

Zainal shook his head, his yellow eyes dancing in the firelight.

"Drassi learn too slowly to do that quickly."

"So you must move more quickly, and soon. Is that right?"

He nodded. And her heart pounded in fear for him.

"You're planning to infiltrate Earth?"

He gave his head a quick shake. "Barevi is safer for me. Many coming and going and we can find out much information from new prisoners. And 'transport' those we need."

"You, Emassi Zainal, can just walk in and demand the worst of the prisoners and they'll be handed over to you?" Anxiety made her sarcastic. "You with a crew of—"

"Deski and Rugarians, and friends hidden from Emassi and Drassi eyes."

"I didn't know Deski and Rugarians crewed for Catteni."

"They will not be the entire crew, only the ones most seen," Zainal

said. Then he rose, in a smooth graceful movement for such a big-boned man, and began to pace. "We are not transport ship. We are from mines at K'dasht Nik Sot Fil," he said as he paced. "We need certain workers, strong, with perhaps some mechanical experience. We get what we need—and certain things Botany needs . . ."

"And no one will be the wiser?"

"The gray skin stuff? How long will it last on a man's face?"

"I don't know," she said, but she was beginning to see just how he would be able to cope. "But you can take as much as you need with you." She ran over in her mind those who had been fake Catteni when the KDL was captured. "But won't the Eosi be watching everything? What if they've already seen the scout getting in and out?"

Zainal chuckled, pausing by her chair to stroke her cheek, looking down at the hungry baby.

"I hope that they have."

"Yes, but you can't meet them sneaking out the back door, can you?"

"Bert Put goes up and takes a quick look to see if . . . the shore is clear?" He lifted his eyebrows in query.

"Coast is clear . . ."

"Good, and I take Catteni speakers, too." Now he started pacing again, rubbing his hands together as he thought out loud. "Have you forgotten all Barevi?" he asked in that language.

Startled, she replied in the Barevi affirmative. Could she go with him? Did she want to go with him? She certainly didn't want to stay behind. But Zane?

"Chuck would be useful," she added. "And Jay Greene . . ."

He had paused by her and looked down at Zane, who had nursed himself to sleep. "I need you, too."

She almost burst into tears, her heart so full of love for both, her responsibilities pulling her in two directions at once.

"Sandy has more milk than a cow," she said, not daring to look at Zainal just then. She added more briskly, "And this is the sort of situation we set up the crèche system for, isn't it?"

She heard Zainal tap out call numbers. "Chuck? Are you free to talk over an idea this evening?"

CHUCK MITFORD IMMEDIATELY SAID THEY HAD TO TALK THIS OVER WITH the brass-heads.

"Only a few of them, at that," he added, grinning and rubbing his hands together because Zainal had included him as the crew foreman.

Chuck hadn't even taken that as a slur because he was indeed the build and height of many Catteni. Handsomer than most, however, as Kris could not resist saying.

Scott had to be consulted—especially as Chuck wanted him to play Catteni, too. And John Beverly, Gino Marrucci, Ninety Doyle, Dowdall, Mack Su for his electronics knowledge, Yuri Palit, and several others who had been in the original commando group because they had some knowledge of Catteni.

"I don't see why we can't go straight to Earth," was Scott's first objection.

"I do not have codes for Earth . . . KDL is Barevi-based. I figure that we speak with latest transports from Earth . . ."

"What about stealing another ship with the right codes?" Marrucci wanted to know, flexing his fingers as if already settled in a cockpit and about to take off. "I sure would love to get back to good ol' Terra Firma."

Zainal grinned. "That is also a possibility. If one just happens to be ready to fly."

"You can't leave the crew around . . ." Scott began.

"There are other valleys here," Zainal said. "The KDL can get in and out of Barevi with no problem. That is important. I know I can get supplies that we need with no problem."

"We get to make a wish list?" Rastancil said, brightening.

"No, a *need* list."

"Medical supplies?" Chuck asked, hopefully, taking his pad and pencil stub from his pocket.

"If we can find any," Zainal replied, reminding Mitford that Catteni medicine was rudimentary at best. "Good steel we can get," he added, knowing that the fabricators needed better materials to form proper surgical instruments.

Chuck wrote "steel" and underscored it.

"This time we have clean Catteni uniforms to wear?" Yuri Palit asked, wrinkling his nose.

Zainal shook his head. "You must smell like Catteni, too, and you don't." Yuri made a grimace and sighed. "Wear what you have on voyage, *then* change at Barevi," Zainal added with a grin. "Now," and he took out the sheets he had worked on to show Chuck, of the Barevi spaceport and its environs, "we must know where to go and you must learn what to answer to questions. If you walk fast as if you know where you're going, that you are taking a message, no one will question. So you must *know!*"

They readily agreed to that, but, along with the language lessons,

came questions, especially from those who had not been enslaved on Barevi and were unfamiliar with it. That was where Kris came in because she had flitted all over the city with her owner.

“Can’t we just steal flitters and not walk everywhere?” Dowdall asked.

“You may *rent* flitters,” Zainal corrected him. “We must fit in or be noticed. If we fit in right, we can come back again.”

“Hey, I like that,” Ninety Doyle said, grinning. “There’s a couple of Tudos . . .”

Zainal pointed his pencil at Ninety. “You will be good Tудо and follow your Drassi’s orders.”

“Yeah, sure, boss, gotcha, boss Drassi,” Ninety said good-naturedly, tugging at an imaginary cap and nodding agreement.

“Chuck, can you remember the exact layout of where slaves were held?”

“Can do, have done,” and Chuck, too, took out a sheet on which he had earlier drawn an outline. “We better learn some Catteni symbols, too, you know . . . to follow hall markings . . .”

PREPARATIONS TOOK TEN DAYS, WITH LONG LEARNING SESSIONS FOR those who were chosen to take part. The selection was restricted to those whose physical appearance was closest to Catteni, who already had some knowledge of the language and some experience with Barevi. Scott, Marrucci, and Yuri did not but they could be paired with those who did, like Chuck, Ninety Doyle, Dowdall, and Mack Su. Coo, Slav, and Pess were a bit nervous about going but they would be required to contact their own ethnic groups for what news they had. Kris was an essential addition for her knowledge of the city and familiarity with the flitters. The legs of one Catteni uniform had to be lengthened to fit her but, with her hair skinned back with the gray mud that would disguise Terran locks and with the gray powder makeup, she passed well enough. She also knew enough Catteni and Barevian lingua to hire flitters and bargain properly. Someone not bargaining with Barevian shopkeepers would immediately be suspect. On both the KDL and the scout enough Catteni scrip and coin were found. Zainal then told them that the habit was for ships to charge to their number, and the charges would be sent back to a central bank to make payments.

“And we’ll be long gone before the reckoning,” Doyle chuckled, rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

“What happens, Zainal,” John Beverly asked one morning during the planning sessions, “if someone recognizes *you*?”

All at the table, and Sandy Areson was sitting in that morning to explain about the gray makeup, turned toward him.

"I am dead," Zainal said, shrugging off that consideration. "No one will expect to see me, especially in Drassi uniform," he added.

Sandy tilted her head and then, rising and reaching across the table, turned him by the chin from one profile to the other.

"No problem," she said. "We add cheek pads so he looks fatter, another in front, and some lines down his face to make him look older, and his own mother wouldn't recognize him."

"What is this? Pads?" Zainal asked, somewhat dismayed.

"I used to do makeup for our theater group, Zainal. Trust me. You won't recognize yourself. I'll bring some over to the cabin and show you," and Sandy added when she saw other skeptical expressions, "you won't know him either. Trust me."

When she demonstrated to Kris and Zainal later that evening, it was remarkable the change those few alterations made.

"I'd slump if I were you," Sandy remarked. "Drassi are small men and don't walk proud like an Emassi, you know."

Zainal grinned as he thanked her, a grin that was substantially altered from his normal one with the pads in place.

"Take them out," Kris said when Sandy had left. "I'm not sharing this cabin with a total stranger. A very unattractive total stranger, I might add." And she gave a shudder of dismay until he had removed the pads and looked himself again.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE IX MENTAT AND ITS TWO JUNIORS AT THE CATTENI main Earth spaceport in Texas, near what had been Houston, caused major security problems. Its reason for coming caused consternation, since the military governor was somehow sure that he would be forced to honorably end his life because he had not been able to reduce the rebellion of the indigenous population, despite the severe measures he employed. He had scrupulously followed orders sent to him by the Mentats on Catten but seemed no closer to dealing with the tides of revolt and producing the wealth available from the planet than he had been in the first months of occupation.

When High Emassi Bulent learned the sort of equipment the Mentats had brought with them, he turned ashen, until he also heard that the mind probes were to be used on humans, not on ineffective Emassi.

Therefore he listened intently to the Ix Mentat's wishes, organized the search, and rounded up as many of the required subjects as could be found. Some could be proven dead: others might well have been

already transported, since they had resided in the fifty cities originally depopulated in the first wave of Catteni suppressions.

Bulent could almost feel sorry for the men and women rounded up and crammed into the open slave pens, for the summer heat was intense, though he himself reveled in such temperatures. There were casualties from the heat and the crowding. He had the unenviable task of explaining to the Ix Mentat that humans could not endure the solar rays that Catteni hides could, particularly humans in this upper age group as most of the new prisoners were. So they were moved to a huge shed that had been cleared of its exhibits.

Bulent's staff then had to assign numbers to the types of specialists the Ix wished to interrogate in order of rank within the science humans had practiced.

The Ix, Co, and Se made trial examinations on lesser-known individuals with varying results. After four deaths with little information retrieved from the bursting brains, the instrument had to be recalibrated. It had originally been used to upgrade Catteni mentality by expanding cerebral and cortical areas and stimulating certain centers in both lobes. The result had been the intelligent Emassi subset of Catteni who had originally been primitive and little more than upright animals. But what could be enhanced could also be withdrawn. That was the purpose of using the equipment on the humans.

The actual examination could take up to half a day, if the initial information plucked from the more accessible areas of the mind looked interesting. That is, if the subject was worth treating carefully. Otherwise an hour's viewing would suffice but the subject rarely recovered much personality and memory. Incontinence was a frequent problem and some retained insufficient intelligence to feed themselves. These were quietly disposed of.

In more judicious use of the mind probe, the Ix and its juniors gained the codes to private files in research laboratories, but much of the material dealt only with human concerns. The Mentats found top-security codes but they weren't interested in the politics, considering them very commonplace and predictable in the extreme—though there were one or two ploys that the Ix might use if the need arose.

Among its victims were the remaining heads of state who had not met with either transportation or execution, revealing the names of more important officials whose brains were full of sometimes amusing if petty details. Some investigations were more fruitful, leading the Mentats to find out what particular scientific studies were in progress and where. This was what the Ix had been searching for, and it gave the High Emassi a list.

The High Emassi Bulent sent his minions scurrying to find these people: often they returned empty-handed with stories that the named persons had died or had possibly been transported, but certainly could not be found. Several of these, the Ix decided, must be found unless proof of death could be established beyond doubt. So Bulent dispatched his best people, including several of the renegade humans, with instructions and promises of titillating rewards for success, to make a thorough sweep of known hiding places and refuges.

The Ix exhausted all avenues to discover what little the humans had learned about the galaxy, the universe, their incredibly primitive methods of star travel, as well as theories that, over its millennium of existence, it had already investigated, and implemented or discarded.

The resultant human chaff that remained alive from these sessions was loaded on transports and sent to Barevi, to be sold as slaves for whatever use could be found for the near-mindless.

Then the Ix closed itself in its vessel and began to sift carefully through all it had learned, in the hope that perhaps there might be even one theory that could spark its high mentality toward a viable line of research.

ON THE OFF-CHANCE THAT THEY COULD HIJACK ANOTHER SHIP, BERT put and Balenquah would come along as auxiliary pilots. It fell to Raisha, then, to pilot the scout to the Bubble and see if the coast was clear. Beverly and Marrucci had plotted the next five windows available that would avoid the orbital satellite, so it only remained to check on the absence of any Catteni ships in the general area.

Kris found it both hard and easy to leave Zane in Sandy's charge. She had been able to partially wean him and he was already eating pureed foods. But Sandy promised she would not stint him. And Kris could trust her. Pete Easley put in an appearance when she brought Zane to the crèche, feeling treacherous and unnatural because part of her was dying to go on this adventure and another part would miss her darling son terribly.

"He's a good size, isn't he?" Pete remarked to no one in particular as Kris started to hand him over to Sandy. He was awake and in one of his giggling moods, the kind that are hard to ignore. "Here, give him to me," he said, and gave Kris no chance to refuse.

Being the adaptable personality he was, Zane had no problems with being passed around, and gurgled as happily up at Pete Easley as he would have at Zainal.

Kris, watching the transfer, suddenly realized that Pete was telling

her he intended to watch out for his natural son during her absence. His proprietariness was both welcome and disturbing. But should the unthinkable happen, Kris knew that Pete Easley would assume responsibility for Zane, and, she had to admit, he had a right.

With a cheery wave at him and a farewell hug and kiss for Sandy, Kris left the crèche, her conflicting emotions gradually easing as she focused all her attention on the mission.

RAISHA TOOK OFF IN THE SCOUT TO TEST THE SPACE BEYOND THE BUBBLE just as Zainal aimed the KDL at the "back door." She poked the prow through the obstacle long enough to get a reading that there was nothing immediately visible in space. Zainal eased the KDL through the Bubble just above the southern polar region. He wasn't the only one to expel a gust of relief that the maneuver was unrestricted and the KDL allowed to exit. Then he aimed the ship toward the nearest of the five moons, and using that to hide his trajectory surveillance, made all speed to that point. Once there, he plotted the course out of the system and to Barevi's.

Even at the speed the KDL was capable of making, the journey would take three weeks. So there was more time in which to perfect their Catteni roles, and learn to automatically respond to orders and queries. The meager library of the KDL did contain spaceport plans for those planets under Catteni domination. These were enlarged for study, especially by Bert and Balenquah if the chance of a second hijack was feasible. Scott was not yet committed to that objective.

"He wants a warship," Mitford confided to Zainal and Kris. "Firepower."

Zainal considered that. "It might be possible to steal weapons but even Catteni keep guards on warships. We don't have enough for crew. Maybe another time."

Chuck and Kris gawked at him in surprise and he grinned back.

"Who was it said, 'Think big'?"

"Dick Aarens?" Kris suggested.

There were also maps of Barevi town which augmented the memories of those who had spent time in it. And how much a flitter should cost to such and such a destination. How to argue with cheaters, how to act if accosted for a fight.

"Catteni always fight," Zainal said. "Work off anger that way. Avoid at all costs."

"Hey, it's easy enough to topple a Catteni," Yuri said, and proceeded to demonstrate a jujitsu maneuver on the unsuspecting Zainal.

One moment the Emassi was on his feet, the next flat on his back on the deck, looking both surprised and annoyed.

When Yuri offered him a hand up, he ignored it but he was smiling when he got back on his feet.

“Teach us!”

So jujitsu, karate, and other forms of martial arts were included in the daily training sessions.

“It is better we do no . . .” and Zainal grinned, “species injuries.”

“As if the Farmers would know or care,” scoffed Balenquah.

“We will know and we will care that harm has been done,” Zainal said, making his position plain to the surly pilot.

“You’re a fine one to talk,” Sev Balenquah replied at his most contentious.

“I am finer than you to know,” was Zainal’s retort.

At this point Mitford, who was sitting next to the pilot, jabbed him so roughly in the ribs that he was winded.

“There’s a brig on this ship,” Beverly said. “D’you want to spend the rest of the trip in it?”

“Have it your way,” Balenquah said, and, pushing away from the table, stalked off.

When Beverly would have called him back, Scott shook his head.

“We’d better watch that one,” Marrucci murmured to Beverly. Both the general and Scott nodded. “Can’t figure out what’s wrong with him. And he’s even gotten to fly again.”

EVERYONE TOOK TURNS IN THE GALLEY, LEAVING THE CATTENI FOOD stores alone since they were even worse in taste than the bars supplied to transported prisoners. The KDL had originally had three freezers: two medium-size and one large storage type. That was now in the mess hall, while one of the mediums was in the hospital. But the remaining one was adequate for the journey since Zainal expected to restock perishable goods from the markets at Barevi. Surprisingly enough, the Catteni galley had the equivalent of a microwave heating device so that the pre-packaged soups, bread, and meals that the mess hall had contributed to the mission could be reheated.

By the time the first contact was made with Barevian planetary authority, they had all perfected their skills to the best of their abilities. Even Balenquah could spit out appropriate answers. Despite his more glaring personality defects, he was a natural linguist and Zainal hoped to use him to accompany Kris on her buying missions.

“He glowers just like my old boss,” Kris said, “typical nasty Tudo.

Whoops, not Tudo, Foto,” she said, correcting herself. She had known “Foto” before she was aware of the distinction between Emassi and Drassi.

When hailed by the Barevian perimeter guards, Zainal, posing as Drassi Kubitai, barked the responses and Kris understood every word he said and every word the duty officer said. The KDL was officially the KDI, since the KDL would be listed as missing. There was no problem in the code.

“Sloppy,” Zainal muttered under his breath, thankful though he probably was that this was the case.

He elected to overfly the town to give everyone the aerial aspect of it and help orient them, giving a description of each area on his way to their appointed docking facility.

Mack Su was the putative navigator and Yuri the engineer. They both had immediate work to do, checking in with the port authorities: Matt Dargle to handle the paperwork and show the log which Zainal had created for them, while Yuri organized refueling, watering, and the usual docking procedures. Zainal paced about the dock area to be sure they encountered no immediate difficulties as the various teams disembarked for their assignments.

Coo and Slav went off first, pretending pathetic eagerness to be away from the Drassi, while Pess stayed on board with Matt, Bert, and Beverly. The latter two should not be seen. Pess and Matt had basic Barevi and some Catteni so they were the best ones to stay behind and prevent unauthorized entry. Ninety and Dowdall would see if there were any humans in the slave markets. Zainal, Mitford, and Scott would go into the center of Barevi and have a meal and some drinks and hear what there was in the way of gossip. Then, when Mack and Yuri had finished their details, Yuri and Marrucci would combine with Kris and Balenquah to get supplies in the market. Some could even be charged to the ship so they could use what Catteni money they had for other things, like the “plursaw” additive the Deski needed. The original shipment was running low and there were new Deski babies in need of it. Zainal had made up a shopping list for them to display, as most Tudo couldn’t read or write more than their own names, and signed it “Drassi Kubitai.” He also made Kris practice the glyph for “Kubitai” in case she had to sign chits for orders.

Kris was scared to the nails on her toes in the heavy Catteni boots. They were a bit large for her, although that only made her plod in a more authentic Catteni gait. She’d probably get heel blisters in spite of fluff-padding the toes but she marched as smartly as the others did out of their berth and onto the main dock staging area. There were few

Catteni lounging about, watching Rugarians and Deski shift crates, loading and unloading material at other berths. The ship, berthed three places beyond the KDI, looked like another of her class, still so new she had few meteor pockmarks, or dinges, on her hull and all of her paint looked fresh.

Marrucci caught Kris in the ribs with his elbow, looking at the ship as a possibly hijackable victim. She grinned and mouthed "No way, José!" at him. He kept grinning.

They saw no Terrans at all once they were out of the main facility and looking about for flitters. Zainal had said there were always a few waiting for possible passengers. They approached the first, its driver a wizened old Catteni whose face was badly scarred. Balenquah gave the orders, as sullen as a Catteni, and shoved everyone on board, his fingers lingering a little too long on Kris' hip as he did so, grumbling about wanting to get this duty over with. He squeezed himself next to Kris on the hard, wide seat, his thigh pressing against hers in a way that made her want to punch him good. She could do nothing now but sit there and endure his attentions. Had the man no wits about him at all? Didn't he know she'd never let him get away with such nonsense? Wait till they got back to the KDL . . . no, KDI, she must keep that alteration firmly in mind. With the maneuvers of the flutter in and out of traffic, Balenquah must be enjoying the ride, rubbing constantly against her leg. Marrucci caught her eyes once and gave her a look that meant he had not missed Balenquah's ploy.

Then they were over the open market area, their driver skillfully avoiding arrogant ascending flitters in the fashion that had always caused Kris near heart failure in her slave days. They got down safely enough and the driver grabbed the fare Balenquah offered and then flung his craft aloft, out of the way of incoming craft.

"Don't push me around, Balenquah," Kris said in an undertone as they moved off.

"Who? Me?"

Marrucci prodded his back, telling him, in Catteni, to talk right, then asked Kris, also in the language, which direction to take.

"Here is food market for Deski additives. We buy enough, they deliver."

"We buy plenty," Marrucci said. "Where?"

Kris had been looking around and spotted a crowd of Deski. "There!"

"Deskis! Huh!" Kris wasn't sure if Balenquah was acting in character or just being his charming self.

On their way, they passed a booth selling the alcoholic beverages

only Catteni could stomach, but Balenquah insisted on stopping to sample one, saying he was thirsty.

“Not good,” Kris said, frowning because that was the best way to prove to Balenquah that he *should* try one. All were swill but let him find that out.

Laughing and jostling her, he pointed to the amber bottle and a large glass. Even the stall owner looked surprised. Guffawing, Balenquah clapped Kris so hard on the back that she nearly lost her balance, but, knowing what was to come, she stood firm and waited.

Balenquah was even stupid enough to try to knock back the entire portion. He should have watched another Catteni who was sipping cautiously. As the raw liquid began to burn down his throat, his eyes bulged and his grayed skin turned red enough to startle her, but somehow he got most of it down.

“Told you not good,” Kris said, deepening her voice. “Better over there!” And she pointed to the corner where her master used to take a drink on market days. She left Balenquah to recover from the pilth—ah, she remembered the name of that particular poison—and strode on toward the Deski. She was also keeping on the alert for any bands of Catteni swaggering around the market area just looking for trouble. Marrucci waited with Balenquah while Yuri moved out in step beside her.

“Good on you,” he muttered in English, and she elbowed him. “Agreed,” he added in Catteni.

They could both hear Balenquah hawking and spitting behind them, and gasping as his system tried to cope with the Catteni equivalent of antifreeze. It certainly smelled like it. The pilth had also affected Balenquah’s vocal cords and he was reduced to gargling unintelligible words when he and Marrucci joined them at the Deski plursaw stall, for that was all this merchant sold. She argued over delivery charges but then added more for an immediate delivery to the KDI. This was actually the most urgent of the supplies they were after. The next was salt: enough to use to preserve meats. Sugar was not a commodity known to the Catteni, so she was to get enough vinegar for pickling. These were easy, since she’d dealt with kitchen supplies and knew where to find them. At the same stall, she was astonished to discover what looked like rolls of cinnamon bark in a sack and a keg of nutmegs: the spicy scent of them was so familiar. She lifted a piece of curled brown bark high enough to her nose to be sure that it was indeed cinnamon—though what it was doing on Barevi was beyond her.

Then, in the gravelly voice she affected for Catteni words, she asked, “What’s this?” of the stall-keeper, dropping the bark curl indo-

lently back into the bag and brushing her hand off on her uniform as any Catteni would.

She understood only half of what he said, catching that it was from Terra and used in cooking. She should try some. She pretended indecision until Marrucci tapped her shoulder and came to her rescue.

“Drassi Kubitai likes new things. Try it.”

That’s when they lucked out because the two commodities were so unusual and suspect that the stall-keeper had been unable to shift any and was feeling he’d made a bad purchase. So the bargaining began in earnest, but in the end she got the spices, the full keg and the sack, and had him throw in a large bag of peppercorns which he also hadn’t been able to sell. Kris had no problem getting him to deliver to the KDI and could barely contain her delight in finding the seasonings. The mess hall would bless her forever. She also got gallons of vinegar of a good quality.

In the next rectangle over, Kris found fabrics of all kinds, colors, and patterns and materials, some of which she recognized as Terran manufacture, which both pleased and upset her. The Catteni must be looting the Earth right, left, and center. She suppressed resentment and went about bidding for whole bolts, in different shades and weights for children’s clothes. The local weaving industry would suffice for any females who wanted something to wear that wasn’t made over from Catteni coveralls, but the kids’ needs were different. Kris bought enough to make the shopkeeper ask if she was a trader.

“Drassi is,” she said as if she thoroughly disapproved, pointing with no real attention to what she was buying. The last shop also sold needles and indifferently she threw a handful of packets on the counter and made the shop owner scrawl a receipt for her. “Drassi requires.” Which was all she needed to say. “Deliver by sundown and will get extra,” she said, winking as she had seen her steward master do from time to time.

Then she looked around for her shipmates and found them near a fruit seller’s stall as Balenquah tried to restore his throat lining.

“I told you no good,” she said, and took a gorupear from the display pile. She turned her head slightly so the stall-keeper would not see that she did not have Catteni-size teeth as she tore off the tough peel as any good Catteni soldier would do and spat it out on the street. One thing sure, she never thought she’d be eating these lovely winy fruits again. My, she’d come a long way from that forest. She pointed to a net of the pears, asking the price.

“Four,” she said, and then began haggling for a discount, just like in the old days. She got them at a good price—enough for everyone to

enjoy on the way back to Botany—and tied the nets together, slinging them over one shoulder. Yuri and Marrucci were watching her. “Tell you later,” she said in Catteni. “This way.”

They went through another arcade, doors open to display and wares of the more permanently sited merchants, to where she thought she’d find ironmongery. The mess hall had also asked for some big stewing pots and cooking sheets. That sort of thing would be there, and sure enough, she acquired five cauldron-size kettles and some huge baking tins. She also saw other items that were definitely Terran in origin, like the fabrics. If there was so much looting on Terra going on, maybe they’d be lucky enough to find medical equipment. Leon Dane had patiently drawn out the tools he especially needed. If she did, they’d basically filled today’s list. She wanted to be out of the market area soon. Once the guard changed, there’d be all kinds of gangs of them off duty, drinking and looking for trouble: any trouble. She wanted to get out of the area before the guards arrived.

Knives of the fine size and shapes Leon Dane had wanted were indeed available, in one of the arcade stores, but at a price higher than Zainal had estimated. She bought what they had funds for—bundles of scalpels, lancets, and the retractors, small-headed hammers, surgical saws. It looked from the display as if Earth hospitals had been thoroughly looted. Still, she bargained so hard that the trader wanted to know why she needed such Terran things.

“Terran? What’s that?” and she pretended to try to find the name on the scalpel’s handle.

“Where you been?”

“There and back,” she said with an indifferent shrug.

“Make it fast,” Marrucci said in an irritable tone, and jerked his head over his shoulder at a gang of Catteni entering the rectangle at the far end, six abreast and brushing past everyone and everything in their way.

“Pack them. We have other business today,” she said, and managed enough saliva to spit into the gutter with. Turning her head, she was able then to gauge the speed at which the gang moved. “Get Bal to a flutter,” she told Marrucci. “Yuri stays.”

She didn’t trust Balenquah if those Catteni muscled him out of the way.

“What takes you so long, Foto?” she snapped at the storekeeper, who was making quite a job of packing the tools, but then the blades were very sharp.

Marrucci did get Balenquah out of the way: thanks to the pilth, he was in no condition to argue much. She had just got her hands on the

packet from the shopkeeper when Yuri was bowled into her, knocking her into the shopkeeper's cabinet, causing half his stock to tumble about and several pieces—since the cabinet was open on his side—to stick into him. He was howling with pain and rage as he plucked sharp objects from his thighs.

Yuri reacted, ducking under the first swing of a squat Catteni guard and then kicking out at the assailant's kneecaps with a double strike that had the guard howling with pain and dropping to the ground. The shopkeeper shouted for help and grabbed at Kris, almost tearing the precious package from her hand. But she twisted her arm down and up and freed herself. When he came around the cabinet, bleeding from the cuts, she got him square in the guts with a karate kick, thrusting him backward and into another glass-fronted cabinet. She heard him scream as a shard of glass penetrated his backside, but she didn't stop.

"Out of here," she yelled in good Catteni, fright thickening her voice as she grabbed at Yuri's uniform just as he flipped another Catteni to his back.

Several of his mates, reacting to his groans and curses, started after them but Catteni are not good runners and Yuri and Kris had very good reasons to run as fast as they could.

They nearly ran over Marrucci, who had come back for them, and so they all made tracks to the flitter where Balenquah slumped, victim of the pilth.

However, the state of him—or rather the smell that emanated from him, added to the bruised gorupears that had split open in the nets Kris had been carrying over her shoulder—made the flitter driver waste no time in getting them back to the dock. When they arrived, the merchandise had, too, with Pess, a cloth bolt in each arm, dealing with the loading.

"Did the plursaw come?" Kris asked, racing up the extruded gangway.

Pess grinned and nodded, speaking Barevi. "First thing. See me, ask questions. I say Drassi orders. Don't know *what* he orders."

Well, she could hope no one heard her speak in English. Marrucci and Yuri were angling the unconscious Balenquah out of the flitter. She went back to pay the driver.

"We the first?" she asked Pess as she helped him stow the cloth away, making sure that the needles had been included.

Pess nodded. "What's wrong with pilot?"

"He drank pilth," she replied. Then grinned as she added. "I told him it was no good."

Pess smiled broadly and she managed to look away from that yawning cavern of greenish gum without giving him offense.

BEVERLY AND BERT PUT CAME OUT OF HIDING AND, THOUGH THEY seemed somewhat distracted, listened to their adventures, chuckling over Balenquah's mishap. They approved her purchases, especially the spices, salt, vinegar, and pepper.

"We had to quit because there was a roving band of Catteni looking for trouble," Yuri said. "We'll go for the electronics tomorrow," he added, looking at Kris for confirmation.

Kris shared out the gorupears and they all agreed that the fruit was very tasty indeed. "We can keep the pits and start our own bushes back on Botany," she said, and was looking for something to store them in as she asked if there was any word from the other parties.

"Zainal reported in when he and Mitford reached the restaurant. So did Coo and Slav," Beverly told them. "But they had upsetting news."

"How upsetting?"

Beverly and Bert exchanged anxious glances.

"It's not going to get any better waiting," Kris reminded them, but a sick feeling started in her stomach.

"There are large numbers of Terrans here now, waiting to be shipped out."

A pause.

"What's new in that?" she asked.

"Coo says they're damaged," and Beverly tapped his skull. "They sit or stand and do not speak."

"What?"

She, Yuri, and Gino reacted simultaneously and stared in horrified consternation at Beverly.

"Coo says he heard their minds were taken from them."

"The Eosi have mindwipes?" she whispered, appalled.

"Does Zainal know?" Marrucci asked, equally shocked.

"Coo says everyone talks about it—quietly. Even the Catteni. Zainal will also hear."

Marrucci swore inventively and without repeating himself. Yuri looked pale under his gray face paint. It was cracking around the natural creases of his face and, absently, she reminded herself to tell him to powder up before he went outside again.

"Zainal won't do anything drastic until he can check with you, will he?" Kris asked Beverly. "What do the Eosi intend to get out of minds? They wouldn't know about us."

“Coo said they are older men, mostly, some women . . .”

“Scientists, I bet,” Kris said, and Beverly nodded sadly. “Oh, God, what did we start?”

Beverly covered her hand with a reassuring grip. “We started a rebellion, Kris, as we wanted to on Earth, and couldn’t. But Zainal knew how and has.”

“But the cost!” She gripped her hands together, holding in the pain of guilt.

“When was there ever a war without casualties?” Yuri said in a bleak voice, absently doodling with the water spill on the table until it was spread out in a Rorschach blob.

“What about Ninety and Dowdall?”

“They say the pens are full of humans. They also heard about the zombies,” Beverly said. “They’re on their way back, too, before the guard changes.”

“Dowdall remembered that, did he?” Kris said, nodding with satisfaction.

ZAINAL, SCOTT, AND MITFORD RETURNED IN A SILENCE THAT SPOKE more profoundly of the tragedy than words. The first thing Zainal did was remove the cheek and chin pads that disguised him.

“We managed to get into one compound,” Scott said, slumping into a chair and taking the glass of hooch that Kris immediately poured for all three. “I recognized a few faces from articles and newspapers. You’d probably recognize more, John, Gino. The ones I could identify were top people in quantum physics, organ transplants, and laser applications.”

“Lasers can be used as weapons,” Kris murmured.

“Eosi have such already,” Zainal replied, also speaking in a low voice.

“Will they . . . recover?” Kris asked.

Zainal shook his head but added, “It depends how long they were subjected to the probe. The Eosi have little pity.”

“Other news is good, though,” Scott said shaking off that dispiriting vision. “Earth continues to rebel and Catteni are looting on a massive scale.”

“I wondered about that,” Kris said. “I bought nutmeg, cinnamon, pepper, salt, bolts of Earth-made fabric and needles, surgical equipment: no doubt part of that loot. I hadn’t enough money with me to buy everything Leon said he needed. Do we have more to spend?” she asked Zainal, who nodded.

“No electronics?” Scott asked, perturbed. “We need them more than surgical tools.”

“If the Catteni have looted as thoroughly as it looks like they have, we’ll find all the Terran electronics we could possibly want. But we encountered an off-duty squad,” Kris said, and Zainal grunted. “And left.”

“We did, too,” Dowdall said. “The spaceport’s full. We were lucky to get a berth.”

“Any damage?” Zainal asked.

“Not to us.” Kris grinned. So did Dowdall.

“Where’s Balenquah?” Scott asked, looking around.

“Sleeping off a full glass of pilth,” Kris replied, still grinning maliciously.

Zainal roared with laughter.

“I told him it was no good,” Kris said as Yuri and Marrucci chuckled.

“Serves him right, too,” Marrucci said, but Kris gave him a look and he didn’t elaborate.

“Did you get the Deski plursaw?” Zainal asked. She nodded.

“At a good price, too. I got as much delivered as I could. Pess has most of it already stored away. ‘Drassi says,’ ” and she smiled at him for the efficacy of that cryptic explanation.

Coo and Slav returned then, Slav with a cut over one eye and Coo with visible abrasions down one side of his slender frame.

“Trouble?” Zainal asked, on his feet.

Coo held up one hand reassuringly. “Catteni gang. Hate aliens.”

“They hate anyone,” Dowdall said forcefully. “Here, lemme fix that cut for you, Slav,” and he took him over to the cabinet containing the few medical supplies they had. Slav endured the ministrations though the brown Catteni antiseptic stung like fire—even for Catteni.

“Bad news,” Coo said, joining the others at the table.

Mitford fixed herbal tea when Coo politely refused to drink the hooch already on the table.

“They’re after your people, too?” Scott asked.

Coo shook his head. “We do not make machines.”

“My people must work in noisy places,” Slav said, scrubbing his chest hair in agitation. “We are strong.”

“You Earth no good working,” Coo said, grinning. “Too much trouble.”

“We make trouble,” Slav said, “if word is given.” And he looked pointedly at Mitford.

"All suppressed minorities rebelling at one time would be difficult for the Eosi to handle," Scott said, immediately savoring the notion.

Zainal, however, snorted and shook his head. "More species injuries."

Scott slammed one fist onto the table so hard the hooch bottle jiggled. "Damn it, Zainal, there're already species injuries, on my people. You saw the state of them. How many more will be put through the same torture? Then sold off as mindless zombies and die who knows where."

Kris had never seen Scott so emotional, but then, she could only imagine the horror of seeing brilliant people reduced to imbeciles.

"The Eosi look for ideas from your people," Zainal said, and there was no doubt from the perturbation on his usually inscrutable face that he felt for the victims and agreed with Scott. "When they find none they can use, they will stop."

"When . . ." demanded Scott, stretching the "n" out to stress the urgency, "will that be?"

"I heard nothing today. Tomorrow we can go elsewhere and listen, and maybe ask."

"And all those . . . those desecrated people?" Scott asked, grieving so keenly that Kris saw tears in the admiral's eyes.

"We can do something about *that*," Zainal said firmly. Then he turned to Kris and Marrucci. "Tomorrow early get the wire, the plastic, the electronic supplies needed. Be ready to move if I arrange . . ."

"What are you arranging?" Mitford asked, though the look on his face suggested to Kris that he already had a suspicion.

"What can be done to help. The Farmers do not *like*," and Zainal emphasized that word, "species injuries. We show them what can happen."

"We'll bring them back with us?" Scott began, his expression brightening for a scant second before common sense overruled that possibility. "How can we possibly care for so many damaged people?"

"We will somehow," Kris said so fiercely that Scott recoiled. "How many are there?"

"Hundreds," Scott said, waving a despairing hand about.

"Not all are damaged," Zainal said. "But they *will* die in mines and fields with no care given."

"We can't leave them if we *can* take them," Dowdall said firmly, glancing around the table for agreement. Even the two Deski and Slav were in accord.

"Zainal, did you notice the other ship of this class a few berths down from us?" Marrucci asked, his eyes sparkling.

Bert Put, who had been silent through most of the discussion, sat up, an expectant look on his face, watching Zainal.

He nodded, a grin turning his mouth up in one corner. "I maybe go see guard tonight, drink a little pilth."

"No," Mitford said with an evil grin, "he'd be used to that. Take some of the hooch."

THE NEXT MORNING AS THEY BREAKFASTED, ZAINAL HAD GOOD NEWS from his evening's interview. Most of the KDM's crew were on shore leave, having just completed a wide swing which had included Earth. In fact, they had brought two deckfuls of the brain-wiped humans to the slave marts and loot that would soon be available in the Barevi markets. Only two crewmen were on board, taking turns on watch. They were not happy about that duty but expected to be relieved in another two days. As was standard practice with Catteni ships, the KDM was already refueled and stocked. The crewmen said they were slated for another trip to Earth: to collect cargo as the Catteni invaders were systematically clearing warehouses and storage facilities, whether the items were useful or not.

"Whatever the Eosi hope to find on Earth, they have not," Zainal said. "Not even information. They may even be pulling out."

"What?"

"Leaving Earth?"

"Hurrah, we socked it to them and they couldn't take it."

"No rush," Zainal said, raising his hands to indicate caution. "Your Earth may never be the same."

"Then we improve it when we get back home," Beverly said, a fierce expression on his face.

Zainal pointedly said nothing. "I also learn that the port manager is very busy with so many ships going in and out."

"Which means he's not checking on individual ones?" Beverly asked.

Zainal nodded. "We come at a lucky time."

"Let's leave lucky, too," Mitford said gruffly. "If we get all the stuff we need, can we leave tonight? I got a gut feeling we're crowding what luck we've already had. On our way back, I spotted just too many of those roving gangs charging about drunk. Glad we weren't on foot."

Everyone looked at Zainal. He hesitated and then nodded. "Sooner is better than later, but first," and he held up one finger, "we do not go back empty."

"Hey, if there's only two crewmen aboard the KDM, couldn't we hijack it?" asked Gino, eagerly.

Mitford made a disgusted sound, dismissing the notion, but Scott leaned forward eagerly.

"Could we?"

"I think it would be very easy. Gino can be captain. Balenquah . . ." and Zainal looked around for the man.

"He was sick all night," Mitford said sourly. "He's no use to us at all, I never did have more than a sip of pilth and that was enough to make me avoid it."

"I told him it was no good," Kris repeated, with an innocent expression on her face.

"Which made him all the more eager to try it, huh?" Mitford asked, giving her a dirty look.

"He deserved it . . ." Gino Marrucci began, but Kris kicked him under the table. "Sullen bastard that he is," the pilot said in place of what he had started to say.

"All right," Scott said, getting back to the jobs at hand, "we find out what we can about the . . . disabled. Right?" He looked at Zainal, who nodded. "You got yesterday's list, Kris? So today escort Mack Su, Ninety, and Marrucci for whatever electronics we can acquire . . ."

"We'll find plenty," Kris said, scowling. "I only had a quick glance but everywhere I looked I could see things that had to have come from home."

"Good," Mack said, "that means we'll have a good chance of finding what we need. We've done as much as we can with the Farmers' material. But we could do a helluva lot more with familiar components, couldn't we. Dowdall?"

"Also get more hand units," And Zainal tapped his Catteni comunit. "We need all we can get, or make."

Kris handed him a pencil and the thin plastic that the Catteni used for notes. "Make us out another shopping list, Drassi Kubitai!"

Zainal grimaced. "I do not know the Catteni shapes," he admitted wryly.

"No word for 'spare parts' in Catteni?" Mack asked, grinning.

"Ah, yes," and Zainal deftly created the glyph, adding tails and squiggles to it. "That means anything to repair electronics." He peered at it. "I think."

"Have we completely contaminated an upright Catteni lad?" Mack asked with one of his displays of whimsy.

"Absolutely," Zainal agreed heartily. "Let us make . . . con . . . con something plans . . ."

“Contingency plans?” Kris asked.

“Them. In case there can be two shipments of humans to mines or colonies or wherever they plan to send them. We are ready to go and take the problems with us,” Zainal said. “I call in to Chuck, I tell him where to bring KDM. Then, sergeant, you will take more hooch to guard on duty. The other will be sleeping. You will know what to do. Then Gino, Beverly, Coo, Pess, and Slav get aboard as crew. Bert, Gino, be ready to bring the ships where I tell you.” He flipped through the pile of maps and charts and found the one he wanted. “Here are slave pens, but you must go around the city, not overfly.”

“Don’t we have to clear takeoff with the port authority?” Gino asked.

Zainal slapped his forehead and sucked breath in between his teeth.

“After we secure the KDM, I can come back and do that, Zainal,” Mitford said. “Give me the words for ‘slave compound’ in Catteni. I only know Barevi.”

“Use Barevi if you need to,” Zainal said, rocking one hand to indicate that the port authorities would know both. Then he rose in a decisive manner. “Good luck.” And he gave the thumbs-up signal, grinning when his eyes fell on Kris.

“Right back atcha,” she said as everyone else got to their feet. “And watch your face paint if you start to sweat, you guys. And, for godssake, remember to keep your caps down, shading your eyes. No Catteni I’ve ever seen has blue ones, much less brown.”

“Slav, Pess, Coo, you guard ship,” was Zainal’s final order as he made for the hatch.

KRIS, WITH DOWDALL, MACK, AND NINETY, GOT THE LAST REMAINING flitter outside the port. The driver grumbled that the market wasn’t open yet.

“Shop I go is,” Kris answered in Barevi. “Drassi says so.”

That ended any further inquiries from the Catteni. He had no left hand, a hook attachment replacing it, but a flitter was easily driven with only one. Did only disabled Catteni get taxi licenses on Barevi?

As the craft made its way to the market area, they all noticed smoke rising from various places.

“Many fights?” Ninety asked in Barevi, grinning but remembering to keep his lips over his teeth.

“Many,” replied the Catteni in his own language and in a sour tone. “Nine ship gangs. Biggest fights in weeks.”

Which meant the survivors would likely be sleeping off pilth as

well as any injuries from the fighting. Or hiding out for the requisite twenty-four hours. Luck was again with them, she hoped, and didn't dare hope too loudly.

Much of the first marketplace that they overflowed—the one they had shopped in the day before—was a wreck of tangled stalls, debris, and shopkeepers sorting for what might still be salable. As they crossed over the line of apartments separating the two, she saw that streamers of fabric, probably from some of the shops she had visited, festooned the area.

"Boys had lots of fun," Ninety muttered, and got Kris' elbow in his ribs for speaking in English. He rolled his eyes in apology but the driver had not heard.

There was not quite as much damage in the third rectangle, the one they had directed the flutter to. Possibly because there were fewer drink and food stands in this one. But one section seemed to have been leveled. Kris just hoped it wasn't the very one they needed the most.

"Another ticco if you wait," she told the driver in her gravelly Catteni voice. She was getting so she could do it whenever she needed to, though her throat was a trifle sore from all the rough-voiced bargaining she'd done yesterday.

"Just one ticco?" he complained.

"Wait and see," she said, leaving it up to him. She handed him a smaller coin and pointed to the stand selling hot drinks and the almost indigestible bread Catteni baked.

That sweetened him sufficiently and she walked off with the others, to find the spare parts.

Four shops which displayed boxes spilling loose chips in their grilled windows, were not open. They came upon a fifth on the long end of the rectangular market area and the shopkeeper was sweeping up components and/or chips with total disregard for the damage done. Mack and Dowdall winced and Kris hissed at them for falling out of character.

"You selling?" she asked, acting the stupid Catteni Tudo.

"What does it look like?" the shopkeeper replied angrily, gesturing at the havoc within and without. He ranted on, switching from Barevi to Catteni in his fury.

Kris held up Zainal's glyphed note. "You got some?"

The shopkeeper paused long enough in his description of what he would do to the gang who had smashed and kicked his stock into garbage and, eyeing her suspiciously, then turned his attention to Mack and Dowdall, who were lovingly picking up this and that which had not been damaged.

“Got everything needed for repair. And then some . . . if it hasn’t all been smashed.”

He put down the broom and led them through the shop, palmed open a rear door and showed them unopened cardboard boxes, all bar-coded and listing the contents in English, French, German, and either Japanese or Chinese . . . Kris couldn’t tell the difference.

“Ah, many unhurt,” she cried. “Drassi wants.”

“All?” The shopkeeper was both delighted and suspicious.

“Drassi Kubitai trades,” said Dowdall, winking as he began removing boxes from the shelves and stacking them in the center. His eyes were so alight with success that Kris yanked furiously at her own cap to warn him. “Kubitai pleased with us,” he said in Barevi, turning his face away.

“Not all, but samples to show. How much?” Kris began, tapping the boxes Dowdall had chosen and to which Mack was adding selections, breathing heavily with excitement but remembering to keep his head down. “You deliver?”

“Ha! When I must clean this and lock up before they come back again?”

“Kubitai wants comunits, Drassi?” Mack asked, returning from a back shelf with a crate. “And wires?”

Kris pretended to look at the list. The shopkeeper pointed to the right glyph.

“Here, stupid,” he said, his yellow eyes turning crafty as he suspected he might be able to do her on the prices.

“I count well,” she said, jerking her cap to shade her eyes but looking fiercely at him. “I be Drassi soon. You see.”

“Ha!” was his reply, but he began to move the chosen boxes toward the front of the shop. “You got transport?”

“Flutter,” she said. “I call it over.”

She had to go get the flutter driver, who had indeed been treating himself to a meal on her coin. When he saw how much was stacked out in the litter in front of the smashed shop, he shook his head.

“Call another,” she told him, pointing to his control panel. “Drassi Kubitai very happy with us. We get long shore leave.” She strutted back to the shop to find Dowdall who was looking anxious.

“Won’t he suspect when we order so much? And check out the KDI?” He spoke in a barely articulated whisper.

“He probably has, and if the port authority has time to answer him, will know which berth the KDI has,” she murmured back, and, then, seeing the shop man out of the corner of her eye, punched Dowdall in the arm. “Work! No work, no leave!”

However, greed—and possibly the call to the dock to verify that a KDI with a Drassi Kubitai was in port—moved the shopkeeper to encourage the large order.

Kris bargained in earnest with him, as part of her character as not so stupid Tudo messenger. She had no idea of what the parts would have cost on Earth but Mack was slightly agog at the range of the merchandise. There were even laptops still in their packing cases. Now what possible use would the Catteni have for such items? They couldn't even read the manuals, much less figure out what the icons meant. She'd had enough trouble with her 286 IBM clone at college. She noticed a dozen units along with all the other parts, plus tool kits and several cases of floppies. She devoutly hoped she wouldn't have to explain why those were among her purchases. She only knew so much Catteni and Barevi.

She haggled and finally made her mark on the collection of glyphs that spewed out of his electronic equipment. She also added the glyph for Kubitai that Zainal had shown her, grateful for his forethought.

Then they all loaded the boxes into the flitters. Their driver had estimated the cargo space required and called in two, not one.

All the way across the city, Kris forced herself to cheerful thoughts, terrified that something might happen and they'd be caught by an army trap or port patrol or some other unexpected glitch. But they made it safely back to the berth, and started unloading. Mitford, Gino, Slav, Coo, and Pess hurried out to speed the process along, Gino whistling under his breath at the range of their purchases.

"Catteni can't whistle," Kris said inside the safety of the ship.

"Ooops."

"Any word from Zainal?"

Gino shook his head, trotting back down the ramp, muttering unintelligible noises that could be muffled Catteni curses and adding "Drassi says" in a grumpy tone.

They were nearly finished unloading when Balenquah staggered into the open hatch, his gray face paint smeared with rivulets of sweat, his hair mud rubbed off overnight on the pillow, looking not at all like any Catteni.

Mitford recovered first. "Sick! Get back! Dow, Nine, get him back!" The two hauled the pilot back out of the way and he had time for only one muffled protest before someone knocked him out. Mitford rolled his eyes at Kris, who was facing the stunned flitter drivers.

Taking her clue from Mitford's remark, she shook her head, feeling quite ill suddenly, too.

"Very sick. Terran sick," she said, still shaking her head and making

her wobbly legs carry her back down the ramp. There were only a few more boxes to be stored.

“Dockmaster knows?” the one-handed Catteni asked, his murky yellow eyes suspicious.

“Dockmaster says keep him on board and take him back to Terra,” Mitford said, keeping his face away from the Catteni. “Leave him there.”

“Drassi say we leave today,” Kris added for good measure. “I take shore leave back there! Told Bal no good there.”

She gave the drivers just enough to satisfy them, not so meager a sum as to annoy them yet not enough to be considered a possible bribe. She mentally blessed those awful shopping journeys with her Catteni steward for knowing the difference.

With them safely off the dock area, she marched straight to the bottle of hooch and poured herself a stiff one. Dowdall and Ninety joined her, silently taking the bottle from her hand.

“We tied him in,” Dowdall said. “Goddamn stinking arrogant bastard nearly blew the whistle on us.”

“He might still have,” Mitford said, holding out his hand for the bottle, “I’m not sure the one-handed guy bought the explanation.”

“Yeah, but why would he suspect Catteni-dressed soldiers to be anything but Catteni?” Kris said, reaching for reassurance.

“There is that,” Mitford agreed.

“Is it safe?” whispered Beverly and Bert Put from their compartment.

“For now,” Kris said, sitting down because her legs had never felt so kneeless. She buried her head in her hands. “I never want to go through another moment like that.”

An urgent buzz from the com board on the bridge startled all of them. Beverly and Mitford tried to make it through the door at the same time, with the sergeant twisting his torso edgewise to allow the general through first.

“Schkelk?” Beverly asked in proper Tundo response as he keyed open the ship’s unit. “Oh, thank God.” Craning her head toward the bridge, Kris could see him visibly relax. For just one moment—then he straightened and urgently beckoned the others to come in. “Yes, yes, I got you. What does ‘forty-seven’ look like in Catteni, for God’s sake? . . . Oh.” He had grabbed up a pad, which Mitford now held firmly for him, since he had the hand unit. “Thick upright, two crossbars, three downstrokes, and a small right-hand square within the end two right-hand downstrokes. Got that. That’s for the KDI?” Beverly began to smile and heaved a sigh of relief that seemed to permeate his whole

frame. "Thank God," he whispered. "Okay, so there's just a change in the final figure, a circle rather than a square between the two right-hand downstrokes? . . . Got it. Be there as fast as we can get permission to quit the dock. Watch for us."

He toggled the line closed.

"Contingency plan is now in operation. Mitford, grab another bottle of hooch and go visiting. Gino, Coo, Slav, Pess, Ninety, lounge outside like you're bored. We're going to rescue us some folks. And God grant there's some spark of mind left to them. We're clearing the prisons."

"I know how to work the levels," Kris said, and grabbed Ninety by the hand. "I'd better show you. Let's hope there're the same as the wreck's."

The controls were sited in the same place by the hatch, although they looked in far better working order.

"And will they be drugged and all?" Ninety asked anxiously.

"I hope so. They'll survive better if they are," Kris said, deliberately not thinking about that process and the bodies that would shortly inhabit the four levels of shallow deck. "Take a peek outside. Ninety, just in case we have unexpected visitors," she said, shoving the comunit from her belt at him.

Chapter Thirteen

FOR A CONTINGENCY PLAN, HASTILY ORGANIZED AND SPEEDILY EXECUTED, it went very well. But there were other Catteni around on the dockside now, shifting cargoes or watching the Rugarians do so. Bert Put's height would make him stand out like the proverbial sore thumb. So he got wrapped up in blankets and Dowdall and Slav carried him over to the KDM, grumbling about Drassis and their crazy tradings back and forth. Then returned to the KDI.

"Piece of cake." Mitford said when he returned to the KDI. "Front and center, Bert, general. We're about to shift ass off this sinkhole."

"What about Zainal and Scott?" Ninety asked.

"We meet them at platform forty-seven and forty-nine when we pick up our passengers. Now I gotta log on to port authority and get clearance."

While Bert settled into the captain's chair, Beverly took the engineer's place as Mitford made contact with the port authority. Kris watched as his shoulders stiffened and he rolled his eyes.

What now? The glitch she had been expecting all along that was going to betray them? She fretted, knees getting wobbly again.

"Sick?" Mitford exclaimed in Catteni, and swore with unexpected fluency in the language for emphasis. "Yes, Terran sick." He sounded disgusted. "We dump him with others. They not see," and he managed a very evil chuckle. "Kotik. Ten."

He whistled when he closed the switch. "That driver was suspicious. Let's get out of here before anyone comes to look at our Terran-sick soldier. Take her no higher than a thousand plegs, Bert. That's our assigned level."

Mitford gave Kris a good luck sign, and, grabbing another bottle of

hooch, leaving only two for the journey home, he sauntered back to the recently hijacked vessel.

Bert initiated the undocking procedures, starting the siren to warn the crew back inside, closing the hatch when they reported all in, starting the engines, just as if he'd done it all his professional life. The KDI lifted easily, and Bert made the course correction and they could see the spaceport steadily receding. On the small thrusters that were permissible in such crowded airspace, it seemed to take a long time to circumnavigate Barevi town, strewn before them and out into the nearby forests and fields. They could see where big land-moving equipment was knocking down trees and scooping up great mountains of rock and dirt to clear more space. Doubtless, Kris thought bitterly, for the masses of products they were importing from a pillaged Earth.

Flitters darted in and around, and each one that seemed to choose a trajectory in front of Kris made her catch her breath.

"They can't see in," Bert said, to reassure her. "And I'll turn this seat over to you immediately if we are hailed. Wouldn't you like to drive this beauty for a while?"

His banter made her relax but she stayed right beside his position in case they had to execute a quick shift.

They did have a little trouble deciding which platform they should dock at, since there were only minor changes in the basic glyph that Zainal had given them. But as they cruised at the slowest possible forward speed, everyone on the bridge identified the number at the same moment, and could even see the KDM's platform just beyond.

Below were the slave pens, similar to the ones Kris had been in when she'd been forced aboard the transport that had landed her on Botany so many months ago. There were acres of pens, spreading out from a huge rectangular building. Not all the pens, however, were full or in use. Only four. She couldn't see who inhabited the ones beyond platform 49 and hoped she wouldn't ever know who or what they had had to abandon that day.

Bert neatly sidled into the platform, cut the engines, and opened the hatch. Kris took her station at the controls and suddenly Zainal strode up the ramp, spitting out the disfiguring pads, muttering under his breath, and snarling up at her, but winking as he passed on his way to the bridge. Kris managed a very subservient "Yes, Drassi," and saw the first of the pathetic transportees.

She nearly burst into tears at the sight of the expressionless faces, the dead eyes, the automatic motion that no intelligence motivated. She did manage to alter the decks to the lowest one as the loading process began.

Half the time she had all she could do to keep from bawling out loud, getting some relief by snarling at the Catteni who drove these poor souls up the ramps. Most had their blankets slung over their shoulders, one hand holding the packet of ration bars to their bodies, the other the treacherous soup cup, now emptied of its contents. She told herself over and over that she was rescuing them—they'd soon be safe, they'd soon be cared for—and she wondered how on earth they would manage all these walking dead at Botany, where there was so much hope and life and a future.

She shifted blindly when the first level was filled. Several of those trudging like sheep up the ramp staggered and fell. It was all she could do to keep herself at the controls and not go help them up, but that would have been out of character for the Catteni Tundo she was pretending to be. She was *not* going to cause a glitch. She was rescuing these people. She was doing all she could.

She shifted to the third level and then it was filled up. So was the air around her with little sobs and cries for pity from those in the lower decks. The drugged soup couldn't put them out of their immediate misery, and hers, soon enough.

It was Zainal who carefully removed her hands from the controls when the ramp retracted and the hatch clanged shut. He helped her back to the wardroom and poured her another shot of hooch.

"We're almost out of it," she protested.

"You need it now, Kris," he said. "I hadn't realized what you were in for. I'd've done it myself—"

"No, no," and she shook her head, "not a Drassi captain." Then she put her head on the table and began to weep.

"They're all asleep now," Zainal said, gathering her up in his arms and against his chest, stroking her hair.

"Zainal?" she cried, raising her tear-marked face, "did we get them all?"

"All we can cram on board. A few spare Deski, Rugarians, half a dozen Ilginish and some Turs for good measure."

"We need Ilginish and Turs so badly, don't we?" she quipped, trying to control her weeping.

Ninety and Beverly stood in the doorway. Zainal nodded at them to enter and both poured a hefty tot from the bottle.

"We don't have much left," Kris said inanely.

"It's medicinal, my dear," Beverly said, and she thought he looked awful under his coffee-colored skin. "Dowdall says the KDM's on a parallel course. There's incoming traffic but we're cleared to leave the system and doing it with all possible speed." He let out a long sigh and

knocked back the rest of the hooch. "You're relieved, Bjornsen. I don't want to see you on deck for two full shifts."

"Aye aye, sir," she said, managing a weak smile and limp salute.

Zainal helped her stand and guided her back to her compartment. He had to lift her up into the upper bunk but his hands, as he covered her with the rough Catteni-issue blanket, were very gentle.

THEY ANSWERED SEVERAL CHALLENGES OVER THE NEXT TWO WEEKS, until they got to the less trafficked area leading to the Botany system. Most were more or less standard ship-talk which Zainal handled on the bogus KDI and Mitford on the KDM.

They also talked about how they could integrate the people they had rescued into the Botany colony.

Kris found herself regarding Admiral Ray Scott with amazement: under all that naval braid and command training there was a man with unexpected compassion. And a high moral integrity. She wasn't the only one who kept reassuring him that there was no way those folks could have been allowed to depart on Catteni slave ships.

"Hell, Ray," Beverly said the second evening, "it isn't as if there are more of them than there are of us! So we'll need to hunt more often and plant a few more fields. If we have to, we'll form a crèche situation for the ones who can do nothing for themselves. We don't even know just how badly some of them were mind-wiped. There may be something there that some of our psych people can revive. For all of that, maybe just being among humans again . . . begging your pardon, Zainal . . . and good food and attention will bring some round."

"Almost everyone's got some kind of house now. We can give them shelter, food and . . . a lot of caring," Dowdall said, clearing his throat. He was another one who didn't let emotions overwhelm him.

"And we shall inform the Farmers," Zainal said.

"You think they can perform some sort of a psychic whammy and replace what got wiped?" Dowdall asked.

Zainal shrugged. "It is possible, since their science is so much better than ours. Why not such healing?"

"I think that's asking for too much of a miracle," Ray Scott said, although the brief flare of hope in his eyes at the mere suggestion of a possible restoration was not lost on anyone at the table.

"We shall inform them," Zainal repeated.

"Speaking for myself," Kris said, "they can't be any more trouble than a baby and we can handle one more in our house, can't we, Zainal?"

He nodded. "If he or she doesn't get upset seeing a Catteni around."

"Well, I think," Kris went on staunchly, "it's important for everyone to know that there's at least one good Catteni in this universe!"

THEY WERE NEARING THE HELIOPAUSE WHEN ZAINAL MENTIONED, QUITE casually, Kris thought, that it was just possible that they might have a little trouble getting the second ship through the Bubble.

"Why?" Kris asked. "They're alike as two peas in a pod."

"There are two and only one went out."

"The KDL was pregnant when she left. The KDM is her daughter," Kris said, surprising herself with such a whimsy. The others around the wardroom table laughed politely.

"It *is* a problem," Beverly said.

"Why?" Scott wanted to know. "If we proceed slowly, as we did getting out, just nudging past the Bubble."

Zainal was not convinced.

"Too bad we can't call downside and get Raisha up in the scout to poke a hole for us," Bert said. "We could go piggyback, maybe," he suggested, and then canceled that notion with a whisk of his hand. "Too risky."

Zainal agreed with a skeptical twist of one shoulder.

"Fine thing if we get these folks right up to the door and can't wedge 'em in," Dowdall said.

"There *has* to be a way," Scott said, looking at Zainal for inspiration.

"If there is, we find it," the former Emassi said.

But it was obvious that everyone on board the KDL worried about it for the rest of the journey through the solar system to its third planet.

"Engines," Kris said as she sat on the bridge watching their approach to Botany.

"What?" Scott demanded. He looked up from the final course plotting that would escape both the satellite and orbital observation.

"Would there be such a thing on board as a tractor beam?" she asked Zainal.

"A what?" He frowned, unable to find those words in his now very large vocabulary.

"Something to pull another ship along, a ship with no power."

"She's got it!" Scott said. "Does the KDL have one?"

It took a little time for Zainal to understand exactly what they meant, but when he did, his grin was broad.

"Not a tractor beam but is possible to connect," and he jammed

both fists together. "One ship hull is negative, the other positive. Very easy to do. I tell Bert."

They had not allowed themselves many intership broadcasts on the off chance that they might be overheard. But so close to Botany, they could risk it. The orbital might pick up some of what was transmitted, but not enough to give any alert. Not unless there were Eosi hiding behind the moons.

"Oh, he means magnetize the hull," Bert said, catching on. "Okay, give me the procedure."

THE LIGHT BUMP AS THE KDM MAGNETICALLY SEALED ITSELF BEHIND the KDL was felt by everyone. There was also a certain tingling in the air. The KDL would be pushed through the Bubble first, propelled by the KDM. All watched nervously as the Bubble's smooth skin got closer and closer and behind it, a luminous half-moon, was Botany. Bert had slowed to the barest possible forward motion while Zainal, in the fore, guided him. The nose of the KDL prodded the Bubble, which gaped wide enough to admit the ship. All of the KDL was shortly inside the Bubble and they felt no resistance, nor any sudden disconnection of the KDM.

"We did it!" crowed Bert on the open line. "We did it! Now how do I separate us? Just kidding."

Then Rastancil opened a channel, demanding to know were they all right. What was the other ship doing on his screen? "What have you guys been up to?"

"Well, we needed it to complete our . . . rescue mission," Scott said, suddenly dropping from the high of successfully penetrating the last obstacle to home. "We couldn't just . . ." and his voice faltered then continued firmly, "leave them there on Barevi."

"Rescued? Who? What?"

"You'll see," Scott said almost angrily. "Some of them are pretty bad. Have all the medics on hand and anyone else with any nursing experience we've got. Especially the psychiatrists. We've some more Catteni prisoners to go to the valley. So have Raisha stand by to fly 'em out. Then we'll need another valley for a bunch of Turs we had to bring along, too. She ought to have guards with that lot in case any wake up prematurely."

"Medics? Psychiatrists? What sort of casualties are they?" Rastancil sounded alarmed.

"You'll see soon enough," Scott said in a terse voice, "and we'll need a good nutritious soup or something easy to eat."

He disconnected, a brooding expression on his face.

"It'll work out, Ray," Kris said, laying a hand on his arm. "You'll see."

"Botany can take on any challenge," Dowdall added with the pride of a First Drop survivor.

WHEN THE TWO SHIPS LANDED IN THE BIG FIELD IN FRONT OF THE HANGAR, Rastancil had mobilized transport, medical staff and enough personnel to assist in unloading the sleepers. Jim Rastancil, Geoffrey Ainger, Bob Reidenbacker, Bull Fetterman—in fact all those who constituted the Council—waited patiently for Scott and Zainal to descend from the KDM, which landed slightly ahead of its sister ship.

"This should have been a unanimous decision by all Botanists," Scott began, nervously finger-combing his hair back from his forehead or rubbing the back of his neck.

"It was sure as hell unanimous with all the Botanists there," Beverly said firmly.

"Hell, yes," Dowdall, Kris, and Mitford added in unison.

"Who? What?" Rastancil asked, surprised to find Scott hesitant.

"The ones the Eosi mind-wiped," Scott said flatly. "They were about to be shipped off God-knows-where as slaves."

"Jesus! Of course you had to bring them here," said Rastancil. "Leon, Mayock, front and center and let's get them out of there," and he charged up the ramp with the medical personnel.

Kris slipped ahead of him to her post at the deck controls.

"All right, now, let's do this efficiently," she heard Bull Fetterman roaring. "Move that big sled up, stretcher bearers up front. Someone get blankets ready as makeshift . . ."

The cargo hold doors parted and, although several people choked over the rancid body smells that wafted out, they walked on it and stopped.

"God in heaven . . ." Rastancil whispered, staring at the human debris, crumpled in small heaps, though some had managed to lie flat before the drug overcame them.

"And I thought we had it bad," Leon murmured, kneeling beside the first unconscious body, feeling the neck for a pulse, his eyes ranging around the deck.

Kris had turned on what lighting there was.

"Stretcher here," Leon said, pointing to the man and then moving inward, to the next prone body. "Mayock, we'd better do a triage."

And the rescue operation began its final phase.

SIXTEEN HUNDRED HUMANS, FORTUNATELY NOT ALL OF THEM MIND-wiped but many with abused bodies and minor injuries, were disembarked from the two ships. And two hundred Deski, one hundred and fourteen Rugarians, ninety Ilginish, and twelve Turs.

The Turs were left on a lower deck, which confined them should they wake before Raisha returned from taking the Catteni to their new accommodations. The two crewmen from the KDM had been secured in its cheerless brig throughout the trip, seeing only Coo or Mitford in his Catteni role. They were told that their ship had been commandeered. One of them protested such treatment every time food was brought: even protested the good food he was served because it wasn't what he was accustomed to. The other Catteni slept almost the entire time, rousing only long enough to take care of natural needs and eat. They were blindfolded before they left their cell so they would have little to add to what information the other captives might have.

WITH SO MANY HANDS TO HELP, LEON'S TRIAGE TEAMS SEPARATED those who needed the most attention from those who needed only rest, good food, and reassurance. By then, quite a few were regaining consciousness and could be offered water and a soup, hastily brought from the dining hall. Even without formal orders, there was suddenly a carer with every victim in a response that certainly gladdened Kris' heart. Scott should have had more faith in the community's generosity. It wasn't as if he hadn't seen examples of it with every new drop the Catteni made.

Some awakened and were utterly passive: their empty faces expressionless. They had to be helped to drink, though they could manage to swallow or eat once food was put to their lips. Others woke, screaming or sobbing helplessly, and that was nearly as heartbreaking even if it gave an indication that some vestige of the original personality might remain.

"Just keep talking to them, folks," Leon called out. "Let them hear English, see human' faces around them. Feed 'em, but don't let them gorge."

"Who knows when they've had a decent meal," Anna Bollinger muttered, trying to keep the bruised and battered woman beside her from gulping down the entire cup of soup. "Just sip it. There'll be all you need."

"Gawd, it's like a disaster scene, an earthquake or something," Joe

Latore said, helping his male victim to his feet since the man was trying so desperately to stand. "What in hell are you doing, Zainal? Taking pictures of people right now."

"I show the Farmers what Eosi do to people. I show the Farmers what humans do to help," he said, bringing the taper in close to the vacant eyes of Joe's man.

Then Zainal turned the camera to include the woman Leon was treating for body lacerations that covered every inch of her torso. He went from her to a group of three whose faces were devoid of any expression, eyes dulled and unfocusing.

Those who could be classified as walking wounded were sent to the homes of volunteer carers, with instructions for basic care.

"Like a bath!" someone remarked loudly. "Wonder what I'll find under all that dirt and . . . yuck."

Everyone volunteered to help almost to the point of being disappointed when all the victims had been assigned a place.

Leon and the other medical staff gave general directions for emergency care. "Keep them warm, give them plenty of fluid, but limit solid food until their bodies can adjust. Let them sleep all they want. But don't let them go off on their own. We'll set up evaluation conferences and see which might respond to rehabilitation."

"Can you manage, Leon?" Scott asked earnestly.

"You better believe it, Ray," Leon replied sharply. "In fact, we can and have managed it," and he swung his arm in a broad gesture across the all but empty field. "Who knows? Good food, fresh air, plenty of friendly faces . . ." he added with a wry grin, "and good trauma skills, we may even effect a significant number of complete recoveries."

"You really think so?" Scott looked ready to accept any reassurance for the responsibility he had off-loaded on the colony.

"Sure do!" Leon said in such a positive tone that Scott finally relaxed. "No way you could have left them! Any road, they're better off with us."

"They are, you know," Kris said. "You look beat, Ray."

"I should take one in with me. My house is finished," and Scott stared after the last couples leaving the field.

"We'll switch people around, Ray. I'll make sure you take your turn," Leon said ironically. "Now, my prescription for you, Ray Scott, is get some rest. You, too, Kris. You left a baby in the crèche, or does that seem years ago?"

"It does, you know," she said. She'd been too busy to give much thought to Zane. But he was happy where he was: one of the crèche girls had told her that he'd been just fine.

"I believe it. Get on up to him, now," and Leon gave her a little push in the right direction. Then, when he saw Kris glancing about her for Zainal, he added, "He was following the final load on the sled the last time I saw him."

To her delighted surprise, she met him just short of the crèche, with Zane in his arms. He shrieked with joy on seeing his mother and, almost overbalancing himself out of Zainal's arms, reached out both hands for her. Zainal let the exchange be made, one hand holding the recording camera tight against his side.

"I saw you filming," Scott said, altering his direction to join them. He even managed a tired smile at the enthusiastic way Zane was hugging his mother.

Zainal patted the camera, nodding. "Such evidence is needed to show the Farmers how the Eosi treat humans. You will help me write a report, Ray?" And when Scott nodded wearily, Zainal added. "What words do not say, the film will."

"You'll use one of those homing capsules the Farmers have in the Command Post?"

"The Farmers do not approve the species' injury. Once they see what Eosi do, we will hear from them again."

"What if the Farmers can live with that?" Scott asked bitterly.

"That's what we'll have to find out, won't we?" Zainal said, but the tone of his voice told Kris that he wouldn't rest until he had completed Phase Three, no matter what it took.

THERE WAS CONSIDERABLE DISCUSSION ABOUT WHETHER OR NOT THE farmers would be able to play the pictorial record when Zainal, Kris, and the former movie cameraman had finished making it. Baxter, however, did still photographs that were indeed worth a thousand words of explanation and these were carefully inserted in the message tube.

The homing device had no trouble penetrating the Bubble on its way to its destination. Its departure was once again noted by the orbital and the geosynchronous satellite as well as its abrupt disappearance just past the heliopause. The event was immediately sent to Eosi headquarters for distribution.

The Ix Mentat, just returned from its almost futile investigations on the rebellious planet, was so contorted with rage that its juniors feared it might lose connection with its host. It had only just received a report from Barevi, citing the disappearance of one of the new transporter vessels as well as over two thousand slaves, destined for the mining colony at Ble Sot Fac Set, which had been expecting replacements for

unavoidable casualties in a major shaft collapse. When the report got to the composition of that shipment, the Ix Mentat came closer to self-extinction than any of its peer group in their long history.

Its recovery from such a seizure was slow: its host had suffered bodily injury and had to be repaired, an almost unheard-of complication in an Eosi-Emassi symbiosis.

To calm their senior, Mentats Co and Se issued orders that an installation was to be built on the innermost moon of the subject planet: a second orbital, programmed for a slower rotation, would provide constant surveillance and prevent the recalcitrant population from effecting another covert exit, since it was now obvious that they had two, or more, spaceships.

When the Mentat Ix recovered fully from its incapacity, it began to organize the largest expedition ever mounted by Catteni forces. It would wreak the most horrific vengeance on that recalcitrant planet that had ever been mounted by Eosi Mentat. Afterwards, there would be no opposition left in the galaxy that could subject an Eosi to such humiliation. But first, they must find the weapons or the method to breach the barrier around the colony planet. A planet, the Mentat Ix stoutly told all its colleagues, which was undoubtedly the cause of all the problems recently encountered by Catteni and Eosi alike. Once it was destroyed, the Eosi could resume their normal activities and enjoy their conquests unopposed.

*Freedom's
Challenge*

Dedicated to the memory of
Joe Mulcahy
1980–1997

Don't look back in anger, I hear you say.

*No longer mourn for me when I am dead
Then you shall hear the sullen surly bell
Give warning to the world that I am fled. . . .*

SHAKESPEARE

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I HAVE, AS USUAL, ACKNOWLEDGMENTS TO MAKE FOR SOME OF THE MATERIAL USED IN FREEDOM'S CHALLENGE.

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Margaret Ball, bless her heart, had all the Swahili and hunted down information about the customs and traditions of the Maasai tribes of East Africa. Fortunately, she also speaks Swahili, though I didn't have to use that much, since so many of the tribal chiefs are fluent enough in English.

I also wish to thank Georgeanne Kennedy for her careful copyediting and invaluable suggestions of what she wanted to know "more about" in this story. What errors a spell-check, even the most advanced ones, do not catch, the sharp eye of the intelligent reader does. And I give my spell-check a lot of hard names to cope with. Thank goodness it can't complain . . . ALOUD!

Chapter One

WHEN ZAINAL HAD ORGANIZED THE DATA HE WANTED TO SEND TO THE Farmers via the homing capsule, he let Boris Slavinkovin and Dick Aarens fly it down to the Command Post for dispatch.

“You have a nasty sense of humor, Zainal,” Kris said when the hatch of the scout vessel *Baby* closed behind the messengers. She had been surprised by his choice of Aarens, considering the man’s behavior on their first visit to the Command Post.

“Well,” and Zainal gave a shrug of one shoulder and an unrepentant grin, “Aarens has had experience sending one off. Let him do it official this time. As a reward for his improvement.”

“What improvement?” Kris still had little time for the self-styled mechanical genius who had deliberately launched a homing capsule without authorization on their first trip to the Command Post.

They both stepped back from the takeoff area, as much to avoid the fumes as the wind, although Boris lifted the little craft slowly and cautiously. They watched as it made an almost soundless vertical ascent before it slanted forward and sped off, disappearing quickly in the dusk of what had been a very long and momentous day.

The wide landing field that stretched out level with the immense, Farmer-constructed hangar could accommodate a half dozen of the K-class ships that had arrived today. They now were out of sight, within the vast hangar. At the far end of the landing area grew small copses of the lodge-pole trees: young ones in terms of the age of the mature groves above and beyond the hangar. In the nearest of those groves the cabins of the colonists were being constructed, out of brick or wood, in separate clearings to allow the privacy that everyone preferred. Further up the slope were the infirmary, which today was crowded, and the huge

mess hall, which served food all day long and well into the long Botany night. The largest building that faced Retreat Bay was the administration, where Judge Iri Bempechat held court when necessary, with the stocks just outside as a reminder that offenses against the community would be publicly punished. The building also held the living quarters for the judge and other members of the body known as the Council, which included those with experience in management and administration to run the affairs of the colony. In the earliest days, when Master Sergeant Charles Mitford had taken charge of the dazed and frightened First Drop colonists, he'd kept records on pieces of slate with chalk. Now the admin building posted weekly work rosters and the community services that all were required to perform. (It still shocked Kris to see Judge Iri washing dishes, and he did it more cheerfully than many.)

Ex-Admiral Ray Scott had elected to live in a small room behind his office in the hangar complex. It was he, disguised as a Catteni Drassi, who had insisted that the Victims be rescued from the fate to which the Eosi had condemned them: working until they died as mindless slaves in the appalling conditions that existed in the mines, quarries, and fields. There had been no way that those of his crew who had been among the first dropped on Botany would have allowed those battered people to be transported to their deaths.

Considering the excitements of the day, the unloading of the victims of the Eosian mind-wipe experiment, which had occupied a good third of Botany's settlers, the field was now abnormally quiet, peaceful. Kris sighed and Zainal gave her a fond look.

"ZAINAL? KRIS?" Chuck Mitford's parade ground voice reached their ears over the muted sounds that Baby was making. They looked back to the hangar and saw Chuck urgently waving to them. He was talking to someone who had just pulled up in a runabout.

"Oh, now what?" The testy demand left Kris' mouth before she could suppress it. She was tired and she earnestly desired a shower and a long sleep. She'd even arranged with the crèche to keep Zane overnight since she knew herself to be stretched to the limit after the tense voyage home and the stress of landing all the pitiful mind-wiped people.

"We'd better see," Zainal said, taking her hand in his big one and pressing it encouragingly.

"Don't you ever get tired and just . . . have too much, Zainal?" This was one of those moments when his equanimity bordered on the unforgivable.

"Yes, but it passes," he said, leading her to where Chuck Mitford waited for them with the passenger of the runabout.

It wasn't a long walk but long enough for Kris to get her irritation

and impatience under control. If Zainal could hack it, so could she. But when would she get a shower? She stank! Well, maybe her body odor would encourage whoever this was to shorten their errand.

“What’s up, sarge?” she asked, noticing that he was talking to a woman she vaguely recognized from the Fourth Drop: as much because she managed to look elegant in the basic Catteni coverall. Kris wondered if she’d taken it in at crucial spots to make it look so fashionable. She was fleetingly envious of such expertise.

“Dorothy Dwardie who’s heading the psychology team needs some of your time, and right now,” Chuck said and had the grace to add, “though I’d guess another meeting’s the last thing you two need right now.”

“It is,” Kris said without thinking but she smiled at the psychologist to take the sting out of her candor.

“It is important?” And Zainal’s question was more statement than query.

“Yes, it is, quite urgent,” Dorothy said with an apologetic smile. “We need to know more about that mind-probe before we can proceed with any sort of effective or therapeutic treatment.”

“Why’n’t you use the small office?” Chuck said, gesturing to that end of the immense hangar.

Zainal squeezed Kris’ hand and murmured: “This won’t take long. I know very little about the probe.”

“I was hoping you’d know something, if only the history of its use among your people,” Dorothy said ruefully and then looked about for a place to park the runabout.

“I’ll take care of it for you,” Chuck said so helpfully that Kris smothered a grin.

Dorothy Dwardie gave him a warm smile for his offer.

“We’ve had a bit of outrageous luck,” she said as they walked to the right-hand side of the enormous hangar where other small offices had been constructed.

“We could use some,” Kris agreed, struggling for amiability.

“Indeed we could, though I must say that hijacking all those poor people out from under Eosi domination is certainly *their* good luck. And you deserve a lot of credit for that act of kindness.”

What she didn’t say rang loud and clear to Kris. There were some who weren’t sure she and Zainal deserved any credit? As well for them that Ray Scott had loudly declared that he took full responsibility for the decision to save the damaged Humans so no one could blame that on Zainal or her. Actually the guilty were the Eosi but too many people

failed to make a distinction between overlord and underling. Kris' mood swung back to negative again.

"But until we . . ." and Dorothy's hand on her chest meant all the psychologists and psychiatrists on Botany who would now take charge of the mind-wiped, "understand as much as possible about the mechanism . . . ah, here we are . . ." and she opened the door to the small office and automatically fumbled for a light switch on the wall.

Kris had seen the cord and pulled it.

"Oh . . . I suppose I'll get used to it in time," Dorothy said with an apologetic grin.

"You're Fourth Drop, aren't you?" Kris replied as neutrally as possible while Zainal closed the door behind them. There were several desks against the long stone wall but a table and chairs made an appropriate conference spot by the wide window. There was nothing but darkness outside, since the hangar faced south and there were no habitations yet beyond the field. "You said you had a bit of outrageous luck. . . .?" Kris asked when they were seated.

"Yes, not everyone in the group you brought *had* been mind-wiped."

"Certainly the Deskis, Rugs, and Turs weren't," Kris said.

"Nor all the Humans," Dorothy said, smiling over such a minor triumph.

"They weren't?" Kris asked, exchanging surprised glances with Zainal.

"Yes, some faked the vacuity of the mindless . . ."

"Faked it?"

Dorothy smiled more brightly. "Clever of them, actually, and they got away with it because those in charge weren't keeping track of who had been . . . done."

Kris let out a long whistle. "All us Human look alike to Eosi? Proves, though, doesn't it, that the Eosi aren't all that smart after all. Clever of us Humans to run the scam."

"They're also able to give us names for many of the people who no longer remember who they are." Dorothy gave a little shudder. "I've dealt with amnesia patients before, of course, and accident shock trauma, but this is on so much larger a scale . . . and complicated by not only emotional but also physical shock and injury. We have established—thanks to Leon Dane's work with injured Catteni—that there are more points of similarity than differences between our two species since both are bipedal, pentadactyl, and share many of the same external features, like eyes, ears, noses. We can't of course cross-fertilize," and to Kris' surprise, Dorothy ducked her head to hide a flush.

“As well,” Kris said dryly.

Dorothy flashed her an apology and continued. “Internally, though the Catteni have larger hearts, lungs, and intestinal arrangements, Leon says that the main difference is the density of the brain matter. It’s also larger though similarly organized as ours are, as far as the position of the four major lobes is concerned. Leon was amazed at what damage a Catteni skull could take without permanent injury. I think,” and she paused, frowning slightly at what she did not voice, “that the initial injuries to the prisoners were attempts to recalibrate the instrument to human brains.”

“Initial injuries?” Kris asked.

“Yes,” and Dorothy seemed to wish to get over this topic very quickly, “though they would have been dead before their nervous systems could register much.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, and leave it at that, Kris,” Dorothy went on briskly. “Will Seissmann should not dwell on the details although he seems to want to . . . a part of his trauma.”

“Will Seissmann?” Kris asked.

“Yes, he and Dr. Ansible . . .”

“Dr. Ansible?” Kris shot bolt upright. “But he’s—was, rather—at the observatory. Only I think he was away on some sort of a conference when the Catteni took Denver.”

“Yes, he was and took refuge at Stamford,” Dorothy replied, nodding. “He tried to argue others he knew to follow Will’s example. I don’t know whether or not the dogmatic scientist has an innate martyr complex but only a few would resort to the trick to save themselves.” She broke off with a sigh. “At any rate, we are able to put names to most of the Victims. But I need to know whatever details you may have, Zainal. They will be so helpful in correcting the trauma . . . if, indeed, we can.”

Zainal shook his head. “I know little about such Eosi devices.” Then his expression changed into what Kris privately termed his “Catteni look,” cold, impassive, shuttered. “I do know—it is part of the Catteni history—that they have a device that increases and measures intelligence.”

“Oh?” Dorothy leaned forward across the table in her eagerness. “Then it could possibly extract information, too?”

Zainal blinked and his expression altered to a less forbidding one. He gave a slight smile. “It would seem likely since I only know of the one device. The Eosi used it on the primitive Catteni to make them useful as hosts.”

"Really?" Dorothy's expression was intensely eager as she leaned forward, encouraging Zainal to elaborate.

"Yes, really. Roughly two thousand years ago, the Eosi discovered Catten and its inhabitants. We were little more than animals, a fact the Eosi never let us forget. About a thousand years ago, my family started keeping its records for our ancestor was one of the first hundred to have . . . his brains stimulated by the device. Each family keeps its own records—how many males it has delivered to the Eosi as hosts and details of children and matings."

"A thousand, two thousand years to develop into a space-going race? That's impressive," Dorothy said.

"Humans did it without such assistance and that impresses me," Zainal said with an odd laugh. "But that's how the Emassi were developed. To serve the Eosi."

"They didn't use the mind thingummy on the Drassi?" Kris asked.

"To a lesser degree," Zainal replied and turned to Dorothy. "There are three levels of Catteni now . . . Emassi," and he touched his chest, "Drassi who are good at following orders but have little initiative or ambition: some were rejected for the Emassi ranks, but are able to be more than Drassi—ship captains and troop leaders. Then there're the Rassi, who were left as they are."

"Rassi?" Kris echoed in surprise. "Never heard of them."

"They do not leave Catten and are as we all were when the Eosi found us."

"So you, as a species, did not evolve by yourselves? But had your intelligence stimulated?" Dorothy asked. She turned to Kris. "The Eosi evidently never heard of the Prime Directive."

Kris giggled. A psychologist who was a Trekkie?

"The Prime Directive means an advanced culture is not supposed to interfere with the natural evolution of another species or culture," Kris explained to Zainal.

"The anthropologists will have a field day with this," Dorothy added, jotting down another note. "Was one . . . application sufficient to sustain the higher level of intelligence?" she asked Zainal.

He shrugged. "I do not know that." Abruptly his expression again changed to his "Catteni look," impassive, expressionless, shuttered. "When I had my full growth, I had to be presented to the Eosi, to see if I was acceptable as a host. And what training I should be given."

"And?" Dorothy prompted him when he paused.

"I was passed, and I was to be trained to pilot spaceships." Then his grin became devilish and his "Catteni look" completely disappeared.

“My father and uncles had worried that Eosi would find me too curious and unacceptable.”

“Too curious? Why would that make you unacceptable?” Dorothy asked.

“Eosi tell Emassi what they need to know. That is all they are supposed to know.”

“Before you start training? Surely you had basic schooling?” Dorothy asked, surprised.

Zainal gave a snort. “Emassi are trained, not schooled.”

“But didn’t you learn to read, write, and figure before you were fourteen?” Dorothy was having difficulty with this concept. “Surely you’ve had to learn mathematics to pilot spaceships?”

Zainal nodded. “Emassi males are taught that much by their fathers . . .” He grimaced.

“The hard way?” Kris said, miming the use of a force whip.

“Yes, the hard way. One tends to pay strict attention to such lessons.”

“And yet you were curious enough to want to know more?” Dorothy asked.

“Because it was forbidden,” Zainal said, again with the twinkle in his eye. He must have been a handful as a youngster. Kris was also immensely relieved that his intelligence, which she suspected was a lot higher than hers, was natural, rather than artificially stimulated.

“So the device assessed you. Can you give me any description of it?”

Zainal looked down at his clasped hands as he organized his response. “I was taken into a very large white room with a big chair in the center and two Eosi, one at a control desk. I was strapped into the chair and then the device came down out of the ceiling to cover my head.”

“Could you see what it looked like?” Dorothy asked, and Kris realized how eagerly she awaited details.

Zainal shrugged. “A large shape,” and he made a bell form with both hands, “with many wires attached to it and dials.”

“It covered your head or just your face?”

“My head down to my shoulders. It was heavy.”

“Did you see any blue lights?” Dorothy asked, scribbling again.

“I saw nothing.”

“And the sensations? What were they like?” She turned to Kris as Zainal once again considered his answer. “We’re trying to establish if any invasive probe is used: Needles or possibly electrical shock. We need to know whether the brain itself has been entered and damaged:

whether or not there has been physical damage—rather than just memory, emotional, and fact erasures.”

“There aren’t any scars on the Victims?” Kris asked, and Dorothy shook her head.

“Not visible ones, certainly. Which is why Zainal’s recollection is so vital to us.”

“Like electricity,” Zainal said, putting his hands to his temples and moving them up to the top of his broad skull. “And here,” and he touched the base of his cranium. “But no blood. No scar.”

“Oh, yes, that’s interesting, very interesting,” and Dorothy wrote hastily for a minute. “No pain in the temples?”

“Where?” Zainal asked.

“Here,” and Kris touched the points.

“Oh. Not pain, pressure.”

“Isn’t that where lobotomies are done?” Kris apprehensively asked Dorothy.

She nodded. “Anywhere else? Pressure or pain or odd sensations? I’m trying to discover just which areas might have been . . . touched by this device. If they coincide with what factual, emotional, and memory centers humans have,” she added as an aside to Kris. “There are more parallels than you might guess.”

“A sort of stabbing, very quick, to the . . .” and Zainal put his hand to the top of his head, “inside of my head.”

“Quite possibly a general stimulation,” Dorothy murmured. Then, with a kind smile, went on. “So you were assessed and passed. Then what happened?”

“I was told who to report to for training.” Then he grinned. “I know that my uncles were disappointed that I was acceptable. My father was relieved. More glory for our branch of the family.”

“How old are you now?” Dorothy asked, a question which Kris had never bothered to ask.

Zainal hesitated and then with a grin and a shrug, “Thirty-five. I have been exploring this galaxy for sixteen years.”

“Sixteen?” Kris was surprised.

“That would make only four years of formal training? Of any sort?” Dorothy asked, surprised.

“Three. I have been here two years now. Two Catteni years.” And he grinned at Kris.

“Pilot training is all you had?”

“I learned what I needed to know to do the job which the Eosi ordered for me. I worked hard and learned well,” Zainal said with a touch of pride.

“Amazing,” Dorothy murmured as she made more notes.

“But you know a lot about a lot of things,” Kris protested.

Zainal shrugged. “Once I am officially a pilot,” and he gave Kris a mischievous look out of the corner of his eye, “it was no longer wrong for me to learn what I wish so long as I pilot well. The Eosi,” and his face slid briefly into Catteni impassivity again, “require their hosts to have been many places and seen many things.”

“Then you don’t have any knowledge about your own body? No biology?” Dorothy asked.

“Bi-o-lo-gy?” Zainal repeated.

Dorothy explained, and he laughed.

“As long as my body does what I need it to do, I do not ask how it does it.”

Both Dorothy and Kris smiled.

“When I compare what our astronauts went through to qualify as space pilots . . .” and Dorothy raised one hand in amazement.

“The earliest aviators flew by the seat of their pants,” Kris remarked.

“Seat of their pants?” Zainal asked, frowning so Dorothy and Kris took turns explaining the meaning.

“I did that, too, when training did not cover all I needed to know. So I made those who build the spacecraft show me how everything worked,” Zainal said.

“And those . . . engineers . . . were also trained by families who were engineers?” Dorothy asked, and Zainal nodded. “Very restrictive educational system. Only a need to know. However did they manage?”

“The Eosi do the manage part,” Zainal said in a caustic tone. “Emassi follow orders just like Drassi and even the Rassi.”

“It’s amazing even the Emassi can do what they do,” Kris remarked, regarding Zainal with even more respect.

“Yes, it is,” Dorothy agreed, “and we tend to rely on the educational process . . . or the genetic heritage,” and she gave Kris a look. “Depending on which school of thought you adhere to.” She gave another sigh and then said more briskly, including Kris, “Are there any special aptitudes which Catteni have which Humans do not? For example, the way the Deski can climb vertically and have extraordinary hearing?”

“Night vision,” Zainal said promptly. “Our hearing is more acute but not as good as the Deski. We can last longer eating poor food . . . or is that body difference, not brain?”

“Metabolic differences certainly,” Dorothy said, having written “eye” and “ear” on her pad. Kris could read such short words backwards. Then the psychologist spent a moment doodling. “Could you possibly draw me a sketch of the device used on you?” She turned to

Kris in explanation. "Those that got a good look at it can't talk, and those who can talk didn't see it."

"Zainal's very good at drawing devices," Kris said, with a touch of pride.

"Yes," and Zainal complied, using the pen with the quick, deft strokes that Kris had seen him use in delineating the mechanicals. "There!"

Dorothy regarded the neat sketch and hummed under her breath. "Hmmm, yes, well it looks like something an evil scientist would create." She sighed. "Considering who the Eosi chose to brain-scan, they seem to have been on an information hunt. But why? Their level of technology is so much more sophisticated than ours. Or were they just trying to strip minds that could possibly help foment riot and rebellion? Or maybe reduce humans to the level of your Rassi?"

Zainal made a guttural noise and his smile, while it did not touch his eyes, was evil. "Ray Scott said that he recognized some of the people as scientists. So the Eosi are looking for information. If they were wiping minds to make you like Drassi, they would start with children and block learning." He grinned. "The Eosi look for ideas. They have had very few new ones over the past hundred or so years."

"Really?" Dorothy remarked encouragingly.

"Maybe they need to stimulate their own brains," Kris said. "Or would it work on them?"

Zainal shrugged.

"Will Seissmann and Dr. Ansible felt that the Eosi were taking a vicious revenge on humans by destroying minds in a wholesale fashion," Dorothy said in an expressionless voice. "There seemed to be no reason to include some of the individuals—TV reporters and anchor men . . . and women . . ."

"Really? Who?" Kris asked in astonishment.

"Who? *Anchor men and women?*" Zainal didn't understand the term.

"Oh," he said, when Kris explained, and added, "information would be the first thing Eosi want to control. All your satellites and communication networks were destroyed in the initial phase of the invasion."

"Did you know they were choosing Earth?" Dorothy asked.

Zainal shook his head with a rueful grin. "I am exploring on the far side of this galaxy. I had stopped at Barevi for supplies and fuel when . . ." And then he shrugged as if both women knew his history from then on.

"Zainal picked a fight," Kris said, answering the querying look on Dorothy's mobile face, "killed a Drassi and went on the lam. I saw his

flitter crash and went to see whom the Catteni were after this time. I had no idea what I was rescuing. If I had," and she gave Zainal a mock dirty look, "I might have thrown him to the wolves. Then I decided I'd better get him back to Barevi. Only we both got caught in one of those gassings the Catteni spray to quell rebellion." Kris knew that Dorothy would be familiar with that tactic which was often used on Earth. "And ended up here on Botany."

"For which many of us are exceedingly grateful," Dorothy said sincerely. "Will, Dr. Ansible, and a former TV reporter, Jane O'Hanlon, were able to bring us up to date with the situation on Earth, by the way. Which I can give you without benefit of sponsors or commercials," Dorothy said in a droll tone of voice. "I think there was probably more than one reason for the Eosi to resort to extracting information from human beings. Not only have we here on Botany produced a new wrench in the works with the Bubble but resistance is increasing on Earth despite their attempts to control or contain it.

"I gather that there will be an effort made to support activities on Earth now that there're three spaceships at our disposal?" And she looked at Zainal for comment.

"We haven't heard of any," Kris said and added "yet." Zainal had been so busy getting pictorial proof to send the Farmers that they hadn't discussed any future plans.

He shrugged. "Three ships are too few against as many as the Eosi have."

"Not even for a teensy-weensy hit," and Dorothy left a very tiny space between her forefinger and thumb by way of illustration, "just to serve notice on the Eosi?"

"I think we've just done that," Kris said with a droll grin.

"They will try to penetrate the Bubble," Zainal said. "They will have to figure out what it is and how it is maintained. That will annoy them seriously." And he was patently delighted. "We must hope that it remains. The Eosi have other weapons that destroy planets."

"Do they?" And Kris felt a twinge of fear under her bravado.

"If they cannot possess, they do not leave it for others to have."

"Oh!" Kris had no flippant reply for that.

"Does the Council know?" Dorothy asked, concerned.

"I will tell them," Zainal said, nodding solemnly.

"Well, then, that's all I can bother you with," Dorothy said, beginning to gather up her notes. Then she paused, tilting her head at Zainal. "You don't have any idea where the Eosi came from, do you?" When Zainal shook his head, she managed a self-conscious laugh. "From a galaxy far, far away?"

Kris chuckled, delighted that Dorothy was not only Trek oriented, but could also quote from *Star Wars*.

"Thank you, Zainal. You've given me valuable information."

"I have?"

Dorothy smiled. "More than you might think. I do apologize for besieging you after what has been a very difficult day but we needed this input." She held up the notes. "We can design appropriate treatment now. In so far as our resources permit, that is."

Zainal opened the door, and they stepped into a moonlit night.

"Over here, Dorothy," Chuck said, flipping on the runabout's light.

"Oh, thank you, and thank you again, Zainal, Kris." She hurried over to the little vehicle, murmuring her thanks to Mitford before she turned it northward.

"I've one of the flatbeds and there's room on the boxes for you two to ride back to your place," Chuck said. "Don't want any night crawlers grabbing you."

"Thanks, Chuck," Kris said, only too grateful for both the offer and the sentiment. She was really dragging with weariness right now. Sitting down for a spell had not been as good an idea as it had seemed. It only emphasized her fatigue.

"Over here," and Chuck reached the flatbed and turned on its light to guide them.

Kris was already climbing on the cargo before she realized that the boxes didn't resemble anything she had purchased on Barevi.

"What's all this, sarge?" She couldn't see the printed labels in the dim light.

"It's the books we found," Zainal astonished her by saying.

"Books?"

"Yes, books," Zainal repeated calmly. "Ray saw them. As trading captain of the KDI, I thought such paper stuff would be good for packing material." He grinned. "The Drassi did not argue, glad to be rid of the stuff."

"But there must be fifty boxes here? They're not *all* the same book, are they?"

"Nope," Chuck said. "Catteni looted libraries, too. We've got some former librarians just drooling to catalog what we managed to 'liberate.' This is only part of what we unloaded. Our kids won't grow up ignorant, though they might have some rather interesting gaps in their education."

"Books," Kris said and suddenly realized that she had missed books . . . certainly the availability of books. "Wow! That was a real coup."

"Books?" Zainal asked. "Schoolbooks?" His tone was sly though Kris could not see his expression in the dim light. "Bi-ol-o-gy?"

“Don’t know yet,” Chuck said, “though that’s a possibility. Why?”

“Zainal has just acquired a need to know,” Kris replied drolly. Oh, well, she’d had good grades in biology, though just how much human biology would expand Zainal’s understanding of how his body worked was a moot point. And she was too tired to inquire.

All three were silent for the rest of the journey.

Once Zainal closed the door behind them, Kris gave up the notion of a shower as being too much work and a ruse to keep her from getting horizontal, and asleep, as soon as she could make it to the bed. She did take her boots off, as Zainal was doing, but that was all she managed.

THE K-CLASS SHIP, WHICH ARRIVED AT BAY FORTY-FIVE TO COLLECT A shipment of slaves for an ice planet’s mining operation, was furious to discover that someone else had taken them. The Drassi lodged a protest about that, and then another one that he had been forced to wait eight days before sufficient slaves could be assembled. So insignificant a report went unread.

The costs submitted against a ship with a KDI identification code were duly registered although it was later noted that this ship had supposedly been listed as “lost.” The charges were paid and the anomaly forgotten.

Chapter Two

IT SHOULDN'T HAVE SURPRISED KRIS THAT BY THE NEXT AFTERNOON many people were aware of the substance of their discussion with Dorothy Dwardie. Rumor circulated the settlement as fast as a Farmer orbiter. Fortunately, it worked more in favor of Zainal than against him. The Catteni were, however briefly, also seen as Victims of Eosian tactics, more to be pitied than feared.

A quintet of anthropologists, while loudly deploring the forced evolution of the Catteni, requested most politely for Zainal to take some tests to evaluate his "stimulated" intelligence. Kris was furious and Zainal amused. In fact, Kris was so incensed that she was even mad at him for agreeing.

"They cannot do me any harm," Zainal said in his attempt to placate her.

"It's the whole idea of the thing . . . as if you were no better than a laboratory mouse or rat or monkey," she said, pacing about the house while her mate and her son regarded her with surprise.

"They are also testing the Deski and the Rugarians." He grinned at her. "I would like to know how I rate."

"How can they possibly evaluate you fairly? In the first place," she said, waving her arms about as she paced, "lots of the questions require a similar cultural background . . . and history and things you've never had a chance to study."

"So?" Zainal reached out and stopped her mid-stride as she was going past him. "You are annoyed for me? Or with me?" he asked at his gentlest, a gleam in his yellow eyes.

"With *them*! The nerve, the consummate gall," and she tried to struggle out of his embrace.

“Sometimes, Kristin Bjornsen, you protect me when I do not need it,” he said, smoothing her hair back from her face. “As you would Zane.”

“Nonsense,” Kris snapped, trying to push him away. “You don’t know when to be insulted. I am insulted. For you.”

Zainal laughed and easily resisted her attempts to break free.

“It is difficult to insult an Emassi,” he said. “I think it is better for them to find out that I am very, very smart. It will solve other problems.”

That mild remark stopped her struggling.

“What problems?” she demanded, suspicious.

“The ones I must solve.”

“Which are?”

“How to free us . . .” and he gestured himself and then to her, “and your people from the Eosi.”

“But we need the Farmers’ help for that and we have no idea when we’ll have a response—if any—to that report you sent them. What are you planning, Zainal?”

“This time you, too, must wait and see,” he said, giving her a final squeeze before he released her. And she got no more out of him.

He went off to the session with the anthropologists while she fumed and fretted as she did the household chores. She was not due for her shift until late afternoon. She couldn’t even find satisfaction in taking care of Zane, which she usually enjoyed thoroughly. She all but pounced on Zainal when he returned a few hours later.

“Well?” she demanded as soon as he entered the cabin.

His grin was a partial reassurance but she insisted on details. “They say I am very smart. At the top.”

“How could they figure that out? What did they ask? How did you reply?”

“Carefully,” he said, pouring himself a cup of water. “Thirsty work.”

Kris let out an explosive “oh” of total frustration. “You’d drive a saint to drink.”

“Saint? More of that God stuff?”

“What sort of questions?” She would not be diverted.

“Logic ones which I am well able to answer. Sorrell told me that they used some of the Mensa tests? That you would know what those are?”

Kris nodded, obliquely reassured. “And?”

“I passed,” he said and then bent to lift the lid on the pot over the fire. “We eat here tonight?”

“Yes, it’s the stew you like. How high did you pass?”

Zainal's grin was malicious. "Very high. They were surprised and . . ." he paused to let his grin broaden, "they were respectful."

"Well, it's about time."

He turned and put his arms about her, drawing her close to him so that he could look her in the eyes. "One earns respect. It is not just given."

"But you've earned it twenty times over, Zainal," she said, not quite willing to be totally placated by his proximity but letting her arms creep around his neck. "When I think of how lucky we were that you got dropped . . ."

"I was very lucky," he said, burrowing his head in her hair. "Very lucky."

They remained in that embrace, enjoying the simple pleasure of touching and being together until Zane, waking from his afternoon nap, disturbed their communion.

"So, what have you been planning in that devious stimulated Catteni mind of yours?" Kris asked.

"I think we have to go to Earth," he said so casually that she nearly dropped her son.

"Just like that? Go to Earth? How? Why? Can you? Will they agree?"

"It is safer right now than it will be . . ." he began, taking Zane from her to dandle on his knee, which had the boy chortling with delight, while she tasted the stew.

"Oh?" The stew needed a pinch more salt, which she added.

"Yes, because it will take time for the Eosi to discover that the Victims did not get to the intended destination. They will also be thinking of a way to break through the Bubble. They do not like such defenses."

"So? What good would a trip to Earth do?"

"Now I think there may be other Catteni, who have had enough Eosi," and he grinned at her. "I am not the only one who thinks for himself. Who is smarter than the Eosi want us to be. I know of five who are like me. I need to know where they now are. I need to know if there are more now."

"Five? Against how many Eosi?"

Zainal considered as he tickled Zane's toes while the little boy giggled, withdrawing his feet and then presenting them again.

"I think there are no more than one hundred."

"Because that's all the Catteni they upgraded? Don't they reproduce or something?"

Zainal shook his head. "Not that we know of."

“We?”

“The others of like mind I told you about. We have met, in small groups, from time to time, to exchange knowledge.”

“You mean, you’ve been plotting against the Eosi for a long time? What would have happened if you had to be subsumed?”

“A risk all Emassi take,” he said with a shrug. “Yes, I do believe that we have been looking for some way to shake Eosian domination. Your people have shown a resistance no other species has. That’s good.”

“As far as it goes and look what happens to Humans who resist . . .” and Kris’s gesture included the planet. “How many worlds do the Eosi dominate? I mean, there’re the Deski, the Rugarians, the Turs, the Morphins, and the Ilginish . . . How many others?”

“The Eosi control fifteen star systems that have at least one intelligent race: another ten where they take metals and materials.”

Kris laughed. “You honestly believe a rebellion has a chance against such a setup?”

“If we have the Farmers’ help . . .”

“Boy, oh boy, oh boy, are you an optimist!”

“It is a start. It is more than we have ever had.”

“With two spaceships and a scout, we can go up against that sort of opposition?”

“It is a start.”

“I’ve got to hand it to you, Zainal. God loves a trier,” Kris said, shaking her head at the impossible task he had proposed. And yet . . .

“Have you mentioned any of this to any one else yet?”

“I talked to Chuck. I will speak to others. We need to go to Earth as soon as possible. Earth needs to know that Botany is!”

“Let’s eat first, shall we?” Kris said as brightly as she could, trying to assimilate the magnitude of his vision.

DOROTHY DWARDIE’S TEAM SPENT THE FIRST WEEK ASSESSING THE CONDITION of the mind-wiped and divided them into various arbitrary groupings, according to the perceived severity.

As she said in her initial discussion with her aides, there were two levels of healing: one, the physical trauma of assault on the tissue and/or function of the brain, and two, the psychological trauma of assault on the psyche or self. She expected that some trauma would be time-limited.

“The mind has gone into functional frostbite,” she said, “and when it thaws after the trauma, returns to normal function without help. Since

most of these people were trained scientists, it's possible that many will simply reestablish old neural pathways. There may be some loss of factual memory: maybe even a great deal. Even then much may return over a period of time.

"Right now, they need reassurance, interaction: music, smells, kindness, encouragement, gentle exercise. As normal a routine as we can manage. Talk to them, about anything and everything: help them reestablish themselves. Where we know the name, repeat it often. When we know something of their background, refer to that as frequently as possible. Help them reacquaint themselves with themselves."

Kris had three women, all in their late fifties: two had been research physicians in a drug company—Peggy Ihde and Marjorie Flax; the third they called Sophie because Sarah McDouall said she thought she looked like a Sophie. Kris was to supervise their meals. Just putting a spoon or a fork in their hands stimulated self-feeding. She read to them from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, which they might even have read in their younger days. She took them on quiet walks in the lodge-pole copse, or sat with them above the bay where benches had been placed for meditation.

"Pleasant surroundings are extremely important after the holding pens they've been in," Dorothy said. "Soft, kind voices, gentle handling will reassure even the most damaged."

There were a few whose condition was clearly catatonic but Dorothy was serenely confident that, in time, even these would recover.

"There's something about this place," she said, spreading both arms out to include the entire subcontinent, "that will generate healing. The smells are good, the food is fresh and tasty, and the vibes..." she smiled at using the vernacular description, "are good because we've made them so. Beauty is a natural stress-absorber, you know. It reassures on a nonverbal level that they are now safe.

"You see," she went on in her soft voice, "we've decided to use a multi-modal treatment of this stress. The right hemisphere—which thinks in pictures—can't tell time: therefore it needs pictures to counteract the negative images of the trauma. The left hemisphere stores rational thought processes in thought and ideas. The two hemispheres interact and each approach can help the other side. We need to maximize good input and involve as much as possible in terms of brain resource utilization. Many of our friends here may never recall exactly what happened. That would truly be a blessing."

"But won't we have to explain something of how they got here?" Sarah McDouall asked.

“Oh, yes,” Dorothy said with a smile, “and by then we’ll probably have a coherent answer for them. They are, to all intents and purposes, on a holiday from their own minds right now.”

“We could always tell them they’re in Oz,” someone at the back of the room quipped.

“And no red slippers in sight,” someone added.

Dorothy’s expression was droll. “We’re all in Oz.”

“The Eosi are the wicked witches . . .”

“Let’s leave the analogy there, shall we?” Dorothy said in the firm tone of she-who-must-be-obeyed.

Kris felt her shoulder muscles relax. She had been readying herself to protect Zainal. Really, she had to stop doing that. He had made his own position here on Botany and was firmly entrenched. She didn’t need to fret over possible snide remarks and animosity. She devoutly hoped!

THAT EVENING WHEN ZAINAL CAME HOME FROM THE CONSTRUCTION site of the new units for the Victims, he very carefully put a book down on the table.

“That’s for kindergartners,” she said in surprise, recognizing the title.

“Kindergartners? It is for learning to read,” Zainal said and gave it a little shove with one large and very dirty thumb.

“Please wash up, dinner’s nearly ready,” she said, because she really couldn’t tell Zainal not to handle the book—which might be the only one of its kind—with his dirty hands.

“I learn to read,” he said and gave it another, almost angry push.

“You?”

Zainal scowled and Zane, who was seated in the high-seated chair his adoptive father had made for him, began to whimper in apprehension. He was very quick to sense moods. Immediately Zainal turned a smiling face and diverted the child by tickling his feet until he was hilarious with tickle laughter.

“I need to read to use computers.”

Kris blinked in surprise, having forgotten for the moment that Botany now possessed working computers . . . which were being put to all kinds of good use. There had been several uninterrupted sessions to develop adapters for the units to run on solar power.

“Oh, yes, of course you would,” Kris said. “Dead easy for a man with your smarts.”

Zainal turned his smiling face from Zane and gave the little book a dark scowl. "Not when all those . . . squiggles . . . make no sense at all."

"Are there many—" and Kris thought swiftly for a less insulting description than "kids' books"—"primer books in what we got?" She hadn't had occasion to look in that section of the hastily assembled "library."

"This was given me. I wash my hands . . . and Zane's feet . . ." he added pointing to the oily smears now marking the child's bare feet.

ONCE ZANE WAS IN BED, SHE TOOK, NOT THE BOOK, BUT A PAD AND pencil and wrote out the alphabet in upper and lower case, as large as she could lengthwise across the page.

"But I brought the book to read . . ." he said, pulling it toward him with now clean hands.

"First you must know the . . . squiggles that spell the words we use. Too bad we didn't have a book on English for second-language speakers . . . although come to think of it, that wouldn't do you much good. Now, this is the first letter of the alphabet . . . 'ay.' Which can also be pronounced 'ah' . . . just to confuse you. It is a vowel. B, which is usually just 'bee' is the second letter and a consonant."

He had repeated "vowel" and now spoke "consonant." Zainal had no trouble committing the sequence of the alphabet to memory—nor of naming any of them when Kris drilled him. His concentration was incredible. He kept her going until even such words as "Spot" and "Jane" were blurring her eyes. He had also read through the book nine times and had it memorized.

"No Spot and Jane on the computers," he said.

"We'll work on computer language tomorrow," she said, rising stiffly from the chair in which his need to learn had pinned her for hours. She yawned.

"I work more now," he said, looking at her expectantly.

"Okay, see how many words you already know that rhyme with Spot . . . like dot, and tot, and Scott . . . or with Jane, like mane . . . no not drain . . . ah, try run, fun, gun, stun . . ."

"Oh," he said, delighted at such an exercise.

She went to bed. When Zane woke her in false dark, hungry, Zainal had filed pages of similarly sounding words, not all of which were spelled properly but she had to give him an A for effort. Spelling would come later. What did astonish her as she fed Zane by candlelight was

the computer manual she found under a pile of his laboriously hand-printed sheets. He had underlined all the unwords . . . ctrl, del, esc, Pgdn, Pgup, num, menu.

“He can’t have read the manual,” she murmured and smothered a laugh. “He may be one of the few who ever did before they turned on a computer.”

She and Zane had gone back to sleep again before full daylight and, by then, Zainal had gone off to work. In a neat pile on the mantel he had left all but the primer. Doubtless that had gone back to the library shelves for something more challenging. The manual was still there but then, there had been plenty of those in the packing cases they’d brought back from the marketplace at Barevi. But why this sudden need to understand computers . . . ah, yes. It probably had something to do with Zainal’s master plan. Maybe it was plans since he intended not only to free Earth but destroy the Eosi *and* release Catten from slavery. Did he also plan to use the mind stimulator on everyone? To equalize the Catten race? Oops, she sort of thought that might be a bad idea. Zainal was a most unusual Catteni. Still, there might well be similarly motivated Emassi among those whom he was going to enlist to help. But the Drassi . . . and the Rassi . . . though she despised herself for generalizing . . . were different: especially since they were such big people with lots of muscles and not much common sense.

She had an early shift this morning so she and Zane started off in the fresh morning air to the day care center. He was crawling around everywhere, even trying to climb, and spent more time falling down. But she let him fall . . . and let him get up. He rarely hurt himself. On the advice of other mothers, she had put extra padding on the knees of his trousers, saving him scratches if not bruises. Actually, Kris thought, Botany’s new generation was generally sturdy and few mothers had the time to pamper their children. With the notable exception of Janet and Anna Bollinger. Their kids, however, had enough rough and tumble at the day care center to have developed allergies to maternal fussiness.

No television, no Coke, or chocolate—though sometimes Kris’ craving for a chocolate bar was almost overwhelming—was all to the good. She did miss caffeine and, while the experiments with beer and other spiritous liquors had been successful, there was as yet no tobacco substitute. As soon as the children were able, they were put to little tasks and chores that would make them as self-sufficient as their parents had learned to be.

Raisha Simonova was checking in the children at the day care center this morning. Zane toddled firmly off to the room that catered to his age group. One of the Deski children, Fil, was on its way (gender in

Deskis developed later) so he waited for Fil. Another plus for Botany—no racism. Well, not to fret over, because the few who had trouble assimilating with the Rugarians and Deskis were gradually losing their sense of Human superiority: difficult to maintain when a Deski walked *up* a wall to carry slates to the roof. Or a Rugarian easily hefted weights that took two or three Humans to manage. Both races were also becoming more and more fluent in English, though they had trouble with past tenses of verbs. Who didn't? And a good couple of dozen Humans were attempting to master their languages.

Almost, Kris thought, as she stopped by the library to pick up the day's reading, it would be a shame to have to open Botany up. It could easily ruin the harmony that had been achieved. And yet . . .

All three of her charges were sitting in their bedside chairs, an aura of anticipation about them.

"They know to the minute when you're due, Kris," Mavis Belton said.

"That's good, isn't it?"

"You don't know *how* good," Mavis said with a deep sigh, slightly turning her head toward one of the "difficult wards" where the worst of the Victims were kept.

"Good morning, Marjorie," Kris began, initiating her morning routine by touching the arm of each in turn, "Good morning, Peggy. Good morning, Sophie."

"Why do you call me Sophie? That's my middle name. My *Christian* name is Norma," the woman said with a hint of petulance. "Norma Sophie Barrow. Miss Barrow."

"I do apologize, Miss Barrow," Kris said sincerely, holding her hand now for the woman to shake. "I'm Kris Bjornsen, the nurse's aide."

"Of course, you are. We've been expecting you," Miss Barrow said almost tartly. "Aren't we?"

Marjorie and Peggy nodded.

"In that case, let us walk up to the dining hall," Kris said.

Behind the newly restored Miss Barrow, Mavis was almost in tears with joy at the breakthrough. It was a very mixed blessing. Miss Barrow was stunned to find herself in such rural, primitive surroundings.

"Rustic, I should say," she remarked as they entered the log-built main hall. "I would certainly never take my vacation in such a setting." She wanted coffee and refused to drink the herbal tea which was all that was served. She wanted white bread toast and butter and did not like the berry preserve, which did service as a spread. Nor would she eat the hot oatmeal. Porridge was for children or invalids. She wanted an egg, boiled, three minutes.

Although Marjorie and Peggy were hungry enough to eat what Kris served them, they began to falter as Miss Barrow's complaints jarred their own memories of breakfasts or homes or what they had once been accustomed to.

Just as Kris was beginning to think she wouldn't be able to cope with this sort of insurrection, Dorothy Dwardie slid in beside Miss Barrow.

"I am so glad to see you looking so well, today, Miss Barrow."

Miss Barrow recoiled from Dorothy, a hint of fear contorting her features.

"Surely, you remember me, Doctor Dwardie?"

"Doctor?" Miss Barrow was only slightly reassured while Kris admired the friendly but not intimate tone Dorothy used.

"Yes, Doctor Dwardie, I'm in charge of your case."

"I've not been well?" As Miss Barrow's fragile hand went to her chest and her expression became even more confused, Dorothy nodded, still smiling with great reassurance.

"Yes, but nothing life-threatening, I'm happy to report. The tests have all come back negative. You may not remember things in the detail you used to but we're positive that you will make a complete recovery."

"I was working very hard," Miss Barrow said, running one nervous finger along the edge of the table and watching its progress, "the merger, you know."

"Yes, exactly, the merger. One of the elements of your convalescence has actually been a change of diet to a very bland one. A change to flush the toxins of fatigue out of your system. If you just look at Marjorie and Peggy, you'll see how healthy and fine they are. And you're very much improved."

"Toxins . . . yes, there were toxins," Miss Barrow said. "Some of them . . ." She closed her lips and gave a weak smile. "I'm not allowed to talk about my work, you understand."

"Yes, yes, Miss Barrow, we do. Miss Bjornsen is the soul of discretion but as I have a top security clearance, perhaps if we had a quiet little chat in my office, I could relieve your mind, and we can figure out just what other therapy will speed your recovery."

Gently Dorothy got Miss Barrow to her feet and led her out of the dining room and toward her putative office.

"She'll be all right, won't she?" Marjorie said, her eyes wide with fright. It was also the first time Marjorie had said more than yes, no, and maybe. Peggy stared from one to another and then back to Kris for reassurance.

"She'll be fine," Kris said firmly, smiling and nodding her head. "But I think we'd better finish our breakfasts. Then we'll find a quiet spot for me to finish reading *Pride and Prejudice*."

"I read that once," Peggy said in a vague tone, frowning slightly.

"I like Kris reading," Marjorie said.

"Why, thank you, Marjorie."

"You know you don't have to be so formal, Kris. I don't mind if you call me Marge like everyone else."

Then she grimaced, looking down at the table and, with furtive glances, gradually looked around the room. Peggy, however, held up her cup for more tea, which Kris instantly supplied.

"Some of your friends aren't here with you, Marge," Kris said, thinking some explanation should be offered before Marjorie's returning awareness caused her dismay.

"They aren't?"

"More tea?" Kris offered and Marge shook her head.

"Doesn't really taste like tea to me."

"It's part of the bland diet to reduce the dose of toxicity you had," Kris said.

"But you're drinking it, too. Did you get a dose?"

"No," Kris replied, "but we aides thought it wasn't fair for us to drink something you aren't yet allowed."

"Oh!" Marge accepted that.

Kris tried not to wonder what else would happen today or who would have a breakthrough but the rest of her eight-hour shift went without any further incident, other than Marge making comments about beautiful scenery and the lovely fresh air. Peggy said nothing more and seemed to be deep in her own thoughts. And Kris certainly hoped she was having some. She got her two charges back for their afternoon nap and, for once, they lay down in their beds immediately and were asleep in moments.

Mavis beckoned her into the nurse's office.

"That Miss Barrow's a pisswhistler," she murmured in rather unprofessional language. "And that's exactly what brought her around."

"How so?"

"She ran a huge lab for Erkind Pharmaceuticals and everything, but everything had to be precisely in place and exactly done."

"Oh! And suddenly her neurones meshed and nothing here was as it should be in her neat little mind?"

"Exactly."

"Has she realized where she is now?"

Mavis cocked her. "She's fighting it but with every twitch of disagreement, she's remembering more. She's more than halfway back to sanity."

Kris grimaced. "If precision and order are her sort of sanity, she could be a real pain in the arse."

Mavis shook her head this time. "No, we'll let her manage our lab when she's fully recovered. It'll be the envy of . . ." Then Mavis giggled. "We couldn't actually ask for someone with a better background."

Kris thought of Leon Dane, of Thor Mayock's hooch, and the easy, if effective, way the hospital facilities had been run, and wondered.

"You'll see," Mavis said. "How're the other two?"

"Some speech from Marge . . . she prefers that . . . and one sentence from Peggy but that one's been thinking hard all day long."

"Good," and Mavis made notes on the day pad. "We'll see if we can improve on your start. You're mid-shift tomorrow?"

Kris nodded and then another group returned to the dormitory and Mavis went to help settle them for their rest.

ON HER WAY TO COLLECT ZANE, SHE WONDERED JUST HOW THE PRIM and proper Miss Barrow would view the Deski and Rugarians with whom they shared the planet. And how she could react to Zainal's presence when she saw him. Once the Victims started being people again, they would have to see, and become accustomed to, the one Catteni since he was the one who had organized their rescue.

Zane was having a late nap and Kris looked rather enviously at all the small bodies, all curled up under their blankets on the mats that had been woven for the purpose.

"Go grab some zzz's yourself," murmured Sheila, who was in charge. She was also working on a detailed map of the eastern coast of this continent, from measurements Kris's exploratory team had brought back. "I'll *never* get used to the long days here. Not to mention the long nights. I'll wake you when Zane's up. I allus say, leave sleeping dogs and chilluns lie."

There were bunks for the nighttime staff, two of which were already occupied, so Kris climbed as quietly as possible into an upper one and very shortly fell asleep.

A SLOPPY WET KISS WOKE HER: THE DONOR BEING HER DEARLY BELOVED son, who had managed to clamber up the ladder at the head of the bunk. He giggled, delighted with his accomplishment, though Kris was only

too relieved he had escaped unscathed. She'd take ladders away the next time she slept here.

"Hey, love, you don't know how to climb ladders yet," she said, alternating between being frightened at the risk he had taken and proud that he had tried.

"Ahh, Mummy."

Kris threw back the blanket, jumped lightly to the ground and held up her hands for him. Quick as could be and without a moment's hesitation, he flung himself down at her, giggling when she caught him neatly. Sssshing him, they left the sleeping room. Two beds were still occupied.

Zane was in great form and, as it was snack time, they went hand in hand to the dining room, which was crowded with others. With such long days, four or five meals were frequently offered. A hearty breakfast, a mid-morning sandwich, a three-course dinner midday, a mid-afternoon fruit and sandwich, and then a good supper. Late-night snacks were leftovers of bread, cake, and sandwiches, whatever needed to be eaten up and usually was. The herbal tea and, with spring now leading into summer, fruit juices were available all day long. Caterers worked in several short shifts but nevertheless worked a twelve-hour day. Food preparation was as often as not a punishment detail for minor infractions of colony laws, but everyone took a turn at those chores. The big difference here on the new land was that the food didn't also have to be picked, dug, fished, or gutted: other working groups had already processed it for cooking.

On the northern wall of the dining room were the listings of jobs and rotas so that there was no excuse for anyone to miss assignments. Diners customarily checked before or after they ate to see what their duties were for the next day or the next week.

Zainal was listed as working with ex-Admiral Ray Scott, Bull Fetterman, Bert Put, John Beverly, Chuck Mitford, Jim Rastancil, Salvinato, Gino Marrucci, Raisha Simonova, Boris Slavinkovin, Hassan Moussa, Laughrey, Ayckburn, Peter Easley, and Worrell. These week-long meetings were scheduled at the hangar. Considering that most of these men were ex-service of one country or another, Kris had no problem figuring out that Zainal was probably talking up his master plan. Whether the others would go for it or not was debatable. Certainly there were significant absences from that list, such as the odious Geoffrey Ainger, the Brit naval commander, Beggs, who had been Scott's gopher, and Sev Balenquah, who had so nearly blown their disguises on their sneak trip back to Barevi to obtain the supplies which were making all the difference in the efficiency and productivity of the colony.

And if all those with experience in flying the Catteni craft, including Raisha, were there, she wondered just what escapade was being planned. And why wasn't she included?

SHE AND ZANE HAD THEIR SNACK, A HOT ROLLED SANDWICH WITH A sort of sausagey filling, the constituents of which she did not wish to know but the result tasted good. Zane licked his fingers so hungrily that she found a small extra one to give him.

"We've our garden to tend now, love," she said, and he hopped and skipped alongside her as they returned to their cabin. She got out the hoe and his little weeder prong and they finished that chore by the time they saw Zainal being dropped off from the flatbed, still occupied by those living farther up the way to the main administrative area.

"Daddy, daddy!" And Zane made a wobbly beeline to his father who heaved him up so high that Kris caught her breath, even though she knew perfectly well that Zainal would never drop the boy.

"And what might I ask are you and all the high, low, and middle brass doing at the hangar these days?"

"Heard one of your old girls remembered who she is," he replied.

"Ah, how good the gossip system is here," she said drolly. "First, please, the answer to *my* question?"

"Those who played . . . doggo?" and Zainal's yellow eyes twinkled as he looked for confirmation on his use of the slang, "knew a lot more than they thought they did."

"That's good. About what did they know more?"

"I believe Scott calls it 'the state of the nation.'"

"And?"

"We're mounting an expedition." He did not meet her gaze, but threw the delightedly squealing Zane up in the air again.

"Soon?"

"Quite likely."

"Who all's going?"

"That's what's taking so long to decide," and Zainal gave a heavy sigh.

"Just think how much more time that gives you, my dear, to learn how to operate computers."

"That is the only reason you find me in such good fettle."

Kris burst out laughing. Zainal knew just how to get her into a good mood . . . proving that he'd mastered yet another Terran expression.

"Can we eat here tonight? Kurt Langsa—well, however you pronounce the rest of his long name—said he would come?"

"I'm not good enough?"

He had Zane safely ensconced on his shoulders now and pulled her against him, kissing her cheek. "I read nine books during the talking," and he wrinkled his nose. "I need someone who uses computers all the time to show me what the manual says. It uses words I know but not the same way."

"I know exactly what you mean, Zainal. I'll go get some food from the Hall."

"No, Kurt brings. I would like you to go over the words I have learned so that I pronounce them correctly. The spelling is always different and yet the words sound alike." He sighed now in exasperation.

"I don't imagine it's any consolation to you, Zay, but we had to learn, too, as kids."

"In Catteni, the sound is always the same . . ."

"If you're accustomed to gargling, yes, they would be," Kris agreed affably, remembering how hoarse she had been when she'd had to talk to the Catteni scout ship before they captured it. "I do speak some Catteni," she added, slyly glancing at him. "More Barevi."

He gave her a sideways look, so that she couldn't really see the expression in his eyes.

"That is known," he said at his blandest. "But you must learn to understand more."

"When do the classes start?" she asked in an equally bland tone, determined to find out.

"Soon."

"Ah, then let us continue teaching you antonyms."

Zane was busy in his play corner with the blocks and the miniature vehicles that Zainal had fashioned for him. He was mimicking the solar panel hum as he played, oblivious now to the adults.

She had no sooner reached for the list than there was a knock on the door, and Zainal called out "Enter!"

Kurt Langsteiner peered cautiously around the door, a thin-faced man with an expression of perpetual anxiety. He smiled, which altered his face considerably to a pleasant appearance, and stepped inside, carefully closing the door with one foot as both hands were full.

"Name plates would help," he said. "This is the third house I've tried in your neck of the woods."

"Let me help," Kris said, rising to take the basket from one hand. She immediately exclaimed with real pleasure at the three long loaves of bread that stuck out around the stew pot. "Rocksquat . . ."

"What else?" Kurt said with a droll laugh, "but they put some salad in as well and something for young Zane." He stepped up to the table

now and placed on its surface the six large bottles of beer that had been tied at the neck and clanked against each other.

“Remnant of my student days when I found that beer made the studying go more easily.” He put the bottles down, and he shook his creased fingers to circulate blood to them.

First Kris brought three glasses to the table. They were still sort of odd shaped, with uneven blemishes from the not-quite-expert glass blowers. In fact, some said that the glasses, with their slightly skewed sides, looked half-drunk. A new guideline had been formulated: if a drinker was asked if his glass was straight and he answered “yes,” you had proof he had had more than enough to drink. She was setting out plates and utensils as Kurt started pulling out notepads and books from the various pockets of his ship suit. It still looked new, by which Kris figured he must have been in the Sixth Drop. She didn’t know that group of arrivals as well as she did those from the other five.

“What is the worst trouble you’re having, Zainal?” Kurt asked as he made an orderly pile of his materials.

“It is the words that sound the same that are not the same,” Zainal said with considerable asperity.

“Quite understandably. They’re bitches to get right at any age.” Then he turned to Kris. “I used to teach computer in junior high school before I got rounded up so Mitford thought I’d be the best candidate to do both jobs on Zainal,” Kurt said to her as he organized his teaching materials on the table. “And Zainal here,” and Kurt nodded at him, “said he’d teach me how to read and write Catteni.”

Now Zainal grinned at Kris and pointed to the third chair. “You will learn, too.”

Obediently Kris settled down. Leave it to Zainal to throw her a real curve ball. Oh, well, she had only herself to blame.

“You learn a lot better on an full stomach . . . and it gives you a base for the beer. Zane, please wash your hands for dinner,” she said, using hot pads to lift the stew kettle to the table.

The three males obediently went to wash their hands as she finished setting the table. Kurt must be well liked by the caterers for a whole cake had been carefully tied between two baking tins to keep it from being damaged by the hot stew pot. And so had a good portion of salad greens, though the heat from the stew had wilted some of them.

THEY MADE A GOOD MEAL, WITH ZAINAL BEGINNING HIS PART OF THE teaching bargain by using the Catteni words for everything on the table. Even Zane tried to repeat them, giggling as easily at his own mistakes

as at his mother's but had the good sense to cover his mouth when Kurt had trouble. Though Langsteiner certainly seemed to get the guttural sounds more easily.

"German was my first language," he said in an aside to Kris.

"You'd never know it to hear you speak English," she replied.

"My parents spoke both," he explained.

"We really should make Zane learn Catteni, too," Kris said, leaning toward Zainal.

"And Rugarian and Deski," Zainal said at his blandest.

"Them, as well, of course," was her quick, equally bland response, and Kurt laughed.

"And what a hodgepodge they'll all be speaking," he said.

"It will be helpful," Zainal said, "when we free Rugar and Deski, too."

Kurt's eyes bulged at that, and he looked quickly at Kris to see her reaction.

"Why settle for freeing just ours?" she said with a diffident shrug though this was the first she'd known of *that* facet of Zainal's master plans. "Besides, Zane already speaks some Rugarian and Deski at day care."

"Really?" Kurt was startled.

"Gets a bit like the Tower of Babel in there some days," Kris said, dipping the ladle into the stew pot to offer second helpings. The pot had been graciously full.

They all had two pieces of the excellent nutty-flavored cake that had a topping of thick sweet blue-colored berries that did not at all taste like blueberries, or have similar seeds.

As was often the case with young Zane, he was ready to go to sleep with his stomach nicely full so Kris prepared him for bed while the two men cleared the table. When she returned, she rather thought the humorous glint in Kurt's eyes was for the accustomed manner in which the Catteni had performed the KP duties.

The beer helped a great deal as the two Humans struggled with the guttural, harsh Catteni words, first jotting them down phonetically and then in the Catteni script. This was a cross between runes, Kurt's definition, and glyphs, which was Kris' notion. By the time the beer had run out, the two of them knew how to count to five hundred in Catteni, and Zainal could now spell all the words that had bothered him as well as understand all the computer abbreviations which had so baffled him. They set a time for the next lesson, and then Kurt got into the runabout and made a slow but competent turn to head back to the main settlement.

SINCE THE MIND-PROBE HAD DISCOVERED VERY LITTLE USEFUL INFORMATION—apart from some shady dealings among the former administrators and administrations of the planet's political divisions—the Ix had abandoned the project: bored even by the occasional scientific theories that had yet to be proven. Most of these were already in use by the Eosi: and far more sophisticated usage than the silly Humans had ever thought to employ.

Unfortunately the obsession to destroy those protected by the Bubble had become so entrenched in the Ix Mentat's mind that it thought of nothing but the means to do so. Where the Bubble had come from and what comprised the amazingly invulnerable material was almost a secondary consideration. The Juniors—which was not how they were called in Catteni but the translation was close enough to their actual position and authority within the Eosi context—had repeatedly tried to divert the Ix with other matters. Lest the Ix be provoked by their counter-arguments into another seizure, they had no choice but to proceed with the Mentat's latest plans: to organize the greatest force the Eosi had ever assembled, even larger than the one with which they had assaulted a planet that many High Emassi wished they'd left strictly alone. But it had seemed such a useful place: with a population density that would provide other, less desirable locations with an endless supply of workers needed to produce and refine the raw materials that kept Catteni ships in space. There was also the added fact that the Eosi were committed to extending their control of this arm of the galaxy as far as they could—and as fast as they could.

So the orders were sent out to the naval shipyards and the plants and planets that produced the materials needed to build more AA-ships, and devise heavier, more devastating missiles to launch at this mysterious Bubble.

The Ix Mentat was approached by one of its peers and tactfully asked why one small, insignificant world was its target.

“Because it's there,” the Ix replied, glowering and seething with rage. “Because it defies us!”

“Defiance is not permitted,” the Le Mentat agreed and that was the end of that.

Chapter Three

MARGE BECAME MORE VOCAL BUT STRUGGLED PAINFULLY FOR SENTENCES or words and would often burst into tears. Peggy would watch her, lean over, and pat her shoulder or her hand, then immediately go into what Kris called her “meditative” state.

When discussing her charges with Dorothy, the psychologist advised her to suggest words, if she could, to Marge or show pictures. Peggy was obviously aware of what was happening about her, and that was a very good sign.

“Miss Barrow,” and Dorothy gave the mischievous smile that made her seem much younger, “wants to take charge of our laboratory. She is naturally appalled at its primitive facilities and amazed that we aren’t all down with something fatal. Leon, Thor, and the others need her skills so much that they’re willing to put up with her . . . disorientation.” Dorothy sighed. “Miss Barrow will not be pleased when she accepts that she’s on another planet entirely and will never get more than the equipment we have.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that, Dorothy,” Kris said with a grin.

“What do you know that they haven’t told me?” Dorothy asked, eyeing Kris with mock annoyance.

“I’m not sure they’ve told me any more than you will have heard, too. Like they *are* going to try to get back to Earth.”

“They couldn’t bring my shopping list with them, could they?” the psychologist asked in a wistful tone, then added more briskly, “I am encouraged, though. We’re getting almost daily breakthroughs now. Though how we’ll fit some of these people into Botany I haven’t a clue. I mean, an astrophysicist who was on the Hubble team and a meteor-

ologist when the weather here is already controlled—Do we even have a clue how that's done?"

"Zainal thinks that huge square block we discovered on the seashore has something to do with it. There are four others in sort of a pattern."

"Any idea of *when* the Earth trip will take place?"

"We've a lot of studying to do first," Kris said and rose, not wanting to spread more gossip, even to someone as discreet as Dorothy was, professionally or personally.

KRIS FOUND HER NAME UP ON THE ROSTER BOARD FOR A LATE AFTERNOON meeting with the Central Council. She checked in with the day care to be sure that the day's manager knew that she wouldn't be in to collect Zane at the usual hour. Sarah McDouall had already been informed. Zane did not notice his mother, since he was involved in some complicated game with Fek's child and two Rugarians whom Kris didn't know. The Rugarian babies were born with as much body fur as their parents, and it really was difficult for humans to tell them apart without going through the list of names until the *yaya* (which was Rugarian for the unadult) answered to the right one. A Deski young one was called a *slib*. Some of them were easier to identify since their skin had different tones.

Zainal caught up with her in the dining hall where they were both eating a quick meal.

"What's this all about then?" she asked him.

"Plans have been made. Discussion now."

She knew him well enough to know that she would get no more out of him. Then she noticed Miss Barrow threading her way to an empty table. She wore a look of disdain, as if wrapping herself carefully away from the reality of an ambience she could not escape. Unlike everyone else garbed in the ubiquitous ship suit, she wore a dress, severely cut, in one of the dark greens, which Kris had brought back from her excursion to the markets of Barevi. The dress was long-sleeved and buttoned up to a high collar, with a hemline at calf-length. To Kris' astonishment, Miss Barrow did incline her head graciously as she registered Kris' presence, but she straightened into consummate distaste as she recognized that Kris was seated with a Catteni. She turned her face haughtily away.

"Poor woman," Kris said, shaking her head.

"Why? She was saved the mines."

"One day, she'll find out. I hope," Kris added as an afterthought, "the notion that she is beholden to you doesn't throw her."

"She is good in lab, they say," Zainal remarked.

"So she is. We'd better go."

Kris saw the biggest of the flatbed vehicles draw up to the dining hall and heard it toot its horn. Half the diners immediately made their way to the door and climbed on the transport.

THEY WERE DELIVERED TO THE IMMENSE MAIN HANGAR WHERE THE scout ship and the two transports lurked in the shadows cast by the one work light left on in their area. Not for the first time, Kris wondered what the Farmers had used this vast area for, so neatly carved from the mountainside.

In the center of some of the unused space, chairs and benches had been set up, facing five large mounted slates that were still the best Botany solution for large displays. She could see that one held the diagram of this system and another of Earth. The other two were probably the systems in which the Barevi planet and the home planet of the Catteni were situated. The fifth held lists and names.

So, thought Kris with a surge of anticipation, we are moving outside again.

There was a table to one side of the slates with chairs crowding around it. Judge Iri Bempechat was seated in the center and was obviously the moderator for the meeting. Kris liked the old man enormously for his wit, his humor, and his vast store of judicial wisdom. So far no one had contested any of his decisions and she hoped the situation would remain that way. On his right was Ray Scott, on his left two men who were vaguely familiar to her: they also had the gaunt look of Victims despite two weeks of restorative treatment and therapy. Even those who had played "doggo" showed the effects of their incarceration in the brutal open pens where the Eosi had contained them. Dorothy Dwardie sat beyond those two men. The rest of the Council, from Chuck Mitford to Leon Dane, occupied the other spaces. Raisha and Gino sat together, trying to look unconcerned and anonymous at the end of the right side.

Two seats were still unoccupied and, as Kris and Zainal entered, he gave his head a slight tilt toward the table, indicating those chairs were for them. Kris was quite glad to join him there. That gave her a chance to see who else had been invited. Mostly those who were technically skilled in one way or another, including Dick Aarens, and a great many of those who had been in the Fifth and Sixth Drops.

Well, she thought, we won't have to contend with Anna Bollinger and Janet.

Ray stood up and whatever private conversations had been going ceased.

“Zainal has proposed several plans of action since we cannot be sure that the Farmers will answer our latest message to them, nor when. We’ve been fortunate enough to have the latest information of Earth from those we rescued from the Barevi slave pens. Zainal?” Ray sat down and Zainal stood, going to the slates.

“First, we need to know who or what is watching Botany outside the Bubble,” he said. “This is the point where the Eosi tried to ram their way in.” Someone had drawn in cartoons of the debris. “They left enough behind so that I believe the scout ship can poke her nose outside the Bubble and have a look.”

“What about the geo-synchronous satellite up there?” Aarens asked, jumping to his feet to forestall the others who more politely raised their hands to signify that they had a query.

“It may or may not be able to see the scout’s nose among the rubble,” Zainal said, “but by the time the report is sent back, Baby will no longer be there. The records will show only what has been seen before. Unless the film is sent to a very high-ranking Eosi, it will be considered what you call a glitch. In order to get out of the Bubble, we need to calculate the speed and direction of the new satellite that the Eosi have put in place. We can then figure out where to leave the Bubble without being detected.”

“Yeah,” Aarens said in a dubious tone of voice, “but that sat would see the scout’s ion trail, wouldn’t it?”

“Not if the speed of the scout is sufficient to get it behind one of the moons. Its direction would be unknown.”

“What about if there’s a fast ship just waiting for us to try something like that?”

“There are ways,” Zainal said with a grin. “That scout is much faster than anything but another scout. Such ships are never used as watchers.”

Aarens shrugged and sat down.

“That is the first step,” Zainal said.

“If you’re going back to Barevi, I’ve a long shopping list,” someone said and received a chuckle.

“No, Barevi would be too hot for us right now,” Zainal said. “We go to Earth and we use two ships; the scout and the KDM which will be renamed and altered to look as if it had been hit by space . . . stuff.”

“That metal’ll be hard to dent,” Gino said, shaking his head. “You Catteni make a good hull.”

“It’ll be camouflaged,” Hassan Moussa said and grinned. “I’m a past master at that.”

"But going back to Earth?" Aarens asked, stunned.

"Last place they will expect us." And Zainal turned to one of the Victims who nodded agreement. "Ricky Farmer here was senior air controller for O'Hare airport while there was still Human air traffic. When all your planes were grounded and he was victimized, he took notes on Catteni routes and procedures. He has code words—though his Catteni is about what my English once was," and that rated some chuckles from the audience, "and these will help us get into some of the landing places now used by Catteni transport ships. I understand from Jeff Fawcett," and he gestured to the other Victim, "that large amusement areas have been built around the landing sites for the crews. These would be useful places for us to find out more information."

"You mean, that cool as a cucumber, we're going to invade Earth?" Lenny Doyle said.

"We also intend to . . ." and Zainal had the merest smile on his lips, "invade Catteni."

That provoked a widespread eruption from the audience, more an elated one than fearful, although quite a few faces bore skeptical expressions.

"Hey, ain't that pushing our luck?" Lenny Doyle asked, raising his voice to be heard above the babel.

"Only volunteers," Zainal said with a sly grin. "And mostly to learn what would be impossible to learn on your planet. More codes are needed and Catteni is the only place to go for that."

Kris waited for someone to ask what was so obvious to her: if Zainal was going to contact Catteni dissidents. She didn't know how many people on Botany—besides Chuck Mitford—knew anything about that facet of his grand scheme. Surely Zainal would have confided in Ray his hopes that he could muster assistance on his home planet to help overthrow the Eosi.

"We got to have information we can't get any other way," Ray Scott put in. Kris heaved a small sigh of relief. Ray did know and seemingly approved. "We're also going to ask for volunteers to remain on Earth and contact the resistance groups."

"I don't know all of them," Jeff Fawcett said in a voice still hoarse from his recent ordeal. "But enough for us to get the word spread."

"Jeff's also going to need a volunteer to go with him," Scott said, "preferably from the First or Second Drops . . ."

The number of hands that shot into the air gave Kris a thrill of pride. The most eager had jumped to their feet, to establish their willingness: Joe Latore, both the Doyle brothers, Mack Dargle, Bart Lin-

coln, Matt Su, and Sandy Areson were those she recognized first in the show of hands.

"Thank you very much," Zainal said.

"Gratifying, most gratifying," Ray said, holding up his hand, too, as did all the other military men seated at the table. "More than the ships can hold."

"Some must speak and understand Catten," Zainal said.

"We're learning," quipped someone.

"You will learn harder," Zainal said with a wry expression.

"What about the Farmers?" Jay Greene asked when the laughter at that threat died. "Shouldn't we wait for their response? And their advice?"

"No, the time to move is now," Scott said.

Zainal stood. "The Eosi will try very hard to break through the Bubble. That is their way. Run shod roughly over any opposition with the force of their weapons. We must leave before they reinforce their warships. They have many."

"But they haven't been able to penetrate the Bubble, and we know they've tried," Jay said.

"They will keep trying until they have," Zainal said. "That is why they tried to discover new information in the minds of your specialists."

Dick Aarens jumped to his feet, his expression angry and obstinate. "And what happens to those of us left here when they do break through the Bubble? Have you contingency plans for that—if you're taking all three ships away with you?"

"We move quickly and not where they expect us to go and learn what they plan and how to . . ." Zainal looked down at Kris for the word he needed.

"Counteract," she murmured.

"Counteract their plans."

"We're still fleas on a dog's back," Jay said, "with all the ships you said they have. I was talking to Rick Farmer, and he says they've got hundreds in their navy. What if they use all of them against the Bubble?"

Judge Iri Bempechat raised his hand and was given precedence over others who wanted to add their comments.

"Zainal, such a fleet is widely dispersed, is it not?" And when Zainal nodded, the Judge went on, still looking at Zainal, "and it would take weeks, even months, to direct them all here. So we have some leeway if we make our moves quickly. Admiral Scott believes that they would try to install a battery on the moons that are outside the Bubble. To do so, they must bring in machinery, material—and life support systems for whichever unfortunate species is drafted for such an undertaking. I

am also of the opinion, with which our military and naval representatives concur," and, with one hand on his chest, he bowed his head to the right and left, "that the Farmers must have placed some sort of sentinel to monitor our protective Bubble. They made it clear, in that one regrettably short interview with various groups of us, that they intend to preserve us. I believed in their sincerity as well as their interest in us . . . even if it should be the interest of a scientist watching ants to see how they contrive—"

"Now, wait a bloody minute . . ." and Geoffrey Ainger jumped to his feet. Kris had not noticed him, seated at the back, and wasn't happy at his presence. "What is all this going to do for us? Except put the colony in more danger? Simply because one . . ." and his pause was pregnant with his distrust and animosity toward Zainal, ". . . person wants to pursue a private revenge?"

"First duty of a captured soldier . . . sir . . ." and it was a stern Mitford whose parade ground voice dominated the shouted reactions from an angry audience, "is to do his best to escape and return to his unit. Mine is on Earth. And if Zainal wants to see his people freed of the Eosian domination, we sure as hell do, too, 'cause it means we'll get out from under 'em. Militarily, a combined assault has many advantages."

That speech set the cat among the pigeons, Kris thought, struggling to keep from cheering. Or maybe the night crawlers after live meat.

Ray Scott, with help from Peter Easley and Judge Bempechat, finally restored enough order to continue the meeting. Easley had been discreetly seated to one side where Kris had not noticed him. Not too far, as it turned out, from Ainger. Not far either from Beggs, whom she saw sitting by the British ex-naval officer. Had Pete sat there to keep an eye on those dissidents? Quite likely, she thought.

"You gave me the impression, sergeant, that you had no wish to leave Botany now." Ainger could put a wealth of venom in a seemingly casual comment.

"I don't, but I'll do a great deal to preserve what we all have made here. So I can enjoy what I've—we've—worked so hard to achieve." Satisfied with the applause to his answer, Chuck sat down again.

"There are risks," Ray said, once more taking charge of the proceedings. "Most of you can figure them out without much help but, if our people on Earth knew that there was an organized *space* resistance to the Cat—I mean, the Eosian overlords—it would give them heart and purpose against the tremendous odds they've had to deal with. Especially if we can also prove that we've rescued the ones the Eosi were brain-wiping."

"Speaking of tremendous odds, admiral—" And Ainger was again

on his feet. "Just how large a fleet exists? That's pertinent even if getting the entire naval arm of the Catteni here would take time." He looked directly at Zainal for the answer.

"Some of the oldest ships in service are slow and their equipment obsolete," Zainal replied. "There are only four of heavy—new in service dreadnoughts, did you call them, Ray—" And when Scott nodded, he went on, "that much information Admiral Scott and I learned on Barevi. Until just recently spaceship builders have been concentrating on producing ships like the KDL and KDM, to replace those no longer space-worthy, like the first ship we attacked."

"So what sort of ships and weaponry do they have to bombard those of us left behind on Botany?" Ainger asked.

Boy, thought Kris, that Ainger has a bad negative attitude.

"Only the four of the dreadnoughts but there are . . . ships of the line . . . which are able to destroy satellites, small moons, and large asteroids. To my knowledge, which is now not up to date, there are thirty of them. They are assault vessels, which supported the kind of large transport that landed on your planet. They are larger than the two K-class we have here."

Ray Scott leaned over the table toward Ainger. "Zainal has given us a list of the types of spacecraft used by the . . . um . . . navy. We've also been able to get a fair translation of the data from the scout ship, so we have useful details about range, crew complement, firepower, and maneuverability of all types, except the dreadnoughts, which are so new. You are certainly welcome to peruse the data at your leisure."

Ainger waved away that offer with a flick of his fingers. "Those of us remaining on Botany are going to be vulnerable . . ."

"Only if the Bubble fails," Ray Scott said in a testy tone, "which seems unlikely, given the advanced technology of the Farmers which is so upsetting the Eosi." Then he deliberately looked away from Ainger. "So we have three expeditions to mount: first, a reconnaissance at the Bubble edge; second, sending off both the scout and one transport to Earth to see what—" he grinned—"trouble we can cause there and how we can help the resistance movements; and third, an information-gathering jaunt to Catten. I think that has to be under your command, Zainal," and he nodded in his direction, "with your choice of crew but we'll accept volunteers for both expeditions."

"Who gets to peek out of the Bubble?"

Zainal stood. "A full crew." Then he pointed at individuals. "Gino, Raisha, Bert, Laughrey, Boris, and Hassan. Those only who speak good Catteni and are the right size will come with me," and his eyes flickered briefly at Kris.

"We feel we should pack the Earth expedition with as many infiltrators as possible," Ray said and had to raise his hand to finish his sentence when most of his listeners rose and shouted out their names, "to spread the good word."

"What if there're some traitors among us?" Dick Aarens asked.

Ray Scott gave the mechanic a long incredulous look. "How many do you think there could be?"

There were smothered giggles, and Dick Aarens swung about, trying to find the sources.

"Well, there might be," he muttered with sullen aggressiveness. "Particularly on the last drop—and even among the Victims. One of them might have been lying 'doggo' for very *good* reasons. He kept his brains while others got them wiped."

"Now, just a cotton-pickin' minute." Will Seissmann was on his feet, shaking a fist at Aarens across the audience.

"Young man . . ." began Miss Barrow who was puce-faced with indignation.

Dr. Ansible was so apoplectic at the mere suggestion that he had to be restrained from diving across two rows of seats to Aarens.

"I'd retract that, were I you," Peter Easley said.

"I won't because it damned well is a possibility," Aarens said, jutting his jaw out as if asking for a punch which would have many willing to oblige him.

Dorothy Dwardie jumped up. "In my professional opinion, Mr. Aarens, there is little possibility of treachery among those who suffered, or even avoided, the Eosi mind-wipe. We have had trauma counseling sessions which would have exposed a quisling."

Which, Kris devoutly hoped, was accurate. But the suspicion had been raised and would hang there, a dark doubt in everyone's mind: even among those who had learned a great deal about each other in the years they had worked together on Botany.

Another of the psychology team, Ben Bovalan, rose. "We may have neither a lie detector nor any sodium pentathol but there are ways of testing responses. That is, if anyone feels such a procedure is at all necessary above and beyond our trauma counseling." He gave Aarens a dire look before he sat down.

"I won't close what has been a very constructive meeting on that kind of sour note," Ray Scott said. He was not the only one scowling in Aarens' direction. "I will summarize what we," and he indicated the others at the table, "have been planning, and why there is some urgency in the scout making a reconnaissance run. We do take Zainal's advice that Earth would be the last place the Eosi would look for us to appear,"

and he grinned, “and the best place for us to set in motion a coup d’état. If Zainal is willing to risk his life returning to Catten for the information he considers vital to our ultimate goal of freedom from the Eosian domination, then I wish him all the luck he’ll need and the support of everyone on this planet. We all have many reasons to be grateful he was on that first drop. Don’t we?”

The spontaneous cheering, and the warmth of it, brought tears to Kris’ eyes. She never would have expected that sort of public gratitude . . . especially from Ray Scott who had not always agreed with Zainal. The applause and stamping continued for so long that she gave him a nudge to stand and acknowledge it. He did so, with typical diffidence, but his wave of acceptance took in the entire audience and became a formal salute to Ray Scott.

That was when Kris noticed the very satisfied grin on Iri Bempachat’s face. Chuck looked suspiciously bland, one eyebrow twitching while he played with his pencil, slipping it up and down through the fingers of his right hand, a sure sign of complicity. And suddenly Aarens’ niggling little suggestion was only Aarens tossing a spanner in works that didn’t happen to include his participation.

THE VERY NEXT DAY, THE DESIGNATED PILOTS CLIMBED INTO BABY, THE scout ship, and took off for the peek out of the Bubble’s remarkable material. They drew straws for takeoff and landing and the other in-flight duties since this was also a training mission.

The official mission directors took places in Ray Scott’s office, grouping around the bridge console, which had been taken from the crash-landed transport that had made the Fifth Drop. So those in Scott’s office would have a chance to see what Baby did and saw. Someone had thought to rig speakers outside the hangar so that the many that wouldn’t find places in the office could at least hear what was going on.

“On site,” Raisha said, her voice ringing with suppressed excitement. “Still the same space flot. Can’t see that any of it has moved a centimeter. Gino’s easing Baby’s nose in between two of the largest of the disks the Eosi vessel left behind.” She chuckled.

“Good choice,” Ray said, grinning. “The geo-synchronous satellite might not even notice we’re looking out.”

“Hold it right here,” and there was such a change in Raisha’s tone that everyone tensed. “How big did Zainal say the Catteni fleet arm is?”

Apprehensively, Ray looked toward Zainal. The Catteni immediately leaned over the speaker grill.

"How many do you see?" he asked as calmly as if he was asking how many rock squats were visible.

"Two of those dreadnoughts, I think. We're not entirely outside the Bubble yet but the skin is transparent and we can see out." What she didn't add, "and I hope they can't see in," hovered unsaid but understood.

Kris felt goosebumps rising on her arms and rubbed them away.

"There are also three flotillas of other smaller craft," and Hassan Moussa took over the reporting, "five in each group, beside and above the two big guys you can probably see on the bridge monitor."

"Yes, we see them. Are they the dreadnoughts, Zainal?" Ray asked, beckoning for Zainal to stand beside him.

Zainal nodded. "What else?"

"Wouldn't they be enough?" Jim Rastancil asked facetiously.

Zainal shrugged.

"Hey, we've got other junk in the sky," Hassan continued. "Shall I widen the screen?"

"Yes, please," Zainal said, crossing his arms on his chest, the picture of objective observer.

"It's the dreadnoughts I worry about," Ray said, rubbing his chin nervously.

"What other ships are there, Hassan?" Zainal asked blandly.

"Bulky cargo type carriers and one transport larger than the KDL or KDM. Heading toward the nearer moon."

Ray looked at Zainal. "You were right about the moon base. What sort of air-to-ground missiles would they have? Something heavy enough to penetrate the Bubble?"

"Stay where you are, Gino," Zainal cautioned. "I do not know, Ray. Eosian weapons are powerful but the Bubble is an unknown quantity."

"Baby has not fully penetrated the Bubble," Gino said. "Hassan's just telling you what we can see through it."

There was a sudden flash of blinding whiteness, which stunned everyone watching, causing them to have retinal flashbacks. It took several seconds before clear vision was restored to those in the office.

"I do believe they're trying to breach the Bubble," said Hassan after a moment, and he sounded highly amused.

"What was that flash?"

"Them," Hassan replied. "Quite likely with every weapon on board."

"I'd say they fired all forward weapons," Laughrey said, "although that flash was so strong, I don't think any of us are seeing more than the damned flash. Baby evidently saved us the worst of it with some sort of instant screen." Zainal nodded.

“Any pain in your eyes? Headache?” Leon Dane asked, present in his capacity as a physician.

“Do you have a clearer idea of what happened down there?” Zainal asked.

“We got the flash right on,” Ray said, blinking furiously, “but I’m seeing all right . . .” He looked around for confirmation from the others and everyone nodded.

“Us, too,” Laughrey said, “even with lots of retinal echoes, all shaped like Baby’s forward screen. Yeah, and hey, nothing got through the Bubble to us.”

“All systems functioning perfectly,” Raisha said, calm again.

“And whaddaya know?” Gino’s tone was jubilant. “There isn’t a ship out there—’cept the one heading toward the Moon, which is in the same place they were before they fired.”

“Some of the smaller ones are tumbling end over end,” said Bert Put. “That was some backlash! Shake ’em up good.”

“I don’t think they’ll try that kind of a broadside again real soon,” Boris said in his deep bass voice, rippling with laughter.

“They’ve lost a whole mess of gear again, too,” Gino said. “I doubt they’ve even reception from the nearer ships.”

“Could they have fired because they saw Baby?” Ray asked anxiously.

“No. We put the brakes on the moment Raisha spoke. The fo’ard screen was right against the Bubble film but we hadn’t penetrated it,” Gino said.

“You might say our timing was serendipitous,” Laughrey said, chuckling.

“Can you pick up the newest Eosi orbital satellite?” Ray said, reminding them of the second purpose of their flight.

“On screen,” Boris said. “Tracking and recording. It is not as fast as the Farmers’ orbital. In fact, it is as slow as a horse-drawn vehicle compared to a Formula One racer.”

“Really?” Jim Rastancil said.

Kris made a note to herself to tell Boris what a lovely comparison that was. And very reassuring. She turned to Zainal and saw that he was grinning, even if he couldn’t possibly know anything about Formula One racers. She’d told him about horses. But Formula racing had not yet come up in any of their conversations.

Now Zainal was nodding. “As soon as we know its trajectory and timing, the scout and the KDM must leave. They will take a while to get ship-to-ship communications back on-line, and then it will take the Eosi time to calm down at this defeat of their weapons. They will be

so angry, they could argue for days before they come to a decision about what to do next.”

“What about the moon base?” Ray asked.

Zainal shrugged. “That will take many weeks, months even, before it is finished. They may not even know we can get out when we want to.”

“But we landed on Barevi and stole a ship,” Ray said by way of reminder.

“They do not know that those ships are in here now.”

“How stupid are these Eosi?” Bull Fetterman asked, his eyebrows raised high in surprise.

“You might be surprised,” Zainal said.

“Then how long will it take to provision and crew the scout and the KDM?” John Beverly asked, speaking for the first time.

“How long is the trip to Earth?” Chuck asked Zainal.

“At top speed, about ten of your days,” Zainal said.

“Didn’t think it was that close,” remarked Beverly.

“From here it is. From Barevi it is longer.”

“I’d say we can provision, water, do a quick service in about three days,” Chuck said.

“Do it in one and a half,” Zainal said. “Sooner is better than later.”

“Okay, gang, let’s do it,” Chuck said, clapping his hands as a signal to move out. He got to the door of Ray’s office, stopped, turned, and asked, “So who’s going?”

Ray Scott was pulling a file to the center of his desk. “I’ll tell you by the end of dinner. All right, now, where’s that provisional list we made up?”

DINNER THAT NIGHT WAS MORE OF A FEAST THAN A NORMAL REPAST and there were loud calls for the evening’s cooks to come out and take a bow. Dowdall stood on his table and announced a call for volunteers to hunt enough rocksquat and catch enough fish to provision the ships with “edible” food, not that Catteni issue.

“Dorothy warned me that there’re a lot of scarce items on Earth. The Catteni take almost everything that’s produced,” he said with a very sober expression.

“Hey, Dow, we still got crates of the Catteni bars,” Joe Latore said. “They don’t taste like much . . . unless you’re real hungry.”

“There are so many hungry people,” Dr. Ansible said in a sad tone, but loud enough for many to hear.

Sandy Areson leaped atop her chair. “We got lots here we can send along. Botanical care packages. Any volunteers?”

“We can let all the kids sleep in the center tonight,” Patti Sue Greene shouted. “They’d love that and I’ll volunteer me . . .”

“You’ll need more than yourself,” Mavis Belton said.

“I will be glad to assist Patti Sue,” Anna Bollinger said and prodded Janet beside her who nodded quickly but without much enthusiasm.

Zane! Kris had to cover her mouth with one hand. What if she never came back from Catten? Never saw Zane again . . . Then she felt a hand squeeze her shoulder and looked up into Peter Easley’s eyes. He nodded his head once and smiled reassuringly. Kris sniffed, patted his hand, and sniffed again. No, Zane would be fine.

She was going on the Catten mission with Zainal and he had not yet set an established departure time. There had to be dings painted into the KDM: he had to do a little fixing with the recognition beacon, so that it gave only so much of the normal patterning before jamming. That would also verify the damage it had suffered. There were uniforms to be fixed: hair to be dyed gray, and the yellow contact lenses to be fitted so that this group would look more Catteni than what was called the first Botany expedition to Barevi had. Sandy Areson had fixed up cheek pads for Zainal and several rather nasty-looking scars that could be glued on his face—she instructed Kris on the process. These would sufficiently alter his appearance and would also explain the persona he was adopting for the expedition. Sandy gave Kris small cheek pads that gave her more of a rounder, Catteni-shaped face. For Chuck she had yet another wad, in between his gums and teeth. Subtle enough but effective in altering appearances.

They’d spend the longish journey to Catten learning as much of the language as they could cram into their skulls . . . as well as the drills that would mark them as Drassi. Coo and Pess would also be in the crew: Deski and both Rugarians often accompanied transport crews because of their strength. There were always Rugarians on Catten as well. Coo and Pess might even be able to discover as much information from their species as Zainal could.

When dinner—and the accolades to the cooks—was completed, Ray Scott climbed to the top of a cleared table and read out the names of the crews for each ship. At the end there were more cheers than long faces.

“If this first run works,” Ray said, “we’ll make as many as we can and save as many who may be at risk as possible.”

That met with a rousing cheer, foot stamping, and hand clapping.

“Can we handle more?” someone shouted.

“Don’t be silly,” a woman replied contemptuously. “We’ve got plenty of space.”

"Yeah, but who's to say who's in a real risk situation?"

"We'll find out," Ray said, waving down others who wanted to discuss that issue. "We've got people from quite a few nationalities so we can make good contacts everywhere."

"Any specialist is at risk," Norma Barrow surprised everyone by saying in a firm and unusually loud voice which defied contradiction.

"And no quisling accepted," a man said from somewhere in the dining hall.

Aarens whirled about trying to find who had spoken.

"Cool it, Aarens," Ray Scott said. "It's not as if the Eosi have coerced many humans. At least I hope not."

"I'll find me a lie detector and some sodium pent," Leon Dane said. "We'll process anyone we think might be suspicious. And long before they find out we've got our own transport," he added with a grin. He was going along as mission medic and to see what medical supplies he could acquire. He was hoping that not every one of his dissident friends in Sydney had been rounded up when he was. Joe Marley hoped to find help in Perth. Ricky Farmer had said that Catteni ships flitted from one continent to another, seemingly without orders or on special missions.

"It's got so even the sight of a Catteni transport sends everyone into hiding," Ricky said. He had volunteered to go to Chicago where many were now living in the old underground sewer and transport system, which had been constructed in the 1800s and had been virtually forgotten.

Leila Massuri and Basil Whitby had volunteered to go to London and Paris. The Chunnel had not been finished or opened up but it was completely dug from shore to shore and had provided a means of getting to and from the continent. Boris and Raisha would pilot the scout and see what they could find in their homeland, Russia. Bull Fetterman, Mic Rowland, Lenny Doyle, and Nat Baxter completed the Baby's crew. Bert Put and Laughrey would pilot the KDM, with Lex Kariatin, Will Seissmann, Joe Latore, Vic Yowell, Ole, Sandy Areson, and Matt Su as crew while John Beverly was de facto captain. They hoped to have all four decks full of refugees on the way back. And at least some of the machinery, tools, and equipment on the wish lists.

Zainal, Gino Marrucci as backup pilot, Kris, Chuck Mitford, Coo, Pess, Mack Dargle, Ninety Doyle, and Jim Rastancil were those going on the KDL to Catten.

Chapter Four

IT WAS AS WELL THAT BOTANY DAYS WERE SO LONG BECAUSE EVERY minute was needed as engineering groups under Peter Snyder—with Dick Aarens working as hard as anyone else despite a sour mood as he took exception to everything and argued any alterations—checked and provisioned the ships.

“If he comes into the infirmary with a wrench-shaped wound on his head . . .” Pete muttered to Thor Mayock at breakfast.

“I won’t give him any painkillers when I stitch it up,” Thor finished for him. “You look ghastly.”

“Ha! Speak for yourself.”

Worrell was everywhere, living up to his nickname of Worry, checking lists and trying to supply whatever he could to take back as care packages. Beth Isbell and Sally Stoffers were his shadows, discreetly double-checking since every one was working flat out to accomplish the necessary miracles.

To be sure of accuracy in the configurations, five people checked out the trajectory and time of the thirty-hour orbit of the second world-circling Eosian satellite and several windows were discovered: Bert chose the south polar ones that he felt gave both the scout ship and the KDM the longest escape shot. The first propitious window left little time, but both KDM and Baby were ready, so the crews scrambled aboard. Weary but satisfied teams cheered as they took off. Following the example that had worked with the return procedure of the first Barevi raid, they made all possible speed to the Bubble, slowed and pressed prows through at minimum thrust. The scout went first, just in case, and gave the KDM the all-clear. After that they were lost to those watching. Nor could any message be sent back to reassure those on Botany.

Zainal, Ray Scott, Pete Easley, and Judge Iri spent hours trying to work out, from copies of Baby's records, a plausible mission that would explain where Zainal and his ship had been before they returned to Catten. Zainal couldn't remember if any of the earliest of the K class had gone missing, although that was likely enough. They were used for large crew explorations of habitable planets, for mining expeditions and supply runs. But the clever damage to the hull would explain a space collision. Pete Snyder got Aarens challenged by the need for a fault that would appear to have disabled the engine. A small part, actually, which as everyone knew, was the kind that could be easily overlooked in a servicing and yet cause considerable problems when it malfunctioned. A bogus part for the gyro was constructed, using imperfect metals to account for its sudden collapse. Aarens was very pleased with his handiwork and received generous praise. His basic need for constant appreciation was wearing on those who had to work with him. But, as they all said, he produced when the chips were down.

Then Aarens redeemed himself once again, by pointing out that the boards in the bridge helm positions were the same. Everything salvageable from the crashed ship had been saved: just in case some unexpected use could be made of the parts. As it turned out, even the unusable pieces had been stacked at the back of a cave. Zainal went through the worst damaged, scorched boards and chose several which, when they reached Catten, he would substitute for the usable ones, thus confirming the substantial damage which had delayed their return. These and the malfunctioning gyro unit would be sufficient.

"They will not let us dock at the space station with such damage," he said, waving the scorched boards about. "They'll shunt us to the surface, to a small emergency field until they can send technicians to inspect. But we need some sort of cargo. A ship picking up materials from a mining center . . ."

"Duxie's prospectors have mined more gold than we need," was one of Judge Iri's suggestions.

"Platinum, too," Ray put in.

"Those are good," Zainal said. "Any other rare metals? Even a crate or two of raw ore would be useful. Rhenium, any of the platinum group. We'll say we had to leave cargo behind to lift with such a damaged ship. The gyro went first, we were in a meteor shower . . . took us a long time to jury-rig the boards. I think that's a suitable scenario," and he grinned slyly at Kris for that latest addition to his ever-expanding English vocabulary. "Good Drassi bringing home what they can. And I can raise such a fuss over the shoddy manufacture that delayed us that I shall be sent from one office to another with my complaints, and that's

how I'll learn what I need to know. Make loud accusations of poor servicing and second-rate materials."

"Is Catten so bureaucratic, too?" asked Ray with a frown.

"Only the Eosi cut corners."

"You're sure you can carry this impersonation off?" Judge Iri was clearly worried.

Zainal shrugged. "Why not? Who but a Catteni ship would go to Catten? It is not a comfortable place to be," and he glanced over at his volunteers, chosen as much because they were all sturdily built and would be able to manage the heavier gravity of Catten. Kris wasn't so sure about her own ability but nothing would have kept her from going along, even if she had to remain in the artificially lower gravity of the ship the entire time. She now had enough Catten to answer any communications the ship might be sent.

"We have been away a long time, whoever we are," Zainal said with a little sly grin, "so it doesn't matter that we have landed and changed the ID. Who will know?"

"How fast does your paint dry?" asked Ninety facetiously.

They still had the uniforms that had been tailored to fit the first Barevi raid but Sandy Areson had some new artifices to contribute. First, she'd an awful-smelling mixture that bleached their hair a dingy gray. One of the recovering Victims was a skilled optician (though he never did explain what he had done on Earth that would have caused him to be victimized by the Eosi). When he realized that gray hair and skin would not entirely present the team as Catteni, he finally managed to produce yellow contact lenses, cursing the need to improvise, since he had not considered his first attempt to be successful. But he managed.

"You'll have to take them out and wash them every day," Riz Kamei said, unhappy with that necessity. "No plastics here at all."

"Yet . . ." one of his helpers said with a grin.

"Whatever," and Riz flicked his long fingers irritably, "but the lenses will do what's necessary." Then he shook his head as if he found even the requirement of yellow as an eye color an offense.

He showed them all how to put them in, how to clean them in a solution he provided, again muttering about insufficient supplies until everyone really did wonder what his Earth side job had been. He did however allow himself a slight smile of approval when the contacts were in place.

Kris had never considered herself especially vain, but she had had a brief flush of dismay when her hair had not only been clipped very short on her head but bleached such a hideous gray. Now, with the

yellow eye lenses, she looked so much like a Catteni, she was almost nauseated.

"You're still much too pretty to be a typical Catten broad," Ninety Doyle remarked. He added a smile that, with his yellowed teeth and dyed skin, made him look all too much like other Drassi they'd seen in the Barevi markets.

She gave a shudder of repulsion. "You look awful, Ninety. Lenny would disown you."

"Lenny's mad enough he couldn't come along," Ninety said, closely examining his gray complected face. Their Botany suntans also helped approximate a Catteni grey skin. Sandy had said both body paint and hair dye would last about two or three weeks, depending on how often they bathed.

"Yeah, but Lenny's closer to a Guinness than I am," Ninety said gloomily.

Looking around, Kris remembered that the Catteni who had crewed Baby hadn't washed at all, remembering the stench in their quarters.

"If there is any Guinness left, Ricky Farmer wasn't so sure about that. But I'm sure he'll bring you back a bottle," Kris said, meaning to console.

"Bottle?" Ninety roared in dismay, as if she had uttered an unforgivable blasphemy.

"Can?"

"What'd you bet he frees the last vat in Dublin?" Mack Dargle said.

"I never bet on sure things," Kris said, grinning.

"They gotta get your teeth yellower, Kris. That smile's a giveaway."

"And not a tube of Coigate to whiten my teeth anywhere on this planet," she said in wistful retort.

"They may bring some back, you know," Mack Dargle said, taking the mirror from Doyle so he could inspect himself and did a good comic double take. "My own mother wouldn't recognize me."

"Just so long as a Catten wife doesn't," Ninety said.

Mack shuddered. "I saw some of those crew-women. No thank you. I'd sooner wrestle with a crocodile."

THE PREPARATIONS FOR THIS FORAY INTO ENEMY TERRITORY WERE FINALLY complete. The window was a nighttime polar one so Kris hurried into the day care where Zane was sleeping, for one last look.

Zainal came to join her, resting his big hands sympathetically on her arms.

“He’s a fine strong lad. He’ll do well here,” he said into her ear and pressed his face against her cheek in his special display of affection.

A noise made them both turn to the doorway and there was Pete Easley, a slightly droll smile on his face.

“I drew night duty,” he said, though all three knew he had probably done so on purpose. “He’ll be fine. Don’t worry about him.”

“We won’t,” Zainal said with a nod of his head and with one arm still on Kris’, led her out of the room. Both stopped at the threshold for one more look at the sleeping child.

Kris tried not to, but she sniffed all the way to the hangar and had to blot her eyes twice. She hadn’t thought—in all the fuss and furor of these preparations—that she would experience the same anguish at leaving him as she had on their first expedition to Barevi.

“Zane *will* be all right with Easley,” Zainal murmured as he lifted her down from the flatbed that had brought them to the now-battered and space-worn KDL awaiting them outside the hangar.

The Judge, Ray Scott, Worry, Pete Snyder, Jay and Patti Sue Greene, and even Aarens were there to wish them a safe journey. Worry was even bold enough to clasp Kris in a bear hug. The judge kissed her hand and then both cheeks. If Ray Scott only shook her hand hard and warmly, Patti Sue was openly weeping as she hugged Kris tightly, murmuring over and over, “I’ll never forget you, buddy, I’ll never forget you.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Kris said, feeling as she might weep like Patti and, ignoring whatever protocol to board there might have been, she scrambled up the steps into the KDL. Everyone else followed, with Chuck Mitford growling how he hated farewells.

ZAINAL INDICATED THAT GINO SHOULD DO THE HONORS ON THE TAKE-off, while he punched the final bits and pieces of their “delayed return story” into the ship’s log. He grinned with unusual good humor when the log acknowledged the entries. There were enough computer hackers to have made it a proper job “as long,” they teased Zainal, “as his Catteni was okay.” They had even coded into the log appropriate star chart coordinates. If, that is, any one would dare question the report of Emassi Venlik, Zainal’s new alias.

“He lived once. Died badly, and only I know where” was all Zainal would say of the man whose identity he was assuming.

“Was he a chosen?” Chuck asked.

Zainal gave a quick shake of his head. His next word startled everyone. “Schkelk!”

Chuck was the first one to fall into the stance of an alert Drassi,

with Kris a second later before Mack and Ninety suddenly realized what had been said: "Listen." Even Coo and Pess straightened from their usual languid positions.

Distinctly and slowly enough for them to understand, he gave orders for the ship to take off and the course it was to assume as soon as it had lifted from the ground.

"Emassi!" was the appropriate reply said in crisp unison and then each went to the duty station they had been assigned.

Coo and Pess buckled into the two drops seats that had been placed on the bridge for their use in takeoff and landing.

Zainal never spoke another word of English during the entire eight-day voyage. Neither did they after one of Zainal's thumps, and Kris was no exception—though she didn't think he whacked her as hard as he did Gino, Chuck, Mack, or Ninety. But it sure reminded her to keep in her part.

The yellow lenses irritated Mack's eyes. Riz had mentioned that someone might have trouble and sent along eyewash, with the recommendation to keep the contacts in for short periods, lengthening the time each day to allow the eyeball to adjust. By the time they were orbiting Catten, he could keep them in most of the day.

Seen from outer space, Catten was a lovely planet! Almost as beautiful as the pictures of Earth sent back from space by Russian and American astronauts. There were larger landmasses but inland lakes the size of seas and several enormous rivers to judge by the width of them. It was also remarkably green, which caused a good deal of surprise.

Zainal grinned. And said in Catten: "They have destroyed enough planets so that they are careful about this one. All manufacturing work is done on other worlds."

"You should see Earth," Ninety said proudly.

"Not all of it is as pleasant as . . ." Mark paused because there was no Catteni word for Ireland, "where you live."

"More unpleasant since Catteni come," added Gino grimly with an apologetic glance at Zainal who merely nodded. "KDM and . . . yaya . . ." which was all Gino could think of as a Catteni description of "Baby," "will not like what is there now."

Everyone paused in reflection on that unhappy observation. Then Gino pointed to a good-sized satellite. "How many moons?"

"Four," Zainal replied, then added as an immense space station spun leisurely into view in its geo-synchronous orbit above Catten, "we do not want to dock there."

Everyone gawked at the sight of the monstrous edifice, with gantries and netted supplies far larger than the KDL floating on tethers about it.

Ships of all sizes made their way in and out of docking slips. One entire quadrant seemed to be a shipyard, taking advantage of the lack of gravity to push large structural members into position for assembly.

Suddenly the com unit blurted out a harsh barking which was either muffled or distorted so much that only Zainal understood; the others caught maybe one word clearly.

“. . . chouma.”

Zainal rattled off his assumed name, the fact that his ship was damaged and requested landing at an isolated emergency site on planet.

By listening with intense concentration to the Catteni language, the crew got most of the next exchange, demanding details of the damage. Zainal responded that he could not maneuver into the moon base with currently faulty equipment. Immediately he was bluntly told to sheer off his present course while a landing site could be warned of his imminent arrival. Zainal twitched fingers behind his back to indicate to the others how well their scheme was going. Considering the size and complexity of the space station, the Terrans could well appreciate the need for caution, and why ships had to be in maneuverable condition. They were probably as fastidious about unstable cargoes.

The interrogation went on. What was the trouble? Where had the KCX been? Was it contaminated? What cargo did it have on board?

Zainal signaled to Gino to go into his well-rehearsed reply, the pilot scrambling to get his notes out of his pocket in case he needed to refer to them.

“Engineer Tobako speaking,” he said. He’d had fun choosing an alias. “Gyro unit, two-three-eight . . .” and he spoke the Catten letters appended to the part, “malfunctioned in meteor swarm, flash-back damaging many boards in control panel and causing helm problems. Maneuvering affected. Suffered hull and interior damages. Landed on largest meteor to repair damage. Gyro part badly made,” and Gino infused a lot of contempt in his voice for that failing. “Imperfect metal. Had to reduce cargo to lift from meteor. Only one cargo deck remains. Three crew died.”

“Only one part cargo?” The contempt and dismay was clearly audible and nothing at all was said about the loss of lives. “Go to field at . . .” and the Catten rattled off the coordinates so quickly that, while Gino managed to jot down the English equivalents of the first four numbers, that was as far as he had got by the end of the message. He gave Zainal a startled and anxious look. Zainal nodded to assure those on the bridge that he had heard all he needed to obey.

“What is the cargo?”

"Platinum, gold, rhenium, some germanium." Zainal took up the report now.

"Ah . . ." and that drawled exclamation was close to approval. "Is there more where that was found?"

"Yes. All can be collected again. I will return to the meteor with a repaired ship, and braver crewmen than the Drassi who died. These were only a step above Rassi . . ." Zainal paused to be sure that his complaint was understood. "It is a cargo I do not wish others to get."

"Ah . . ." and there was more warmth and approval. "A vehicle and mechanical support will meet you on the surface. Klotnik."

"Klotnik," Zainal responded. "Out."

When the com line had been cut, every one reacted, sighing, or whistling or mimicking the wipe of a sweaty brow. In fact, Ninety took out a square of cloth and was about to mop his face when Zainal thumped him. Immediately Ninety used his finger to scrape off the sweat, as a real Drassi would do.

"There is really not that much of a cargo," Kris said dubiously. Would they get in trouble with what they had? It was all that Walter Duxie, the head miner, could find that might be considered valuable by the Catteni in the short time he had to do any prospecting. The germanium had been pure luck. And what little of the platinum groups they had so far discovered. While the gold had seemed a real sacrifice to some people, the metal had little intrinsic value on Botany. The two professional and many amateur jewelers used it as settings for some of the rather magnificent gemstones which had turned up on the planet during the general assessment of mineral and metal deposits.

"It is enough, since they think we go back for what was left," Zainal said and grinned, looking more like the man she knew so well than the very Catteni Emassi who had barked answers over the com. "It has gone well. Now proceed slowly until we are in atmosphere and remember to vent smoke often."

That was an effect that Peter Snyder had been particularly pleased to install. It would dissipate fast enough in space but would certainly be visible from the space station, to enhance the story of a "damaged" ship.

"Much traffic," Gino said, glad enough to be steering away from the space station with so many other vehicles zipping here and there or ponderously moving' out.

"There are two dreadnoughts in dock, nine large surface landers," Zainal said, pointing to the stern ends.

They were visible once you knew what to look for, Kris realized. They looked bigger to her than the Empire ship from *Star Wars*.

"I count eighteen H-type ships," and again Zainal indicated where to look. What initially looked just like protrusions of the spaceship were, in fact, spaceships in dock. The H-types were similar to the one Kris remembered landing at Denver. She shuddered. Zainal went on. "Look beyond the station to your right, past the freighters and drones." His big finger now indicated a three o'clock position. "There's a full flotilla there."

"I can spot another one on the screen, farther out," and Gino tapped the screen with the proximity display.

"Wow!" Mack swallowed as he saw the incredible number of ships being handled by the station. He stared at the display as they moved slowly away from a direct view of the massive unit.

"How big a navy did you say the Catteni have?" Ninety asked, looking quite anxious.

"More than you see here," Zainal said.

"Lots of traffic, too," Chuck said.

"That is good. For us." And Zainal smiled.

When they were far enough from the space station for Kris to feel as if there were no eyes on them, she and the others began to relax. Now they could spend the descent watching, as more details of the planet were visible.

"I know the field we've been assigned," Zainal said as their ship slowed for landing. "It has some facilities. Always be Catten there. I pilot now."

"SMALL?" KRIS MURMURED, REMEMBERING TO SPEAK CATTEN AS SHE took in the landing site. Nine football fields wide at the very least, and long as a Denver jet runway: almost larger than the landing field at the Farmers' hangar on Botany. Low, large buildings framed one side, and beyond them, across an access road, were separate structures, small enough to be dwellings though they reminded her more of the hovels in a Brazilian barrio.

They came down, venting more of Pete's smoke for effect. Zainal's handling of the ship made them all glad they were well strapped in but the motions certainly imitated a ship that was barely controllable. He also halted at a distance from what looked to be hangar or servicing facilities.

Immediately he and Gino, who seemed to be moving slowly for such a generally deft man, removed the panels of the control positions and substituted the scorched boards, handing the good ones carefully to Ninety and Chuck to wrap and store in a prepared hiding place. Ninety and Chuck grunted and seemed to get out of their seats like old men.

Zainal replaced the damaged panels, as Gino couldn't seem to get his hands to work properly.

"What's the matter with me?" Gino demanded, in English, looking at his hands.

Ninety and Chuck were taking forever to walk down the short passage and Kris then realized that she felt awfully heavy. It took a real effort to bring one hand over to release the safety belt.

"Me, too," she said, struggling to stand.

"Hmmm," was Zainal's anxious response. "Catten's gravity is heavier than Earth's. You will adjust—but slowly. Just move slowly and pretend that is how you move."

"Wow!" exclaimed Gino when, with considerable effort, he pushed himself to his feet. "My knees are not going to like this."

"Hurry with the hiding," Zainal called out down the passageway to Ninety and Chuck.

"We try, Emassi. We do," but even Chuck Mitford's heavy baritone voice sounded strained by the heavier gravity.

"They will think me a great pilot," Zainal said, with a toothy Catteni smile, "to bring down a ship in this condition."

"Will they believe that we're Catteni?" Gino muttered.

Zainal gave one of his inimitable shrugs and grinned. "Who else but a Catteni would come here?"

"I can sure believe that," Gino said in English. Zainal thumped him and cocked a warning eyebrow at him. "Kotik," he answered, chagrined at his lapse.

Zainal gave him a gentler pat for the proper response.

A pounding on the door and Zainal leaned forward to flick the release switch on the hatch.

There were Catteni growls of "get out of the way" and the thud of nailed boots on the deck as three men, none of them small, stalked into the cramped bridge compartment. Remembering all the drills, Kris somehow managed to get to her feet and assume the proper attention stance. She thought her arms would lengthen from the weight on her shoulders and it was hard to keep her chin up. Fortunately, she didn't have to say or do anything.

"Kivel," said the lead man who acted as Emassi as Zainal did. Since he neither stated that he was Emassi or saluted, Kris knew he had to be the same rank. His brutish features and small bright yellow eyes were also more typical of the species than Zainal's.

"Venlik," replied Zainal and waved to the scorched, warped panels while Gino, who was supposed to be another Emassi, displayed the carefully manufactured defective gyro part.

"Hmph." Kivel took and examined the gyro and handed it back to the Drassi behind him.

Kris decided she was getting good at differentiating the ranks.

Kivel now gestured for the damaged panel to be opened, and turned slightly so that Kris, being a lowly Drassi, could do it.

"Too many in here," Zainal said irritably, and with an imperious wave at Kris, "open cargo, bay three. You hear me?"

Kris nodded which was a lot harder to do in the heavier gravity than she would have believed. And, by sheer effort of will, passed the other two big Drassi and, when she was out of sight, put both hands on the sides of the companionway to give herself some support. She made it to the cargo deck and was grateful that she knew how to operate it. As soon as the cargo hatch swung open, she saw the vehicle, load bed against the side of the ship, and stepped aside as seven men swarmed aboard. One was Drassi and the other poor wretches were obviously the Rassi, the primitives from which the Eosi had made the two more intelligent groups.

The Drassi shouted his commands, obviously delighting in his ascendance over these dumb creatures. For that was what they were. He had to show them where to place their hands on the crates, shoved them toward the open hatch, and even walked them onto the vehicle and pointed to where the crates must be stacked. He sent them back for another load but paused long enough to pick up one of the gold lumps, scratch the soft surface as if to reassure himself it was gold, before he dropped it with a dull thud back into the crate. Then he walked back and forth, the gravity not affecting him one iota, Kris noticed enviously, as he supervised the unloading.

"Is that all?" he asked, glowering at Kris.

"All on board," Kris replied negligently.

"Humph," was his unimpressed response. She then handed him the receipt that Zainal had prepared.

"Everything must be signed and acknowledged," Zainal had told her, in a discussion of the unloading procedure. "He has to take it up front for my signing and whoever is his leader."

"Sign," she said firmly and held out the Catteni issue clipboard that had been in the KDL's supplies.

"Humph." He scrawled some runes.

She pointed to the companionway for him to take the board to his commander and with another "humph" he stomped off. She hung on to the control panel until she heard him returning before she straightened up against the awful weight. He jabbed the clipboard into her midriff.

Fortunately she was leaning against the bulkhead so he didn't quite knock her down. She did remember to check that there were two new rune lines before she nodded and gave him the wave to leave. She was appalled to see him jump off the cargo deck to the ground—but then he was Catteni and had on heavy boots—her ankles ached from even watching him. He strode to the front of the vehicle and she was able to close the hatch and just slide down the bulkhead to sprawl on the deck, exhausted by this battle with Catteni gravity.

She was actually close to tears, thinking that she would be no good to Zainal at all on this mission when she couldn't even stand up for more than a few minutes without collapsing.

When she heard voices and booted steps in the companionway, she started to struggle to her feet but the noises stopped; she heard Zainal request transport for him and his crew for shore leave.

"Not much here," Kivel said. "Try Blizte. Small but adequate."

"I know the place," was Zainal's reply.

"Transport will be dispatched on our return."

"Good."

She didn't hear the hatch close and wondered what she should do now. Get to her feet or collapse again. She knew which she preferred but did so want not to disappoint Zainal.

Suddenly he was there, hands under her armpits, lifting her, almost effortlessly, from the deck. He managed a quick press of his face against her cheek.

"You and Chuck must stay on board as guards," he said swiftly in English. "When the repair men arrive, you are off watch and asleep. Chuck only has to stand around and look suspicious."

"He does that well," she murmured back.

"You did very well, Kris," Zainal said again, his tone warm and loving. She leaned into him for strength until they heard steps approaching and separated from their close embrace. But Zainal kept one hand under her arm to support her.

"They're gone, and a smaller vehicle is on its way here," Chuck said and moved forward to take Kris' other arm.

If she hadn't needed their support, she would have pushed both away from her to walk on her own two feet, but she didn't have the strength and was far too grateful for their assistance.

They eased her back into the bridge compartment and into the com seat.

"Your Catteni is enough for any messages," Zainal said, keeping one hand on her shoulder. "Anything you don't understand, make them re-

peat. Tell them com unit is also faulty. Then act stupid Drassi and you will tell the Emassi when he comes back. You don't know where he has gone . . . but then they wouldn't ask you since you wouldn't know."

Kris was glad that gravity was not affecting her ears because she understood every Catteni word Zainal spoke.

"Chuck, you will admit only the service men who will have a proper clipboard you will have to sign as they enter, put in the time—I showed you how—when they leave. Whenever they come, Kris is to be off guard and asleep."

An obnoxious klaxon announced that the transport was awaiting its passengers.

"I gotcha," Chuck murmured in English.

Zainal bent to Kris' ear. "The first few days are the hardest. Move as much as you are able and use hot showers," he said in English. "Walk around the ship if you can. We will not be here long. If I can help it."

Then, with a final squeeze of her shoulder, he nodded for Gino, Ninety, Mack, and the two Rugarians to follow him.

Kris saw the ground transport as it sped diagonally off the field, toward the road, away from the command post and the hovels. It was all too quickly lost as the road took it into the thick forest of tossing greenery. She didn't even have the energy to compare Catteni botany with Botany's vegetation.

While she was sunk in the seat, she heard Chuck moving around. When he reentered the bridge compartment, he carried cups and gave her one. Rather, he put it in her right hand where it lay, almost useless with the gravity, on the armrest.

"Try it, gal, you need the energy. Some of Mayock's special."

"Oh, Gawd," she said. It took two hands to get the cup to her mouth but liquid didn't seem to object, and she was able to get a good swig down her throat. Did the heavier gravity make it go down faster? She took another sip and it did seem to drop into her stomach really fast.

"Any better?" Chuck asked in a conciliatory tone.

"I don't know. It all seems like so much work."

"It's never too much work to drink, Kris," he said and took the other chair, looking out at the scenery. "They don't seem to do much in the way of forestry."

"I saw the Rassi," and despite the gravity she managed a little shudder. "You wouldn't want them as work gangs. They barely managed to carry the crates into the waiting truck. I begin to understand why Drassi have such short tempers . . . if they have to work with that level of unintelligence. Not even room temperature. More like just above freezing."

Even talking was hard because it meant she had to move her jaw.

"Just sit, honey," Chuck said, lightly touching her arm in compassion.

"We'll get used to it?" she asked.

"If Zainal says we will, we will. Look, Kris, finish the drink and then get some sleep. That'll help. We've already had a busy day."

"Would I feel too heavy to sleep?"

"Finish that drink and believe you me, you'll sleep, honey."

She did just that, taking the second half of the drink in one gulp and letting Chuck help her back to the crew quarters. Even the bed, which had never been all that soft, felt harder to her. The blanket hadn't gained any weight but it felt rough, even through her uniform. The pillow was a rock but that didn't prevent her from falling deeply asleep.

ZAINAL COMMUNICATED WITH THEM ONCE THE NEXT MORNING; HIS blunt phrases indicated all was well. To expect repair crews the next day. He gave a com contact number. Drassi Chuck would give their Drassi leader the prepared list of resupply items. Zainal was getting the rest.

Kris felt somewhat better by midday, with frequent sips of Mayoock's Superior Hooch. In fact, it did make her feel lighter. Not light-headed for her head still felt thick. She insisted on standing a watch while Chuck slept. She answered several com unit calls quite adequately. Four were obviously a check to see if the ship's guard was actually on duty. Another, from a very pompous Emassi, inquired if the ship was still in a dangerous condition. She replied firmly that it was not. When the Emassi wanted to speak to Zainal, she gave him the contact number Zainal had left, grateful that he had since she had absolutely no idea where he was. There had been a lot of noise in the background during Zainal's call, which led her to believe he was in a much larger place than the Blizte place which Kivel had mentioned.

She did make herself leave the ship and managed, with very slow steps, to do a full circuit. She sat on the hatch steps and made herself do a second circuit the other way round. When she reentered the ship, she felt as if she had done a marathon at top speed. More of the Mayoock Superior with very little water in it helped relieve the exhaustion. In fact, it helped enough so that she did another walk two hours or so later, bored with doing nothing. This excursion didn't leave her feeling as wrecked afterward.

She managed to make some food for Chuck and herself. By then

Chuck had slept a good deal longer than his legendary six hours, but he had needed it. She woke him and they ate together, with more of Mayock's supportive aid.

They decided they had both better be on duty when the repair crews arrived, to give a show of exemplary attention to duty. Chuck made her sleep until just before dawn.

"You've got to see dawn here, Kris. Never seen anything like it in my life," he told her. "Then I'll kip out until you see the service crew arriving."

That sounded fine to her. Food helped nearly as much as Mayock's brew, and she slept again until Chuck woke her and, with a friendly hand supporting her, led her into the bridge compartment so they could watch the dawn together.

There weren't many clouds in a Catteni sky—too heavy an atmosphere, Kris decided, or they'd just drop down. But the sky coloration went from the most delicate aqua into fantastic—almost lightning-like—displays of yellow to orange to red and then back to orange and fading into yellow that turned greenish before the blue-green of a normal Catteni sky settled, and the very bright white sun came up. Instantly the bridge screen darkened.

"Too bright for Emassi and Drassi?" she asked facetiously.

Chuck yawned widely and stood up. At least he seemed to be adapting to the heavier gravity. Maybe she would . . . probably just about the time they could leave.

Chuck went off to sleep, and she fixed herself some breakfast. Her stomach must be adjusting because it felt empty, not merely heavy and unready for any new burdens.

She took just a slight dose of Mayock. She didn't want the repair crew folk to smell any liquor on her breath because it would be very difficult to explain where she'd gotten it. Besides, they'd only brought enough for their personal needs. Even if her personal need for continued potions seemed excessive, considering her generally abstemious habits.

Remembering the state of Baby and the KDL when they had captured them, she did wonder if perhaps this ship was a little too neat and orderly to be a proper Catteni used vessel. She'd ask Chuck if they shouldn't throw a few things about. She did leave dishes on the table and the cooking pan on the heat pad.

She never had a chance to discuss this detail with Mitford because she saw the repair crew vehicles, massive affairs, Catteni-style eighteen wheelers, come careening across the field. She had only enough time to shake him awake before the trucks screeched to a halt by the cargo

hatch. Someone banged on it. Chuck gave her a shove forward to the bridge compartment.

"You're on com watch," he muttered and then in fine, annoyed Catteni, yelled that he was coming, he was coming.

He undogged the hatch and was almost mowed down by the Emassi who charged in, scowling and punching Chuck out of his way. But years of army discipline intervened, and Chuck assumed a properly military stance, far more humble than any American soldier would present even if a four star general *or* the president of the United States confronted him. Kris' com unit blurred for her response.

"Crew are there?" was the inimical query.

"Yes, Emassi," she replied meekly.

"Get Emassi Yoltin to speak."

"Yes, Emassi." And Kris actually managed to increase her stride to something approximating "hurry" to the hatch and, with a proper salute, begged Emassi Yoltin to speak to Emassi on com.

Meanwhile, the repair crew, burdened with heavy kits and a variety of portable affairs that resembled the weaponry of a bad science fiction movie, went astern to the gyro unit. Another group waited outside the hatch, carrying more carefully some packaged units that looked like control board replacements. Managing to glance outside, she saw others, led by a second Emassi, examining the "meteor" damage, Pete Snyder's magnificent efforts. Several of the outboard sensors on the port side had also been broken off to add verisimilitude to the supposed crash. Suitable gashes had taken a lot of time to make but the Emassi was nodding, touching the marks and then rattling off orders to his crew. A third group were setting up what looked amazingly like a field kitchen. Kris breathed a little sigh of relief that she wouldn't be expected to feed this lot.

Considering what she saw being prepared and smelled cooking, she hoped that she and Chuck wouldn't have to eat any of it.

"You," Emassi Yoltin said, returning from the bridge, but he pointed to the group waiting outside, "repair controls." He passed by her as if she didn't exist but Chuck now followed Yoltin astern.

"Emassi Venlik orders me to check replacement unit," he said.

Emassi Yoltin gave Chuck such a look that a snake would have died of the venom in it but Chuck held his ground until Yoltin gave an abrupt nod of his head and allowed Chuck to follow him.

Totally superfluous, Kris decided she needed more Mayock to get through this experience.

When the control panel repairs were finished, she did resume her station at the com unit. And saw the arrival of another vehicle. This

time she remembered how to initiate communications with an on-surface vehicle and made contact.

“Cargo, supplies. Open hatch,” she was told and dutifully followed such orders, wondering what Zainal had acquired.

It was considerable. Foods, crates with runes she couldn’t quite understand, but thought they were spare parts. Certainly a good deal of fuel canisters was unloaded, taking up a full cargo deck and then half of another. Some open slatted crates proved to be fresh foods.

“Good,” she said, when the Drassi supervising the loading looked at her for some reaction. She smacked her lips. “Not much fresh to eat for a long time,” she added. She recognized some of the fruits she had seen, and bought, in the Barevi markets. She’d thought they were indigenous. Then remembered that Zainal had said the Rassi worked the land and produced great quantities of food for both Eosi and Catteni ships. “We eat well.”

“We will. And soon,” the Drassi said but he jerked his head to the exterior and the rather unusual smells coming from the outdoor kitchen.

The Drassi had been marking off items on the clipboard as the Rassi came on board with their burdens. These seemed slightly more intelligent than the ones there the other day. Possibly because they had resupplied ships so often.

Then the truck was empty and the Rassi sat on the floor, waiting for whatever would happen to them next.

The Drassi handed her the clipboard, and she wrote down her rune and then took it from him to get Chuck’s signature. He was standing in the passenger hatch, watching the repair crews eating. He signed and winked at her.

“We weren’t invited,” he said, mouthing the words with little sound.

She rolled her eyes in relief, aware out of the corner of her eye the ravenous way in which the meal was being consumed, with much smacking of lips and slurping. Even eating in such company would have been nearly as nauseating as the food they consumed so greedily.

She returned the double-signed records to the Drassi, and he also jumped to the ground and barked an order at the apathetic Rassi. They slowly rose and followed him around the ship to the eating place.

She closed and locked the cargo hatch, three of its decks now full of supplies. Zainal had gone whole-hog here. Would they get away with such bald-faced piracy?

“We can eat,” Chuck muttered to her as he pushed her past the open cargo hatch. “Water’s pretty good.”

They used that to dilute the Mayock with which they washed down

the fresh fruit and what passed for bread in the Catteni cuisine. It was so fresh that it was easy to chew and didn't taste half-bad.

"D'you know what they're eating out there?" she asked Chuck.

"You don't want to know," Chuck said and took a long swig from his mug.

That was enough to inform Kris that the Catteni were probably eating Rassi. She ate nothing more despite Chuck pantomiming that she should.

The exterior crew had filled in the gouges, and the main hole, using some sort of mastic. When the interior specialists had finished their job, they drove off but left Emassi Yoltin behind to supervise the rest of the repairs.

A Catteni day was longer than one on Earth but shorter than one on Botany. There was actually more exterior damage, between the "meteoric" gashes and the hole, because the stumps of the broken external units had to be removed and replaced. This required technicians going in and out of the ship, and coming awfully close to where the undamaged control panels had been secreted. Kris thought she might have indulged in the first faint of her life but managed to pinch herself hard enough to retain consciousness. They'd come so far and done so well, she simply could not jeopardize everything with such a reaction.

So they had another day to endure the proximity of sweaty men whose clothing was smeared with the repair compound, which intensified the stench of them.

Chuck did offer the Emassi the captain's quarters but that was curtly refused, and Chuck and Kris were left to themselves. They did, however, close the passenger hatch as night descended on the field. That meant they didn't smell whatever it was the Catteni were eating. Kris was ravenous by now and made a huge meal for them both.

"I'll take first watch," Chuck told Kris, and she could not demur. The day's excesses as well as the gravity had reduced her to total exhaustion.

He woke her six hours later. "We've had a few calls, and one from Yoltin to be sure we're keeping watch. So you've got to stand one."

"I'm fine, Chuck, fine," she assured him. Indeed, she realized that it wasn't quite as difficult to sit up and get out of the bed though she still felt as if all her muscles and flesh were being pulled inexorably groundward.

She got a call from Yoltin shortly after she took the com. Yoltin was a real Catteni bastard. Checking up. She had a sudden notion and put it into action by removing the undamaged control panels from where

they had been stashed and putting them quietly behind a huge crate in the cargo deck that was currently available. If they should be discovered, though she doubted that, they were no concern of hers. The Drassi had checked off all the items that were brought on board, and being Drassi herself she could pretend she didn't read well. Not many true Drassi did unless they "needed to know" as Zainal would have put it.

By the time all the repairs had been done, Emassi Yoltin did an onboard inspection of every panel and locker of the main ship. Chuck turned an awful deeper shade of gray until she managed to give him a wink. He leaned briefly against the bulkhead in relief.

Yoltin could find nothing to reprimand them for—apart from unwashed dishes in the kitchen, and he ticked them off soundly and loudly for that, while they looked humble, meek, and repentant.

As Yoltin left, Chuck said very angrily to Kris "that the galley must be spotless when Emassi Venlik returned. You are responsible, you will do it."

"Yes, Drassi Chuck," Kris responded with earnest subservience. Both were close to laughing at their little charade and did, when the passenger hatch was closed.

They heard the vehicles revving up and immediately strode to the bridge compartment to see the last of the crew leaving, dust rising at the speed of their passage. They also saw a smaller transport coming out from the field buildings.

"Oh, God, what now?" Chuck demanded. "Go do the galley thing, in case that's what's to be inspected."

They really had not been that untidy but she sloshed water and what went for cleaning liquid about the sink. Her hands were raw, and she checked to make sure that the liquid had not taken off her skin dye. It looked paler but she didn't dare do a touch up—the dye had a very noticeable odor to it—until their latest visitor was gone.

It was Kivel after all, with two Drassi, who inspected the ship as well, spending more time on the exterior to approve a smooth hull.

"You go soon?"

"Emassi Venlik is not back," Chuck replied.

"He must come soon. This field will be needed," Kivel said at his most pompous.

"We have been in space months," Chuck said with a very good imitation of a Zainalian shrug.

"Months? Where?"

The query was innocent enough but there was a gleam in Kivel's eyes that suggested rumors of an abandoned cargo of considerable worth had circulated.

Chuck shrugged again.

"We will talk of this at the evening meal," Kivel said, far too affable to have confused even a Rassi.

Chuck looked slightly eager and then relaxed. "I am on guard. Emassi Venlik is a hard commander."

Kivel inclined his head at Kris. "The little one can stay on guard. We will enjoy ourselves this evening," he went on, his tone an insidious promise.

Chuck allowed himself to consider this and, looking hard at Kris, he finally nodded. "You will say nothing of this to the Emassi."

"No, Drassi Chuck."

"Come, then," and Kivel gestured affably for Chuck to take precedence out of the hatch.

Chuck, bowing politely, insisted that the higher-ranking officer leave first. With Kivel's back turned, Chuck had a chance to throw an inquiring look at Kris, and she winked in encouragement. She'd close the hatch and not open it until Chuck got back. Mitford really didn't have much choice, not since a Drassi more or less ordered his company.

Kris ate by herself at the com, watching the dark creep across the beautiful forest and then the first moon rise, a large orange crescent. Two, one very far away and small, also started their ascent with the first one mid-heaven. She almost wished the com unit would blurt at her so she'd have something to do. She poured herself a respectable tot of Mayock's superior and then wondered how Chuck would be handling the Catteni equivalent. Mitford had often boasted that he could drink anything alcoholic and keep his wits about him. She certainly hoped he could tonight.

The fourth moon was rising, and the level in the bottle of Mayock was only a finger high, when she heard a transport, and loud, off-key singing. Then there was a spirited banging—by more than one fist—on the hatch and she hastened to open it.

Kivel almost threw Chuck inside, waving back to the transport and peremptorily waving the driver to go on.

"You made it," she said, hearing herself slurring her words.

"On . . . ly just," Mitford replied, having far more of a problem than she in enunciating.

"I'll get you to bed," she said, pleased that she was so much soberer. "Whad' he wan'?"

"Cooooo . . . orrrr . . . dinates," Chuck managed, lurching from side to side, even with her trying to keep him upright.

"Thought so."

"Doan . . . know . . . 'em. On . . . ly Drassssssi," Chuck said and

hiccuped. “Stuff . . . was . . . worst . . . thing . . . ever . . . drank. Drunk. Drink.”

They had reached the captain’s quarters, which was nearest, and Chuck turned in at that door. Kris didn’t object. It was nearer than the crew quarters. In his condition she doubted he could get into the lowest of the three-tiered bunks without cracking his skull.

The captain’s bed was also wider and she steered him toward it. He flopped down but was sitting up so fast that they cracked skulls.

“Ohhhh,” he groaned. “Can’t . . . get . . . boots . . . off.”

She did that service for him with fingers that had trouble opening the closures. The next thing she knew, he had locked his arms about her and tumbled her into the bed along with him. By the time his head was down, he was snoringly asleep. She waited a few moments, wanting to get horizontal herself because suddenly the Mayock that she’d been sipping for hours was catching up with her. But he had some sort of a death grip on her and she couldn’t disengage herself.

Well, she was as nearly horizontal as he was, though she still had her boots on. She inched her way into a more comfortable position, put her head on his chest and went to sleep.

SHE WOKE FIRST THE NEXT MORNING. CHUCK WAS NO LONGER SNORING but he had his head resting on her bare shoulder. She’d had the most remarkably vivid, almost pornographic dreams, and gasped in dismay.

“And I’m bare?” Chuck also was—clothing strewn about the cabin. “Oh, my god, that Mayock did it again.”

She swallowed. “That’s unfair. I don’t remember anything about it. At least I hope that dream wasn’t what we *did!*” She stared at the relaxed, sleeping face of Chuck Mitford and slowly shook her head. She could not, would not believe he, and she, had done *that!* Such behavior, even in their super-drunken conditions, was as uncharacteristic as it was unlikely. Even impossible. She shook her head, infuriated and irritated.

Then she tried to remember when she’d last had a period and couldn’t. Between Botany days and the elapse of time on the Catteni trip, she couldn’t figure out if she was in a fertile period or not. She glanced over at Chuck. Well, if she was pregnant by him, at least she’d spared both of them any embarrassment over actually going to bed for that purpose. But she did wish she’d remember *something* both logical and in character. That was unfair.

A buzzing penetrated her ruminations. The com unit on the bridge was announcing a message coming in.

Mitford was so relaxed—well, she’d done that for him at least—

that she was able to withdraw from his side. She covered him with a blanket, hoping that he was so far gone in sleep he wouldn't rouse as she went to answer the buzz. She did grab up her clothing as she left the room. Let him think he slept alone.

She didn't waste time dressing—she'd just leave the visual off but she wanted to stop the buzz. She managed the correct response in her guttural disguised tone.

"Venlik here. All repairs finished?"

"Yes, Emassi."

"All cargo aboard?"

"Yes, Emassi."

"Prepare the ship for immediate takeoff."

"Yes, Emassi."

He didn't even ask why she didn't turn on the visuals.

Did she have time for a quick shower? Well, she was going to have one anyway. She'd have to take care of that detail, or some of the other Humans might notice a certain other reek about her. And her eyes hurt. Oh, Lord, the contacts. She slipped hers out, and they were the first things she cleansed. Then she remembered that Chuck's would surely still be in so she knelt beside his bed, and delicately stroking the eyelids, managed to slip the contacts out. His eyes might be sore, too, but maybe seeing the lenses in a cup of water might make him think he'd had the sense to do it for himself.

She washed quickly, dried herself off, and remembered to check her color before she dressed. She was still gray enough. Oh, Lord, how glad she'd be to be Human again. She used some eyewash to soothe the irritation, hoping it would ease before she had to use her eyes for something important. The way Chuck was sleeping, her eyes would be normal by the time he woke. Should she wake him before Zainal returned? No, she'd say she'd just relieved him on watch.

"You caught me in the shower, Zainal," she rehearsed aloud as she dressed if he asked about the delay in response.

Damn, he hadn't indicated how long before he'd be there. No, he'd said he wanted the ship ready for immediate takeoff. Had he run into trouble?

She started the pre-flight check, having watched Zainal, Gino, and Raisha do it often enough to know the drill. She then checked each cargo deck to be sure everything was locked down there for takeoff and left the empty deck ready. When she returned to the bridge, she noticed a dust cloud appearing at the edge of the forestry. The truck, and it was a good-sized one, did not, as she half-expected, come directly to the ship but paused in front of the command post. Whatever transpired there

was very brief for the vehicle did not stop long. And, as it turned toward the ship, she noticed it headed toward the cargo hatch so she made her way as fast as she could down the companionway, rather pleased with being able to move with some speed in the heavy gravity. One really did get used to it. She unfastened the hatch so all was ready for a speedy loading as the truck backed up, almost but not quite banging against the freshly repainted hull.

Coo and Pess emerged first, lifting the accordion backdoor of the truck. They hurried on board with a large and heavy-looking carton. It made a heavy thud as they let it down. Behind them Ninety, Mack, and Gino each struggled to bring in more crates and containers. Zainal appeared with satchels that he deposited with more care on the bow end of the cargo space. He grinned at her, his eyes sparkling with success but he immediately turned to bring yet more crates on board.

“Where’s Chuck?” Zainal asked on his next trip back, and he was speaking English again.

“He had a busy night as the Emassi’s guest,” she said and stepped forward to help unload in Chuck’s absence but Zainal shook his head and tapped the control panel for her to be ready to close the hatch at his command.

It didn’t take all that long to unload with Pess, Coo, and Zainal all more used to Catteni gravity than the Humans who handled the lighter objects. This deck was almost as full as the others and Kris was obsessed with curiosity.

“Pess,” Zainal said, pointing to the truck and indicating that the Rugarian was to take it back to the command post. They had to wait until Pess came back, covering the distance quickly with his oddly jointed long legs.

“That’s all?” Kris asked, her hands on the cargo controls.

“Yes. You didn’t happen to do a pre-flight check, did you?” Zainal asked as she closed the cargo hatch. She nodded an affirmative. He and Coo were netting the cargo down, fastening the ropes tight to the deck cleats.

Gino had already gone forward. Mack and Ninety looked about done in as they leaned against the bulkhead.

“Had a good time, lads?” she asked blandly.

“It’ll take the entire trip back to fill you in,” Ninety said with a ghost of his usual impudent grin. “Lenny will never believe what I’ve seen and done.”

“Yes, he will. I’ll vouch for it.”

“C’mon, let’s get strapped in for takeoff,” Zainal said, urgently pointing forward.

"Is anyone after us?" Kris asked anxiously.

"Not exactly," Zainal said with a grin, "but they're not above following us back to where we left all that high-grade ore."

"How can they find an asteroid that doesn't exist?" Kris asked, answering his grin.

"Ah," and he put his hand under her elbow to speed her along the companionway, "but that is exactly what we must find before we can go home to Botany."

They were almost to the bridge compartment when Kris remembered that Chuck wasn't strapped in. "I'll have to net Chuck down."

"Don't waste any time," Zainal said, turning sideways to squeeze past her. He smelled of something acrid which she couldn't identify.

"Zay's also got to be gone for at least a full Catteni day," Mack muttered to her as she strapped in beside him.

Kris rolled her eyes. "You can't leave that man out of your sight but he gets into trouble."

Fortunately Zainal was far too busy laying in the course with Gino, making the necessary com calls to hear their soft remarks.

"Tell you one thing, Kris, he's not a man I'd tangle with anywhere or anytime, and even in my own gravity," Ninety said, impressed.

Mack chuckled. Having received clearance from Emassi Kivel himself, they proceeded to take off at a sedate vertical ascent.

"Kivel tried to get Chuck drunk enough last night to interrogate him," Kris said. "I don't know what they use for such purposes here on Catten, but it was a miracle Chuck made it back this morning."

Kris severely berated herself for her adjustments to the exact truth but no one would be hurt by her version, and she might not even have any reason to explain anything to anyone.

After enduring the Catten homeworld gravity, the takeoff pressure was minimal. As they rounded Catten on the outward-bound orbit, Kris once again found the beauty of the planet almost breath-stopping.

The space station hove in sight and this time, one of the dreadnoughts was maneuvering out of its dock. By noticing some of the H-class ships nearby, Kris got a better idea of just how ginormous the dreadnoughts actually were. It was comparable to being in a Tomahawk with a 747 looming behind you. And these ships had *not* been able to penetrate the Bubble?

The com unit blurped, and Gino answered in a totally expressionless Catteni voice.

"Your destination?"

"This is Emassi Venlik. Eosi Ba is responsible for our destination," Zainal said.

“Understood.”

Maybe Kris only imagined it, but there was even a note of awe in that response. Zainal grinned at Gino who chuckled softly when the com line was off.

The KDL executed a course alteration and then showed its stern to the space station. Zainal poured on the speed as the ship headed out to where thousands of stars gleamed in the black of space.

“Did he beat someone up?” Kris asked when she felt they were safely away.

“To a faretheewell,” grinned Gino, and then he rolled his eyes. “Some nerd sycophant of an Eosi. I don’t think the ones we met were that anxious for trouble. At least not the ones that Worry and Leon saw. Now the guys I met . . . One was humongously wide and I made myself as small as possible against the nearest wall. But the ones in an ugly mood were worse than anything Hollywood ever dreamed up, including the aliens in *Aliens*.”

Zainal now leaned back in the command chair and stretched until every joint and tendon seemed to crack.

“Let’s hope Duxie can get us some more of that high-grade ore and we’ll be the toast of the capitol,” Gino added, “in and out as often as we choose.”

“Gino, are you okay?” Zainal asked, rising.

“I’m great, Zay, you need the rest.”

“Chuck’s in your bed,” Kris said.

“Where is immaterial so long as I am horizontal,” Zainal said and, pointing to Mack and Ninety, “and you’re off duty, too. It should be all clear ahead, Gino, but wake me if something you don’t understand comes up.”

“Get some rest, Zay,” Gino said and made shooining motions with his right hand. “You, too.”

Kris looked around for Pess and Coo. Surely they’d need some rest as much as the others, but neither Deski was there.

“They zonked out as soon as we made orbit,” Gino said. “Move up here, Kris, and I’ll give you a rundown of all we did and what Zainal managed, smooth as a baby’s butt.”

A DRASSI CLERK NOTICED THE EXCESSIVE CHARGES AND ILL-ASSORTED cargo registered against this particular vessel. When he checked through to administration, holding the com line open for nearly an hour, he was

told that the ship had sufficient credit to cover the expenses. There was no problem. He was to return to his duties. Being a Drassi, he did so, but felt more abused by his superiors than ever. There were no rewards for being diligent on behalf of his Emassi. But what choice had he?

Chapter Five

“I HAVE TO TELL YOU, KRIS,” GINO BEGAN, “I WASN’T ALL THAT KEEN on seeing a Catteni there on Botany, but . . .” and Gino whistled expertly and shrilly through his teeth, “when you see how that guy operates, I’d walk through fire for him now.”

“He does have a way about him,” Kris admitted with a grin, “so how did he operate?”

“Blizte was a boondock of a berg, all Rassi in godawful hovels, just staring at us. Or to be more precise, staring at nothing really. Two Catteni vets—one had both legs missing and the other was minus an arm—managed the one—get it—the one eatery in Blizte. They were sitting on a bench as we went past. Zainal got a wave. A few clicks on and we came to a surfaced road. Don’t know with what but there were few ruts in it and that old banger could move when you put your pedal to the metal.” Gino executed a joint cracking stretch, and Kris wondered if she couldn’t possibly manage the bridge and let him sleep, too. “No, I’m fine,” he told her, hands back on the armrests. “I can sleep anywhere and be fresh with half an hour’s catnap. I slept on the way back from the city.

“And that was an eye-opener.” Again that distinctive whistle of respectful awe. “Like something from future worlds ’n’ stuff. Beautiful layout and even the important buildings weren’t squared-off in plate glass but . . .” he mimicked a commercial voice-over, “‘ecologically situated so as not to mar the natural beauty and making good use of flora and fauna.’ Nothing higher than one story. Mostly because the buildings are built down rather than up. Zainal says some of them go down a good hundred plegs.”

“What do the Eosi live in?” Her curiosity got the better of her dislike of the overlords.

Gino raised his eyebrows. “Only for Zainal pointing them out, I wouldn’t have guessed. Though they do enclose their properties with high walls and force screens. Saw a bird-like thing get fried trying to land on one. So we didn’t get to see anything inside the compounds. They’re also scattered all over Cattena—which is what they have so imaginatively named the city. Still, if it weren’t for the neighbors, it’d be better than Beverly Hills. Or even Carmel.

“Zainal showed us where his family home was, and it’s spread out over quite a hunk of real estate. Zay says it’s because so many Eosi hosts have come from his lineage, or pedigree or whatever you want call it.”

“Did you see an Eosi?”

Gino’s shudder was not faked. “Four of ’em. Big bastards, even when you know the poor damned Catteni that got stuck with being subsumed was big to start with. Crazy eyes! Scare the shit out of me . . . begging your pardon.” Again his whistle. “Sure was glad Zay got out of that living death. Worse than a zombie in my opinion.

“However, he stops at a place where there’re public com units and made a half dozen calls, while we ambled over to the eatery.” This time Gino grimaced. “They don’t know a damned thing about good eating. Cram anything into their mouths, but Zay had told us what to order and we did and that was pretty good. Almost as good as what we regularly eat on Botany.” He said that with an air of condescension.

“He couldn’t reach all the guys he wanted to see, but he said that these four were the best and he was just lucky to find any one of them at Cattena. We did the secret hand signs and passwords and stuff and met at what passes for a service station here. Sort of Catteni-style garage sales.” He grinned impishly at her for his witticism. “We made as if we were trying to sell the transport so much of the conversation between Zainal and the others appeared to be discussing the condition of the truck and the engine it uses. That engine is stuck above one of the ground level panels. Zay had parked obliquely to the station so no one could see anyone coming or going. One of us was there to keep the mechanics or whatever they were from closing in when inconvenient. There were two or three other vehicles being inspected so it was a good cover to use.”

He paused, rubbed the side of his nose.

“And?” Kris prompted him.

He chuckled a smug “he he he he” of satisfaction. “There seem to

be a lot of Catteni Emassi fed up to here,” and he levelled his hand with his nose, “with Eosi domination. Especially . . .” and he paused again for emphasis, “since Mentat Ix—that’s the one Zay’s brother’s lugging around—and Co and Se have been agitating every one of the other Eosi about demolishing Botany, diverting all naval forces to that end.”

Gino looked worried. “No one has ever seen the Mentats—they’re the leaders among the Eosi—going so ballistic. They’ve got to penetrate or burst or explode or implode the Bubble—because it’s there, I think, and has them stumped. And stumped, they don’t like to be.”

“Anything said about Earth?”

“Yeah, and it’s not good. They haven’t stopped mind-wiping specialists so those who were lucky enough to escape being caught have had to go into hiding. And hiding places are getting filled up and harder to find . . . especially as we have no air transport at all. And very few working trucks or cars. The Eosi have found another use for petroleum products—all theirs. It’s not as if they can burn the Bubble away—no oxygen in space, thank God.

“And the Emassi Zay talked to are not the only ones beginning to get ideas from the rebellion on Earth.” Gino nodded in satisfaction. “Evidently we’ve really got ’em going, Catteni and Eosi. Never had so much opposition before. We might not be as technically advanced as Eosi, but I’ll tell you, there’re not enough Emassi to deal with what we’re giving ’em back on Earth.”

“So we could actually rebel enough to get Earth back?” Kris felt a surge of triumph flow through her.

“I didn’t say that,” Gino replied cautiously, tilting his head to show his skepticism. “In the first place,” he held up one finger, “Emassi and Drassi like Earth and want to keep it—just get rid of the troublesome population. Meanwhile they’re looting everything that isn’t cemented into the ground and sometimes they jackhammer loose what they fancy. In the second place, they have stopped ruining manufacturing complexes and keep some of the specialized companies working nonstop . . . which means until the workers drop from exhaustion. I mean, shift work was never like that. Nor those sweatshops in India and Asia we were hearing so much about. We do have some items high on the list of acquisition and they’re being turned out in bulk. While there might not be enough *good* Emassi to help a worldwide coup, I’ll tell you one thing: the Eosi invasion sure stopped all the petty squabbles and got all Earth working toward one real good goal—getting rid of the invaders.”

“I always did think a really bad extraterrestrial menace would unite the world,” Kris said.

"It sure has. Palestinians join Israelis; the Northern Irish have allied with the Brits in covert actions against any Catteni on the British Isles. Even North and South Korea are cooperating against the mutual enemy. The African nations got some real rough treatment—because they're black fer Gods' sake and the Catteni tried to make Rassi out of them." Gino snorted. "That didn't work. In fact, I think the African nations have wracked up more fatalities among the Drassi and Emassi than any other race. Turnabout's fair play. Now, if that will hold when we've thrown out the invaders, it'll be the first wonder of the twentieth century."

Kris sighed in a hopeful breath. "I suppose it *could* happen."

"Might not until the twenty-first but we'll see. We've a few years to spare."

"So, where does that leave us?"

"Well, I'm not quite sure, since this is going to take a lot of planning and under difficult circumstances. We've got to wait until Baby and the KDM make it back. Then we'll have to somehow get some of the Emassi sympathizers to Botany so we can correlate plans and stuff."

"Lord, how'll we do that?"

Gino laughed. "Zay's started the process and, as long as we can keep bringing in the high-grade ore, no one's going to wonder where he's getting it. So he can check in as much as he needs to to mobilize dissidents."

"What did he mean about being followed? By the friends of the Catteni he beat up?"

"Oh, him. He didn't have friends smart enough to follow us. But there are others, Eosi, in particular who might try," Gino said with a laugh. "Probably will. But one of his Emassi friends gave him a chart of an asteroid belt so dense you could hide the entire Catteni fleet in it and they wouldn't be able to spot each other unless they knew exactly where the other ship is. There're so much heavy elements in the belt, supposedly, that it jams all signals. We can slip in and out of there neat as a whistle. In fact, that's where we're headed right now."

Reacting subconsciously to being followed, Kris turned about in her seat but Gino laughed.

"Don't worry, Kris," and Gino patted her knee. "Zay and I spotted them. Way back. We took off before they expected us to so they were late leaving the space station. They'll try to track us by the ion trail and let's hope another ship crosses ours and confuses them. Any way, we'll be in the asteroid belt long before they make it. You wait, Kris, you'll see."

"See if this so-called friend of Zainal's is setting us up?"

Gino shook his head. "Not Kamiton. You know how reserved Catteni are? Well, this guy all but kissed Zay he was so glad to see him. Not that he knew who he was at first . . . and in fact, damned suspicious because he had known Venlik, the Emassi Zay's pretending to be, and hated the man. So there was a bit of an impasse at first. Until Zay removed the cheek pieces and reminded Kamiton of a few details only the real Zainal could have known. You should have seen Kamiton's face when he realized who Zainal really was. And I like Kamiton. He can smile, and he's got that same wacky sense of humor Zay has." When Gino noticed how dubious she was, he laughed. "Look, hon, I've been a good judge of people all my life and there's not that damned much difference between us and Catteni when you get down to basics."

Then unaccountably Gino blushed.

"Well, if you say so, Gino," Kris said, ignoring the blush since she had a good idea what caused Gino Marrucci's sudden embarrassment. There was indeed one very notable difference between Human and Catteni that she happened to enjoy exceedingly. And Gino had suddenly remembered that. "I'll reserve my opinion until I meet him. If I ever do."

"I think you will," the pilot said, recovering his composure quickly. "He's the first one Zay wants to bring through the Bubble."

"Really?"

"Yup, because if they had a Missouri on Catten, Kamiton'd be from there. We gotta show him the Farmers' part of Botany and what we've managed to do on our continent before he'll really believe what we told him. Humans speaking Catteni are not that uncommon these days, but Humans living beyond Eosi control need to be seen to be believed."

Kris nodded. "Sometimes I don't believe it myself."

"Hell, kid, you were making it happen before I got transported."

"That doesn't change the fantastical aspects of it, Gino."

They were silent for a long while, watching the stars, then Gino pointed out some of the anomalous primary colors, and even one double star. They were so far away as to resemble opaque marbles rather than suns. Gino crossed his arms on this chest, a slight grin on his face, and shook his head ever so slightly.

"Never thought you'd be this far from our solar system, huh?"

"You got it."

"Hungry?"

"Something hot would go down well, food and drink, if you don't mind, Kris."

"Drassi hear, Drassi obey," she said with mock humility and made

her way back to the companionway. She had become so accustomed to the heavy gravity that a normal one had her bouncing along.

Snores from the various sleeping accommodations indicated that the others were well and truly asleep. She had the galley to herself and prepared enough food for them both. Then she remembered she didn't need to wear the lenses anymore so she took hers out, cleansed them once more before putting them back in the little container. She got an extra cup of water for Gino to get rid of his.

As she handed him his tray of food, he gave her a puzzled glance and then chuckled. "Excuse me, while I get my own eyes back." He put his lenses in the cup and put that to one side. "I'll clean 'em later. I'm hungry enough I might eat 'em as hors d'oeuvres."

"Naw, they don't taste at all like oysters," she retorted facetiously and started in on the stew she'd reheated for them.

SEVERAL HOURS LATER SHE DECIDED THAT THERE WAS NOTHING TO DO and she would certainly know which lights indicated trouble in any section of the ship.

"Go get some rest, Gino. I can sit here and look at the telltales just as sensibly as you can."

"Not quite yet," and he pointed ahead, without taking his eyes from the sensitive scope he was using. "The pulsar I've been looking for. We make a course correction when we line up with that. Then I'll go get some sleep. And wake Zainal up. He said to."

WHEN ZAINAL TOOK OVER THE BRIDGE, HE FIRST PRESSED HIS CHEEK against hers and kept one arm about her shoulders even after he had seated himself.

"Did Gino bring you . . . how does he put it? Up to speed?"

"Including your brush with another Catteni."

"He asked for it. But he's a mere nothing," and Zainal gave a contemptuous flick of his hand. "Getting Kamiton on our side was more than I expected. Tubelin, Kasturi, and Nitin can be valuable to us, but they don't have the connections that Kamiton has. Or the family prestige."

"And?" she prompted.

He ruffled her short hair, tipped her face toward him so he saw she had removed the lenses. "You look much better with your own eyes. You did make a convincing Drassi."

“Noble Emassi, you are too kind.”

Zainal chuckled in that bass rumble that made her grin. “Don’t let that get around just yet. However, all four are due to go back to Earth for various tasks. If we could somehow get them in touch with our Humans there, we could begin to make the Catteni regret what they’ve been doing to your planet.”

Kris thought that over. “But you’re Catteni. And you said ‘our’ Humans.”

“I like the way Humans think better than I like the way Catteni don’t ever think.”

“Some of them must. You do.”

“Luck.”

“What are our chances of doing what you want? Getting rid of the Eosi, with or without the help of the Farmers?”

“I heard something I have never heard about an Eosi Mentat before,” he said, his tone very somber and thoughtful. “The one who subsumed my brother went totally out of control and his juniors had a very difficult time reducing his . . . wildness. He’s the one that wants to burst our Bubble no matter how long it takes.”

“Eosi can have nervous breakdowns?” She was astonished.

“I don’t know about nervous, but Ix was dangerously out of control.”

“What does it take to kill an Eosi?”

He gave her a quick look and a humph. “I’ve never heard that one has ever been killed. Though . . .” and he paused reflectively, “killing one has never been tried. They are well protected, by the fear of them that is instilled from the time we understand anything outside childish needs. We don’t even know how long an individual Eosi lives. Except that it needs to change hosts.”

“Poison it?”

Zainal shook his head, drawing the corners of his mouth down. He gave her a sideways look. “You Humans say you do not like to take Human lives. It is against your laws.”

“The Eosi are not Human,” she said tartly.

“The Farmers would not like it.”

“You haven’t given up then, on gaining their assistance?”

“No,” he replied.

“What if Humans managed to kill an Eosi . . .”

Zainal waved both hands in a cutting negative gesture. “The numbers they would kill in retaliation would decimate your population.”

“The Eosi are already doing that, aren’t they?”

“They are, on a small scale, but if an Eosi was known to have been

killed by some Human agency, they are just as likely to destroy the entire planet.”

“Well, there goes another good idea. We have to kill them all then.”

“What is it Ninety says? Bloodthirsty?”

“Bloodthirsty,” she corrected him. “I just want my planet free of them.”

“As I want my planet free of them. We’ve had them longer. We get the first chance.”

“Not without us right there beside you, Zainal. You Catteni can’t have all the fun.” Then a yawn overtook her.

“Get some sleep, Kris. You’ve served a double watch already.”

She tried to argue but with one hand, he lifted her out of the chair.

“Get some sleep. I can hear the sergeant moving around.” He reached into one of his thigh pockets. “Tell him to take this powder in water. It’ll help.”

She took the packet he handed her.

“Didn’t know Catteni ever needed hangover remedies,” she said, amused.

“Headaches are caused by other things than too much Mayock.”

Kris left before he could see the guilty expression on her face. She found Chuck, looking more green than gray, just coming out of the head, one hand clutching the door frame. He was definitely in need of whatever remedy Zainal had given her for him if it had taken him this long to sleep off the hangover. She cleared her throat, and her mind, of other details.

“Zainal said this will help.”

His eyes weren’t really focusing, but she’d got the lenses out before they could have irritated the eyelids. Mind you, his eyes were pretty bloodshot in spite of having no lens aggravation. She took his other hand and—sternly forgetting what her erotic dreams reminded her his hands had been doing—slapped the packet into the palm.

“All in the line of duty, sarge,” she said brightly. “Take it immediately in water. I’ll even get the water . . .”

“I’ll get my own water, Bjornsen,” he said with great dignity and straightened himself out and walked, however slowly and carefully, back to the galley.

Chapter Six

IT TOOK NEARLY TWO WEEKS TO REACH THE COORDINATES KAMITON had given Zainal. Kris said nothing about it, but she hadn't realized she'd be so long away from Zane. She thought a lot about him and there was plenty of time to think as they hurtled at top speed toward their destination. "Top speed" was somewhat dampened by a device which Zainal had attached to the propulsion unit just before they shifted to a new heading, and before they left what would have been a well-traveled area of Catteni-controlled space.

"It alters the ion emissions slightly," he explained. "We may not be as easy to follow. Certainly it will delay pursuit. Kamiton knows where to meet us."

"He's *meeting* us?" Chuck exclaimed.

"Didn't Gino tell you?" Zainal asked.

"He told me that Kamiton would have to see before he'd join wholeheartedly," Kris said.

"Oh," for once Mitford was taken aback. He rubbed his forehead. "I seem to be missing a lot."

"There are alcoholic drinks even I wouldn't take," Zainal said reassuringly. "I think Kivel probably did his best to get information from you."

"Fraggit, I thought I could hold anything and not spill any beans," Chuck said. "I did hear you mention Kamiton but I didn't know you intended to take him back to Botany."

"Him and how many others?" was Ninety's query.

"Only Kamiton," Zainal said. "He is a scout explorer, which is why he knows about this asteroid belt where we will meet him, and then

return to Botany. Spatially we are traveling in a triangle so we won't be long getting home once we contact him."

"Do we have to be Catteni with him?" Gino asked, rubbing at the stubble over his gray skin.

"No, because it will give us the . . . the upper hand," and Zainal grinned, "to show him how well we can fool Catteni, even on their own world."

Kris was not the only one who took in the significance of his last phrase. Ninety nodded slowly, and Gino grinned more broadly than ever. Coo and Pess nodded. Mack Dargle made a comical grimace.

"What did I say?" asked Zainal who was becoming more and more sensitive to Human nuances.

"Their own world," Kris said, enunciating the three words slowly.

"I would give my eyeteeth to hear other Emassi speak that way of Catteni," Mack said.

The asteroid field was a spectacular vision as they passed the heavy Uranus-type planet well away from the slowly orbiting mass of space detritus. Chunks large enough to be small moons were interspersed with smaller, uneven hunks following eccentric orbits about each other as well as the big planet, which, like some interstellar miser, seemed unwilling to release any of its satellites. The cosmic do-si-do dance was almost mesmerizing. Gino wondered just how many of the original inner worlds and moons had been involved in a collision of such magnitude. And how it had occurred. Two charred and dead planets, pockmarked by impacts centuries old, wobbled on erratic Mercury- and Venus-type orbits, each with more small moons of spatial debris attracted by the gravity of the planets they now orbited but not large enough to head for final dissolution in the primary. The star was dying, according to the spectroscope analysis Gino had done: the readings suggested that the star was doing its damndest to continue to live. Yes, all this space junk wasn't really an asteroid belt . . . a field of planetary and lunar fragments hugging the one thing that gave it some stability—the heavy Uranus planet. The area would take days to circumnavigate. To wend a way through it would require not only a very, very experienced pilot but a ship with heavy shielding and good gunners to explode those bits and pieces that were too small for them to avoid and too big to bounce harmlessly off the shielding.

"Only someone like Kamiton would find a . . . a curiosity like this." Zainal shrugged and settled himself more firmly in the pilot's chair, hands poised over the control panel.

"How'll we ever find the one we want with that mess churning

around like that?" Gino asked, his hands tense as he readied himself to use the thrusters on Zainal's command. "It's damned near a light year across."

"No," Zainal replied prosaically, "but certainly it covers an enormous area."

They'd rehearsed the maneuvering tactics all the previous day, using the diagram that Kamiton had given Zainal. They were to approach from coordinates at the ecliptic and weave a course that, in itself, would have thrown any pursuer off. Not that the ship's detectors had spotted anything following them. Kris wondered how anyone could rely on the diagram since every rock, boulder, mountain, and small moon seemed to be on a totally erratic orbit.

"I SEE WHAT YOU MEANT ABOUT BEING ABLE TO HIDE . . ." CHUCK MURMURED respectfully.

"Right thruster two seconds . . ." Zainal interrupted Chuck's remark.

Gino responded, and they seemed to be heading directly at a cluster spinning end on end when Zainal asked for three seconds right thruster and they broke into the clear . . . briefly.

No one dared say another word to risk breaking the concentration of the two pilots. They sat, occasionally with an inadvertent gasp at the terrifying proximity to a space obstacle large enough to crush them, clinging to the armrests of their seats, and grateful for the safety belts that held them in place. Zainal had insisted they don protective helmets and emergency oxygen tanks, and these precautions, pitiful though they seemed as the ship wove a torturous way through the maze, irrationally gave them a sense of security.

It seemed like hours, and possibly it was, before they finally saw empty space again. Then Zainal ordered a left thruster for five seconds, which swung the ship right back at the belt. The second course change, just before they would have reentered the asteroid belt, brought them parallel to it.

A sparkle caught Kris' eye and she pointed. "Look! Three-fifteen!"

Zainal gave a nod of his head and slowed the KDL almost to a complete halt. The ship drifted toward a ginormous asteroid, which turned ever so slightly to display an obvious cavern, which had been punched into it at some point. Zainal now slowly moved the KDL toward the dark hole, and they caught sight again of a glint where no light should be. He activated an exterior light, and they all reacted to the sight of an EVA-suited figure making for their hatch.

"Light the air lock," Zainal said, "and prepare to accept boarder."

Kamiton was as much a surprise to Kris as he was to the rest of the Botany group. He acted, Kris thought, much as Zainal had on their first meeting: dismissive, even contemptuous, until he realized that each and every one of them understood what he said to Zainal.

"I did not expect you to arrive so promptly, Zainal. I have only just arrived myself."

"With no pursuit?"

Kamiton shrugged shoulders as broad as Zainal's and began to strip off the rest of his space suit, looking around with a frown as no one seemed to immediately assist him.

"You're closest, Chuck," Zainal said in Catten, "give him a hand. These are awkward even with plenty of space." He took the helmet from Kamiton and the harness of the one-man thruster pack.

"Your cabin has the most room," Chuck said as Zainal opened a compartment where the helmet and thruster could be stored. "This way, Kamiton, in case you are unfamiliar with this class of ship." By tone, gesture, and courtesy, Sergeant Chuck Mitford was establishing his equality with the new arrival.

"They all speak Catten?" Kamiton asked, surprised as Gino and Mack pressed tight against the bulkhead to give him room to move aft.

"All of them," Zainal said.

Kris, too, had made as much space in the companionway as she could to allow Kamiton to pass her, but he stopped and stared hard at her. She merely raised an eyebrow in askance. He was a touch taller than she.

"Is it a female?" he asked Zainal, not taking his eyes off her.

Kris was glad that her gray skin did not show the flush of blood to her face at being referred to as an "it."

"Female and of command rank," she said in a cold hard voice, almost spitting out the Catteni syllables. "A fact you will remember."

"One of the Terrans, though, is she not?" He looked forward at Zainal.

"Do not speak *of* me, Kamiton," she said, thoroughly incensed and determined to be certain he answered her directly, "speak to me as you would *to* any other of equal rank."

"I would, were I you," Zainal remarked in a mild tone to Kamiton. "She's dangerous in a fight. Gino," and he paused at his cabin, "set course for Botany, top speed." Then, as soon as Kamiton and Chuck had entered the cabin, he winked at Kris and closed the door.

WHATEVER MIGHT HAVE BEEN SAID DURING THE SHORT INTERVAL IN which Kamiton was assisted out of his EVA apparel, he did not again refer to her as an "it" or "she" but addressed her directly, as he did the rest of the crew. Since he asked a great many questions, glancing about the cramped table in the crew mess, he did seem to accept her answers if she gave them. Once or twice, he rephrased the question later on, looking at Gino for an answer.

"Kris would know that, and I think she's already given you the answer," Gino said blandly.

Kamiton was quick enough never to use that ploy again.

"Which of you were first on Botany?" Kamiton asked.

Chuck held up his hand first followed by all, including the two Deski and Zainal, except Gino. Kamiton had the same habit of raising one eyebrow as Zainal would, in the manner of requesting explanation.

"I am space pilot, too," Gino said with a shrug. "Third Drop."

"The rest of us," Chuck said, "were what the Eosi picked up in the initial invasion."

"So you have learned Barevi as well?" Kamiton asked.

"Well enough to barter in the markets," Kris said.

"And other places," Chuck added in a droll tone.

Kamiton started to cross his arms, but there were too many wide bodies to permit that so he put his elbows on the table. Gino got up and started to clear the remnants of the meal, which provoked a startled reaction from Kamiton. Gino grinned.

"We all take turns," he said. "You do know, Kamiton, that there are many minerals in the asteroid belt. Read traces as we wandered through."

Kamiton gave a curt nod of his head. "I picked it so."

Coo and Pess, evidently having had enough of the social scene, rose and left the room.

"Now," Kamiton asked in a patient tone of voice, "I wish to see the spatial photographs of this refuge of yours. And especially of this Bubble that has our leaders . . ." his tone was contemptuous, "so aggravated."

At least that was what Kris thought the word meant. Most of the language Kamiton had used could be understood in context if he used words that she wasn't familiar with. At least he did them the courtesy of not speaking in pidgin Catteni.

Mack Dargle came in then: he'd been standing the watch. "Nothing around here but us, Zay," he said, nodding to Kamiton. "Pess has taken over the watch."

Zainal nodded, then asked Mack to collect the hand viewer and the file that had been compiled as what they facetiously called the "travel guide." Kamiton went through the file several times, first very quickly, grunting now and then. The second round was more selective as he magnified certain scenes, like the enclosed valleys, which caught his attention. Zainal had had Baxter take shots of the new Farmer equipment in the garage and then in action. There were also shots of the units, which the settlers had made of the original equipment.

Kris noticed it about the time that Chuck must have because the sergeant's eyes made contact with her. In no shot did Zainal actually show the geographical location of either the original installations or the current ones. Nor any details that might have given their positions away. Kris wondered if this was intentional. Zainal had said that he trusted Kamiton. How far? That was when Kris began to fret over the possibility that Kamiton was actually a spy for the Eosians.

Then Chuck tapped her on the arm. "Your shift, Kris." He also gave her a nod to reassure her that he would remain. And that he was still assessing this new recruit.

Kris glanced at the timepiece on the wall. "The time has just flown, hasn't it?" she said inanely. Then pushed herself around the table, which also meant momentarily displacing Kamiton from his position.

"I think the Cat's okay," Gino said when he came forward an hour later. He'd brought her a cup of herbal tea. He had one as well as he slipped in the pilot's seat and absently ran his eyes over the panel lights. "So do Coo and Pess, and they'd have more to go by than any of us. 'Sides which, I can't imagine Zainal risking any chance of aborting phase three." Then he wriggled his fingers in a characteristic stretch of his hands over the control panel. "Got a course correction to make soon." He leaned slightly to the left to peer at the rearview screen. "Nary a sign of pursuit either. Hope the others are okay." And doubt crept into the pilot's voice.

"So far Zainal's been right . . ." Kris said loyally.

"You only need to be wrong once," Gino said.

"For Pete's sweet sake, you sound like Balenquah."

Gino sat up straighter in the chair. "Kindly keep your insults to yourself, young woman," he said. "To begin with I'm a much better pilot than that idiot ever was."

"Sorry," Kris said, feigning meekness.

Gino had his eyes on the timepiece now and, toggling up the course correction made it with swift movements of his agile fingers. "There now. We should be home in next to no time."

“Really?”

“As the man said, that asteroid jumble wasn’t all that far from where Botany is after all.”

GINO’S WORDS WERE TRUE ENOUGH FOR THEY MADE IT HOME JUST AS the watch changed. Before that, however, Zainal and Gino had done the computation to find which window was the best one to take, avoiding the thirty-hour satellite. They had three and Zainal decided to use the one that would bring them in just “beyond” the range of the geosynchronous, older one while the thirty-hour sat was on the other side of the Bubble.

By mutual consent, Kamiton was allowed to take the second seat so he could have the best view of the Bubble and the insertion. He sat, arms folded across his chest in best Catteni mode, and watched, his keen yellow eyes missing nothing. Zainal had indicated that Kris and Gino should remain in the cabin. The others were detailed to rig the ship for landing and check the cargo restraints. There was always some buffeting as they entered the atmospheric envelope of Botany.

Zainal altered one view screen to show Kamiton the Eosian arrays still stuck in the Bubble at that point of exit. Kamiton snorted, then peremptorily gestured for Zainal to turn all screens on the Bubble. He seemed surprised when Zainal slowed to penetration speed. They almost popped through like a pea coming out of a pod, Kris thought. She gave a nostalgic sniff. Peas were so good, fresh out of the pod. Maybe someone would have thought to bring back some Earth-type seeds to experiment on Botanic soil. She hoped so, and that peas were among them.

They slipped easily through the Bubble’s skin, and Kamiton rumbled a request for a rear screen view. Of course, there was absolutely no indication that a large ship, with arrays of all the same sorts that had been ripped off the Eosian vessel, had passed through it.

Then Kamiton saw Botany, the largest of the continents in full view, though clouds were obscuring the seas and the other landmasses. His eyes opened wide. He said nothing but the crisp nod of his head was approval enough for Gino and Kris who grinned at each other.

Zainal did the necessary orbits, pointing out the original continent they had inhabited, also the half-desert one they had partially explored, barely visible under cloud cover. Then at a much lower altitude, he did a flyby of the command post, magnifying the screen sufficiently so that Kamiton could identify that this was an alien structure.

They flew on, low enough over the neatly cultivated fields to show Kamiton a few Farmer mechs at work, spraying in one case, harvesting

in another. Again that sharp Catteni nod to indicate Kamiton had noticed.

Almost at a glide—conserving fuel had become second nature to all the pilots—Zainal took the KDL across the narrow sea and up to the landing field.

“God in heaven, what’s happened?” Gino cried.

Zainal snapped on the intercom. “Scott? Beverly? Someone. Landing instructions.”

“Five, I count five,” Kris said, her voice rising in a squeak. “We’ve been invaded?”

“Welcome back, Zainal,” and Scott’s voice was far too vibrantly triumphant for the extra three ships to be menaces.

Suddenly Zainal began to swear in Catteni, only a little of which Kris understood but it had to do with boiling and eating and other usually fatal applications. Kamiton was roaring his head off, laughing and whooping in such uncharacteristically Catteni behavior that Kris and Gino were both grinning, too. Kris couldn’t quite understand his angry reaction: after all, he was the one who proposed the acquisition of Catteni spaceships.

Zainal was definitely not amused and continued to growl out his fury all through the landing procedures. As soon as he put the KDL down, to one side of the now crowded field, he jerked his head at Gino to power the ship down. He brushed past Kris who was considering what options she had of cooling him off before he did something that would really put the cat among the pigeons. She slipped in ahead of Kamiton who was nearly staggering with laughter down the companionway to the hatch. Zainal didn’t wait for the landing ramp. He jumped to the ground and started looking about for someone to holler at.

The other ships could not have been there very long, because two were still unloading groggy passengers or cargo or both. The passengers were enough of a surprise all on their own because Kris recognized the unmistakable lanky figures of black Maasai, with their long hair and distinctive garb. She missed the customary spears and shields that she’d seen them carry in the documentaries and news reports during the African famine.

Cargo was being unloaded, boxes and crates and larger items that required the use of a quickly constructed hoist told her that the mission, however increased, had been very successful.

“AH! SCOTT!” And Zainal had seen his victim and turned in that direction.

Halfway up the field, Ray Scott acknowledged that shout with a wave and the most cheerful expression Kris had ever seen on the ex-

admiral's face. She groaned at the thought of that dissipating when Zainal confronted him. Standing in the now fully open cargo hatch of the KDL, she began to semaphore her arms, trying to catch Ray's attention. Just warning him might help.

There was nothing wrong with the ex-admiral's eyesight, and he caught her frenzied signal. His smile began to fade as Zainal closed the distance between them. Even Zainal's back looked angry, Kris thought. He was in a towering rage and even Kris could understand why other species were afraid of Catteni. What she couldn't understand was why he'd be so angry at what seemed to be a very successful undertaking.

He was confronting Scott, waving arms and fists about, pointing from one of the newly captured ships to the other. Two were as big as the H-class, which had kidnapped her from Denver ages ago. The other was another new K-class. One way or another, Botany was assembling a substantial space fleet. So why was Zainal so put out?

Kamiton had disembarked the KDL, Chuck Mitford and Gino Marucci acting as guides as well as sponsors. Mack was following at a more leisurely pace, taking in all the activity and the new arrivals, Human as well as material. The busy stevedores didn't even give Kamiton a second look. Kris ran to catch up with Zainal and caught the last of Zainal's diatribe, so well interspersed with more Catteni curses and allegations, that Ray looked so stunned Kris could almost feel sorry for him.

Abruptly Ray Scott began to chuckle. "You taught us how, Zainal. Don't bitch at me when we had a chance to improve on your tactics and save a lot of people the Eosi want badly."

"One ship at a time would not be missed," Zainal began again, his voice harsh, his manner so belligerent he looked more Drassi than Emassi.

"These all went unnoticed, too, Zainal," Ray said, calmly, suavely defusing the unexpected anger Zainal displayed. "And who is this you have brought?"

If there was an edge that approximated disapproval in Ray's voice, Kris could hardly blame him as he now caught the approach of Kamiton and his guides.

But evidently Zainal had spent most of his anger. With a definite effort, he contained himself, taking a deep breath. Looking over his shoulder, he saw how close Kamiton and the others were. He also turned his head just far enough to take in the anxious expression on Kris' face. Suddenly, the gray of his skin lightened and, with a massive shake to his whole body, he relaxed, gesturing for Kamiton to approach.

"Admiral Ray Scott, this is Emassi Kamiton, a friend for many years

and one as committed to removing the Eosi domination as I am." Zainal let the two men shake hands—he'd mentioned that custom to Kamiton since Catteni rarely touched in cordiality—and Ray did not wince at the grip Kamiton produced.

"You are welcome, Emassi," Scott said in Catteni, with a slight grin when he noticed Kamiton's surprise. "Most of us can speak a little Catten . . . these days. Come, join us, you, too, Kris, Chuck, Gino. We can debrief in turns." He added the last in English. "Report, I meant to say," he put in, remembering the Catteni words.

Kamiton was looking around with great interest, especially at some of the unusual people who were being helped out of one big H-class.

"We've almost doubled our population again," Ray said, gesturing for them all to go up to the hangar and his office. "Later, Emassi Kamiton, it will be my pleasure to introduce you to the leaders of our colony."

As they entered the hanger, Kris saw Baby already ensconced, her hatch wide open. How had they managed to get pilots enough for three more ships? The KDM had had Laughrey as a second pilot and Boris with Raisha on Baby, and Ricky Farmer, maybe that's how they did it. She shook her head. But none of them, except Laughrey who'd captained Concordes, would have any experience with such big vessels, which would also require a minimum crew.

"Kris . . ." and obviously Ray Scott was calling for her attention a second time, "there's coffee over there," he said with a broad grin. "And even some reasonably fresh milk."

"WHAT?"

That shook her out of her introspection.

"COFFEE?"

Gino and Chuck reached the serving table almost as soon as she did. Chuck inhaled the aroma, eyes closed in ecstasy.

"I'll take a fresh cup, Kris," Scott said as he gestured the two Catteni to the chairs around the long table.

"Maybe a cup of coffee'll help settle Zainal, too," Chuck murmured to her as she poured for them all. His eyes were twinkling but his expression was sober. "I don't ever want him to get that mad at me, and I've been chewed out by experts."

"You?" Gino said, trying to ease the tension he felt in the atmosphere.

"Sugar as well, Ray?" Kris called out, noticing the large package of it open on the table.

"Two," Scott answered and she wondered just how much sugar had been acquired.

Without even an apologetic look on his face, Chuck used three spoonfuls but no milk. Kris was still deliberating what to add to the two cups destined for the Catteni when Chuck splashed in both sugar and milk, stirring vigorously.

"They can always try it pure later," he said. "This is *real* army coffee."

He took three cups as deftly as Kris did while Gino, eyes glinting with amusement, carried his and Scott's over to the table.

"See if you like it, Zainal," Chuck said at his most affable in trying to placate Zainal's still visible anger. He spoke in Catteni but when he went on, he had to use the English words where there were no equivalents even in Barevi. "Army can't move without coffee, nor the navy."

"It is a pleasure for us all," Scott said, also in Catteni. Then he blew on the surface of his coffee before sipping judiciously. As the other Humans were following that example, so did Zainal and Kamiton. Then Scott dropped into English. "First thing Sandy Areson off-loaded was a huge pot of brew and doled it out. I got that pitcher and two refills. I think she'll be brewing for the rest of the day, we're all so eager for the taste of it. Boxes of tea as well, so Ainger's happy."

"How much coffee did she bring in?" Chuck asked hopefully.

"Sacks full, though not all may be as fresh as this," Ray said before he switched to Catten. "I don't think the Catteni," and he nodded graciously at Kamiton, "realized . . ." and he made gestures of grinding with his two hands, "that the beans have to be ground to be useful."

"Sort of like potatoes when Sir Walter gave them to Queen Elizabeth," Kris said, slipping in the remark to allow Zainal more time to regain his usual dignity.

"Now, let me explain to you, Zainal, Kamiton, about the three ships," Ray said, sitting forward but keeping both hands on his coffee cup.

"I listen," Zainal said in a firm voice and sipped again at his coffee. Kamiton did, too, rolling the liquid in his mouth and savoring it.

"Neither of the two ships we sent on this reconnaissance of Earth had any trouble with their ID's or traveling. As you said, Zainal, Catteni ships are moving about without any restrictions at all. All right, all right, that might change because of what happened next," Ray intercepted Zainal's objections. "But considering how easy it all was to take over three more, I doubt they will be missed."

"They will not be missed," Kamiton said, having followed Ray's somewhat basic Catteni even with the ex-admiral's atrocious accent. He grinned broadly. "Everyone is too busy taking valuables and loading cargo drones. Those who are assigned to the Eosi do not have the same

freedom, but those, as you know, Zainal, are the chosen few!" Kamiton's smile was a mixture of contempt and condescension.

"Matt Su and Vic Yowell managed to find an unused channel on the communications band and kept in contact with our scout ship." Then Ray rubbed his forehead and, with an apologetic nod at Kamiton, asked Zainal to translate to Kamiton while he resorted to English. "That proved extremely useful because once Raisha and Boris saw what had been done to St. Petersburg, they were so shattered it took hours for Bull Fetterman and Lenny to talk them back into action." Ray paused briefly. "I'll say this for them, once they got over their initial shock, they really showed the stuff they're made of. By then, the KDM had realized how easy it was to get in and out of any major Catteni landing field and were reconnoitering." He sighed heavily. "Not much is left of the major world capitol cities, except the ones that don't look big enough to be important. After the KDM dropped off Basil Whitby and Leila in England, they let Sandy off in what had been the Boston-Cambridge area, and Joe Latore in upper New Jersey. Then the KDM proceeded, as planned, to Houston and the big Catteni/Eosi installation there.

"That's when they had the chance to take over the two H-class ships. The H's had just been loaded with more folks and were headed to one of the mining planets. Matt Su pretended to be in command and reassigned Bert Put and John Beverly as the new Drassi officers in charge of the newly acquired HTS. It was loaded but had only two crewmen on board so they were easily fooled into believing a change in command . . ."

Zainal actually grinned. "Perhaps it wasn't a bad idea, after all."

"No, because John Beverly knew where some air force personnel might have gone into hiding. And they were. So that didn't leave just two fake Catteni to manage that big mother. They aren't that difficult to operate but some crew had to be used. Beverly got to the hideout—but he had a bit of a problem, dressed as a Catteni until he wiped off part of the makeup and recognized one or two officers he knew. After that, they had enough to crew half a dozen more ships." Ray chuckled at the startled look on Zainal's face. Kamiton grinned, shaking his head at the audacity.

"We also now have NASA ground crew personnel who'll know how to service the ships," and Ray was obviously relieved about that aspect. "Beverly brought Laughrey and two more experienced Hercules pilots back with him to the Houston facility in the H's shuttle and enough men to crew a second H-ship." Ray paused, noticed that his cup was empty. Chuck rose, took it, and went to fill both. "That's when we got

the African contingent. Even the Hutus and Tutsies resented Catteni interference with their little war and joined forces against the Gray Men. We've Maasai, Luo, and Kikuyo and evidently a smattering of Tuareg and Zulu. The Catteni took savage reprisals all across Africa."

"So I also heard," Kamiton put in.

Over at the coffee table, Chuck murmured to Kris: "He's laughed once. Relax." As he poured coffee from the large bottle, he inhaled the aroma with a look of pure pleasure on his face that Kris had recently seen, but in much different circumstances. Fortunately he didn't see her blushing.

"And the K-class? Three spaceships disappearing from the same area would arouse suspicion," Zainal said bluntly.

"No, the K was Joe Latore's contribution to our growing navy," Ray said. "He found a lot of people hiding out in the forests in New Jersey, and they told him about all the ships they'd seen coming and going from what's left of New York City. He organized a bunch to go have a look. Had enough volunteers to make an army but kept it to a sensible force. Lots of people have rifles and small arms, you see. Have to hunt to live. They got to the city via the Lincoln Tunnel."

"The tunnel?" Chuck asked, exchanging surprised looks with Kris and Gino.

"Well, all the bridges were gone, and the Holland, but debris from the old Port Authority hid the entrance to the Lincoln and evidently the Catteni hadn't noticed the New Jersey entry. Can't get vehicles through the ones already stuck there. Some folks are using them to camp out in: those who got stuck there when the Catteni hit the city. Joe said they nearly caused a landslide getting through the debris on Fortieth Street and that didn't make them popular with the refugees. But . . ." and Scott shrugged off that complaint. "According to the tunnel people, Central Park was a prime landing and loading area. So Joe and his group started up Eleventh Avenue toward the park. When Joe saw the K-class parked on top of the Cunard building at Fifty-fourth Street, he decided to take a closer look. It was fully loaded and the crew drunk out of its tiny minds on champagne." Ray grinned. "By the way, Catteni do not know how to swim."

When Zainal translated that, Kamiton gave another of his bursts of laughter. Even Zainal had a grin on his face.

"So no one's going to miss that K right away. It was only a matter of getting in touch with the KDL. General Beverly sent his shuttle with a couple of air force Hercules pilots and enough crew to handle her. Joe brought as many folks back as possible and promised to lift more when he could." Scott sighed.

Not, Kris thought, that he didn't blame Joe for promising, but because it might be difficult to honor it.

"Were proper precautions taken to avoid the thirty-hour satellite?" Zainal asked in English.

"Hid behind the moons until they got the olley-olley-in-free," Ray Scott said with a boyish grin in keeping with the hide-and-seek password.

"The what?" Zainal glanced at Kris for explanation. She was relieved to see that his eyes were back to a normal shade of yellow and that the tension in his face muscles had dispersed.

"A children's game word. Quite appropriate."

"But how did the new vessels pass the Bubble?" Zainal asked, frowning.

Ray gave a flick of one hand to indicate the ease of that operation. "Baby brought one H-class in, using the same trick you did, Zainal, with a magnetic linkage. Then the KDL piggybacked the other two the same way when the coast looked clear of surveillance."

Zainal blinked. "Piggybacked? *More* children's games?" he asked, with a weary but tolerant sigh.

"As far as we know, before they got through the Bubble," Ray went on, filled cup raised in both hands, "no alarms were heard on any of the Catteni channels. If they haven't missed the ships in nearly three weeks, will they ever?" Then he took a long drink of coffee.

Zainal repeated that in Catteni to Kamiton, then stood up with his empty cup in his hand, and silently held out the other for Kamiton's.

"It is refreshing to drink," Kamiton said, handing the cup over but he followed Zainal's progress to the service table to refill their cups while answering Ray in Catteni.

"I doubt even the Eosi know how many ships they have in the fleet. The shipyards keep building them," and Kamiton shrugged his heavy shoulders diffidently. "The ships not to touch are those used only by the Eosi. They are distinctively marked and no one enters who does not have to."

"I can easily understand that," Ray said with a grin. Then, as Zainal returned with the refilled cups, he leaned across the table toward them. "But would not *they* be the very ships we'd need to hijack if you," and he pointed at both Zainal and Kamiton, "want to be rid of Eosian domination?"

Chuck grinned, though Gino, for a moment, looked apprehensive.

"There are at least one hundred Eosi," Kamiton said. "That is one hundred ships to destroy and you have . . . how many now? Six?"

"It's a start," Ray said, grinning slightly. "Are you also with us in

our fight against Eosian domination?" When Kamiton nodded slowly, he added, "Are there any more at home like you?"

"There are," Kamiton said firmly and soberly. Now he leaned forward across the table. "We must plan. It will not be easy."

"What is worth having never is," Ray Scott said. "Now, it's your turn, Zainal," and he continued in Catteni, "tikso."

ZAINAL "REPORTED" IN THE SAME LANGUAGE, ALTHOUGH OCCASIONALLY Ray had to ask for a translation. He chuckled over the asteroid belt deception.

"Well done, well done," Ray said, rubbing his hands together.

"We cannot make mistakes, Ray," Zainal said as if he could see Scott planning all kinds of hijacking missions that would eventually be noticed: perhaps even traced to Botany.

"There is one Mentat, the Ix," Kamiton said, glancing at Zainal with a significant nod, "who is certain you all," and his large finger circled the table, "are responsible for every disaster that has occurred recently. You realize that a moon base is being constructed to keep watch over you."

Ray nodded. "We know, which is one reason why we are using the south polar windows."

"Good." Kamiton hitched his chair forward, the wood creaking under his weight. He glanced down at it, shifted experimentally, and then ignored the occasional noises.

Kris really did hope that the chair, though made of lodge-pole wood, was sturdy enough for the heavily built Catten.

"The Mentat Ix has had one seizure . . ."

"Seizure?" Zainal came alert.

Kamiton nodded, grinning. "Interesting, isn't it? The Immortals have flaws. We must discover how we can use them to *our* benefit."

"Tactically," Ray said, showing appreciation for that information, "it is always smart to get your enemy to destroy himself . . . if you possibly can."

"No species' injury," Chuck said with great satisfaction. "Only how the hell do we do it? One of them losing his cool doesn't mean we'd be able to blow the minds of the others." He cocked his forefinger and clicked his thumb, making his hand into an imaginary weapon.

"A seizure in a Mentat has never happened before," Kamiton said in Catteni, sitting back and folding his arms across his chest.

"No, it has not," Zainal said, then switched to English, addressing the others. "The significance of such an occurrence wouldn't mean as

much to you as it does to us," and he turned back to Kamiton. "I would like to know more since I heard nothing of that on Catten," he added in Catteni.

"Nor would you," Kamiton said in a droll tone. "But I know of it and several others as well. The Bubble frustrates Mentat Ix. Total annihilation of this planet is required as retaliation for the humiliation suffered by Ix."

"But this Ix fellow can't get past the Bubble and we know he, it, whatever, has tried," Ray Scott said smugly.

"Necessity is the mother of invention," Gino reminded them pointedly.

Zainal translated to Kamiton.

"Have you heard if their brain-wiping of Human specialists has given them any help?" Ray asked.

"We know that it was done," Kamiton said. "We are trying to find out if any worthwhile information was discovered. More importantly, if any new projects have been started. Not so far as I know." And Kamiton's attitude was that if anyone would know, he would.

"I think that the Eosi," Ray said slowly but with a glint of satisfaction in his eyes, "have underestimated Humans."

Kamiton smiled. "They have and it gives us," and his thick thumb touched his chest, signifying his group of dissidents, "immense satisfaction. And hope. How best may I serve you, Emassi?" Kamiton bent his head toward Ray in an unexpected gesture of compliance.

"My rank *was* admiral, Emassi Kamiton," Ray said, with a grin. "And it looks likely that I may resume it. We'll have to consider how best to use your services. Welcome aboard." Then he stood up and turned to Zainal. "I think that perhaps it would be wise if you all," and he gestured to include Gino and Chuck, "escort Kamiton up to the hall and make sure everyone knows he's on our side. I'll see how soon we can schedule a tactical conference, but right now, unloading and the disposition of our latest arrivals takes precedence."

Kris was on her feet. "And I have a son to see." Clearly it was safe for her to leave now that Zainal was himself again. And she was suddenly overcome with the urge to see Zane.

"Take my runabout, Kris," Ray said expansively. "I've got reports to write while all this is fresh in my mind."

Chapter Seven

ZANE WAS SO INVOLVED, PLAYING WITH OTHERS HIS AGE, GIGGLING outrageously over something they found funny that she stood and watched, drinking in the sight of him.

Suddenly they went dead quiet, eyes wide open and staring. One of the little girls whimpered in fright but was instantly comforted by Sarah McDouall, one of the carers on duty at the crèche.

“Great heavens, where did they come from?” she said, her voice part surprise and part reassurance.

Kris turned and saw a line of the tall thin Maasai men and women striding up the hill. They had not been outfitted with the customary Catteni coveralls, possibly because the Catteni hadn’t made any that size before, so they wore the tatters of their traditional garb. And were as proud and dignified as she remembered seeing them in occasional news broadcasts when there had been that awful drought in Africa and Bob Geldof had started Band Aid.

The size of the Maasai would intimidate more than two- and three-year-olds.

“How come you’re leading the Maasai, Bart?” Kris asked, noticing him in the front, almost lost among the tall folk.

“They seem to trust me. Now a few smiles wouldn’t go amiss right now,” Bart Tomi said firmly and immediately everyone complied, waving as well. “Hassan says ‘Jambo’ is a greeting. Can we have a chorus from you all?”

Everyone obediently repeated the greeting. The Maasai beside Bart looked surprised, eyebrows ascending up his wrinkled forehead but he stopped. So did the others behind him.

Abruptly Sarah brought the child she was holding closer, waving its arm as she did so. The transformation of the Maasai from surprise to delight was amazing. They all smiled now, at the children, rather than the adults.

The leader came right up to the playground, the picket fencing not as high as his knees, grinning broadly and saying something that Kris heard as "kasserianingera?"

Sarah held out the little girl's hand to the man. Smiling with very white teeth and bending his tall frame down to her level, he very gently touched her fingers, so gently that the child, wide-eyed though she was, did not withdraw. The Maasai nodded and stepped back, then smiled at all the children. Behind him, the rest of his tribe, if that's who they were, nodded and smiled and murmured their response of "jambo."

"Good, good," Bart said. "That's the first any of them have reacted at all."

"I'd heard," Sarah said, "that they love children. And cattle. Our loo-cows are going to give them quite a shock."

The little girl had a grin hovering on her lips, but she burrowed her head into Sarah's shoulder, peeking coyly at the tall man. But the breakthrough had occurred and a ripple of soft words went down the line. The Maasai all had smiles now and strode forward more cheerfully.

Bart pointed toward the hall. Then, looking down at a strip of paper in his hand added in Swahili, "Hapa chakula kizuri! Get me?"

"Ndio, ndio," the leader said, nodding and looking around to gesture for the progress to continue. "Hapa chakula kizuri!" He repeated the same words Bart had used but with the proper inflections, and the Maasai behind grinned and nodded.

"So much for Hassan's instant Swahili lessons," Bart said, grinning as he stuffed his paper back into a thigh pocket.

At that moment, Zane came running towards Kris, arms outstretched to be picked up. "Mommy, mommy, mommy."

She was only too glad to collect him and hug him tightly and kiss him all over. Then she took his arm, turned, and had him waving at the Maasai as they flowed by in their long striding gait.

"Mommy?" Zane whispered in her ear, his eyes wide.

"These are good people, Zane."

"Not Deski, not Rugars . . ."

"No, Maasai."

"Massssi."

"Maas—ai," she corrected him and he got it right.

"Has a quick ear, this one," Sarah said. "Have a good trip?"

Kris chuckled, thinking of some of the elements she was not going to mention. "Mind you, all we brought back was a dissident Catteni which isn't much against the increase in Botany's fleet . . ."

"Dissident Catteni?" Sarah made round eyes at that. "Do tell!"

"Didn't you see him go up to the hall with Zainal a few minutes back?"

"Can't say as I did. But then, I can't say as I knew of any Catteni dissidents either." Sarah grinned. "Nice to know we might have inside help, though. Will we?"

"Tell you later."

"Over lunch perhaps?" Sarah said, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

"If you share what you've heard that I haven't had time to find out."

"Good. It's nearly lunchtime and sandwiches are all made. LUNCH-TIME," Sarah called.

Out the window of the crèche dining room, they saw the procession of what Sarah called the "repossessed," mainly Africans, but some whites, and their nationality not so obvious as they had been given Catteni coveralls.

"Not so many injured either," Kris remarked.

"We did the unloading," Sarah said, "and wait 'til you see what else we got."

"Zainal came back with equipment as well," Kris said. "But it got loaded in such a hurry I don't know what all he acquired."

"Did you see much of the planet?" Sarah asked, as others joined their table, eager to hear of Kris' adventures.

Kris shook her head, breaking a piece off her own sandwich, which Zane evidently preferred to what was on his plate. "The gravity damned near wore me out. I stayed on board and answered the com unit. My Catteni's good enough for that but I don't look the part. And I sure couldn't operate in that gravity! Chuck did all the fronting for us. I'll tell you one thing for sure, I was awful glad to lift off safely." Then she laughed. "We ended up in an asteroid belt and whatever created it must have been one helluvan explosion."

She told them the ruse they'd used so that the space station hadn't wanted them to land there, which would have meant handling more formalities than was wise. So they'd got to land on the surface of the planet, far enough away from any settlement so that their "faulty" systems would cause no damage. "And we sure were sent to the boondocks. I did see the Rassi and they are . . ." she gave a shudder, "really little more than animals. You can't call them morons or retarded because they don't have much intelligence at all. They copy what they are shown

to do and even that has to be repeated over and over. But Zainal and the others got into the main city and made contact with Kamiton.”

She could relate the deception about having to off-load an extremely valuable ore cargo, which is why they came back via the asteroid belt, and how they could get back to Catten if they wished.

“So what’s this Kamiton doing here?” Sarah wanted to know.

“Seeing’s believing, isn’t it?” Kris replied.

“And if he likes what he sees, he brings in more dissidents?” asked another woman. Belatedly Kris recognised her as Jane O’Hanlan, the TV reporter who’d been one of those rescued from Barevi in a mindless state.

“You’ve recovered!” Kris exclaimed.

Jane gave a rueful smile. “I’m improving. Many are. Dorothy Dwar-die’s been marvelous.”

“Indeed she has,” Sally Stoffer said, as she wiped cereal off a baby’s face. “I’m practically out of my job there.”

“Really?”

“Seventy-five percent have recovered enough to function on their own now, to talk and help out. We’ve been busy while you were gone.”

“I don’t doubt that for a moment,” Kris said. “But boy-oh-boy, am I glad to be home.”

“Daddy, daddy,” Zane cried excitedly just then, and Kris looked up to see Zainal and Kamiton in the doorway. “Scuse,” Zane said in Sarah’s direction and ran up to his father, squealing in excitement when Zainal swung him up.

“Watch out, Zainal, he’s just had lunch,” Kris cried.

Obediently, Zainal positioned Zane on his back while Kamiton looked on in amused condescension at the sight of a paternally occupied Zainal.

LATER KRIS HEARD ALL ABOUT THE RESETTLEMENT OF THE MAASAI from Sarah at dinner in the hall. Zainal had taken Zane off for an evening walk and talk. Zainal was also teaching Zane Catteni, and if Kris was there, he preferred to jabber away in English, which defeated the purpose.

“Well, I did do some work in the outback with Aborigines, so they guessed I, and Joe, might be able to help,” Sarah said in her matter-of-fact way. “Problem is that the Maasai’re used to a totally different life-style, which was getting ruined in Africa even before the Cat . . . Eosi hit Earth.”

"I remember the famine there in the eighties," Kris said.

"So they won't be happy up here but Chuck thinks that the southern end of this continent might do, where we found semi-desert."

"Why not the desert continent?"

"Maybe, in time, but right now, that'll keep them in a more or less familiar terrain. Oh, and you should have seen their faces when we showed them the loo-cows!" Sarah laughed. "They couldn't believe 'em and they wouldn't believe that the critters don't give milk until one was captured for inspection."

"What about night crawlers? As I recall it, the Maasai are nomadic, looking for grazing for their . . . cattle. Will loo-cows *do* for them? And they have huts or kraals . . . or something like 'em to live in."

"Well, tonight's the big demo on night crawlers and all the newbies are going to have to attend," Sarah said with a certain amount of grimness. "We gotta get that lesson across."

"What about using some of the closed valleys?" Kris asked.

"That's another solution but nothing to hunt and they don't like fish. But you should have seen them looking at all the plants, grass, and stuff we wouldn't think twice about. Hassan was damned near tongue-tied translating for my Joe and the other herbalists . . ."

"It'd be helpful if there just happened to be a book on Swahili in that latest shipment . . ." Kris thought, remembering the crates of books she'd seen being transported to Retreat's library.

Sarah gave a snort. "They're rummaging through 'em right now. Hassan's running out of useful vocabulary."

"That'll be a first," Kris said with a grin. The former Israeli spy was the chatty sort at any time.

"Let's see what they got in. I'd love a good juicy murder mystery to read," Sarah said.

"With this new lot in, how'll you find time?"

"I'll make it," was Sarah's firm reply. Then she sighed again. "I have missed reading, I really have."

"That's because you weren't rescued from two college survey courses with required reading lists this long," and held her hand out at about four feet above the flagstones of the hall.

"So this," and Sarah gestured ironically around, "is a much better way to spend your time." Before Kris could open her mouth to answer, Sarah added, "Actually, college would be pretty dull in comparison."

"Prof, do I get an A in this survival course?"

"Too right," Sarah said and they both rose, taking their dishes back to the window that led to the KP section of the dining hall.

WHEN THEY REACHED THE STRUCTURE, THEY FOUND ONLY DOROTHY Dwardie unpacking and shelving books.

"Oh, good, some help. I've found the most astonishingly eclectic . . . texts here. I can't imagine how all these books got in the same case together," and she showed them the ones in her hand.

"*Post-Renaissance Painters?*" Sarah said, reading one title.

"*How the Grinch Stole Christmas?*" Kris read the second title and took it from Dorothy, leafing through the colorful illustrated pages. "We may not have Christmas here, but I'm sure glad to see some good children's books. Can we help?"

"Yes, please," Dorothy said and pointed over behind her.

Cases had been stacked three and four high all the way back to the tarpaulin that covered the end of the present library and the addition under construction. Aisles allowed access to the cases.

"Marian, the librarian," Sarah began in a sing-song voice, "where's the mystery section?"

"Now that's a mystery to me," Dorothy replied, rising to her feet with an effort. "Have at it. I can't promise there will be any. I'm cataloging as I go along and thank God for more computers. Otherwise we'll never know how much we've got."

"You're not doing it all yourself, are you?"

"Well, I'm supposed to get some help shelving," she said. "We had some Victims in here this morning and I think it's helping them remember some of the basic skills they once had."

"What're you looking for?"

"Anything, everything. Dr. Seuss for the children ranks in my eyes as a far greater treasure than anything Post-Renaissance. Though I've nothing against painters at all."

"Actually, light classics that we can read to the Victims: even Westerns or a good mystery story."

"Gotcha," Sarah said and closing her eyes, she turned herself around and pointed. When she opened them, her finger directed her to one of the side aisles. "C'mon, Kris."

Kris was still chuckling at Sarah's whimsical manner of choosing when they heaved a crate to the ground and opened it.

"Lord love us, how're we going to sort this mess out?" she said looking at the tumbled collection: books with spines bent and pages crumbled, all heaped together. A few loose pages only added to the tribulations of transfer.

“By starting at the top and working down. I’ll get a few of those shelves over here,” Kris suggested, going over to one side where she’d seen the empty shelving, “and separate as we go.”

“Good thinking,” and Sarah sat herself down and started pulling out books.

However, they had “unerringly,” as Sarah remarked, migrated to a whole case full of mysteries and romances. Their conscientious efforts to perform their assigned task were interrupted by seeing books they either recognized or titles that looked interesting.

“A new Hillerman,” Sarah crowed and settled against the back of the crate, shamelessly reading her find. “I’ll just read a few pages . . .”

Kris worked more diligently but not much longer because she found an Elizabeth Peters’ Amelia yarn and she, too, couldn’t resist reading “just a few pages . . .”

“Ah, Doctor Hessian, have you come to help shelve books?” they both heard Dorothy say.

When Kris would have moved guiltily back to unpacking, Sarah grabbed her arm and whispered at her.

“No, let’s just listen,” Sarah said in a very low voice. “Dorothy’s been trying to pin him down since he got his mind back. He wants all the Victims to undergo proper Freudian sessions. He feels that he should be in charge of the treatment team, not Dorothy.”

“Are you Miss Dwardie . . .”

“Doctor Dwardie, Doctor Hessian,” Dorothy replied calmly but there was a slight edge to her voice that alerted both Kris and Sarah. Kris would have risen but Sarah grabbed her by the arm, pressing her back against the crate.

“You’ve made a remarkable recovery,” said Dorothy with apparent pleasure.

Sounds like “grumph grumph” and an audible “be that as it may” seemed to indicate that this Dr. Hessian was not in complete accord. His raspy baritone gave Kris a mental image of a portly man of advanced years, probably balding, overweight, and overbearing.

“I was told that there had been new additions to the library and wished to avail myself of some suitable reading material.”

“Oh? Were you not also told that your help in cataloging our new shipment would be sincerely appreciated?”

“Shelving? Books?” was the pompous and astonished reply. Kris thought he sounded remarkably like Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, declaiming: “Handbag? Station?”

“Doctor Hessian, we all do community work . . .”

“He’s from the Freudian school of psychology,” Sarah whispered

to Kris. "Dorothy's a social learning psychologist . . . completely opposite to him."

"The community work," Dr. Hessian went on inexorably, "for which I am eminently qualified is to help those Victims still in severe mental distress. I am quite willing to allot all the time necessary with some of the more prestigious Victims whom I have recognized, despite their appalling ordeals. I can certainly provide blueprints of the underlying psychodynamic conflicts of their conditions."

"We *know* what happened to them, Doctor Hessian. As it happened to you, and it is quite a triumph to see you walking about and conversing with everyone. Quite normal again."

"Normal? Normal?" the second repetition was louder than the first. "What *is* normal . . . ah . . ."

"Doctor Dwardie," Dorothy put in gently. "Shall we take a walk, Doctor Hessian? I think the shelving of the books can wait."

Kris looked chagrined and Sarah evidently felt the same way for they were obviously not supposed to know what Dorothy needed to tell Hessian. Books in hand, they crept quietly out by way of the tarpaulin.

Although Dorothy had seen the slight ripple of the tarpaulin, she wanted to continue this discussion outside, where there was no danger of them being overheard. Hessian, responding to a tug on his arm, followed her out of the library, saying as they went, "My normal self scarcely compares with anyone else's so-called 'normal state,'" and "certainly anyone here" lingered in the air as if the doctor had spoken aloud. "I have only just begun to recall how exceptional *my* normal self is. You cannot *expect* . . . *me* . . . to shelve books?"

"If I can do it, why should it be beneath your capabilities, Dr. Hessian?"

"Now, just a moment, young woman," and his voice dripped with opprobrium.

"Doctor Dwardie, Doctor Hessian," Dorothy said firmly but kindly. "This colony survives because everyone . . . everyone . . . is willing to do the basic tasks as well as the application of their *previous* profession, whatever that might have been. My entire team looks forward to your helping us with the psychological treatment of the remaining Victims. Treating trauma response has been such an overwhelming task that even I have been doing this, as a much needed change of pace. There are so many more Victims," and her voice was not exactly imploring him to be reasonable, as encouraging him, "than we can effectively treat with so few psychologists, psychiatrists, and nurses. Will you join our treatment team, Doctor Hessian?"

"Arumph. Be part of a *team*?" and his voice and manner reminded

Dorothy of the English actor Robert Morley at his most pompous and petulant. “You’re not serious? I hardly think so. Not with my exemplary qualifications.”

Fortunately, there were few people around as dusk settled over Retreat so she steered him to the flagstone path that would eventually lead to his current residence.

“Yes, they certainly are, Doctor Hessian,” Dorothy said warmly. “I am quite familiar with your professional background. However, the psychological team here is under my direction and we have designed a multi-modal treatment program, which has indeed healed the trauma of many of the Victims. While your work within the psychoanalytic community is a valuable asset to the field, we have employed a social learning framework here because of its efficacy with psychological trauma.”

“And I would, I opine, have to *use* . . .” and once again Dorothy was treated to the magnificent disdain he could inject into such a small word, “this . . . this multi-modal treatment?”

“Yes, you would, since we have found it to be so effective. I worked with trauma units before I was . . . dropped here. But undoubtedly you would not be aware of my professional work in that area.”

“No, I am not,” he said in a flat discounting of any expertise she might have. “Especially since you now have someone of my stature in the field. Surely you realize that a change of treatment models would benefit those still in the grip of what appears to be catatonia. When the main troops arrive, as it were,” and his supercilious tone suggested that he was smiling condescendingly at Dorothy. “. . . the reserves are no longer needed.”

Dorothy was undaunted. “Let’s take a stab at this situation from the viewpoint of research, and see what happens. I understand that it is probably a shock for you to discover that there are other treatment models with empirical efficacy greater than the one you are most familiar with and have evidently spent most of your life studying. I know, for example, that your résumé includes eight books on the life and work of Freud in theory and psychoanalysis. I really do believe that you will be a tremendous asset to the Victims.”

There was no immediate response by Dr. Hessian.

“Doctor Hessian, please don’t misunderstand me. I am not implying any undervaluing of Sigmund Freud or the power of his work. I think that Freud was one of the greatest thinkers of all time in the study of nervous disorders. It’s just that we are using a model with proven efficacy, and the model your work is based in is most applicable to a different treatment problem—neurosis. We’re dealing with deep mental trauma, not neuroses.”

His earlier long stride, as if he had intended to outwalk her, had shortened. Now he stood, head down, pulling at his lips.

"I doubt that you and I, Doctor Dwardie, can ever work together with any degree of mutual respect, much less find a basis for a *proper* course of treatment for these unfortunate Victims."

"I can accept that, although with great regret, Doctor Hessian. No, please don't go yet. There is one trauma case I'd like a chance to discuss with you. It was one that baffled all of us."

"Oh?"

"Yes, now do sit down, Doctor Hessian," and she indicated a strategically placed stone bench that had a magnificent view of the Bay, "this might take a little time."

"I should imagine so."

"Well," and Dorothy seemed to be taking a breath before plunging into this case. "There is a professional woman, Doctor K—a psychologist of exceptional brilliance—whose case, though successful, was very difficult. She experienced the mind-wipe shortly after a series of Victim deaths, or so one observer tells us. These had resulted from the effects of the modulated electrical current level. Some of the early deaths were those who had been trained as neuropsychologists although leading professionals of all branches of sciences also were among the dead."

"Yes, I had heard that," Dr. Hessian was willing to admit, "from talks with Doctor Seissmann. Evidently Doctor Stanley Kessler was one. Tragic loss to the field."

"I agree," Dorothy said. "From various sources, we did learn that the Eosi reduced the current to prevent additional deaths due to central nervous system overload. Unfortunately the reason was less humanitarian than selfish. The Eosi were killing before they could complete the retrieval process that would extract the information they wanted. To be useful, the subject had to remain in a state of altered consciousness, therefore alive, during the probe."

"What could be their interest in neuropsychology?" Dr. Hessian asked.

"This is theory, of course, because they mind-wiped leading professionals and state officials on a random basis but it might have to do with increasing the compliance level of the races they have dominated. They have had an unusual amount of resistance from Earth's races and they may well have been trying to find a way to disempower their ability to resist. Just 'turn them off,' so to speak, by inhibiting or altering the synaptic receptor response. It would have the same effect as removing the drive unit from a computer—you can punch the keys but nothing

will happen. For some reason, and fortunately for the rest of those subjected to the mind-wipe, the Eosi went off on another tact of mental exploration entirely. Or the percentage of death was discouraging.”

“What happened to those who were so examined?”

“Some experienced organic damage to both frontal lobes from experimental current levels. Still others were left with the effects of psychological trauma and some had both. In addition, many have had survivor guilt, as they were aware of the eminence of many that died. They have, quite naturally, questioned their own worth at having remained alive. Others grieved. Actually, in the case of Doctor K, there was some of both.”

“Tell me more,” said Dr. Hessian.

“Our patient, Doctor K, heard of the deaths of several such scientists, colleagues at the university, and prior to her own ordeal under Eosian instrument. And, while the mind-wipe current level had been reduced and no further deaths resulted, she was severely traumatized. Having the power of her mind stolen by ruthless aliens who had strapped her into a chair and assaulted her with a searing blue beam of bright, laser-fine light was devastating. She had flashbacks of the blue beam following her, aimed directly at the forebrain, entering her head while she was physically and psychologically paralyzed, unable to escape.”

“Hmmm. Could cause severe neuroses, indeed.” He cleared his throat. “You have told me about the trauma Doctor K experienced. Now I’d like to know something about her development history, psychological defenses, and pre-morbid adjustment level.”

Dorothy took a deep breath as she was coming to the difficult part. “Pre-morbid adjustment level is not a very useful concept in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder of highly functioning individuals. The focus is more closely conceptualized as helping them gain self-efficacy and self-control over their symptoms at the conscious level.”

“Well,” and Dr. Hessian’s tone was pompous, “if you don’t take pre-morbid treatment into account, you are not offering comprehensive treatment.”

“In your theory that is true: in mine, technically, it’s not,” she replied. “Imagine a nearly new automobile that is totally destroyed in a head-on collision. We would seldom ask how well it ran prior to the accident or expect it to return to its nearly new form after a visit to the body shop. In fact, such wrecks are discarded. But, with people, the nature of the human spirit often allows them to achieve an amazing level of functioning so that they can transcend the level of the trauma. Teaching how to do that by employing techniques from cognitive psy-

chology, behavior therapy, and multi-modal treatment has proven efficacious."

Another pause. "Well, then, tell me," Dr. Hessian said again with that hint of gracious condescension, "what were the symptoms of post-traumatic stress that were most difficult to treat?" he asked.

Dorothy decided that he was trying to buy time to revise his strategy.

"Doctor K had temporary post-trauma amnesia and flashbacks of the blue light. She could not sleep or remain awake without recurrent images of the blue light attacking her forehead. Everywhere she went, it haunted her. In dreams as well as in waking life, she was trailed by this nasty flashback that impeded every aspect of her recovery."

Dr. Hessian straightened himself, a smug gleam in his eye and Dorothy wondered what hole he would try to pick in her method. He was making eye contact now while he assumed his characteristic condescending expression.

"This is why pre-morbid adjustment is so important to know," he said. "I would guess there was some unresolved conflict in this woman's background that made her more prone to the flashback. Do you know if there was some unresolved guilt toward a parent or unresolved shame in the area of sexuality, for example, that showed itself in this way?"

By now the sun was disappearing behind the mountains. They could hear others hurrying home but no one used this path. She didn't want to rush the man but they would soon have to leave, to avoid the night crawlers. However, she had to make an end of this power struggle between the two opposing camps of psychological treatment. The base of their current discussion, she reasoned, is power, not just theory. There are two ends to this rope: he is pulling one end and I have hold of the other in this psychological tug-of-war. I will decide not to play and see what happens.

"Well," Dorothy said out loud, "while I would continue our discussion, we must make it back to our respective residences before full dark. I had wanted to tell you that the way we treated Doctor K's flashbacks was to bring under stimulus control using a fading procedure combined with deep muscle relaxation. We also provided her with an imagery intervention which was highly effective."

Dr. Hessian looked at her, unimpressed. He was probably not inspired by the a-theoretical even if it was effective.

"We'd best call it a night," she said, standing up and his deep-rooted courtesy made him get to his feet, too. "I hope you decide to join us. Would you sleep on it? We could use your clinical help and perhaps

you could summarize Doctor Kessler's work and present it to the treatment staff. It might be a fitting tribute since you knew him. Anyway, let me know what you decide."

She took the few steps back to the safety of the flagstone path but turned back, assuming a humble expression. "Oh," she said, "Doctor Hessian, before I leave, I do need to apologize to you." She even managed the slightest hint of chagrin.

"Apologize to me?" he repeated, obviously pleased that she was seeing the mistake of her own ways.

"Yes, you see, presenting the case of Doctor K was my way of attempting to share with you the power of the treatment model. I guess I was not successful in helping you see that."

"Well," he said, with an almost gracious wave of his hand, "you tried."

"The irony," she responded gently, "was that while most of the case data was accurate, one part was not. I changed the gender of the doctor involved."

"Well, I hardly think that is significant."

"Not when Doctor K is you. We used social learning techniques to revive your fine mind, Doctor Hessian, and they worked."

She saw his gaping mouth and hurried away, leaving him to digest that final thrust.

KRIS AND SARAH HAD RUN AS FAST AS THEY COULD TO LEAVE THE scene of their eavesdropping.

"Should we apologize to Dorothy?" Kris asked, her expression repentant.

"How were we to know Hessian would come in, all ruffled and precipitate a set-down? I hope he got it from her, too," Sarah replied, not the least bit repentant. Then she shuddered. "I hadn't heard her theory about what the Eosi might have been trying to do. Make zombies out of all of us."

Kris had a sick feeling in her guts. She shook her head slowly in denial. "No, Zainal is certain that the Eosi were trying to search for possible new scientific theories . . ."

"And what, pray tell, was that?" Sarah asked acidly.

"A point, but it wasn't just psychologists and psychiatrists that got the treatment. There were heads of state and government departments and whatever NASA personnel they could find. All kinds of specialists." Kris realized she was talking more to reassure herself than Sarah. And

she wasn't sure she was convincing. "Well, with all the information that's come back, the High Command," and she managed a grin, "are sure to come to some conclusions. I'm sure Dorothy would have told Leon Dane, at least, since he's still more or less chief medic."

"Well, it's not something we just *ask* about, is it?"

"Nope, but that doesn't mean we can't find out if it's been discussed." Kris muttered under her breath. "That's the downside of being away from here. You can't keep up with what's happening."

Sarah raised her eyebrows and regarded Kris with a wry grin. "Look who's talking? You've been traveling the galaxy and I'm stuck at home . . . Oops!" She caught Kris' arm, then pointed to the cluster of torches at the dark edge of the settlement. "Demonstration!"

They were not so far away they didn't hear the gasp as the latest arrivals witnessed the emergence of night crawlers. They could hear male shouts of surprise and alarm and female cries of terror. They saw plainly the shadows of a milling throng, wanting to put distance between themselves and the wet, slimy denizens of the night ground. A chant began, and from the depth of the voices, the two friends decided that was a Maasai response to danger.

"I'm glad they're on our side," Kris said.

"Me, too, and Joe won't be on mine if I don't get home," Sarah said and turned off toward her own home on the flagstone path where their way parted.

WHEN KRIS REACHED THEIR HOUSE, ZANE WAS ASLEEP AND ZAINAL BUSY with papers on the table, so she slipped in to check on her son. He'd grown inches in the weeks she'd been away. What else had she missed of his development?

Zainal grinned at her. "He walks well now."

She pulled up another chair to sit beside him, their bodies barely touching at shoulder and thigh. She had worked herself into a nervous wreck on the walk home, thinking about Dorothy's theory. Well, eavesdroppers never heard anything good, about themselves or other matters: as just demonstrated. But maybe Zainal could reassure her. She was certain to have nightmares tonight, remembering the blank looks of the Victims as they had been led off the two K-ships.

"Zainal?" she began and then noticed he was dealing with figures and time slots, and entry windows through the Bubble. "What's being planned now?"

Zainal leaned back, tossing the pencil to the table and stretching until his tendons cracked which made her shudder. The sound made her wince, thinking of bodies on a rack.

"Kamiton met some of the other leaders, and I must agree with some of their ideas." Zainal linked his fingers together across the back of his broad head. Which reminded Kris of the burning question.

She put her hand on his upper arm in brief apology. "The Eosi couldn't come up with a means to turn off all our minds, could they?"

Zainal tipped his head back, roaring with laughter, and she had to hush him. Zane would sleep through a great deal of noise but not a bellow like that.

He slipped an arm around her shoulders and gave her a reassuring squeeze, his face against her cheek.

"They've only one of those mental helmets. They could scarcely cope with the millions of you Humans, and that's what they'd have to do. Though Ray asked Kamiton, too, if it was possible. It isn't! It would be better if we could put the Eosi under that device." He made a grimace, a new trait of his which made him seem all the more Human. She'd caught the surprise in Kamiton's eyes over Zainal's facial reactions. Very un-Catteni, probably. "Of course, their enlarged heads wouldn't fit so we can't use that as a way of cutting them down to size."

She grinned back at him. "So?"

"So, since Kamiton needs to get back, we are going to see what other mischief . . . is that the right word," and his yellow eyes twinkled at her, "we can get into. Actually," and he retrieved the pencil to tap it on the various sheets that she realized were now laid out in a semi-circle on the table, "Beverly wants to dazzle them with surprises everywhere. Everyone who went back to Earth is all for it." His expression was solemn. "Your planet had taken a terrible beating and still won't succumb to practices the Eosi have always found effective. If not being able to get through the Bubble has been frustrating Mentat Ix, why not prod them elsewhere! Frustrate them more! Confuse them! Harry—I thought that was a man's name—harry them until they don't know how to deal with the various strikes we'll make."

"Well, there're ways to totally confuse a computer," Kris said, "and make it blow up. *Could* there be a way to do that to the Eosi?"

"Kamiton thinks it's a good way to go," Zainal said, with a sly grin. "He says it might be the right way, too."

"So?" and she pulled one of the sheets toward her which Zainal then deftly shifted back.

"So, since Kamiton can get access to all the recognition codes, *and*

find out which ships of which class have been destroyed or believed lost, we can make our fleet into a much larger one."

"By changing the code name?"

"And where it appears. For instance, as Emassi Venlik, I need to bring back all the metals I had to off-load in the asteroid belt. First, as Emassi Kulak, I will go to a mining planet and acquire a load . . ." He interrupted himself. "Walter Duxie says he can't mine enough to make a full load of interesting stuff, so we go where they are mining it. Then, we take that load back to Catten." He stopped and took a deep breath. "I wish to bring my sons to safety here," and he looked her squarely in her eyes.

"Of course," Kris said quickly. "They would be at risk if the Eosi found out you're still alive."

"There is one who is sure I am," Zainal said in a heavy voice.

"Your brother?" And when he nodded, she went on, "But where are your sons now?"

Zainal clenched his teeth a moment before he answered. "With my sire."

"Aren't they . . ." and she stopped because it was obvious from the pain in his eyes and the tension in his body that they were not safe. "Kamiton's seen them?"

Zainal nodded.

"Well, it's an easy way for me to increase my family," she said in an airy tone.

"I will be their father but you will not be able to mother them," he said, surprising her. He held up his hand. "They are now too old to be mothered. But if you can be their friend, that will help integrate them."

"We've managed to integrate everything from Deski to Maasai, there should be no problem with integrating two Catteni boys."

Zainal gave an odd snort. "They will be safer here than on Catteni and Kamiton wants to bring his. Though he would prefer to bring his woman and set her and them in one of the closed valleys. We may have to assume responsibility for any other young who might be used as hostages by the Eosi against the activities of their sires."

"I'd think . . ." but she stopped when he put his hand over hers. "Okay, it's your call. So are we all going back to Catten with you?" She really didn't want to: that heavy gravity had been a killer, but she wouldn't desert him for such a specious reason.

"Drassi Kulak proved very useful," he said with a grin.

"So, once we've delivered all this ore, what else is on the agenda?"

Zainal smiled. "Kamiton can find out the other places where Hu-

mans have been dropped. Some of them are very bad places, where many deliveries of workers have to be made, and we may not find any Humans left. But we will make the effort.”

“Oh.”

“Three of the ships, with a change of ID, will go back to Earth and see what else they can . . . what does Chuck call it . . . liber—”

“Liberate,” and Kris grinned.

“Liberate any poorly guarded ships. If they are loaded with loot, we will just take off. Otherwise, we will have what Leon calls a ‘shopping’ list.”

“Well, you guys didn’t lose much time planning, did you?”

“Kamiton thinks we must strike as often and as hard as possible to prove to the others in our group that we have ways to annoy and hamper the Eosi domination. To make them helpless to counterattack.”

“Lord help us if that Bubble bursts,” she said. “But it must be so very satisfying to you, and Kamiton, to make the Eosi helpless.”

Zainal kept nodding his head but his smile altered from anticipation to immense satisfaction. “We also do no species injury.”

“Oh, Lord, that’s a good thing. I wouldn’t want to lose the good opinion of the Farmers. That Bubble is essential to making any of these plans of yours work.”

“I do not think the Farmers will find fault with what we do. They are, I think, flexible entities.” And when Kris nodded in agreement, he added with a droll smile: “What impresses Kamiton most about Humans is your flexibility. We Catteni do not possess that.”

“Ha! You’re as flexible as anyone on this planet.”

He stroked her short, blond hair, running his fingers through it. She’d had to wash it nearly fifteen times to get the awful dye completely out.

“I have learned.”

“The more remarkable when all your lifetime before you had to operate on a need-to-know basis.”

Zainal turned his head away, looking out into the darkness around them. “I want my sons to know all they *want* to know.”

“I think sometimes we forget what a gift free thought is.”

Chapter Eight

THE NEXT DAY, HASSAN FLEW SEVERAL LEADERS OF THE MAASAI, FOR the remnants of five separate tribes needed to be consulted and shown, down to the southern end of the continent. Mpeti Ole Surum, Caleb Materu, and Sikai Ole Sereb spoke some English, understood more, and calmed the other two leaders, Pakai Olonyoke and Tepilit Ole Saitoti, who had excellent Swahili. Bart, who had boned up most of the long night on Swahili words and phrases, came along on the trip in the KDL, as did Yuri Palit, who was nominally in charge of resettlements. Baby would have been more practical. The Tub would have taken a lot longer but the tall Maasai would have been cramped on the one and experienced some claustrophobia on the other, so Hassan said he'd just make altitude and glide as much as he could on the way, to save fuel.

"I see . . . planes . . . often," Caleb said, pointing skyward. He was sitting with great dignity on one of the command chairs of the bridge. Overnight he and many of the older men had managed to equip themselves with lodge-pole spears. The straightness of the wood had fascinated them and Geoff, who did a lot of the iron fabrication around Retreat, had fashioned spear tips. "Never think I fly in one." He grinned all around the bridge cabin.

Mpeti Ole Surum stood directly behind Hassan as the Israeli sat at the control panel, his eyes not quite wide with any readable expression but he missed nothing Hassan did.

Sikai Ole Sereb was the most relaxed of the three English speakers, more like a curious kid having a special outing than the most senior of the Maasai leaders.

"I think they were all so busy setting examples to each other, they didn't have time to be afraid," Hassan told the Head Council that eve-

ning when he reported the day's outing. Kris, Zainal, and Kamiton were among the group—so that Kamiton could be shown how the colony governed itself. Zainal translated in low tones, which did not disturb the others in the big hangar office. "They *do* understand about the night crawlers. Last night's demonstration certainly was dramatic and frightening enough. They do want their own loo-cows, even if the creatures are ungrateful enough not to give milk. You know, we could import some cattle, or goats and sheep. They'd be useful for us to have."

"If you can find any," Beverly remarked.

"True but we can look. A lot of Terran animals would do well here."

"Now, wait a minute," Beverly said, raising a big hand in caution, "we have rocksquats which serve as good protein and supply us with quite a few byproducts. I can't promise we can do a Noah's ark bit."

"We wouldn't know until too late," Leon Dane said, "if Terran grazers or browsers would survive on Botany . . . not with night crawlers and those avian terrors."

"I agree. We've got to go slowly. We've got a lot here going for us without wanting what might not be ecologically feasible," Beverly said.

"The Maasai will be grateful, I think," Yuri Palit said, "to be allowed to live in their own ways on their own land, which was taken from them back on Earth, and make the best of things as we've done, as they've always had to do. We did discuss the need to have shelters, built either on stone—which isn't their way—or on platforms set high enough above the ground and the reach of night crawlers, using steel plates on the underside. I wouldn't trust night crawlers not to eat wood if something edible got spilled on it. I think they'll opt for the platforms. It's a good even climate down there, edging into really hot but Africa's like that, too. Each tribe will have its own com unit and I think they've mastered calling in and taking messages. But I think we better check on a regular basis."

"Once we know all the women are in good health. Some of them are expecting," Beverly said. "There are only that gaggle of young boys and five or six girls in their early teens who survived."

"Ah, and those boys bring up a minor problem which I think we'd better solve as soon as possible," Hassan said. "Five of the teenagers are about to go into training as warriors. They are going to require some of the ritual drugs. Olkiloriti," and Hassan stumbled over the unfamiliar word, "is one of them. Joe Marley said that's only *Acacia nilotica*, which is taken as a digestive excitant and to prevent hunger and thirst on raids. It's also said to prevent fatigue and fear."

"Were they looking for it here?" Chuck asked. "They seem to be examining every single bush, shrub, and blade of grass."

Hassan grinned. "They're big on knowing the flora around them. It's how they've survived as long as they have—knowing what to take for sickness and fever and how to keep wounds clean."

"Well, I suppose that we could import some of the acacia for them . . ." Bull Fetterman began. "If we can find any in their part of east Africa."

"The roots must be clean," Leon Dane spoke up. "Let's not import Terran dirt or we might just import something we don't want growing wild on Botany." As an Australian, Leon knew something of the problems vegetation could cause when transplanted to a different ecology.

"Good point."

"I've been showing them what we've been growing for medicinal use," Leon went on with a wide grin. "And the old guy kept telling me everything was good for some ailment and patted me on the back as if I'd done something spectacular to have everything growing in one place."

"You have," Bull said with one of his deep rumbling laughs.

"Indeed," Hassan said. "They would have to travel many miles to get to where certain bushes grow."

Just then Dick Aarens came rushing in, Pete Snyder trying to keep up with the long-legged mechanic's stride and also reason with him.

"But I've got it! I've got it," Dick said, beaming with self-satisfaction. He shrugged off Pete's final attempt to control him and spread his arms wide in apology to those at the conference table.

"Hold it, Aarens, we're discussing another problem right now," Ray said.

"Can anything be more important than being able to *see* and *hear* outside the Bubble?" Aarens demanded, head thrown back and chin high in challenge.

Ducking her head and putting her hand to her brows, Kris shook her head slowly at this latest display of Aarens' egotism.

"See and hear?" Ray repeated, glaring at Aarens.

"I don't know how such a simple thing could be missed." And Aarens was contemptuous.

"Then just how did you miss such a simple thing, Aarens?" asked Ray Scott, leaning back in his chair, an absolutely blank expression on his face.

Aarens frowned, knowing he was being ragged.

"You do leave yourself wide open, Dick," Pete said, shaking his

head. He leaned his hands on the table opposite Ray and explained. "The Eosi ship left all its com arrays stuck into the Bubble. They haven't moved in months. I doubt they can, even if I don't know why the material holds them in place. But it does. If Zainal or one of the NASA guys can do an EVA, we can probably make connections on this side of the Bubble and get to use the Eosi equipment to intercept messages and check on who's visiting us. We've got the spare parts we'd need, thanks to Zainal. We can actually put a com sat up there on our side of the Bubble."

"You see," Aarens said, his lip lifted in a sort of supercilious superiority. "Simple thing and you missed it."

"We all missed it," Pete Snyder said, patiently but with an irritable glance at Aarens. "I'm not all that sure we'd get much filtered through the Bubble, but certainly it's worth a try."

"It is," Zainal said. Then he grinned. "I like it. Using *their* arrays to do *our* looking and listening."

"Save us a lot of fuel, too, as we wouldn't have to go make a check before departure," Beverly said, chuckling. "Which we will be doing a lot of soon enough."

"Do I ever get a chance to come along?" Aarens said, his jaw still stuck out in belligerence.

Ray regarded him. "Only if you can lose about five inches, Dick," he said in a deceptively genial tone. "You're taller than either Zainal and Kamiton, and they say they're tall for Catteni."

"You've let Bert Put go, and he's nearly my height," Aarens went on, angry and frustrated.

"He's a pilot, who stays on board and seated so no one checks his height," Ray said. "But if you want to go back to Earth—so long as you remain on board the ship—it could be arranged. We'll talk about it again. After . . . we've got eyes and ears upstairs."

"Something for something, just like we were back on Earth," Aarens muttered.

"Oh, come off it, Dick," Pete Snyder said, putting a hand on the tall mechanic's back and gently urging him out of the hangar.

"That's a great idea, Aarens," Beverly said and, taking their cue from the ex-air force general, others murmured appropriate phrases. "Sometimes it just takes the right eyes to see what can so easily be missed."

"It may not work," Aarens said as he slowly let himself be eased out of the hangar. "I mean, we may not be able to get through the Bubble from this side."

"The idea remains a smart one even if it doesn't prove feasible,"

Ray said and then the door closed behind the two men. Ray cleared his throat.

"It certainly would be a help," John Beverly said.

"He's a damned good mechanic—a genius at some things," Ray Scott said.

"But he's not a team player," was Bull Fetterman's assessment.

"Exactly," and Ray sat forward at the table, shuffling notes. "I wouldn't trust him not to jump ship at the first chance. Where were we?"

"I think we just settled the Maasai for the time being," Yuri Palit said and settled back in his chair.

"I suggest we see how fast Aarens can fix a connection to the array," Zainal said. "I will help. And so will Kamiton."

"When we have that, the rest of what we were going to discuss tonight will be easy enough. So let's see if Aarens' idea works. I think this'll be all for tonight," Ray said and, placing his hands on the table, pushed himself to his feet. "Thank you, gentlemen, for your reports and attention."

A LOT OF JURY-RIGGING WAS NEEDED ON THE BUBBLE SIDE OF THE EOSI array, with both Zainal and Kamiton working in space suits. One of the NASA communications personnel—uneasy at doing an EVA—finally solved the problem of the connections. They pulled and tugged at the material of the Bubble until it was as thin as they could make it. Then they rammed into those frail holes the connecting linkages. Dick Aarens had wheedled himself on board with the communications crew and made such obnoxious comments about how ineffective, stupid, fumble-fingered everyone else was that Zainal shoved him into the spare space suit—Aarens had to crouch to fit and complained that the helmet was wearing grooves in his skull—and closed the air lock behind them. There were those who wished that Zainal had not securely attached the safety line.

Aarens had known that he didn't like heights. He'd screamed enough when they had to haul him up to the command post to see what he could make of the control panels. He'd been so damned keen to say he'd been in space in an EVA suit that he didn't realize that his height phobia would also include vast, black open spaces where, in every direction, there was nothing. The other space walker had to push the rigid man back into the air lock.

"Take him inside. He's useless."

But that incident happened early on. The completed connections

were initially attached to the Baby's com array to see if they could actually use the Eosi equipment through the thinned skin of the Bubble. They could. And great cheering and congratulations resounded between Botany and Baby. The next step might take longer since a com sat had to be built but Kamiton sampled the messages that were audible through the link and smiled with great satisfaction at what he learned.

"We can proceed with our plan," he told Zainal in Catteni. Then, in thickly accented English, he added to the rest of the group on board who did not know much Catteni, "Is good. Works. Hear good."

"I told you it would work," Dick Aarens said, clinging to the door frame, and still very pale from his disastrous EVA. "So how soon can you get this crate back down to Retreat?"

"Soon," Zainal said and turned back to Kamiton, speaking in rapid Catteni. "We will leave on the KDL as soon as we return. I want to get back to Catten as fast as possible."

"Understood."

WHEN KRIS' NAME APPEARED ON THE LIST FOR KDL AND A RETURN TO Catten, she did some counting on her fingers. Well, if they didn't have any delays, she'd be back in time for Zane's first Botanical year birthday. Zainal did not anticipate any delays with the plan he had filed with Ray Scott. He had been amused by the request from the ex-admiral but, with the other ships also departing in opposite directions, he filled in the data.

"Did I do it right?" he asked Kris, shoving the paper toward her across the table in their main room.

"You'd better have," Kris said with mock threat, "or you're no advertisement for my teaching."

He printed in bold letters, using both capitals and lower case as required. But he spelled properly and, even if he used short sentences, they were correctly phrased.

"You get an A."

"Just an A?" he said, pretending to be disappointed.

"Oh, that's the best you can do."

"Oh?" and he leaned across the table and neatly lifted her out of her chair and high enough so that, when she bent her knees, she cleared the surface. "I must lesson you, too, to see if you can achieve the A."

Zane was long since asleep, so they could indulge in the intimacies that would be impossible for the duration of the trip.

"I hope to bring out my sons," Zainal said, when they lay side by

side, mutually satisfied. "You must not treat them—at first—as you would a Human child."

"How old are they?"

"They are nine and seven."

"Same mother?"

"No. Good Catteni blood in each."

"They will have a lot to learn, won't they?" And, while in one sense Kris felt able to accept the challenge, she hoped she would be able to meet it. Another aspect of it was that Zainal would trust her with his own children. How badly would they have been treated because Zainal had failed to accept the family's obligation to present himself as Eosi "chosen"?

"We all have a lot to *learn*," Zainal said and, pressing his face against hers, turned her over so they could sleep, spoon fashion, his heavy arm warmly against her.

"NOW COMES THE FUN PART," ZAINAL SAID TO THE CREW OF THE KDL, all assembled on the bridge. They were orbiting into one of the most desolate-looking planets: how could anything, or anyone, live down there?

They had first let Kamiton off at the asteroid belt and lingered long enough to hear him report that the spy sats he had released in the belt confirmed the fact that there had been quite a few ships poking around the field: more likely, for traces of where Zainal/Venlik might have stored the remainder of his cargo.

Kamiton would then proceed back to Catten with the report that he had found no suitable planets in the three systems he was supposedly exploring. He would have the opportunity to get in touch with any of the other dissidents and assure them that Zainal's refuge was invulnerable. He would also visit Perizec, Zainal's father, and, hopefully, locate the whereabouts of Zainal's two sons. Since the family had supplied so many "chosen," they had acquired many assets on the planet. The two young males could be anywhere.

With a purloined cargo, Zainal would arrive. This time they would have to dock at the space station.

"It will be easier for you as the station is not on full Catten gravity," he had told Kris, who had not been looking forward to a second period of feeling more like a piece of compressed stone than a human being. "But you may not leave the ship. You are not Catten enough," and he had tousled her cropped re-dyed hair.

The rest of the crew was the same. Gino, Ninety, and Mack Dargle had learned to speak, and understand, much more Catteni. Kamiton even taught them a few so-called Catteni jokes which, when translated, left the audience wondering what possibly could be funny about them.

“Old slap-stick routines is what they remind me of,” Kris said. “Sort of Marx brothers without any of the same class. More like the Three Stooges.”

“They were never as good as the Marx brothers,” Ninety said.

“Speak Catteni,” Zainal said, scowling at all of them.

“Does not translate,” Kris said with mock obedience in a very deep rasping Catteni voice.

WITH THE KDL BEARING THE ID OF A SHIP KAMITON HAD FOUND, ITS forward section embedded in an asteroid it hadn't been able to avoid, they orbited the desolate planet and made contact with the mining station. This was a huge, scarred globule planted like a ravaged blister on one of the main raised areas. This particular station had been chosen because it had no processing plant in which to refine the ore. So their purloined cargo would match Zainal's story of finding such ores in an asteroid belt. Once this planet had evidently had oceans that some unimaginable catastrophe had drained or boiled away. There were other, smaller blisters set in deep ranges of what had once been ocean trenches. As they were given clearance and descended, they could see heavy vehicles drawing numerous, and immense, carts of ore toward the main depot, for that was what Kris decided it must be.

Several such vehicles were already drawing into parallel lines by the facility, which Zainal said was where the cargo levels would automatically be loaded.

“By what?” Ninety said. “We don't have enough space suits . . .”

Zainal grinned and held up his hands. “That is why there are space locks between the main compartments of the ship and the cargo area. The K-class is a versatile carrier, cargo, slaves, whatever.”

There was a bit of a scene when the station Drassi wanted Zainal to take on board three Catteni who had been so seriously injured they were no longer any use to him. All this while the ramps from the loading platform were being extended through the KDL's open cargo bay, and while Ninety, suited up, handled the controls.

“As soon as the decks are full, Ninety, we're taking off,” Zainal told Ninety. “So be sure to hang on to something the moment we're full.”

"I hear and obey, Drassi," Doyle said, slapping one fist to his chest in a Catteni salute.

"Won't you get into trouble?" Gino asked nervously.

"Just plot a rapid ascent. This station has no weapons," Zainal assured him.

"But can you just refuse to take injured men aboard?" Gino asked.

"Not for a two-week journey back to Catteni with them on board," Zainal said. "This station has frequent cargo ships in. The next one can take them. I won't."

So, when Ninety signaled that all four cargo levels were full, Zainal gave Gino the nod to lift just as three space-suited figures, two helping the third who did not seem to have legs, exited from the surface loading facility.

Zainal reached over and shut off the com board, silencing the threats of the infuriated Emassi in charge of the mining operations.

"We couldn't afford the risk," Zainal said, aware of the shocked look on the faces of his crew.

WHEN THEY WERE AGAIN IN SPACE, ZAINAL AND NINETY, WHO HAD come to enjoy such EVA outings, changed the ID symbols on the KDL's hull to match those used in their first trip to Catten. Once more in communication with the immense Catteni Space Station, Zainal became Drassi Venlik again, cheerfully (for a Catteni) back with the ore he had to leave behind in the asteroid belt.

There were some scary moments for Kris, however, when the space station sent officials on board to see if the KDL's cargo should be unloaded into drones for transport to the surface or allow the ship to land at the manufactories needing the ore. The rest of this trip depended on Zainal being ordered to make planetary delivery. One of the officials seemed determined to figure out the site of this rich load.

"It is my site. By right," Drassi Venlik said, standing with legs parted in a fighting stance, hands at his sides. This semi-belligerent posture was not lost on the officials, even if they were Emassi.

Finally they admitted that they had orders for his ship to land on the surface at the refining plant awaiting these very fine metals. Zainal and his crew saluted the officials off the KDL and received immediate clearance from the facility and the location of the refinery.

"Couldn't have been better if I'd cut the orders myself," Zainal said in English, grinning at his success.

"Yeah," Ninety began skeptically, "but would you really have laid into the Emassi?"

Zainal laughed. "There are many Drassi who are Emassi who did not pass Eosi standards to be chosen. They have family who would come to their assistance. Those station Emassi know only what they need to know," and he dismissed them with a contemptuous flick of his fingers.

Kris decided that Zainal became more Cattenish the nearer he got to his natal planet. She wasn't sure she liked that change in him. Then they landed and the weight of Catten gravity pulled her down, until she felt her belly would end up near her knees. And ordinarily her stomach was as flat as Zainal's. It had a decided bulge to it right now.

She spent the hours the KDL was being unloaded on her bunk, on Zainal's order, being "off-duty" as the corridors swarmed with Rassi and Drassi. Zainal, with Chuck and Ninety in full Catteni dress, eyes, and hair, went to the refinery office to complete the forms required and get the credit voucher for the ore.

It was evidently most unusual for a cargo vessel to require a credit voucher, but Zainal had a story ready for that. They needed special equipment to mine the ores on this asteroid and had been given permission to make such purchases, but would have to show a current voucher to verify that the ship's account would stand the expense.

"THAT DEPOT'S LIKE ALI BABA'S CAVE," NINETY SAID, RETURNING AFTER the first day's scrounging through the supply warehouse. "Mind you, a lot of the stuff was made on Earth," he added in a sour tone. "But I located most of what the com sat boys ordered."

With great determination, Kris had made a huge stew of the meat Coo and Pess had gone out to the nearest marketplace to get for her. It had taken almost all the energy she could muster with the constant pull of gravity on her muscles and bones. She was sure she'd shrink: she certainly felt compressed.

Zainal did not return that first night. The Catteni diurnal cycle was only an hour longer than Earth's but, to Kris' intense relief, he was back just past dawn the next morning with Kamiton and two other Catteni making a surreptitious dart up the ramp of the open cargo bay.

The men were introduced as Nitin and Tubelin. Bolemb could not leave as yet and Kasturi was going to bring Zainal's two boys as soon as the ship was ready to take off again. For Catteni they exuded enthusiasm for the chance to relieve their world of Eosian domination. To believe that Zainal's crew was really Human, every one, including Kris, had to take out their yellow lenses and show the natural shade of skin.

on their upper arms and legs. Kris was on watch at that moment and thus did not have to reveal her subtly different limbs.

Nitin looked older than Tubelin but later Zainal told her it was the other way round. Nitin had had harder duties than Tubelin, and so looked his years of service to ungrateful Eosi. Nitin said little but Kamiton's exuberance made up for his silence.

The next day the three real Catteni assumed other identities and went about acquiring more of the material that was on the shopping list. Nor, to the Humans' surprise, did they question that they had to buy such odd items in unusual quantities: like the huge iron kettles (which were used by the Rassi to cook their mashes in—about the only thing, Nitin said, that they could manage to do without constant supervision). The kettles were destined for the Maasai who were much, much smarter than most of the Drassi Kris had encountered. She stood her shifts on the com desk and had to deal with the calls of merchants who wished to check on the ship's account and its current position. She had also managed not to reveal her femininity to new members of the Catteni. If Zainal did not think to mention it, she would not.

The KDL had been parked to the side of the refinery's double-ballpark of a landing site to allow other vessels to unload. Zainal had neatly maneuvered them close to one of the refinery's secondary gates, to allow access for his "equipment" to arrive without upsetting the regular traffic in and out.

"It's a good place to be," Zainal had said in explanation. "Many ships come and go. It is also the last place where any Emassis would be found."

With their cargo levels full, they waited for word from Kasturi. Kamiton fretted more than Zainal did and paced up and down the corridors, cursing at the com unit which did not utter so much as a burp. They waited two full days, until Zainal, too, showed signs of stress.

Both men were on the bridge when a low, sputtering ground vehicle came through the gates and trundled around behind the KDL.

"It has stopped," Chuck said, swiveling around in his seat at the com board. He flicked on the exterior camera. "Three, two smallish, one not so small."

Instantly Zainal and Kamiton were on their feet and pounding down the passageway to the cargo air lock.

"Prepare to take off," Zainal called over his shoulder, and Gino hastily started the pre-flight checks as he had done from time to time as something to occupy them during the long wait. "And turn the ship slightly to starboard to incinerate the vehicle." That came through over the intercom from the cargo level.

“Right ch’are, captain,” Gino muttered, fingers busy tapping in the necessary code and engaging the rear thrusters to be certain the object was reduced to an unrecognizable lump.

As they were at the refinery, their leaving would go relatively unnoticed. They lifted and were well above the atmospheric envelope of Catteni before Zainal and Kamiton came forward, both grinning broadly.

“We got them,” Kamiton said as Zainal motioned for Gino to move out of the pilot’s chair. Kamiton, oddly enough dressed in a space suit, and carrying his helmet, positioned himself against the bulwark.

So as not to be seen, Kris thought, when Zainal had to make visual contact with the space station for clearance out of Catteni space. But why was he suited up?

“I’m parked right by net four,” Kamiton said as if he had heard her mental query. “Head slightly in that direction now.”

Contact was made, clearance was given, and Zainal said that he was going back for another load of the fine ores he had carved out of the space debris.

“Of course, they’ll come after you again,” Kamiton said. “See you back on Botany,” he added before he put on his helmet and stumped down to the air lock. “Can you read me?” he asked a few moments later.

Kris stuck her finger harder than she needed to on the pad—her body didn’t realize she was out of Catteni’s depressing gravity—and gave him an affirmative.

Zainal made a small adjustment to his direction, seeming to head directly for the center of net four—large Catteni glyphs had been plastered on the net fabric—one could not miss “4” unless one was totally blind. He also slowed so that when the air lock lights came on, he was almost stationary. He allowed the KDL to drift a count of two hundred, because Kris was counting right along with him, before he gently reengaged the thrusters and pulled away. Then he made a drastic course alteration and signaled to Gino to pour on the power.

There was a little time for Kasturi to meet the Human crew and for Bazil and Peran to get accustomed to the idea of Humans, and Humans who could speak their language and were not slaves. Kris almost wept at the condition of the two boys: they had come on board filthy, in clothing that was a shred away from being indecent, with many bruises on their limbs and visible through the remaining scraps of their tunics. Their ribs were showing and their faces had the gaunt look of the starved. What they asked Zainal for first—once they had recognized their father—was water.

“They wouldn’t take anything from me,” Kasturi explained. “They

did not show fright, Zainal. They have your blood and courage. In my opinion, many cruel and vicious things have been done to them.”

Zainal himself bathed the boys, carefully tending their hurts and seeming to count every healed scar. Kris handed him Botanical medications, and they had flinched, even from their father's very gentle touch. She was close to tears for how they had been treated . . . worse than even the Rassi she had seen so casually whipped to work.

All the time Zainal spoke softly to them, not gently, not as he would speak to Zane, but as an adult would speak firmly and reassuringly to a frightened animal.

Tubelin put his head around the door and both boys stiffened, their yellow eyes dark and wide with the fright of surprise, which his unexpected appearance provoked before they could conceal their reaction. Once they recognized Kamiton, they relaxed a little.

“I have clean clothes, Zainal. I'll space those rags if you'll hand them to me, Kris.” She did, holding the mess by the tips of her fingers and letting them all fall into the receptacle Kamiton offered.

“Have you any clear soup to give them, and perhaps some journey bread,” Zainal said as he gently pushed the boys ahead of him toward the galley. Coo and Pess were alone at the table but the boys merely glanced through them, as if the two Deski did not exist.

Well, Kris told herself sternly, they've probably been taught that Deski are little better than Rassi.

When Coo and Pess made to rise, Zainal gestured for them to remain where they were. Someone had already put some clear soup in the heater so all she had to do was pour it in cups and get out the travel bread. Zainal raised one finger to show he'd have some, too. Lord, those kids were messed up bad, Kris thought. How will we ever get through what they have been conditioned to expect? Or, having been roughed up so much, would they rough up her son?

Zainal sat opposite the boys, beside Pess, and dipped the bread into the soup, blowing on it to cool it. The boys did nothing, though Kris saw the tongue of the older boy, Bazil, protrude slightly between his cracked lips. Then Zainal put his bread first in Bazil's cup and then Peran's before he ate it as if to prove it was not only edible, but harmless.

“Eat. You need food. This is good.”

Peran, being the younger, could not contain his hunger at that invitation and nearly burned his tongue to get the bread into his mouth. Bazil gave him an almost contemptuous sneer, but he was no less quick to take his first bite.

When they had finished their meal, although their eyes darted back

to the heater unit, which they knew still had soup in it, they waited. Peran's lids wearily descended over his eyes, but he shot bolt upright again as soon as Basil pinched him.

"No more now, Basil," Zainal said in a neutral tone. "You need sleep, too. There will be more soup when you awaken. That I promise!" Zainal rose and, still not offering them his hands as he would certainly have offered one to Zane, he pointed the way for them to go.

Coo leaned across the table and patted Kris' hands; Pess offered a square of fabric when she started to sniff and then to cry.

"Being Emassi not easy," Coo said.

When Pess' thin arm came about her shoulders, Kris just leaned into the embrace and let the tears flow. She didn't even care if one of the other Catteni came in and saw her weeping.

So, by the time Zainal returned, she was over the worst of it. He knew she had been crying because her eyes always turned red.

"They have suffered much," Zainal said. "That shall be considered when this is ended." He reached for the Hooch bottle and poured himself a large tumbler full, taking a big gulp of it.

"Tubelin is a good Emassi but even he did not like what he saw when he visited the farm where they had been made to work like Rassi."

"Is that why they were so dirty?" Kris heard herself asking with great indignation. "But why were they beaten? They're seven and nine? They've been starved, too."

Zainal took the hand she was waving about in consternation and clasped it firmly.

"I had not thought Perizec capable but it may have been the idea of my brother's mate. She is such a good Catteni mate," and his emphasis on "good" was sarcastic. "It will take longer than it should but they will learn much on Botany and want to know more."

THEY FOLLOWED THE TORTUOUS COURSE INTO THE MAZE OF THEIR infamous and rich asteroid belt and once again, while Nitin, Kasturi, Tubelin, and Zainal's two sons watched with varying degrees of consternation during the twisting route, made contact with Kamiton at his hollowed-out asteroid.

Then Zainal poured on all the power at the KDL's disposal on the way back to Botany.

The two boys did not speak unless spoken to, and Tubelin, whom they knew almost better than their father, would tell them stories in a decidedly avuncular and uncharacteristic manner. Zainal put them on a feeding schedule of every two and a half hours, each time little meals

until their cheeks began to fill out and flesh appeared over their ribs. He also taught them how to print their names in Catteni glyphs and then in English letters. What astonished Kris was their absolute obedience.

"It's been beaten into them to obey without questions, Kris," Ninety said when she voiced her distress to the Humans. "We'll just be sure they never hear another discouraging word on Botany, that's all."

Chuck tilted his head sideways. "I've seen whipped puppies a time or two. It's going to take a lot of patience to make that a happy pair again."

"If they ever were," Kris said glumly. "I don't think Catteni have happy childhoods. Or expect to."

"Now, Bjornsen," and Chuck Mitford patted her shoulder, "we'll all help."

And so he contrived to make a checkerboard from a bit of stiff packing casing, coloring it in, and then neatly scissoring out the counters from another piece.

"What makes you think Catteni kids play games?" Gino asked when he saw the finished product.

"Ah, a zemgo board," Kamiton exclaimed in surprise as he entered the mess room.

"What makes you think there wouldn't be something similar in such a warlike culture, Gino?" Chuck demanded, grinning at Kamiton. "Will Bazil and Peran know how to play . . . zemgo?" he asked in Catteni.

"Hmm. I shall soon find out. Or will you teach them since you made the board?"

"It might be good if I teach, and you tell them the moves at first," Chuck said. "I wouldn't know the right words and they should learn the proper words."

"I will return with them. A good idea, Sshuk," Kamiton said and went to find the boys.

"They were on the bridge, standing watch with their father," Kamiton said when he returned with them. He pointed at Bazil to sit at one side of the table next to Chuck and Peran to sit on the other. Then he sat beside Peran and asked if the boys knew the game.

Bazil managed the barest of negative head shakes. Peran just stared at the bright colors of the board and the round white counters on his side.

"This is a good game for Catteni to know," Kamiton explained. "It teaches how to form your troops for battle and how to win against an equally matched opponent. You are white, Peran, you must start first."

Peran kept his hands in his lap, his little body stiff with indecision.

"Why don't *we* play, Kamiton?" Chuck suggested.

"He is Emassi," muttered Basil, glaring up at Chuck.

"So he is," Chuck said, amiably. "And so am I."

Basil darted a surprised look at Kamiton and received a confirmatory nod. Basil sank in on himself in dismay.

"All on this ship are Emassi," Kamiton said.

"Even the little one?" Basil asked, his dull yellow eyes flickering with doubt. But his tone was more courteous.

"All," Kamiton said.

"So we shall play, Emassi Kamiton?" Chuck asked as demurely as only a sergeant of marines could.

"Yes, let us show Basil and Peran how this ancient game is played, Emassi Sshuk."

THE TWO BOYS WATCHED CHUCK AND KAMITON PLAY FOUR GAMES (ending in two wins each), every time explaining the moves and discussing the game so the boys would know why. Then Gino played Chuck and won, but when he played Kamiton, the Catteni won. The boys showed the first spark of interest. It wasn't until Zainal entered the room and saw that the boys only watched, making no move to play at all, that he pointed to the board and said in a hard voice: "Play! Need to know!"

He left the room and Kris followed, furious with his so-Catteni manner that she almost couldn't speak as she dragged him into the captain's quarters. She slid the panel shut and told him off, madder than she had ever thought she could be with him.

"Those boys have been so mistreated," she railed at him, "could you not show a little give?"

He listened, with his Catteni face.

"I've never seen such bruises, nor such constant brutality on boys so young. What were your folk doing to them? Systemically brutalizing them as punishment for what *you* did?"

"Yes." And his quiet reply, and the sad look in his eyes, silenced her.

"Then why aren't *you*, their father, from whom they can expect some affection . . ."

He held up one hand. "Catteni fathers are not affectionate."

"But you are with Zane!" She was flabbergasted. "How can you differentiate like that? All three are children and need love and kindness and care . . ." And when he opened his mouth to speak, she advanced on him so infuriated that he recoiled slightly, not trying to evade the

hard finger she poked into his chest as emphasis to her words. "And don't tell me Catteni children cannot expect such treatment, too."

"From their mothers, not from their fathers."

"And, I suppose, now you'll tell me that Bazil and Peran are too old to be with their mothers." When he nodded, she made a sound of total disgust and frustration. She was so mad she couldn't think of what to say next. "If you ever . . . ever . . . take a Catteni line with Zane, I'll . . . I'll kill you!"

"Or Pete Easley will," Zainal replied calmly. Mad as she was, she could see the shadows in his eyes. He might have expected the treatment his sons had received, but that didn't mean he liked it.

"Oh, God, Zainal, why am I angry at *you*?" And she put her arms around him in apology and returned affection.

Hesitantly, she felt, with great relief, his big hands gripping her shoulders, pressing a response to her expression of regret.

"We must treat them—for now—as Catteni boys are reared, and gradually, when they have settled, teach them that there are other ways, and that they may learn whatever they want, not just what they 'need to know.' I want them to be more Human, too."

"Well, that's better," she said, sniffing back the tears that pricked her eyes: tears of frustration and relief. "I couldn't stand it if you turned all Catteni on me suddenly. And if you ever . . ." She raised her finger threateningly.

"Zane is Human. He is your son and I will always treat him as I see Human children treated."

"When in Rome . . . huh?"

He repeated the phrase without comprehension.

"Oh, I'll explain later, Zainal." And she cupped a hand on his head. "Must we all be hard with the boys?"

"For now. We must give them the orders they need to know . . ." And a ghost of a smile pulled at his finely shaped lips. "To make them sure of how to act and what to do. But we will be fair, where others have not. And, if we can get them to play zemgo, it will help. And if you are not as firm as we are, they will not respect you. And they must for they will find out that you are a woman and therefore, now that they are becoming adult, they will need to see you as a being who commands respect, too."

She leaned against him, accepting the burden of such an uncharacteristic manner for her.

"Am I not a warrior already, being on this ship?"

"Reinforce that as often as possible, for when we reach Botany,

they will see that you are also a woman and a mother. And wonder.”

“They’ll have an awful lot to learn on Botany,” she said, ruefully.

“They will have the need to know,” Zainal answered, a lilt of rueful laughter in his voice.

“So, if I preface remarks with ‘you need to know this,’ it will be all right?”

“They’ll . . . how do you say it . . . catch on quickly. Neither is stupid.”

“Of course. They’re your sons.”

CHUCK HAD CAUGHT ON TO ZAINAL’S METHOD OF TREATING HIS SONS. Which must have been easiest for Mitford, Kris thought, having had to train recruits in the marines. Gino, whose Italian background was totally at odds with Catteni child rearing, had to be talked into playing it Zainal’s way. Coo and Pess had no problem, and Mack Dargle taught them how to carve things out of pieces of wood and how to assemble useful equipment. They knew how to handle knives but returned the blade immediately after they had finished their turn with it. They liked the assembling best, though, and their fingers were quick once they’d been shown how the first time.

The other Catteni ignored them, save for Kamiton who kept trying to get Bazil to make moves against his counters on the board.

When they were within the Botany system, all stations were on the alert for any possible Eosi presence.

“The work on the moon base has stopped,” Zainal observed.

“They were sent the useless materials,” Nitin said with a wry expression. “My contribution. They will be stopped for some time as the regular shipments have also been diverted. They may even run out of oxygen and water.”

Kris’ sense of fair play was assaulted by such doings, and she had to keep her mouth shut. Catteni could deal with Catteni as they wished . . . just so long as Botany was safe from their methods and ethics.

THEY ENTERED THE BUBBLE ON THE EQUATORIAL LINE, JUST OUT OF THE range of the geo-sync satellite. Prior to that they had spotted a distant “V” formation of Catteni ships headed directly toward Botany.

“See if we can get through to Retreat,” Zainal asked Gino who was sitting at the com controls.

“Oh, you’re back, are you?” said a female voice. The visual was

not clear so only a hazy picture came through the thinned Bubble material. The voice sounded slightly filtered but intelligible.

"Who's this?" Gino asked.

"Jane O'Hanlon, here. Now we can use the array, someone has to man the com desk all the time. Or woman it as the case is today. Gino Marrucci, right?"

"Right."

Fortunately only Kamiton, of the five Catteni on the bridge just then, had enough English to catch some of the words he knew. But the other four exchanged surprised looks that a female had answered.

"Did you get what you went after?"

"We did but there are some boogies . . ."

"We're expecting them. Baby returned last week with her piggyback G-class ship to warn us of the traffic to come. She may have to go back and lead some through the Bubble. You may be needed, too, as the other K's are still wandering around."

"How many ships were hijacked this time?" Zainal asked, frowning slightly. He was still nervous, despite assurances from Kamiton, Nitin, Tubelin, and Kasturi that, with due care, the disappearance of the ships would not be immediately noticed.

"Catteni ships are all over the galaxy and some never come back," Kamiton had said repeatedly, waving his hand indifferently at such losses. "It works to our advantage. We must have enough to be able to strike at Eosi before they know that death approaches."

Since that was not the strategy which Ray and the other head council members were advocating, no one on board contradicted Kamiton, not even Zainal.

"There are three G-class coming back from one of the other colonies where Terrans were dropped. The K's are coming back with supplies and equipment and only a few refugees."

"If the G-class are full," Zainal said, "we will be very busy."

"Preparations are being made," Jane said, "and Ray Scott is thinking of the closed valleys as safe interim sites. With the K's coming back with food and equipment, what we have won't be spread so thin."

Zainal nodded, occupied with slowing the forward speed of the KDL so that it could gently nudge its way through the Bubble. Immediately the picture of Jane's duty station cleared up.

"That's better," she said, smiling and then caught sight of the four Catteni just visible behind Zainal. "Ah, we have guests," and she added in good Catteni, "welcome to Botany, Emassi."

"How does she know we are Emassi?" Nitin asked, as if slightly offended by being addressed as an equal by a woman.

“Why would I inflict Drassi on Botany?” Zainal asked. “The ones we have are more than enough.”

“The ones you have?” asked Nitin, surprised.

“The crews of the ships we have captured have been placed in an isolated area.”

“You did not kill them?” Nitin frowned.

“And ruin Catteni uniforms when we needed them?” Gino asked, though there was an edge to his question.

“Those who disobeyed died,” Zainal said in a tone that did not leave any need for further questions.

Chapter Nine

BIG AS THE FARMERS' HANGAR WAS, IT COULD NO LONGER ACCOMMODATE the "fleet" Botanists were assembling. Jane informed them that they could unload there, but might have to take some of their supplies to other locations, thus cutting down on the transportation problems.

"We need more ground vehicles with heavy load capacities. Doesn't do any good to steal trucks from Earth because we have no gasoline or diesel here. So you'll have to do the transporting. You don't happen to have a list of your cargo, do you? Then we can figure out where else to send you."

"It's in Catteni," Zainal said with a chuckle.

"Okay, then Sally Stoffers will be supercargo," Jane replied. "Send it down and safe landing."

And it was. Immediately the stevedore contingent and several of the large flatbeds, plus a forklift which had been "acquired," surrounded the KDL. There was only so much gasoline available for it so the engineers would have to convert it to solar power. Aarens and Pete Snyder were there since Zainal had indeed brought back some of the elements needed by the engineering group. Sally Stoffers was acting as supercargo with two assistants to check off what was to be off-loaded as she translated the manifests from Catteni.

She smiled a greeting at the three new Catteni and added Kamiton's name to her general welcome. Then she saw the two boys, looking in much better condition landing than they had in boarding. But Kamiton signaled to her to ignore them: a signal she obeyed.

"Zainal says medic for these. We walk."

Ray Scott came hurrying out of his office and took charge of Nitin, Tubelin, and Kasturi.

"Whose are those?" Sally asked when Kris made her way down the gangplank, avoiding those carrying some of the lighter cargo.

"Zainal's," Kris said, "and we have to treat them as Catteni boys are treated." She gave Sally a sour grimace.

"What? On Botany? Bring up another generation like the one we're trying to educate in new ways?" Sally was indignant.

"To begin with at least," Kris said with a sigh. "You should have seen the state they were in when Kasturi brought them aboard!"

"The sins of the father' sort of stuff?" Sally asked, perceptive as ever.

"In spades," and she broke off, hearing Zainal's familiar step on the cargo ramp.

Zainal looked around and spotted Kamiton, on his way to the infirmary with the boys following a discreet two steps behind him, and nodded. He gave Kris a squeeze on the arm but one that subtly suggested that she should not accompany him, and went to join Ray Scott and the new Catteni recruits.

She struggled with an uneasy resentment and won.

"D'you have any questions, Sally? Chuck and Mack marked much of the stuff with English subtitles, as it were, during the return. I can help if you need me," she said.

"Nonsense, girl, go soak somewhere and come back looking completely Human. Here," and she handed over a com unit, "I've a spare. If I need you, I'll contact you."

All the Humans on the KDL had removed their yellow lenses as soon as they were safely out of Catteni space: that had been surprise enough for the newcomers. As the supply of water was limited, no one was able to wash the Catteni gray off from more than their hands.

KRIS WOULD HAVE RATHER GONE WITH KAMITON AND THE TWO BOYS to see what their general physical condition was but Zainal had vetoed that. There didn't happen to be any children the ages of Basil and Peran on Botany, so Kris wondered how on earth the two could be integrated with a peer group.

Zainal solved the problem and took his sons down to the Maasai encampment.

"They are warriors. They have boys the right ages. They will learn Terran ways."

"Not in a Maasai camp," Kris objected vehemently.

"Why not?" Zainal was surprised, believing he had made a good decision.

“Because they treat their women the same way Catteni do. I mean, they practically starve a pregnant woman so she’ll have a small baby and no problem delivering.”

That part of the Maasai culture had been a shock to most of the medical staff for several of the Maasai women were in the last trimester of pregnancy. How the embryos had survived the trip was a matter of considerable speculation at the infirmary. All the women tested had been anemic and undernourished. With some skilful diplomacy on Hassan’s part, he managed to get the Maasai leaders to allow the women normal pregnancy multi-vitamins on the grounds that they would not have the usual herbal digestive medications. These would replace what the women were used to using. Hassan insisted that the tablets contained no milk, which was a taboo for Maasai pregnant women. That the multi-vitamin contained calcium as well as trace elements was not mentioned.

Kris canceled a half-formed mention of the other extreme racial differences. There *were* boys the right ages. The Maasai were warriors, even if they used only spears, and their height would ensure the boys respected them.

“But they won’t learn English,” was the only other protest she could summon.

“Not now. That will come. When there are males their ages here in Botany.”

They were his children. She had no right to tell him where to send them or how to raise them. The Maasai at least would be fair to the poor waifs. Which was a distinct improvement.

The boys were kept overnight at the infirmary in a separate room. They both had intestinal parasites, which could not be spread on Botany.

“Considering they have been half-starved for a number of months, they’re sturdy boys,” Leon reported to Zainal. “At least the Maasai are also eating well now and that can only improve the general health.”

If Leon did not concur with Zainal’s disposition of his sons to the Maasai, he said nothing to that point. He did mention that word had reached him from one of the incoming ships that Joe Marley had managed to secure a fair number of the plants the Maasai considered essential, including the olkiloriti though he could give no reassurance that they would survive on Botany. The boys could go on the transport with the plants when they arrived.

“I will go with them, too,” Zainal said.

As such matters sometimes work out, it was Kasturi who took them as Zainal was needed to pilot Baby which, with the two K-class ships that had already been “accepted” by the Bubble, was needed to get the

G-class ships past it. But Zainal delayed his flight long enough to give instructions to his sons.

“You are going to a warrior camp to train with your age group as befits your rank,” he told them in Catteni. “They are different folk but known for courage and (a word which Kris did not recognize.) But you will consider them Emassi as I am, and you are. You will learn from them as you need to know their ways, too.”

Small bruised fists hit cleanly clothed chests in the Catteni farewell gesture and, without a backward glance, Bazil and Peran boarded the float and sat among the various bushes, shrubs, grasses, and two saplings in their plastic-covered cans of hydroponic solutions. They each wore a replica of Zainal’s Catteni face.

One day, Kris promised herself, they would learn to smile and use expressions instead of those awful alien deadpans.

GETTING THE G-SHIPS THROUGH TOOK ALL THE AVAILABLE BOTANY fleet to bring them into Botany space.

“We sandwiched them in,” Gino said when he returned. “Even then, we had to push the stuffing well back of the bread. That Bubble doesn’t fool easy.”

“What happens when we want to get them out again?” Bert Put asked. He’d been piloting one of the G’s and privately confessed that he thought he’d never get home. It was his ship which had brought back the Maasai plants as well as others: roots steam cleaned and tested to be certain they brought in no Terran parasites. Seed as well had been irradiated to ensure purity as a much more varied diet was needed, especially the complex proteins. Rocksquats bred fast but not as fast as the population of Botany was growing. Loo-cows produced one calf at the height of the Botanical summer. The actual birth took place in a tight, deep circle of other loo-cows, all tramping round and round the female to deter nightcrawlers reaching the newborn, attracted by the bodily fluids also exuded by the birthing female. The wonder was that the newborn was not inadvertently stamped to death before it could get to its six wobbly legs.

Not so many refugees had been accommodated on the G-ships, but some families of those of the First Drop had been located and there were happy reunions, as well as tearful ones for those relations who had not been found.

There was a celebration for the placement of the permanent Botany com sat when it was connected to the inner arrays. The NASA folk had managed to jury-rig one to serve in the interim.

The infirmary, which now had satellite clinics dotting the continent, had received much needed diagnostic equipment, an ex-ray machine, and generators large enough to power them. And sufficient oil and gasoline to run them. (Empty barrels were then recycled as anti-night crawler defenses and the bases for stilt homes.)

Nitin, Tubelin, and Kasturi began to learn enough English to respond to greetings. They would not conduct meetings with the Head Council in anything but Catteni. Kris often sat in as translator, so did Chuck Mitford, Mack, and Ninety. Their trips had at least improved vocabulary and usage. Though there were a few phrases which none of the men would translate for Kris. She decided they must be so pejorative and anti-female that she'd rather *not* know.

Nitin was agitating for speedy returns, to acquire more spaceships—and missiles. He wanted to see the total destruction of all Eosi on Catten. He dismissed the problem of getting armed ships past the space station that guarded the planet from attack, even a sneak one, by units of its own space force. The ships used in attack missions were based in another system. He pointed out that he knew all the code words to gain access to naval ordnance: there was even a high-ranking officer who was a member of their covert group. But he had been an administrator until he had been dismissed from his post and a much younger junior with excellent blood and Eosian connections had taken his place. That had been sufficient for Nitin to wish to retaliate against a hierarchy that had not rewarded his many years of devoted service.

“Almost Human of him,” Hassan Moussa said with a chuckle. “Happens often in Israel.”

“But does that attitude assure us of his loyalty?” Ray bluntly asked Zainal.

“Considering that his family bloodlines date back to the Original Hundred, yes, it does. He needs to wipe that dismissal from his family’s history,” Zainal replied.

The latest news from Earth was both good and bad—the good being that the Eosi had given up their mind-wipe program. The bad was that they were now concentrating on razing cities, towns, settlements of any size, to the ground.

ZAINAL SEEMED TO HAVE NO TROUBLE PLAYING WITH ZANE IN THE AFFECTIONATE way he had always used with the child who was walking without assistance. If he fell down, he got himself up. If he bruised himself in doing so and started to cry, Zainal would cock his head and the tears would dry up.

Kris didn't approve of Zainal's attitude toward perfectly reasonable tears. They had another fight over that.

"If he is badly hurt, he may cry," Zainal said. "But, on Botany, he must learn to take tumbles and get up and walk on," he added. "As you did on our initial treks."

"I was an adult, not a baby." She was also stung that he would bring up those incidents, so long ago she'd forgotten them.

"If Zane walks, he is no longer a baby."

"He's my child and I'll dictate what he may or may not do."

"Tell him not to bother me then."

"Bother you?"

"He seeks my company."

"And you never push him away."

"No, but I will if you do not like the way I treat the son of my mate."

Zainal's face had assumed the cold Catteni look that devastated her, and she caved in.

"I want you to be fatherly toward Zane. He couldn't understand you changing," she said more meekly than she meant to sound.

"I do as I see other fathers here do, Kris," he replied in a quiet, kinder tone. Then he caressed her cheek. "And when my sons learn that you are really Emassi in spite of being female, I would like you to be elder mother to them."

"Truce?" she said, holding out her hand.

"Truce? Yes, truce. We two should not be angry at each other over nothing."

"Nothing?" That was enough to get her back up all over again but Zainal stopped the incipient quarrel by kissing her so thoroughly that she had to cling to him to keep upright.

He was learning some other tricks of Human males, too, she thought as he carried her to their bed. It was nearly midday but neither was due for duty for another hour or so. Zane was already in the crèche. They had not been together often enough recently, she thought. No wonder they were fighting.

When they had finished a very satisfactory passage in arms, Kris asked Zainal how plans were going for the next series of "raids." Despite the inconveniences of masquerading and enduring the heavier gravity of Catten, she realized there must be a piratical—certainly a Viking—streak from her ancestry that gave her such enjoyment in these forays. It was so very satisfying to sneak in under Catteni noses and get away with such good plunder. Though she gave a little shudder

thinking what might happen if they didn't get away with their deceptions. She quickly gave up thinking about *that*.

"The Council thinks hard about the next step. We," and Zainal turned his thumb in on himself so that Kris knew he meant the other Catteni, "must make additional contact with those who can help with our challenge to Eosi domination."

"Will that mean only you go?" she asked. After being with him again, she hated to be separated. Not that they could indulge in intimacies aboard even the larger KDL, but she would miss him acutely no matter how short a separation.

BY THE FALL OF NIGHT THAT DAY, THE RESIDENTS HAD ANOTHER PROBLEM. Some of those brought in on the last G-class ship were young folks, aged between five and twelve: children who had grown up knowing nothing but the Catteni domination. Most of them were either orphaned or had been separated from their parents, and three could not even remember their names. Dorothy Dwardie turned the most violent over to Dr. Hessian since his Freudian training would be valuable in these instances. Their childhoods, if one could use the word, had been so traumatic that, unless therapy was used, they would be neurotic by their teens.

"Children can survive the most appalling circumstances," Dorothy said as she addressed those who had volunteered to house the orphans, "but the one thing they have, which adults often lack, is resilience. Shown kindness, especially fair play, will do much to show them what we, here on Botany at least, consider 'normal' behavior."

Some of the wildest had had to be sedated throughout the trip. Laughrey, who had been captain of the purloined ship, said his crew had been totally unable to cope with this group.

"We did find out that, when we brought them to the ship . . . the first time," and he grimaced, "we were Human quislings and were taking them to work to death as slaves. When we rounded them up again, we had to sedate them. Most were covered with infected sores—well, you've seen their scars—and wounds. In my opinion, they're worse off than the Victims. And they're just as much Victims of the Eosi as the mind-wiped."

Every attempt was made over the next few weeks to integrate the children. The placements were not universally successful, though Sarah and Joe lucked out with a five-year-old girl. Once she realized that she was safe, she refused to be separated from her foster parents and either

Sarah or Joe had to have her in tow. She also didn't speak, but Dorothy Dwardie felt that, once she felt really, truly safe, she would talk.

"Children pick up speech patterns from their carers. If they've had no carers, of any kind," and Dorothy shrugged. "There's certainly no impediment in her vocal equipment."

The psychologist grinned, reminding the foster parents of the screams the child had uttered when she was given her three-in-one injection. Two of the children on board the G-ship had had measles so preventative shots were essential.

Maizie, the name Sarah and Joe had given their waif, was derived from her constant look of amazement at food—all she wanted to eat—and clean covers on a bed that only she occupied. She did take to carrying the fluff-filled pillow with her everywhere. That was a useful habit, not only reinforcing her sense of security, but because she was inclined to take unexpected naps, both hands clutching the pillow.

"I don't think she ever slept on Earth," Sarah told Kris. "At this rate, you won't have to have a second child," and she cocked her head at Kris. "Especially now Zainal's got his two sons here."

"Kasturi hid his family away before he defected, and he wants to bring them in. He has daughters. I just hope he doesn't do a Maasai on them," Kris said in a jaundiced tone of voice.

"If you ask me, it wouldn't hurt some of our latest drop-ins to be sent down to Chief Caleb Materu," Sarah said.

"I believe that's also occurred to our noble leaders. Dorothy's against it," and Kris paused.

"So are you," and Sarah snorted. "But I catch any of them bullying some of the littler boys again, I'm going to thump 'em."

There was a hard-core group of eighteen who had banded together: six black, eight white, two Japanese, one Chinese girl, and one French lad: ranging from seven to the eighteen-year-old black lad, Clune, who was their acknowledged leader. They had actually been rounded up by the Catteni, as they were old enough to survive the drugged journey. Laughrey freed them from the DC-area holding pens where they awaited transportation.

They had become a unit, fourteen males and four females, calling themselves the Diplomatic Corp. They were still a unit, despite being assigned to foster parents. They refused to work but managed to acquire food whenever they wanted it. Several sessions in the stocks for Clune, and his two "consuls," Ferris and Ditsy, failed to correct their attitude. Twice their unit disappeared from Retreat and had to be tracked down by Rugarians and Deski, with Chuck Mitford in command. The second time, he marched them back without a single rest break.

Not even demonstrations of what night crawlers could do seemed to deter them from defecting from Retreat. The supplies they had acquired on both occasions showed that they could access anything they chose to have: including com units. And they were clever enough to have opened secure premises to get the weapons they wanted. Oddly enough, among the goods they took from infirmary supplies were condoms. One of the group, the seventeen-year-old who called herself Floss, had insisted that none of the girls should get pregnant: an unexpected display of common sense.

It became clear within the first two weeks that they had no intention of integrating. They were not, in Leon's medical opinion, physically well enough—after four or five years of eating whatever they could scrounge for the unit—to look after themselves in one of the closed valleys. Which had been suggested as one remedy to their recalcitrant behavior. Floss had been acting as their medic, since she had taken a first-aid course before the invasion, but she would not be capable of dealing with the serious wounds nor the various infections, external and internal, which plagued the young folk.

"We can't let them go half-healed, and that Floss needs a D and C," Leon reported. "Mary said it's not urgent . . . yet. But fibroid growths have a tendency to keep growing unless there's a curettage."

"Why don't we see if Chief Materu would take them in for a spell," was Laughrey's suggestion. "Let's make it really basic for them."

"Haven't they endured enough 'basic'?" Dorothy asked, though she could come up with no other suggestions. Almost all the other children that had been rescued were settling in or responding to trauma therapy.

"Not a structured basic," Ray Scott said. "I'd rather they had enough training to survive on their own, if that's the course we have to take with such a hard-nosed bunch. I'll give Chief Materu a call."

Chief Materu accepted the challenge. It didn't surprise Kris, though, that Zainal decided to go along with those marching the Diplomatic Corp down to the southern settlement of the Maasai. She chuckled, thinking of the pace that Zainal would set. Chuck, the two Doyle brothers, Joe Latore, Coe, and Slav came along "for the exercise."

When Chuck met Kris on his return, he said that the trip had been instructive for all concerned. "Chief Caleb's segregating the girls who certainly don't like that part of it. Nor working with only women. But work they will. Good thing those Maasai are so tall." He grinned with satisfaction of an assignment suitably fulfilled.

"Ah . . . how are Zainal's two fitting in?"

Chuck eyed her. "They are. Even manage to chatter some in Maasai. Zainal allowed a smile for each of them, and you'd've thought they'd

been turned loose in a candy store. They've picked up some sort of skin problem but the Maasai now have the medical plants they need to cope with almost every ailment."

That reassurance gave Kris enormous relief.

"Were our renegades similarly impressed by seven-foot chiefs?" she asked.

Chuck laughed. "What's that word that Ninety uses? Oh, yes, gobsma. They were that in spades. Turns out that two of the black kids were Africans from their countries' respective embassies. They knew the Maasai, certainly by reputation, and enough Swahili to understand basic orders." Chuck took a long pull on his beer and then folded his hands across his stomach. "Yup, that was a good idea Laughrey had."

THREE DAYS LATER THERE WAS AN URGENT COM CALL FOR ZAINAL AND Leon from Chief Materu. The skin problem for the two Catteni boys had not responded to Maasai cures and the boys had developed fevers that could not be reduced. Kris offered to come, too, and Zainal was worried enough to want her company. Leon brought what he felt would be the appropriate equipment, carefully strapping the microscope box into a travel net on Baby, as well as a variety of medications.

"It's unusual for Catteni to have skin infections," he murmured to Kris as Zainal drove Baby at its best speed. "Or fevers. Zainal's never shown any toxic reaction to anything here on Botany. That I heard of?" the Australian looked inquiringly at Kris. She shook her head. "Well, we'll just have to wait and see. Not that, with this speed, we'll be long waiting."

ZAINAL LANDED BABY AS NEAR TO THE CHIEF'S HIGH-SET PLATFORM AS he could. Materu had heard the noise of the approaching ship and beckoned them to follow him to where the boys were being cared for.

The fevers were high, even when Leon adjusted the thermometer reading to Catteni levels. The sores exuded yellow pus that had a nose-shriveling odor to it. Leon quickly made slides and, taking his microscope out in the light, did a quick investigation. He was shaking his head when he returned.

"I've never seen anything like it. It's some sort of . . . allergic reaction that's causing the skin to erupt like this."

"Will antihistamines work on Catteni systems?" Kris asked, hands clenched into fists with anxiety. Zainal wore his worst Catteni face, and

she was sure he thought the boys were dying. So did Chief Materu and his medicine man, or whatever they were called in Swahili.

"It's the one thing I can try. The only Human equivalent to those sores is pyoderma gangrenosum," Leon said. "And that may be the result of a colitis. Neither lad had any sign of that sort of problem when I checked them over." Then he asked what the boys had been eating, but he shook his head when the listing was complete. "Nothing they didn't have on board the KDL except for fresh rocksquats and fish, and they haven't bothered Zainal. Nothing else, Chief Caleb?"

It was the medicine man, introduced as Parmitoro Kassiora, who said something in Maasai to the chief.

"He says he gave them a very, very small dose of olkiloriti because they ate too much and had bellyaches. Much less than he would use with our boys because they are different."

"Isn't that from the acacia plants that were just brought back?" Leon asked.

Parmitoro added something else.

"He says that some of the Catteni who rounded them up took ill like this, with sores, and died," the chief translated, looking exceedingly pleased.

"Hey, you could be right about allergy, Kris." He checked through the medications he had brought with him and found several, looking from one bottle to another. "Their metabolism runs at a different level despite other similarities to our own body mechanisms. Give me your arm, Zay," he said.

When Zainal had bared his arm, he did a quick reaction test of all three possible medications. Leon whistled under his breath as he timed the testing. Behind him the boys muttered in their fevers, tossing and almost, but not quite, crying with the pain incurred by moving.

"Not a damned thing," Leon muttered after the required reaction time was up. "At least you're not allergic to antihistamines." Then he looked Zainal straight in the eye. "Do I have your permission to try, Zainal? At least I believe they will take no further harm from the shots."

Zainal nodded. Leon bowed slightly to the Maasai medic, who had been observing with close interest but no reaction to what Leon had been doing. Chief Materu had murmured some explanations in Maasai.

"Do I offend your Parmitoro Kassiora by using our medicines?"

Caleb Materu gave them a wide smile of very white and even teeth. "Not at all. The boys have been good boys, and they are *not* Maasai so perhaps Maasai medicine could not work on them." Materu turned to Zainal. "For that he apologizes."

"None needed." Zainal nodded once to Parmitoro in acceptance.

"That takes care of the medical ethics," Leon said in a wry tone. "I'll give one to Bazil here, and another to Peran. Then we've one spare . . ."

He made the injections.

And they waited. Some of the women, and that included a rebellious and surly Floss, brought food and cool water. The hut was not only stuffy but also reeked of the suppurations. Kris did edge toward the opening of the hut.

"I want out of here, bitch," Floss muttered as she and an older Maasai woman returned with a fresh bucket of cold water.

"Only when you're no longer one, dear," Kris replied in a low tone.

"D'you know what they do to women here?" Floss said, and there was a certain desperation in her eyes now.

"All the more reason for you to reform your outlook on life on Botany," she said, for she had heard about the female genital mutilation practiced by some African tribes. Were the Maasai one? She couldn't remember.

Floss made a sudden movement toward Kris, which, in retrospect, Kris decided she deserved for the taunt, and immediately the tall Maasai woman grabbed hold of Floss and threw her from the hut. Kris could hear the thud of the girl hitting the hard ground. She thought she'd better make certain that the girls of the Diplomatic Corp were not required, during this reeducation period, to adhere to *all* Maasai customs. They should have brought along one of the Swahili speakers. How the hell was she going to explain this one?

They waited. They could and did try to ease the boys' fevers with the cool water, laying fresh cloths carefully over the sore-covered bodies.

It was dark before Leon extracted a thermometer from Bazil's armpit and exclaimed, "The fever's coming down."

Kris was in the process of changing a cool cloth when she noticed that the sores were no longer oozing. In fact, the smell was lessening, too.

"Hey, look!" And she pointed to the nearest sore. "It's drying up."

Zainal immediately stripped the coverings from Peran, and the younger boy also seemed to be responding to the medication.

"It's four hours. Time to give them another shot."

During the next four hours, the sores seemed to dry up in waves, starting from the chest working downward to the limbs. The boys' temperatures dropped to normal, and they each fell into a deep sleep.

"Empirical but you Catteni are not impervious to the minor ailments

to which Human flesh is heir," Leon said as they all left the hut and stood in the fresh night air.

"This acacia? They swallowed it?" Zainal asked.

Materu said, "It is ground fine and a small amount taken with water."

"Do I know what you're thinking, Zainal?" Leon asked, eyebrows twitching and the gleam of a smile on his face.

"The problem would be 'how.'

"Yes, it would, wouldn't it," Leon said.

Kris had no trouble following their line of thought but she also couldn't figure out how the olkiloriti could be administered to the Eosi. How could they possibly get Eosi to swallow sufficient to kill them? Or at least give them an awful allergic reaction?

"Were the boys in real danger from just an allergic reaction?" she asked Leon. She'd never even had a bad case of poison ivy.

He cocked his head. "If the antihistamines hadn't taken effect, I don't think they'd've survived the night." He looked back at the hut. "They'll still need a lot of care . . . and no further herbal medications. I hope Parmitoro won't take offense."

"He would take more offense if you had come and the boys had died," Caleb Materu said with an amused snort.

"I do have some salve I used on Catteni wounds," Leon said, dragging his medical bag out into the cool night air. "To heal the sores. I know it doesn't react on Catteni. The sea, too, will help. Can they swim, Zainal?"

"They do now," Caleb said in his deep voice, and in the torchlight, his eyes sparkled.

"When the sores are closed, have them swim in the sea. Salt's still a superb cure-all."

"You wish them to remain in my care?" the chief asked Zainal.

"I do," Zainal said firmly.

"How are the others doing, chief?" Leon asked and his eyes danced with mischief.

"They learn."

Kris pulled at Leon's sleeve, to get him to listen to her whisper. "Floss is terrified that the Maasai will do something . . . down there," and she pointed to the correct spot.

Leon covered a burst of laughter. "I imagine she would be. Don't worry. Hassan made it plain that the females must return in the same physical condition in which they arrived. He also said that Chief Materu is one of the more modern leaders."

Kris let her breath out with a whoosh.

“Don’t reassure her, though,” Leon went on. “Being real scared is effective conditioning as negative conditioning. Dorothy and I did discuss an aversion state, like intense fear, to be used to cancel out a lesser, unpleasant state . . . like choosing to be cooperative if you’re angry. If there is something that does terrify that hard-boiled little minx, let’s let it stand. Right?”

“Right.”

LEON GAVE THE BOYS A THIRD INJECTION. HE MEASURED OUT TABLETS, which he put in a jar for Parmitoro to give the boys orally during the next ten days. Then the two medical men shook hands.

By common consent the three retired to Baby to sleep for the Botanic night wasn’t even half over when the boys began to improve. In the morning, when Leon had gone over to check on his patients, Kris heard an odd noise, small but definitely not a regular sound.

She caught Zainal’s attention and pointed to the passageway. Two of the Diplomatic Corp girls, and one of them was Floss, were attempting to squeeze into one of the storage compartments. It was the opening of the panel that Kris had heard.

Zainal had no sooner made it to the doorway with Floss under one arm—and Kris behind him with an arm lock on the other, younger girl—than four Maasai women arrived.

“If you behave, Floss,” Kris said sternly as the Maasai women took firm charge of the would-be stowaways, “you’ll come back in the same physical condition you arrived here. But if you continue to misbehave . . . well,” and Kris spread her hands wide to indicate the outcome would be out of her control.

Floss turned dead white under the tan she was acquiring. Then she gathered herself up to snarl back and, before she could utter a word, she was pinched so painfully by the headwoman that whatever invective she had been about to spit out at Kris was lost in her yelp. Zainal drew Kris back in the ship. He was grinning.

“Doesn’t like you, does she?”

“I can’t blame her, but tough love works.”

“Love?” Zainal queried.

“Well, discipline meted out fairly for failure to obey.” And she pointed to the tableau of Floss. Balancing a big basket on her head with both hands, she was bracketed between two tall Maasai women who moved with a grace Floss had yet to achieve. The younger girl was sobbing softly, her arm in the grasp of the headwoman.

Kris didn’t at all like the sexism practiced by the Maasai but, if it

taught Floss discipline and respect, she might even become a useful colonist when she returned to Retreat.

THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THIS MEDICAL ALERT WERE IMMEDIATELY REPORTED TO Ray Scott and the other Catteni were hastily gathered together. When Zainal had explained what he hoped to achieve, Nitin and Kasturi both started shaking their heads.

"Eosi are well aware that even the Emassi who surround them might seize an opportunity to use a poison. Anything they consume is first tested by a Catteni," Nitin said gloomily.

"Perhaps it is effective only on young bodies which have not matured enough to deal with dangerous substances," Kamiton said.

"Care to try it?" Leon said, taking out a vial containing some of the powdered olkiloriti. The Australian had an odd sense of humor.

Zainal held out his hand for it but Kamiton snatched it first. He pulled out the cork top and sniffed deeply.

"See? There is no danger . . ." His yellow eyes turned up in his skull and he started to have such severe convulsions that he jerked off the chair he was sitting in.

Leon sprang into action. Fortunately he still had his medical kit handy and, muttering under his breath about what dose would be sufficient to counter the reaction, he filled a syringe. Zainal and Kasturi were trying to keep Kamiton from hurting himself with the severity of the spasms that beset him but, strong as they were, they were having difficulty holding him. Leon tried twice to pierce the tough Catteni hide with his hypodermic needle, cursing about elephant hides and crocodile scales, but managed to plunge the medication in.

The convulsions did not immediately cease, though Kris—watching anxiously, for she had come to like Kamiton—thought they were not as violent. Leon readied a second syringe from a different bottle with the longest needle Kris had ever seen.

"Let's hope your hearts can take this kind of convulsion," he said as Kamiton's spine arched grotesquely. "Here, hold this, Kris. Hold it up."

He gave her the hypodermic and got his stethoscope out.

"Keep his arms out of my way, can you Zainal, Kasturi?" he asked in Catteni. Over Kamiton's inarticulate cries, whatever he managed to hear worried him. "I don't like the sounds in his lungs. Inhalation was a damned foolish idea. Cardiac arrest is possible. Kris, call the infirmary and send the team down here fast as possible."

"I've already called in a medical emergency," Ray said, com unit

in his hand as he stared down at the writhing body of the Catteni. "I think that shot is beginning to work."

"It is?" Leon said, surveying the contortions. "You're right. The spasms are reducing in intensity."

"Eosi must breathe, mustn't they?" Kasturi remarked in Catteni to Nitin, their eyes still on the slowly relaxing body of their colleague.

"Yes, even Eosi breathe," Nitin observed. "But their living quarters are so carefully guarded . . ."

"Crop dusting might do," Leon observed with the fingers of one hand on Kamiton's neck. "Pulse still racing. Damned fool thing to do with a drug he knew was dangerous."

"A very Catteni thing to do," was Kris' rejoinder, her pulse racing as well from fear of the consequences of Kamiton's rash impulse. "Do I need to keep this?" she asked, meaning the syringe she still held.

"We might. I'd rather have conducted a controlled experiment but the empirical test was certainly conclusive," Leon added in an admiring tone.

Kamiton's body twitched only slightly now but his breathing was still labored, and he had not regained consciousness.

"Crop dusting?" Zainal asked, looking up at her, not having understood Leon's remark.

"A term for an aerial application of fertilizer or insecticides over large areas. Airplanes are used," and she made a sweeping gesture with her free hand.

"What has she said?" Nitin asked, his English being almost non-existent.

When Zainal explained, Nitin once again shook his head. "No aerial traffic is allowed over Eosi compounds."

"There's more than one way to kill a cat without choking him with butter," Kris said.

"Say again?" asked Zainal, blinking with a lack of comprehension.

'There are nine and sixty ways of singing tribal lays,' Leon chanted, 'and every single one of them is right.'

Ray Scott laughed. Kris wouldn't have thought he'd know Kipling that well. But they needed a spot of relief after the anxiety over Kamiton.

"I'm sure we'll think of some way," Scott said.

Just then the cardiac arrest team arrived.

"There *has* to be some way," Kris said.

"We will find it," Zainal said, stepping away from Kamiton as the emergency team moved in on him.

Leon was explaining what had happened and what precautions he

wanted taken when they got Kamiton to the infirmary. Almost as an afterthought, he took the syringe from Kris' hand as he followed the team, with Kamiton carried on a stretcher out the door.

"Are there any dissidents on board an Eosi vessel?"

"If this stuff is spread through the air circulation, it would kill everyone on board," Ray said, putting the stopper back in the vial and placing it well away from the remaining Catteni.

"More will be needed, too," Zainal said, regarding the little container with considerable respect.

"Why?" asked Nitin, returning to his seat. "There is no way it can be spread for Eosi to inhale."

"There must be," Zainal said, giving the table a pound with his fist that rattled the vial of olkiloriti. Ray immediately steadied it.

"We will somehow contrive," Kasturi said, giving Nitin a dire look for his pessimism.

"Meanwhile, we have other problems," Ray said, "and, while I am relieved that your sons survived their ordeal, Zainal, we've a meeting later today to decide how to cope with the growing destruction of our own planet."

With a nod of dismissal, he pulled his keyboard to him and began to call up a program to consider.

Zainal, Kris, Kasturi, and Nitin left the hangar office in thoughtful silence.

"WHAT'S THIS I HEAR ABOUT A LETHAL DRUG FOR THE EOSI?" RAISHA asked when Kris came to collect Zane from the crèche.

Kris paused in lifting her jubilant, and heavy, son into her arms. "Boy, the grapevine works faster than light."

Raisha grinned broadly. "Well, we did see the cardiac arrest team speeding down to the hangar and then back . . . so naturally, we had to find out the details. And thank goodness, Zainal's sons are all right."

"Yes, that was pretty tricky for a while. So who's spreading the word? You or Sarah?"

"Actually, Mavis' rushed down. She was collecting her daughter after her shift." When Kris, busy with her son, was not forthcoming, Raisha added more curtly than her usual manner, "Wellll?" and she raised the elegant curve of her fine brows in query.

"Yes, there is a substance that produces a violent allergic response in Catteni, young and old. But whether it can be got to the target area is the point. Don't get your hopes up."

"I will try not to, but it will be hard," the pilot said. "There simply has to be a way . . ."

"We'll find it. Maybe we'll hear from the Farmers. It's been long enough," Kris said, hoping to distract the woman.

"Huh! I have come to believe more in your Yankee in-gen-oo-ity," and Raisha grinned, parodying Zainal's use of the word.

"See you, later. Say good-bye, Zane and thank you to Raisha."

"Goo-by, t'ank," the obedient child managed.

"You should have another before he is much older," Raisha said.

"Ha! Won't need to if we import more kids."

"Has that wild group settled in with the Maasai?"

Kris chuckled. "They've had no choice."

Raisha nodded with satisfaction.

"I think Zane'll have to spend the night here . . . a big meeting this evening. I'll feed and bathe him first."

"This good boy's always welcome."

ZAINAL WAS NOT IN THEIR COTTAGE SO KRIS LET ZANE WANDER ABOUT the place while she cleaned up from their hurried departure the previous day. All the time her mind kept working through possibilities, but any bright ideas that occurred required more knowledge than she had of Eosian habits and habitats, information she did not have on hand. Even if Nitin was so pessimistic, she had the feeling that Zainal and Kasturi were not.

Her com unit buzzed, and Beggs informed her in his prosaic manner that her presence was requested for twenty hundred hours at the hangar for an emergency session of the complete Council. She opened her mouth to thank him when he closed the connection. She didn't like him and he knew it, but Beggs was the sort who would do his duty though it choked him. And he was efficient. With the com unit in hand, she called the infirmary to ask how Kamiton was.

"He's left," was the report from the agitated receptionist. "Dr. Dane tried to keep him in for observation, but he just walked out."

"He's all right then," Kris said, chuckling. No Catteni worth the rank of Emassi would let a thing like a near brush with death keep him abed. So he'd be there at the meeting. That meant that Tubelin would probably side with Zainal, so it would be three Catteni for and one against.

No, she shook her head, correcting herself. The meeting was about other matters entirely. While wiping out the Eosi would be the answer

to many problems, that wasn't the panacea for all the woes that currently beset Humanity.

That was the subject of the meeting.

John Beverly addressed those who crowded into the hangar. When the numbers attending exceeded space available, a com system was hurriedly set up to allow those outside to hear what was being said. Kris noted with approval that the four Maasai chiefs were there, with Hassan Moussa whispering translations.

"Our last trip to Earth showed us what the Eosi are doing to our planet . . . stripping it of anything valuable and destroying what they do not understand. They are also systematically shipping Humans out as slave labor. The old, the very young, the infirm, the injured or sick are being left to fend for themselves and many will die. We cannot, here on Botany, continue to provide succor to those, much as we would like to. There is a finite limit to what Botany can provide.

"However, Kamiton has been able to supply us with the information of the other planets—some of them as habitable as Botany—where Humans have been dropped, as we were, to make the best of what was available. We want to check on these. If necessary, support them with tools, medicines, and other supplies. That will mean healthy people to take back to Earth when it's ours again. I'd like volunteers to go with *our*"—and he paused to emphasize the recent acquisitions—"G-ships to show them how. There are five other drop"—and he grinned to use the term—"planets that we know of and we want to visit each. We also know of four installations where, according to Kasturi, Humans are being used as slave labor in appalling conditions. Some of our Maasai were sent to an ice planet. We want to free those we can. Right under Catteni noses, so to speak." And Beverly flashed a smile when someone demanded to know how. "Pretend we're Catteni shifting work forces. We've inside help now besides Zainal." And he turned to indicate the four dissident Catteni seated to one side of the table. "We can't emancipate—" and again that roguish grin on the air force general's face—"all the slaves but we can try."

"Why?" someone roared. "They'll be half-dead. I don't mind helping now and then, but all the time?"

There was considerable support to that complaint.

"I know, I know," John said. "Altruism can go too far. And if we can, we will disperse these folk on some of the other planets we know about.

"Don't lose sight of the fact that the reason for these forays is to spread confusion among the Eosi and the Emassi in charge by a series

of totally unexpected shifts of personnel and material which will disappear completely. The Eosi don't like mysteries."

"Yeah, but won't they just retaliate by killing more of us back on Earth?"

"They might, if they could see the connection," John Beverly said. "We'll be using Catteni ships they haven't yet realized we have. How can they hold Earth responsible when Catteni are the only ones involved?"

"Meanwhile, Catteni dissidents will be mobilized—and there are many Catteni who want to be free of Eosian domination just as much as we do."

"You going to use that dust to kill those bastards?" someone shouted.

John Beverly paused a moment, smiling. "Doesn't take long for rumor to circulate Retreat, does it?"

There were good-natured chuckles.

"We now have a means, but we don't have a way."

"Set up a Ways and Means Committee then," some wit shouted and laughter greeted that suggestion.

"We have. Any ideas are cheerfully received. Now," and John looked down at his notes, "we're making another foray to Earth, to collect supplies, visit the other planets where Humans have been dropped, so I'm asking for some of the First Drop to come along in case we can help. Zainal's making another run to contact other dissidents."

Suddenly Gino Marrucci, who had been in the bridge on com link watch, came rushing up the steps to the platform and whispered something in Ray's ear.

He rose. "We may not be able to implement those plans just yet," he said. "Gino says there's a massive attack force approaching. We may just have annoyed the Eosi too much."

"What do we do now?" a woman wailed in the silence that followed the announcement.

Kris had no trouble identifying the wailer as Anna Bollinger.

"I think we go out the back door NOW," Zainal said, gesturing for John Beverly to nominate his crews.

"What if the Bubble bursts?" Anna screamed.

"Don't be so stupid, woman." And Aarens was on his feet and faced her. "The Farmers design much better than the Eosi do."

Kris smothered her laugh. Anna's panic did spread. Those at the head table rose to try and restore calm. Beverly didn't waste any time, but pointed out those he wanted as crews for his ships. He took them

off with him, gathering other men and women as he went. The hangar was emptying rapidly, with many running outside to look up in the darkening sky to check on the Bubble's distant nebulosity.

Many watched the barrage all night long. In some places, the force of the repeated assault turned the Bubble a glowing orange. There is no noise in space, of course, but there was plenty on the com sat link. Those who gathered in the bridge rooms of Baby and the two K-class in the hangar listened to the sharp exchange of Catteni and Eosi commands. Kris had joined Zainal and the other Catteni at the bridge installed in Ray's office where the ex-admiral and the rest of the Council followed what they could of the attack.

"Mentat IX seems to be in charge," Ray said, looking at Zainal. "All the orders seem to be issued in his name."

Zainal only nodded as he reached for paper and pencil and, with Kamiton's help, listed the force trying to batter down the Bubble.

"Both the new AA-ships," Kamiton said, "and five of the big H's that have been refitted with missiles."

"Ah," and Nitin was cheered up slightly. "I hear Niassen is commander of one of the H's. He's useless."

"All he has to do is follow orders," Kasturi said, grinning.

"Isn't Redinit on that H?" asked Tubelin.

"Yes, I believe he is," Nitin said. He had supplied Zainal with the captain and crew complements of most of the ships the Eosi had been using against the Bubble.

"Don't we have three on the HHT?" Kasturi asked.

"Not in command posts, unfortunately," Kamiton said with a sigh.

"Can you give me some idea of how large a dissident group you're talking about?" Ray asked.

"Roughly three thousand, spread throughout Eosi-dominated space," Kamiton said.

Nitin regarded Kamiton with some apprehension, but the Catteni shrugged the implied reprimand away.

"Only three thousand?" Ray said, having hoped for a much larger subversive element.

Zainal laughed. "It is the nature of our group that's far more important than the number. Most of them are in strategic positions. Quality counts more than quantity."

"I suspect it could," Ray admitted.

"Oops," and even Gino recoiled when the Bubble above the com sat area turned a livid shade of red. "They're obviously hoping the fabric of the Bubble is weaker around the array."

"Is it holding?" Ray demanded with a hint of anxiety in his voice.

"It'll hold," Gino said, "but it's taking a beating."

At some point during that long vigil, Ainger arrived, much annoyed, with a folded note from John Beverly.

"I resent being used as a messenger simply because I happened to be on hand," he grumbled as he handed over the paper.

"John's taking all the G's out the back door," Ray said, frowning a bit.

"Isn't he exceeding his prerogatives?" Ainger said with an expression of deep censure. "Unless, of course, you intended him to attack the Eosian?"

"With G-ships carrying a minimum of weapons?" Zainal asked, surprised. "No, he's going to provide further distractions, as was planned."

"He's away," Gino said, grinning.

"He broadcast?" Ainger was livid.

"In Morse," Gino said, laughing. "I just caught it. Thought it was only static at first, but he's got it on repeat. I'd best tell him his message was received." He manipulated some toggles on the com board and then, listening intently to the chaotic Catteni messages, finally nodded. "Yeah, he got it."

THE BARRAGE OF THE BUBBLE WENT ON ALL THE LONG CATTENI NIGHT and into morning, but the fabric of the sphere did not collapse. The sun blotted out the colors the bombardment made but Bert Put, working the dawn shift as com officer, said he could hear the orders for continued barrage.

"This should infuriate the Mentat IX," Zainal said, a smile of intense satisfaction on his face.

"Too bad there's no way to use that anger to our benefit," Ray said.

"Ah, but there is," and Zainal held up one finger, his smile deepening.

"How?" Nitin said. "There's no way to get that dust . . ." and Kamiton gave an uncharacteristic shudder.

"Having failed, the Mentat will have to explain its defeat to its peer group," Kamiton said, rubbing his hands together. "And such a convocation *can* be of benefit to us."

"How? We have the dust but not how to disperse it to kill 'em all off, even if they are in one place together?" asked Ray.

There was a long and thoughtful pause, which Jim Rastancil finally broke.

"Where are they likely to assemble?" he asked.

"Ah, now that is something we should find out," Zainal said, "and

as soon as possible." He jerked his head at the other dissenters. "Nitin, what's your best guess?"

"My guess?" And Nitin seemed surprised to be asked such a question.

"Where they seem safest, of course," Kamiton said, flicking his fingers.

"Where?" Jim asked, looking at Zainal for a translation.

"Catten itself," Zainal replied.

"Most likely," Kasturi agreed, nodding.

"No," Nitin corrected him, frowning. "The space station where everyone can be searched and monitored. Security will be very, very thorough," and Nitin looked more pessimistic than ever. "You won't be able to get in."

"They will, however, need missiles to replace what they have wasted against the Bubble," Zainal said with a satisfied grin. "Emassi Venlik and a cargo of very useful ores would be made welcome."

"You don't have more than a few immature bushes of the olkiloriti down south," Kris felt obliged to point out.

"Baby could sneak in and out without being noticed, couldn't she?" Ray asked. "To get more from East Africa?"

"You'd better take someone along who knows where to find enough bushes," Kris added.

"It only took one sniff to disable me," Kamiton said with a grin.

"You must have more than a sniff to get all the Eosi," Nitin grumbled.

"It will take some time for all the Eosi to assemble, you know," Kasturi said. "If this requires a full inquiry."

"Oh, it will," Nitin said, once again sunk in his usual gloom.

"I'm counting on the full inquiry and the time it will take to assemble a sufficient number of Mentats," Zainal said, addressing Nitin. Then he turned to the others. "As for gathering the substance, I think Parmitoro Kassiaro, or even Chief Materu, might assist."

"Don't the women do the actual work?" Kris asked for she couldn't construct a mental picture of Chief Materu pulverizing leaves in a mortar with a pestle.

Zainal shrugged. "We use it as a weapon. That may alter his mind."

"The Maasai have declared war on the Catteni, you know," Ray Scott said with a wry grin. "I don't believe you'll have any trouble getting the stuff."

"That is," Jim added in a cautious note, "if there's still enough available. The mission report had trouble finding what they did bring back."

“Then we must send for what can be found immediately,” Zainal said. “I will go myself to ask the chief’s help.”

And, Kris thought to herself, to make sure that Bazil and Peran are fully recovered. In his own Catteni way, he did care for them.

Chapter Ten

RETREAT BUZZED WITH A BARELY CONTAINED EXCITEMENT WHEN KRIS brought Zane up to the crèche before reporting to her shift on the com watch in the hangar. Some of the buzz sounded ominous but then there had been a lot of criticism about taking on more problem groups: like sick and disabled ex-slaves. The Victims could not have been left on Barevi: everyone admitted that. Now! Especially since all but thirty of the original group had responded to the trauma therapy. The remainder, Dorothy sadly reported, had been too damaged to reach. But the psychologist felt that the ratio of recoveries was very good indeed. Even Dr. Hessian had had to admit that her program had been the proper one . . . in this instance. He was happily at work helping the disturbed children in a blend, Dorothy had said with a perfectly straight face, of both traditional therapies.

Kris always allowed ample time to walk Zane up to the crèche so she had some to spare and stopped in the main mess hall to sample the general temper.

“Are they still trying to burst our Bubble?” asked Fred Gambino, who was serving coffee. “Only one cup allowed, you know.”

“That’s better than none. I’ve really missed my caffeine hits,” she said. “And no, the Bubble’s holding.”

Fred leaned across the counter. “I got a place picked out where I’ll never be found.”

“You do?” Kris managed to imbue her tone with surprise and amusement. “I doubt you’ll need it.”

“You sure?”

“Sure as I can be about anything apart from death and taxes, and we don’t pay taxes here, now do we?”

"Hmm. Well, it may come to that . . . taxes, I mean."

"Weren't you among those who met the Farmers, Fred?"

He gave her a long look. "Yeah . . ."

"Haven't they done what they promised? Kept us safe here on Botany?"

"Yeah . . ."

"Well, hold that thought because that Bubble's there to stay."

"Yeah, but where are the Farmers if we need them? They don't have any satellites buzzing about us like the Catt—'scuse me—Eosi do."

"Who's to say they haven't?"

That brought his eyebrows up but she put one finger to her lips and winked. A harmless enough white lie if it helped reduce panic.

"Thought the Farmers were sent a message?"

"They were. I suspect that they have a lot of other planets and systems to manage, too. If we really get into trouble, they'll be back. They don't approve of injuring any species."

"I know one I'd like to take apart, bit by bit," Fred said, making tearing motions with his hands.

Kris merely smiled at him, took her coffee and a hunk of fresh bread, and found a table at the side where she had a good view of those eating. Fred had probably expressed what many were thinking or fretting about. And he had a hidey-hole picked out? Interesting.

Fragments of arguments, some of them heated, reached her. Most concerned the possibility that the Bubble would be breached. She heard snatches of complaint about being saddled with more groups who wouldn't pull their own weight. Community service hours were long enough as it was and why did they have to keep on increasing the population. There were already enough here. Some were earnestly discussing the deplorable conditions on Earth and would they have to go back and help rebuild, just when Botany was beginning to have at least some amenities. Where would coffee grow on this planet? All right, rationing at least gave everyone a cup a day but when you were used to having as much as you wanted, a cup barely got you started. How much more food crops would they have to plant to feed more new arrivals? What would happen if a Catteni warship did manage to sneak through the Bubble? Or one of the ships that left so precipitously got captured and was used to penetrate the Bubble with all the Eosi ships right after it? That could happen, couldn't it? There were Humans who were vile enough to collaborate with the Catteni, weren't there? Shocking to turn against your own kind like that. One of the nearer tables composed of women only were discussing how best to cope with the outrageous behavior of their foster children. The waifs had initially

seemed so happy to have the basic essentials instead of having to scrounge whatever they could, you'd think they'd be more grateful to be well fed, well housed and not complain about the chores they were assigned. Everyone worked on Botany. This colony didn't tolerate free-loaders. Didn't hurt anyone to sweat? Making bricks wasn't that hard. Or weeding.

Then Kris realized she'd better make tracks for the hangar and her shift.

BABY WASN'T THERE, BUT THEN, THE PLAN HAD BEEN FOR IT TO BE used for a fast round-trip to obtain sufficient olkiloriti. One of the K's was gone but not the KDL, which she had crewed on so often with Zainal. She took over the com watch from Matt Su.

"They're still pounding away," he told her as he rose from the station. "My ears burn from some of the stuff they're saying about us and . . . what they'll do when they get in."

"Well, they can't and they won't," Kris said because there was just the hint in the Chinese's dark eyes that he was worried. "They have tried the heaviest stuff they have, haven't they?"

"Then why haven't they just left?" Matt asked, dubious.

"Well, the shan will hit the fit if they fail. More likely, they just don't know when to give up."

"That Mentat IX is some mule," Matt said. "It's roaring more and more, and I think it axed some of the captains. I'm hearing new names."

"Maybe it'll have another fit and die," Kris said, very much wishing that was possible. Though how Lenvec's subsumed personality could have had any effect on his host Eosi, she didn't know. She'd ask Zainal. The IX was certainly the *bête noire*—wanting Zainal's hide for sure.

SHE STOOD HER WATCH, COLLECTED ZANE, AND TOOK A TURN AT PLAYING with other children: some of the five-year-olds who had been rescued. Most of them had to be taught games that children seemed to know instinctively.

"Well, none of them *had* a childhood, did they?" Anna Bollinger said, treating Kris in a very stiff and almost insulting manner, as if somehow this were Kris' fault. "Some of their personal habits are revolting."

Ah, thought Kris, she doesn't want her little darlings corrupted, does she?

"At least they have good role models now," Kris said mildly, point-

ing to Anna's well-grown youngster, nattering away to two boys, so undernourished at five that her three-year-old appeared older.

"I'd prefer that Jackie had proper children his own age to play with."

"Jackie seems to feel that it is his job to rectify their ignorance," Kris said. Chattering away, Jackie was showing the others how to build a little cabin out of the small logs that had been whittled as toys. They watched, their faces expressionless, even if their faces were now clean and their cheeks rounder and tanned.

One of them sent a foot into the log cabin and scattered the blocks. Anna gave an exclamation of concern but Kris caught her arm. "Let's see how Jackie handles it first."

"Really, Kris, you exceed your authority. I'm in charge of the . . ." Her voice trailed off as Jackie's reached the two women.

"Now that was very naughty of you," he said, hands on his hips and sounding exactly like his mother. "You collect them, and we'll start over. On Botany, we make things. We don't break them. That's what the Catteni do and you don't want to be Catteni, do you?"

The boys glanced over at the two women watching: Anna's expression was stern enough to frighten anyone. Kris grinned and made a gesture that suggested that it was wiser to obey. After a little more hesitation, possibly to show that they were making up their own minds about this, they bent to gather up the logs.

A little girl caught her finger on something sharp and she came rushing over to them, sobbing. Anna's whole countenance altered to one of concern and sympathy. Kris let her handle the consolation and first aid. For all her other faults, Anna was a very good mother and the children—at least the Botany-born—trusted her.

ZAINAL WAS IN THEIR CABIN WHEN SHE RETURNED WITH ZANE AND their evening rations from the main mess hall. He was busy with lists and diagrams and a curious gadget on the table, which, when she picked it up, Kris recognized as an inhaler bulb. The sort she'd seen asthmatics on earth use to forestall an attack.

"Think you can get close enough to a Mentat to give him a dose of this?" she asked.

Zainal looked up, saw the bulb, and took it from her. He squeezed it.

"There's nothing in it," he said as she instinctively swatted it away from his face.

Her heart pounding, she exhaled. "Don't scare me like that."

Zainal chuckled.

"Baby got off all right? The Ix was still at it when I finished my shift."

"They must have ordnance—that's the English word, isn't it—"

"Right on." Kris grinned.

"Resupply vessels. Only a Mentat would continue like this," he said.

"The Mentat, who once was your brother," she said and when he nodded, she continued. "Is there any connection? I mean, would . . . the Lenvec personality have any influence on the Mentat?"

Zainal leaned back, idly sliding a pencil through his fingers, up and down on the surface of the table.

"It could, but I'm not certain how. The subsumation takes in the entire personality and then the dominant Mentat is in total control . . ." He paused. "Although it was the Mentat Ix, once my brother, who investigated Ayres Rock and then seemed to be searching over the sea we were safely under . . . possibly for me."

Kris began to assemble dishes and utensils to serve their meal. Zane was playing with his goes-inters—the shapes that Zainal had made for him to fit together. These afforded the child hours of pleasure. As she leaned over to put a glass before Zainal, she got a better look at the diagrams.

"Isn't that the space station?"

He nodded.

"When is the brave captain Venlik and his crew likely to set out for another mining expedition?"

Zainal gave a shrug. "First Baby has to return. Then we have to wait to see what Beverly finds out about the other drop planets."

"There's a good deal of feeling that Botany's population is large enough right now," she said.

"We know," he said and jotted down something else in a combination of Catteni and English. He gave her a wry smile as she chuckled at the mish-mash. "It is difficult for me now to remember which language to think in for the words I need."

The barrage of the Bubble continued but in nowhere near the force that had been first launched against it. All four Catteni found that amusing as well as reassuring.

"It takes time to call in sufficient Mentats and senior Eosi to deal with an obsession like the Ix's," Zainal explained. "I will worry more when it stops."

OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, CERTAINLY WHILE BABY WAS ON HER MISSION, Kris sensed that Zainal was hiding something. She couldn't think

what because they had had no previous secrets from each other, and he was as willing as ever to talk about any subject: especially the upcoming forays. Several times Zainal was dragged out of bed in the middle of their sleep period to race to the hangar to speak to some of the Catteni dissidents on the com link. He used a code that had proved successful. At least none of their group had been arrested by Eosi, or suspected by High Emassi supervisors.

The bombardment turned sporadic and occasionally a force tried to penetrate another point on the Bubble, or several at once, since they had failed to pierce it with all their might.

Kasturi, Tubelin, and Kamiton—not so much Nitin, though the older man, for all his pessimism, seemed to be a vital key in the subversive actions—were able, by means of careful codes, to be in contact with many of their adherents. What was being set up, Zainal did not say, or if even something was. Contact had to be made, though, especially with those dissidents in command positions on other Catteni-dominated planets.

“We have to be sure our people are warned, and ready, to take over. They must take control,” Zainal did tell her. “We could lose one or two but more would be disastrous. We’ve worked so long and hard to get our men where they are right now.”

“A good point. Have you someone on all the Eosi-controlled planets and installations?”

He shook his head. “Hardly. There are a great many more than we have personnel to cover but the most critical positions are.”

BABY RETURNED WITH THE HARVEST OF OLKILORITI LEAVES. RAISHA had reminded Chief Materu that this dust was a weapon of significant power so he helped to make it on that condition. Parmitoro had shown them how he preferred to prepare the powder and taken his turn at the mortar, working alongside the other Humans of the crew.

Although the back of the job had been broken on the way home, Leon had off-duty personnel from the infirmary helping to complete the manufacturing process. There was also a small, very dirty, and scraped box of inhalers among the supplies Baby had had time to collect, but the bulbs had not been broken.

“We went all over the place,” Raisha said, presenting it with due ceremony to Leon. “I thought we’d have to scavenge from drugstores, where we could find any not already cleaned out. But we got in touch with the underground, and they found us these. Are they enough?”

Leon rubbed away enough of the mud to check the quantity. "Three dozen ought to be enough."

"Enough for what?" Kris asked.

"For the job to be done."

"There are a hundred Eosi," she said.

"Catch 'em all in the same spot and that'll do it."

"And here, we got the nose plugs in a scuba diving place Bert Put suggested." And Raisha handed over a smaller rectangular box.

"For them who shouldn't breathe deeply," Kris said, quite relieved to know that Zainal and his friends weren't going on some sort of a suicide mission, sacrificing themselves to get all the Eosi.

JOHN BEVERLY RETURNED WITH CHEERING NEWS, HAVING LEFT BEHIND some volunteers to help. And bad news, because two of the planets were inimical to Humans. Remnants of the usual Catteni crates and supplies had been found, bits and pieces of gnawed leather but no sign of a Human, even when they had done a low-altitude search for life signs. Nor any Deski, Rugarians, Turs, or other known "slave" species. On the other three planets that had been used as experimental colonies, people had made the best of what was available. Although on one, even the Human groups had widely separated and wished no contact with others, especially the other species. The other two had not turned to any form of anarchy or lawlessness but formed communities not unlike Botany's.

"Common sense prevailed," John Beverly told those who assembled in the open hangar to hear him, "although they were very grateful indeed for some of the supplies we brought."

"Did they give you any shopping lists?" Sandy Areson called out.

"Oh, yes," John agreed. "Our compatriots on Dystopia . . ." some of the audience groaned, others laughed, "offered the most amazing amount of metals, gemstones, gold, silver, and stuff to purchase any spare ship we'd give them."

"Do 'em no good unless they have an Emassi," someone else said, and Kris smiled appreciatively at this oblique salute to Zainal.

Since Kris was privy to so many of the Head Council meetings, she knew that Dorado's attitude toward alien species made it low on the list of help. Dystopia and NoName (so called because no one had come up with a name that a majority could approve) were at the top for whatever could be spared of medical instruments and medicines that would supplement what the colonists had found useful and effective by the same

sort of trial-and-error method the colonists on Botany had used. That meeting concluded that basic medications, part of the results of their raids on Catteni-held Earth, and what extra medical equipment could be spared should be delivered as soon as feasible.

“When we explained, they did say that they’d even consider working with an Emassi, if this is what resulted,” and he waved over at the G-ship. “So we got friendly neighbors, establishing the banners of Humankind. Kinda good to know.”

NATHAN BAXTER HAD BEEN ONE OF JOHN’S CREW IN HIS PROFESSIONAL capacity as photographer. He had brought back pictures of the other planets, both from space and on the surface, including some group photos of inhabitants and examples of how they had settled in. When these were developed, there were lines of those waiting to see the pictures up on the bulletin board outside the mess hall.

The infirmary actually treated more work injuries than diseases so, between what Kris had got on Barevi and others had found on Earth, they had enough to share. A second trip, and three cargo holds of wheat and dried rocksquat and loo-cow flesh, was planned. Microscopes, surgical tools, and other basic supplies were packed. Dystopia had only Humans while both NoName and Dorado had mixed populations. So some plursaw was sent along for the Deski inhabitants. The Turs had killed each other off in some sort of a bloody battle that had also taken many Human lives.

There had been no official census taken on any of the other planets but, during his flyby of the surfaces, John Beverly estimated that all three had more inhabitants than Botany.

“Basically, we’re way ahead on the amenities,” he told the Council. “I’d suggest we try to set up some sort of a com link . . .”

“Not with the Catteni ships likely to make more drops,” Rastancil said.

“Which reminds me, John,” Ray began, “did you see much Catteni traffic in space?”

“We kept our com open all the time and there was a lot of chatter on the various channels, but I’d no really fluent Catteni speaker aboard. There was a lot of interference, too. Jamming, I think.”

“Possibly high-security messages,” Zainal said, after asking Kamiton a quick question in Catteni. To which Kamiton nodded. “Many?”

“Com officers logged them if you want to check the records,” John said.

Kasturi leaned forward eagerly. “Ask if they kept voice records?”

"Oh yes," Beverly grinned toothily. "We figured you guys might be able to understand them."

"You have them?" Kasturi stood up, eagerly holding out his hand.

The ex-air force general laughed as he reached for the sack that he had deposited on the floor at the beginning of the meeting and handed it over. "Every last one we caught."

"We leave. We listen. Where?" Kamiton asked Ray.

Ray glanced at Kris, jerking his thumb toward his private office, and she pushed back her chair to lead the way. She stayed to help because while Kamiton had been learning English with almost the same speed that Zainal had, neither could write English without a lot of false starts. So Kasturi made the initial transcriptions and then she and Kamiton translated them.

"They *are* convening the Mentats," Kamiton said suddenly, when they had gone through about half the recordings. He raised both arms, waving his fists with great satisfaction. He and Kasturi exchanged broad and gratified smiles.

"So how are you going to dust them?" Kris said, leaning back to rub the taut muscles of her neck and shoulders.

"Dust?" Kamiton asked.

She pantomimed inhaling and then fell to one side, twitching, as Kamiton had done.

"Ah, plant dust. Yes, we are thinking."

That was the same answer that Zainal gave her later that night when they finally returned home. Once again she had had to leave Zane to sleep over in the crèche but instinctively her head had turned to where his crib was when they entered the door.

"He is safe," Zainal said gently, circling her shoulders with one arm and drawing her toward the bedroom.

"I know that," she said, almost peevishly. "Sorry," she added instantly, rubbing at her neck again. "All that thinking in one language and writing down in another gave me a headache."

His strong fingers pushed hers out of the way and he began a restorative massage, all the time easing her toward their room. She chuckled. But she was not at all unwilling. Especially when the fingers of his other hand began to massage elsewhere.

WHEN SHE WOKE THE NEXT MORNING, AND IT WAS MORNING, NOT dawn, so she had been very tired indeed, his space in the bed was empty. She allowed herself the luxury of a leisurely awakening. She needed a shower so she took that, since the solar panel would have warmed the

cistern water by now. Her hair was growing out from its last crop but she'd have to endure that again for the KDL's next spurious trip back to Catten. It was while she was soaping herself that she noticed a bulge in her abdomen and felt it. Firm and . . . She stopped and didn't move until the water turned cold once the tank had emptied. Her mind rapidly did a series of figuring, taking into account the length of the Botany day, the number of days since her last period and when she had had it. Could she have been fertile on Catten? Could she be pregnant by Chuck Mitford? He'd been too drunk to . . . hadn't he?

But when she began to fasten the belt to her overall, she realized that she was buckling it two holes up from the usual one. She sat down heavily, as much because she needed to sit to put on her boots as to gather her stunned wits. Not that she would really mind having Chuck's child. But she hadn't been nauseated or had any morning sickness and her breasts weren't that tender—yes, they were a tad sore, but last night could account for that.

“Stop fooling yourself, Kris Bjornsen,” she said out loud.

Well, it could be worse. But she couldn't tell Zainal. At least not yet. He wouldn't let her crew the KDL, not if it was going back to the heavy gravity of Catten. Though gravity oughtn't to interfere with her pregnancy, not if she wasn't even showing the usual discomforts. She figured again. She was well into the first trimester. But she didn't want to have to admit a pregnancy, just when things were getting so interesting. And Zainal would need her help, wouldn't he?

She looked at the time. She did a swift deduction for the longer Botany day, reset the watch to what would be the local hour and figured she had time to see Zane, take him along to the mess hall and get her cup of coffee and something to eat while she played with her son. Boy, there'd be some explaining later on when each separately sired child wanted to know why. No, why should they know why? That was the Botany way of doing things, not the Terran one. And even if they did manage to get Earth back—no, Kris Bjornsen, not if but *when* Earth was returned to its proper owners and governments—she intended to stay here on Botany. Catteni, even erstwhile heroes like Zainal, might not be appreciated on Earth for some time to come.

TODAY SHE HAD TO COMPLY WITH BOTANY ETHICS, WHICH REQUIRED everyone to do some “dirty work.” She had drawn KP but that happened so infrequently that she could almost consider it a vacation day. Well, a change *was* as good as a rest.

She had her breakfast with Zane who was a vacuum cleaner at

breakfast time the way he gobbled his cereal. Sarah joined her with her three children and offered to take Zane to the crèche.

"Maizie's getting to be quite a help," Sarah said, smiling at the much-too-sober-faced orphan she was fostering. "Will you hold Zane's hand?"

Maizie nodded after a quick, too-mature evaluation of Zane. Then, with what was for this five-year-old an almost daring action, she picked another piece of toast from the plate in the center of the table. In an absent fashion, Sarah passed her the jar of sweet berry jam. Sighing with relief, Maizie slathered the jam over her piece.

"Yes, I saw that," Sarah said without turning toward Maizie. "She is improving. Now if we can get her to talk. I know she understands every word I say. Maybe I should have made her ask for the toast," and Sarah made a grimace, then sighed. "It's hard to know."

"What does Dorothy say?"

Sarah made a second, self-accusing grimace, "That I shouldn't just give her what I know she wants but make her ask for it." Then she laughed in a self-deprecating way. "When I think how firm I was with Tony here . . ." and she broke off with a weak laugh.

"She may just start talking all on her own once she knows she's really, truly, genuinely safe, won't you, Maizie dear?" Kris said, smiling as she leaned toward the girl.

"Yes," Maizie said quite distinctly and continued licking the jam off her mouth with a pink tongue.

Kris and Sarah exchanged stunned glances.

"Would you like another piece of toast, Maizie?"

"Yes." She reached toward the last one on the plate.

Sarah immediately snatched it out of reach, and Maizie sort of crouched in surprised terror. Quickly Sarah shoved the plate back in reach but Kris intercepted.

"First, it's good manners to say, 'yes, thank you.' Can you manage that after 'yes'?"

Maizie, her face recovering its color, looked from Kris to the plate Sarah still held.

"Thank you," came the almost inaudible reply.

"You're quite welcome," Kris said formally and removed her hand.

Still watching her, Maizie took the piece of toast but she didn't pick up the spoon to spread the jam.

"Would you like more jam with your toast?" Sarah asked.

"Yes . . . thank you." This time it was more audible.

"You may have jam with your tea, too," Kris said, as proud of Maizie's little step forward as Sarah was.

As it was time for Kris to start her day's work, she hunkered down by her son.

"Maizie's going to take you with her to the crèche, Zane. Give me a hug and be a good boy."

Zane threw his arms about her neck and she could tell she had jam there for she had missed a patch earlier in wiping his mouth. Then she put his hand into Maizie's and watched, with a deep sigh, as the two small people followed Sarah who was carrying her youngest.

BABY REACHED THE HOLLOW ASTEROID WHERE KAMITON HAD STASHED his spaceship. They could take no chances with a ship of dubious identity. Nitin, ever the pessimist, had voiced a serious concern that, especially with a convocation of Mentats requiring extra security measures, a vessel that had supposedly been destroyed or lost could not suddenly appear. Security checks could be extremely thorough. They must cover every contingency, including the two non-Catteni crew members. Chuck Mitford at least passed, and his knowledge of both Catten and Barevi was an asset. Lean and tall, the Australian Bert Put, who might have to pilot Kamiton's ship, would never pass as a Catteni. A hide must be constructed for him.

It was Bert who suggested it. The lower crew bunk in each bank had three drawers for the personal belongings. That meant just enough space under the lower bunk to accommodate Bert if the drawers were left ajar. As the general mess in any crew quarters, short of an inspection by a High Emassi, was never very tidy, half-open drawers, with contents half-in and half-out would be unexceptional. The credentials which Nitin had supplied for the unquestionably Catteni members had been genuine with support documentation on the files of the administration. There were even a few more that would pass the most rigorous inspection.

It was as well that such attention to detail had been observed for Kamiton's vessel had to pass five separate full inspections to be passed to land on Catten. There would have been more had the conspirators tried to land on the station.

There had, however, been a very tense moment when an Emassi captain who knew Kamiton quite well was the inspecting officer. He had given the vessel and the documentation only a cursory inspection but settled himself in the mess for an update on Kamiton's latest exploration.

Kamiton had played out his part with laudable indolence, ordering Chuck and Nitin to provide food for their guest.

Bert, sweating in his hiding hole, worried about Zainal, Tubelin,

and Kasturi on the KDL. But it was laden with ores—all in the useful platinum groups—that would make it so welcome any suspicion of its genuineness would be overlooked. Nitin had also supplied the non-Catteni members of the crew with equally authentic documentation. Since their destination was the refinery area of the planet, well away from the main city, they ought not to be in any danger.

Nitin had so picked at that first part of the overall scheme that even he had come to be satisfied with its high chance of success. About the rest he was only certain that *he* had done all he could to ensure the possibility of success: not, he was quick to add, the *probability*.

“Too many things could go wrong. Our group could have been infiltrated and our plans known . . .”

“Only so much of the plan,” Kamiton interjected. “*When*,” Kamiton stressed the conjunction, “we get down on Catten and when we have contacted the rest of us, I think you will raise the odds in favor of probability.”

Kamiton turned his head ever so slightly to see Zainal taking a few more sips of water, all that he was allowing himself since he had designated his role in their plan. He hoped that Zainal would not overdo the starvation he had deemed necessary to the success of their stratagem. One did not underestimate an Emassi of Zainal's proven ability.

He was however glad to change into his own ship and let others do what was necessary to improve on Zainal's disguise.

Well, as soon as this niggit left, Kamiton thought, they could proceed. This appeared to be the last of the space inspections. He had never seen so many security shuttles and craft zipping around the planet before. Ah, well, there hadn't *been* a full convocation of Mentats during his lifetime. And, with any luck, this would be the last. The most that ever had assembled since he had taken up his adult duties had been ten. He rather doubted that some of those farthest from Catten would make the journey but whoever came would receive a lasting reward for their trouble. He did spare a thought for those on the KDL. He really wanted to get the dependents away to the safety of Botany. Good idea of Zainal's on several counts: one of them being that Kasturi had a girl child and so did Tubelin: mates for Bazil and Peran. That way some of their families would survive the blood bath that would be certain to follow a failure. But this time, they would *not* fail. Kamiton grinned and fortunately his smile coincided with some fatuous remark of the security Emassi, and Kamiton rose, able to signal that they really had best end their conversation.

They landed on the field they had been directed by security to use. Then proceeded, as planned, in a ground vehicle to Kamiton's quarters

in a secluded area of the city where many Emassi kept temporary units. As Kamiton disarmed the alarm system, it blinked its message that persons still within the apartment had recently deactivated it. Kamiton warned the others by silently pointing at the message and took out his stun weapon, setting it on medium.

“Kamiton?” and, as that was Zainal’s voice, Kamiton reholstered the weapon with relief.

He stopped in the doorway to his main room, shocked at Zainal’s altered appearance, and quickly looked beyond the haggard man to the other members of the KDL group and ignored Zainal’s battered and nerve-whip lashed body.

ZAINAL REMAINED IN SECLUSION WHEN THE OTHERS WENT OUT ON THEIR individual errands of contacting other dissidents and setting in motion the next step of the scheme. If some of the dependents objected to being forced to leave their comfortable homes in the middle of the night, carrying only basic necessities, they were silenced by the dire consequences of ignoble deaths or futures if they chose to stay behind. By dawn, the empty ore carrier, the KDL was aloft and received only the most cursory of queries by security patrol ships as it proceeded at a leisurely speed out of Catteni space. As soon as it was in relatively empty space, the KDL would run at maximum speed, red-lining if necessary to be sure the dependents were safely at Botany before the last of the Mentats arrived, and more were assembling in their fast and comfortable ships every time period.

ON THE FIFTH DAY AFTER THE KDL HAD DEPARTED, KAMITON RECEIVED the short burst of code from their space station colleague.

“Ugred,” said Kamiton when he had translated the message, “says that there are only two more Mentats and four juniors scheduled to arrive. All should be in place by morning.”

“Everything else is ready?” Zainal asked. He spent a lot of time on his belly buffered by the softest material Kamiton’s quarters contained since his back had been lashed by nerve whips. He rather thought Kas-turi had enjoyed that exercise a little too much, but the disguise had to pass any close inspection. He wasn’t sure, at this point, which annoyed him most—the necessary wounds or the equally necessary starvation.

The medic among their secret group had injections ready to sustain him—but these would only last so long and would have to be admin-

istered in the last safe moment on the space station. If they made it that far.

“Everything essential to the operation is in place, or so Ugred said in his last message. The presence of so many Mentats has everyone nervous, agreed, but one more security vessel is not likely to cause any unnecessary attention. And Ugred will have issued a special clearance to the duty officer in case he cannot himself be there.”

“Waiting is always hard,” Kasturi remarked to no one in particular. No one had an answer for such a truism.

“Any message from Chuck and Bert?” Zainal broke the silence to ask.

Kamiton shook his head. “No message is good.”

Zainal fell into a light doze, which he did more often than he liked, but it helped him to conserve energy. He went over and over the plan, fretting that Chuck and Bert who had remained aboard Kamiton’s ship might be discovered. He reassured himself that the ex-marine sergeant, with his knowledge of both Barevi and Catteni, could handle any eventuality. He would be able to move about the huge field, would be able to listen to any rumor in the mess on the field where other Drassi were awaiting the return of their captains. Most of the talk was about the Mentats coming to Catten and everyone wondering what it was all about.

The variety of speculations amused Chuck, but he added a few little tweaks to find out just how popular Eosi rule was. It was not. No one said so in so many words, for that was dangerous, but many lowly Drassi were unhappy with their lot, with their Emassi, and the crazy planet that was resisting unexpectedly. Some Drassi boasted of the loot they and their officer had come back with, though a lot of the stuff that wasn’t edible or potable hadn’t seemed worth the fuel to transport it back to Catten.

As it was normal for a ship to be securely locked when empty, Chuck did so, which meant Bert had some freedom of movement. Chuck had arranged a code remark so that Bert would know to resume hiding if someone might be snooping about the scout ship. And Bert was also there in case they received emergency messages and had to hightail it back to Botany. The package containing the new ID decals had arrived by special messenger on the first day, a fact that they confirmed to Kamiton in an innocuous report by his Drassi that the ship had been serviced and was awaiting his convenience.

Chuck never found waiting easy, and it was almost twice as bad in the heavier gravity of Catten. At least, when he and Bert were safely

alone on the ship, they could play poker. Right now, Bert owed him a small fortune and had suggested bezique as a change of game. Chuck had learned that game from an English commando and, though he didn't win as often, he didn't lose much either.

WORKING KITCHEN DUTY ON BOTANY HAD A FEW REWARDS, LIKE FIRST samplings of the day's baking and first servings of lunch, before the crowds started in. There were always options: sandwiches which people could take to eat elsewhere, or a quick snack of soup and bread at a table, or a more leisurely meal. On a fair summer's day like today, many chose to take their food outside and enjoy the fine weather. That meant less washing up to be done. Paper plates had once been discussed but paper was too valuable for other necessities to be wasted when pottery was available. Pottery and some finer china as well, now that Sandy had a full kiln again, bigger than her first ones at Ayres Rock on the Farmers' continent. Those who had bartered for a fine china plate did not use it to eat off of—especially the hand-painted ones, which were hung as wall decorations or displayed on the mantelpiece.

Since this sort of mechanical work required no great mental effort, Kris occupied her thoughts with whether or not she should say anything about her pregnancy. She had imaginary discussions with Mavis, who did a lot of the midwifery, about the effects of heavier gravity on an unborn child. She ran several scenarios on telling Chuck that he was going to be a father—even if both of them had been too drunk to know what they were doing. That was almost a pity, in a way, but in another, a relief. Chuck might well be mortified to think he had abused her—but, hell, she hadn't resisted and she could have—since he seemed to be seeing a lot of Dorothy Dwardie. Kris rather hoped her having Chuck's child wouldn't complicate that arrangement. She'd be quite willing to explain the circumstances to Dorothy. It certainly hadn't been premeditated . . . not in that gravity! She shook her head because she kept trying to imagine how they had managed, both of them damned near wrecked with the heaviness and alcohol. But not completely wrecked, Kris told herself. Let's face that fact squarely. I'll simply have to give up drinking any more than a glass of hooch unless Zainal is with me.

About then, she realized that she had seen none of the Council eating in the mess hall. She'd been out in the main hall often enough, making sure that surfaces were clean for the next diners or picking up stray cups and glasses. There were still folks who did not know to clear their tables off.

She had an hour's rest before she was expected to help with the supper. So, though she had half an urge to go spend it with Zane, her feet and legs were aching and, if she wished to be efficient this evening, she'd better put them up now.

She almost fell asleep but someone dropping a kettle in the kitchen roused her, and she jumped to her feet and went back in to her duties.

She was tired enough when she got home to shower with Zane, who loved mommy showers, before stowing him in bed. Then she stretched out her weary legs and aching feet up on the bed and arranged the pillows behind her. In broad daylight, she thought in self-deprecation, but she'd just take a short nap.

She was roused, in the dark, wondering what had awakened her. Zainal wasn't back yet from wherever he'd been working that day. He'd been on the duty roster in the hangar with the other Catteni. Probably kept late at a session of the infamous Ways and Means Committee. That thought amused her as she turned over on her side, the one that would face Zainal when he came to bed, and she went back to sleep.

She had the next morning off, but was due on shift at the com unit for the afternoon. But when she and Zane reached the mess hall for breakfast, the place was full of the exciting news that, sometime during the night, the Eosi ships had given up their attack and left.

She was as excited as everyone else and wondered where Zainal and the other Catteni were. Everyone was as dizzy with relief as she was. But that didn't mean she'd have the shift off. For all anyone knew, the Eosi had only taken a breather to reload or something.

She did look around for Chuck, but didn't spot him. She should inform him of his imminent fatherhood. She should also, she told herself sternly, make an appointment for a prenatal checkup at the infirmary. And find out, if she could, about the effects of gravity on the unborn. What had that title been: "The Effects of Moonlight on Man in the Moon Marigolds"? No, no, no. So she bored around in her memory for the exact title. She'd read the book—oh so very long ago now. In another life entirely. "The Man in the Moon Marigolds . . ." no, that wasn't it, either.

Suddenly Mavis rushed up to her. "Kris, can you help us? We have a concussion patient. Needs someone with him, and we're short of staff since John took a bunch off on his run to Dystopia and the other two."

"I'm due on com watch," she said, and Mavis waved that aside.

"Beth can take that. She's got enough Catteni. It's Bart, and I know you like him and he likes you."

"Bart?" Kris was instantly on her feet. "What happened?" she asked

as she and Mavis made their way out of the hall. "I'll just drop Zane off. How'd Bart get a concussion?"

"Fell off his ladder putting slates on the roof. Nearly splattered his brains on the flagstones. He should pull round but we need someone to monitor him in case there's a significant change."

"That's me."

Maizie was at the gate into the fenced area, and she blinked in pleasure at the sight of Zane in Kris' arms.

"One day that child will surprise herself and smile," Mavis said.

"Maizie, Maizie, Maizie," Zane chanted, reaching for her and Kris lifted him over the pickets.

"Yes, thank you," Maizie said very distinctly.

"You're quite welcome," and to Sally Stoffer, "I'll be at the infirmary."

BY THE FIFTH HOUR, KRIS WOULD HAVE CHANGED DUTIES WITH ANYONE. Glad as she was to sit after yesterday's kitchen duty, enough was enough. Bart was on one of the cardiac monitors but that didn't give much indication of what was happening in his cranium. His color, generally a dark creamed-coffee, was not tinged with any lividity. The wound had been sutured and sealed with nu-skin, another of the items "liberated" from hospital stores on Earth. She'd seen enough of Mayoock's neat handiwork to recognize it. Nine stitches from just above the hairline, skewed to the right brow. Quite a gash but it would be the fracture under the skin that would be worrying. Whatever X-ray had been taken was at the nurses' duty station. Did no one notice that a state-of-the-art X-ray unit had gone missing on Earth?

IN HIS AIR-CONDITIONED OFFICE ON EARTH, EMASSI PLOVINE, STRUGGLING with the printouts of ship IDs registered as landing in Catteni fields across the globe, was puzzled by some anomalies in the records. He had received a stern reprimand from the Mentat who had ordered the use of three G-class ships for the bombardment of that wretched enclosed planet, and Plovine had been unable to locate them. He had had interviews with four indignant Emassi who had reported, as ordered, to the bays where the G-ships should have been awaiting them, to find them gone. Two from the main Catteni landing site, once named Houston, and one from the eastern continent. Reports of the departure of these ships seemed perfectly normal and the ships had taken off with no untoward problems. Except that the duty officers had been told that the

crew assignments had been altered. Since that happened frequently enough these days, with the Mentats being more erratic than ever, no one had questioned the changes. Until the Ix Mentat had demanded, not requested, the Mentat in charge of subduing the Terran rebellions to deliver all G-and-over-class ships available to help bombard the planet, which was defying Eosi control.

Plovine's search had been thorough but the results mystifying. Indeed, one cargo vessel full of slaves, due to be sent to one of the cold planets that had far too many slave deaths, had taken off with them on schedule but never arrived at its destination. The Emassi governor of that planet was now demanding more slaves or he would have to close down operations. Even Rassi could do this sort of work. Probably better. But, by edict of the Eosi, no Rassi was ever taken from Catten.

There was also the matter of huge charges made against the accounts of three K-class ships which he finally discovered have been written off as no longer in service: one had blown up in space, with suitable debris to make a positive identification of the KDL. Another had disappeared on a routine voyage. The third had taken off from Barevi with a full cargo but never arrived at its destination, and it had been in the company of a KDI of which there seemed to be two by that designation.

Not to mention the duplication of cargo vessels, both sent to a mining planet to collect ores. The cargo had been duly loaded onto a carrier, and later the ore had been logged into the refinery on Catteni, but a second ship had arrived at the mining planet two days after the first, expecting to load up immediately. The captain had lodged a formal complaint since he had had to wait until the mine superintendent had been able—by increasing the hours of his workforce—to extract enough ore to fill the second ship, as the Emassi of the cargo ship had no wish to return empty of goods and receive reprimands from his superiors.

"Very irregular, very irregular," Emassi Plovine said as he wrote up his findings. At least he had concrete proof that what he had discovered could be verified. Only where had so many ships disappeared? And did it matter?

WHEN ORDERS HAD COME FROM NINETEEN MENTATS THAT THE MENTAT Ix was to cease and desist its attempt to penetrate the Bubble, the juniors expected it to have a second seizure. The Mentat Ix could not, however, disobey such an order. It had to issue the commands to cease the barrage, despite the fact that resupply ships were on their way to this quadrant.

The IX replied to that desist order by issuing a demand for a general meeting of Mentats to discuss an alarming and dangerous situation: one that must be countered as quickly and efficiently as possible.

As the Mentat IX had the power to call such a meeting, and most of the others of its age and service were as desirous of a meeting to find out why the Mentat IX was wasting so much in its attempt to penetrate an obviously impenetrable barrier, the summons were sent out in coded bursts to those who would comprise such an assembly. Such a convocation of Mentats occurred rarely enough to provoke considerable speculation among the Emassi who zealously guarded their Mentats. For some, it meant a rare chance to visit the home world and families unseen in the decades of their service to a Mentat. For others, it meant giving up comfortable quarters to squeeze into whatever accommodations might be available on the space station. Of course, the Mentats would be safe on the station. Safer than they would be in the luxurious homes they kept on the surface of the planet.

Many other Emassi, not in personal service to the Eosi, decided to take the chance of arranging for personal interviews with Mentats about this favor or that new condition. So, many ships converged on Catten over the next few weeks while the Mentats returned from their far-flung dominions. Codes had been set and, if the incoming ships properly answered these, the guardian ships protecting the space station allowed them to pass. A few could not and were immediately taken to one of Catten's moons until the Mentat convocation had ended.

Had Emassi Plovine been recalled from Earth, some of the anomalies he was searching for might have been solved: two vessels, a K-class and an exploratory scout, both listed as lost in space, would have been of particular interest to him. But he had forwarded his report to the Mentat Governor of Earth.

Ships that left Catten outward-bound were neither stopped nor searched by the patrols, though their departures were noted on the duty sheets.

BY THE TIME THE KDL RETURNED TO BOTANY WITH THE MATES AND families of fifty Emassi, Kris had already discovered that Zainal with his Catteni colleagues had left Botany and that the Ways and Means Committee had been disbanded. A lot of her usual friends, who had never been used as crew, were also missing. She finally cornered Coo who gave her a big Deski smile and said, "All gone. Fix valley."

"Fix? Fix for what, Coo?" Although images of Eosi trapped in an

enclosed valley for the rest of their unnatural lives had a certain appeal to her, she did not think those were the intended "guests."

"I go help fix. Good idea."

No one else seemed to know, even Bart, who usually heard rumors other people didn't. He was on light duties since he was still on the sick list from the skull fracture.

"I don't know, and I gotta tell you, Kris, I *hate* like hell not knowing."

She agreed completely with Bart. Leon Dane was missing from the infirmary, and all Mavis could say, and she was telling the truth, was that he had taken off for a few days' rest.

She had Zane and, when she discovered that Sarah and Joe had gone off as well, leaving Maizie and Tony in the crèche, she opted for a change of duty and worked in the crèche instead of hangar duty. Maizie seemed to like her and, because Zane was learning to speak, it seemed a good idea to include Maizie in her informal lessons.

Ray Scott didn't avoid her and she could almost believe him when he said he didn't know where Zainal was, but that they'd gone off to make personal contact with other crucially situated dissidents.

"Every important position has to be covered by an Emassi who can be trusted, you know."

"Why?"

"That I don't know. Zainal got very reticent about his strategy," Ray said, and he seemed a bit annoyed with such reticence.

Bull Fetterman didn't know. Jim Rastancil was wherever everyone else had gone. Ainger was so annoyed that she wouldn't have asked him if he'd been the only person who did know.

Maizie learned to say "please," "thank you," "may I have . . ." and some other useful words and enunciated them more clearly than Zane did. Clearly Maizie felt safer with him and Tony than with any of the other children, even those who had taken her into their orphan group.

Then one morning at the crèche, Kris' com unit bleeped. It was Beggs. "Admiral Scott requests that you proceed immediately to the hangar, and be prepared to stay at your destination for several days."

"How several? Can I bring Zane with me?"

"I have given you the information I have, and no, the child would not be an asset."

Just like Beggs to consider Zane an "asset" but she gave him a long smacking kiss and told Maizie that she would be back soon and left Maizie clinging to Zane as if he were the elder of the two. That didn't do her mood any good but she borrowed a runabout, slammed into her

cabin and, as she was throwing a change and other needs into a pack, realized she had liquid dribbles drying all down the front of her. Fortunately she did have a recent issue of clothing and changed, cursing under her breath as she hauled the belt tight and then had to let it out over her expanding middle. As she stormed out, she got madder and madder—with Beggs and Scott. She was only halfway to the hangar when she heard the familiar sound of a spaceship coming in to land. Her heart beating faster, she threw the speed bar as far across as it would go and had the pleasure of being on the landing field when the KDL landed.

“Now, Emassi Zainal,” she murmured, “you’ve some explaining to do.”

“Kris, come on. It’s only touching down to pick us up,” Scott called over the loud noise of the idling ship engine, beckoning her to hurry. He looked her up and down with a very admiralish stare that made her realize that he was sharply dressed, too.

“If you don’t tell me what’s going on, Admiral Scott . . .” she began as the ramp extruded partway: enough to jump up to the personnel hatch open in the cargo door.

“I’ll explain it when we get where we’re going. Climb aboard.”

She did because he was hauling away at her arms, and she refused to be manhandled even by Admiral Ray Scott.

She caught just a glimpse of a lot of people sitting or lying on the cargo level, and then he was guiding her toward the bridge, past Ninety who seemed to be standing guard. Which he well might have been because she realized that all the faces had been Catteni.

“What the hell . . .”

“They’re the women and children of the dissidents who were based on Catten and therefore at risk,” Ray said, briskly urging her toward the bridge.

Well, she could understand the wisdom of getting dependants safely away from Eosian retaliation. The abuse that Zainal’s two sons had suffered certainly made that a priority.

“Zainal got them out?”

“Ah, more or less. We’re installing them in the largest of the enclosed valleys. They’ll be safe there.”

That made sense because not all of the Headquarters valley’s buildings had been taken down, so expanding that facility was a perfect solution. Then there was another aspect of a shipload of Catteni arriving at Retreat. One Catteni, even four, wouldn’t raise much resentment at Retreat, but an influx of mates and children could be a source of irritation.

Gino waved a backhanded “hi” in her direction, and Raisha shot a quick look around as the two pilots lifted the ship from the hangar field. Everyone else on the bridge gave her a nod or a smile. They were all, Kris noticed, those who had a fair knowledge of Catten.

“Kris,” Gino began in an odd voice and paused to clear his throat, “the plan is that you’ll act Emassi to our . . . guests. Zainal said you’d had practice. He said them knowing there was someone in charge of them might help in the long run.”

“What long run?” Kris asked casually.

There was a long pause.

“Oh, it’s just a contingency idea.”

“Gino, you don’t lie very well,” Kris said, folding her arms across her chest and glaring around, her gaze ending at Ray Scott.

“It *is* a contingency,” Ray said, but he stopped right there, without specifying for what. “We agreed to give sanctuary to relatives of Kas-turi, Tubelin, Kamiton, and several other key dissidents. A precaution. When the dust settles, they can return.”

“I’ve a letter from Zainal explaining . . .” Gino paused again. “It’s in my cabin. Just let me land, and help us get these people settled. It explains everything. Ah, see, we’re nearly there.”

“I’m not a fool.” And Kris swept the entire bridge complement with a stare.

“No one has ever accused you of that,” Ray said. “But you’re tall, imposing, you speak good Catteni, and you act Emassi without half-trying. It’ll make settling the dependants easier. I will pretend,” and Ray accorded her a smile and a little bow, “to be under your command. Now assume it!”

His last three words were tantamount to an order that he intended she would obey. She looked him in the eyes long and hard, and he did not flinch. He did, however, steady her when they landed with a little thump.

Wheeling, she looked out to the quiet scene of the HQ valley. The main hall, only half-finished when she had last been here, was completed. There was even smoke coming out of the chimney. Several large houses, with half dormers for sleeping lofts, were interspersed with small accommodations, scattered throughout the lodge-pole forestry. It was certainly a lot better housing than the First Drop had had. She took a deep breath.

“Ninety,” she called, turning again on one heel and moving back down the corridor.

“Yo!” was Ninety’s unexpectedly army response.

“Prepare to unload,” she said in Catteni, having no trouble at all

sounding harsh. "Is there a list of who's who?" she asked in English over her shoulder.

Ray offered her a clipboard, presenting it to her with a smart bow, thus showing the women that Kris was the superior officer. Kris looked down at the board. All the names were in Catteni glyphs, which she couldn't read, but also in English and she recognized the English script was written in the bold, forceful style Zainal used. Unexpectedly her eyes filled with tears. She blinked them away, pretending that the sun was glaring in her eyes and shielding them as she took a position at the head of the ramp.

Ninety had opened the cargo hatch and the loading ramp was down. "Just this level, Drassi?" she asked in Catteni.

"Yes, Emassi Khriss," he said, staring straight ahead.

Emassi Khriss turned to the passengers, the sunlight streaming in. The women were all standing now: the children, the youngest showing some fright, the others very silent and wary, grouped around them.

"As your name is called, come forward and leave the ship. Follow the Drassi who will lead you to your quarters." She noticed that each name had a number after it, indicating the number in the party. Flipping the top sheets, she noticed that each family had already been assigned quarters. She had only to call them out. She had no trouble remembering Catteni counting. She also remembered enough of what Zainal had told her about Catteni women: that they were almost as subservient as Drassi or Tudo and would have to be shown what to do. "You will be safe here."

One woman stepped forward and cleared her throat, bowing her head for addressing an Emassi without first being spoken to.

"We were told that no Eosi can come here. Is that true?"

"You are . . ." and Emassi Khriss impassively awaited an answer.

"Sibbo, Kasturi's mate. These are his sons and his child." She bowed again.

Well, at least one of them had some guts, Kris thought with relief.

"Ah, I know Kasturi well. He has been here," Kris said. "Eosi have not been able to penetrate the shield that surrounds this planet," she added with as smug a smile as she had ever seen on any Catteni face. "You are safe. We have *made* you safe. Go with this Drassi to the quarters prepared, Sibbo. Place twelve."

Sibbo and her children picked up their bundles and they started down the ramp after Ninety. Crew members stepped forward to escort each group called.

It took a while to work her way down the list. She had one interruption, an older woman, who bowed.

"Drassi Khriss," and she bowed an almost embarrassing depth, "are there no Rassi or slaves to assist us?"

Kris was so surprised that she blinked, her mind racing to find an answer. She pretended to consult her list. This was the oldest of the women . . . ah, Nitin's wife. How like him to have a critical mate!

"Rassi do not leave Catten, as you know, Milista. There are no slaves on this planet. You will do what is necessary yourselves."

"But," and there was real consternation on the woman's lined face as she spread out her hands in a helpless appeal, "we have never been without slaves."

"Oh, my God," Gino muttered behind Kris. "Never thought of that."

"Well, by God," was Scott's equally low but quite firm addition, "they're going to damned well learn how to cope without them."

"All the food is Catteni, with pictures on the sacks or boxes," Ninety said. "We did that special."

"With recipes?" Gino put in hopefully.

"I dunno. Can't read that much Catteni," Ninety added.

"Bummer," was Gino's final remark.

"Any ration bars?" Kris asked.

"Yeah, lots of those."

"Let them eat rations, then," Kris said, startled to find herself paraphrasing Marie Antoinette. She turned back to Milista. "It is enough that you are safe and have food to eat and shelter. You will take what is provided and be grateful."

Kris didn't have any trouble acting Catteni just then. She was thoroughly annoyed. Surely Kasturi or even Tubelin would have thought to tell Zainal, or someone, that the women were accustomed to servants. Not that she'd ask anyone to serve Catteni women. They could bloody well learn how to do for themselves as the colonists had.

"All work will be shared, Milista. Learn that now." She gave a curt dismissal to the woman who backed away before she turned. Indignation and fury were obvious in the way she stalked down the ramp, carrying a very small bundle, which she kept hitching or changing from hand to hand. Briefly Kris wondered what Milista had brought with her that could be heavy. She didn't know if Catteni women had jewelry, and if that was all Milista had brought, instead of clothing, she was going to get very tired of the one wrap she was wearing.

With mixed emotions of chagrin and irritation—and the latter was stronger—Kris crisply called out the next name. The gall of the woman, wanting servants as well as safety. Maybe once she'd had a taste of—Shut up, Kris, it's not Milista's fault.

She got through the rest of the unexpected and generally unhappy

guests. She'd been so busy ushering them out, she hadn't seen that there were Humans boarding the KDL on the far side of the ramp. Some carried just tools while others humped excess building materials aboard.

The last few arrived as the final Catteni family of seven was led off to cabin thirty-five. So Kris nearly gasped when Sarah passed her with a wink. Joe was right behind her, carrying carpentry tools. Sandy stalked up the ramp last.

"They wanted servants," Kris muttered savagely to Sandy, who burst out laughing.

"That'll be the day. Did you hear what Kris just said?" And Sandy was spreading the remark, causing both chuckles and exclamations of surprise.

Kris was about to turn away, to retract the landing ramp, to get away from her before she lost her cool entirely. Then she paused, looking out at the tranquil valley. The scene was all wrong, even disturbing. Not a soul was in sight and the mess hall and quarters looked as empty as when they had landed.

"Kris?" Sandy came to stand beside her. "What the hey?" And she frowned. "What's wrong with them? Sulking?"

Kris listened intently, but apart from an odd mechanical creak or a hiss from a vent, she didn't even hear crying or angry voices.

"Hell, any normal kid would have been out and snooping about by now."

"Maybe when we leave," Kris said. "They've had a bit of a shock."

"Ha! About time!" Sandy took Kris' arm and drew her inside. "D'you know how to close this?"

Almost absentmindedly, Kris depressed the right switch and the ramp slid up and inside, and the cargo hatch made a low, well-oiled rumble as it slid shut.

Kris strode along the corridor to the bridge.

"We're ready then?" Raisha asked, looking up from her pre-flight check.

"Can I have a rear-view screen as we take off, Raisha, and do a slow ascent, huh?"

"Sure, Emassi Khriss, whatever you say, Emassi Khriss," and Kris managed a little smile for Raisha's teasing.

"You do a swell Emassi act," Gino said, entering from the captain's ready room. He had an envelope in his hand and his expression was carefully neutral as he gave it to her.

"Positions, please, for takeoff," Raisha said in warning. Not that strapping in was needed with the smooth vertical lift she achieved.

Kris watched the rearview screen as long as she could but the valley might have been uninhabited for all she could see. Then the KDL was over the enclosing wall and beginning to level out for the flight back to Retreat.

"Well done, Kris," Ray said, clapping one hand lightly on her shoulder. Then silently he gestured toward the captain's room Gino had just vacated.

Kris looked down at the envelope in her hand as she walked toward the privacy the room would offer. She had an awful feeling about what the letter would say to her. Sliding the panel shut behind her, she sat on the nearest surface and looked down at the message. It was upside down and Zainal's distinctive script made an interesting pattern of her name from that angle.

She turned it around. "Kris." She spoke her name aloud.

"Well, waiting's not going to change a single word inside," she said and, with a decisive nail, opened the edge of the sealed flap and then ran her finger up, spreading the paper. She also tore the corner out of the envelope with the force of her action.

There were two sheets. Well, he tended to sprawl his words across a page, even if the sentences were exceedingly straight . . . as if he'd followed a ruled line.

*Kris, love,
Don't look back in anger or be angry with anyone if I do not
come back to you. It was my plan.*

She stopped reading, her eyes filling with tears, terrified of what he would say next.

*There is only one way to get into the Mentat meeting, and we
shall take it.*

"We," he had written. He had specified "we," not just himself. But which we? Had the old pessimist Nitin been included in that plural noun?

*You will understand why the mates and children must be sent
to safety. The Ways and Means Committee agreed as Scott
will tell you.*

We . . .

Somehow Kris couldn't really believe in that plurality. Zainal led the others. He would lead them into whatever it was he had decided to do. But that didn't mean "he" would be safe.

We know that, should things not turn out as we have carefully planned,

You leave him alone, now, you hear, Murphy? Your damned Law doesn't operate in Catteni space, d'you hear me, Murphy?

you and the rest of the Botany colonists will allow them to live in peace. The Council has promised us that and you will understand why Humans must learn to live with Catteni for the good that really is in us as a species, misguided by those who have controlled us for so long.

If we fail, and I do not (she gave a sob when she saw that fierce underlining) return to Botany, this letter authorizes you and Chuck Mitford to be guardians of my sons, to rear them as near as your hearts will let you to be good Catteni but better Botanists. They will need to know all they can learn from you and Chuck. He will teach them what young men need to know. Chuck and Bert will be able to get home in Baby. We have every intention of being in that ship on its way back to Botany.

I did not like keeping the plan from you who have invaded my heart and spirit. I never expected the wealth of love would be mine. And I have been so very happy with you that even this Catteni can ache with longing for you. You would have insisted on coming. I could not allow you to be in such jeopardy.

You have been my only love.

And the final letter was the bold crossed "Z" that he liked using.

"Well, you were right, weren't you, Kris, m'girl," she murmured aloud, her voice sounding scratchy in the quiet cabin. "He was planning something dire. And he really doesn't expect to survive."

She folded the two pages with very careful motions and replaced the precious letter in the envelope, smoothing the ragged edges down, over and over, until they remained flat.

She opened the door and, although everyone was studiously looking elsewhere, she flagged Ray Scott and beckoned him into the room.

"Okay, I've had my Dear John letter. *What* are he and those other madmen planning to do?"

Ray exhaled and gave her a long look. "I don't know either," he said slowly. "Unless I was sure of its success, he knew I'd try to talk him out of it. Therefore, he's taking unacceptable risks." Ray sighed again. "They left before they could be stopped." Another pause as Ray looked down at his hands and dug something from under one fingernail before he made eye contact again. "I didn't think I'd ever say it of a Catteni, but I admire that man. I will always admire that man. And I hope to hell he gets away with whatever it is he went to do."

"I'm glad you're rooting for him, too, Ray. More than you would have done when you first got here, but better late than never," Kris said wryly. "Is there any of Mayock's brew on board this ship?"

Ray took one step to the wall units and pulled out a drawer. She heard the click of glassware as he extracted two glasses and a bottle of the somewhat ale-pale alcohol.

Solemnly he filled the glasses and handed her one.

"Down the hatch!" Ray said, lifting his in a toast.

"Murphy," Kris said raising her glass, "stay the hell away from my man!"

They both knocked back the toast and turned as one to symbolically smash the glasses against the outer wall.

Chapter Eleven

"WE HAVE THE PRISONER," SAID THE EMASSI COMMANDER, DRESSED IN security uniform. He jerked his head back at the limp figure, which had been dragged on the knees between two members of the rather strong detail. The slimed skin of the naked captive showed a crisscross of angrily red, raised welts from frequent lashings with a nerve whip, and his legs and arms were bloodied from other wounds.

"Prisoner?" asked the duty Drassi. "I have no knowledge of a prisoner summoned by any Mentat. The convocation is in session," he added as if this was a sacred occasion.

"Mentat Ix has been searching for this man," and the Emassi stepped back, lifting the drooping head to display a gaunt, half-starved face, "for months. The name, I believe, is Zainal." A smug smile suggested that the name was enough to secure admittance.

"Zainal?" The name was certainly familiar to the Drassi guard and produced an instant conference between him and the other door guard.

"I will inform the Junior Pe. It is just inside."

The door was opened just wide enough to admit the guard. It remained slightly ajar in his haste to deliver his news.

The security Emassi tapped his foot impatiently, sighing. Then he stepped closer to the second guard, raising his right hand as if to muffle his words and the guard leaned closer. A slight breeze crossed his nostrils and he gave a reflexive sniff.

"How much longer is the security going to be . . ." the security Emassi began conversationally. Then he caught the suddenly convulsing body of the door guard as he fell to the ground. Instantly two of his detail slipped out of line; one dragged the guard off down the corridor

while the second stood in his place at the door just as it was thrown open.

The grotesque body of the Junior Pe came out and went straight to the prisoner. It pulled up the head and stared into the grimed and bloodied face.

"Revive him. When he is conscious, tap on the door and bring him in immediately." The Junior Pe's face shone with an awesome light and it washed its hands vigorously in anticipation of the delightful culmination of a long search. It reentered the room. As soon as the panel had closed, the limp prisoner got to his feet unaided, though his breath hissed from stretching muscles and flesh made extremely sensitive by the nerve whip. His dirt- and blood-grimed hands, restrained by Catteni manacles, were oddly cupped together.

"Long enough?" the Emassi asked softly.

"The rest have been deployed?" the prisoner asked as softly.

"Yes."

"Then let us proceed," and he stepped back and, as the two guards took hold of his elbows again, he nodded once.

The security Emassi tapped and the door swung outward smoothly, giving the detail a good view of the many Eosi within the long narrow chamber where Eosi faced Eosi. A quick glance showed that there were very few vacant seats. If he experienced relief at the numbers within the room, he gave no hint of the elation he felt. Indeed, his expression was studiously impassive.

"BRING HIM TO ME!" And the Mentat Ix, halfway down one side of the rectangular room, rose to his feet and pointed to the floor in front of it.

The security Emassi beckoned to those holding the prisoner to follow him forward while the rest of his squad stopped at intervals on both sides, trotting beyond the Ix to complete a security cordon, formally protecting the Eosi. The Emassi then stepped ahead and turned to gesture dramatically at his prisoner.

"As you have commanded, Mentat Ix, the chosen who chose not to serve is here. His physical records confirm that he is indeed the Zainal you have searched for."

The Mentat Ix looked down at the figure in front of him, head bowed as if in submission. The Ix towered above the captive, and the triumph of this moment seemed to expand the huge Eosian head.

"Look at me, Zainal," the Ix commanded, its voice rich with an anger that had grown moment by moment over the years since the summation of Lenvec.

“At you, Lenvec? Or at the Ix?” Zainal said calmly, as he looked up, not at all the submissive and cowed prisoner. “Do you envy me any longer, brother, that it was I who was chosen? For you have succeeded.”

Then he raised his hands in what appeared to be supplication. The Ix inhaled at such a reaction just as a puff of mist issued through Zainal’s fingers, curling up to the Mentat’s nostrils. He turned to the Mentat beside the Ix and repeated the puffing of mist.

“What is this?”

The restraints fell away from Zainal’s hands. Then, with an energy surprising for one who was rib-gaunt and had been savagely beaten, the former prisoner began squeezing his bulb at the next Eosi who had jumped to its feet and opened its mouth to protest. The other soldiers of the detail, following Zainal’s example, were vigorously making use of their bulbs and the startled Eosi, never expecting to be attacked in this sanctum on the security-protected space station, inhaled the deadly mist in their surprise. Indeed, the long room was soon filled with particles, shining in the brilliant illumination of the room, as they slowly sank to the floor.

The Ix was the first within the room to collapse, its body writhing and arching in agony as the dust it had inadvertently inhaled reached its lungs . . . reached and filled them with lethal allergens. Others were catching at their throats with despairing hands and reacting with the convulsions that the substance produced in Catteni bodies.

“What is happening?” cried a voice from one of the screens at the end of the room. Not all the Eosi were in the long room but the fourteen who had been unable to attend in person had been viewing the proceedings on a visual com link. “Ix! Pe! Co! Se! Answer, one of you.”

In the long chamber filled with Catteni bodies skewed in the rigors of death, Zainal strode forward and, hands on his bare hips, answered the impatient query.

“These Eosi are dying. We, Emassi Catteni, have executed them for the twenty-five hundred years of exploitation and enslavement, for the heinous crimes you, and they, have forced us to commit against helpless planets. You had better find a new sanctuary for we, the Catteni,” and he brought his fist to his chest, “will hunt down and destroy you as we have destroyed these. There will be nowhere safe for you in this galaxy. Leave it.”

He turned his back on the Eosi whose horrified expressions were probably the first honest reactions they had shown in centuries. He heard several gasps at what was an insult to their dignities.

“Are they all dead yet?” Zainal asked, padding down the line of the Eosi who looked more like collapsed bags of shuddering and putrid flesh

to the one that had been his brother. The Eosi host that had subsumed Lenvec still retained some of its genuinely youthful, and recognizable, facial appearance. This was fast turning to a viscous mess and to the size of the original host before subsumation. There was so little of Lenvec left even after the short time the Eosi had inhabited it. But enough to have waged a stupid and futile war against the planet which sheltered Zainal.

"I think that does it," the Emassi security officer said, tipping back a helmet to reveal Kamiton, a mightily relieved Kamiton. "I didn't think we'd bring it off. I really didn't."

"I always knew it was the only feasible way of eliminating them all," Nitin said, stepping around a slow-moving rivulet of varicolored fluids.

"We didn't," Tubelin remarked, pointing toward the screens, some already blank.

"Those fourteen will be scrambling to leave. They do not have enough power to regain command," Zainal said. "Now, all we have to do is get out of this level. The sooner the better."

He moved toward the door—staggered would be more accurate since his emaciation and the nerve whip welts were real, if the wounds were somewhat exaggerated by dramatic additions of blood and excrement. Leaning against the wall, he shook the bulb that had been secreted between his "force" bracelets.

"Who has the stuff?" He looked around, one shoulder resting against the wall.

"I do," and Kasturi came forward, holding out the flask and the little tundish with which he carefully added the lethal dust to Zainal's innocuous-looking device.

"Better do it all round," Kamiton said, "while we're where we can't be observed."

Tubelin shook his head. "Even with nose plugs, the stench is awful. Will the doors keep it out long enough?"

"Call the other guard in," Zainal suggested.

Nitin was nearest and, opening the door enough to see the real guard, beckoned him in. The smell wrinkled the man's nostrils but he was too well trained to show either revulsion or hesitation. He had time to take in the scene of the mass execution. In fact, he caught his breath in astonishment and terror. And that was sufficient to inhale enough of the free dust particles in the air of the long room to ensure his demise.

Quickly, the detail assembled outside again.

"You did it? I can smell you did it," their bogus guard said, touching his nostrils to make sure his nose plugs were in place.

"Anyone passed by?" Zainal asked, and their colleague shook his head, looking relieved.

"Then let's get out of here," Kamiton said, settling his helmet correctly on his brow. He looked about as the security detail formed up and nodded as Zainal resumed his inert posture between his "guards." He had no trouble at all assuming an expression of intense and smugly self-congratulatory pride as he led his detail back the way they had come.

The dissidents were by no means in the clear yet. Anyone with some urgent message for a Mentat could arrive in that corridor. The absence of guards at the door would be the first thing noticed and then, undoubtedly, the presence of an incredible putrefying stench would seep into the corridor. Since this was a space station, there were devices all over that should detect unusual alterations in air circulation.

On the space station, down on the planet and across Catteni-occupied space, other dissidents awaited news that the execution had been successful. There had been enough to secure the most important Eosi installations. Once deprived of orders, many other Catteni would be so totally confused that they would not protest Emassi rulers. They had been trained too well to operate on orders and not on their own initiatives. As Zainal had said, there might not be that many Emassi dissidents but most of them were in critical positions, or could assume them. One of their number ranked high in the security section, and he had deftly changed assignments on the station to include more rebels, as well as preparing himself to take control of the space station if the executions were successful. He could do only so much until he knew the coup achieved its prime objective.

It was Ugred, in the central communications and security section of the station, who could then send the coded message to those waiting to hear, and act upon it. On receipt, those who had waited almost a lifetime would go into action and initiate actions that would forever end Eosian domination.

First, they had to escape the station before loyal Catteni discovered the deaths and, in turn, eliminated the perpetrators. The Emassi in control could do only so much to assist the dissidents. And it would take time for the others to complete their takeover.

THE FIRST SIGNAL WAS THE RETURN OF THE PRISONER DETAIL.

"Was the Ix finally satisfied?" a High Emassi fleet officer asked, pausing to watch the prisoner dragged by, leaving a trail of blood.

"The Ix went into spasms again," Kamiton said smugly. He had to

swallow against the nervous laughter inside him at the so accurate remark.

“What’ll happen to him?” The Emassi nodded down at the prisoner.

Kamiton barked an unpleasant laugh. “You know the games Eosi will play with those who displease them. I am glad I can hand him over,” and Kamiton pointed to the floor, “to the cells. He’s got until the convocation ends.”

With a suitable bow to an Emassi of superior rank, Kamiton curtly gestured for the detail to move forward again, across the main corridor of the space station.

If his glance took in the high-security window of space station control overlooking this space, it was more part of a general survey than a signal. He did settle his helmet more securely on his head as he crossed to the grav shaft that would take his detail and its prisoner to the lower levels.

Reaching the appropriate level, the detail marched along, still dragging its prisoner, down the corridor and to the ship bays that ringed this level of the station, and the security Emassi paid no attention to others going about their duties.

They reached their destination. Kamiton tapped in the security code for the locked room, and he curtly beckoned to the two carrying Zainal to bring him through first. The others hastily filed in. As soon as the panel closed, Zainal was swung up on his feet. Kamiton passed him moist towels to clean off the blood, grime, and also the slime, which was actually an antihistimine cream to protect him from the lethal dust. Kasturi peeled off some of the multiple nerve whip welts—carefully—since the first layer was genuine. Tubelin washed down his legs, while Zainal did his own arms: both used some degree of care for the gouges and slices that were visible were also genuine, if realistically enlarged. Nitin was opening a cabinet and taking out the Drassi security uniform and passed the helmet to Zainal. The erstwhile prisoner quickly inserted into his now clean cheeks the pads, which Sandy Areson had made for his first impersonation. He pulled off the unkempt wig, wincing as the glue stuck to the skin of his forehead a moment, revealing a properly trim Drassi hairstyle underneath. He put his legs through the trousers, his arms through the tunic, stood first on one leg while a boot was pushed on and tied and then on the other for the second boot to be shoved on his foot.

The change had been achieved in seconds. No one would have suspected a delay of any kind as a detail marched out of that antechamber and toward the shuttle on which they had arrived.

“You got a reward?” asked the Emassi in charge of that section of

the hangar deck, intercepting their path to the officially marked security shuttle.

"I expect to be honored at the next official ceremony," Kamiton said, swelling his chest. This was quite truthful, as Kamiton's reward was the command of the planet.

"You did well, Emassi."

Kamiton merely nodded as Zainal, posing as an alert Drassi, opened the shuttle door so his officer could enter. The rest of the detail—and the hangar section Emassi didn't think to count or he would have come up with the wrong number for patrol strength—filed in. The hatch slid closed and was locked on the inside and the hangar Drassi waved them off, opening his com link with hangar control to assure the security guards that all was in order for the departure of this shuttle.

KRIS MANAGED TO KEEP GOING THOUGH THE DAYS SEEMED EVEN longer and the nights were even more dangerous with her longings for him. Until she began to do silly things in her assigned duties, like garbling messages on the com unit. Or weeping over Zane when he had only a scratched knee, not a broken leg, and Sarah had to pinch her sharply to end the incipient hysterics. Dorothy Dwardie suggested a mild sedative. Even in the daze, which seemed to surround her during the long weeks, she did notice that someone was nearby: Sandy, Sarah, Dorothy, and occasionally Peggy and Marge. The presence of ex-Victims among her watchers afforded her a little private amusement: the carer being cared for. But she hadn't the energy to smile over the irony. Dorothy's presence was soothing, especially after Kris surfaced out of her self-absorption sufficiently to realize that Dorothy was probably suffering, too. Chuck had been seeing a lot of the psychologist but, as Dorothy was somewhat of a private person, Kris wasn't at all sure if the "seeing" went both ways.

"I apologize, Dorothy," she screwed up enough courage to say one afternoon when she was assigned to help Dorothy teach the orphans some basic R's.

"Why? You're doing a very good job, you know."

"Not of handling my emotions."

"Oh?" Dorothy smiled kindly at her. "You're very Human, Kris, and this is a very trying time for you."

"And you, too?"

"Me?"

Kris thought for a moment she had exceeded propriety, but then Dorothy flushed and turned her face away.

"You have the right to be worried about Chuck. I am, too, when I stop being selfish enough to realize that he's in jeopardy as well."

Dorothy looked down at her hands, which picked at a frayed seam in her coverall. "There's nothing been said . . . I mean, I do like his company. In fact, he's a surprising fellow. All that ruggedness, and he's not bad-looking either, though not the sort of man I'd say was my type . . ."

Kris managed a wry smile. "Chuck's not what he appears to be."

"No," and Dorothy gave a wistful sigh, "he's not. Yes, Dick?" And her tone abruptly altered to her professional manner as one of the orphans held out his slate for her to correct.

That ended that exchange of confidence but it was Zane who pulled her out of her depression. It upset him terribly to see Mommy in tears when he asked where Daddy was. So he stopped asking and that made her heart ache even more. When she realized that he had stopped asking, she began to tell him tales about Zainal every evening as she put him to bed. He liked those stories a lot more than the ones she read to him. Relating their first explorations together helped Kris get a grip on herself. It also made the missing man not half as "missing." The discreet observation tapered off and people were nice to her in whatever jobs she was assigned to do. Not too nice, for she would not have tolerated condescension from Janet or Anna Bollinger. Those two must be secretly delighted with her situation: "only what she deserves, carrying on like that with a . . . Catteni male."

So as the days dragged into a week and the weeks to the month, and then days beyond that elapse of time, she became almost inured to his absence and refused to believe that his absence would be permanent. Zainal would survive as he had survived so much: such as the flutter crash he had walked away from the day she first met him. She clung, also, to the rationalization that because they had been so close emotionally as well as physically, she was certain that a lover's prescience would have subconsciously known he had died. She really didn't think she was assigned most frequently to com desk duty in the bridge because she could translate Catteni messages. She decided even Ray Scott had a heart after all. She might even be the first to hear his voice. But there was little enough chatter via the com sat. Amazingly little. But this was as close as she could get to Zainal, wherever he was and whatever he was doing.

She was asked to sit in on all the Council meetings, so she forced herself to listen to what John Beverly could report. Dystopia had been very grateful for the supplies and so had NoName. Beverly had brought back a delegation from each planet, and they had been welcomed. If there were ironic comments from some who envied Botany its advan-

tages, that was the luck of the draw. Of course, they wanted to know every detail about the Farmers, saw their machinery in action on the big continent, saw what had been contrived of the parts, and envied the Botanists their Bubble which awed them, one and all.

None of them spoke Catteni or even Barevi, and some of those on NoName eyed the Deski and Rugarians with suspicion. (John said very little in those meetings about the inhabitants of Dorado—at least until the KDM took the visitors back with more supplies and equipment, which Botany felt it could spare.) When Laughrey and his crew set off to return the visitors to their respective planets, he told the Council that Dorado was off his list. He had been proudly told how all the ET's had been killed, generally as soon as possible after they had been dropped.

"Seems that the 'aliens' had been killed because they were 'different' and not mentioned as God's creatures anywhere in the Bible," John said. "And I won't say I got the courtesies my rank can expect. In fact, they ignored me whenever they could, but my crew wouldn't let 'em, thank God."

"Let's cancel them out of consideration then, shall we?" Jim Rastancil said and tore up the sheet headed DORADO. Others did the same and Kris felt a small twinge of satisfaction break through the numbness that she carried around with her.

She had to, in her capacity as Emassi in charge of the refugees, visit them in their valley. Mostly she listened to complaints about their lack of amenities, the need for additional clothing since none had brought sufficient with them. She supplied them with Catteni ship suits, which appalled Milista. She also supplied them with needles and thread as most of the women, and certainly the children, would swim in the standardized garment. Sarah made her include some lengths of fabric since the last "shopping" trip had brought back great rolls and bales found in a warehouse. Sarah had included a child's sewing book with sufficient illustrations to give even the Catteni women useful instructions.

Sandy Areson had done an inventory on supplies in the mess hall and came back, looking both exasperated and amused.

"They've been living off the ration bars of which there are none left." Sandy shook her head. "As useless a bunch as I've ever seen."

"I could cook for them," Bart said who'd volunteered to come along on this "light duty."

All three women pounced on him.

"No way, José!" Emassi Khriss said. "But who knows enough Catteni to teach them how to cook? And it has to be female. I'm not going to let them know that Human males *can* and *do* cook."

"Zainal makes a mean grilled rocksquat," Sarah said and then flushed, having inadvertently reminded Kris. "Sorry, luv."

"I wish you would all stop pussyfooting around the subject of . . . Zainal. But we can't return starved women."

"Ha! None of them are starved, and the kids at least are playing," Sandy said.

"Only the younger ones," Kris pointed out.

"Maybe we should send the older ones down to keep Bazil and Peran company in the Maasai camp," Bart suggested.

Kris considered that. She had even considered bringing the boys up to the valley. But . . . she didn't have that authority yet . . . and hoped she really wouldn't have to deal with that pair. Well, Chuck would be handling them as "males"—if Chuck got back. She found her hand halfway to her belly and drew it back. No sense in giving anyone any more to talk about.

"What about making Janet teach 'em?" Bart said, his eyes twinkling. "It'd be her Christian duty."

Kris burst out laughing and almost went into the weeps because she'd let go of the rigid command she'd been exercising on herself. Sniffing and wiping at her filled eyes, she plastered the grin on her face after the initial and genuine outburst of laughter. The others looked so pleased with her reaction.

"Now that was plain mean of you, Bart Tomi," she said. "I just wish I had the nerve to order it."

"I think," and Sandy cocked her head at Kris, "you could just about order Ray Scott to jump rope with those kids and he'd do it."

"Beth Isbell cooks—does a lot of the pastry in the hall, at least—and she's a Catteni speaker," Sarah said. "Let's check in and see if she'd take the duty on. I think we'd better leave Bart and a couple of other men here to be sure she's safe."

"Why should we fuss over them, if they're so stupid they even let the fire go out," Raisha asked, pointing to the chimney. She'd come aft from the bridge with Joe Marley to find out how long they'd be on the ground.

"Zainal," and Kris didn't hesitate on his name, "promised to keep them safe and that means keeping them fed, too, so they don't have a real complaint to lodge against our hospitality. And clothed. Some of us had to learn to do basic things when we got here. I'll go check in and ask."

"None of us were lords, or ladies, of all we surveyed either," Raisha said, and then sighed. "But you're right. Why should we fault them for

ignorance when all of us are ignorant of something or other that we've never had to do before."

Sally Stoffer agreed to accompany Beth who was a good friend. Sally liked to sew, was teaching some of the older orphans, and her Catteni was excellent. Lenny Doyle, Dowdall, Bart, three ex-soldiers from the last drop, and Patti Sue returned and set up tents for themselves and the three female instructors.

And that minor hiccup was smoothed over. Not that the Catteni women were pleased to be forced to do slave work. The three soldiers instructed the older boys on how to catch fish from the stream. They'd been sitting around doing nothing since they were old enough to have started some sort of training for their life's work. They were happy enough to form a small detail and marched up and down. Their mothers also seemed happier to have them occupied.

"I don't say I'd ever want to eat what they cook," Beth said when they returned, "but at least they can now build a fire, open a can or unscrew a jar, make what they call 'bread,' fry fresh fish which they do like, by the way. One of them will make a good seamstress. At least she figured out how to take in the ship suits. The rest were happy enough to wear something new even if they did have to learn how to sew up the edges to keep the lengths from fraying. Who would have suspected that Catteni women would wear sarongs?"

"Makes most of them look like boxes," Sally said, grinning. "Even the ship suits have more shape."

"The Catteni women sure don't," Lenny remarked with a wry grin.

THE SHUTTLE REACHED CATTEN'S ATMOSPHERE AND DROPPED SPEED quickly, homing in on the main government buildings. It hovered over the roof, though a surveillance guard ship instantly appeared to inspect it, recognized the security markings on the shuttle, and retired without questioning its presence.

"There is something to be said for protocol," Kamiton said with a grin. He was now attired in a fresh Emassi uniform, smartened with tabs of the highest rank available to Emassi. "Have Tiboud and Valicon reported in yet?"

"Just got their signals now," Tubelin said from the com desk. "They're in position."

"Tell them to proceed," Kamiton said coolly, knowing that several more unsuspecting Catteni who were dedicated to their Eosian masters would shortly be dead. He turned to the others, checking to see that his

former security detail were now all clad in uniforms similar to his. It amused him that all members of the prisoner detail had been rewarded with major steps in rank. "We all know how to proceed." He checked the nose plugs once more and then indicated to Zainal, in the pilot's position, to land.

He gestured for the others to precede him before he turned once more to the pilot.

"Good luck, Zainal. I'll keep you informed."

"You had better. I need to return your families. They will undoubtedly tell you how mistreated they were on Botany."

"Of that I have little doubt for they have been accustomed to luxuries not available on your home planet."

Zainal answered Kamiton's rueful smile with one of his own.

"Go finish the business, Kam."

Kamiton stiffened then and gave Zainal not only a salute but also the low bow that indicated great respect. He jumped off the ramp and Zainal shut the hatch.

Zainal swung the shuttle away then and flicked on the com unit to wide range so he could hear what was going on . . . and know when the shock hit the sleeping planet.

Nitin might be a pessimist but he was also a realist and they would be following his plan of reconstructing their world, and the worlds the Eosi had once dominated.

They had not been able to get a dissident into a prestigious position on Earth, but he rather thought that once the news was out, the Terrans would double their efforts to regain control of their own planet. Nor were there sufficient colleagues on the various fleet elements to take control of the AA's or some of the great H-class, but Catteni were so accustomed to being told what to do and how, that Kamiton's forceful manner, the backing they did have, should eventually result in capitulation. Surely no Catteni had *enjoyed* the Eosian domination even if many, singly or in family groupings, had benefited by their loyalty to entities they had never before attempted to supplant.

Often enough during Zainal's flight to the main security landing field did he have to shield his eyes from the spotlights of other guardian vessels. But the purloined ship did have the right markings and permission to be aloft in night hours. Zainal put the vehicle down at the edge of the force-field-protected landing area.

He rose, stiffly, hissing against twinges from the nerve whip. That had been a necessary ordeal, as had his starvation on the way to Catteni, but he had to *look* the part and whole-skinned and fat would not have

been credible. His knees hurt from all the dragging but at least that posture had allowed him to keep his head down and his eyes closed as he faked unconsciousness.

Now, all he had to do was find Baby, which should now bear the security markings of yet another authorized vehicle. He had to stride out purposefully and each heel jarred the various tormented parts of his body, from the scratches to the long welts of the nerve whip. Kasturi had not struck as hard as he might have done to a real offender but hard enough. Whippings endured from his father had been lighter. His stomach ached with hunger and, by the time he passed the first rank of unlit ships on the pavement, his mouth and throat were parched. He took time to drink from the flask he had brought with him from the ship, first swirling the water about his mouth and letting it trickle down his throat. Then he took the stimulant from his pocket and, with a big swallow of water, let that go to work in his empty belly. He'd have food soon enough. Fourth rank east, Chuck had said, second ship. Chuck had managed that discreet parking but it was a long way from first rank west.

He walked inward now, shielded from casual notice from the parked vehicles, made it past a wide turning circle and on toward the distant fence and fourth rank. He had to lean against the side of the scout to catch his breath. At least there was a light on inside it to reassure him that this was right. He tapped out the code on the door to alert them to his arrival.

The hatch opened immediately.

"Keep back, dammit, Bert," Chuck said and the Australian vanished from the brightly lit hatch. Chuck was down the steps, instantly supporting the sagging body, his eyes wide and then closing in relief as Zainal's nod as well as his presence told Chuck that, so far, all had gone smoothly.

"We've got to get out of here, and fast," Zainal said.

"Yeah," Chuck said, his voice unsteady with relief as he helped Zainal up the short flight to the hatch, "it ain't over 'til the fat lady sings."

"What fat lady?" Zainal asked, realizing that the sergeant had answered him in English as he made his way forward. "Why a fat lady?"

"Explain later." Chuck closed the hatch with a clank. "You got 'em? All of 'em?" Chuck persisted with his questions as Zainal made a slow way to the pilot's compartment. Bert was now in the other chair, having let Chuck help Zainal.

They'd had the harder job, Zainal knew, waiting without being able to use the com unit for fear the position of the scout ship might be discovered.

"We got all but the fourteen who were not present," Zainal said, noting that a course had already been laid in, preparatory to his arrival. He nodded approval at Bert, who was completing the last of the pre-flight checks. "They are unlikely to remain where they are. They're too scattered to unite. In any event, once the news gets out, they may decide to leave the galaxy as we suggested. Coded messages should have gone out from the space station to our other colleagues who are waiting for our signal. Kamiton got to the center before the execution could be broadcast . . ." He shrugged and grimaced at such an unwary and painful action. "If it has. Or Ucred has managed to give us more time by deferring an announcement. Otherwise we couldn't have landed at the building. But we were able to. Kamiton gave the word and those who could not be trusted have been eliminated by now. But let's get out of here. Just in case."

"Too right," Bert Put said. "Strapped in, Chuck?"

"Only after Zay gets something into his belly," Chuck said, thrusting a ration bar over Zainal's shoulder.

"I need that," Zainal said and tore off the wrapping, taking a huge bite. "Clear us from the field, will you, Chuck?"

And the sergeant leaned across to the com board. They had to wait for a reply.

"They're all bored," Chuck said while Zainal impassively chewed.

Bert was chewing, too, but on his lip as they waited until the line was opened.

"Schkelk," Chuck said in his hoarse Catteni voice, "Emassi has called. I go. Clearance?"

"Given," was the bored response and the line went dead.

The ship lifted carefully out of the crowded parking area and turned away from the city.

Having finished his slowly consumed meal, Zainal opened the com link, pausing at the various channels to check on the tone of exchanged messages. They were, in fact, in space and heading obliquely away from the vicinity of the space station before the first report was aired.

"This is the Supreme Emassi Kamiton, informing you of a change of government on Catten and the execution of eighty-six Mentats and Juniors on the space station which is now under my control. High Emassi Ucred is now commander of the space station . . ."

"Supreme Emassi?" Chuck asked, wide-eyed and grinning.

"That is the title he picked."

"What'd Nitin get?"

"Oh, he's speaker for Parliament . . ."

"Speaker?" Bert said in astonishment.

“You guys don’t have a parliament,” Chuck protested.

“We will soon enough.”

“You learned a lot we didn’t know about on Botany, didn’t you?” Chuck replied but his tone was admiring. “Uh-oh, look! Bogies at three o’clock and coming in awful fast. Can’t we pile on some speed? We might be able to miss ’em.”

KRIS WAS ON COM DUTY: SHE HAD REQUESTED THE ASSIGNMENT AND, except for those weekly visits to the closed valley and the Catteni guests, that had been her duty. Now she didn’t even answer Catteni complaints but impassively saw that supplies were unloaded near enough to be easily carried to the mess hall for storage. So, she just happened to have the duty in Scott’s office that evening when Ray Scott and Jim Rastancil rushed in.

“What’s going on up there, Kris?”

“Up where?”

“Up near the Bubble.”

Kris gave her head a little shake, reset the earpiece. “Nothing. Nothing that I can hear since all those coded messages stopped shooting back and forth.”

“Well, there’s something coming down. Gino says there’s some sort of shooting stars. And there aren’t any of them in this sector of space, especially not with the Bubble . . .”

Ray stopped mid-sentence and rushed outside, Rastancil right behind him.

Kris didn’t know whether to stay on duty or join their exodus to see what had made Ray and Jim move that fast. She heard startled cries, some panicky, others, loud and incoherent cheers. Her curiosity roused her from apathy. She abandoned duty and joined the others outside the hangar on the landing field. It wasn’t full dark, but the bursts of flame or brilliant light were obvious to the naked eye. The shower—of whatever it was that Gino now said was burning up in upper atmosphere—didn’t last very long even with several tiny late flashes. What was obvious was that the Bubble was gone. The sky above them was as clear as it had been before the Bubble had been woven into place. One of the moons was even visible, the one on which the Catteni had tried to build a base. Kris gulped, frozen to the spot. Unable to grasp the significance. There hadn’t been any more bombardments. Those had ended just before the surreptitious departure of Baby and the KDL. She strained her eyes, trying to locate any glitter that would be their com sat or even the roving spy satellite the Catteni had placed in the thirty-hour orbit.

Why had the Bubble come down? Were the Farmers about to visit them? But surely they didn't need to remove the Bubble to get in. Or did they?

Ray gave her a little shake. "Back to your post, Kris. Tell us what you can hear?"

"But there's nothing up there. The Bubble's down. How could the Eosi dissolve it . . ."

Now Ray gave her a shove toward the hangar. "Tell us what you can hear. We need to know if the com sat's still operating."

Kris didn't ask how she could tell from just listening to static. Or maybe that, in itself, was proof the com sat was still operating? But it had been connected to the Eosi array that had been sheered off their ship in its attempt to exit. Surely, if what they'd seen burning up in the atmosphere were the bits and pieces dropping now that the Bubble no longer held them in place, everything would come down. No, no, that wasn't quite right. Pete Snyder had told them that the com sat was independent, with vanes trapping solar power so that it functioned all by itself. But, what about what it had been attached to? She had this vivid image of an umbrella with a crooked handle, the rain shield pointing downward and the crooked handle pointing out toward empty space.

Ray now hauled her with him back to the office and then took up the earpiece himself, frowning as he listened. Jim Rastancil, Gino Marucci, and the others who had been in the hangar office stood about, anxiously waiting for his report.

"All I get is static," Ray said, handing the earpiece to Kris who put it on and sat down, listening to the same sort of static, which might be very faint messages. "So it is still up and functioning. Nevertheless, Gino, get a skeleton crew and the KDL up to check."

"With the Bubble gone?" And Gino's normally swarthy skin paled.

"Yes, damn it. To see if it's gone. We've got to know what action to take if it is. That is, unless the Farmers vouchsafe to give us some indication that we don't need it anymore."

Kris held up her hand. "I'm getting something . . ."

"Look!" And Jim was pointing to the bridge screen, which showed the moon that was coming up, and a small sparkle that couldn't be debris since it moved with astonishing speed on a steady, inward-bound direction.

"Oh, my God," and Ray's voice was an awed whisper. "Have they been watching all along?"

"Does it mean that Zainal succeeded?" Jim Rastancil asked.

For the first time in her life, Kris fainted.

SHE CAME TO, LYING ON THE COT IN RAY'S SPARTAN ACCOMMODATION at the hangar, with a folded towel on her forehead. She could hear male voices beyond the open door. Carefully, hoping the attack of vertigo had passed, she sat up, holding the towel in place as it felt good on her forehead, and swung her legs over the side of the cot. However did Ray get a decent night's sleep on this thing? Then memory flooded back, and she whimpered.

An anxious Ray Scott was instantly beside her. "Sorry, Kris."

That was when they both felt the almost electrical tingle that they had experienced before.

"We need more than *that*," Ray shouted, raising a fist above his head in challenge.

But that was all they got, and everyone they checked with over the next half hour confirmed the sensation. The Council called a meeting of its main members in the hangar as soon as they could get there. Fortunately a good deal of Retreat's population was asleep and might even have been oblivious to the mild shock. Others called in, having seen what they thought were "shooting stars." Blandly, Gino had agreed that that's what they were. Few realized that the Bubble was gone, and Ray thought a general announcement could wait until the Council could figure out what to do.

Dorothy Dwardie took the chair next to Kris at the end of the table. The psychologist had been studying notes on her day's clinical sessions with some of the more unresponsive orphans when she'd felt the tingle. Unusual enough a sensation to make her want to find out if anyone else had experienced this phenomenon. She wasn't far from the infirmary so she opened a com link to the duty officer at the infirmary who had just been told to inform Leon Dane of a special meeting at the hangar. Dr. Dwardie ought to go, too. She was Council, wasn't she? And, yes, she'd felt the tingle, too. It had happened once before that she knew of. Then she excused herself to answer another message. No sooner had Dorothy closed the link than she was buzzed, and hurriedly informed that she was needed at the hangar.

Walking down from her cabin, it took Dorothy a few hundred yards to realize that she could see the stars. Then the moon came shining through a gap in the lodge-pole trees. She ran the rest of the way to the hangar. She arrived breathless and took the first available seat, which was beside Kris.

"The Bubble's down?" she murmured, and Kris nodded without looking directly at Dorothy.

Then everyone heard the unmistakable sound of a ship taking off, and the brilliance of the propulsion units in the darkness of the landing field made them cover their eyes.

"Who's going where?" Dorothy softly asked, trying to squelch a feeling of anxiety.

"Checking on the com sat. Everything else up there came down in a shower," Kris said.

"I felt the oddest tingle, like an electric current running through me," Dorothy added.

"The Farmers do that now and then. Counting noses," Kris replied.

"The Farmers? Have we had a message from them after all?" She leaned toward Kris, having just realized that Kris sounded very subdued. "You look awfully pale." She paused a moment, blinked as she came to a logical conclusion. "How would the Farmers know we don't need the Bubble anymore? If that is the case, then your Zainal succeeded?"

Just then Ray Scott's characteristic calm deserted him, and he banged his fist on the table.

"How the hell can we construe a reassuring message from one goddamned short tingle!" he said in a loud, frustrated voice to Judge Iri Bempechat beside him. "Are they so goddamned busy monitoring the rest of the universe that we don't qualify for an explanation?"

Judge Iri Bempechat raised a gentling hand. "The message, I would think, is clear. We no longer require the protection of the Bubble. They've done a planet-wide search and counted noses again. It is my opinion that we should be grateful for what they have done, instead of—if I may be allowed to use the vulgar expression—bitching about it."

"The Judge is right." And Kris rose to her feet, having heard all the wrangling and speculation she could stand. Not even the calm Dorothy had been oozing in her direction had helped. "And it took the Bubble away because Zainal and the others succeeded in . . . doing whatever they planned to the Eosi."

"JUST . . ." Ray raised his voice above the immediate babble of comment, "in case, I want the crews of all the other ships standing by and ready."

"Why?" Dorothy asked, almost amused. Obviously that was what an ex-admiral immediately thought of as appropriate. "There're too many of us now to be evacuated and where would we go?"

"Earth, of course," Geoffrey Ainger said, disgusted with her obtuseness.

"I dropped. I stay," Kris said and walked out of the meeting.

Chapter Twelve

AFTER THAT SCARE WITH THE THREE BOGIES LOOKING AS IF THEY WERE coming straight at them, the ships had not so much as hailed the scout, so they had proceeded on their return to the asteroid belt.

"I don't see why we need to pick up Baby now," Chuck said since that would lengthen the journey home.

Bert nudged him in the small of his back and held up one finger, making a grimace, and two, altering his expression of a beatific smile. Then he gestured to his whole body and winced.

Chuck Mitford had never considered himself slow in comprehension but the fright of that squadron bearing down on them—and then passing by, close but no cigar—made him interested in getting back to Botany as fast as possible. So Zainal wanted Baby back. Hell, why would Kamiton want this ship returned? He had a massive navy to pick from. But Bert's other point—that Zainal wanted to be as fully recovered as possible from his "disguise"—made more sense. Although Chuck had been there when the first layer of the "disguise" was laid on, so to speak, he had been shocked when he'd seen Zainal in the cabin light.

They hadn't dared bring any Botany foods on Kamiton's vessel but there were some on board Baby. Chuck had some fresh goods in the galley, having enjoyed the daily haggle with the scruffy providers who brought their carts and baskets around to the occupied vehicles. A lot wasn't very fresh, probably rejected from the main markets in the city, but it was better than what was served in the mess where Chuck was permitted to eat as a Drassi crewman. Years of eating marine chow had inured him to practically anything remotely edible. Some of the messes served to the crewmen were definitely remotely edible. But he pretended

the same lip-smacking enjoyment the others did, even if he didn't eat as many servings as the others did. He ate more slowly, though, so as they slopped food into their mouths, he seemed to be keeping pace with them.

He made a stew of the vegetables, then whipped it into submission as a puree which Zainal's abused intestines should be able to manage. He served the meal in small portions and often.

Then they encountered a squadron of mining vessels, and Bert had to scramble for his hiding place as the larger ship informed them that they were sending over a pinnace.

"We could outrun them," Chuck said, thinking that their luck must have run out. The bogies hadn't bothered them but mining ships could only be searching for the precious metals that had been found by Emassi Venlik. There were times when one could get too clever by half, Chuck thought.

"No. They have missile launchers and tractor beams. We're a sitting duck for the one and too close to avoid the other," Zainal said and opened a line to the DMV, the leading ship, jovially awaiting the arrival of the pinnace and any news they might have.

The news was, indeed, that the Eosi had all been executed and every captain was free to do what he wished from now on.

Captain Kabas was half drunk when he arrived, and he and his pilot, Wenger, who was completely sober, brought the same nauseating stuff which Chuck remembered all too well from his stay at the boondock field they'd first landed on at Catten.

It was in character for Zainal to demand all the details.

If some of them didn't quite jibe with the facts as both Chuck and Zainal knew them, that was all to the good. They did hear, which was excellent news and their cheers were genuine, that most of the High Emassi who had not been part of the coup now backed the Supreme Emassi Kamiton to the last male of the line.

When finally the conversation got around to Zainal's presence in this area, he replied that he had been exploring in a distant quadrant, had seen the asteroid belt, and wondered if he should report it when he got back. Some of the bigger rocks looked as if they might contain useful ores.

"Well, now," Captain Kabas said, "you can leave that to us. We're all our own masters now, you know. I wouldn't stop you going your own way."

"Good of you." Zainal turned to Chuck in a semi-confidential air. "We saw a place we'd rather like to be masters of, come to that."

He lifted his mug, its opacity hiding the fact that Zainal's apparently hearty use of the contents had been faked, in a toast. "May you find what you deserve, captain," he said.

The captain who had continued to sip while he gave details of the momentous news had now gone through most of a new bottle. He laughed raucously at Zainal's toast and tipped back the last of his current glass. Gave a huge burp and, bloodshot yellow eyes turning up into his head, slumped slowly over the table.

"Help Wenger get him into the pinnace, Drassi," Zainal said, slurring his words as if he had had more than enough, too. He waved them to remove the unconscious man.

"Were I you," the pilot said, "I'd get out of this area as fast as you can fly this thing. Captain ain't the only one is worried about you being nosing around this belt."

"Agreed," Chuck said as he carried the captain's feet and helped the pilot arrange him in a seat.

When he returned, Zainal was already in the pilot's chair. "Fasten up, Chuck, we're making all due speed out of here."

"The pilot suggested that, too."

WHEN THEY FELT THEY HAD PUT ENOUGH DISTANCE BETWEEN THEM, Zainal did insist on turning back, to collect Baby, despite Bert taking Chuck's part in trying to dissuade him.

They used a huge rock to hide their return, but their encounter with the miners had also skewed them far from the course that would bring them to the hollow asteroid. There had been a specific way in and through the belt to reach their destination. So they were forced to prowl counter to the spin of the belt until, just about the time they would have been in danger of being spotted by the miners, they found it.

Chuck insisted on remaining with Zainal.

"You need feeding. I'm not going to answer to Kris if you return like a goddamned scarecrow."

"Scarecrow?"

Chuck explained. "Maybe even, you'll get a chance now to see one on Earth. Boy, while I was glad to be in the thick of it on Botany, I wouldn't mind seeing a scarecrow again, or having a rock in the porch hammock. If it's still there."

Piloting Baby, Bert kept on their port side, as escort, so that when Chuck noticed Zainal was having trouble keeping awake, he suggested putting on the auto-pilot and having something to eat. In the spicy rock-

squat stew he'd heated up, he mixed into Zainal's plate a few dollops of a sedative that Leon had included in the first-aid supplies as a painkiller.

It did take some maneuvering to hoist the inert Catten from behind the table and into his bunk. Chuck took off the boots, loosened the belt, and covered the snoring man. He caught himself wondering if Zainal always snored and how Kris . . . he censored the rest of that and went forward to inform Bert what he'd done.

"Good idea, sarge, even if he will give you hell when he wakes. Okay, now here's how I pilot both ships," Bert said and gave Chuck detailed instructions. "We've some days to go on this leg so let's arrange a schedule for each of us to get some shut-eye. I know Zainal was going to do one with me. We're unlikely to run into another thing in this zone. Nothing but planet-less primaries. No good to anyone."

"I got enough sleep at the field," Chuck said. "I'll take first watch for us both. Okay?"

"Right."

And that is how they managed during the twenty-two hours Zainal remained asleep.

He was mad as hell at Chuck for dosing him but he calmed down when he realized that his energy had improved, as had his appetite. And that each of the pilots had also had some sleep.

Chuck's much vaunted six-hour requirement had him up and ready to take over from Zainal who tried, but not too hard, to continue for a full eight hours. Bert was asleep in Kamiton's ship but Chuck insisted he could handle anything, and besides, he'd wake Zainal if there were any alarms.

THE FIRST THAT THE COLONISTS AT RETREAT KNEW OF THE SUCCESS OF the mission was when a cruiser of the Catteni navy contacted them via the com sat, requesting permission to land on Botany.

"RAY!" Matt Su roared and grinned at the scowl on the ex-admiral's face as Scott careened into the bridge room. "We got a cruiser of the Catteni navy asking permission to land."

Ray ran to com desk. "Identify," he snapped in Catteni."

"Can't you clear up the visual, Ray?" asked Matt.

"Tikso," Ray ordered.

"We . . . kum . . . frum . . . Catten. Su-preme Emassi Kamiton. We . . . coleckt Catteni fee-males and male young."

Ray and Matt exchanged startled glances. A Catten was addressing them in English . . . or trying to.

The visual flowed clearly on the screen. "This is High Emassi Captain Tiboud," and there was relief in the Catten's voice for being able to speak in his own language. The man beside him had a sheet from which he had obviously been reading phonetic English. "All Eosi dead or gone. Catteni now own Catten . . . and all previously owned planets and installations . . ."

"He's making sure we got that . . ." Matt muttered sotto voce.

"With the exception of the Human planet, Earth and, of course, the impregnable Botany. Earth is gratefully returned to its rightful owners and inhabitants in view of the help given by Humans to end Eosi domination. Botany's extraordinary defense against the might of the Eosian navy has been admired—if silently—by many. We Catteni honor bravery."

"Damned white of them," Matt added sotto voice, avoiding the kick that Ray directed at his shins to shut him up.

"That is very good news, captain," Ray said with great poise and solemnity. "Has my home world learned of its freedom from Eosi domination?"

"The news was relayed by Supreme Emassi in person over a special com link." Tiboud bowed respectfully. "Good news to you, I am certain."

"Indeed it is, and thank you for relaying the message."

"Is it possible to have speech with the Excellent Emassi Zainal?"

"He's not here," Ray said, and his elation at the news of Earth's liberation evaporated. Matt looked shocked.

"Not there?" Then the short Drassi who had read the English message spoke a quick word into his superior's ear. "Ah, the Excellent Emassi Zainal was aboard the scout which does not have the speed this vessel has. He will doubtless arrive very soon now."

"Then he . . . he is alive and well?"

"That is our understanding," Tiboud said, again with a respectful bow. "We . . . all Catteni . . . owe our freedom to the Excellent Emassi Zainal."

"We here on Botany owe him as much," Ray said, returning the bow. Then added, out of the side of his mouth, "For God's sake, go tell Kris Zainal's alive while I deal with this."

Matt nodded once, eyes round in his face, and departed at speed. Ray heard him shouting at someone in the hangar and then heard the tools dropping and the cheering as the good news was absorbed.

"We have the honor to collect the mates and offspring of those to whom you gave sanctuary," the High Emassi Captain continued.

There were shouts at the door now, which Ray turned to silence.

This planet was run properly and wild demands for details would have to wait until he'd finished the interview with the incoming ship.

"Cool it, guys, I'm doing the diplomatic but tell the Council to get their asses down here on the double." He turned back to the screen. "Do you need the coordinates of the landing field?"

"They would be welcome. We understand that the continent on which the original shipments were made is no longer available."

"That is correct," Ray replied with a wry twist to his lips and then supplied the landing field's coordinates. The appropriate protocols were being scrupulously observed.

"Received," the captain said with another bow, "and course laid in. We anticipate touchdown in two of your local hours."

The contact was broken. Ray felt the need to seat himself at the desk, wondering why success always weakened you whereas imminent defeat caused you to stiffen in protest. So Zainal's crazy plan had worked, whatever it had been. And Kamiton had snatched away the leadership. Well, perhaps Zainal hadn't wanted it. Not with a woman like Kris to come home to. But maybe he'd take her back to Catten. No, not with that sort of gravity to combat on a daily basis. Mitford had mentioned how she had coped, but only just. Mitford hadn't been too happy with the problem but marines could handle anything.

Just where in the new power structure, Ray Scott wondered, did an Excellent Emassi fit, if there was now a Supreme Emassi? He wondered what plums had gone to Kasturi, Nitin, and Tubelin. As Catteni went, they'd been pretty straight guys.

He had only those few moments before people once again plagued him for details. He gave them what he knew and warned them of the impending arrival of a "friendly." Beverly and Judge Iri arrived together, Rastancil close behind them, and the four had decided that first there would have to be some sort of honor guard. Now that Botany was liberated, it had the right to its own protocols.

"Why didn't you just tell them where those bitches were and just get them away from here?" Beverly said, his brows knitting with displeasure. "When I think what a rough time they've given Kris . . . ah, Kris," for she was standing in the doorway, looking white as a sheet. Behind her, Matt was making all kinds of incomprehensible gestures at him. Warnings, Ray realized, and noticed that Kris was dressed in her Emassi uniform. But the look on her face . . . He strode over to her.

"He's all right, Kris. He survived. He's on his way back. The cruiser that's going to land here was just faster and came on a direct line . . ."

Her hands, when he took them, were freezing.

"Kris, he's all right," he repeated and, without thinking what he was

doing, he embraced her, patting her shoulders and stroking her hair as she burst into tears. Ordinarily tears were enough to drive Ray Scott as far away as he could take himself, but this was Kris. The long and difficult wait was over. "He did it, Kris. He did it and Earth is free. Botany, too." He held her off. "Do you understand? Earth is ours again as well as Botany."

"Botany, too?" She'd taken a deep breath as he started to cajole her.

"Botany, too. And they asked . . . *asked* . . . for permission to land, which is damned well the first time they've done that." He wondered if Zainal had traded rank in the new government for the freedom of the human colonized planets.

"That's a change," she replied with a crooked smile. And burying her face in her hands started to weep again.

"Come, Kris, my dear." Dorothy Dwardie took her off to one side, giving Ray Scott the dirtiest look he had received since he got his junior grade bars.

SO THERE WAS TIME TO PLAN A PROPER CEREMONY WHEN THE CRUISER landed. Drums, pipes, and two bugles were assembled, and the Council put on their best clothes since they now had some from the same shipment of purloined materials that had gone to clothe the Catteni exiles. Kris decided to keep on her Catteni uniform since she would officially hand over that duty to Captain Tiboud. And relieved to do so.

The cruiser was so new that there was not so much as meteor gashes on its side, and it bore a much different design on its prow than vessels had displayed under Eosi management.

Not very artistic, Kris thought, but probably the Eosi hadn't encouraged the arts and at least the runes used were in different, bold colors. She just ached to be able to ask Zainal what they meant.

When the crew, Captain Tiboud leading the formation, drew up in front of the Botany deputation, Ray embarrassed her somewhat by introducing her first. High Emassi Captain Tiboud startled her when he bowed with unexpectedly deep respect to the female introduced as Zainal's life companion.

"Excellent Lady Emassi," Captain Tiboud said, his eyes keenly inspecting her. Then, with an unexpected show of Catten amusement, he pointed to her shoulder tabs. "These are incorrect." He snapped his fingers, rattled a command to the aide who jumped to his side and then bounded off to the cruiser, almost hitting the top of the hatch he had so misjudged his stride. "Zainal is on his way here or so the Supreme

Kamiton himself told me when he dispatched his fastest ship to retrieve all those you were good enough to protect.”

Kris couldn't stifle her reaction but hoped Tiboud would not see that relief was the main one. “We secluded them in the safest place on Botany but I fear that the accommodations could not meet what they are used to.”

The aide was back, bowing as he opened and presented a large box with many pairs of fancy rank tabs. But the pair he selected was the most lavish in terms of the use of platinum, gold, and a fine dazzling diamond.

“I was ordered by the Supreme Emassi as well as High Emassis Nitin, Kasturi, and Tubelin that you, Kris Buyorzen (which was near enough for a Catteni trying to enunciate a Scandinavian name) be the first to receive the honors which I have brought.”

With a quizzical look for permission, he stepped forward and made a quick job of replacing her shoulder tabs. The new ones sparkled with the diamonds that capped the platinum half-spheres. She saluted, feeling that was an acceptable gesture. He bowed very low and she followed suit though did not bow as low. After all, she figured, an Excellent was higher in rank than a High Emassi.

Then he stepped to Ray and frowned slightly as he realized that Ray was not wearing a uniform-type tunic on which it would be easy to affix the rank tabs. But Ray held up one hand before the Captain could start any presentation speech.

“One small matter, Captain Tiboud,” Ray said, clearing his throat. “You mentioned that Earth has been returned to its rightful owners and governments and that Botany has independence. There are three other Human settled worlds that we know of. What disposition has been made of them?”

High Emassi Captain Tiboud managed an expression of amused understanding.

“Your altruism is only to be expected of a Human, Ray Scott. It is not in my authority to deal with that issue but, since so much is owed to Humans in general, I would anticipate a similar courtesy of independence may well be granted those three.”

“Thank you,” Ray said, barely heard above the cheers and shouts and whistles from the crowd of settlers.

“You are welcome. But to the matter at hand, Admiral Scott, for your assistance to the Supreme and High Emassi in their bid to overthrow Eosian domination, please accept these and the honorary title of Highest Emassi.” The Captain then handed Ray a splendid set of tabs, crowned by rubies that flashed in the sun.

The rest of the presentations went all the way from High Emassi Leon Dane for saving Kamiton's life down to Emassis Sally Stoffers and Beth Isbell for their translations and to Emassis Dick Aarens and Peter Snyder for jury-rigging the com sat on the wreckage of the Catteni array.

By then, everyone welcomed the drinks and other refreshments, which the cooks had managed to make and serve on the two hours' notice.

"They don't seem in a very great hurry to get those bitches and leave, do they?" John Beverly said in Kris' ear.

"Do I have to do the bloody honors there, too?" she asked.

Beverly grinned down at her. "Oh, I think you should, Excellent Lady Emassi. Duty before pleasure." Then his grin faded, and he gripped her shoulder firmly, his expression reassuring. "If everyone says Zainal lived through it and even got promoted, he'll be here soon now."

"How soon is soon? Damn it."

KRIS WAS NOT GIVEN AN OPTION, EXCEPT THAT SHE WAS ESCORTED ON board the cruiser with Leon Dane, Ninety, Ray Scott, Dorothy, and Judge Iri Bempechat who would make the journey with her. Raisha followed in the KDL, using a quickly assembled skeleton crew to take the Botanists back to Retreat. Captain Tiboud had requested permission to launch on his return flight once he had the refugees safely aboard.

"I trust you have suitable accommodations for the Emassi ladies," Kris couldn't resist asking.

The Captain's yellow eyes glittered. "They will be made comfortable, I assure you. They will find their new quarters on Catten all, or even more than, their fondest dreams."

"Have you a mate, Captain Tiboud?"

"I have," and there was that in his eyes that suggested to Kris that perhaps all Catteni women were like those he was required to restore to their men.

They, especially Sibbo and Milista, did not wish to be collected, even after repeated assurances, and handwritten rune messages from their respective male partners. They were terrified that it was some kind of Eosian trick.

"Is your com link strong enough for direct contact with Catten?" Kris asked, thoroughly fed up with these antics. "Then call . . . High Emassi Nitin and have him confirm your orders to Milista. She's the one who has to be convinced."

Milista said nothing when High Emassi Nitin, annoyed at being

interrupted and taken out of an important government meeting to reassure his mate, gave her what had to be a tongue-lashing. She blanched almost ecru and began to bow apologetically, her bows getting lower and lower to exhibit her willingness to comply. She said several short, sharp, low-voiced phrases to the other women which Kris thought she must have misinterpreted. Did Catteni women know such language?

As soon as they were boarded and being led to their quarters by obsequious junior ranks, Kris signalled to her companions that their duty was done. Perhaps Zainal had made it home while she'd had to dally here with the wretched ungracious Catteni females.

The captain, however, paused, looking out over the valley, once again tranquil, despite bits and pieces dropped or discarded en route to the cruiser ramp.

"I do not think the females will have appreciated the beauty of this valley," he surprised her by saying. He sighed. "But I would. Good-bye, Excellent Lady Emassi Kris."

They exchanged bows, she keeping hers to the shallow dip that indicated the difference in their ranks. Then she went down the ramp. Maybe the Farmers had used the valleys as vacation spots for corporeal enjoyments. That wasn't such a wild notion. Raisha was circling above in the KDL because there wasn't room enough for two ships to land without knocking down either the houses or the lodge-pole groves. The cruiser lifted over the retaining wall and discreetly sped up, allowing the other ship to land. That was when Kris noticed that someone had painted new ID letters on its prow: BSS 2. Was Baby to be BSS 1? And where was Baby? Her momentary lapse into amusement at the newly styled ship quickly dissipated.

Once aboard the BSS 2, Kris sought refuge on the bridge while those who had come with her stopped at the mess hall for coffee and to unwind.

"He'll be here soon, Kris."

"Oh, yes," she said in a weary voice. Half of her did not believe she would ever see him again. The other half wondered what his rank of Excellent meant in terms of the work he'd now have to do. Would he take Bazil and Peran back to Catten with him, to be raised properly as young Catteni males were? "Nice touch, renaming the ship," she said after a moment and because she knew that she ought to make some reference to the alteration.

AS RAISHA PILOTED THE BSS OVER THE HILL ABOVE THE LANDING FIELD, she had a clear view. No Baby perched there.

“When you get your hands on him, eh?” Raisha said, cocking her head at Kris, as if she’d known how much Kris hoped to find them there.

“You’d better believe it!” Now she was angry with Zainal for this unconscionably long delay. How could he keep her in such unending suspense? Did he have any idea of how she had suffered during his absence? Especially since the moment she had figured out that he was going to be the sacrificial lamb? That he would deliberately put himself in the ultimate danger as the only way of gaining admittance to the Mentat Ix?

Raisha landed the ship and did all the after-flight checks.

“It can stay out tonight: the visible confirmation of our change of status. Frankly, Kris, I’m exhausted after so much good news and emotion and all that wearying ceremony. Aren’t you, Excellent Lady Emassi?” She turned one of the shoulder tabs on Kris’s shoulder. “Those are really fine diamonds.”

Kris was as tired, too, weary beyond belief. Raisha had gone down the passageway and seemed to be gathering up the others for their voices drifted away.

She heard steps. Someone was coming to get her so she ought to go. Zane would be waiting for her to take him home. If she hadn’t had him . . . She pushed herself out of the chair and had reached the passageway when she realized it was filled with a large . . . and familiar figure.

“I thought you’d never come out,” Zainal said, “so I came in to get you. You can tell me off in privacy.”

“Tell you off?” Kris inanely repeated his words, because she had to be sure that it was really him.

“Raisha said you were waiting to get your hands on me . . .”

“I am,” and she threw them and her arms around his neck. “But if you ever go away like that again, I . . . I . . .” He closed her mouth with his, and they spent a long time like that. Until she had to come up for air, patting his face, his shoulders until she felt his muscles tense.

“You did, didn’t you? You went as sacrifice, didn’t you?” She pulled him into the better light of the cabin and saw the marks of suffering and starvation on his face: marks that only a keen and loving eye would now notice.

“It did the trick,” and he smiled a little, his hands touching her hair, her face, brushing away the tears on her cheeks, “and that’s all behind me. Behind us.” Then he held her away from him, noticing the thickening of her body. He raised one eyebrow. “You gave me up for lost?”

“No, never! It’s Chuck’s, just like you wanted.”

“On Catten?” He was astonished but smiling with pleasure. “Well, well.”

“We were both legless, between hooch and whatever Chuck was given to drink by that field keeper. Promise me you won’t ever be away again when I get drunk?” she pleaded.

“I promise,” he said solemnly, crossing his chest before he reached for her again.

“Just a moment.” And she pushed away his hands, standing up very straight and tall, her expression suspicious. “Where do you fit into the new hierarchy of Catten, Excellent High Emassi Zainal?”

“Oh, Excellent is the title they decided to give useful foreigners. I dropped. I stay.” And his yellow Catteni eyes glittered as he folded her into his arms. “How about you, Kris Bjornsen? Will you return to Earth?”

She shook her head. “I dropped. I stay.”

IN FACT, ONLY A FEW RETURNED TO EARTH: SOME OF THE SPECIALISTS stayed to help reconstruct their damaged home world. Most of those who went back did so to find what relatives remained alive and brought them back to Botany. Chuck Mitford brought back two cousins, a scarecrow, and the repaired hammock that had been on his front porch the day the Catteni arrived.

Afterword

THE NEXT TIME A FARMER UNIT SCANNED BOTANY, IT REPORTED THAT THE POPULATION HAD INCREASED FIVE-FOLD. A DECISION WAS REACHED since these newest, and unexpected, protégés had proved so innovative and independent. When the maintenance vehicle reached the planet, it lifted not only the food that had been harvested on its cultivated continents but also all the equipment, vacating their premises to allow the indigenous population to expand as populations had a habit of doing.

An unusual species had done well, and they could devote their attentions where similar discreet and carefully limited assistance was required.



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