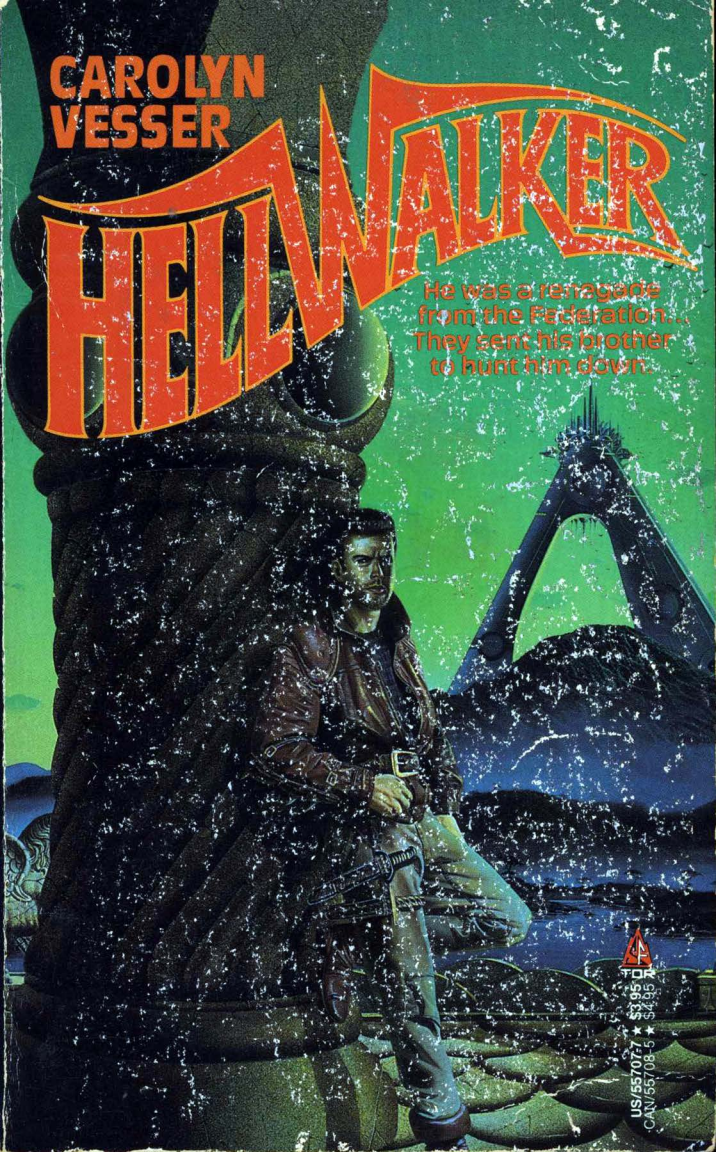


CAROLYN
VESSER

HELLWALKER

He was a renegade
from the Federation...
They sent his brother
to hunt him down.



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A BROTHER'S DILEMMA

One thing he could depend on: his brother would be no easy prey. Rath was as unpredictable as he was brilliant. He had certainly complicated everything by picking Orran. An Edict world was impossible to work with—no protocol, no extradition policy, no diplomatic channels at all. Interference by any off-worlder was a breach of law.

Edict or not, Rath had to be retrieved and the little war he was fomenting stopped. How do you do that with the least entanglement?

Seems you ask little brother.

And so he now faced his greatest challenge—bring his brother back to justice—or die trying.

HELLWALKER

Carolyn Vesser

**CAROLYN
VESSER**

HELLWALKER



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to real people or events is purely coincidental.

HELLWALKER

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A TOR BOOK

Published by Tom Doherty Associates, Inc.

49 West 24 Street

New York, NY 10010

ISBN: 0-812-55707-7 Can. ISBN: 0-812-55708-5

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 88-50990

First edition: December 1988

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CHAPTER ONE

Kael watched the screen as Laedry interrogated the starship's ground-surveillance computer. The tiny cursor immediately shifted northward as the map appeared. There were only a few centimeters separating it now from the wide band of mountains that divided the Nisjan desert from the plains of Sor.

"Moving right along, isn't he?"

Laedry nodded. "Latest data. They've picked up their pace. Have to land soon if you're to intercept Rath before he gets to Minth Valley."

"I'm submitting my updated proposal. If Command cuts the orders, where will you drop me tomorrow?"

"I'd say ahead here, halfway through Minth Pass," Laedry said, pointing to a spot on the map overlay in the mountains north of a small valley. He glanced at Kael. "I know, rugged country, but we need that distance until we get the ship's tele-booster antenna oriented on you with minimum radiation."

"The booster cell active in Rath's communicator after seven years?"

"It's borderline . . . You want to risk it? If Rath knew . . ."

"No," Kael said, "just ignore me." He shook off the

stirring of apprehension that had come with the mention of Minth Pass. "Get me a picture?"

Laedry punched in the computer command and leaned back in the chair, giving Kael full view of the screen. At first there was only color, a white-spattered deep purple wash.

Gradually shapes enhanced in detail—a series of mountain ranges, their snow-whitened ridges half in shadow, half in sun. Across the southern horizon the cliffs and peaks of the Minth Wall cut a jagged, glaciated border. Streams of white water plunged down several narrow, deep canyons, leveled out on the plateau, and fed a dozen sapphire lakes. And spreading like a fur blanket across the lower mountains and valleys, so thickly massed that the reality of their incredible height was lost, were the blue-purple pines of the high forest.

Kael rubbed his jaw and whistled a few notes of the "Star Rider's Lament," well aware of Laedry's open concern.

"And you've got a pocket of unsettled weather to the west," Laedry said, drawing attention to a small monitor at the right of the main screen. "Shouldn't be a problem for a few days, but you may have to deal with it."

"Nice."

"Nice? That? You with me, Kael? Hey, even the Orranians are wary of the heights this time of year. You pull a late winter storm—" He shook his head.

Kael raised an eyebrow, half teasing. "You're not going to back me up?"

"Sure—if I can get to you. But what happens if I can't?" Not waiting for a reply, he went on, his tone underlining his words. "Be serious, Kael, will you? Just once. That's no place for an Orranian novice

right now, let alone an off-worlder. Look at those pictures and tell me again you don't need Rese."

"I know my needs," Kael said, suddenly weary of the sparring. "I also know I can't take him. He hates Rath, and I'm not sure he can control it. He barely endures me."

"That's not so."

"It is, Laedry, and you know it. Every time Rese looks at me, he sees Rath—in spite of himself. Scula was his bond-brother. But for me, he could have had some satisfaction. Maybe sometime he will be able to accept it, even to forgive, but right now I can't take a chance. If he got the opportunity—"

"I know. He could ruin everything."

There was resignation in Laedry's voice, and Kael hoped that this was the end of it. Raising the problem again and again only deepened the frustration. There was simply no one to go with him. Better they accept that fact and work from there.

A sudden ache of guilt-riding loneliness touched deep in his mind, and Kael froze. For a moment he tasted its bitterness, not quite believing what he was feeling. It had been so long, so many years. As the feeling grew, there was no mistaking it. It was the same old loneliness, that old enemy back again. He could feel his stomach knot with its ache.

What could have drawn it? he wondered. It couldn't be the old guilt, not now, not any more. That had long been reconciled. The feeling seemed to yawn as he questioned it, deepening, swelling, rising into his chest and throat.

He shook his head. Whatever it was or why—it had to go. He didn't have the time or energy to deal with it. Gripping the thought firmly, he shoved it back into a corner of his mind and sealed it off. Still, he felt

strangely uneasy as he turned his attention back to the monitor again.

The shots were close in, now, at the timberline. The forest cloaked the ground like some great burial shroud, oppressive, all-covering. The few clearings that did appear were cloaked in orange fern and gray-green stunted brush.

No animal life was apparent, but it was there. Small herds of blue-horned zari fed in the area from spring to fall, and their sure-footed cousins, the agra, would be returning to their summer feeding grounds near the wind-sculptured cliffs. The split-eared kaven would have roused from their winter slumber, too. Food should be plentiful—

"And poisonous reptiles and insects and a variety of intriguing carnivora," Laedry murmured, catching the tail end of Kael's thoughts as he rejoined him. His gaze carried a certain challenge that demanded an answer.

Kael stared back at the white-haired pilot, exasperated and tired of the whole subject. "Okay," he answered. "Who do I take?"

A shrewd look crossed the pilot's face, almost as if he were waiting for the invitation. Cocking his head, he studied Kael from the corner of his eye. "How about the natives? Why not use one of them? How about that Sor scout we saw in the area yesterday? He knows the mountains. With a convincing cover, you just might recruit him and leave him no wiser for it."

Kael groaned. "You're reaching, Laedry. You can't be serious."

"Aren't I?"

"Orders are to keep these Orranians out of it," Kael sputtered. "Retrieving Rath's our problem."

"I'm not talking about retrieving, just getting you through the mountains."

Kael shook his head. "Still against orders."

"Maybe. Maybe not," Laedry went on, unruffled by Kael's objections. "With no other recourse, the Council might consider it. Wouldn't hurt to feel them out—they can only turn you down."

"Okay. Supposing they do go along with the idea. What if this . . . recruit chooses not to cooperate? Scouts are not the most trusting of souls, so I'm told. Then what?"

Laedry met his gaze and held it. "Then you might have to bring him around."

Kael's eyes narrowed. "You know they're not telepathic. That's foul."

"This is no game, my friend. If you're to intercept Rath before his army hits the plains, you've got to get through those mountains." His voice softened and took on an almost fatherly tone.

"Look at it this way. You'll probably be saving the scout's life. He *is* heading into the thick of the invasion." His eyes narrowed again with concern and pleading. "It's too dangerous for you to go it alone, Kael. You won't take Rese and there's no one else on the *Seeker* that's qualified."

The room quieted again as Kael contemplated his friend's words. All that Laedry said was true; he couldn't argue against it. But the thought still twisted him inside. To invade the privacy of an innocent mind and manipulate him, when the man had no understanding and no protection? It . . . it was abhorrent. He just couldn't do it.

"Leave it to the Council. If they feel your mission warrants it, they'll assume the responsibility."

"You don't understand . . ." Kael closed his eyes and swallowed. "It isn't the responsibility. I just can't—"

"Of course you can," Laedry interrupted, his green

eyes flashing in mild rebuke. "If it's ordered, and if you have to. This is no private concern . . . is it?"

There was warmth in his cheeks and Kael ducked his gaze. A quiet tone sounded in the compartment, signalling the hour, and Laedry pushed back his seat to stand up.

"Got a proofing due on the shuttle and some things to finish up before tomorrow. If you can get along without my pleasurable company, I'll bow out."

Kael nodded. "Thanks for your help." He gave the pilot a half-smile.

"You think about it. I really feel it's an answer." Laedry hesitated a moment, drew in a long breath and then let it go. "See you at supper." Crossing the compartment in a couple of long strides, he was gone.

Seating himself in the chair Laedry had vacated, Kael switched on the transcriber unit. The screen lighted and stared blankly back at him, waiting.

"Request for Affirmation," he began, activating the pickup. "Planned Retrieval of Vondorian Fugitive Rath Ni Thaarn . . ."

He frowned at the screen. Could he do it? he wondered. If he had to? All his life he'd been taught to honor privacy, and it didn't matter whose. There was no fight here—the scout was no threat, no enemy, he wasn't even involved. To use him, manipulate him . . . Would it be any less evil than what Rath had done? Where does right end and wrong begin?

He blinked, feeling himself drawn into the depths of the question, and then shook his head. Laedry was right. This was simply a job, a lousy one however he approached it. His feelings were secondary. The moral thing was to get it done. Besides, they hadn't given the Orranian scout to him yet, and there was a good chance they wouldn't.

Still, if they did . . . what would the man be like? They weren't an advanced lot, but in their way they were intelligent and resourceful. It couldn't have been easy to be cast out from a dying home world, having no idea where you were going or whether you'd ever arrive anywhere. That took guts. There had to be depth to them.

It was certainly a miracle that the Federation had found them and been able to preserve them until they could be established here on Orran. There had been so few of them in the beginning. Even with outside assistance, it had been a struggle. A hundred and eighty years of Isolation Edict protection and the handful had only grown to half a million—half a million strong-willed individualists—but still no match for a telepathic society. Rath, alone, had proved that.

He winced at the name. Strange, how even the sound of it hurt.

Lucky for the Orranians that it was the Federation's year for monitoring them. Lucky, too, that the *Seeker* had been within range. With the fugitive's father commanding the ship and his brother assigned, there could be hope for at least a chance of correcting the situation. A lot of luck so far. Now if it would only hold out a little longer.

One thing he could depend on—his brother would be no easy prey. Rath was as unpredictable as he was brilliant. He had certainly complicated everything by picking Orran. An Edict world was impossible to work with—no protocol, no extradition policy, no diplomatic channels at all. Interference by any off-worlder, be it for good purpose or bad, was a breach of law.

So what to do? Edict or not, Rath had to be retrieved and the little war he was fomenting

stopped. His influence and the results of it had to be negated. How do you do that with the least entanglement?

Seems you ask little brother.

Funny what words can do to a man. Tell him honor is at stake, remind him of bonds and ties, and reason is forgotten. It had been easy for them to convince him . . . even in his father's silence.

He blinked as the Commander's face centered in his thoughts: before him the long table, at both sides the intensely alert faces of the ship's Council. It had been a long time since he'd seen his father so pale, so tightly controlled. Controlled, except for that one little tremor in his hand as he fumbled with his stylus.

Though Kael had sought it, the Commander had withheld his gaze, and he had kept his emotions locked behind the door of his mind. Only his affirmation bridged the silence between them: *Your decision, son. Whatever you do, I am with you.*

He bit his lip and shook off the memory. So, to find Rath and bring him back. And what if Rath refused to come? What if he chose to fight? Retrieve or execute.

Execute? Could he execute . . . his own brother?

For a moment Rath stood in his memory, his eyes bright with excitement.

Kael, you old son of a space jockey. Hey, everybody, d'ya hear the news? Kael made top cadet. He's been assigned to the Seeker! We're shipping together—Kael and me. Shades, d'ya know how long it's been since that's happened? Too long to remember, that's what. Hey, what a run this is going to be. Come on, little brother, this calls for a celebration.

And how they had celebrated! Kael smiled, remembering. All of Rath's friends had come, the whole Dawn Society had joined them at the Blue Spacer. Twice they had marched around the center bar

carrying Kael high on their shoulders before they toasted him. They'd made him an honorary member of the Society, had given him his own medallion with the mountain sunburst insignia.

That night Rath had taken him up in the *Comet*, had even let him pilot it. They'd flown high above the regular airways and looked at the lights stretching out below them—familiar lights, home lights, lights they would not see again for years.

Rath had told of his dream, the Dawn dream, of freeing intelligence, of allowing talents to know their full potential, of ridding the galaxy of the old, stifling laws that drained life from the future.

"We have our plans, Kael. We've the best talents on Vondore. Already we're moving ahead, being apprenticed to the best minds in the galaxy. Sikaerian and me, Drosse and Maer, Samovaar and Aedreen. A few years and you'll find us in government, industry, science, space, military. By the time we get back, you'll be old enough for the University and full membership. It's going to be a great universe, little brother, when we get through with it. God, it's going to be great." And he had laughed in pure joy, and Kael had laughed with him.

Laughed. How long had it been since he had really laughed? His throat tightened, as a heaviness grew in his chest. Tears welled in his eyes, and he could feel the stinging in his nose. Suddenly he was angry—with himself, with Rath, with what could have been. His lips tightened. Blinking rapidly, he thrust the memory back, far back. Then straightening his shoulders, he fixed his attention again on the transcriber.

"Shuttle Landing: Noon Tomorrow, Planet Time. Location: Minth Pass . . ."

An hour later, request in hand, Kael headed for the bridge. Captain Para, the Commander's aide, met him at the bulkhead and accepted the envelope, assuring him that it would be considered immediately. Kael didn't doubt him; there had been delay enough.

But even immediate processing took time and it was still a couple of hours before supper. He couldn't do any more with his plans until he received the go-ahead, and that might take hours. Better to spend the time on something useful, he decided, perhaps on the language. If permission to use the scout came, the less accent he had the better off he would be. And with that thought, he turned back to the library.

It seemed that he had hardly stretched out when a cadet roused him from the hypnotic half-sleep of the Thought Charger. He came up slowly, blinking as he returned to full awareness. A glance at his watch brought a frown. An hour and a half? Had the Council denied it? Switching off the Charger, he hurried from the room.

As the bridge bulkhead slid shut behind him, Kael tore open the sealed envelope he had been given and scanned the contents. It wasn't negative; in fact, the Council had approved it—all of it, even the use of the scout. He stared at that part, feeling the old queasiness return. The telepathic persuasion was not just okayed but ordered, if it was found necessary for the mission.

He swallowed the thought, and read on. His identity-cover—papers and clothing—would be available that evening. Laedry was assigned shuttle backup. A report would be expected daily. There followed a list of cautions and the Council's charge for a successful mission. Authorization for immediate implementation was stamped across the orders,

with the Council's seal of authority and the signature of the Commander. All quite official.

Kilor Ni Thaarn, Sector Commander. The signature seemed to reach out to him from the paper. He read the name slowly, holding the sound of it. A good name, Thaarn, in spite of Rath. It would be honored again, he promised himself.

Drawing a deep breath, he folded the paper carefully and secured it in his belt. That did it. Ready or not, he was on his way. He headed for the ship's mess, a grim smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

The evening passed quickly with the last-minute planning and preparations. Laedry demanded a double-check of everything, and it was late when they finished. As they returned to their compartment, they found the Commander waiting. Laedry bid them both good night and retired.

Father and son walked down the corridor, quiet for a time, letting that deeper communication soothe the fears and loneliness that were a part of them both. As they continued, Kael became increasingly aware of something bothering his father which he was holding back. He finally stopped and faced the older man.

"Father," he said quietly, "what is it? What's worrying you?"

Kilor raised an eyebrow and almost smiled. "What's worrying me? That's a question?"

"I mean beyond the mission. There's something else . . ."

Kilor lowered his head a little. "It's just my fear, Kael. Comes with getting old."

"Old? Yeh, sure. And I'm a babe." He stared at his father, trying to see behind the quiet eyes.

"It is me, isn't it?" Kael waited for an answer but it didn't come.

"Is it what we talked about . . . before? The guilt? My feeling responsible?"

Still Kilor was silent, but Kael persisted.

"I've told you, Father, that's over—all of that old guilt. You know me. You must know it is. I'm not a cadet anymore. I understand what happened back then, and it's all settled. Believe me. I know I'm not responsible for what happened, and I'm not volunteering because of any guilt I feel. Rath is my brother and I want to help him. If anybody can get through to him, it has to be me. And that's it. Now will you stop worrying about that?"

For a long moment Kilor studied him, his silver-green eyes even more transparent than usual. A frown settled for a moment across his brows and his face seemed to gray in the corridor light.

"Father?" Kael began, uneasy under the scrutiny.

Kilor sighed at last. A softness came into his face and he reached for Kael to draw him close. Then he held him away by the shoulders.

"You come back to us. You hear? I don't want any foolishness down there. And I want you to keep us posted. Now, Rath—" He paused and swallowed.

"I'll bring him back—"

"If you can—"

"I'll bring him back—" Kael repeated.

"Kael, you may not be able to, even with Laedry's help. If you can't, then whatever happens is Rath's choice. It has been his all along. Don't underestimate him, and don't let your feelings get between you and your duty. You come back, son."

Winning a little under the pressure of his father's hands, Kael dropped his gaze and nodded. For a moment those strong arms gripped him again. Then he was free, and they were walking back the way they had come.



CHAPTER TWO

The fire crackled softly, puffing an umbrella of sparks into the darkness. Kael, resting against the trunk of a giant ironwood, watched them rise and blink out. The odors of spring were heavy in the night air, the smell of mint and pine a curious combination. Kael filled his lungs hungrily, enjoying the sweet taste so different from the sterile atmosphere of the *Seeker*. It had been years since he had sat before a campfire and felt the chill of a mountain evening.

The canopy of ironwood held back the faint light of the stars. Berri and Ferro, Orran's twin moons, had not yet risen, and the sun had long since set. It was an opaque blackness that encircled his fire.

A few meters off to his right a brook tumbled, its low murmur deceptively tranquilizing. A man crouched there safely hidden behind thornbush and darkness—or so he thought. He had been there for almost an hour, wary, watching.

Kael had not been idle during the wait. With the scout so near, he'd been able to deep-probe him, identifying those points of character that could be effectively utilized. There had been little to surprise him. The young man was a typical frontiersman—

independent, proud, and resourceful, with an unusually strong sense of honor and loyalty.

That it was easy probing him made it no less distasteful. The thought of manipulation still bore repugnance, orders or no. That a Vondorian could do it willingly and without cause was impossible to imagine. And yet Rath had done it, purposefully and brutally. Rath . . . Kael shook his head. Come a thousand millennia, he would never understand his brother.

Although he was using the lightest touch possible, the probe was still making the young Orranian nervous. The subtle force of it apparently sounded an oppressive note in the man's normally wary subconscious. It was hard to tell how long the observation would go on. Kael's abrupt appearance, with no forewarning trail, had piqued more than the scout's curiosity.

What should he do? If he continued to probe indefinitely, he might spook the scout; and he couldn't risk losing him, not now. There was no one else to work with in the area. Kael sighed and rubbed his forehead, anticipating the headache that he knew was on its way.

If probing a nonpsi left a nasty taste, manipulation brought a full-blown revulsion. It took him a full five minutes to get his stomach under control, and he was still choking on his aversion when he sent his probe.

Much as it distressed him, Kael forced himself to take his time. It had to be done right—building the argument within the other's mind naturally, neutralizing the man's fear with patterned logic and common sense, enlarging his feelings of confidence and capability with direct telepathic infusion. It was a gentle but tenacious web his manipulation wove, each thread drawn from the victim's own will.

In the end, the scout reached the needed resolution. *I have to do it, don't I*, he told himself, dejection coloring the admission. *Well . . . at least I'll force his move . . . maybe?*

Kael echoed the scout's sigh. With the manipulation over, the relief almost settled his stomach. He drew in a deep, clean breath and readied himself.

A moment later the scout appeared beyond the fire. Appropriately startled, Kael sprawled as he lurched to grab his sword, which he had dumped with his pack beside his bedroll.

He caught the wryness mentally, although the grin was gone from the soldier's face when Kael recovered himself. With a shove to his feet, he half pulled the scabbard off the weapon, hoping he was showing a proper amount of apprehension in his face.

"Wait, friend!" The scout's amusement almost got away from him as he held his right hand before him, palm out. "No trouble . . . I saw your fire." He waited respectfully, his bedroll clutched in his left hand, a length of rope slung loosely over his shoulder.

Although young in years (slightly Kael's junior), the scout was not lacking in capability. It showed in every movement, and even more in his waiting stance. On the surface he was casual and respectful, but underneath, there was a body perfectly tuned and ready to spring. Kael had little doubt that in a fair fight the scout could hold his own.

The Orranian was dressed in brown leather—jerkin, kilt, moccasins—and a heavy wool shirt. A wide leather belt spanned the youth's waist, holding the scabbard of a short sword on his left and on the right a shorter one sheathing a long-bladed hunting knife. In all, the scout's dress was not unlike Kael's own.

The telepath stared at the newcomer, a nervous

frown ridging his brows. A moment passed, and then, pushing his sword back into the sheath, he nodded.

"Sit." And as an afterthought: "My name is Kael."

"Tjan," the scout said, breathing out a low sigh. He approached the fire, dropped to one knee, and warmed his hands over the flames.

"Are you from around here, Kael?" he asked, his dark eyes searching.

Kael shook his head, fingered the sheathed sword a moment and then laid it beside him. He leaned back against the tree, but his manner was still wary, watchful.

"I'm from Dakor. This is my first time on this trail."

"You have business in Minth?"

"I hope to buy some horses."

A name crossed Tjan's mind, a well-known Minth rancher. Kael noted it, and the name that followed almost immediately. The second was no rancher at all, merely bait for a trap. Kael smiled to himself as he played the game out.

"From Stojor's, I'll bet," Tjan murmured, flicking a quick look at Kael. "They raise some mighty fine stock."

The Vondorian frowned, shook his head. "No . . . we're dealing with a man named Guston."

"Rast Guston?" Kael nodded, felt a warming flow of relief go through the scout's mind. "He's a good man. You'll get your money's worth."

"Are you a scout?" Kael blurted out.

Tjan's head came up, his face expressionless except for a glint in his eyes. Kael pointed to the scout's weapons.

"You look like you'd have no trouble using those, and you seem to know your way around up here . . . even in the dark. Not many people can do that . . .

from what I hear." He shrugged. "Just wondering . . ."

Tjan half smiled. "People raised in the mountains get a feel for them, I guess."

"Going far?" Kael asked.

"A ways . . ."

"You know Minth?"

"Some."

"Are Guston's horses really as good as they say?"

"The best breeding stock in Sor. Top grade." The scout's eyes warmed over a faint smile. "I worked there one summer. He had a string of the prettiest little fillies you ever saw. They used to stir up more mischief than a den full of surkas—literally drove old Rast to drink."

"The horses?" Kael asked with feigned seriousness.

Tjan grinned openly, his freckled face lighting for a moment. With that shock of flame-colored hair, he wasn't exactly handsome, but he had an appealing face. Kael could imagine old Rast having cause to drink.

"Are you hungry?"

Tjan shook his head. "I had some jerky and biscuits back on the trail . . . Your caba smells good, though."

"There's plenty."

The scout took a cup from his pack and filled it from the small pot simmering on the coals. He moved back against a tree, unbuckled his belt, and laid the weapons beside him within easy reach. Sitting back, he took a sip of the steaming liquid.

"Do you come through often?" Kael asked.

"Now and then."

"Ever travel with company?"

"When I can."

"I don't like traveling alone," Kael murmured,

looking up through the darkened trees. "Especially in these mountains. You wouldn't be interested in having company, would you, as far as Minth?"

"Sounds tempting . . . but I'm afraid I can't." There was, oddly, a genuine regret in his answer.

"Well, maybe I'll see you in Minth."

"It's possible. You could look me up at the village. Just ask for the Lanfrees. If I'm about, I'll be glad to go over to Guston's with you. Be good to see them all again."

He pushed himself to his feet. "I'd best move on. Thanks for the hospitality."

"No need to go," Kael said, getting to his own feet. "It's late, why don't you spread your roll here? There's no sense setting up another camp in the dark. Besides,"—he grinned wryly—"you give a body a feeling of security."

Tjan grunted at the compliment. "You don't mind?"

"Not at all. Pick your spot, there's plenty of room."

The scout looked about, moved opposite the fire a couple of meters, kicked a few pebbles aside, and shook out his blanket. Apparently the conversation was over, for a few minutes later the Orranian was bedded down with his weapons beside him.

He appeared to fall asleep immediately, but it was still a game. Kael could have played it, probably better, but he felt no reason to. Tjan was wary, not hostile. And Kael was tired. He could wake later and deepen the scout's sleep. For now, he might as well get what rest he could. Snuggling down in his own bedroll, the telepath was soon fast asleep.

It was predawn the next morning when Kael awoke. The scout was still asleep and would continue so until sunup when the hypnotic suggestion released him. That was time enough to get a fire going and his

plans working—it would take a bit of primed suspicion to get Tjan to join up.

Kael hurried the fire and set the pot to heating, then walked to the stream and washed up. It was cool in the early air and he was hungry, although the thought of dried meat and biscuits took the edge off his appetite. But at least the caba would be palatable.

The sun was crowning the mountain as he returned to the camp. He positioned himself before the fire, the unmarred soles of his moccasins turned back in plain view. Tjan woke all at once, alert and alarmed at having slept so long and so hard. For a few moments he lay still, his senses searching the area, until satisfied at last that all was well, he turned and studied Kael.

The telepath followed Tjan's mental scrutiny, allowing him the time to see all that the increasing daylight revealed. For a moment Kael was merely a man feeding a fire. A second later Tjan mentally caught his breath. All was *not* well. With light came a host of alarming questions: How could a man after days on the trail have clean hair? Where were the marks of sweat and trail wear on his clothing? And why did his moccasins show no wear? Carefully, Tjan loosened his blanket, retrieved his knife, and held it ready under the covering.

Pushing himself to his feet, Kael turned, saw Tjan watching him, and nodded. "Morning. The caba will be hot in a minute. Sleep well?"

"Very," Tjan said soberly. "Have you been up long?"

"A few minutes. It's going to be warm today." He bent to his pack and removed a few slices of dried meat and a couple of trail biscuits.

The scout's face had shown nothing, but the weighing and measuring was still going on. And it seemed

Kael was failing all the tests. The telepath smiled to himself. Tjan was finding his sunburn particularly intriguing—so fresh, no more than a day old . . . as was his beard . . . And his fingernails were clean, and his smell was wrong . . .

The Orranian was becoming more and more perplexed. A frown flitted across his eyebrows as an old concern resurfaced. Tracks. There had been none until yesterday. It was almost as if Kael had sprouted from the ground. Where had he been before that? Who was he? What was he doing here? Really doing here? It was a mystery that demanded to be solved—more than Tjan's own life might depend on it. But how could it be determined without risking even more?

The conflict went on behind his quiet eyes as the scout packed his gear. If Kael was a spy, he was at once the worst and the best Tjan had ever seen. Unless . . . his worst were planned? He shot a glance at the Vondorian, his frown deepening. If he took Kael with him, the man would learn the Sor routing. Yet, did he dare leave him on the trail? The conflict deepened as the minutes went by, and contented with its progress, the telepath merely listened and waited.

In the end, the invitation came.

"I've been thinking," Tjan began. He took a sip of caba and slowly swallowed it. "There's a lot of rough country ahead. You could get yourself into a pile of trouble going it alone . . ." He paused and studied Kael thoughtfully. "Why did you come alone, Kael? Folks just don't do that through here, not with Nisja on the prowl."

"I was supposed to come through with a party, but they were held up at the last minute. We need the stock," Kael explained, "so I decided to chance it

alone. Thought I could hire some help in Minth." He shook his head. "Sure didn't know what I was getting into. It wasn't too bad the first couple of days, and after that, I just kept going. I figured if I stayed on the trail I'd get there eventually. I didn't realize how hard it would be just keeping the trail. You know, last night was the first night I've slept through since I left Jolan?"

Tjan took it all in, seeming to accept the other's words. But underneath, even though he couldn't dispute the answer, Kael's story bothered him. He nodded and took a sip of caba.

"Anyway," the scout went on, "I have my work to do, and from here, we'll be off trail. But if you think you can keep up—"

"Don't worry about me," Kael broke in. "I'll be right on your heels."

"Won't be any talking while we're out, unless I say. I need it quiet to concentrate on my work."

Kael nodded. "Whatever you say. I'm just grateful for your company."

"You might wait to say that. It might not be the benefaction you think it is."

There was a shadow of threat beyond the implied warning. Kael didn't miss it. His eyes narrowed a little as he poured the remaining brew on the fire.

That Tjan loved his work was apparent from the beginning. To him the mountains were a playground, a world to be explored and respected, a place of pleasure and learning. He was an excellent scout. Even in the midst of his frustrating concern over Kael, he bent to his work with a detached concentration that seemed untouched by emotion. His eyes flicked continually from horizon to timberline to

ground to leaf to bush with a knowing sight that fascinated Kael. It was more than skill, it was an instinctive ability to feel his way—to know even before he saw it that something was there to be discovered.

Kael finally had to take it back—the primitive-characterization thing. This scout was no savage. He might not know galactic law or space technology, but he knew his world a lot better than Kael knew his own. The telepath would do well to keep all his senses open. It wasn't every day one gained a competent teacher.

They had just left a thick stand of pine, when Tjan halted abruptly, his left arm extended to stop Kael. He pointed silently at a leafless bush a few meters away, large balls of golden cottony fiber clinging to its bare branches. Long, stringlike, brown tendrils curled out from its base.

Surprised by the youth's approach, a rabbit-sized rodent fled before them and inadvertently crossed one of those thin coils. Instantly the tendril spun to life. Seizing the animal, it wrapped itself quickly around the body, a tight band squeezing the stomach as it curled back toward the bush. At the first movement, long, almost transparent spines thrust from the yellow balls. The victim struggled as the bush surrounded it and then lay still as a half dozen encircling spines turned bluish-red. In a moment the bush opened up, returning again to its previous posture. The spines disappeared and the tendril slowly unwound and deposited its shrunken burden on the ground. Then, as though disliking the neighborhood, it rose on those deceptively innocuous appendages, slithered backward a couple of meters, and became a bush again.

"Old Spiny's a bit testy," Tjan observed soberly, leading Kael in a half circle around it. "It's always wise to give it berth. Ever seen one before?" Kael shuddered and shook his head.

"I'm not surprised," Tjan went on. "You won't find them in low country. They're rare here. Looks like a plant, doesn't it, sitting there. You know, those tendrils are stronger than this." He stroked the rough, hand-woven rope slung over his shoulder. "And once they take hold, they don't let go. If it can't drag a victim to it, it simply pulls itself over. Once those spines go to work, it's all over. I saw a full-grown two-prong zari once half drained, and that devil thing was still feeding. Came on a Nisja once, too . . ." His voice trailed off into silence.

They spent the day in a zig-zag ascent, heading steadily south. The climb had been a gradual one, for which Kael was grateful. The rarified air in the heights was a problem to which he had not yet adjusted, in spite of his Nion blood. Although their progress was slow, still they were considerably closer to the Minth peaks when they made camp that evening.

There had been no sign of Nisja, but Tjan's contemplative mood continued. Clearly, Kael bothered him. Even though he had found nothing in the Vondorian's actions to cause him concern, the questions remained unanswered.

Leaving Kael to build a small fire, the scout retired to a nearby stream and cleaned the wild hen he'd flushed earlier. He had dropped it with his dirk, hardly breaking his stride, as the bird darted among some brush about ten paces away. The Vondorian had been aware of the knife hidden in the center back seam of the scout's jerkin; but the lightning use of it

had taken him quite by surprise and had raised his estimation of the scout another notch.

The fresh meat was welcome. Tjan served it with a warm but probing conversation. It was a good contest. Kael found himself pulling from his own study as well as Tjan's memory in supplying the needed responses. Three hours went by in the verbal sparring. Suddenly, Tjan stood up.

"We'd better bed down . . . be leaving at day-break."

It was an invitation Kael welcomed. The evening's conversation had been exhausting. He sighed as he lay waiting for Tjan to go to sleep. The morning would bring only more of the same; the web of lies would grow ever more complex and . . . not without guilt. He felt dirty somehow. Even ordered, it was degrading—to use one's gift in a deception was . . . The telepath sighed, shook his head. There were times when duty just raised hell with one's peace of mind.

If only the scout would sleep. He mentally touched the man and backed off. The scout's mind was unwinding, but it was still busy. The night's quiet had loosed memories and emotions and the ever-present questions. Tjan was quietly pondering them, reviewing all that happened since he had met Kael and wishing that somehow he could sort it all out.

The Vondorian frowned. With his own mind and body tired and aching, minutes seemed like hours. Impatience was beginning to take on an edge of irritation, but at last Tjan's deep breathing came.

Sitting up, Kael's hand sought the belt around his waist. Almost hidden in the leatherlike plastic near the sword-sheath on the left was a sealed box, four centimeters by six by two. The mini tele-booster was

small but efficient. Opposite it, ridging the top of the knife-sheath, rested a tiny, but lethal, pen-laser.

Both were telepathically sealed and bonded to the belt—impossible to remove or operate without Kael's direct mental command—as was the belt itself. The folian plastic strip looked in every way like a worn, tooled leather belt of a city-bred Sor. Even the attachments worked into the design in such a way that they were hardly discernible. The belt was a comfort, as its instant access to help was a source of protection far greater than sword and knife, should the situation arise. It was *most* reassuring.

Kael released the booster and held it before him in the palm of his hand. Delivering the needed telepathic signal, he watched a crack bisect the top and sides. With a touch the box sprang open and a tiny white light responded, beaming brighter as he centered his thoughts. As the focus tightened, the light peaked and flared a pale blue. He sent the probe.

Like a half-formed, drifting thought the answering signal came. He reached out and linked with it, increasing his concentration until, as if they stood face to face, he felt the familiar presence of the shuttle pilot. Kael projected his report and then listened as Laedry answered.

You're reading good, Kael, and the booster's transmitting well. I have a negative and a possible plus for you. That little disturbance we noted up north is building faster than we'd anticipated. It's at level four now and climbing steadily. The front will reach you late tomorrow night. Do you want to pull out?

No! Kael replied emphatically.

What about extra gear?

Would be nice, but a little hard to explain, don't you think? Thanks anyway. Tjan's a good scout and he is

familiar with the territory. I've thermal gear—he doesn't. Let's see how he handles it.

A small surge of emotion came back from the pilot, translatable into a frowning shake of the head. *Your play, I guess.*

You mentioned a plus?

Oh, yeah . . . A band of a hundred riders broke off the main body of Rath's Nisja about three hours ago. They're moving double-time toward the valley. Rath's with them. If you could speed things up a bit, you might catch him with the small force. That would simplify things for us.

Kael rubbed a knuckle along the scratchy stubble of his beard. *I'll see what I can do. Nothing else? Ah, so. Catch you tomorrow.*

He broke contact and returned the instrument to his belt. Then making sure that his weapons were within reach, he pulled the blanket around him and willed himself to sleep.

Tjan awoke with a frown on his face. He hurried their packing and moved them out without breakfast. And he kept them moving, even through lunch. His restlessness seemed to grow as the day wore on. He stopped often to sniff the air and listen, and once he dug through the mulch under a tree, drew up a handful of flat, blue-green bugs, more like worms than insects, and studied them. Dumping them back in the hole, he silently motioned to Kael, and moved on.

Toward evening a chill wind came up out of the northeast. Wispy clouds pushed before it, snagged on the high peaks, and drew out across the ridge like soft wool scarves. Tjan watched them, growing ever more troubled.

They camped late that night, not bothering to build a fire. Too tired to talk, they ate their rations silently and went to bed. The scout's snoring came almost immediately. As quickly, Kael made his report. His weariness also reached through to Laedry, and the pilot's returning thoughts came, thick with concern.

Don't overdo it, Kael. You're going to need all your resources when you meet Rath.

I'm all right, Kael assured the pilot. Nothing that a good sleep won't help. One thing about this hiking, it helps you to sleep. And don't talk to me—you read like you could use a little more rest yourself. Tomorrow?

Right.

Kael snapped the booster shut, held it a moment, and then replaced it on his belt. He squirmed down in the blanket, pulling in his aching legs. It felt so good just to lie down. The bed of pine needles felt almost soft under his side. Sighing, he pulled the blanket over his shoulders, cleared his mind of the day's mental clutter, and settled into sleep.

Or, rather, he tried to. Tired as he was, his sleep was fitful. A rude wind deviled his dreams, sucked and curled around him, leaking past the thermal fabric of his blanket to spread icy fingers across his flesh. It was waiting for him when he awakened.

A glance toward the scout showed him already up, wool pants and a heavy brown wool jacket supplementing his usual garb. Kael stretched and rubbed his arms as he got to his feet. A minute in the embrace of that wind and he dived for his own pants and coat.

"Brrr," he muttered, shivering. "What happened to the sun?"

"Storm's coming," Tjan said simply as he rolled up his bedroll. There was an odd note in his voice that

brought a questioning glance from Kael. But, busy-ing himself, the scout said no more, and Kael quickly bent to his own gear.

As the Vondorian finished, Tjan walked over and helped him shoulder his pack. Kael tucked in the edge of his scarf, pulled on his gloves, and then turned, ready to go. But Tjan didn't move. He just stood there, a frown coming and going across his forehead.

"So?" Kael prodded.

Sighing, the scout let his gaze go past Kael to the mountain behind him. "We have a problem," he said. "It's at least a three-day hike into Minth by the pass—two of those days in high country. These late-winter storms can be killers up here. I'm not geared for it and you don't seem to be, either."

He hesitated, then went on. "There's a shortcut we scouts use when we get caught like this. I'll be honest, Kael, it's tough, and there are a couple of bad places. But it'll cut two days off, and there's a good chance if we hurry that we can beat the heavy snow. We can be in Minth tomorrow morning, if we're lucky." The scout wrapped a wool scarf around his neck and tucked it under his coat collar.

"If you'd rather, we can backtrack, and I can leave you on the trail," Tjan went on without enthusiasm. "I don't recommend it . . . but it's up to you."

Kael blinked at the wind and whistled under his breath. He glanced at the gray, overcast sky and then turned to look at the peaks already shrouded in clouds. He could read a healthy concern for trail and storm, but at the moment Tjan's worry seemed to concentrate more with the storm. He looked back at the scout.

"I don't seem to have much choice, do I?" Kael

murmured. Tjan shrugged. The Vondorian drew in a long breath. Well, he had picked his pilot—might as well see how he could fly.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Immediately, the scout turned and led them out of the clearing.



CHAPTER THREE

For an hour and a half they followed the wall of thickly forested hills that footed the peaks of Minth. At last, Tjan stopped. Kael swung his pack free and sank down beside it, while the scout studied the steep slope.

The Orranian had set and maintained an accelerated pace. Although Kael had kept up, he was panting. If Tjan continued that drive up the mountain, the Vondorian was in big trouble. Unlike the scout, he was no woodsman, nor was he acclimated; and he was not in condition for such a climb, in spite of his hurried preparation in the ship's gym. It would be a gamble even without the storm. He shivered, and not just from the cold.

Funny, he hadn't noticed the chill while the scout paced him, but he could surely feel it now, while resting. It would be colder on the mountain, and that would make it more difficult to breathe. He looked at Tjan from the corner of his eye. He'd done a good job nourishing the scout's distrust. It was hard to know how much sympathy the man might feel if Kael did get in trouble, or how far the man's honor would carry him in the face of death. He bit his lip.

Maybe he should turn back and call Laedry. It was still possible to get the shuttle in. It would delay

everything, but at least he would be alive. Once they were on that mountain there would be no place for Laedry to set down.

"Kael?" Low as it was, Tjan's voice startled him. He looked up at the scout. "Didn't mean to wind you. I wanted to get a head start on the storm. We won't be able to move very fast once we start climbing. Do the best you can, but don't overdo it. We have a long stretch ahead and neither the time nor place for lengthy rests. Keep your eyes up and your mind on Minth." He smiled grimly.

In that moment Kael read the deeper reason for Tjan's rapid hike that morning. It seemed there had been an appraisal made of the Vondorian's stamina in that sprint up the pass. Tjan was still testing.

"Ready?"

Kael nodded, got to his feet, and shouldered his pack.

The slope stretched out before them, unwinding in a series of summits they never quite reached. Tjan watched Kael, adjusting the ascent to accommodate him. In turn, Kael studied the scout.

He was a curious young man. Just to look at him, you wouldn't suspect what was there. He was wiry, but he had no extraordinary physique. Still, somewhere under that tanned skin were muscles like whipcord, a body almost immune to fatigue, and a strength and agility that were amazing. Walking in his footsteps, Kael knew envy.

The air cooled and thinned as they fought upward, and the sustained exertion began to take its toll. At times the tightness in his chest left Kael bending over in pain, gasping for air. Tjan waited impassively for the spells to end.

The timber was sparse and stunted, and the ground broken with outcroppings of rock. Beyond them,

heavy gray clouds swathed the mountain, obscuring the jagged peaks that towered above. As they climbed, the little patches of crusted snow multiplied, finally forming a white carpet that disappeared into the cloud bank.

Kael crunched through it, cursing again as he slid off an ice-slickened rock. He clawed at the frozen surface, caught himself, and once more thanked the gods for gloves that were dry and warm inside. How Tjan could feel anything through the moisture-darkened leather he was wearing, numbed as his fingers had to be in the cold, was beyond Kael.

A stinging interrupted his thoughts, and he brushed the snow from his knees. There were new tears in the wool, and underneath, he could feel the scrapes, but at least there was little bleeding. Sighing, he hurried after Tjan.

Wisps of vapor stretched toward them, coiling out of the gray head. The snow grew steadily deeper, the crust thicker—in places, thick enough to walk on. Too often, though, they broke through, sinking sometimes past their knees.

As Kael climbed, the ache in his legs gradually spread to his back and head. He tried to ignore it, and the cold and the wind that now whipped about him, finding their way to his body in spite of his thermal clothing. He loosened his scarf, began to rewind it about his nose and mouth. A sudden gust tore it from his neck, and he watched helplessly as the wind carried it down the mountain. He turned back into the storm cursing his carelessness.

Strange how a bit of cloth could be so comforting. Without it, the cold settled around his neck, seeped into his shoulders. He drew his coat collar up, pulled his cap down, but still the wind bit.

He watched Tjan, wondering how he stood it. The

scout's moccasins and much of his leggings were now soaked, and when he stopped, he constantly shifted from one foot to the other. Knowing that his own lagging was adding to the scout's misery frustrated Kael, as did the scout's overly patient, resigned silence.

The numbing mist reached them finally. Wind-pushed, it curled around them, adding its dampness to the cold that worked beneath their clothing. The icy needles of air stung as Kael breathed them in, making him cough, and spells of coughing left him light-headed.

Tjan watched him through one particularly bad spell, unwound his own scarf, and wrapped it around the Vondorian's face and head. As Kael objected, Tjan cut him off.

"You need it more than I do," he said firmly, ending the argument.

By the time they reached the pass, the mist had turned to driving snow. The howling wind, sweeping down from the peaks above, swirled it about them, whitening their clothing. A sudden blast rocked Kael backward, off balance. Grasping frantically for a handhold, he slid a half dozen meters on his side, until a rock caught his pack, stopping him. He got to his feet slowly and slapped off the snow. A hand gripped his shoulder.

"You all right?" Tjan shouted in his ear. Kael half turned and nodded. "Got to keep moving. There's no shelter up here. The quicker we get down to timber, the better."

Kael grunted and turned back into the wind.

They stopped often now as Tjan searched more with instinct than eye for landmarks. Kael had no idea where they were; he could only follow and pray. They edged down the south rim of the pass eastward

to a crevice between two high rock walls. The narrow passage plunged downward for a good distance, shielded from the wind. The snow fell softly in the calm air, and they rested a few moments, grateful for the respite.

Somewhat renewed, they continued through the passageway until the walls fell away and the wind found them again. But it was a lighter wind, and the storm itself seemed to have eased. Shaking with fatigue and relief, believing that the worst was over, Kael felt his spirits begin to mount again.

Cutting across the rear slope of the mountain, they began to descend slowly, zig-zagging, working their way down. The knee-deep snow gradually dropped to ankle depth, and no longer did Kael need to pull each foot up, lift it high, and shove it forward against the weight of the snow. His relief mixed with grim satisfaction, and relaxing his concentration a little, he looked about him.

There was a strange isolation in the cloud with its soft fall of snow, a silence that closed in but was not oppressive. The feeling of shadowy wonders lurking just beyond his view wove a spell; and Kael, growing careless in its hold, took an inattentive step, slid across an icy patch of ground, and fell flat on his back. He lay there, motionless, the breath knocked out of him.

Tjan walked back, stared down at him for a moment, shook his head, and smiled. "You really should use a sled if you want to travel that way."

"Very funny," Kael drawled. He sat up and wiped his gloves on his coat.

"How much more of this nightmare?"

"Well . . ." Tjan frowned as he threw a glance over his shoulder. "When we get past the slide, two hours should do it."

"Slide?" Kael asked in a horrified whisper.

"Shale. Tricky stuff. One of those bad places I warned you about." He gave Kael a rueful grin. "We're lucky, the worst of the storm's behind us. We should make it all right if we take it easy."

Kael groaned and pushed himself to his feet. The Orranian moved behind him and brushed the debris from his back, then wheeled and continued diagonally down the slope.

It was still snowing lightly as they stopped beside a great slash in the mountainside—a river of shale covered with a thin blanket of new snow, fifty meters wide where they stood, but flaring wider below them, and reaching as high as he could see up the cloud-veiled mountain.

"Can't we go around?" Kael asked, though he knew the answer.

"It begins up in the cliffs," Tjan said simply, "and ends down there a few hundred meters. So does the mountain."

"More cliffs?" Kael asked, a shiver sliding down his back.

"Five hundred meters, sheer."

Kael blew a sigh and swallowed.

"It's the last obstacle to a warm fire," Tjan said, turning his back to Kael. "Untie my rope, will you?" He began to cinch up his pack straps.

Kael pulled his right glove off, released the hitches on the coiled rope and whipped the snarls out. Tjan took one end, walked it out and returned, looping the end under his arms.

"We use that rock," he said, pointing to a jutting boulder behind them. "It's buried deep. Should belay me if I go for a ride." He ran his hand through his hair, replaced his cap, and wiped his face with his sleeve.

"Well, into the devil's mouth." As Tjan walked toward the edge, Kael looped the rope around the rock and secured it.

The scout moved out slowly, carefully, feeling each step. Little falls of rocks and snow slid away from his feet and rolled, building into rivulets that merged and cascaded down the slide. He was almost to the other side when his left foot suddenly gave way. Struggling to catch himself, he rammed his right foot hard into the shale. The surface trembled a moment and then began to slip. Patches broke loose above him, following and foaming like a gray and white surf. He turned and threw his arm over his face as he went down. Rolling, tumbling . . . in seconds he was lost in boiling dust and rock.

Horror held Kael motionless. He could feel the ground throb beneath his feet and the air vibrate with the continuous, rumbling thunder. Helpless, he watched as the seconds seemed to stretch into eternity.

And then it was over, dying as it had been born, the thunder fading from the mountain—a low, rumbling echo sounding in the cliffs and valley below. The wind moaned as it curled the dust above the slide channel. So quiet . . .

"Tjan?"

Kael came alive all at once. He ran to the edge of the shale, his eyes following the rope down until it disappeared into the settling dust. He couldn't see! He couldn't see a damned thing! Reaching out, he gripped the rope. It was tight, no sign of movement from the other end.

Tjan? The fear that rode Kael's probe eased as he touched the scout. Unconscious, not dead.

But even as the dust settled around Tjan, another cloud boiled up below him and followed a low

rumble down the slope. Holding his breath, Kael listened, frozen by the fading sound. He had to get the scout off that slide; there was no telling when the whole mountain would let go again.

He studied the area between them. The slide was fluid, slips rilling even as he watched. It would be suicide to try crossing the treacherous surface without a line—and he had none. He would have to go down the rope. But would it hold them both? He cast the question aside as the earth throbbed again. He had to try—there was no other way.

Before fear could stop him, he moved. Quickly, he tested the knot and then, grasping the rope with both hands, stepped off. He'd gone almost four meters before he felt the vibration beneath his feet. He moved on a step, slid, stopped, waited without breathing as a trickle of rocks rolled away from him. He dared another step, and another. Five, six, then stopped again.

He forced himself to breathe, felt the sweat cool under his arms as the wind gusted around him. Suddenly, without warning, his right foot slid away from him, sending a shower of rocks flying below. He went down on his knee and hung there, motionless, too terrified to move.

"Hold up, Kael. I'm . . . I'm all right." The words were a whisper, almost lost in the wind.

"Tjan?" Kael called over his shoulder, as he strained to see.

"I'm okay. The fall took my wind . . . that's all."

The rope tightened as the scout pushed himself to his knees. He rested there a moment, hands on his thighs, his head bowed. Then he looked up and again, waved Kael back.

Cautiously, the telepath retraced his steps. Back on solid ground, he turned again to watch. Tjan pushed

himself to his feet and stood swaying, as he wiped the blood and dirt from his face; then very slowly he continued his trek.

Kael covered the distance with him in his mind, feeling the pain, fear, and shock that the scout was fighting; as well as the man's absolute refusal to give in to them. When that resolve began to weaken, Kael's probe filled the scout's mind with renewed determination and the assurance that he had the strength and the will to make it.

Somehow, Tjan kept going. The last steps he took were made on willpower alone, but he was finally across. Without hesitation, he pushed himself to a rock, untied the rope from himself, and lashed it to the boulder. Checking it for strength and holding, he then beckoned the Vondorian to come.

Kael looked at the slide and felt his fear run in cold sweat down his back. Forcing himself forward, he gripped the rope. Already the earth was trembling. He looked back at Tjan, and the scout gestured for him to come again.

Getting one leaden foot to move, Kael placed it, felt the shale settle under it. *Come on, man, move*, he told himself. *Tjan did it when he was half conscious*. Forcing his hand open, he slid it across the rope, locked his grip, and stepped out again.

Minutes passed. With his head down, seeing nothing but gray rock, Kael minced his way. Then, miraculously, it was over. He had made it. Looking up in triumph, he turned to the scout.

"Tjan?"

There was no response. Hurrying to the injured man, he gently stretched the body out. For a long moment Kael mentally scanned him, and then sat back on his heels.

So . . . Not critical yet, but he had lost a lot of blood and his shock was deepening. If he didn't

receive aid quickly, the Orranian could be in serious trouble.

Kael frowned and looked about him at the rocks and snow—he had to get the scout out of the storm. The wind whistled, sending a blast of sleet into Kael's face and across that of the unconscious scout.

No shelter here . . .

Forcing himself to his feet, Kael dropped his pack and removed Tjan's. Carefully wrapping the injured man in the two bedrolls, Kael wedged the rest of their gear in a hollow under a rock. Working the scout onto his back, Kael set out down the mountain again.

Premature darkness brought on by the storm was settling over the mountain as he reached the timberline. He sought a suitable shelter, settling on the first thick stand of pine and brush.

Laying Tjan partly under a large deadfall, Kael turned to another dead tree nearby and cut a one-meter section from its thickest part with the laser. Dragging it back to the scout, he made another cut lengthwise and the log split. The dry, dead wood inside smoked as the two halves fell apart. A few more trips to the old tree, and he had both a warm fire burning and a small pile of firewood stacked against Tjan's deadfall.

Working pine boughs under the scout, Kael then formed a makeshift shelter of the same above him. With heated, well-padded rocks behind the injured man's back and the fire before him, the Orranian was as warm and dry as it was possible to make him. Only when he had done all he could did Kael allow himself time to sit and rest.

Throughout the night, he reheated the rocks, fed the fire, and waited. The sleet turned to snow during the night, but it had stopped by morning. The wind continued, however, and the clouds hung heavy

around them. Kael busied himself gathering more wood, building a pile without laser markings. It was midday when the scout finally roused.

"Are you thirsty?" Kael asked.

Tjan nodded, confusion showing through eyes still glazed with shock. "You . . . brought me here?" It was a question holding a dozen questions.

"You weren't walking much," Kael answered with a sympathetic grin. He held the canteen, lifting the scout's head as he sipped. The young man's eyes closed and, sighing, he dropped back onto his pine bed. A few seconds later when he looked up, the dullness was gone.

His glance took in the pine shelter, the fire, and then Kael. "Not bad," he murmured. "Might make a scout of you, yet." There was approval in the voice, but a question behind his eyes.

Kael smiled, stood up, and slapped the dirt from his kilt and pants. "I had to leave the packs. Probably ought to go get them. Will you be all right if I leave for a while?" Kael waited for Tjan's nod and then went on. "I'll build up the fire, and you get some more rest."

After stoking the fire and placing wood within Tjan's reach, Kael set the scout's short sword and belt beside him. "I won't be long. You rest, now." He handed Tjan the canteen and studied him a moment. Then reaching across, he pulled the blankets back up around the scout's shoulder and left.

The wind died as Kael started back down the mountain. Overhead, the heavy gray clouds slid apart, revealing patches of blue. Then suddenly, like a laser's flash, the sun blazed the whitened mountain. Raising a hand to shade his eyes, Kael squinted against the glare. Off to his right, cascading under a mist-born rainbow, a stream tumbled.

A large bird broke from the trees below and flew up the mountainside into the sunlit air where it circled lazily. Kael watched it as he walked, fascinated by the effortless soaring, forgetting for a moment the hazards of the terrain. A half-buried root reminded him rudely as, catching his toe, he pitched forward and slid on his side through a patch of snow-covered brush.

With an exasperated shake of the head, he got to his feet and slapped the snow from his clothes. He boosted the packs higher on his shoulders, took a couple of steps and stopped, as something whistled past his ear, raising the hair on the back of his head. He looked up to see the bird, with giant wings whipping the air, lift itself back into the sky.

Startled by the bird's pass, he watched it warily as it circled above him, but it didn't drop again. He shrugged and continued on. He had taken hardly a dozen steps when a blow from behind sent him sprawling. He rolled to his side, drawing the laser as he moved. The bird was diving again, and its talons, at least ten centimeters long, extended beneath the black legs.

For an instant the laser's brightness glowed high on the gray breast. Then the wings flailed as the bird plummeted to the ground almost at Kael's feet. He scrambled back out of the way as the bird thrashed about. The brilliant light touched again, this time severing the gray head. The great body quivered and lay still.

Kael nudged it warily with his foot, and finding no life, picked it up. He whistled in amazement as the black-tipped wings stretched out, for they measured almost two and a half meters; and the body was well-meated, heavier even than he had imagined.

"I'll bet you're one tough old bird," he murmured

wryly, "but tough or not, you're an improvement on jerky."

Tjan was sitting up, his back against the log, when Kael came into camp. "Ah, you're up. How do you feel?" The telepath dropped the packs and the bird beside the fire and moved around it to squat before the scout.

"I'm a little sore," Tjan returned, a half-smile tugging at his lips.

"I'll bet."

Tjan's eyes slid past Kael to the bird. "How in . . . How'd you get the mace?"

Kael glanced over his shoulder and then back. "The bird? Luck, I guess. The fool thing was playing games with me. I clobbered it on one of its passes."

Tjan frowned, unasked questions again filling his mind. "Clobbered . . . ?"

"The dumb thing ran into my sword."

Tjan gave him a curious look. "The peakmace doesn't usually play, and it's rarely dumb." He stared at the bird, his frown deepening.

Kael stood up. "There's a brook over that way." He jerked a thumb to the right. "I'll get supper going, and then maybe we can clean you up a bit. If you walk in on someone like this, you just might scare him."

Tjan nodded soberly. "I think I'd like that. I feel like I've been stuck together with pitch."

Kael grinned at him, built up the fire, picked up the bird and headed toward the stream.

As the air warmed in the sunshine, the melting snow ran in rivulets down the sloping ground. Patches of green began to appear again. Putting the bird on to roast, Kael turned to Tjan, carefully cleaning and debriding his wounds, while the scout endured the ministration in patient silence.

Although the wounds were multiple and painful,

none were seriously deep, and there had been enough bleeding, especially in the deeper ones, to clean them. Infection didn't appear to be a problem. The long laceration that reached from forehead to jaw, narrowly missing his left eye, was a bad one. It would leave an ugly scar. Kael sighed inwardly. It would be so easy to have it erased on the *Seeker*.

Leaving the scout wrapped in the bedrolls, Kael gathered up the stained woolen clothing and went back to the stream. He returned a little later and draped the garments over the brush near the fire to dry. Tjan was already asleep.

In the combined warmth of the fire and afternoon sun, with the weariness of the hours behind him, Kael, too, napped.

When he awoke later, the cloud cover had returned and the air was chill. He built up the fire and checked the bird. As he waited for Tjan to awaken, he thought about the past few days. It seemed like a dream—surely if he tried, he could waken himself, and he'd be back on the ship with Laedry and the others. A groan from the scout brought him back to reality . . .

The bird was tough and stringy as he had expected, but it was fresh meat, the first they'd had since the storm. Even Tjan ate a good portion. Although the scout was still weak, his determination to get on to the valley was high—as was Kael's own. Laedry's surveillance of Rath and his soldiers was interrupted by the storm. It was anyone's guess where the war party might be.

As twilight faded into darkness, Tjan grew more quiet and thoughtful. Kael watched him, wondering if he ought to be monitoring. Somehow, he hadn't felt like probing since his return. Tjan had enough problems sorting out the confusion in his mind as it was. The questions had multiplied with the storm, and all

that had happened. To owe your life to a man who held so much mystery, to come to grips with logic and feelings—it was a struggle Kael didn't envy. Maybe, if he could get Tjan talking, take his mind off all that had happened . . . He tossed a twig into the fire.

"Is she pretty?" he asked, his smile a teasing question.

"Who?" Tjan glanced at him blankly, his mind taking a moment to focus.

"The girl. Must be a girl to warrant such deep thought."

Tjan smiled and shook his head.

"Do you have one?"

The scout nodded. "In Tae-Sor. Do you?"

Kael shook his head. "Nobody special."

"Laniya has a couple of friends. If you like, maybe we can get together when we get back."

"Sounds interesting."

There was silence again, but it was warmer, almost friendly. Kael waited.

"You know, I like to go home," Tjan murmured suddenly. He looked beyond the fire into the darkness, a little embarrassed by his revelation. "I guess we have about the closest family in all Sor."

He didn't go on, and Kael didn't know quite how to reply. "Have you been a scout long?" he said finally.

"Since I was fifteen . . . three years now. This is my first year on my own."

"Your home in Minth?" Tjan nodded. "Do you get to visit there often?"

"About once a year."

"Have any brothers and sisters?"

"Three brothers—ten-year-old twins and a little guy, a year and a half. I have two sisters, too. Chala's sixteen and Lani just turned twelve." He squinted

against the encroaching darkness and grinned sideways at Kael. "Sometimes they're more a trial than a blessing."

Kael nodded. "I know what you mean."

"Do you have 'em, too?"

"I have a brother older and one younger; and I have a sixteen-year-old sister, too. She's twice as smart as I am, but I'll never tell her."

Tjan smiled. "Doesn't pay to, does it, not if you have to live around them. Do they all live in Dakor?"

Kael kicked a branch-end into the fire. "The kids are home with Mother. Father's on a trip right now." All true—all misleading. Damn, but he hated to lie.

"Have you ever seen a Nisja, Tjan?" he asked, changing the subject. "Are they really much of a threat through here?"

Tjan hesitated, and his eyes clouded. "I've only seen one—the one a spiny got, and I'm afraid he was more dead than alive. But Channon surprised a couple near the Morantja just after the spring thaw a month ago. He killed one of them and wounded the other, but that one got away. We had them in the pass half a dozen times last summer."

"You ever see their leader?"

"Hellwalker? Once. They went through Minth on their way south." Tjan's eyes seemed to focus on some unseen face in the darkness. His head tilted a little as though studying it.

"He's a strange one," he said finally, looking back at the Vondorian. "You could just about call him albino, except for that touch of green in his eyes. Nature can sure produce some oddities, can't it?" He shook his head, stared into the fire a moment, and then shrugged.

"He does seem one to reckon with. His followers almost seem to worship him. You'd think he was

some kind of god. Hard to believe that thinking people could feel that way about a man, isn't it?"

Kael nodded slowly. *Hellwalker*. So that's what they called him. Well, the name was fitting enough. If anyone walked a hell in this life, it had to be Rath. The thought brought the old gnawing in the pit of his stomach, and he forced it away.

The scout had lapsed into silence again and was idly stirring the fire. The loneliness that waited in the silence seemed to grow in the alien night. Not yet ready to accept the feeling, Kael tried once more.

"Do you think there's going to be war, Tjan?" he asked soberly, playing the role. "Seems like everyone's talking about it these days. Do you think they'll really try it—to come up in force against us?"

"In time, sure. They didn't leave the plains to stay in the desert forever. That sun down there is going to make their old homes pretty inviting. Sure, they'll come. Question is when." His voice was tired and there was a deeper weariness behind it.

Kael got to his feet and threw some wood from the pile on the fire. "I think we'd better get some rest. Can I get you anything?"

"No, thanks, but hold on a minute; I'll give you back your blanket." He drew the covers back and began to separate them.

"Keep it." Kael dropped the wood on the fire and turned back to him. "You need it more than I do." He paused, hearing his words echoed in memory. He could almost feel Tjan tuck the scarf into his coat. "The fire's warm and my jacket'll be fine. I'll use yours if I need it." He leaned over and drew the blanket back up again.

"Humph. Give me your bed and tuck me in, too?" The scout smiled sardonically. "People will talk."

Kael gave him a dry smile in return. "I'm sure

you'll let them. Get some sleep. I'll see you in the morning."

Dragging a small deadfall to the fire, Kael returned to his seat by the log. He stretched out and leaned back, his feet edging the coals. He lay there for a long time, thinking, listening to Tjan's soft snoring. The sound was almost soothing in the stillness. He roused himself finally and called the shuttle. Laedry was waiting.

How's the scout?

He'll be all right, Kael replied. He's planning on taking off in the morning. I don't know . . . Guess we'll see how he's doing then.

It's going to clear tomorrow. You should have plenty of sun.

Good. We can use it. What's new with Rath?

We don't know. The mountains to the south are still under the clouds. I'd imagine they're on the move, though. They've been getting rain, not snow. I wouldn't be surprised to find them close to the valley by now.

Do you think it's going to be bad?

The scout's from there, isn't he? Laedry responded, reading behind Kael's question.

His family is there.

Let's hope you can get to Rath first. Laedry was quiet a moment, and then the prompting came:

Be careful, Kael. Don't get any more involved than you have to. There was no preaching in the counsel, only concern.

I know. Kael returned the thought without irritation. Anything else?

Your father's been pretty worried.

A remembered sorrow touched Kael again and he swallowed. *Tell him I'm all right. We picked a good man. He'll get me through. I'll check in tomorrow.*

Right.

Kael put the booster away and leaned back against the log. *Don't get involved.* Just what did they expect him to do? Leave the scout strung up on the slide? Well, it wouldn't be a problem much longer. A few more days and the man's usefulness would be over, and they'd be going their own ways. At least he had paid the scout back a little for using him—given him a story to tell in his old age. He smiled to himself, pulled the coat's collar up, and hunched down to sleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

If I rest any longer," Tjan snorted, reaching for his belt, "you'll wind up carrying me." He pushed himself to his feet, wincing, until he saw Kael frown again. "Well . . . you coming or aren't you?"

"I'm coming," Kael grumbled. "I still think—"

"Look, if I can't handle it, I'll stop," Tjan interrupted. "We've nothing now but foothills and it's mostly downgrade. You're even packing my gear. I don't deserve to be a scout, if I can't make it with that much help. Let's move. We make any time at all, we'll be home for lunch."

Kael sighed, shook his head. "Okay, but don't push yourself. An hour or two's not going to make that much difference."

"You think not?" Tjan's eyebrow lifted. "Listen, pal, your cooking might be better'n starving, but it's sure not my mom's."

"Ah, come on," Kael teased. "And after my great feed last night."

"Yeah, especially after that! Look what it did to me. I'm a wreck." He gave Kael a lopsided grin.

Although the questions still brewed in the scout's mind, the apprehension was gone, and his thoughts centered on that home only hours away. With the sun

warm on his shoulders, heady with anticipation, and reasonably sure he would not be overheard, Tjan rattled on in a low joking chatter as they walked. It was impossible for Kael not to be caught up in his mood. The telepath even found himself looking forward to meeting the redhead's family.

They were back in thick forest now and only rarely glimpsed the tiny valley below. Tjan led them down the mountain, moving left at times to follow one ridge, then right to follow another.

"Why don't we go straight down?" Kael asked during one rest period. "Seems like it would be a lot quicker."

"Deadfall below. We stay away from it if we can, especially the large patches in the swales. The sun devils thrive in that decay."

Kael shivered as he did a mental replay. Sun devil: viper, black and gold banded, central and peripheral neurotoxin, death within three minutes. No anti-venin.

"No wonder you don't get home very often."

"Oh . . ." Tjan grinned. "The trail's not bad. It's the shortcuts you have to watch."

They headed left again, caught another ridge and followed it down to the edge of a long matted area of deadfall, overgrown with brush and thorn thickets and shin-deep fern. Tjan stopped a little way off and looked both ways. He hesitated a moment and then nodded.

"This way," he said, gesturing to Kael to follow. "Trail gets overgrown in spite of our cleaning it out each year."

"Thought you said you avoided these places," Kael muttered uneasily.

"When we can. This one we have to go through as it runs the length of the valley. Just watch your step.

The snakes aren't usually aggressive, but in that undergrowth you can't see much. Watch for a flash of color or a wave in the fern—and move slowly. We'll be all right once we're in the meadow on the far side."

Tjan moved into the growth before Kael could say more, and the Vondorian followed, staying on the scout's heels. Almost without thinking Kael slipped the pen-laser from his belt and held it hidden but ready in his hand. The air was strangely still, as though the forest were holding its breath, and around them the smell of damp, rotting vegetation hung heavy. Twice Tjan stopped and waited, and then moved on.

On a denuded patch of dirt halfway across, the scout paused, looked carefully around, and then stretched. Kael dropped to his knees, surprised at how totally exhausted he was. Everything ached, from his eyes to his arches. Flexing his back muscles, he drank in great gulps of air, hardly tasting the foulness of it. Tjan stood relaxed, breathing deeply, his eyes warily scanning the area.

A few minutes later, rested and alert, they continued on. The rest of the patch was crossed without incident, and they moved on into the clean-smelling grass of the meadow. Across the clearing near the trees, a doe looked up, startled. Flapping her tail, she bounced off, followed by her twin fawns. In seconds they were lost in the sanctuary of the surrounding forest.

Kael drew in the clean air in deep breaths as he watched the animals flee. "You know, I'm just about hungry enough to eat a whole one." He nodded after the deer.

"You'd have to catch her first," Tjan said, smiling. "Besides, could you do that to those fawns? Patience,

pal. Home's just over that hill. A few minutes and you'll get some real food." His face brightened with renewed anticipation and he strode happily across the meadow.

Kael wheeled into quick step behind him, reattaching the laser as he walked. He glanced down to see if the weapon had mounted properly and almost bumped into Tjan, who had suddenly frozen in mid-step.

Even before he saw it, Kael felt the snake—felt it centered in the fear that ballooned out from Tjan, that held him hardly breathing, staring past his half-raised leg at the thing that reared up before it.

Black tongue flicking, the snake wove slowly back and forth, its gold stripes shining in the sun. Watching it sway, almost hypnotized by the movement, Kael slowly lifted his hand, slid it across his belt, and opened his fingers. The mini laser gleamed dully in the sun as he aimed and pressed. A bright spot touched the snake's head and left a glowing hole where the mouth had been. The snake hung a moment and then fell, writhing in the grass.

For a moment Tjan stared at the twisting form and then slowly turned, focusing his numbed gaze on Kael and then on the weapon that the Vondorian held in his outstretched hand.

Kael heaved a sigh and bit the side of his lip. Putting the laser away, he walked around Tjan and the snake and stamped out the smoldering grass. As though caught in some slow-motion nightmare, the scout turned with him, watching him, his battered face paled to a greenish-gray.

The fire out, Kael touched the scout gently on the shoulder. "Come on, let's go."

Tjan took a step and then paused. "They're never

here," he said bewilderedly. "They don't like the meadows."

Kael moved ahead, his hand on Tjan's shoulder, encouraging him on. Beyond the clearing they found a well-trodden game trail.

"Is this the way?" Kael asked.

Tjan stared dully at the trail, then back at Kael. He blinked a couple of times and swayed unsteadily. "I think I'd better sit down," he murmured. And then he was on the ground, his head against his knee, his shoulders shaking uncontrollably.

Kael dropped the packs and sank down beside him. He looked back, past the scout, to the peaceful meadow and shivered. A few minutes passed and Tjan's shaking subsided. Sitting back, he drew in a couple of deep breaths and turned to Kael.

"Thanks." He managed a half-smile. "Seems I'm saying that a lot, lately."

Kael looked at him and shook his head. A twitch caught in the scout's cheek and he turned away again, afraid to voice what he knew he must. The telepath waited.

"Kael?" It came at last.

"Hmmm?"

"What's going on?" Tjan stared at him, his eyes as dark and troubled as his voice.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean . . . that . . . that thing you used. That's not Sor. And it's not Nisja, either. Where'd you get it?"

"Oh . . . that," Kael said, his voice as innocent as he could make it. "It belongs to my father. It's been in the family for years."

"Years!" Tjan's voice broke on the word. "Years, hell! No one's got that kind of thing around here, and

you know it. You'd better give me more than that . . . friend."

Kael winced at the sarcasm in Tjan's voice. He could feel the scout's apprehension mount as a host of old suspicions and half-formed fears came flooding back. The questions multiplied. The Vondorian's sudden appearance with no telltale tracks, his being alone in hostile country, his unmarked clothing, his fire of wet wood in the middle of a snowstorm, his blanket that held heat in and moisture out, his clobbering of a peakmace on the wing, and . . . his tiny cylinder that spouted death—questions and more questions . . .

Kael pushed a knuckle against his lips and tried to think. If he blew his cover, the whole thing would be out. Would Tjan understand? Would he even listen? What if the scout went to his superiors? What would they do then? And the Federation? If the mission were aborted, it could create all kinds of bloodshed and chaos—problems that could reverberate for centuries. He rubbed the back of his neck.

If he said nothing—just got up and left . . . ?What would Tjan think then? But where would he go? He shuddered, remembering the snake. And Tjan . . . ? The man didn't look like he had the strength to walk ten meters, let alone ten kilometers. Between his injuries and this shock, he was near collapse.

"Truth, Kael? Twice I'm in your debt, honor bound. What am I bound to?" Tjan's voice was low and pleading, and Kael could feel his gaze, full of fear, but determined and unwavering. Somehow, in spite of it all, the scout still trusted him, still wanted to believe . . .

Kael felt a cold wash of shame. Damn! Why did Tjan have to be that way? It made it so much harder. He just couldn't do it anymore. He couldn't lie to him

again—and he couldn't walk out, either. *God help me!* He squeezed his eyes shut and heaved a long sigh. *God help us both.* He looked back at Tjan, met his gaze squarely a moment, and then nodded.

"I'm not from Dakor, Tjan," he began softly. "I'm not Sor. I'm not even Orranian. I'm from a world out there." He pointed to a spot in the sky over Tjan's left shoulder. "I'm attached to a starship that's been sent here to find a fugitive—another man from my world."

For a moment Tjan sat frozen, his mouth agape, forgetting even to breathe; and then wonder filled his eyes and his mind.

"Guardians?" he whispered, his voice tinged with awe. "Starmen?"

"I'm no Guardian." Kael almost chuckled in spite of himself. "But I am from out there."

The scout's mouth closed and he swallowed. "The same ones . . . those that . . ."

"I'm from Vondore. We're a member of the Federation, but we're not the ones who brought your people here. They were from Thorm II."

"But you know about us?" Tjan continued, his voice still full of wonder.

Kael nodded. "Your history's recorded."

"All these years with no contact. We thought we were forgotten."

Kael shook his head. "Not a chance, Tjan. Policy just forbade our interference."

"Interference?"

"If we'd stuck around, we would have changed you, stripped you of your own identity. We'd only rob ourselves if we did that."

Tjan stared at him, struggling to sift through the confusion in his mind. "You helped us once," he murmured.

"Your people were alone then, a handful in a disabled ship. Your homeworld had been destroyed and they had nowhere to go. The Federation simply made sure they had a chance to survive."

Tjan nodded slowly. A thoughtful frown creased his brows. "Did they ever find any of the other ships?"

Kael looked down. "There's a record of one other ship being located, but the life support had failed."

"Then, we are *all* that are left . . . ?"

The Vondorian nodded sympathetically. "But you *are* left." He looked around. "And it's not such a bad world, is it?"

"Humph . . ." The scout shook his head disgustedly. "If we keep up the way we're going, this one'll end up as empty as the old one." He looked back at Kael, remembering something. "You mentioned a fugitive?"

"A Vondorian we know as Rath. I think you call him Hellwalker."

"Hellwalker! You've come to take Hellwalker? You, alone?" The scout's voice went up half an octave. He rolled to his feet and slapped the dirt from his kilt, grimacing with pain as the action found half-healed wounds. "Shurn, Kael! That's suicide!"

"Not necessarily," Kael said quietly. "I'm not coming in blind." He rubbed his jaw. "I'm sorry about leading you on. I didn't want to, but I had no other choice. We were not supposed to involve any of you, but I needed help to get through these mountains." He shrugged. "You happened to be handy."

Tjan was quiet for a time and then nodded again. "You know, the chances aren't good . . . but I'll back you. I'll have to get word to my superiors, though." A bleak smile touched the corner of his mouth. "I do owe you a couple."

Kael got to his feet. "You don't owe me anything. The debt's mine. If I'd tried to take these mountains alone, I'd have been dead days ago. As for Rath . . ." He shook his head. "Rath is Vondorian and under Federation law. He's our problem—my problem. Besides, I couldn't take you with me if I wanted to. I have orders to keep you out of it, remember?"

"Seems like I'm already in," Tjan returned, his eyebrows lifting meaningfully. "And Sor does have an account of its own to settle with your Rath."

"I know. But the Federation has first jurisdiction. Rath's action here is a Federation crime, and he has to answer to that law if order is to be maintained in the galaxy. Don't worry, Tjan, he'll be put away."

"You're going to take him alive?" Tjan asked incredulously.

"If possible. It could save a lot of bloodshed and future problems. Once he knows I'm here—if there is any reason left in him—he'll cooperate."

Tjan was quiet again and Kael continued. "I've got to have your word, Tjan, that you'll keep all this to yourself. It's vital. If it gets to your authorities, there could be all kinds of trouble. There are no diplomatic relations set up between Orran and the Federation to handle such things, and we don't have time to negotiate them. Rath's on the move."

The scout started, his face turning white. "Minth?"

"They're headed for the Morantja."

"How close?" Tjan asked, his voice a cold whisper.

"I don't know. We lost them in the storm."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I had orders," Kael said, swallowing.

"Orders, hell, Kael! My family's in Minth and a lot of other good people. You know that. Why in hell didn't you tell me?"

"What could you have done? Who could you have told out here in this wilderness? We were headed toward the valley as fast as—"

"Where *did* you spot Hellwalker last?" Tjan cut in, his tone a frosty, clipped command.

"About four days from the pass. Tjan, please. I need a chance with him. He can call off this war; we might be able to stop the whole thing without any bloodshed. Just help me get to him."

Tjan's dark eyes narrowed as he regarded Kael. "And if you fail? If he won't . . . ?"

Kael sighed. "I have orders to execute him here. There's a backup team standing by if I'm unable to do it alone."

"And the Nisja?"

"Hellwalker has manipulated them." Kael felt Tjan's stare. "He has his methods," he said simply. "If Rath dies a hero and his tampering is not corrected, his command may fragment for a time, but they'll breed trouble as long as they have the means to do it."

Tjan was quiet, and Kael waited, uneasy in the silence.

"Then it's war either way, unless you can convince Hellwalker?" Kael nodded. "You'll be needing help to get through the pass," Tjan said grimly.

His shoulders slumping in relief, Kael swallowed and nodded. "That I would appreciate." Their eyes met for a moment, and then Kael turned and looked up the trail.

"How much farther to the village?"

"Couple of hours," Tjan said, glancing at the sky. "Just about lunchtime." Catching the question in Kael's eyes as the alien turned back, Tjan sighed. "Sure, the invitation's still open."

The forest ended abruptly, leaving them blinking in the warm, open sunlight. Kael hesitated, went on a few steps, and then stopped, captivated by the beauty of the scene before him.

The valley lay like a Garan scenic—uncluttered, serene, toned in quiet peace. Long and narrow, maybe eight kilometers from foothill to mountain, it was a patchwork of spring-green hay fields and wild grass and plowed, rich brown earth. A tree-lined river meandered through it, beckoning with cool promise. A perfect place to escape to, Kael thought wistfully. Sighing, he hurried to catch up with the scout.

Tjan had been silent since their talk by the meadow. It was a studied silence, contemplative—as if he were trying to sort out and reassemble himself. So much had happened in such a short time that it was almost more than his mind could handle. But at least his fear of Kael was gone.

The grass-covered ground was soggy from the recent rain. As they moved onto a plowed patch, the soft sponge turned to a muddy, tenacious goo that sucked and clung to their feet. Tjan pushed on, hardly slackening his pace, and Kael, swearing at each leg-wrenching step, tried his best to keep up.

As they crossed again to more solid ground, the Vondorian quickened his pace and walked beside the scout again. It was then that he noticed Tjan's frown and uneasiness. He glanced about, wondering at the cause. All seemed peaceful and serene; even the air was calm and void of sound.

To the right ahead of them, stretching out from the grove of trees that hid the village, lay an empty, rail-fenced corral. The gate was open, pushed aside. Tjan's frown deepened as they drew nearer. And then without a word, he broke and trotted toward the

gateway. He was crouched there, studying the pitted trail that led out, when Kael caught up with him. Looking up at the Vondorian, he pushed himself to his feet.

"Last evening . . . the whole herd . . ." he muttered. He stared past Kael at the fields for a moment, the frown deepening as he slowly turned toward the grove of trees.

"Oh, Kael!" he groaned, and wheeling, raced for the village.



CHAPTER FIVE

Kael found Tjan slumped against a tree at the edge of the village clearing. Before him, towers of chimney-rock rose above mounds of charred, still-smoldering logs. Around the ruins sprawled the silent bodies of the villagers—large bodies and small.

Nausea constricted Kael's throat. He staggered, his legs suddenly having no strength. As the horror filled him, he shut his eyes, trying to blank out the sight, but it was implanted indelibly in his mind. Guilt filled him, the old soul-wrenching guilt he had fought for so long and had thought conquered. Guilt and its accompanying loneliness, back again. He wanted to run, to flee far from the village, from Tjan, from the planet. To lose himself, dissolve into nothingness. But his feet were leaden, rooted to the spot. He stood there, lost for a timeless moment as he fought with himself. A sigh from the scout caught, drew his attention.

Tjan. Oh, God. That poor man. He reached out hesitantly, placed a hand on the other's shoulder. The muscles tightened under his grip, and he felt the other stiffen.

"Tjan . . . ?"

No response.

"Tjan," he began again, knowing the scout's shock, that which he dreaded, knowing also that it had to be faced. "Where are they, Tjan? Which way?"

The scout's fist tightened and his knuckles turned white against the tree. He turned slowly to Kael, his eyes pleading, and the telepath winced as waves of anguish washed raw and painfully against him. Shielding against the scout's emotions, the Vondorian struggled to bring his own under control.

"Which way?" he asked once more.

Tjan's eyes dropped, and a groan was abruptly stifled. Setting his jaw, he led the way into the village, moving quickly past the wrecked homes, widely skirting the dead. As he rounded a large tree, he staggered and grabbed at a limb for support. Before him lay an infant, half a meter beyond its dead mother's outstretched hand.

A vise tightened around Kael's chest as he pushed Tjan on, away from the scene. They crossed the dirt road that divided the settlement and moved rapidly through the homes on the opposite side, almost reaching the edge of the village before Tjan paused.

The yard was fenced with a pale lavender flowering hedge. In the front left corner a fruit tree blossomed, its perfume hanging heavy on the still air. As they stood at the gate opening between the bushes, he felt Tjan draw back. Claspng him tightly on the shoulder, Kael walked with him into the yard.

Just inside the hedge on the right lay two young boys, their blond hair almost white in the sunlight. The nearer was face down, his tunic rent and stained with blood. Near his feet rested an army scout knife, a duplicate of Tjan's. The scout froze as he stared at them, and Kael could feel his trembling.

Struggling to maintain his control, Tjan turned

away from them only to see across the path the sprawled body of a copper-haired man in his middle years. The youth's eyes closed and the muscles tightened in his face. Abruptly, he straightened, drew Kael's hand from his shoulder, and crossed alone to his father. He stood above him for a long moment, the muscles working around his mouth. Then, dropping to his knees, he tenderly closed the staring eyes.

Pushing himself to his feet, he moved back across the yard to the twins. He knelt between them and tenderly turned the first to his back, wiped the hair from his forehead and the dirt and grass from his face and chest. Then taking the near hands of each boy, he brought them together in his own and held them tightly against his cheek. Releasing them at last, he stood up.

He hesitated, wavering as though unable to continue. And then, even as Kael started toward him, he slowly, reluctantly, turned toward the house. Near the burned porch lay a small form with flaming red hair; and beyond the toddler, half in, half out of the doorway, partially covered by the charred logs and smoking sod, lay a woman.

Tjan stumbled a couple of steps toward them, and then clutching his head with his hands, he swung away from the sight and lurched blindly back toward the gate. Kael reached him there as the scout went down on his knees, retching in agony.

Crouching beside him, Kael felt his own guilt swell until he feared it would strangle him. Questions without answers repeated themselves in his mind, sword-points of torture raising the horror and the guilt ever higher. *How could Rath do it? How could he kill all these people—women, children? Oh, God. What have I done?*

He felt Tjan shudder under his hand. From himself again, the scout drew him; and in that moment, Kael's thoughts focused. The rest were dead, but the scout was not. He couldn't help the others, but he could help the grief-stricken young man at his side. Some way, he would do it. Somehow . . .

Kael held the thought, a lever against his own insanity. Desperately, he forced back his own guilt and pain, wiping his mind clean of all thought and emotion. Concentrating all his energy in a mind-wipe, he felt his deeper powers take hold. For an instant he floated free, his mind in perfect vacuum. Everything seemed to stop in that instant—heartbeat, breathing, seeing, hearing, feeling, even time. He was—and he wasn't. And then he was, again.

He came back slowly through the emptiness, his mind in perfect psi-controlled order. Emotion was shackled, reason ruled. But even as the warp came, Kael knew it couldn't last. Such control was difficult to maintain under the best of conditions. He would have to hurry.

Directing his memory to release those items pertinent to the situation and his intent, he began his analysis. Thought after thought slid into view. Each he seized and quickly examined. As he drew out yet another, an idle phrase of Tjan's caught his attention: "I have two sisters, too. Chala's sixteen and Lani's just turned twelve."

Girls? He checked the yard again. There were no girls. He thought back across the village. There'd been men, women, boys, babes . . . but no girls!

"Tjan?" he whispered urgently. He moved in front of the scout and squeezed his shoulders. "Tjan, listen. Your sisters are not here—they're not in the yard."

The scout blinked at him, his eyes glazed with shock. "Your sisters are not here. Think, Tjan. There were no girls in the village, either."

Tjan frowned, his lips opening and closing. Kael gripped his shoulders and shook him. "Tjan! They've got the girls. The Nisja have the girls."

The scout winced under his grip. "Chala? Lani?" He looked around the yard and then back at the grass in front of him, bewildered, blinking as he tried to bring reason out of the chaos of his mind. And then he understood. In one motion he rose, turned, and glared helplessly at the southern mountains, his fists clenching and unclenching spasmodically.

"Ease up, Tjan," Kael said gently, pushing himself to his feet. "This happened last night—right?" Tjan grimaced, shutting Kael out as he pressed his hands against his temples.

"Any chance we can catch them?" Kael persisted.

"They have my sisters," Tjan murmured thickly, still hardly aware of the other's presence. The red lines of his lacerations stood out, vividly marking his ashen face. He looked at the telepath as though seeing him for the first time. "They've got them, Kael. Oh, God—what am I going to do? I've got to stop them!"

Kael nodded patiently and repeated his question. "Is there a chance we can catch them?"

Desperately tightening his fragile hold on himself, Tjan turned to study the mountains to the south. The muscles in his cheek began to twitch again and he closed his eyes. In a moment he lifted his head, determination again showing in his expression.

"With at least a dozen girls and our stock, they'll have to take the Morantja Trail around the Emperor." He stared at the long cliff-topped mountain immedi-

ately south of them. "It's a two-day trip from here to the top of that pass. If they camped during the night, we still might have a chance by going over the ridge." He looked back for Kael's response, but the telepath was already shouldering the packs.

"You'll have to leave them for now, Tjan. There's no time," the Vondorian said softly as the scout hesitated, his eyes sweeping the yard again.

"Give me a moment, Kael." Tjan crossed to the tiny redhead, bent and picked him up, cradling him in his arms as he smoothed the curly, blood-matted hair. Then, walking quickly to his mother's body, he laid the child beside her. Straightening his shoulders, he stood a moment gazing down at them, and then abruptly turned. With his eyes narrowed, he faced Kael, nodded, and led out.

They reached the base of the great mountain in less than an hour. Unlike the northern side of the valley, the Emperor rose sharply, devoid of foothills; and after the first several hundred meters of scraggly timber, it was bare of ground cover.

Without pausing to rest, Tjan attacked the slope, climbing diagonally westward until, weak and breathless, he was forced to halt. The ground was still wet, in places muddy from the rain. Again and again they sprawled, slid, and rolled. Kael was covered with scrapes and bruises, and many of Tjan's half-healed wounds had opened and were oozing blood.

Ignoring his own exhaustion, filled with hatred and fear and the need to hurry, Tjan had blanked all concern for the two of them. Kael worried as he felt his strength ebb under the weight of the double pack and the exertion of the climb, knowing that if they continued at such a pace one of them—or both—would surely collapse. He considered reasoning with

the scout, but then decided that it probably would do no good. Tjan was not in a mood to listen.

After resting a short time, they continued on, but Tjan settled back to a more moderate zig-zag course of climbing, apparently having come to an understanding with himself on his limitations.

The leafless brush, like the occasional ironwood tree, grew in deformed angles, rising upright from the steep slope. Still, their roots were deep and more than once they saved Kael from a fall. Long gray lizards sunned themselves on outcroppings of granite, and Kael eyed them uneasily. Once as he grasped upward for a handhold, he felt something rough squirm and slide from his fingers. Yanking back, he tumbled a few meters, caught himself, and looked up to see Tjan carefully making his way toward him.

"The lizards aren't poisonous," the scout assured him as they rested a moment. "Black scorpions up here are, though. They don't like each other—the lizards and the scorpions. You won't find them together; so be glad it's the scabies you've brushed."

The climb was affecting them both now. Tjan was pale and dripping with sweat, and he wore an expression of rigid endurance. Only his eyes reflected the darkness still within him. Kael, too, was exhausted, each breath an effort in the thin air. Still, the fear of facing his guilt with no possibility of restoration and the knowledge that Tjan needed him kept him going. Each rest period grew longer, each climb became a contest between mind and body. And the hours passed.

They had been resting again, silent, too tired to talk, when the scout looked up to meet Kael's gaze. He flashed a grim smile and shoved himself to his feet. "Better give me my pack, Kael," he said, facing

his companion who was struggling with the load, trying to stand.

The Vondorian shook his head and boosted the load into place. "No, I'm doing fine." He nodded ahead and waved the scout on with his hand. "Are we going over those cliffs?" he asked, falling into step. His voice didn't quite conceal his apprehension. Like a box the mountaintop rose above them in sheer slices of granite, seamed together by jagged vertical crevices.

"The crown's been climbed," Tjan stated flatly, "but not by amateurs. We'll go up a little farther and then circle on around the west end." Kael breathed an audible sigh of relief and Tjan glanced back. "Hang on, the worst of the climb is about over."

It was evening when they stopped. Below them the pass was already half shadowed by the setting sun. Tjan took a seat and immediately began a systematic survey of the region. Kael sat down beside him and tried to do a little scanning of his own, although he soon found he could see very little in the timbered gap between the mountains.

"Where will they come?" he hesitantly asked the scout, not wanting to interrupt his search. For a moment, Tjan didn't answer; but then as Kael resigned himself to wait in silence, the Orranian spoke.

"If you sight down that ridge of the saddle into the trees about halfway to the mountain opposite us, you'll see the river. The trail follows it."

"Any signs of a camp?" Kael asked hopefully.

The scout continued to silently study the route, shading his eyes against the reflecting sunglow. Kael waited, knowing the other would speak when he was ready. Suddenly Tjan straightened and then leaned

forward again, as though focusing in on a section. A bitter smile caught at his lips and he gestured Kael forward, still not taking his eyes from the area.

"They're there, Kael. There. See the smoke down there at the foot of the final ascent?" He pointed his finger over Kael's shoulder. "It's almost hidden in the trees."

Kael's mind tingled with an odd excitement as he leaned forward, straining to see. It was impossible—just too far for him to make out anything. But if Tjan saw it, it was there. He'd bet his life on it.

"I'll have to take your word for it," he said, turning back to the scout. "What now?" He waited expectantly, ready to move on the scout's order.

But the command didn't come. Tjan's face merely tightened a little as he glanced at the darkening sky and then back at the Nisja campsite.

"It'll be dark before we could make timber and I'm not too familiar with this side of the mountain. I'm afraid we'll have to bed down here and wait for daylight. It will take most of the morning for them to ascend the pass and we'll be in the saddle long before that."

Bitterness silenced the scout again, but the pain of that decision was intense enough to be felt without a probe. Tortured by the imagined brutalities that he feared were taking place in the raider camp, haunted by the remembered scenes of carnage and destruction, Tjan's whole soul cried out for action. Only his soldier's discipline held him to a reasoned course. Feeling the scout's struggle, Kael could but marvel at the courage and strength of the young frontiersman.

Wrapping themselves in their blankets, they stretched out at the base of a granite outcropping. They didn't speak, but for a long time they didn't

sleep, either. Kael could feel the tightness, the horror and loneliness and fear that kept Tjan awake. It was almost as real as the guilt and misery he carried within himself. If only he could somehow ease some of the other's burden . . . He sighed and turned.

"Tjan?" he whispered softly, but as the scout faced him, Kael hesitated. Words seemed so inadequate, so shallow, but there was nothing else to give. He drew in a breath.

"I'm sorry, Tjan." He moistened his lips. "I'm so sorry."

Tjan stared back for a moment, silent, his face dark-shadowed and lined in the starlight. And then the hardness melted, his features softened, and he nodded.

"I know." A shadow settled across his face. "Thank you, Kael."

The voice floated for a moment on the darkness and then faded. Laedry? Kael wondered. No. It couldn't be the pilot—the voice wasn't deep enough. Who, then? He listened, hoping it would come again so he could place it.

"Kael!" The word snapped in his mind. Awake now, he looked up. Tjan crouched beside him, his head and shoulders silhouetted in the half-light. Kael stretched his legs out, closed his eyes again, and muttered softly at the stiffness.

"Better get hustling," Tjan murmured quietly, turning away from the Vondorian. "It will be light soon."

Forcing his eyes open again, Kael threw back the blanket and sat up. Tjan already had his bed rolled and was strapping it to his pack frame.

"Hey, hand it over, Tjan." Kael pushed himself to

his feet, but the scout barely glanced at him as he finished cinching the straps. There was determination in his movement—there would be no use in arguing. Shrugging, Kael turned to his own gear.

It was cool but not uncomfortable during those first morning hours. The ground was wet with dew and the air smelled washed and fresh. Tjan hurried on ahead, silent, prodded by an impatient vengeance.

Kael followed mutely, his mind working on the critical problems ahead; while his aching, empty stomach plagued him, making it almost impossible to concentrate. Visions of the half-eaten peakmace drifted through his thoughts so vividly that at times he almost knew he could smell it.

They had descended much of the steeper part of the slope by the time the sun appeared. The air warmed quickly, evaporating the dew. It was like another world on the back side of the mountain. The trees were scraggly and gnarled in the heights, while below in the saddle were stands of rust-streaked scrub pine. The forest thickened farther down the pass, and the small pine gradually deepened into the purple and blue-green of ironwood and the tall trees.

The next range to the south beyond the saddle was covered with brown straw grass and deep-red patches of prickly brush. The few sentinels of green that dared to grow there stood alien above the undergrowth. It was not hard for Kael to imagine the desert beyond.

As the slope gentled, he moved up beside Tjan and walked with him for a while, hoping that the scout might feel some comfort in his silent presence. At last he stopped.

"We have to talk, Tjan. We've got to figure out what we're going to do. Do you have any plans?"

The scout's breath caught. He glanced at Kael and then dropped his eyes. "What can we do?" He shook his head slowly. "There's a hundred of them—two of us. It's hopeless. All I pray for is that I can get to the girls, even for a moment. Better they be dead, than used by those murderers." His chin quivered and he turned away.

Kael frowned, drew him back. "Come on, Tjan. That's giving up before we start. I didn't climb this damned mountain to give up. We won't get ten meters taking them head-on, and you know it. Maybe there are only two of us. But we have surprise on our side and . . . a few tricks." He paused to study Tjan, hoping that he would understand.

"Hellwalker has a way of controlling his people that makes them both respect and fear him," he began.

"So you said," Tjan muttered grimly.

"It's a type of mind control possible to some of my people." Tjan frowned, and Kael put a hand on his arm. "Let's hold up here a minute and I'll try to explain some things to you." He sat down and leaned back into his pack. The scout hesitated and then dropped down beside him.

"Rath's psi, Tjan, a high-level telepath. He can control another person's mind with his own, and without the other knowing."

"Telepath?" Tjan repeated, his eyes questioning.

"They are people who can communicate with their thoughts."

"You mean . . . people who can read minds?" Kael nodded, and Tjan's eyes narrowed as he considered this new information. He studied Kael, undoubtedly reviewing the proceedings of the past few days. The frown came, and with it the question Kael expected.

"And you, Kael? Are you one—a telepath?"

He met the scout's gaze levelly, held it a moment, and then nodded.

"Can you read my thoughts?" There was a brittleness to his tone. Kael nodded again, but said nothing. "Do you manipulate, too, Kael?" The lines on his face tightened.

Kael shifted uncomfortably and let out a long sigh. "I have . . ." He dropped his eyes and looked away. "I had to when we met. I had orders . . . I needed your help and there was so little time . . . I didn't want to, but there seemed to be no other way."

The scout was quiet, but Kael felt the backwash of anger and bitterness—the feeling of being used and betrayed. He waited uncomfortably as Tjan fought with his feelings, and at last a cold, weary resignation settled in his eyes. It was reflected in his voice when he spoke again.

"You must do what you must. You will remind me in the future to watch my thinking." There was a caustic bitterness in the words.

"No!" Kael cried. He gripped the scout's wrist and shook his head in adamant denial. "That's not the way it is. We're not eavesdroppers, Tjan. We know more than anybody else how important the privacy of a man's mind is. But sometimes there are situations—emergency situations—that require our doing what is necessary, even if it may seem wrong—and this was one of those times. We were trying to stop a war, remember? Your war. You think it doesn't bother us? You think we don't feel? I'm not proud of what I did, but it was necessary. And I'm bringing it up now because I just might be able to use it to give us a chance tonight. I could have lied, but I think too much of you to do that anymore . . ." He fell silent, having nothing more to say.

As he watched the play of emotions across the

scout's face, he saw the frown disappear and color paint his cheeks. He let go of Tjan's wrist and smiled self-consciously.

"We review our assets—okay?" Tjan nodded and Kael sighed with relief.

"Telepathy can be used as a weapon in different ways. It's always nice to know what your adversary is thinking, but that's not all one can do. You can manipulate, hypnotize—it's a great confusion-maker . . ."

"How so?"

"I'll show you, if it's okay with you."

The scout looked uncertain, but then nodded. Kael studied him soberly for a moment. Suddenly, Tjan twisted and looked over his right shoulder. He studied the area, the brush and trees. Frowning, he turned slowly back to Kael, a wary unease still apparent in his posture. Then, without a word, his face blanched; he rolled to his feet, drawing his sword and knife, and whirled to a half-crouch.

"See what I mean?" Kael said softly.

Tjan looked back, teeth still set, his eyes wide with a tension that slowly turned to confused disbelief.

"You did that?"

Kael nodded.

"But how? It seemed so real."

"It's easy. I simply project a picture, a feeling, or a thought. Put them in an unsuspecting mind with the proper setting, especially darkness, and all kinds of hell can be created."

"I see what you mean," Tjan murmured, glancing back over his shoulder.

"We also have a way of fighting with our minds," Kael continued. "We can cause great pain, disablement, even death. That kind of projection expends a

great deal of psychic and physical energy—we can't keep it up very long—still, it's a help when you're pressed. And I still have my laser. So, we might be outnumbered, but we aren't written off. Not yet."

"Hellwalker can do all this too?"

Kael nodded. "If he has the chance and if he can find us. I have a shielding mechanism—when it's up, I'm mind invisible. You aren't so lucky. Sweep-probing, he could pick you up, especially if you continue to broadcast your feelings like you've been doing. I know it's difficult, but you'll be a lot harder to locate if you sit on that hate, pull it back in, at least for the time being. You think you can do that?"

"Guess I'll have to." He looked across the pass soberly and then back at the Vondorian. "Well, better get on with it."

A little before noon, they came on a bed of lei berries. The ankle-deep, gray-green carpet was peppered with white and pink fruit. Tjan paused, torn between the desire to get on to the river and the need for food. Hunger won out. He grabbed Kael's arm.

"Better eat while we can—we'll need our strength later."

Pulling a bunch of long, red-veined leaves from a low shrub, he walked into the berry patch and sat down. As Kael joined him, the scout handed him a handful of the leaves and reached for a cluster of berries.

"Stick to the pink and eat some greens with them. If you don't you'll get a hell of a gut ache."

Kael lost no time sampling the fruit. Although the greens were bitter, the berries were tart-sweet, their juice like honeyed lisk. Moments later, somewhat filled and rested, they pushed on.

As they neared the river, Tjan immersed himself once more in his scouting. Kael followed him silently, imitating the scout's movements as well as he could. They entered a stone- and brush-covered gully while yet some distance away from the river and, walking carefully on the rocks so as not to leave tracks, they made their way to a bluff overlooking the trail. Tjan led them almost to the bottom and then moved left a short distance to a well-hidden envelope-cave. A quick check proved it empty.

As Kael squirmed into the narrow opening, Tjan retraced his steps to the rock gully and then carefully worked his way back, erasing their prints to the cave's edge. Satisfied, he joined the Vondorian.

"You've used this before," Kael whispered, as the scout wriggled into place beside him.

"I found it on a hunting trip with my dad when I was still home." He pulled some dry brush back into the opening. "This could take a while. Go ahead and get some rest."

Kael shook his head. "I couldn't if I wanted to—I'm too keyed up."

Tjan nodded and returned to his surveillance. Fluffy white clouds slid from behind the mountain as the hours passed. Below, the air was still and warm. Cramped as they were in the narrow, damp quarters, Kael was acutely aware of an aching stiffness that was settling in his arms and legs. His eyes were acting up also, refusing to focus, while his mind grew weary of the constant probing.

He rolled over, reached for his water, and froze as he caught a movement in the brush off to his right. As he watched, a young pauchee wolf trotted into view, its rust-colored coat bristling like fire in the sunshine, its tufted ears poised for sound. He was a full meter

tall, arrogant, already a prince of wolves; yet, despite his size, he moved shadow-silent, his great head slowly swinging from side to side. He paused not twenty meters from the cave, sniffed the air, and then padded on. In that same moment Kael picked up the Nisjan.

CHAPTER SIX

The man came out of the trees only moments after Kael had alerted Tjan. He was young, no older than the Orranian, and was obviously Nisjan. He wore the dull green leather uniform of the enemy, with his gray desert robe rolled and strapped to his back, along with a shoulder pouch and a coiled rawhide rope. He carried a sword and a hunting knife, and his eyes studied the ground with a searching intensity as he walked.

Kael held his breath, grateful for Tjan's wisdom in not allowing them to continue on to the river. As silently as his four-footed companion, the Nisjan moved on, melting into the forest shadows.

Half an hour later, the raiders appeared. It was a small party—twelve men with fifty head of cattle and the prisoners. The girls rode bareback, their wrists tied in front, their horses roped together, flanked by guards.

Kael frowned. Tjan had said a hundred—where were the rest? And where was Rath? He glanced at Tjan, but the scout seemed as perplexed as he was.

The Nisja progressed steadily up the trail, the boisterous soldiers taking particular delight in taunting their young prisoners. The girls endured the

torment in silence, heads bowed in weary resignation.

Contenting himself that Rath was nowhere about, Kael sent a probe. The group had passed beyond their hiding place when the telepath nudged Tjan.

"Rath's split his men," Kael whispered. "Twenty have been sent on to hold Minth Pass; these he left to bring up the stock and the girls; and—the girls are okay, Tjan. They've been roughed up a bit, but that's all. They're being held for Hellwalker and his cadre." He studied the column as he continued.

"Rath took the remainder of his spearhead back into the desert to bring up the army. They passed through here yesterday . . . Should uncomplicate things a bit, don't you think?" He glanced at the scout out of the corner of his eye.

A vengeful, bitter smile crossed Tjan's face in answer.

The Nisja made their camp in a broad bluff-faced wash. Tjan and Kael retreated a prudent distance and then climbed the steep bank to the top. Motioning Tjan to hold, still on his stomach, Kael mind-swept the area above the camp. It was an action not in vain.

Company that way, he signalled silently, pointing out the guard's location.

"I'll take care of him," Tjan muttered. "You wait here."

Hold up. Something else out there . . .

"Pauchee?" Tjan whispered.

I think so. An image of the wolf they had seen earlier padded through his mind.

"You mind-talk them, too?" Tjan asked hopefully.

No, not talk. But sometimes we can reach each other on a lower, simpler level, if they're willing and curious enough.

"Why don't you try it? See if you can draw him in, shut him up before he warns the camp."

Kael nodded. He sent his probe as Tjan disappeared to his left. The wolf came in slowly, curious but wary. He froze a few meters from Kael and stared at him, his tail high and challenging, but without the rigidity of attack. Kael aimed his laser and fired.

The scout said nothing when he returned, but there was an odd set to his face. Moving forward to a spot where they could see into the camp without being observed themselves, they settled down to watch. Below, the evening's preparations were well along. A fire had been built in the center of the camp, and the girls, with heads still bowed, sat near it in a circle, their common tether looped securely around a tree.

Fresh meat was being charbroiled over the coals, and loaves of flat bread and a bulging wineskin had been brought from the packhorses. The smell of the roasting meat hung on the windless air as the camp quieted. Time passed and the last trace of twilight slid from the mountain, leaving the area in starry darkness. Still Tjan waited.

It wasn't until the raiders had begun their evening meal that Tjan motioned to Kael. They descended the bluff carefully in the darkness, threading their way through the scrub pine to a point where they could observe and listen to the camp activity.

The soldiers were taunting the girls again, painting vivid pictures of the entertainment planned for them once their Hellwalker returned. Not enough, this mental torment, they added to it with a cruel play on their hunger. Dumping bits of charred meat and fat, crumbs of half-eaten bread, and mud-lined cups of stale water in the dirt beside each girl, the men turned to their own food with noisy relish. The girls

remained silent, withdrawn, ignoring the food, giving no notice of the harassment.

As the soldiers finished eating, the wineskin was brought out and the night's ration poured. One of the soldiers, returning to his seat opposite the captives' circle, tripped over a dark-haired child who had tried unsuccessfully to get out of his way. As he fell, wine and cup went flying.

Laughter erupted from his fellows. The soldier's face darkened, twisted with anger. Scrambling to his feet, he cursed and kicked the girl brutally in the side. The blow lifted then dumped her in a moaning, crumpled heap. As he aimed his foot again, the blond girl next to her lunged sideways, managing to deflect the blow.

Sputtering, cursing again, he struck the second girl across the face with the flat of his hand.

"Easy, Tjolly—captain's got his eye on that one," a raider cautioned from beside the fire.

Tjolly glared at the speaker, glared at the girl, bent and picked up his cup and returned, muttering, to his place beside the tree.

At the first kick, Tjan had lunged forward, sword drawn and furious. Desperately, Kael grabbed for him, caught his belt.

Don't do it, Tjan! You'll get us killed! You'll kill the girls!"

"That's Lani—that's my sister!" Tjan hissed, renewing his struggle to get free as the raider struck the second girl.

Chala? Kael asked soundlessly. You want them alive, Tjan?

Another moment the scout tensed against his hold as emotions fought within him; then slowly he turned, buried his head in his hands and dropped to his knees.

Hang on, Tjan. We'll have our turn.

The hours passed slowly but the camp finally settled for the night. The girls huddled together, taking warmth and rest as they could. Three soldiers were doing guard duty—two were on the west with the horses and stock; and the third had stationed himself by the fire. It wasn't long until all but the guards were asleep.

Feeling the emotional struggle in the scout, Kael could imagine what the wait was costing him. His own tension had grown to an almost intolerable level, until he had had to at last set it aside, shifting his awareness into that cold objectivity of psi control. A child moaned. The fire crackled, as though wanting to put some sound in the night. The guard fed it periodically. Another hour passed.

Telepathically checking each of the sleeping Nisja, Kael at last signalled the camp's readiness. Their sleep was not as deep as he would have liked; but for soldiers, it would probably be the best they would get. He gripped Tjan's shoulder and stood up.

Let's get it done. I'm going to stay with you mentally—we can cover each other that way. Just think what you want me to know. Okay?

Moving carefully through the darkness, they made their way to the rope corral. Once in place, they went to work. It was easy manipulating the guards. Kael led them, like curious children, into the scout's hands, where they were quickly and silently dispatched. The camp guard met a similar end.

Afterward, Tjan did not hesitate, but moved immediately to the sleeping raiders; and Kael, following him, added his special talent to Tjan's sure knife. Their dual attack was most efficient, and it was going well—over half the enemy lay dead—when a warning cry echoed across the camp.

The sleeper in front of Kael was all at once a blinking, sleep-dazed beast on all fours. The man lunged for his sword, one arm outstretched as though to ward off a blow. Almost mechanically, Kael hit him with a full probe of anger, and the man dropped without a sound. For a second Kael stared, startled at what he'd done.

A girl's high-pitched cry rang out behind him, and he whirled to see a man racing through the circle of prisoners toward him. As the Nisjan reached their tethering rope, two of the girls threw themselves apart, raising the line between them. The man sprawled, clambered quickly back to his feet, only to fall again with Kael's sword through his chest.

Recovering his blade, Kael glanced quickly toward Tjan. Blood dripped from his left shoulder wound as the scout retreated from a pair of Nisja. With a knife in one hand, his sword in the other, he parried their blows as they pressed him.

Kael took the larger of the enemy with another telepathic assault, and the man collapsed. Seeing no wound given, the other raider hesitated and risked a backward glance.

Only Kael stood behind him. Realizing he fought alone, the Nisjan whirled and raced for the forest. A spinning dirk followed, for a second catching the firelight, then buried itself in the man's back. He ran a few more steps, staggered, and fell.

Tjan followed him, made sure he was dead, and then methodically wiped his blades on the man's shirt. Casting a quick glance about the camp, the scout resheathed his steel and hurried to the girls.

"Chala? Lani?" Tjan dropped between them, his hands touching first one sister's face and then the other's. Chala, on her knees, as close as she could get to Lani, stared at him in disbelief.

"Tjan . . . Is it really you?" Chala reached for him, still a little hesitant, as if she dared not quite believe. He drew her against him, held her a moment, then turned toward Lani. As the child struggled to sit up, a paroxysm of coughing racked her small body. Bloody mucus bubbled at the corner of her mouth, joining the dried blood already caked on her cheek.

"Oh, Lani," Tjan whispered, as he gently laid her back down. "Don't you move, sweetheart. Don't try to talk. It's all over. Tjan's here."

He pushed the hair back from her face, took the hand she reached toward him and held it to his lips. Then abruptly he reached for his knife.

"Let's get these ropes off."

Kael felt his stomach turn as he checked the bodies of the raiders, making sure none breathed. He tried not to think about his part in the carnage now that it was over. He tried not to think at all. Thinking would have to come later, when reason had returned and feelings didn't color everything. For now, it was enough to feel the nausea, along with the exhilaration of success.

Oh, God! Was killing so easy . . . ?

He must have stood there frozen for some time before Tjan called. Somehow, he pulled himself together, and stumbled toward the scout and the now freed circle of girls.

"You all right?" Tjan asked, his question low, intended for Kael only.

The Vondorian nodded. "How are the girls?"

"They're fine, except for Lani. Just eager to get out of here. Okay if we get moving and talk later?"

"Point the way."

"We need to destroy the stock first, everything we don't take with us. It'd only be meat in the Nisjan pot. The girls will round up supplies and get the horses

ready while we take care of it. We'll have to go through the mountains now, with Nisja in Minth Pass . . ."

He paused, his eyes glistening as he glanced at his sisters. "We really did it, didn't we? I'd never have thought it in a thousand years . . ."

"Yeah. We were lucky. Will the girls be all right while we're gone?" Kael asked.

Tjan nodded. "They're free. They'll be fine."

"Then let's get it done and get out of here."

As they forded the river, the evening moon rose full, like a promise in the night sky. Its pale blue beams spread from the eastern peaks, flooding the high country. The river was thigh-deep and smooth where they crossed, not yet bent on its steep descent. Aside from a floundering horse and a dunked youngster, the crossing was made without incident.

They were able to increase their pace in the moonlight, and Tjan hurried them, wanting to put as much distance between them and the raider camp as they could before sunrise. At first he carried Lani, refusing to make allowance for his own weakened condition. But finally, realizing his full attention was needed for his guide duties, he gave the child to the Vondorian and turned his mind to his work.

Kael's conscience chewed on him as they traveled, arguing against his going, reminding him about Rath and his mission. At times he succumbed to it and set his mind to return to the pass, only to have Lani and Tjan and the exhausted girls draw him back again. They needed him even more now, and Rath's doings had confused issues and responsibilities. At last, he put his conscience away and accepted the detour, telling himself that once the group was safe he would get on with it.

It surprised him when, at their first rest stop, Tjan broached the subject himself.

"You'd better head back, Kael. Much farther and you might lose your way."

The Vondorian stared at him. "You don't need me here?"

"I can handle it," Tjan said.

"And if you don't? What'll happen to the girls? Look at them, they're almost dead on their feet. And Lani . . ."

"We'll manage. You go on back."

"No . . . I don't think so. I'll get to that as soon as we get you all to safety," Kael replied. "I should still have plenty of time before he makes it to the plains. He'll have all of Minth Pass to get through, and that will take a while."

The relief in Tjan's mind erased all doubt as to his need.

"You won't be alone when you do," the scout murmured, his tone a determined promise. Then he turned his attention again to his little sister.

"What do you think?" he asked Kael, the worried frown returning.

She's bleeding internally—maybe just from the broken ribs, but I think it's more than that. If it doesn't stop . . . Kael didn't project any more.

Tjan gently brushed her hair back and smiled at her. She was blowing blood-tinged bubbles again; and though she stared at her brother, her eyes were glazed with shock, and she moaned with each breath.

There's not much we can do to help her, Tjan, but if you'd like me to, I could blank the pain telepathically. At least she could rest then.

Tjan nodded and pulled the blanket up around her. Drawing in a deep breath, he wheeled his horse and moved up to the front of the line.

As he held her in his arms through the long hours of the night, Kael felt a growing anger at his helplessness. The bleeding did not stop and it was slowly draining the life from her . . . and from the whole party. He questioned it—the why. There had been so much misery for the young people, why this added tragedy? His anger slowly mounted to a premise—it was enough. Some way, he had to stop this death. But how? In the last hours of darkness the answer came to him.

A few minutes later Tjan stopped them for a longer, much-needed rest. Hobbling their horses, the girls wrapped themselves in their blankets, huddled together, and almost immediately fell asleep. Kael checked them and then approached Tjan.

"We have to do something about Lani," he began. "A few more hours of hemorrhaging . . ."

"What can we do? You said yourself that we're helpless."

"Not entirely . . . There is one recourse left to us. I don't want to give you any false hopes—I don't know if they'll be able to help or not—but I'd like to ask the *Seeker*, if it's all right with you."

"The *Seeker* . . . ?"

"I know they won't shuttle her to Tae-Sor: there would be too many questions. I'm not sure they could help her there now, anyway. But, if they will, would you let them take her to the ship?"

Tjan blinked back at him, stunned.

"We have an excellent surgeon aboard and the finest equipment—if we can get around the politics. I don't know if they can give their permission with the Edict and all. But we can ask. Only I must have your permission, as her guardian."

Tjan gripped Kael's arm, his eyes pleading. "For God's sake, Kael, get on with it."

"There's a good chance they will have to say no," the telepath cautioned again as he reached for the tele-booster. Tjan numbly released his hold and moved back a step to wait.

The instrument seemed to pulse in Kael's hand. He looked down at it, feeling again the sting of conscience. He had set that part of him aside, not easily, but with little thought as to certain ramifications of his decision. In fear of being overridden, he had shut himself off from the ship, seeking neither counsel nor permission, not even granting his father the courtesy of a report and an explanation since leaving the village. He had taken an alien into his confidence against specific orders and had revealed his mission and possibly compromised his ship. It all spoke rebellion—and that was cause enough to be recalled.

Recall! The thought caught his breath. The Council *could* do it, couldn't they . . . ? They could scrap the whole win-Rath-over project and assign a patrol to carry out the order. And they would lose all they had worked for, hoped for—and leave Orran in chaos. They could do it. But would they? He shivered.

But even if they didn't—what right did he have to request anything, let alone the boon he intended to ask? He glanced at Tjan, suddenly feeling the complete futility of even trying. The scout's face was pale in the waning moonlight, drawn and lined with exhaustion; and yet, as his eyes watched Kael, the fear and helplessness were mixing with hope. Hope . . .

Slowly, Kael activated the booster. Tjan started as the tiny light responded. He edged closer again, his eyes narrowing as he watched it flare blue. Kael felt Tjan's curious wonder, and then shutting the scout out, he sent his call.

The answering probe came immediately. He reached out and caught it, increasing his concentra-

tion until, with some surprise, he found himself in the presence, not of Laedry, but of his father.

Kael? There was a pause and then the Commander's thoughts roared through his mind. Where in hell have you been? We've been looking all over for you. There was a sting to the reprimand that knit Kael's brows. Do you realize you've missed two status reports?

I'm sorry, sir. It's been . . . difficult here. You know of the village?

We're aware of the raid; Laedry checked it out. Why didn't you report in?

They massacred the whole place, sir—men, women, children—all but thirteen young girls that they took with them. Tjan and I went after them, hoping to free the girls, and, if possible, to contact Rath. We managed the rescue, but . . . Rath and the majority of his men had already gone back to the desert.

There was a sudden spill of frustration and weariness that came through the link from his father, and immediately the Commander withdrew to compose himself.

You weren't able to confront him at all? he went on, once again in control.

No, sir.

But you rescued the women. Was there killing?

Yes, sir.

There was another pause, and his father's thoughts were clipped when they returned. *Where are you now?*

I'm with Tjan and the girls in the mountains west of the Morantja.

You've left the pass?

The girls are very young, sir, Kael went on, almost pleading. Some were hurt, and Tjan was injured. I couldn't let them go on alone.

Couldn't . . . ? The word cracked through Kael's

mind. Have you forgotten yourself, Ensign? You have a mission, as I recall.

They're only children, Father, twelve, thirteen years old. None are over sixteen.

And you had no authorization. You've committed a serious breach, Kael. Do you realize that?

They were children, Kael repeated, interrupting him. Children, Father—and they would have died, too, and not nearly so quickly as their guards did.

His father hesitated, as though Kael's thoughts had just penetrated.

I will need a complete report on all this, he sent finally. I assume you have plans—that is, providing you're allowed to remain; your status may be in question. The Council will have to clear you again.

Yes, sir. Kael blew a sigh of relief. At least there would be no immediate recall. Tjan needs help in getting the girls to safety. We have to get through these mountains. Once that's accomplished, he's promised to guide me back into Minth Pass for another try at Rath.

The scout knows?

About me? Yes, sir, Kael answered soberly.

And I suppose it was necessary to tell him?

I believed it was. Circumstances rather forced it. He has pledged silence, though, and can be trusted. The girls are still unaware.

How long will it take you to clear the mountains?

Tjan estimates about forty kilometers untrailed. I'd guess four or five days. Where is Rath's army now?

Our sensors show a group about three days' march from the Morantja.

Then it will be at least a week before they can make the plains, Kael mused, sending the thought across the link. We still should be able to catch Rath in the mountains.

I'll inform the Council. For the time being, continue as you are, but check in!

*Father, there is something else. Tjan's twelve-year-old sister was seriously injured by the raiders—she has fractured ribs and internal bleeding, is in deep shock, well beyond our help, and we're days away from civilization. I'm not sure they could help her if we could get her to Tae-Sor. But—*He hesitated. *Is there a chance that she could be shuttled to the ship?*

Exasperation came through the link. The Edict forbids it, Kael. You know—

I know, sir, but that's for normal conditions, isn't it? This is not an ordinary situation, and we—the Federation does hold some responsibility. The Edict is to preserve life, isn't it? We're sworn to it, aren't we? Couldn't a lack of action—if it results in further death—create a breach, as well?

Don't argue semantics with me, Kael.

I don't presume to, sir. It's just . . . I've had a stomach full of death down here. And this one doesn't have to be . . .

For a moment Kael felt his father hesitate. A feeling came through very much like the one he had felt the last night on the *Seeker* when the two of them had talked. A sadness, almost pity, followed it. But oddly, there was no rebuke, no argument, no lecture, no counsel—only that sad understanding. Kael swallowed, and then straightened. Guilty or not, the child's need was real.

Only a child? his father asked, his thought somehow gentler.

Twelve. Kaedron's age—and she's already been through hell. She saw her family . . . in Minth . . .

If . . . I do get an okay, would they accept our help? Tjan's asked for it.

You realize the child will have to stay here until this is over, and you'll have to keep it from the other young people?

Yes, sir. We'll work something out.

Once more his father withdrew. The silence lengthened, and waiting became an interminable misery. At last his father came again.

All right, Kael. I'll assume the responsibility. Your position's been verified. Do you have shuttle clearance there?

It's timbered where I stand, but there's a small plateau about two hundred meters to the southwest that is relatively clear. We should be able to keep the others from seeing the shuttle there, also.

Laedry's on his way. When you're ready, signal; he'll follow the beam in. Now, one more thing. Your involvement with this scout concerns me, Kael. You've not only broken an order, you've compromised your mission. I'm aware of the forces that pushed you together, but the relationship has to be curtailed—for your own good and that of your mission; but even more so for your Orranian friend's well-being. Be wise, son, don't let it deepen any further—it can only bring pain to the two of you. Now, God go with you. He hesitated, and then his order roared. And keep us posted!

I will, sir. Goodbye, sir.

The signal died and Kael closed the box, watching as it fused once more. He clasped it tightly for a moment and then, replacing it on his belt, he turned to the scout.

"Get her, Tjan. We'll have to hurry."

"They agreed? They'll do it?" Tjan's voice was a whispered mixture of relief and awe.

"They've agreed. She'll have to stay on the ship until this is over, and we have to keep it from the others."

"We can't tell them? Not even Chala? Good grief, Kael, what will they think?"

"We'll just have to tell them that she died during the night. We can make a rock burial mound. They know she's bad."

"But, Kael, I can't do that to Chala. Lani's her sister, too. It would kill her. She'd never forgive me, not after all this. Please, Kael—she's sixteen: she'll keep quiet."

Kael hesitated, caught between Tjan's emotional plea and his duty. He felt a surge of resentment that was almost self-pity. Always, decisions! He rubbed his forehead and felt the grit ball under his fingertips. Oh, hell, they just didn't know—nobody knew . . .

"All right," he said finally. "I'll go on ahead. You get Lani, bring Chala; explain what you have to on the way—but hurry. I'll be over on that little rise."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The clearing was bathed in the warm rose glow of Ferro, Orran's second moon. It was a deceptive warmth, though, for the night air was still chill and damp. Kael shivered as he waited and glanced once more at his watch. Four minutes. Laedry would be closing. He could sense Tjan and Chala nearing also.

I have you on visual, Laedry broke in. Hold on to your boots.

"Stay back," Kael warned, as Tjan and his sister came out of the trees. "The shuttle has her shields up and you won't see her come in. There'll be a bit of wind as she sets down—that's all."

Pale and shaken, silent in her confusion, Chala stared at Kael as though he were a puzzle that she desperately needed to put together. She followed her brother, staying at his elbow as he approached Kael. Her gaze shifted from the Vondorian to the clearing; then, seeing nothing, she turned to Tjan as though for an explanation. The scout shook his head and nodded at the blanket-wrapped child in his arms. Tenderly, Chala pulled the cover back, brushed the dark curls away from the child's face, and wiped the dried blood from the corner of her mouth. A bewildered fear

filled her eyes again and she looked once more at Kael.

"She'll be all right, Chala," he murmured. "My people will take good care of her."

Tears sprang to her eyes as if the realization of what they were doing suddenly registered. In that moment, like a blanket settling gently to the ground, there came a muted, rushing noise as air whipped out across the grass. It settled in, a strange, vacant whirl of wind, and immediately, a small ship of shimmering metal appeared.

The needle-nosed, Y-shaped craft hovered horizontally on air jets two meters above the earth, its sleek body toward them. Three metal struts slid out and settled into the ground. The wind died and a ramp, descending as an airlock opened, was caught in the soft reddish light that radiated from the interior. It framed a white-haired young man, wearing a silver flight suit.

"Stay here!" Kael ordered his friends as he took Lani from Tjan. Then quickly crossing the clearing, he made his way up the ramp.

"Laedry. It's good to see you."

"Missed you, too." The young pilot smiled and stepped aside to let Kael pass.

"Lieutenant Karall! Am I glad you're here," Kael said, sighting the medical officer across the cabin.

Karall, a mauve-suited man well into his fifties, nodded back. "Bring her over, Kael. Let's have a look."

Taking her to the pull-down wall cot, Kael removed the blanket and Karall did a quick check as he strapped her in.

"Good hell, Kael," the medic commented as he looked up. "What kind of animal could do this to her?"

"The kind that could murder her family in front of her," Kael replied with emotion. "You know," he said, glancing at Laedry, "she never cried out once. Not once."

Inserting the child's arm in an IV cuff, the medic quickly attached a number of monitor leads. "Get ready to blast, Laedry. We've got to get this child to the ship." He turned to Kael.

"Don't worry about her. Daeleen will have her up in no time. You take care of yourself, Kael."

"I will, sir, and thank you." Walking quickly to the lock, Kael paused and turned back.

"Tell the Commander thanks for me, will you, Laedry?" He hesitated another moment, glanced about the cabin and sighed. "See you . . ." Shooting the pilot a friendly chest salute, he strode down the ramp and back to Tjan and Chala. The lock was closing as he turned, the ramp already withdrawn. Immediately the air jets activated, swirling the grass in waves that reached their feet. The supports lifted and like a breath the ship faded from view. The air turbulence heightened briefly and then ceased.

Kael turned to his friends, his own relief ballooning inside of him. The air seemed strangely still. Tjan stood frozen, staring at the spot where the ship had been. His arm was tight about Chala, who leaned against him, her face a mask of stunned disbelief.

"We better get the grave made," Kael said finally, breaking the numbed silence; and turning around, he led them back down the bluff.

They worked quickly, stacking the empty grave with rocks. Chala stayed beside her brother, walking where he walked, carrying stones as he carried them, carefully managing to keep Tjan between her and the

Vondorian. Yet, once in a while, she stopped and watched Kael. It was a pensive, almost unconscious study, one that seemed to search more of her own feelings than his face.

Kael was aware of her staring, as he was of the turmoil and personal searching going on in her mind. The underlying emotion was easily read, and he could well imagine what pushed it. She had been completely stunned by what she had seen—even Tjan was confused to a degree, in spite of his primary preparation. There was also her concern for Lani, which seemed to be deepened by the separation from her. The child was half of all Chala had left; yet to save her, she had given her to strangers—frightening aliens—without even a murmur of protest. Kael was now her only link with them, but what did she really know of him? So there was ample reason for the turmoil and fear within the girl. Kael could understand her need for time and the reality of seeing him to reconcile the new elements in their relationship. For that reason, he made it a point not to meet her eyes during those few moments when she stared at him.

They were placing the last stones on the oblong mound when Norelle joined them. She watched them silently, the muscles tightening in her face. Her chin quivered, but no tears came. Picking up a stone, she laid it on the mound and then joined Chala beside the grave.

One by one, the other girls came. Silently, fighting their tears, each found a stone, placed it on the grave, and then formed a circle around the site. They stood mutely with heads bowed in grief, in weakness—and in strength. Caught up in the tenderness of the moment, Kael found himself with tears in his own

eyes and a sadness that was only eased by the knowledge that Lani was really alive and in caring hands.

Playing his part, Tjan cleared his throat, opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it. For a long moment he stared at the grave and then lifted his head.

"Lani loved the mountains," he said finally. The words came hesitantly, his voice quavering a little. "She was always happy in them." He paused. "So God has given her a lovely day . . . a day of sunshine in exchange for grief." He put his arm around Chala's shoulder and turned her away, drawing the group after them.

Back in camp, Tjan gathered the girls together. "It should be easier if you pair off, an older girl with a younger. Make sure the canteens are full, and each of you gets some jerky—we won't be stopping for breakfast. Kael and I'll get the horses. When you're ready, we'll move out."

Trailing behind the silent group, Kael found plenty of time for reflection. At first he had worried about the girls, aware of their depression and shock. But as the group pushed ahead, he witnessed a deeper resolve take command in them, drawing them together with an empathy that was almost tangible. There was little of the stoic resignation they had shown the day before. Instead, they rode tall and straight, even the youngest ones, their anguish and sorrow somehow buried beneath a determination to survive. He watched them, a little awed. They seemed very young for so much courage and maturity.

As he shared their sufferings and resilience, his thoughts eventually turned to Rath, or to that stranger who had once been Rath. The old, familiar ache

returned as he scoured his memories looking for those missing pieces of the puzzle that his brother had become. If he could only understand why, then maybe he would know better how to confront Rath, how to help him.

His brother had to be desolate, knowing what he could have been, living every day with what he had become. What had changed him, what had happened? What had brought him from the Dawn Society and his dream of bettering mankind to this . . . unfeeling savage, this heartless, mindless shell who could organize a massacre of women and children? How could he have fallen so far that he could live with such visions of brutality?

Kael shut his eyes tight and smoothed the lines of tension from his forehead with the back of his hand. Somewhere in that maze of memory were answers. There had to be, or all existence was insanity. Maybe if he went back to the beginning once more, followed the memories down . . .

His first years . . . ? Just a pleasant blur of feelings. But the fourth he remembered. Rath had been fourteen then, and taken with family responsibility. Almost the first thing he did after arriving home from his maiden starship cruise was to inform Kael that it was time to begin his education. He had posted on Kael's door a list of outings to be undertaken during the school holidays that year, and he had executed every one of them faithfully, making sure that the lesson was not overlooked in the pleasure of the moment.

They had hiked, picnicked, visited the space port and the stellar circus; they had belled in the Water World off the island of Daro, had laughed at the comic gymnastics of the Winged Men of Shan in the

Meeska Pavilion. It had been a growing-up year for Kael.

And for Rath? Had he not found his role equally stimulating? Had he not thrived on the teaching, the directing, the planning? Had family love been his only motivation, or had there been something more—perhaps a budding trait of domination? Kael frowned.

Surae had been born toward the end of the year right in the midst of launch preparations. Everyone had loved her, especially Rath. Still, in spite of the exciting events and frantic activity, Kael had not been forgotten by his big brother. There had been moments, especially planned, right up to the day of the launch.

Even as they waited for the shuttle, Rath had drawn him aside to the star map, had pointed out the route, the planets they would visit. His eyes had shone almost as brightly as Kael's as he whispered a prophetic promise. Someday they would fly the stars together.

Kael had listened, entranced, feeling that he could never love anyone quite as much as he did his brother that day.

He had been seven when Rath returned from his second voyage. For weeks Kael had dreamed of the things they would do together when he was home again. But Rath had changed: school and friends now occupied his time. He even declined family outings, much to their disappointment.

The months passed, and with them Kael's eighth birthday. It was springtime, holiday time, a day free and golden. Rath had brought two friends home from college for an early morning schaaaf hunt in the river swamps southwest of the Thaar estate. A reward had been posted for a documented sighting. Bets were on.

Kael begged to go with them, but to no avail.

Undaunted, he wheedled a lunch from the cook, waited until Rath and his friends set out, and then followed them. It was a delicious game—hunt the hunters.

The men moved off at a rapid pace, intent on reaching the river as soon as possible. Caught up in their half-silent, half-spoken conversation, the three telepaths didn't sense him. Kael trotted along behind them, staying out of sight, thoroughly enjoying his adventure.

By lunchtime they were deep in the forest, and Kael could hear the faint whisper of the river ahead. He ate his lunch and then rested, as he waited for the three hunters to continue their trek. It was warm, even in the shade. He lay on the soft grass, watching the play of sky and leaves. An orange-banded tree swerp scolded, ran along a branch, and disappeared in a cluster of leaves. The grass tickled his neck. He turned over on his side to watch a soobug shuffle along, its rear part doing the weird wiggle it was famous for. His eyes closed.

Several hours later he awoke, wondering at the coolness of the grass, the great trees above him, patched with blue-gray sky. Still half-asleep he looked at the long shadow fingers stretching across wild grass now alive with the chorus of evening caalderkits.

Where was he . . . and what was he doing . . . in the forest? And then he remembered!

In a second he was on his feet, fear balling a hurting knot in his throat. He raced back up the trail, yelling Rath's name, listening for any answering call. But there was only the muted murmuring of the forest.

He had run only a short distance when he came to

a fork in the trail. Halting, he looked first one way and then the other, trying to remember which way they had come that morning. Neither of the paths looked familiar. A sharp, high-pitched squeal broke from the trees to his right, immediately followed by a series of snorts and grunts. The knot of fear swelled in his throat and without another thought he raced down the left fork.

Roots tripped him, tears brimmed, blinded him. He fell, scraping his knee, got back to his feet, and ran on. The trail forked again, and once more he chose blindly, running with the panic that pushed him on.

The trail ended by a tiny pool of turquoise water on which floated pale lavender blossoms. Exhausted, lost, his throat raw with crying and fear, Kael slumped near the roots of an old gimwood tree. Slowly the tears dried as he sat there, numb with despair, watching the shadows grow longer as the pool turned gray-blue, reflecting the darkening sky. There was no use running anymore—he didn't know where to go . . .

Far away someone called. Kael looked up, wondering if the sound was real or only imagined. He didn't move, didn't even breathe. Once more the voice skimmed the air—hollow, as though from a sound projector. It was his name.

"Rath?" he cried, scrambling to his feet, his heart thumping until he could feel it through his ribs. He yelled as loud as he could, but his voice was a hoarse, shrunken sound that hardly made it into the trees. He tried again and again, but the forest swallowed it as it had before.

Rath's shouts grew fainter as he moved away. Desperate, Kael plunged into the darkening forest after him. The trees seemed to be in motion as he

raced through them—tall, red-barked demons riding the backs of writhing giant root-snakes. He dodged saplings and jumped bushes, and the ground sped under him.

Rath was closer again, his voice sounding louder with each leg-stretching step. Kael's face burned. A pain grew in his side that wouldn't let up. He sped across a shadow, jumped a low bush, and stepped into a hole, momentum pitching him forward.

He heard the snap. Pain shot from ankle to knee, so fierce that his throat constricted until he could not even scream. His breath came in ragged gasps as he lay motionless, praying for the agony to pass.

Rath's call came again, fainter once more, as he moved farther away. Despair and terror overruling his pain, Kael pushed himself back to his feet, only to collapse again, sobbing, as new agony ripped down his leg. In desperation, he yelled once more, but the sound hardly cleared his throat. Exhausted, he reached out, holding on to the fading sound of his brother's voice, pleading silently.

Suddenly, a part of his mind whirled outward, following the faint call. The sensation stunned him, and for a moment he forgot everything, even the pain. Somehow, he was in two places—there on the ground and somewhere out in the forest. Then, without warning, he was in Rath's thoughts.

There was an instant of recognition, of joyous relief, before he was lost again, engulfed in a boiling, furious storm. This mental assault hurt worse than the pain in his leg. Somehow, he withdrew and was back in himself, but the pain followed, entered his own mind, filled his body. He screamed, silently, the sound echoing through a million canyons. And then, mercifully, there was nothing . . .

Funny that anything good could come from so much pain, but his psi gifts had, and that day changed everything—especially his relationship with Rath. Following his recuperation, the two of them were inseparable. It was the old dream reborn.

Once more the world beckoned—the Midshipmen Club, the gym and pool, the flight lessons in the *Comet*. But the best were the sessions in the cellar of the Blue Spacer. There, sitting on the table surrounded by his brother's friends, those super members of the Dawn Society, treated like one of the men—Kael found a dream.

In the beginning it had been the betting. Who could believe an eight-year-old was workably psi? Breakthroughs before puberty were almost unheard of. Surely it was a trick. Rath was not one to miss an opportunity for a sure bet, even with friends. Kael had to be brought in for proof and trial. In the end, it was his talent that had sealed the comradeship. His sure gift intrigued them, and they never tired of trying his abilities.

As for Rath, he made sure that Kael's talent did not fail him. Hours were spent on tele-play, and celebrations given for each new breakthrough—more often than not at the Blue Spacer with his friends. It was a merry whirl—until their father returned home from Toros.

They had had no difficulty keeping their doings from their mother; she was not psi. But the Commander knew almost from the time he exited the shuttle.

"Kael? Lad?" Kilor's eyes narrowed, as the boy touched minds with him.

"Isn't it marvelous, Father?" Rath broke in. "It came with the accident in the forest, when he broke

his leg. It's not a juvenile talent, either. It's a good workable one."

"I don't understand . . . How?"

"It was the trauma, the need to reach me. The doctor says it must have been enough of a catalyst."

Kilor turned to Majia. "You did not tell me of Kael's breakthrough."

"The doctor said it was a small thing, that it should bury again. The boys have said nothing about the gift. I did not know it was still . . ." She shook her head. "I did not know."

"Rath, have you been working with Kael?"

"We talk to each other."

"I want to see both of you in the blue dome when we get home." He was still frowning as he bent to pick up Surae, and Kael looked uncertainly at his brother over his father's back. Rath raised an eyebrow and shrugged.

The conversation was short. A few questions and Kilor had all the answers he needed. His reaction was swift and sharp, full of anger and extreme disappointment. Kael was given a stern lecture on the responsibilities of psi power and its proper use and was then dismissed.

Rath fared not so well. Following a blistering tirade on responsibility and honor, the heat of which Kael felt on the other side of the house, Kilor issued an ultimatum. If Rath didn't end his exploitation of his younger brother immediately, his commission in the diplomatic corps would be summarily withdrawn; indeed, he could consider himself placed on probation for the remainder of his leave time on planet.

Rath was silent throughout the storm of censure, but when his father finished, he left the house, returning the next day only to pick up his clothes.

As the days went by and Rath did not return, Kael pleaded with his father to go find him, to bring him back.

"You're wrong, Father. Rath never hurt me. He loves me. He wouldn't."

"You're too young to understand, Kael, but there are reasons why the gods designed a psi breakthrough to come during your teens, while you're becoming a man. A talent isn't a plaything, it's a responsibility. It would have been much better to have let your gift lie dormant a few more years. I know that it's exciting, but it can bring trouble, and neither your brother nor I will be around to guide you through this difficult period. Now, I've ask old Maelor to be your tutor these next few years. You listen to him and learn well, lest your gift becomes more sorrow than joy."

"But Rath—"

"Rath can come home any time he wishes, Kael. The decision is his, not mine."

That assurance had done little to ease Kael's hurt. Nor did he understand what all the fuss was about. The only thing he knew was that his beloved brother was gone, and somehow it was his fault.

Weeks went by and the lift-off time of Rath's ship was approaching. Afraid that he would never see his brother again, Kael slipped away one afternoon to find him. After a number of inquiries, he was successful.

Rath was sullen at first, wanting nothing to do with him; but after being plied with tears and pleas, he had finally warmed. Although he refused the appeal to return home, he had assured Kael that it was not his fault. He had even opened a bottle of wine and shared a glass to prove it. Harmony chased the shadows as, recalling happier days, they laughed the afternoon

away. When Rath took him home that evening, he pledged Kael to secrecy as to his whereabouts and their afternoon together.

Kael didn't see his brother again for three years. Nor did Rath return home then. The chasm remained, even after Rath's bonding with Garik. The tall, soft-spoken geneticist had risen through the ranks of the Dawn Society with Rath, and was in many ways his opposite. A quiet youth, meditative, slow to make decisions, yet loyal and filled with an idealism easily sparked by his bond-brother. Kael had liked him from those first Blue Spacer cellar days. In spite of Kilor's willingness, the Thaarn adoption formalities never took place, were never requested.

Because of Rath's feeling toward his father, Kael was somewhat surprised when Rath bid for diplomatic apprenticeship on his father's ship. For a time, he even hoped that it might mean a warming of the relationship between them. But the hope was never realized. Clearly, the bid was for an apprenticeship with Lord Sikaerian, the most respected diplomat in the galaxy. That the transport happened to be his father's ship was incidental. Rath's sun was rising—Dawn was beckoning.

A horse whinnied. Kael looked up, startled, still half caught in his memories. Tjan had reined in his mount, bringing the line of girls to a halt behind him. Just ahead of the scout a steep, narrow gorge sliced the mountain.



CHAPTER EIGHT

We'll have to go on foot from here," the scout said, as Kael joined him. "No way we can get the horses across. We try farther down the mountain, we'll probably run into sun devils."

He studied the canyon another moment and then turned and motioned to Chala and Norelle.

"Have the girls strip their horses. Keep the rations, weapons, whatever you think we might need, and see what you can do for footwear."

The two young women nodded and left. Turning to his own mount, Kael removed his gear, slid the bridle off, and sent him trotting with a slap on the rump. Tjan brought up the packhorses, untethered the supplies, and placed them with those gathered by the girls.

Spread out on the grass were swords, long knives, ropes, canteens, cooking and eating utensils, bags of jerky and trail biscuits, flour and salt, the Nisjan desert robes, blankets—things that would prove essential on the long hike. Chala and Norelle quickly divided the whole, giving each girl basic gear and weapons, reserving the heavier items for Tjan and Kael and the older and stronger young women. Rolling the girls' supplies in blankets, they secured

them with lengths of rein and latigo and then tied the ends together.

While the girls finished the packing, Chala and Norelle cut up the woven-hair saddle blankets, making foot coverings for those who had no moccasins. Strips of leather bound them in place, giving a little extra protection. The work commenced and finished with little comment.

The sun had shortened its shadow only a little when, slinging their blanket packs diagonally across their backs, the young women joined Tjan and Kael at the edge of the ravine.

It took the group an hour to descend to a small stream in the bottom of the canyon. A few trees provided shade, and Tjan ordered a break before continuing on. The girls eagerly sought the water, drinking of its coolness, washing hands, arms, and faces. Hair was loosened, finger-combed, wet down, and rebraided.

Kael watched Chala as she worked with her young partner, Niki. The child's long black hair was matted with twigs and grass and dirt. Patiently and tenderly, she cleared the tangle and rebraided it, tied it with some threads, and then freed her to join her young friends.

Sighing, she turned to her own hair. Quickly finger-combing the curly, unruly locks, she wet them down, formed them into fat, reddish-blond braids, wound them around her head, and tied them in place with a strip of cloth. Almost immediately, short strands pulled loose and curled onto her cheeks and forehead. Her face, shiny from a good scrubbing, showed a sprinkle of freckles, blending into the purple bruise surrounding her left eye and cheek. Kael's lips tightened as he remembered the blow that had given her that bruise. His gaze moved on, tracing the slightly

upturned nose, the full lips, the tawny eyes. No teasing sophistication here, no great beauty . . . yet there was grace. Odd to find that in a homeless mountain girl.

She said something to Tjan; and then suddenly, as if she felt Kael's study, glanced at him. Their eyes caught and held for a moment. Her look held neither fear nor awe now, only a thoughtful, wondering gaze. The moment passed and she turned back to Tjan, resuming her conversation as though it had never been interrupted.

Kael stared into the stream, wondering what she was thinking. The poor girl had experienced so much horror. To add to that pain . . . He shook his head. If only he could set her mind at ease, if not about Lani, at least about himself.

Lani? He glanced upward at the cloudless sky. It had been hours now. Had she made it? Was she awake? What could she be thinking up there all alone? All alone.

It had been good to see Laedry again, good to feel his friendship. Always an optimist, the pilot, giving his strength, his calm assurance. So good. He frowned at himself. Damned if he wasn't getting soupy.

Too soon Tjan had them moving again. The climb up the other wall of the canyon was grueling. With Tjan above, Norelle and Chala between, and Kael working from below belaying a rope as he could, they scaled it meter by meter. As Kael pushed the girls and helped them find hand- and footholds, Chala worked close in, pulling, grunting words of encouragement, helping them get to Norelle and then up to Tjan. The sun grew unbearably hot. Her face was flushed and beaded with perspiration, yet she never quit, never rested, but kept on until all were safely above in her

brother's hands and the next level could be attempted.

Again, Kael found himself watching her, intrigued by the determination and hidden strength of the girl. They reached the rim at last and a prolonged rest period was called. For about an hour most of them slept, exhausted, resting on their makeshift packs.

They camped that night in a mountain meadow where clumps of anankra grew. The bushes, their large bluish-green leaves spiked with mint, gave off an aroma that filled the glen. A stream of clear, icy water ran nearby, and Tjan retired there to dress a young agra buck he'd surprised earlier.

As the girls gathered wood and roots, Kael built a hot, nearly smokeless fire. A patch of spring berry bushes was found. In a short time the meat was roasting over the coals, and with it a mash of roots and berries wrapped in anankra leaves. The smell of meat and mint hung over the meadow as the sun set.

Later, the girls gathered by the fire, the first time they had really talked since the rescue. Their emotional shielding thinned in the conversation, and Kael became acutely aware of the visions of horror and loss that ran through the young people. It cemented the girls and Tjan into a tight group, a group having no place for an alien Vondorian.

He envied them that companionship, that empathy, feeling, in his isolation, his own burden grow very large, very difficult.

The evening passed. The fatigued girls wrapped themselves in their blankets and settled down to sleep. All but Chala. She remained by the fire, rubbing her arms in its warmth, the flames casting gold and red highlights in the darkened wisps of hair that clung to her neck and cheeks.

Kael watched her, searching her expression for the

emotions she felt. She appeared calmer now, as though she had come to a decision. Still, there was a pensiveness about her that left him wishing he was not forbidden to plumb the depths of her thoughts.

The girl intrigued him—all of them did, but Chala more than the others. She seemed hardly more than a child, but he would never call her that, not with what he had seen her do. Full of her own store of horrors, her on-going worries about Lani, the shock of Kael and his world, she had still directed the other girls with the tenderness of a mother, and the group had obeyed her without a murmur. Outwardly, she had seemed as controlled and stable as the peaks above them. Yet, underneath . . .

"How does she do it?" he murmured to the night.

"Do what?" Tjan asked.

Kael looked blankly at the scout, taking a moment to refocus. "Oh . . . guess I was thinking out loud. I've been trying to figure them out all day—the girls. What are they made of, Tjan? They've been through hell the past few days, and look at them. Look at your sister. Not a crack. She's showing more strength than Masuba's warriors. What are they made of, Tjan?"

The scout studied his sister a moment. "I guess it's the Minth in us. The valley's not an easy place to live in, even when times are good. We have long winters, lots of sickness, little medicine. It's a four- to five-day journey to the nearest town when the passes are open. Death's not a stranger to us. We've learned to face it and to work our problems out together. We've had to. We wouldn't last long otherwise." He was quiet for a minute and then continued.

"You probably wonder about Lani, her being so dark and the rest of us so fair. She wasn't always ours. Her folks and her baby brother died six years ago when the fever hit Minth. We lost thirty people that

winter, and half were children under five. Our twins were four then and we were lucky; they lived, but we lost our two-year-old sister, Anya. Lani was alone . . . We needed each other. She's ours now and we love her as our own. Maybe that's what you see in the girls. We've lost a lot, Kael, but we've still got each other."

Tjan was quiet again for a long moment as he leaned back and looked up at the sky. "What's it like up there, Kael? What's your home like?"

Kael stared at him, his thoughts still in Minth. "In Guarnt?" he asked.

Tjan nodded. "What's it like? I can't imagine it's anything like here."

"No . . ." Kael smiled, seeing the city in his mind. "No, Guarnt is nothing like Orran." He frowned, wondering where to start. "I guess . . . mostly it's old. Really old when you consider Orran. It was planned as the central city three thousand years ago, when Vondore joined the Federation. There had been a city there before, but it was leveled and everything begun anew. Outwardly, it hasn't changed much through the centuries. Vondore has preserved the architecture as a kind of museum. Historical traditions are important to us. It took us a long time to grow up as a people. I guess we don't want to forget what we've learned. Anyway . . ." He shrugged.

"The buildings are cylindrical towers of kormite, a phosphorescent stone that has a glassy surface when it's hot-cast. Its natural glow radiates at night. You can see those towers for a hundred kilometers across the plateau.

"The city nestles in an elbow of foothills on the north side of the Sabir Mountains. There's a river on the west, and some beautiful mountain lakes back in the hills. The mountains aren't rugged like these; there are a few peaks, but mostly they are large

rolling hills covered with cultivated gimwood forest." Kael settled back and stretched out his legs. "You'd better think twice before getting me going on this—I'll probably keep you up all night."

Kael could tell from Tjan's face that the scout had not completely understood. Obviously, kormite meant nothing to him; still, he smiled.

"I used to dream of you people up there traveling from one planet to another, meeting all kinds of other alien people, seeing all those strange places. It must be exciting."

"A lot less exciting than it is here," Kael said dryly.

"You know what I mean." There was a touch of wistfulness in Tjan's voice.

"Yeah, I know," Kael replied, more seriously. "And it is adventure and new things. But it gets boring, too, at times, and awfully impersonal. Years go by and you never see home or family. Sometimes, it takes months to get around, and there's only so much you can do on a ship."

"But it's worth it, isn't it? Even the loneliness?"

Kael nodded. "Yes." Meeting Tjan's gaze, he nodded again. "Your people will be up there one day, Tjan."

"Yeah . . . one day, I guess."

They stopped talking as Chala came toward them. She sat down beside Tjan and put her hand on his arm.

"If you're busy, I'll go," she said, her gaze sliding across the Vondorian and then fastening on her brother.

"No problem," Tjan said, and Kael smiled.

"I wanted to thank you for all you've done," she said, turning to Kael. Her voice was warm and gentle. A shadow-frown settled a moment and then disappeared. "I'm sorry I've waited so long. It . . . took a

while to get things together." She hesitated and sighed, as though a great burden had been lifted. She even managed a faint smile as she went on. "We're grateful, aren't we, Tjan?"

A little embarrassed, Kael sat quiet for the moment. Chala looked as though she wanted to say more, but didn't. Instead, she glanced at Tjan, frowning, waiting, wanting him to speak for her. Kael had a good idea what was on her mind.

"I'll be calling the shuttle in a few minutes, as soon as the girls are sound asleep. If you'd like to stay, I'll probably be able to get a report on Lani."

Chala was on her feet before he'd finished, her eyes suddenly bright. "I'll check them. Be right back." She was gone before he could answer, and back almost as quickly. A few minutes later he made ship contact.

Laedry, is there anything from the Seeker on the Orranian child? Kael asked, after reporting.

Surgery went well, Kael. Physically, she's doing fine. But she had an awful shock when she woke up. She had no idea where she was or who we were. We explained; but apparently the combination of the trauma she had experienced down there, added to that here, was just too much. She's withdrawn, deeply—there's almost no response at all. Lorjahl's working with her, but he's making no predictions.

Damn . . . How much more must they take? Kael groaned inwardly, feeling the weight of depression settle across his shoulders.

Kael? Are you all right? Laedry's thoughts pressed him, concerned as always.

Just tired, Laedry. It's been a long day. I'll catch you tomorrow night. Oh . . . give our thanks to the med personnel.

Will do. You take care, Kael.

Tjan and Chala waited as Kael put the booster away. He took his time with it, trying to figure out how to tell them. Tjan put his arm across Chala's shoulders as Kael looked at them.

"Lani's doing well," he said. "Her injuries are all taken care of and her vital signs are stable. She's coming along." He smiled, supporting his assurance. "They do have one problem, though, but they're working on it. You know this has been an awful shock to her." He paused, swallowing hard. "When you're weak like she is, and you've been through a lot—"

"What are you trying to say, Kael?" Tjan asked quietly, his voice strained. "What's wrong with Lani?"

"A little setback, that's all," Kael answered gently. "She's withdrawn, Tjan! But it's only natural," he hurried on. "She simply couldn't face another unknown in her condition, so she backed away from it. It's a kind of mental shock. There's a good doctor working with her. It's not a big thing—just another wound to heal. Once she gets her strength back and knows she's not going to be hurt again . . ."

Tjan looked at him long and searchingly before he nodded. But the nod was for Chala's benefit; Kael hadn't fooled him. Chala was watching her brother with almost the same intensity the scout had given Kael. Tjan lifted her chin with his other hand.

"Hey, you heard the man! She's going to be all right. Just wait until we get her home." He smiled at her, and turned back to Kael.

"You did thank them for us?"

The Vondorian nodded.

"You've got to get some sleep, Chala," Tjan said, getting to his feet and helping her up. "Come on, I'll go with you."

They walked to the line of sleeping girls; and he gave her a quick hug, waiting while she lay down so he could pull the blanket over her shoulders. Then he walked slowly back to the Vondorian.

"I'll take first watch, Kael. I'm not very sleepy."

"Lani's going to be all right, Tjan. We've got good doctors on the *Seeker* and the medical knowledge of the galaxy. They'll bring her out of it."

Tjan nodded. "Don't worry about me, Kael. I have faith in what your people are doing for Lani. Now . . . go on, get some rest."

The next day they headed due north, occasionally catching glimpses of Minth Valley to the east. Just after midday they came on a burned-off area. The dry, rocky soil and the blackened stubs of trees with heat-shattered trunks seemed to absorb the sun's rays, baking the hikers in the still air. Most of the girls were limping and the rags that wrapped their feet were blood-tinged.

The icy runoffs from the snowpacks high above had been infrequent on the eastern slopes, and there'd been none at all across the burn area. It had become more than a game—their scanning the cliffs above them for water.

Ahead a kilometer or so the slope wrinkled at the base of a cliff-size outcropping of rock. Norelle called out first, pointing excitedly. The cascading stream was almost hidden in the shadow of the rocks. A few minutes later they were sitting on the mossy bank soaking their feet and slapping handfuls of the icy water against their sunburned faces and necks. For a moment all was forgotten but the relief of the stream. For a moment—and then that idyllic scene was shattered as a cat's high-pitched scream echoed

eerily across the slope. It came from above and slightly behind them and, almost instantly, was echoed high in the cliffs.

Kael met Tjan's glance and then studied the mountain as he reached for his laser. "Surka?" he questioned, shuddering as he recalled an image of the great silver-coated cat.

"Two—male and a female. Female's above," Tjan answered, as he loosened his sword. The girls moved together, their eyes sifting the crags and crevices above them.

"Do we move, or wait?" Kael asked.

"I doubt that they'll attack us right away—probably stalk us a while to feel us out. There's little to burn here to keep them back if they wait for dark, and the rocks are good cover. Think we'd be better off to go on. If we stay together, we should be all right." He turned to the girls.

"Keep your swords ready and stay tight. We've got to get across this burn-off. Kael, you stay close. Okay, let's get out of here."

They moved across the barren ground warily, every eye searching, so tense that they were hardly breathing. The afternoon hours passed, and increasingly, Kael felt the presence of the two great beasts—one now paralleling above and one below, slightly behind. He tried mind-touching them, but that only seemed to increase their naturally unpleasant disposition.

Tjan stopped them on the edge of a small grove of trees near the forest and the two men quickly cut and sharpened pikes for each of them of the sturdy saplings. Should they be needed, the extra length would be vital. With their new weapons they moved on again into the open area between the grove and forest.

It was only a few minutes later that Tjan signalled

for camp. There was plenty of firewood lying around, half hidden by clumps of strawgrass, close enough to be easily gathered, yet far enough away that the cats could not use it for a move onto the camp. There were a few trees, some whole, some partly burned, but Tjan stayed away from them, keeping the camp well in the open where sight would be unhampered.

"Tjan," Kael whispered, coming up beside him, as the scout set about making assignments. "The cats are out there and I don't think they are going to hold off much longer. I should be able to sense if they decide to move, and I have my laser, if it comes to that. I think it might be wise if you give me the three older girls to gather wood, and you keep the younger ones here with you to get the fire going."

Tjan frowned, but he nodded. Taking Chala, Norelle, and Luan, Kael headed for a fallen tree about forty meters away. Working together with their pikes in one hand, the quartet made a number of trips dragging back the dry wood. Tjan quickly built a large fire and then helped the younger girls stack the wood near it.

Another deadfall lay about twenty meters beyond the first, just short of a solitary, misshapen scrub pine that grew sideways a couple of meters before reaching for the sky. One of the surkas lay beyond that tree, hidden by brush. The other waited unseen off to the left. Neither had shown any sign of advancing, although Kael could sense their emotion building. But as his group moved up, the cats reacted.

Kael stopped abruptly, his arms out to halt the girls. The muscles tensed in his back and neck as he drew his sword and readied the pike.

"Back up slowly," he hissed over his shoulder. "Don't panic and don't run!"

The girls did as commanded, retreating one step

after another. Suddenly, with a paralyzing scream, the silver cat leaped. It seemed to float for a moment beside the gnarled pine and then landed without a sound in front of Kael. For a long second they faced each other—cat and man. The beast, a full three meters long, was waist-tall, lean, and well muscled. His thick silver coat was matted with burrs and charcoal, and he stared at the alien with an insolence that was almost human.

Came another nerve-shattering roar and the surka leaped again. Kael thrust the pike home, sinking the shaft half its length in the silver chest. The roar turned to a shriek of pain, and the cat fell writhing almost at Kael's feet. Quickly plunging his sword into the beast's neck, the telepath scrambled backward away from the flailing claws.

Someone cried out behind him, and whirling, off balance, Kael glimpsed the second gray form flying toward him from his left. There was no time to reach for his laser, he could only fling his arms in front of his eyes as he went down. A searing pain tore through his left shoulder as the sour, hot breath of the cat hit him in the face. Desperately, he twisted as he felt the weight of the beast drive the air from his lungs. A new pain ripped from groin to knee and his stomach cramped as nausea swelled.

The cat rose suddenly, snarling. It lunged to the left, claws raking the air, and then, snapping in anger and pain, swung to the right. Twisting around, head almost to tail, it reversed itself, although it still straddled Kael's chest. Roaring once more, it fell back against the Vondorian, its coarse, matted fur pressing against his face and chest.

Unable to breathe, Kael struggled under the beast, pushing at it with his good arm, feeling the animal convulse and flail the air above him. For a moment,

all went black. When he came to, the cat had been rolled off, and the girls were kneeling around him. Drawing in gulps of air, he struggled to sit up, to turn. He could see the animal beside him, its body bristled with pikes and swords.

Kael looked from the cat to the girls. They seemed to strangely fade in and out of focus. Hands reached out and gently pushed him back. He shook his head, squinted, blinked. There was a rock under his shoulder, sharp and digging. He tried to tell them, but the words came out garbled. He saw Tjan's face above him and he tried to form the words again, but his tongue felt numb and the numbness was spreading throughout his body. Everywhere but that damned rock . . .

There was darkness at the edge of his consciousness. Feeling himself sliding toward it, he reached up, suddenly afraid. A callused hand gripped his own, and with that reassurance, he slid into the dark.

CHAPTER NINE

Pain drew Kael out of the darkness, a sharp, burning pain that knifed through his body. It knotted the muscles in his chest, strangling his cry even before it reached his lips. He fought to move, but hands gripped his arms and legs, holding him immobile. The smell of searing flesh filled his nostrils as new pain ripped down his thigh. A cry of agony and anger rose above the flames, and then the fire was gone and he was lost again in the absorbing darkness.

He roused later to find his shoulder wrapped, his arm bound tightly to his side. A cool cloth wiped his forehead as someone took his hand and gently moved it from the bandages.

"It's been cauterized and dressed, Kael, as best we could. Leave it alone." Tjan's voice floated above the pain.

The darkness waited, weaving shadows in his consciousness. He moved his free hand down again, across the bandages that bound groin and thigh.

"You'll be all right, Kael," again came Tjan's reassuring voice.

Kael let his hand fall and closed his eyes. He would have to get things moving, and quickly. The darkness was pushing again, drawing ever closer. Summoning

all the energy he could, he drew his thoughts together and turned his concentration inward. Shutting down all his nonvital bodily functions, he focused the full power of his mind on the therapeutic centers of his body, speeding the release of cell nourishment, hormones, enzymes—all the vital materials of healing. He felt an immediate increase in pulse and blood pressure and knew he had done all he could do, consciously. It was now up to his body and time. Blanking the pain, he slid back into the comfort of unconsciousness.

When he awoke again, it was as though from a puzzling dream. He lay staring at the softly rustling leaves above him, watching the play of firelight and shadow, letting memory build consciousness. In time it came back, and with his remembering came an awareness of pain and a ravenous hunger and thirst. He mentally scanned his shoulder and leg—the healing was going well. He sighed, turned his head, and glanced around.

Catching the faint sound, Tjan turned from the fire and dropped to a crouch beside him. "Feeling better?" he asked, quiet concern in his voice.

"Much. How long have I been down?"

"Two days."

"Two?" Kael frowned.

"Like a drink of water?" Tjan offered his canteen and Kael took it, drank a few swallows with the scout's support, and handed it back.

"Chala has some broth warming. She'll bring it in a minute."

"Sounds good. I'm hungry enough to eat my pack straps." He glanced at the fire and saw Chala crouched there, stirring something in the coals. She looked over at him and smiled.

"You warm enough?" Tjan asked. "How's the pain?"

"Just in my stomach." Kael tried to smile as Chala came with a cup of steaming liquid and knelt beside him. Tjan lifted him up, supporting him, as Chala held it for him to sip. There were bits of meat and strange, bitter-tasting herbs in it, but it stopped the gnawing hunger. He drained the cup.

Again he slept. An hour, maybe more, passed before he roused again. He lay there for a moment looking at the stars, and then, gritting his teeth, he rolled to his knees.

"Hold it," Tjan cried, scrambling toward him from the fire. "Back off, Kael! If you break those wounds open, you'll lose blood you don't have."

Kael shook his head. "I'm all right . . . ALL RIGHT! I need to move, just give me a hand up."

"What are you doing?" Chala broke in, as she joined her brother. "Tjan, stop him! Make him lie down."

The scout shrugged. "You try. Maybe he'll listen to you."

"But his wounds . . ."

"They're all right, check them," Kael insisted. "It's okay, believe me." He pushed himself to his feet and stood wavering unsteadily. "See . . . I'm doing just fine."

"Tjan—" Chala turned to her brother, worried and exasperated.

The scout shrugged and shook his head. "Guess he knows what he can take." Still, he stood beside Kael, ready to help should the Vondorian need him.

Kael frowned in frustration, unable to ignore them as he worked with his belt, trying to trigger the tele-booster release.

"Going to call your ship?" Tjan asked.

"I'd better. I'm late again; they'll have my head."

"I doubt it. When you didn't report in night before last, they sent someone to look for you. A man named Laedry found our party. He came in when the others were asleep, took one look at you, and left in a hurry. He returned later with another man who checked you over and gave you something they said would counteract the cat's poison and speed healing. They told me to just let you sleep."

So . . . Kael mused, that's why things were going so well. He should have suspected . . . Stupid belt! He stopped, closed his eyes, and drew his thoughts back together.

"I thought they were going to take you back at first—they spent quite a bit of time mind-talking to your people."

Kael glanced at the scout, acknowledging the information, and then silenced him with a pleading look. The device finally came free. With sweat beading against his forehead, he activated the instrument and sent his call. The shuttle response came immediately, and almost as quickly he found himself patched through to the *Seeker*.

How are you, son?

An anxious concern surrounded the thought, and behind it was the weariness of much worry. Hastening to ease his father's fear, Kael assured him that he was doing well and that he intended to finish his assignment—all in one slightly frayed transmission.

With that, the Commander's reserve completely collapsed, and for a moment he withdrew to control himself. Kael waited, wondering at the emotions that had flooded the link during that moment. Relief, pride, fear, annoyance, an overwhelming affection—it had been an odd, but sobering, assortment.

I'm okay, Father, Kael repeated, somewhat over-

whelmed by his father's emotional release. *I'm on my feet. The wounds are healing. I'll be walking tomorrow. I'm fine. Really I am. See for yourself, I'm open.*

Don't overdo it, Kael; there's more coming through than you realize. And will you please sit down. You don't have to prove yourself to me. You've got so many chinks in your probe, I'm barely able to read you. His father's affection surged again, warming the young telepath like a mug of hot skava.

The Commander's thoughts came again, more serious now, searching. *Are you sure you want to continue, Kael? A setback like you've had will take time to get over. It could make what's to come even more difficult.*

You think I can't deliver?

If we did, Laedry would have brought you back. No. We're just concerned, Kael.

And what if I don't go on? The alternative carries little promise, either. In spite of everything I'm still the best hope we have—the only hope for Rath. Right? I can't quit, Father, not now. Besides, I think my brother owes me this meeting . . . And I know I owe Orran.

Owe Orran? For what? There was exasperation in the thought.

Kael's gaze dropped and he slumped. If I hadn't freed him—

He would have found another way to escape. Kael, you've got to get on top of this; what happened at Minth was not your fault. Believe me, son, Rath put himself where he is now—not you. Stop carrying this guilt.

He broke for a second and then went on, his thoughts frank now and grave. *A misguided conscience has no place in this business, son. If you lose your resolve, we'll be forced to recall you.*

Recall? A trembling seized Kael, and it was all he could do to steady himself, to stay on his feet.

I mean it, son. You face him with this guilt and he'll destroy you. I won't have that.

Yes, sir. The thought broke as more and more of his concentration went into holding himself erect. He could feel the link breaking up, knew it wouldn't be long before he lost it entirely.

Do you need anything? His father's thoughts pumped him again, gently, full of concern.

No, sir. Just rest. Please thank Dr. Karall and Laedry for looking in on me. If I have any problems, I'll check back.

Ensign, you check in whether you have problems or not. Now get some sleep. Good night, son.

Kael cut the signal, replaced the booster, and eased himself down, stretching his injured leg out before him. Immediately everything let go and he began to shake, completely exhausted. Tjan tucked a blanket around him and then sat down at his side. The scout didn't say anything, just shook his head. A little later Chala joined them, another cup of broth in her hand.

Kael's trembling finally subsided, and gratefully he accepted the food. His gaze lingered on the girl as he sipped it, and as he set the cup down, he cleared his throat.

"Seems I have a lot to thank you for . . . It was a brave thing you all did for me."

Chala ducked her head and glanced at Tjan. Kael closed his eyes, giving in for the moment to his weariness. It was then that he felt it—a subtle change in the emotional atmosphere, a feeling of acceptance . . . but more than that. For the first time he felt that he was actually a part of their unity. He could feel their warm strength surround him, support him. His mind reached out to it shyly, yet eagerly, acutely conscious of the ache of loneliness still deep within him.

"Are you all right?" Tjan asked as Kael opened his eyes again.

"I'm fine. Where are we, anyway?" Kael asked, glancing around. It was clear they were off the burned area. The forest was thick around them and the trees were giants like those of Minth Pass.

"We're in the pass. We'll pick up the Mista in the morning. Should be in Jolan in a couple of days."

"That far? You've made good time carrying me," Kael murmured.

"We've done all right," Tjan said, smiling at his sister.

Kael looked at the two of them and nodded. His tiredness was increasing, making it difficult even to think. "I'd like to talk," he said, reaching for the edge of his blanket, "but I'd better do it tomorrow."

"First sensible thing you've done all night," Tjan said, getting to his feet. "Can I get you anything?" Kael shook his head. "Then I'll see you at first light." He helped Chala to her feet and walked her back to the sleeping girls.

Kael watched them go, tired, but still aware of the comfort of their presence. Funny, how small Chala seemed, walking beside her brother—almost fragile. Fragile? He smiled. She was about as fragile as the trees above him. He tucked the thought away in a near memory corner. It was one he wouldn't mind exploring further when he had the energy.

The girls were astonished and a little appalled at his decision to walk the next morning. But Kael was determined. No girl was going to carry him if he could possibly keep his feet under him. He still had considerable soreness and stiffness to put up with, but as the morning wore on, he found himself feeling

increasingly better, enough so that he asked that his pack be returned. Chala flatly refused.

"Better to carry it now, than to carry you again, later," she told him, smiling. But her tone rejected persuasion, and Tjan supported her.

"It's not that heavy," she argued. "I've carried it a couple of days already—another day is not going to kill me."

The pack dwarfed her, and it embarrassed Kael every time he looked at her, but she refused to yield. When Tjan moved them on, Chala hung back and walked with him.

Although she stayed at his side, she didn't speak. Occasionally, he glanced at her, wondering what she was thinking—but he caught no returning look. Leaning forward a little, her thumbs hooking the pack straps, she walked with an easy gait, relaxed, almost rhythmical, showing a strength unsuspected from her size. It was good to have her there, even silent. That strange feeling of belonging seemed even stronger, and yet there was something else chasing her thoughts. He waited, wondering.

"Tjan says you read minds," she blurted out suddenly. Kael glanced at her curiously and nodded. "Do you know what I'm thinking?" He shook his head. "But you could if you wanted to?"

He nodded again. "If I wanted to."

"You don't want to?"

Kael didn't answer that, and Chala was silent again. When she spoke a little later, it was with a thoughtful hesitancy. "It's not fair, you know."

"What isn't fair?"

"For you to always know about others . . . never to have to wonder." She gave him a straight, almost challenging look, then turned away again. "You always have the advantage."

Kael frowned, trying to fathom the deeper meaning of her words. There was a lot of uncertainty in the emotional aura that surrounded her.

"You're still not sure, are you, Chala?" he said quietly. "You're still afraid of me . . ."

She shook her head. "Not so much fear, now; not like I was before." She cocked her head sideways and frowned. "It's just that there's so many questions . . . and Tjan doesn't tell me anything. Why are you here, Kael? Why are you helping us? Why are you alone? Why did your people leave you when you were injured so terribly? Why does Tjan trust you so much . . . ? He's not one to build quick friendships . . . he never has before. And me . . ." She looked at him, her frown deepening. "I gave you Lani . . . and I don't know you at all." She broke off, her gaze shifting front again, studying the ground as they walked.

"Tjan must have told you something?"

"Only that you're from the stars and here for something important that he can't tell me about, because he promised you. I respect his oath . . . I haven't pried." She paused a moment and then continued. "Sometimes, though, I'm so afraid. I fear his involvement with you. I fear this war and his hunger for revenge. He's all that Lani and I have now, Kael." She was silent again.

"If you were given some answers, would that put your mind at ease, Chala?"

"Could I believe you?"

"Do you think I would intentionally hurt you or Tjan?"

"I don't know."

"Chala, if I could bare my mind to you, I would. But . . ."

"But. So we're back to my wondering. And yet,

there are no secrets for you. It's not really fair, is it, Kael?"

He blew out a low breath and walked on a few steps, searching for a way to answer her. "I don't think . . . you really understand us. Were we unprincipled in its use, you might be right. But we consider telepathy as a gift to be used for good purposes; and good gifts have their responsibilities. We long ago developed a code of honor. Unless it's an emergency, we don't enter minds where we're not invited. I've wondered about your thoughts since that first night." He smiled a little. "I still do."

Chala had stopped and was facing him. "It is really true then. Tjan said as much, but I needed to hear it from you . . . I guess." They walked on in silence then—a comfortable silence.

The day passed quickly with Chala at his side. Although he had watched Tjan's woodcraft with respect and admiration, Chala, too, surprised him. She pointed out birds in the trees above and mimicked their songs so well that Kael could not tell the difference. Occasionally, even the birds flew down to check her out. At other times she showed him half-hidden animals and strange plants, and with each came a story with some humorous or subtle lesson. It was easy to see that Chala also knew and loved her mountains.

They camped that night on the Mista, bedding down soon after their evening meal. Kael was much stronger, but the hike had been exhausting. He waited impatiently for the young women to sleep and then made a quick report to Laedry.

Any news? he asked as he finished.

A little, Laedry returned. *Rath found his raider camp this afternoon—or what you left of it. I imagine it has them speculating.*

Kael shivered, suddenly feeling a cold emptiness. The tingle lingered in his chest, nudging his mind as he did a quick calculation. *That should put us four-five days ahead of him, right?*

I'd say.

Anything on Lani?

She's doing well physically, Kael. No response otherwise. Sorry.

Yeah. Me, too. We'll be in Jolan tomorrow night. Tjan's going to low-key me in his report to his chief. I'll contact you afterward.

I'll be waiting.

The link broke and he closed the booster. "There's not much change in Lani," Kael told them, answering their unspoken question. He replaced the instrument and leaned back wearily. "Physically, she's strong—mentally, she's still unresponsive. I'm sorry. These things take time. We'll just have to be patient."

Tjan nodded, his feelings well masked. As the hope in Chala's eyes died, she wearily pushed herself to her feet, bid them both good night, and crossed to where the girls lay huddled together. As she lay down beside Niki, the child moaned. Chala cuddled against her, letting her warmth and presence give their comfort. Moving restlessly within her blanket, the child struggled to get an arm out. A moment later, she screamed. As her arms and legs thrashed, fighting her confinement, her cries mounted in nightmare terror.

Throwing off her own cover, Chala spun to her knees and rolled the girl toward her, freeing her from the blanket. The screams continued as, flailing and kicking, Niki tried to escape Chala's restraining hands. Quietly, gently but firmly, the older girl held her, talked her awake. As awareness wiped out the nightmare, the child broke into sobs, wrenching sobs

that twisted Kael inside. Chala took her in her arms and rocked her, smoothed her hair, whispered words of comfort until at last the child quieted.

Kael watched them lie down once more, Niki still in Chala's arms. Tjan had said nothing, had not moved, but the hurt was there, the anger, the frustrated helplessness.

"Hellwalker found his camp this afternoon," Kael murmured, watching the scout from the corner of his eye. Tjan's chin lifted, but he said nothing. "Look—I'm not much good right now, but if you'll give me a couple of hours' rest, I'll be fit to stand guard."

"You need your sleep, Kael," Tjan replied firmly. "I'll see *you* in the morning."

"But you can't—"

"Chala and Norelle have been spelling me. We can get along another night."

Again Chala, Norelle. Was there no end to the girls' endurance?

Dawn touched gently, wakening Kael to the sleepy murmur of the mountain stream. He lay drifting in and out of a dream, hearing the sounds around him, but not bothering to identify them. At length he rose on an elbow and scanned the camp. About fifteen meters away the girls sat talking quietly, their blankets rolled and waiting. Tjan was absent, but his pack lay with the others. Throwing the blanket back, Kael sat up.

"Morning," Chala called. A dozen other greetings followed almost as an echo.

"Morning, yourselves," Kael answered. "You're spoiling me. How long have you been up, anyway?"

"Long enough to pick these." Chala held up a

handful of pink berries. "They're delicious. Want to try some?" The other girls chorused the invitation, moving aside so as to make a place for him among them.

He got up stiffly, straightening his clothes and running his fingers back through his hair. Accepting a double handful of the berries and a bunch of greens, he sat down.

"Where's Tjan?"

"Scouting a bridge below. It's been years since anyone used it. We may have to go around. How are you feeling?"

"Ready to move." He savored the fruit, cleaned his hands on the grass, and reached for his canteen. "I could use some help for a few minutes," he said, looking at Chala. "I'm not much good one-handed, and I've got to change these bandages; they're beginning to chafe."

"Sure. Now?"

"If you're ready. I don't want to keep Tjan waiting."

Chala nodded and pushed herself to her feet. "Norelle, why don't you get Kael's things ready? We'll be right back." She brushed some berry stems and leaves from her skirt and followed Kael across the clearing into the willows that lined the stream.

It was a small brook, crystal clear and icy, and the grass lining it was already deep and comfortably soft. Kael sat down carefully, easing out his leg. He loosened the strings of his jerkin and shirt, and with Chala's help quickly removed them. Kneeling at his side, in seconds she had the knots untied and the strip of cloth unwound that bound his arm to his side. He shook his canteen, listening for the water.

"We'll need more than this," she said, taking it

from him and heading for the stream. Back a few minutes later, she knelt again at his side, gathered a handful of shirt and pressed it against his chest under the wound and began to dribble the water across the bandages. He tensed a little, anticipating the coldness; even so, he gasped when some of the water ran down his back.

"Sorry," Chala said, wiping the water off and draping his shirt across his other shoulder.

"Remind me next time to warm the water," he mumbled, shivering. She smiled a little and poured again. As it soaked through, she peeled off the layers of bandage. As the last of it came free, her eyes widened incredulously.

"I don't believe it." She dropped the bandage, sat back on her heels, and stared at him.

He looked at the wound with some satisfaction. The lacerations were covered with thick protective scabs already feeling the encroachment of healthy new skin. There was no swelling, no inflammation, no sign of infection—he was healing well, better even than he had expected. He reached for the canteen, poured a little water over the adjacent area, and scrubbed at the brown skin with his fingers. Swallowing her surprise at his healing, Chala moistened the edge of her skirt, and pushed his hand away. He watched her as she worked, very much aware of her closeness. And apparently, that closeness was having its effect on the girl, too; for the longer she worked, the more shy she seemed to become. No . . . he decided, it was not really shyness, it was more like she was uncertain—not of him but of herself. With curiosity, he searched her face, wondering about her thoughts, trying in vain to catch her eye.

Suddenly, pain shot through his shoulder. He jerked away, held her hand from the area and waited, breath held, for the sharpness to ease.

"I'm sorry," Chala stammered apologetically, her eyes wide with concern.

"It's all right," he said, when he had his tongue again. "Just keeping me humble." He smiled and squeezed her hand. It was a cold, chapped, rough little hand, but at that moment it was one of the nicest he'd ever held.

Chala watched him, her expression on hold. After a moment he released her, and with a quick indrawn breath, she returned to her work. He caught her glance once more a bit later, but she quickly looked away. The moment had been intriguing. It was a pity, he thought wistfully, that it couldn't be pursued.

"There," she said, pushing herself to her feet. "That should do it." She picked up the canteen and walked back to the stream. Kael followed her with his eyes, feeling a little frustrated by his twist of feelings.

As she returned, she pointed to his leg. "Will you need help with those, too?"

"No," he said quickly, an unaccustomed warmth touching his cheeks. "Got two good hands now. You go ahead. I'll be along in a few minutes."

He silently cursed his flush, embarrassed by his loss of control. Chala handed him the canteen, picked up the soiled bandages, and left—not a hint of a smile at his embarrassment.

Drawing in a long breath, Kael reviewed the moment, reflective of his reaction to the girl. It had been a long time since he had been caught so off guard. He set the canteen down and unfastened his kilt. With one last look at the willows where she had disappeared, he began to pick at the thigh bandage ties.

Tjan broke through those same willows a few minutes later, crossed the grass in a half-dozen long steps, and halted before him.

"You surprised, too?" Kael asked dryly.

Tjan rubbed his beard in amazement. "Shern, man. I wouldn't have believed it, if I hadn't seen it. Down here, a surka's clawings cause an infection that normally takes months to clear up. Those wounds of yours look no worse than bad scratches. Damn—they look better than mine. And in two days . . . Two!" He shook his head and studied Kael. "Musta been some medicine they gave you."

"It helped," Kael admitted. He soaked the bandages again and began to remove them. As he peeled off the groin bandage, his own eyes widened. "Shades . . ."

"You were lucky," Tjan murmured. "Half an inch deeper, and we'd have buried you."

Back in camp, the men found the girls packed and ready. Chala, as she had done the day before, was carrying Kael's gear.

"Oh, no you don't," Kael said, crossing the clearing. "You got away with it yesterday, but not today. Come on, hand it over."

Chala shook her head and backed away. "You can't carry it; the straps would rub those wounds raw."

"Give it here!" Kael repeated, embarrassment adding to his irritation. She backed behind her brother, and Tjan abruptly stepped to block him.

"You can't afford to break that shoulder open, Kael. It won't hurt to let her carry it a little farther."

"Whose side are you on?" Kael muttered.

"Common sense. Give yourself a little more time, Kael. It won't hurt the girls, and it will help you."

Kael frowned back at him, turned on his heel, and stalked past the waiting girls. He hardly noticed the

wondering looks or the whispered exclamations that rippled through the group as he passed. With his shoulder wound open to the air, the lacerations could not be missed.

Chala walked with Norelle for a time and then slipped back to walk with Kael.

"Why don't you tuck those things under my pack straps?" she said, pointing to the shirt and jerkin he had slung over his right shoulder.

He ignored her, trying his best to be grim and uncommunicative. His resolve collapsed before the mimicking, overly stern face she gave back to him, and before the morning was half over, she had him grinning and talking again.

The forest thinned as they left the pass and the temperature went up several degrees. Now and then as they topped a knoll Kael glimpsed stretches of yellow flatland. A little after noon, they walked down a last hill and into a blaze of prairie sun.

Tjan stopped them in the shade of a lone forest monarch, insisting they rest before braving the heat of the open plains. Ahead of them, the land was a vast stretch of tall prairie grass, studded with clumps of berry bushes and wild nut trees. It spread as far as Kael could see, a yellow-green, sun-brightened carpet. The little brook they had followed from the summit had swollen into a river whose rapids slashed arrow-straight over a kilometer into the plains.

Kael had scanned the area with Laedry a number of times and was reasonably familiar with the lay of the countryside. A small rise, as he remembered, split the river, sending one arm east and another west. The west tributary snaked out across the thirsty prairie, gradually widening until it became a meandering,

bog-lined stream. The other flowed east about ten kilometers before joining the larger channel of the Minth. The trail they followed would lead to that junction, and there join the trail between Minth and Jolan.

The rivers were edged by fields that had been enclosed by one- to two-meter-high rock fences; and along the main trail were brightly painted homes and farm buildings, nestled in shade trees, surrounded by well-cared-for orchards and large gardens. As the number of farms grew, the trail became a wagon-rutted road. Kael could see it all in his mind as though it were laid out in map relief. Still, it was different seeing the plains from the ground. They were so much bigger—freer—than from above.

"I never knew there was so much sky," Chala murmured, staring past Kael into the brilliance of the sun-washed land. She was sitting beside Tjan, half facing Kael, as she balanced on one arm. The three of them formed a tight triangle with the rest of the girls stretched out or sitting around them.

Kael nodded and smiled. "It's even bigger from up there," he said, drawing her attention to a bird circling high above them. It swooped suddenly in a lightning dive and disappeared behind an unnoticed roll in the land. A second later it swept back into the sky, its talons clutching an unlucky meal.

"That's a plainsmace, cousin to that little fellow you took on the mountain," Tjan said. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and drew his canteen. "It might not grow as big as the peakmace, but it can outfly it. Nothing like it in the air." He took a drink, replaced the canteen, and stood up, drawing the others' attention.

"The heat can get you this time of the day. Keep

your water handy. We'll take it slow and rest when we have cover. Shade your faces as you can. Okay, let's get going."

Kael was on his feet before Chala realized what he was up to. He grabbed his pack and slung it over his good shoulder before she, sputtering, could stop him. He grinned at her, enjoying the exasperated look she gave him. Standing there, her hands on her hips, legs wide, balancing as though ready to rush him, she formed a picture that almost made him chuckle.

"Not this time, Chala. Why, what would people think?" he teased.

She hissed back at him and turned to Tjan, but the scout merely shook his head and shrugged.

"If I can't handle it, I'll give it back. Fair?"

Chala's scowl gave nothing as she turned back to Kael. Indeed, she wore the most perturbed expression Kael had ever seen on a girl's face.

"Fair?" he repeated, his pleading grin deepening, gently teasing.

At last, shaking her head, she sighed. "Yeah. But I still think you're stupid."

"Well, now that you have that settled, do you think we can get moving?" Tjan asked dryly. "I would like to make Jolan sometime today."

"After you," Kael said, nodding at the scout. "Girls . . ." He waved them on, reaching out to catch Chala's hand as she moved past him. He raised his eyebrows in question, and she hesitated, looking at him from the corner of her eye. But no smile came and she moved on.

Kael let them walk ahead a few steps and then fell in behind them, feeling unease mar that first comforting success. He really had put her down, hadn't he, forcing the issue like some rutting bull. He just had to win. Damn his ego anyway. Mind-kicking at his

loneliness, he sighed and drew his thoughts inward again. It was just as well—he had no business starting anything anyway.

He was doing pretty well setting up a detached mood when he felt a small, chapped, roughened hand slip hesitantly into his own.

CHAPTER TEN

This place belongs to Mov Norinda," Tjan said, stopping Kael and the girls in the orchard next to an old farmhouse. "They're good people, friends of the scouts. Being the last outpost against the wilderness, they keep their eyes open and we keep them informed on conditions to the south. Stay here and rest a few minutes while I see if I can borrow a team and wagon, and get some food from them."

Welcoming the break, Kael and the girls stretched out in the shade to wait. They had come about four kilometers from the river junction and this was the first sign of civilization they had seen. It was a typical Sor homestead, with a couple of orchards and a garden surrounding the home and farm buildings. He could see a few sten-milkers grazing near the barn . . . the main herd was probably nearby.

The sten were stub-legged, fat animals, covered with long gray wool. None of them looked to be over a meter and a half in height. They were native—unlike the horses which the Federation had contributed to the colony in those first days. Domesticated by the first settlers, they had become the principal source of meat and winter clothing.

It was refreshingly cool under the trees after the

hot dusty trail. Kael leaned back into the grass, letting it soothe the sting and soreness from his sunburned back. Chala sat down beside him, called Niki, and began to rebraid her hair. As he watched, he found his thoughts returning to their walk that morning, and he smiled to himself.

He had liked being with her, feeling of her spirit's warmth; being, for a moment, simply a young man with a young woman finding companionship in a normal, natural way. It had been almost like an illusion, putting aside the truth of who they were and what must be. It wasn't that they were fooling themselves—it was just that today was still with them and they had need of consolation. Tomorrow would come soon enough with its harsh realities.

The scout had been gone only moments when he returned with a stout, gray-haired woman, her arms filled with a lumpy, cloth-wrapped bundle which she immediately spread on the grass before the girls. Bread, sausage, cheese, and an assortment of dried fruit opened to them, and for a held breath they just stared at it.

"Eat! Eat! Oh, my poor babies . . . poor babies," she muttered over and over, as she handed out pieces of the food. "Ah, such animals, such devils to have done this." She went from one girl to another, patting each head, wiping the sweat off their faces with her apron, shaking her head.

The girls bore her ministrations in silence, not quite able to open their hearts to a stranger, however tender her solicitude, although they were grateful for her kindness. As they feasted, a young boy, ten years or so, trotted up to the group on a dappled red pony. He lighted, handed the reins to Tjan, and took his place by the woman, his eyes wide as he stared at the young refugees.

"Kael, Father Norinda's in Jolan with the rest of his family and both teams. Chori's lending me his pony to go on to the next farm to see if I can borrow a wagon there. You might as well wait here and rest. Mother Norinda will get you whatever you need. I'll be back as soon as I can." He stuck some meat and cheese on a heel of bread, mounted, wheeled the pony, and headed out.

And Mother Norinda did look after them. She fed them until they could eat no more; she brought towels and water; offered clothing, which they declined except for a shirt for Kael; and hovered about them, giving, touching—as though she had to fill them with her own love before sending them on. Although they were grateful for her care and assurance, they still felt uncomfortable with her fussing over them; and they breathed a sigh of relief when they saw Tjan come around the corner of the orchard with a flatbed wagon and a team of blacks.

As they clambered aboard, Chori released his pony from the rear of the wagon, and Tjan saluted him. The boy returned the salute crisply and soberly.

"Thank you," Tjan said, turning to the homesteader's wife and son. "Thank you both for your help. We'll see you again one of these days. You take care of your mother, Chori." The boy nodded, his back straightening as he backed the pony away.

The woman was still waving, drying her eyes on her apron, as the wagon rounded the turn at the far end of the orchard.

Traffic picked up as they neared Jolan, most of it moving south away from the city. Horse-drawn wagons, goatcarts, riders, and walkers scurried past. Although many stared at him and Kael and the girls with considerable curiosity, Tjan kept the team moving, allowing no questions, ignoring the attention.

The slanting rays of the sun warmed the log wall that surrounded the city and touched the windows in the small wooden homes lining the road. The two hundred meters next to the wall had been cleared and the ground directly in front of the stockade had been studded with sharpened stakes. Two bored soldiers stood guard at either side of the massive, iron-strapped gates.

Tjan raised a hand in salute as they passed between them. As the soldiers recognized the scout, their boredom vanished, and they were still soberly watching the wagon when Kael glanced over his shoulder minutes later.

The wagon moved on through the narrow streets, making its way among the hurrying, homeward-bound people. One- and two-story log homes, their fronts brightened with boxes of flowers already in bloom, lined the roadside. The travelers crossed the marketplace, empty but for two old women sweeping the stalls. The open-fronted sheds used by the farmers for their produce were squeezed among a dozen or so enclosed shops. At one time they had been brightly painted, but they were faded now to dull shadows of gold, rust, and green. Although empty, there was still the smell of vegetables, baked goods, and animal sweat in the air around them.

Tjan turned the team off the market square onto another winding dirt road. A few minutes later, he brought the wagon to a halt before a long, one-story log building. Looping the reins around the brake handle, he jumped down. Kael and the girls were already off; and crossing the boardwalk, Tjan opened the door, waited for the others to enter, and then followed them in. Making his way to the front of the group, he stepped to the desk and crisply saluted the soldier seated there.

"Scout Lanfree, sir. I must report to the captain."

The officer hesitated for only a moment as his glance took in the tattered group; then he walked quickly to the door on his left. Tjan was ushered in immediately. The soldier returned to his desk, motioned the waiting young people to the benches lining the wall, and began to sort out a sheaf of papers, only a frown betraying his curiosity.

A brief minute later, the door opened and Tjan stepped out, followed by a shocked, grim-faced captain. The desk officer snapped to attention.

"Malak, have these young people . . ." The captain's gaze settled on the group and he swallowed, caught himself, and went on. "Have these young people billeted and boarded for the night at Chomers Inn, our voucher. Find someone to see to their team, and then get back to me."

The adjutant disappeared through a door on the far side of the room, and the captain turned back to Tjan. "Lanfree, take them over, get supper, and then come back here. I'm sending you on to Captain Tzarno first thing in the morning."

"Sir?" Tjan hesitated. "What of Kael, sir? He could be helpful, too . . ."

The captain studied the Vondorian a moment and then nodded. "Take him along. Bunk him in the barracks with you."

"Thank you, sir." Tjan saluted. The captain nodded, turned, and reentered his office. The duty officer reappeared a moment later with a young soldier. The newcomer scanned the group and gave Tjan an inquisitive look as he ushered them into the street.

"Minth?" he asked quietly. Tjan nodded, dropped his eyes, and the scout said no more.

They crossed the darkened road, proceeded down a boardwalk past the barracks and stable to a

moderate-size inn. A red-haired, thickset man sat near the edge of the long dining table. He pushed his mug back and rose to greet the party. A word from the escorting officer, and the proprietor nodded, a welcoming smile breaking across his face. The prospect of a full house for the night, all on the government, apparently set well. Kael could almost imagine him rubbing his palms together. The man waved them to the table and bellowed an order to the kitchen. The young soldier nodded at Tjan, excused himself, and left.

In minutes, bowls of thick hot stew, bread, and buttermilk were set before them. There was little talk over the meal, and it was quickly eaten. As they finished, Tjan approached the proprietor again. The man looked up, pivoted in his chair, and yelled down the hallway behind him.

"Mia! Ya got them beds ready yet?" He took another swallow of ale and wiped his mouth on his shirt sleeve. "Weren't expectin' so many at once," he explained. "She'll be showing ya in directly." He turned back to the hallway again. "Mia!"

There was a scurry of feet, the opening and closing of a door down the narrow hallway, and a freckle-faced girl appeared, her arms laden with washbasins, pitchers, and towels. She was strongly built and reflected the features and red hair of the proprietor. Stopping at his side, she eyed the table, passing over the girls with a flicker of distaste, but pausing to take in Kael and Tjan with more than casual interest.

"Will you men be stayin', too?" she asked Tjan, a teasing, saucy expression spreading across her face.

"Only the girls, Mia," the proprietor answered her. He raised an eyebrow and grinned knowingly at the young men, as he motioned the girls along the hall.

Kael joined Tjan and watched as the young women

were led to their rooms. Chala was last to enter; before she did, she turned and gave them each a smile. Her gaze lingered for a moment on Kael, and he felt a sadness in it that haunted his thoughts as he walked back to headquarters with the scout.

Water was heated during their debriefing and a bath was waiting when they returned to the barracks. Kael enjoyed the soak almost as much as the thought of sleeping in a bed. His sunburn smarted, but his wounds, at least outwardly, were almost healed. Only a few scabs and red lines remained, although the area around them was still tender. The cleansing had eased a lot of the aching weariness and he felt almost renewed as he towelled dry. Clean army issue was waiting on the bench beside the door, so he dropped his own torn, dirty clothing in the laundry bin near the bench and quickly donned the uniform. Retrieving his belt from the wall hook, he fastened it on and strode into the adjoining sleeping quarters.

"Back here," Tjan called, motioning to Kael. "We've got the place to ourselves tonight. The captain's called a field alert." There was an unusual edge to the scout's voice, and as Kael crossed the room, he wondered what was behind it.

"Take Channon's bunk; he won't mind," Tjan said, indicating the bed next to him. Kael sat down, patted the mattress, and shifted back and forth. It was straw-filled, stiff, and it talked back to him when he moved. No magnetic floatation hammock, but still it beat the hard ground. Well, he better get this trouble—whatever it was—straightened out with Tjan, and then report in to Laedry. That done, nothing was going to keep him from sleep.

He clapped his hands on his knees and fixed the scout with a frank stare. "Okay, what's bothering you?" Tjan's eyes narrowed. "Was it something I

did?" Kael asked. Tjan shook his head. "Something I didn't do?"

Tjan shook his head again. "It's not you, Kael." He was silent again.

"How much did you tell the captain?" Kael asked, gently prodding him.

Tjan met the question without a waver. "I kept my word. I gave him the same story you gave me that first day. He thinks you're one of us. You'll probably get a citation for your help." There was a touch of amusement in his smile. Kael waited, but Tjan offered no more. After a moment, the Vondorian shrugged and reached for his tele-booster.

"Just a minute, Kael, before you . . ." The words were hurried, as though kicked out on a sudden impulse—and then abruptly stopped. Kael dropped his hand and waited. "We're going to be in Tae-Sor tomorrow . . ."

Kael nodded. "I heard."

"We'll be talking to Captain Tzarno . . ." Kael squinted at him, trying to read behind the words. "I'll have to tell him." Tjan swallowed. "He's a man of integrity close to our leaders. I know I promised—but I have my duty, too . . . and my oath. Chala and I know . . . can one more hurt? Just one man? Couldn't we get that much flexibility . . . ?" His eyes intently locked with Kael's.

Kael didn't answer for a moment, although he knew what the answer had to be. "It's not that simple, Tjan," he said finally. "If we told your captain, would it end there, or would the captain, because of his integrity, feel obligated to tell the Chief Judge, and the Judge to tell the Council of Elders? And where would their obligations end? I'm here illegally, Tjan. Where would that put me? If they choose to detain me or use me in some kind of power play against the

Seeker, or if word got out and back to Rath, where would that leave Hellwalker and his army . . . and Sor? I wish I could tell you to go ahead, Tjan—and I'll ask. Maybe something can be worked out. But if this Tzarno is the man you say he is, he'll understand my trying to stop a madman, whether he's told now or later."

Tjan's gaze fell and he nodded, a dark resignation coloring his emotions. Kael hesitated a moment, his own frown deepening with a guilty frustration; then reached for his booster and sent the call.

For a long time afterward, he lay staring into the darkness, listening to the scout's deep breathing. He was tired and depressed and frustrated, and he just couldn't unwind. Tjan had not mentioned the captain again, and other than being more quiet than usual, he had taken the negative answer from the *Seeker* with his characteristic acceptance. The "no change" status of Lani had been received without comment, too. In accepting the inevitable, he had walled off his disappointment and concern, at least for the night, releasing mind and body to a much needed sleep. As he wrestled with his own sleeplessness, Kael's envy of the scout's control grew.

Visions came of the girls in the inn, washing, combing their hair, trying in vain to make themselves presentable in their torn, dirty clothing. Chala's face swam in his mind and he smiled, remembering their days together. He missed her, her impetuous honesty, her frank challenge, her strength, even her pouting. She was warm, gentle, easy to talk to, and she made sense, too, for a girl.

Ah, space, he sighed. If only his mission was done, finished, over with.

Over with . . . And what would that be? Rath dead? Himself dead? A thousand dead? Yesterday it had

been Rath and himself and the men of the *Seeker*—their lives, their destinies. Today . . . so many. How could Rath stand it, knowing he would meet all those souls? How could a man live without honor, without hope? How could he stand knowing what he'd lost, what he could have been, but now would never be, eternities without end . . . ? To be alone, forever alone . . . Once again Kael shivered as the empathic pain and despair crowded his mind, that pain that always forced the question but never found the answer.

"Why, Rath?" he murmured. "Oh, God! Why?"

Tjan's low snoring reached out through the silence, a strange rhythmic thread of comfort. At last Kael, too, drifted off.

He floated upward out of the well of sleep through a soft fold of darkness. A sun's warmth touched his skin and the night chill fled. Slowly his vision cleared and he looked around. Above the horizon, lavender clouds scudded through the amber light toward him. Dreamily, he watched them come, surround him, lift him even higher. The sky and clouds gradually darkened until they became one with the velvet blackness of space. Still he floated.

A great rolling ball of fire spun by and he was alone again. Worry began to gnaw at his calm. Suddenly the darkness opened, spit him out, and he was falling, cartwheeling slowly through a great white void. Gold touched the white and then tinged with pink, pale at first like a strange dawn. Below him he saw a forest rushing up. He drew up his legs, covered his head. Struck! A thousand needles jabbed, a thousand pricks of pain. He raised his head. A thorny branch waved above him, white light beyond. A thorn tree—he had landed in a thorn tree.

He tried to move, but the thorns dug in and he

froze. Turning his head carefully, he strained to see below. An endless expanse of thorny branches—no ground at all!

Welts were forming where the thorns had pricked. They stung and burned. He clung to the branch, terrified of falling, praying for someone to come. A shadow covered his face. He looked to his left, saw Rath at the edge of the tree. He was standing in the air, looking out across the forest, smiling.

"Rath!" he cried in relief. "Thank God. I'm over here—it's me—Kael. Give me a hand, will you?" Rath turned, looked at him, and his smile froze. Bitter anger flashed in his eyes, his face shimmered a second in the light, and he was gone.

"Rath!" Kael screamed, his voice echoing down a hundred canyons.

The thorn tree dissolved and it was dark again, space-dark—cold—and he was drifting. His skin still stung and burned, and he welcomed the icy numbness of the deep cold.

Ahead of him a door opened in the darkness, spilling reddish light. Forcing his frozen muscles to move, he maneuvered himself toward it—not wanting to, fearing it, but somehow compelled. He pulled himself inside. Two men sprawled on the floor, motionless, not breathing. He backed away from them, edged around the compartment to a console and a giant black lever. He had to stretch to reach it, and it groaned as he pulled it toward him. A shooting star slid away and spiraled down.

"Wait!" he cried, plunging after it, following its trail, racing in giant strides down the darkness.

Below was a valley, burning; blackened chimneys reached upward through the flames toward him. Darkened mounds dotted the ground. Between light

and shadows, he saw . . . corpses! He whirled, trying to climb back up the darkness. Still struggling, his feet touched earth. He stood frozen, arms still reaching, terrified, while the dead turned to stare at him with grotesque curiosity. Pain-whitened lips opened and a low sound rolled, gathering momentum. The rumble became a word, a single, drumming word, repeated over and over.

"Why? Why? Why?" The sound rose, hammering through his mind until he clasped his hands over his ears and screamed at the voices to stop.

The dead crowded him, forcing him back, down. He could feel their cold hands grasp him, shake him, and he fought back wildly. His cheeks stung, first right and then left. He fought harder and his face stung again. Another voice joined the chorus—different, harsh, commanding. His name! He froze.

"Kael! Come out of it! Wake up, you're dreaming."

He came out of the nightmare slowly, clammy with sweat. A figure bent above him, his face a bare outline in the dark room.

"Tjan?"

The scout blew a sigh and sat down on the edge of Kael's bunk. "Are you all right?" he asked anxiously.

Kael sat up, shook his head in an effort to clear it, and ran his fingers through his hair. "Yeah," he breathed, his voice trembling. "Yeah, I'll be all right."

"Do you want to talk?" Tjan offered quietly.

"What about?" Kael rolled over, pulled the blanket up as far as it would go. "It was just a damned dream."

It had been at least two years since he'd had one of those nightmares. He had thought they were over—that he had outgrown them. Now he shivered as a chill went from his neck to his feet. He could feel the

deep, empty, warped feeling seeping into his mind again. It always came after the dreams. He shrank from it, trying to swallow his panic.

Laedry . . . He pushed the silent plea upward as he had those times before, but the probe dissipated and died. Too far . . . His hand closed around the booster and then released it. No! He was no kid anymore. He could handle it alone. He had to . . . A man handled his own weakness.

"Kael?"

He heard a sigh. Tjan . . . ? He'd forgotten the scout. He opened his eyes and tried to see into the shadowed face.

"I'm not *Laedry*, Kael, but I *am* here. If you need to talk, I'll listen. Whatever . . ."

Kael frowned. "What did you say?" he asked, his voice a whisper.

"I just said, I'm not *Laedry*, but I'm—"

"Why did you say that . . . about *Laedry*?" Kael interrupted, raising up to see Tjan a little more clearly.

"Well, you just said—"

"I didn't say anything about *Laedry*."

"Oh, come on. I heard you as plain as you're talking now."

"I didn't say a word, Tjan. Not a word."

"Then, I guess, you must have put it in my mind."

"No! I was projecting away from you; I'd have known if I touched your mind, anyway."

"Then you must have said it." Tjan stood up. "I think I'll get a lantern." He walked over to a wall, retrieved a lamp and lit it.

"Tjan?" Kael began hesitantly as the scout again sat down beside him. "The old people who settled here—they were working with telepathy, just in the early stages, weren't they?"

Tjan squinted back tiredly, trying to be patient. "I don't know. I never heard of any."

"Well, they were—believe me. It's in the records. Your people were just breaking through. It was latent in your race; it's been latent again in your generations—but the potential's always been there."

Tjan frowned, shook his head, and Kael sat up and put his feet on the floor. "Do you know what I'm saying?"

"Not really, Kael. But you need rest now and you'll feel better in the morning."

"Don't put me off, Tjan. You heard me think—"

"I heard you talking." Tjan's voice had tightened and was becoming a little impatient. "You just had a nightmare, remember? Probably you didn't even realize you were talking out loud. I'm sorry I listened."

"No! I know the difference, believe me. Dammit, Tjan. Do I have to spell it out?"

"I'm no mind reader, Kael," Tjan answered levelly but firmly, "if that's what you're getting at. We don't have telepaths on Orran. Never have had."

"None that you know of."

"Okay. Suppose you are right. Then how come I can't read you now? How come the only thing I'm getting is your voice?"

"Because you were tuned in then. It set your mind up for the breakthrough. When the wall came down, the probe went automatically, subconsciously. I was unshielded and drawing you."

Tjan's impatience took on a tinge of exasperation. "What wall? What tuned? I don't understand a thing you're saying."

"I'm not explaining it very well. Simply, Tjan, a part of your mind that was closed suddenly started to function. You sent a probe subconsciously without

knowing it. It happens sometimes when the circumstances are right. Things aren't the same now. It's not working by itself, and you don't know how to get it started."

"And why did it start working in the first place—all by itself?"

"I don't know. Part of it is probably me. Telepaths can sometimes be catalysts; they can bring a potential telepath to a point of breakthrough. What we've been through the last few days certainly had its effect, too. Stress often precipitates a breakthrough, especially if there's a telepath applying pressure at the time. And I was doing that. It probably was a combination of everything."

"And I can't get your thoughts now because I don't know how to make things work—but you can show me?" There was skepticism in Tjan's voice.

"It'll only take a few minutes and we'll know for sure."

"And then we can go back to sleep?" Kael nodded. "Okay, let's get it over with. What do I do?"

"It's a matter of controlled concentration. You can do that better at first if you relax. It will release the hold your conscious mind has on everything. Go ahead, lie back here. I'll get you started. Just let your body relax, let go. Hey—not to sleep." Kael quickly talked him down.

"Okay. Now . . . One thought. Try to feel what I'm thinking; try to see behind my eyes. Picture me, my face. Imagine it opening up, letting you see behind it. Hold tight to that image. You may feel a splintering feeling in your mind, like it's splitting in two—that you have two awarenesses. Don't worry about it. Just keep up your concentration."

Kael quickly formed a mental picture of the waterfall and garden near his home in Guarnt. He drew in

the forms and colors, making them as vivid as he could, and then waited. He could feel Tjan struggle with his concentration. He would drift toward sleep, rally, and pull himself back. His control was far too shaky for a good probe, but even a . . .

Kael's breath caught suddenly as he felt a fleeting pass of energy, like a feather skipping across his consciousness. He bit down hard on his excitement. It wasn't much, a bare sliver, but it was a probe. Emotion swelled until he felt he would burst. He swallowed and calmed himself. He had to keep the image uncluttered and free from interference. There was another feather touch and then he heard Tjan sigh.

"I'm sorry, Kael," he said wearily. "I'm dead." There was a note of real disappointment in his voice. "I thought for a minute . . ." He shook his head. "No . . . it's stupid. It couldn't have been."

"It couldn't have been what?" Kael asked, somehow keeping a sober face.

"I had a strange feeling for a second." Tjan rubbed his temple and slid his hand back through his hair. "There were some odd silvery streaks that came and went. But . . . No. I'm reaching. You want to know what I got? I got a headache, and it serves me right."

"Silver streaks?" Kael asked, ignoring the rest of Tjan's talk. "Like water, sheets of water, like in a waterfall?" Kael's voice was unnaturally low.

"Sort of. Maybe. It was only a flash." He studied Kael, his head lifting a little. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

"There was a waterfall in the scene I pictured," Kael said. A grin touched the corner of his mouth and spread. "But that's not important. I caught a probe, Tjan, unstable and rudimentary, but a probe." He gripped the scout's forearm as excitement, released

at last, put an edge to his voice. "You've got it, pal. God knows how, but you've got it."

Tjan paled, his muscles tensing under Kael's hands.

"Did you hear me, Tjan?" Kael shook him a little, grinning as the dazed look in the scout's eyes turned to one of incredulous wonder.

"A telepath? Me?" he murmured. He searched Kael for confirmation, and, still grinning, Kael nodded. "Like you?" Kael nodded again. "Damn! Who would ever believe it?" He rubbed his head and eyes, and turned back once more. "You're sure? I didn't see—"

"It takes practice, lots of it," Kael broke in, enjoying his friend's wonder. "Don't worry, the gift's there."

Tjan bounced to his feet. "Wow! Wait'll I tell Chala and Channon."

The comet of excitement Kael was riding suddenly rammed against a rock-hard wall of horror. He was squashed, drained of all other emotion in that one agonizing instant. He bent forward cupping his head in his hands. "Oh, God, what have I done?" he mumbled. "What have I done to you?"

"Kael?" Tjan's voice was low and afraid. He leaned over, placed a hand hesitantly on Kael's shoulder. "Kael?"

The Vondorian stared blankly at the shadowed floor. "You've got to let it die," he mumbled at last, "and pray that it's not too late."

"Why?" Tjan demanded in disbelief.

"Because," Kael said, meeting Tjan's gaze. "If you don't you may regret it the rest of your life."

"Regret it . . . ?" Tjan frowned as he struggled to understand.

"Back home, this would be reason for celebrating.

Psi power is a blessing, a true gift of the gods—there. But we're not on Vondore, Tjan. God forgive me, but for a moment I forgot. It won't be the same here. It can't be. You'll be all alone with your talent. There'll be no one else on this entire world with the gift, no one to share with, no one to understand. When the others find out about you—and they will eventually—they'll set you apart; may even seek to use you. If you let them, they'll hate you; if you don't, they'll hate you. There will always be that distrust because you're different; it will even be there in your friends. And you'll know—you'll feel that wall they put around you." He paused, letting his words be absorbed.

"And there are other hazards," he went on. "A psi fellowship can be one of the most fulfilling of all relationships. It's one of the joys of being psi." A bleak smile touched Kael's lips. "We get so excited at a friend's coming—it may be his gift, but it's our potential blessing . . ." He looked away. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I let my emotions cloud reality."

"And that's bad?" the scout asked when Kael hesitated.

The Vondorian sighed wearily and shook his head. "No, it's good, ordinarily, but there can be a negative side to such a relationship. To experience one and then have it abruptly ended can leave a terrible void, and if there are no others to fill that emptiness, the loneliness can be excruciating. It's like going around with a part of you ripped away, always open and never healing. Even endured for a short time, the mental pain is unbelievable. Long isolations can warp you—make you bitter and hateful, violent, suicidal . . ."

Kael hesitated. It could be . . . Combine the pain and emptiness of the tearing of Rath's bond with Garik with the isolation and loneliness he would know in this nonpsi land—it had to have affected

him, terribly. If it had robbed him of all reason, humaneness . . . ? A sudden weakness came over the young Vondorian.

Tjan was watching him intently, his expression hurt and confused. Kael drew himself back, feeling the new fear settle cold around his heart.

"It won't be a short time for you, either, Tjan," Kael said slowly, feeling the full impact of his words. "There is still a lot of dysfunction in the area. If you don't force or exercise it, it will probably seal again. If it doesn't, it should still be no more apparent than the occasional deep insights of ordinary people, nothing for anyone to do more than marvel at."

He looked sadly at the scout, feeling his friend's hurt and disappointment. Seeking for words as he had done once before, he found only those same inadequate ones waiting.

"I'm sorry, Tjan."

The scout looked as though all the air had been knocked out of him. After a moment he got up and went back to his own bunk. Putting out the lamp, he plunged the room again into darkness.

Kael lay on his bed, his thoughts as black as the night. He had done it again. He'd flung himself headlong on a forbidden path, forgetting the harm that could come from it. Would he ever learn?



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tjan reined his horse to a walk and slumped in the saddle. Kael glanced at him, wondering if he was going to speak. The scout's face was drawn and haggard and dark circles bagged under his eyes. His lips were pulled in a tight, thin line—a last defense against the expanding weariness. It had been two hours since they had left Jolan, and Tjan had said nothing, nothing at all.

Kael had tried to make conversation, but the scout had only frowned and withdrawn even further—not in anger or irritation, but as though something inside required his undivided attention. Kael had a good idea what that something was. That Tjan should still be struggling with it bothered Kael. As far as he was concerned, there was no decision to debate. There was only one possible solution and that had already been arrived at. There was simply too much risk to pursue Tjan's gift further. But the scout struggled, and so Kael worried.

He reached down and rubbed his thigh. The newly healed wounds were still tender and the saddle chafed. He sighed and glanced about. The rock fences that had so faithfully lined the road to and from Jolan had been interrupted the last several kilometers by a stretch of grass-covered prairie. It

was a welcome break in the monotony of the fenced farms. To his left a tiny dust devil caught his eye as it sent a whirling brown fountain into the air. In the distance lake mirages shimmered in and out of view.

A herd of small pronghorns grazed not more than a kilometer from the road, their brown and gold stripes catching the sun's rays. Silinx would undoubtedly be out there, too. The blue-gray smaller cousins of the mountain surkas were never far from their favorite prey. Above the herd a plainsmace circled in its morning quest for food, while ahead of them, by the edge of the road, a small brush rodent, its rusty tail arching over its head, rose on hind feet and studied their approaching horses.

"Better keep your head down, little one," Kael murmured. "There's a hungry hunter overhead."

"What?" Tjan asked, turning. He blinked a little, as though just awakening.

"Just warning a little fellow out in the grass that a mace is on the prowl."

"Oh."

"It's getting warm," Kael said, hoping to keep the talk going. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, stood up in the stirrups, and stretched. "I hate to think of walking after a few more hours of this. I've got blisters on blisters."

"Want to rest?" There was still a remoteness to Tjan's voice.

"No . . . It would only prolong the misery."

Tjan nodded, stared for a moment at his mount's head. "Kael?"

And so it comes, the Vondorian thought, as he turned to meet the scout's gaze. "Yeah?"

"Orran's a big place with a half million people. There ought to be someone out there . . ."

Kael slumped and let his breath go in a long sigh. "Anything is possible, Tjan, but it's improbable that you'd find them. Believe me, you're an exception. Even matching the circumstances, the chances that we could come up with another breakthrough is less than remote. Besides, there is no time. A few days at the most and I'll be gone—and we're going to be busy, remember?"

"I could search later."

"How? This isn't Vondore. You're alone here, Tjan. Search openly and you'll reveal yourself. However they look at you—charlatan, spirit-possessed—their own fears will turn them away. Do it in secret and you infringe on their privacy. Unless it's an emergency, no honorable telepath ever probes another's mind or exerts any influence secretly. We have to live by some rules or a telepathic society would end in chaos. Besides, it's hard to keep such things a secret, and if you're found out . . ." Tjan looked down uncomfortably.

"Either way, the risk's too great. Give it up, Tjan. It's a gift out of time and place, and can only bring you misery."

The scout's eyes had darkened as Kael spoke, and emotion showed now—dark waves of bitterness. He gave his horse a kick, sending him at an easy lope down the road. Kael followed a little behind, a nagging apprehension riding with him. Another tree-shaded village unfolded, and on its outskirts Tjan reined back. He reached for his canteen, took a long drink, and replaced it. A boy playing on the roadside waved and they waved back. They walked their horses past the small inn, the livery stable, and a tiny outdoor market already showing signs of life.

Two young women in brightly embroidered woolen

skirts visited beside the well, their wooden buckets balanced on the rim. They glanced up as the men passed and then returned to their conversation.

Tjan rode silently through the town and nearly a kilometer beyond it, before he suddenly reined in and again turned to Kael.

"It's my gift, Kael. My decision. Won't you work with me?"

Kael pushed the unkempt hair from his forehead. "Dammit, Tjan, I can't. You might as well ask me to run you through. Can't you understand . . . I know what the gift means to you—I know what it meant to me. But it just can't be—"

"I won't be alone. My sisters—"

"I know, and there is Laniya and the others from Minth. But if they find out you can read their thoughts, they might not feel the same about you."

"Maybe—but I don't think so. Look, I don't know about you, but I've always been taught that gifts come from God in times of trouble, and when a man receives such a gift, he has a responsibility to develop and use it. If he doesn't, he mocks the Giver. I don't mock my God, Kael. No—wait a minute, let me finish," he hurried on, cutting off the Vondorian's words with a wave of the hand.

"If men backed off from everything just because of risk, you and I wouldn't be here. Who knows how it will turn out? Maybe it will be hard. Life often is, but we don't stop living. Life also brings joy, and often the joy is greater because of the pain. Look at me. I'm no fool. I know what you're telling me. I've known loneliness and I know what it can do. And I believe you when you say that telepathic loneliness is worse than anything I've ever experienced. But I believe man can endure a lot more than he thinks he can." He smiled sadly, thoughtfully, as he gazed up the

road; and for a moment Kael saw a ruined village spread before him in memory.

"I would rather taste the pain, than regret all my life the cowardice that threw a miracle away. God's given me a gift." Tjan turned, caught the Vondorian's arm, as though wanting him to feel the depth of his plea. "How can I discard it, Kael? How will I know the worth of it or the purpose if I don't use it? And what of tomorrow? Tomorrow, we may both be dead."

"Tjan—"

"It's my life, Kael! My choice! I've helped you, haven't I?"

Tjan's impassioned plea, spoken so quietly and with such inner assurance, left Kael without argument—or at least one he could voice. He stared mutely at the road, angry at himself, at his own confusion. After a moment Tjan sighed in resignation and kicked his mount forward again. Kael reached out and barely caught the scout's reins.

"All right, I'll do it, but no second thoughts. You can't . . ." He didn't finish. In that moment Tjan's face had been transformed. Defeat had vanished, and with it, the deep lines of melancholy. There was no joy in his expression, but neither was there fear, only an odd, relieved anticipation.

"We don't have much time," Kael went on, already regretting his decision. "We'll have to use all we have. There's a lot to cover, and it's going to be frustrating. Don't worry if you get angry; we all do in the beginning. And you'll feel shyness as you open up. Accept it. A telepath learns pretty quickly to be tolerant. It's either that or cynicism. You're going to see people as they really are—good and bad. You'll be a lot happier if you concentrate on the good. There are ways to keep your secrets. A telepath can take

only what another telepath allows him to take—as long as he has control and a working shield. You'll learn about that, too. We'll take it step by step. Okay?"

Tjan nodded as a nervous grin broke across his face. "What do we do first?"

"I think we better put a kilometer or two behind us," Kael said, glancing at the sun overhead. "Your captain is waiting, isn't he?"

"Yeah," Tjan said with a sigh. "I'm afraid he is."

Kael straightened, released Tjan's reins, and the scout kicked his horse into a trot. Following behind, Kael watched him, knowing the excitement he must be feeling, remembering the early days of his own gift. It was a time for rejoicing and wonder, and Tjan deserved to feel that thrill. Kael only wished that he could enjoy that same enthusiasm. If the circumstances had only been different. If only . . .

The sun climbed and the kilometers fell behind them. They passed villages with cool groves of trees, yet were hardly aware of them. Ahead, the smoky haze of Tae-Sor rose, graying the horizon. Others joined them on the road; the rock fences returned and farms dotted the landscape, but they saw none of it, so engrossed were they in exploring the new world of Tjan's gift.

How much farther to Tae-Sor? Kael asked, when the horses slowed once more to a walk.

. . . *hour.* Tjan's transmission was spotty, still not as good as his receiving probe. But that was understandable. It took more control to send. In all, to have achieved that much in such a little time was gratifying; Tjan was equalling, if not bettering, the early skill-reach of the Vondorian initiate. Kael could feel the interplay of tension and control in the scout. Tjan had taken very little time, really, to reach that balance, but it was that defined control that was allowing

his progress. His years of scout discipline were going to prove invaluable with time so short.

Will they bring the girls later?

. . . afternoon.

What will they do with them in Tae-Sor?

Families . . . work . . . board. You read?

Better all the time. Do I get introduced to Laniya?

Tjan smiled, the first real smile that morning. Even his eyes lighted up . . . *chance . . . get. Hands off . . .* His grin teased. *I read . . . good, now.*

Kael pretended surprise. *Why, telepaths share everything, or did I forget to tell you that?*

Everything? The thought came through with perfect clarity, pushed in jest, but without the same lightness of the previous one.

Well, almost everything. Kael grinned, signalling his own tease, and the scout relaxed. The seriousness remained, though.

Need . . . talk . . . Tzarno . . . decide. Man's no fool.

You worried that he won't believe us?

. . . see . . . lie.

Then don't lie any more than you have to. Stick to the Nisja and leave me in the background, just a bystander that got caught up in things. I'm not military; he won't expect much from me.

Don't know. You're part . . . He'll want . . . observations.

I'll give them. But there's no reason for him to question me; my actions have been positive. He won't be looking for information that has no bearing on the military stats. Give him what he wants, and play the rest as it comes.

Tjan nodded slowly, not altogether convinced. He dropped his toe into the leather stirrup and nudged his horse into a lope. Kael could see the city plainly now. It was unwallled and rambling, with home-lined

roadways reaching out in all directions, like a great, many-legged bug. The farms and open land grew ever sparser as they neared the metropolis. There was moderate traffic on the road and the young men traversed it carefully, skirting the small herds of sheep and goats, wagons and carts, and the clusters of people.

He couldn't see the inner wall, the one that separated the old city from the new, but he knew it was there. The architectural landmark had been erected in the early days for protection. Today, it contained an inner city of rich estates, lovely gardens and parks, the university, and the governmental residence of the Council of Elders—a city far different from the one he saw before him.

The homes they were passing on the outskirts of Tae-Sor had lost their large yards and gardens and many had taken on additional stories. Unlike the log and frame buildings of Jolan, these were made of gray, unpainted stucco. As though to break the monotony of the dull color, the homes sported window boxes with brightly flowering plants and small shrubs. The street corners, too, hosted their flower beds and a bench or two.

Small shops began to appear along the street—shoe shops, haberdashers, bakeries, blacksmith shops, inns, and other quaint but necessary businesses. Children raced through the traffic, daring the wagons and the wrath of their drivers.

Watch your things, Tjan cautioned . . . waitfs . . . thieves.

Thieves?

Yeah. Dishonesty abounds. There was a note of cynical sadness in the transmission and Kael glanced at him. The scout's expression was bland though and he stared straight ahead.

They rode on, picking their way through the crowds as more and more traffic joined them. Kael could feel the tingle of excitement and anticipation in the street activity, and then suddenly they were out of the roadway and in a great square filled with stalls, pens, tables and benches, some canopied, most of them not. Animals mingled their bleats and cries with the calls of farmer and buyer, and above it all rose a blended smell that made Kael catch his breath and sit back, nauseous. He followed Tjan through the crowded marketplace in fascinated half-shock.

Glancing back at him, Tjan chuckled. *You . . . be here . . . evening . . . ripe experience.*

They passed a fish stall where a thick-set, ruddy-faced woman fanned at a hoard of flies. She looked up and smiled, burying her eyes in heavy folds of skin.

"Fresh fish, lads," she called, her voice brassy from much calling. "Caught only this morning." She swatted at a fly.

"Meeba, you old thief. Clarton oversleep again?" Tjan grinned, stopping his horse before the vendor.

"Watch your language, boy. This is all fresh shank."

"And I'm four days old. Come on, Meeba, that stuff'll get you kicked out of here. Where's your man?"

"In bed. He got hisself drunk last night and his wagon rolled—smashed his knee."

Tjan frowned. "Damn, I'm sorry. Got somebody helping you?"

"My son. He'll be along soon."

The scout nodded. "Take care."

"You, too, boy." She smiled that eye-burying smile again and returned to her hawking. They turned off the square and down a narrow street.

"Well, this is it," Tjan said, coming abreast of a long, low building much like the one in Jolan, al-

though bigger. Behind the low, wood-faced structure rose a two-story cement building, with high narrow windows marching in precision across the gray face. "Army Headquarters. The barracks are in back and the stable's to the left." He pointed to a tall wooden building just beyond the headquarters.

Dismounting, they gave their reins to a young orderly who hastened forward to take them. Tjan wiped his hands on his kilt, smoothed his jerkin, and straightened. With a glance at Kael, he led the way inside, motioned the Vondorian to a bench, and strode quickly to the duty officer's desk. Seconds later the scout was ushered into the captain's office.

Kael sent his probe, felt Tjan's acknowledgment, and then relaxed. As he listened to the scout, he watched the duty officer thumb through a stack of folders and papers, pick one sheaf and leaf through it, and then set it in a bin on the corner of his desk. There was a large metal plaque on the wall behind the soldier—the sword, bow, and crossed arrows emblem of the Sor army. Its polished surface seemed to halo the man's head. It gave Kael a strange feeling of unreality, heightening the matter-of-fact orderliness and calm of the office in the midst of the war news. Somehow, he had expected the place to be humming with activity. But then maybe that part of it was over and the machine was already in gear.

He sighed. It had been a difficult morning; he was already tired and the day was still young. And waiting only brought his doubts back. Tjan, Rath, the war—the burden seemed to grow heavier with each passing hour. Even the thought of meeting the scout's captain held its own disagreeable challenge. Lies were becoming too much a part of him. He wondered if he'd ever feel comfortable with himself again.

Time passed and the captain's door opened. A

moment later Kael found himself facing the senior officer's desk.

Captain Tzarno was a tall, trim, middle-aged man with dark hair graying at the temples. He smiled at the young alien, walked around his desk and offered his hand. Kael took it in the Orranian wristhold and gave it the firm double shake.

"Young man, it seems we owe you an official salute. Tjan has spoken nothing but praise of your actions these past few days."

"Thank you, sir."

"It was certainly fortunate that you were in the area at that time. Do you travel alone often?"

"No, sir. Not when I can get out of it. I was very lucky that Tjan came along when he did. I would never have made it through the storm without him."

The captain smiled. "Tjan used almost the same words. But . . . enough of compliments. We'll have plenty of time for that later." He leaned back against the edge of his desk and folded his arms across his chest.

"What we need right now is a picture of what we're up against. Tjan has told me all he can remember of the raid and rescue. I'd like to hear it from you, too. It's possible that you could have picked up something Tjan missed. I'd like for you to sit down and tell me what you can remember. We'll add it to the scout's report and see what we come up with." He turned back to Tjan.

"If he jogs your memory, go ahead and break in."

Kael frowned thoughtfully. "I've been trying to get it all sorted out. I'll do the best I can." Tzarno listened as Kael talked, nodding occasionally, stopping him twice to clarify a point.

"You buried the child the next morning?"

"We didn't have shovels, but there were plenty of

rocks about." Kael glanced sideways at Tjan and dropped his eyes.

"Go on."

"We left the horses at the canyon and proceeded on foot. I had a run-in with a couple of surkas and got clawed up a bit. I'm afraid I was out of it then for a couple of days. Tjan kept them moving, carrying me—it cost us some time." He paused, feeling a warning mental nudge from Tjan. He looked questioningly at the scout. "Did I forget anything?" Tjan shook his head.

The captain's eyes had narrowed when Kael turned back to him. "You were clawed?" He looked at Tjan. "You didn't mention a clawing . . ."

"It wasn't bad and I healed rapidly, sir," Kael interjected, drawing the captain's attention again. "I do that—heal rapidly, I mean. I have since I was a kid. Some quirk in my makeup, I guess. Anyway . . . I was down for a couple of days."

"When did it happen?"

"Oh . . . five days ago."

"Five days . . . ? A surka . . . ?" The captain stared at Kael, obviously with a puzzle on his hands. He had to be familiar with surka injuries, and it was common knowledge that a clawing, however minor, was serious and nearly always debilitating. Yet, Kael stood before him, healed, irrefutable proof of his story. Tzarno shook his head finally, setting the incident aside, although Kael had the feeling it was not to be forgotten.

"You're a lucky young man," he murmured. "Should you ever find the source of that quirk, I hope you'll come and see me." He smiled then and held out his hand. "Thank you for your help. If you don't mind, I'd like to put you up with Tjan for the night in case we need to talk to you again." Kael nodded.

Turning to the scout, the captain extended his hand again. "I'm late for a briefing right now. The orderly will arrange your mess and quarters. Let him know where the two of you will be."

Tjan saluted, and the two youths left.

Not so bad, Kael observed as they stepped away from the door.

No. Not yet. Why . . . surka?

Because the girls won't forget. Besides, I'll be on my way before he has time to get to it again. What now?

See Laniya. . . . works near . . . Come?

Sure. I'd like to meet her.

I'll tell . . . orderly . . . reach us. He hesitated, shook his head. *Glad . . . over.*

Yeah. Me, too.

It was a fifteen-minute walk, and half of that was cool-shaded. Kael enjoyed it, drinking in the smell of grass and flowers; for the moment he felt relaxed. They turned off the road toward a large pine-pillared home and took a path that wound through a garden of flowers, past a pool with a waterfall fountain, and up to a small, railed side porch. A young woman was just pushing her way through the doorway, her arms full of embroidered rugs. She looked up, saw Tjan standing in front of her, and dropped the lot at her feet. Without a sound, she flew down the steps and into his arms.

Tjan caught her up, swung her around like a small child, and set her back on her feet, and then laughed as she tried to smooth her hair. She was beautiful. Delicate and fine featured, with hair like flint and skin a pale rose. A tiny girl, yet femininely soft and well formed—a fitting match for the scout. Kael smiled at the two of them.

"Laniya, this is Kael. Kael, Laniya."

She smiled up at the Vondorian, her eyes the

clearest blue he'd ever seen. "Are you a scout?" she asked.

"No," he said, grinning back. "Just a traveler."

She laughed and squeezed Tjan's arm. "He's nice," she whispered, standing on her toes to reach the scout's ear. "Ohhh, I'm so glad you're here. I've missed you so much."

"Missed you, too," Tjan said, drawing her closer. "Can you get away for a little while?"

"I think so. Let me go tell them. I'll be right back." Tjan helped her gather the rugs, and she slipped through the doorway like a shadow. Kael found himself thinking of Chala, of their last day on the trail. He could almost feel her hand in his, the swish of her skirt against his legs. The loneliness began to creep in; he swallowed hard and pushed it away.

"Say, Tjan. I think I'll look around a bit. I'll meet you back at headquarters in a couple of hours."

"Oh, come on, you won't be in the way. Laniya won't mind and I sure don't."

"I'll bet." Kael grinned back. "You two go have some fun. I'll see you later." Laniya was hurrying toward them. He waved and turned away before Tjan could say more.

The image of the two of them was still in his mind as Kael walked back to the street, but the more he held it, the more the girl's face changed. Black hair turned to blond; ivory skin became freckled; and blue eyes changed to tawny brown. Ah, Chala. Damn, but he missed her. He blew out a long sigh. At least she was safe now and would be cared for. A little time and she could put the past and its memories behind her, even get married and have a family again. He pictured her in the doorway of her own home, little ones running about, hugging her legs. He frowned.

Somehow, the picture didn't carry the warmth he thought it would.

Well . . . There was no sense creating a mood. He might as well sack out a while, get some of that sleep he'd missed the night before. Picking up his pace, he hurried back toward the barracks.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Back already?" Kael sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bunk. "Thought sure I had the afternoon to myself."

"It's not my doing," Tjan answered. "The captain's called a briefing, and the girls have arrived. Tzarno's already talked to them, and they've been farmed out. Chala's new family lives only a short distance from here. I wanted to go over and see how she's doing, but looks like I'm going to be tied up the rest of the day."

"Like me to fill in?"

Tjan hesitated, a flicker of unease crossing his mind, and then nodded. "I'd appreciate it."

"How do I get there?"

Sitting down on Kael's bunk, Tjan drew a finger map on the blanket. "The crossroads is on up the street about a kilometer. Just head west and stay on the road. You'll pass a small recreation area that divides the estates from the cottages. She's in the eleventh house beyond it on the right. You shouldn't have any trouble finding it; it's right on the main course."

He looked at Kael and frowned, as that odd uneasiness Kael had noted earlier returned. Gently probing the point of that concern, the Vondorian almost laughed. Almost. Ridiculous as it seemed, the youth's

concern was honest. Kael met his look with one of disappointment.

"You don't trust me, after all this?"

Tjan's expression hardened, and he fixed Kael with a frank stare. "You like her, don't you?"

"You know I do."

"Well, she likes you, too, probably more than she should. She's vulnerable, Kael. There's a big hole in her life right now. Chala's country stock. She's been family-protected all her life. She's strong and independent and smarter than most in a lot of ways, but not with men. Especially not men like you."

He paused and looked out the window across the room. "She's a romantic, Kael. Has been all her life. She's as naive as a child. Even after all this terror, far back in her mind she's still a dreamer—and you're a storybook hero come true."

Once more he hesitated, and then blew out a sigh. "Oh, hell, Kael, I trust you. I just don't want her hurt anymore."

"She won't be. Stop your worrying," Kael assured him. Standing up, he pulled on his jerkin. Tjan walked with him to the door.

"Tell her I'll be out as soon as I can. And, Kael . . . thanks."

He gave the Vondorian a push through the door and then hurried toward the headquarters building.

A few moments in the midday sun and Kael felt the sweat rise. His muscles ached and he could feel the tiredness take hold from too few hours of sleep and too many days of body-wearying activity. He imagined himself dozing off as they talked. The image was particularly depressing. Hoping a brisk walk would get his blood pumping and clear his head, he hurried his steps.

He had hoped for an opportunity to explain about

Tjan and his new gift, his needs and how best she could help him. Things couldn't have fallen together better. And . . . it would be nice to say a proper goodbye.

A shoulder-level, lattice-work, cement wall edged the road beside him. Behind it, set back in small groves of pine trees and flowering shrubbery, were the large, plastered homes of Orran's more prominent families. The two-story dwellings were columned and porched, and there was something very stiff and formal about them, almost confining. The wealth showed, but what of love and warmth? He could understand Tjan's concern for his sister as he passed one after another of the cold mansions.

The west road took a couple of bends, and coming out of the second, Kael walked by a small park, thick with trees and flowering shrubs. Beds of flowers followed winding paths. A rearing winged-horse fountain sprayed a softening mist of water near a child's play yard, and women sat around it, visiting, their white linen blouses and long embroidered skirts adding their own bright bits of color. Off to one side beneath a tree, a boy and girl stood, their eyes seeing only each other. Kael took in the secluded benches and the quiet peacefulness and nodded to himself.

He arrived at the house a few minutes later, a modest home, a well-fit, one-story log-and-rock dwelling, comfortable, but not overdone. Fruit trees shaded the small, intimate yard and flowers brightened the lawn. If its people reflected their surroundings, it should be a good home for Chala.

He paused at the edge of the path and ran his fingers through his hair, brushed at his clothing, and drew in a couple of long breaths. He'd gone halfway up the walk when the front door opened and Chala came out. She studied him, frowning a little, and then

a smile broke across her face and she ran down the steps to meet him.

He laughed and took her hands. "You didn't know me."

"You look different—no whiskers, no dirt, those clothes—"

"Better, I hope."

"Well . . ." She tilted her head, screwed up her face in feigned appraisal, and then grinned. "Much better."

"You doing anything? Like to go for a walk?"

She nodded, her eyes brightening. "Let me tell Sera so she won't worry. I'm being terribly mothered." Her lips tightened for an instant and then relaxed. "I'll be right back."

He stood smiling to himself after she had gone. It was remarkable. Bathed, hair washed and brushed, the lines of weariness and tension almost gone from her face, her young, shapely body draped in blue linen—Chala was no longer the tortured waif. She was a lovely young woman. He found himself impatient for her to return.

As she came through the door again, he started forward and then stopped. A woman followed her onto the porch and stood there smiling down at him. Chala took his hand and drew him forward to introduce them.

"Sera, this is my friend Kael. Kael, this is Sera."

The woman smiled warmly. A pretty woman, probably in her late twenties, dark haired, thin, very pale, as though she had been ill and shut in.

"Chala has mentioned you," she said, a twinkle breathing life into her gray eyes. "Will you come in?"

"Not right now," Kael said, "but thank you."

"Then run along." She smiled at Chala. "I know how precious time is when you are young."

"We won't be long," Kael said. "If we're needed, we'll be in the park." He nodded up the road. Sera waved them off, and clasping hands, the two young people walked back down the path to the street.

Her hair bounced as she moved, and the sunshine played in it, making sparkles of copper and red. It hung loose and wavy, and the electricity from the fresh washing framed it around her face. Lotions had removed much of the harsh effects of the trip: softening her hands, fading the sunburn and bruises. Her freckles swept dark across her nose and cheeks under sparkling light brown eyes. He kept staring, amazed at what a few hours could do.

"Tjan wanted to come," he said as they reached the road. "But Captain Tzarno has him tied up this afternoon. He'll be over as soon as he can."

"I knew he must be busy."

"Are things going to work out all right? Is it a good family?"

"They're very nice. Really. They had an aunt in Minth. Sera's been ill all winter and they've had to board their children—two little boys and a baby girl—with a cousin in Tium. Now that I am here and she is getting stronger, we're going to go get them and bring them home. She's worried about all this talk of war and wants them here with her. Tium is just north of Jolan and close to where they may wind up fighting." There was a glistening of moisture in her eyes.

"You know, it's almost like having a family again . . . being with people who need me." She smiled self-consciously and looked down.

They walked off the cobblestoned street onto the thick grass of the park, found a shaded bench away from the general traffic and sat down. Across the path under a flowering tree, a small boy had built a wall of

twigs with battlements and was conducting a miniature war. The two young people watched him for a while, wanting for words, yet not uncomfortable. It was cool under their tree, and sunlight filtering through the leaves wove patterns on the grass. Around the tree trunks grew long-stemmed, tiny white flowers.

"Cerci," Chala said suddenly.

"What?"

"They're cerci, the white flowers around the trees. At home the girls weave them into chains. If you give one to a boy, it means he's special." She grinned. "Saves a lot of guessing."

"I can imagine," Kael said. "Do you plait chains, too, Chala?"

"I did once, when I was about five, but it didn't last."

"None since then?"

"No . . . although the thought has crossed my mind lately." She colored a little, and they were quiet again.

He leaned forward and rested his arms on his thighs. "Chala, does it still bother you, my telepathy?"

She looked at him, surprised. "No. No, I hardly think of it anymore." She smiled. "I guess that's not really true, either. Sometimes I still wonder, still envy you. Why?"

"Because it's important how you feel about it."

"Important?"

"Chala, you're going to find this strange, but . . . how you feel about it could mean everything to Tjan."

"Tjan?" Surprise widened her eyes and she straightened, instinctively concerned. "What has it to do with Tjan?"

"Tjan's telepathic, Chala."

She stared at him, blinking rapidly, not quite comprehending.

"He's telepathic. Like me. He can read thoughts, minds—"

"Telepathic? Tjan?" Disbelief filled her voice.

"It happened last night in Jolan. I don't know how, it just did. I'd give anything if it hadn't. I tried to get him to leave it be, let it bury itself again. But you know your brother. He has some idea that it's a divine gift that he has to pursue, come whatever. It's my fault, and I don't know quite how to handle it."

"Wait a minute. I'm not following you. If this thing has happened, if Tjan can do all this—well, then it's wonderful." She searched his eyes. "Isn't it?"

"It would be if he were somewhere else. But it's no blessing here, Chala. Your people are not telepathic. Tjan's gift will set him apart, make him different. People fear things they don't understand. That distrust is going to make him lonely, and Tjan needs people.

"And telepaths need telepaths. Very serious depressions can come to a gifted person when he is isolated from others of his kind. Once I'm gone, he'll be alone. It's going to be difficult for him—very difficult."

Chala's gaze dropped from his face to the grass in front of the bench and for a time she was quiet. He could feel her trying to sort it out, reaching for understanding.

"What about me?" she asked at last, searching his face again.

"What about you?"

"Is there any chance I . . . ?"

He shook his head. "I wouldn't do that to you, even if I could."

"Is there a chance, Kael?" she persisted.

"Forget it. If something happened to Tjan, you'd be alone, and it would be even worse for you."

"Tjan and Lani are all I have left, Kael. I love them. I'd do anything for them."

"Not this," Kael returned firmly. "Look, there isn't a chance in a million of you being one anyway. All I'm really asking is that you'll be there when he needs you, and that you try to understand him when these depressions come. It won't be easy. He'll want to close up and withdraw. Don't let him do it. You must be prepared emotionally, yourself, for whatever arises once his secret gets out. Your support could be vital; it could save his sanity, maybe even his life. And you've got to talk to Laniya and make her understand. With his strength and the two of you to support him, he's got a chance. Without you . . ." He left the sentence hanging.

Chala turned away, lines of worry again creasing her forehead, and Kael chastised himself mentally for putting them there. She seemed very fragile under the added weight of this new burden, and yet there was no sign of capitulation. It was now, as it had been in the forest, as though she were regrouping her forces for a frontal assault.

He put his arm around her and drew her against him, wanting in that moment to add his strength to hers, to comfort and reassure her. She stiffened at first, but didn't resist, and then the tension left and she leaned her head against his shoulder.

"I wonder, will our troubles ever end, Kael?" she murmured sadly. "It just seems to go on and on."

He tightened his arm and smoothed the hair back from her cheek. Sighing, briefly content, she closed her eyes. He watched her, waiting, and presently she smiled and glanced up at him.

"You're a secret place," she said, "like my old one."

Kael frowned a question, but didn't speak, and she went on.

"When I was a little girl and things got too much for me, I used to hide out in the grove. There was an old tree there with great, humped roots that had little caves under them. The earth was soft and cool, and there were fascinating blue spiders that wove the most intricate, beautiful webs. I used to watch them for hours. My friends didn't like the caves; they never could understand why I liked to go there. But they were mine, my refuge, my quiet, secret place.

"There was a family of bushbabies that lived there, furry little fellows with the biggest, saddest eyes. I used to talk to them, tell them my troubles and my dreams and fears. They always seemed to understand. Sometimes they played with me; sometimes they just sat, quiet, listening . . ."

She shook her head, remembering. "One day I grew up. I never went back." She looked up at Kael. "You're like that—a secret place full of intriguing things, a refuge."

"And you're a dreamer," he said, smiling at her. "Know something? I like dreamers."

A warm glow settled in her cheeks and her eyes sparkled as she gazed back at him. Her lips parted the very slightest, and without a second thought, he drew her around and kissed her. For a moment her hand pressed back against his shoulder and then relaxed.

It was a gentle kiss, unhurried, more than friendly, less than passionate. Still, her lips quivered uncertainly, as the confusion in her mind dissolved into delight and then to an awakening desire. Her arms circled his shoulders and a cool hand brushed his neck. Holding her so, keenly aware of her nearness, of the softness and warmth of her body against him, of the rise of her emotions, Kael felt more than a

nudge at his own long dormant passion. With it came a warning note of memory, reality in ice.

He broke the embrace abruptly, sat her back beside him, and leaned forward, his head in his hands.

Chala stared at the ring of cerci, confused, suddenly afraid, half her being still feeling the delight of the kiss, wanting to hold it, the other knowing somehow she'd lost even as she won.

"Chala?"

Her head lifted a little, but she didn't speak.

"I'm sorry. I had no right."

Again nothing.

"I can't stay. You know that." He paused again, searching for words.

"Damn it, Chala, you know I like you. If we're not careful . . . We have to be careful. I wish things were different; that we had time for such a relationship to grow. But we don't. We don't have any time at all."

"You won't come back, ever?" Chala asked at last.

"It isn't likely, much as I want to."

"It's not fair. It's just not fair," she said, tears welling in her eyes. "I didn't ask it to happen. It shouldn't have. . . . I didn't want it to, but it did . . . and it hurts." A tear spilled over and slid down her cheek.

Kael brushed the tear away and pulled her close, putting her head against his shoulder. "Still friends, Chala. We'll always be friends. You and Tjan and I."

"It's not the same."

"No. But it can be lived with, and the memories can be good ones."

She studied him a long moment and then nodded. "Very special friends," she murmured.

"Better be getting you back." He stood up, helped her to her feet. The walk back was slow and silent, as loneliness threaded their steps.

"Will I see you again?" Chala asked hopefully, as they stopped at the edge of her path.

Kael shook his head. "Probably not. We're supposed to leave in the morning, if things go well."

"So soon?" Her chin quivered, as tears once more brimmed in her eyes.

He squeezed her hand. "Hey, you better find a smile before you go in. What will Sera think?"

She managed a small one.

"That's better." He smiled back at her.

"Got to go," he murmured apologetically, and she nodded, brushing at a tear. Lifting her chin, he gently kissed her once more, gave her a quick embrace, and then backed away. Wheeling, he strode quickly up the street.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Half lying on the ground, supported by one elbow, Kael took a sip of tepid water from his canteen and glanced at the sky. However he might shift under the low leafless brush, he just couldn't escape from the high-altitude sun. He licked his split lips, tasting the salt, the dried blood, and the mountain dust. Sweat streaked down the side of his face, hung for a moment, and dropped from his jaw to the cracked earth. He wiped his forehead with his arm. The sunburned skin smarted, and he sighed.

He looked longingly at the timberline below with its cooling shade, and then farther down the pass at the shimmer of light on water that marked the twisting path of the Minth. The thought of one icy swallow taunted him, but he could just as well have wished for Vondore.

Tjan had picked the area in the early dawn. With the steep mountains crowding in from both sides, a sparsely timbered neck had been formed in the pass below, making it a good spot to watch the trail for an approaching army. At least it was good for Tjan. After the first few minutes of Kael's own survey, the pass had become a blue-orange blur, making it impossible for him to pick out anything. The following hours had seemed endlessly long.

Aware of Tjan's need for silence in his concentration, Kael left him alone, waiting a bit impatiently for those moments when the scout rested his eyes. The breaks were a release from the tedium; but even more, the need for telepathic instruction and practice was increasingly apparent. The scout was no minor talent. His proficiency was growing by leaps, not at all like the plodding pace of the usual mature adult's awakening. And it was good that it was. There was so much to learn and so little time. A high level of power without strict control was dangerous. Kael sighed again, feeling the added frustration of his responsibility.

As the hours dragged by, Kael's mind wandered, exploring one memory after another, until they settled on that one image grown so familiar in the empty hours. He smiled as he searched Chala's face, the sprinkle of freckles, the turned-up nose, the full lips with their gentle smile. It warmed yet frustrated him, setting loose desires and loneliness he had not felt before.

He frowned, wondering at the feeling. There had been girls in the past, some quite fair, and more than one a challenge. A few he had missed since the ship's departure, but none so deeply as he did this tiny, golden-haired girl. How could she have disarmed him in such a little time? He had known her barely a week, and they had never really been alone. And yet, she stayed with him, in his thoughts, under his skin, near, yet out of sight, like some spell woven of magic. And all the others? They were as nothing now; he could hardly remember a face. But Chala's he couldn't forget. As the hours went by, the more real she became, the more he longed to see her, to hold her; and the more it hurt knowing he never would.

A fool, that's what he was, to go over and over it,

dreaming dreams in the daylight that came back to haunt him in the night. Still—he smiled to himself—dreaming did help the time to pass.

Movement caught his eye as Tjan shifted, stretched out a leg, rubbed it, and then drew it back under him again. Kael watched him, hoping it signalled a break, but the scout's eyes didn't stray from the trail. His mind stayed as remote as ever, and the moment passed.

With a sigh, Kael resigned himself to a further wait. But his gaze lingered on the redhead. He wondered what Tjan would think if he knew how much of the past four days Kael's thoughts had been on Chala? He would probably agree that his alien friend was indeed a fool. Well, better a fool than a threat. He shook his head, still disbelieving that the scout had ever considered him as such.

Funny, brothers. He had never been concerned about Surae and her relationships. But then, he wasn't acting as mother and father to her, as Tjan was to Chala. That was bound to make a difference. He rubbed his chin as he stared thoughtfully at the scout.

His Orranian recruit sparked more facets than Theda's crown. And Kael had thought him a boor. Hah. He was about as boorish as Vondore's high-born. And maybe just as sensitive.

Kael's brows knit as the old worry returned, and he looked away from the scout, across the valley. There had been too much personal involvement. He should have been more aloof. But he hadn't been, and now there was friendship . . . and the gift. And everything was a mess.

And it wasn't because he was blind. His father had seen it coming, had warned him. And so had Laedry. But good old Kael had plunged on, paying no heed, trampling every thread of reason into the dust. And

why? Because his conscience hurt. If only he had listened.

He looked back at Tjan. What will you do when I'm gone? he thought, when I'm back with my own and Orran is just a spiny thorn locked away in my subconscious. With your sensitivity and a full vision—with no one to balance you, to share, to understand, no one to draw you from yourself—how long can you possibly stay sane?

Kael shivered, knowing the answer, feeling the hopelessness in it. If only he could do something to help. But that was what had started the whole thing, wasn't it? Seemed however he tried, it never went the way he wanted it. It just got more and more involved.

Catching the sweat with his forearm, he pushed it back through his hair. His gaze wandered across the valley and then upward to the cliffs that sheared the opposite mountainside. They were spotted with wind caves, some shallow, some deep. To look at them from where he sat, it was hard to imagine that anything could reach them from below, let alone claim them for a home. But the surkas did. Like Tjan, they spurned the impossible, taking it all in stride.

For a moment he tasted envy. Envy of these frontiersmen who refused defeat. Envy of their ability to fall and rise again. Envy of their resolve and their unshatterable belief in themselves.

The feeling tinged with bitterness and despair. Like a thief moving in the dark, the loneliness came, empty and drawing. Kael's muscles tightened as the ache reached his stomach and nausea rose in a wave.

Trembling, he fought the sickness and struggled against the tightness in his chest. Come on, Kael, he told himself, get ahold of this thing before it gets you. Relax, man. Come on. Breathe it out. One in, two out. Breathe.

Little by little he felt the tension ease. At last, feeling once more in control, he faced the darkness and the loneliness it held, gripped them firmly, and thrust them back, far back, as deep as he could push in that inner self.

For a moment his mind floated empty, and then, as it always did, it cast about for a thought. The scene of early morning three days before surfaced. He caught the memory, feeling it as safe as any to explore.

An hour had passed since they had bidden Captain Tzarno goodbye. The road south still held scant traffic, yet Tjan had spoken little, and had put off any telepathic exercise. His thoughts were deep, dealing mainly with the coming war and his part in it. Chala and Lani, Minth and Kael for the moment had been set aside, and although the scout's shield was not up, Kael was effectively out.

As they rode along, Kael took a good look at himself. It bothered him, the changes in himself, the double standard that was becoming a part of his life. He had been forced to do a lot of lying—had made Tjan lie. He'd used people, manipulated them, had broken bonds, shunned loyalties, and formed new ones with hardly a look backward. Honor was a word he wasn't sure of anymore. True, it all seemed to have been expedient to his goal, but what was the ultimate effect? When this was all over, who would Kael be? And what of the scout? His values were simple and honest. What could he possibly think of all this sophisticated justification?

... don't know. What should ... think? the scout answered, his question suggesting a bit of hypocrisy. *I ... right ... right, and honor ... honor.*

It is, but it's not always simple, Kael returned, ignoring the jibe. *In spite of what you see, what you may think, we telepaths do have a code in the Federa-*

tion. There are laws. I tried to tell you about them before. The first thing we learn is that no telepath violates the privacy of another's mind without his permission—except in the preservation of life. It's that exception that's had me breaking every law in the book down here. The code is based on honor, and it's been so ingrained in us that even necessary infractions are viewed with revulsion.

He paused, as a thoughtful, sad expression crossed his face.

At least they are in the beginning.

Tjan stared at him, waiting.

It almost made me ill when I used you that first time. Even the lie . . . He shook his head and sighed. *It's true, you know, the saying that repetition salves one's conscience. I don't get the nausea anymore.*

Like . . . thing bad, . . . guess. Tjan leaned forward and patted his horse on the neck. *Yeah, I . . . see . . . you have to . . . pretty careful . . . privacy, . . . sort of thing . . . A mind's . . . easy . . . read.*

The nontelepathic mind especially, Kael returned. *Those with the gift aren't quite so accessible, but it's a problem even with them. You can't keep a shield up all the time, and everybody deserves his privacy, even a bond.*

. . . bond? Tjan asked.

BOND! The word caught the Vondorian, abruptly snapped him back into the present, pushing all other thoughts from his mind. A bonding. Of course, it was the answer. With a bond there would be no isolation, no loneliness. Relief flooded him, and then turned cold.

Tjan would never bond, not with him, not after he learned the truth.

"What truth?" Tjan's words came quietly, but with definite interest.

Startled, Kael glanced at the scout, then dropped his gaze. A numbness crept over him, dulling his mind as well as his body. He could feel Tjan's eyes, watching him, searching as the question hung, reverberating.

"Come on, Kael. I think it's about time we level." He waited again, and then went on.

"I know something's eating you. I've felt it since Jolan." He paused, looked at the ground for a moment and frowned. "No . . . before Jolan. Minth."

His eyes narrowed, as his gaze returned to the Vondorian. "It was Minth, wasn't it? And it wasn't just the horror of the massacre. You felt something personal there, like it was your tragedy." His head cocked with that thoughtful, probing gaze, and he studied Kael's face for a long moment.

"Why did they send *you*, Kael? You're not a seasoned manhunter and you're not exactly a diplomat. What's between you and Hellwalker, anyway?"

Kael involuntarily stiffened as Tjan's guess, like a sword, thrust deep and withdrew. The scout caught the motion and he frowned.

"Truth, Kael."

Coldness wrapped the Vondorian, numbing him even further. He stared dully at the brush, unable to think. At the edge of consciousness, he could feel the loneliness waiting. He was so tired—tired of the guilt and the lies and the fear. Could the truth be worse? To finally let it all go, even if it meant he would lose the scout's friendship? At least he could live with himself. In that there would be relief.

He drew in a deep breath and forced himself to meet the scout's gaze. "You're right about Hellwalker and me. I should have told you a long time ago. Hellwalker . . . Rath is my brother." He waited for a reaction, but it didn't come.

"Seven years ago he was arrested for a murder on the *Seeker*, and I helped him escape."

There was shock now.

"I was twelve, a new cadet on my first voyage . . . and he was . . . my best friend. I idolized him." Like a dam breaking, he could no longer hold back the words. They flowed in an anguished torrent.

"Rath was brilliant; he received the highest scores ever recorded at the Space Academy. His career was assured, prestigious—in the diplomatic corps. He had a girl promised, a wedding planned when we returned. He had sealed a bonding just before we left home with a young geneticist whose university work had already made him famous in our medical world. The two of them headed the Dawn Society, a futurist organization attracting the finest young minds on Vondore."

Again he paused in the agony of that old unanswered question. The scout watched him silently, waiting.

"Rath had been picked from a class of two hundred to be apprenticed to Lord Sikaerian, Clan leader of Sharol, and Vondore's leading diplomat in Interplanetary Affairs. It was the top—the most coveted of diplomatic apprenticeships. My father's ship happened to be the diplomatic flagship, and so Rath was assigned to it also. A fact that he did not find particularly appealing, as he and our father were not on good terms at the time.

"I graduated top of my class and was allowed to choose my ship. I asked for the assignment to the *Seeker*. And that's how we wound up together. Normally relatives are not assigned to the same ship.

"Anyway. Telepathy is required in the diplomatic corps; it's a protection as well as a help in communication. But there are strict rules governing its use—

the Code applies whatever the level of authority. Anyone who breaks those rules without due authorization is summarily dropped from the corps—and from any other responsible career.

"Rath knew the rules; he was raised with them. They are pounded into us from infancy. He was working with a diplomat from a nonpsi world, a particularly stubborn man, suspicious and difficult. Even Ambassador Sikaerian was at the end of his diplomatic patience. Days had passed and the negotiations had bogged down. Then Rath asked for a try one on one, and it was granted—"

Kael hesitated, the headlong rush of words stopping abruptly. His eyes closed and he swallowed. When he spoke again, the words came low and broken.

"Father and Lord Sikaerian and two others of the planet's negotiating team joined Paako and Rath unexpectedly later that morning with a message from the planet. Rath was caught in a deliberate infraction of the Code.

"Father left Lord Sikaerian with the foreign diplomats, excused Rath and himself, and the two of them returned to the Commander's cabin."

Once more Kael paused, swallowed, and coughed against the dryness in his throat. Tjan waited, his eyes narrowed and unwavering.

"Father was angry. He demanded an explanation, but Rath refused to answer. Father relieved him of duty, ordered him confined to quarters, told him there would have to be an inquiry. As he read the order into the ship's log, the finality of it hit Rath, and he must have exploded. For while Father's back was turned, Rath attacked him telepathically. Father reeled and fell through the traffic sensor, opening the compartment bulkhead.

"Scula, the communications officer, was in the passageway. He hurried to Father, then saw Rath, calling him by name." Kael's mouth opened, but no sound came. Pushing his knuckles against his teeth, he stared out over the pass. A long moment went by before he could go on.

"Rath killed him on the way out. But others saw him, and the log transcribed it all. They caught him, imprisoned him. Everything was in confusion. I heard bits and pieces—enough to know that Father was critically injured, and another man dead, and something terrible had happened to Rath. I ran to the infirmary, but they wouldn't let me in. I went to find Rath . . .

"The brig is down deep in the bowels of the ship. A force field bars the portals, leaving them open but unaccessible, and the corridors are sun-bright. It's the coldest place in the universe. They wouldn't let me go in to him, either. I couldn't even touch him. And all the time he kept telling me it was a lie, that the ship was in mutiny."

Rath's face danced in memory, drawn, pale, his eyes pleading. Even yet Kael could feel the grip of the guard's hand on his arm as he was drawn away from the cell. He shivered with the hardness of that hand.

"Father wasn't dead, but he remained unconscious, and the ship's crew grew restive as they waited. The inquiry was put off for days in hopes that he would be able to testify. When it seemed that it might never be possible, a date was set, and there was talk of execution.

"In spite of everything, I believed Rath. I didn't even question his integrity. He had never lied to me. He wouldn't. The ship's rumors terrified me. How could they kill him, if he was innocent? I found if I went at change-of-guard time, we could have a few

minutes without being overheard. Again and again, I begged him to let me help him escape. He wouldn't listen to me. I made a plan and pleaded again. We'd escape together, somehow get back to Vondore and rescue Father. Finally, he agreed.

"For two nights I watched the corridors and charted the usual activity. On the third night, I acquired a stunner, used it on the guard, and released Rath."

Kael looked past Tjan, his voice breaking as he went on. "We ran . . . and ran . . . and ran . . ."

The words trailed off as the memory gripped Kael. It was as if he were there again. He could see the shadows in the empty corridor, could hear heavy breathing and the dull thumping of boots. He searched the hallway ahead, sent a mental probe behind him . . . Nothing.

The ache rising in his side was spreading like invisible fingers, constricting his chest. He gasped for air, fought the fear and the exhaustion that weighted his feet.

Still no alarm—

As they rounded the corner, the bulkhead of the *Seeker's* Combat Information Center loomed at the far end of the passageway. Thirty meters now, then twenty. A strangled, gasping sigh escaped his lips.

The silence tightened, held for one more interminable second, then shattered as the rasping alarm throbbed down the corridor. Light flooded the hall, glaring its own accompaniment. The noise surrounded him, pounded through his head, filled him with a horror that drove him even faster. He glanced at the tall young lieutenant running at his side, saw only grimness.

His muscles cramped as pain shot up his shins and through his thighs. Perspiration turned cold against

the heat in his face. Skidding to a stop at the end of the corridor, he gulped mouthfuls of air as he shoved the ID key into the slot. Then, watching, listening, he waited, his face contorted with fear and the effort to breathe.

Seconds passed. Despair built within him, and he tried to stem the rush of tears. They were too late! The door was sealed! He turned away and angrily wiped a brown sleeve against his cheeks.

And then he heard it, the faint familiar hum. Hardly able to believe his senses, he watched the massive door slide silently open. Inside, clutching a blaster, a startled ensign jerked his head around, his left hand still on the emergency-seal switch. He raised the weapon, hesitated, uncertain of what to do with the boy standing alone, wide-eyed and gasping in the doorway.

In that instant Rath lurched from the side of the passage into the opening, his stunner firing chest high at the CIC officer. The ensign's eyes rolled back as the charge hit, and almost in slow motion he dropped to the floor.

A purposeful look crossed Rath's face as he pulled Kael into the room with him. He stepped over the unconscious duty officer, picked up the blaster, and reached for the emergency seal-switch, which closed the door and secured it from within.

The boy leaned against the bulkhead, panting, trying to suppress the hysterical laughter that threatened to unnerve him. Rath laid the heavier weapon on the console and replaced the stunner in his belt, and then turned to Kael.

"Well, we did it, little brother," he said, ruffling the boy's dark hair. "Damned if we didn't."

As Rath released him, Kael excitedly followed across the room. The CIC was a large hemisphere, the

most secure compartment on the ship. Lining the walls were the backup monitors and command controls should the bridge be disabled—or should the computer be told that it was disabled. Below the grating the other half of the hemisphere contained the central ship computers. On the right wall another sealed bulkhead led to the emergency escape shuttle deck.

Rath moved before the central screen, worked with the enhancer a moment, and motioned to the boy.

"Four men have duty on the shuttle deck," he whispered, drawing the boy's attention to the surveillance pictures on the screen. "See if you can locate them. I'm going to be busy for the next few minutes."

The camera immediately picked up three of the men gathering near the right edge of the central shuttle tube crane. They were facing away and seemed to be discussing something. A nervousness showed in the repeated glances they cast around them and in the blasters, snugged in the curve of their elbows.

As the different pictures filled the grid, Kael found a fourth man striding around the port shuttle tube. In a moment he joined the others; and at his arrival they holstered their weapons and fell into quiet conversation.

"Are they all together?" Rath asked, looking up from the control console to the screen. Kael nodded. "That's good of them," he said almost absently.

"Can you take care of them, Kael?"

The boy's breath caught, as he stared at the screen.

"They won't suspect anything from this direction," Rath continued. "It will be a lot easier to stun them now, while they're together. If we have to hunt them down later one by one . . ." He let the sentence hang.

Kael shifted uneasily.

"I'd do it myself," Rath continued, "but I'm in the middle of programming. I can't leave that right now and it will probably be too late to take care of them as a group by the time I've finished."

It was an apology as much as an explanation, but still the pleading was there. He waited expectantly for a moment, then returned to his work, not pushing the boy further.

Kael watched the men talking below. Stun them . . . His lips quivered. He'd bet they wouldn't just stun back. He closed his eyes, but the image of the men remained. He cleared his throat.

The now-muted pulsing security alarm seemed to mock him. What was he anyway? it seemed to say. A twelve-year-old infant to be looked after, coddled? No! He was in this all the way, and Rath needed him now. He drew in a deep breath, his chin lifting resolutely. Scared he might be, but he was no baby. Setting his weapon, Kael clutched it tightly and headed for the shuttle bulkhead.

"Stay on the ramp and keep down. It will shield you." There was pride in Rath's voice and a strange satisfaction. Kael nodded.

The ramp made a half-circle to the deck. The part near the bulkhead was out of view from below, and Kael hesitated there a moment, fighting his fear, trying to hold that thin line of resolve. In the midst of his struggle there came a strange warmth and courage of such depth and power that he knew it could only have come from his brother. Strengthened, Kael dropped prone and elbowed to the edge of the ramp.

The noise of the alarm throbbed in the hangar. He welcomed it, knowing it masked the faint sounds he made. Below him, the men still talked, two blue-clad ensigns, two lieutenants in green. They were not in line for a clear shot, so Kael backed off, squirmed

down the ramp a few meters, and checked again. The group was breaking up. He caught his breath and, without thinking, pushed the gun forward, aimed with both hands, and squeezed. Once, twice—four times in quick succession. Only the last man even tried to draw his weapon.

He sealed the entry bulkhead and then reentered the CIC sphere. The portal closed behind him and he leaned trembling against it.

Standing in front of the master console, Rath rubbed his chin thoughtfully and studied the monitor to his left. Fully alive now, the computer rippled with light—rhythmic, yet somehow out of sync with the blaring alarm. The intercom call light was flashing, too, demanding a reply. The crew, alerted by now, were probably at work on the door. Kael glanced uneasily toward it. With one last adjustment, Rath stepped back.

"I saw. Couldn't have done it better," he said, smiling at the boy.

Kael forced a smile in return, short and with little warmth. "Can we go now?" he asked, glancing anxiously at the door again and then at Rath.

Looking back at the monitor, the lieutenant was silent for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice was unusually gentle.

"I'm sorry, Buddy, but I can't take you this trip. I wish I could, I really do, but there's no way."

The boy stared at him, gulping a half-laugh that died even as it began. "You're kidding . . . aren't you?" His lips opened, closed, opened again. "You said . . . You promised—" His voice broke as Rath brushed past him to the remote shuttle controls. Kael followed him across the deck.

"Why?"

Looking away, Rath checked the console.

"You can't leave me here, not now, not after all this. You just can't." Tears welled in Kael's eyes.

"I can't take you, and make it," Rath snapped. His green eyes became almost transparent, but immediately softened.

"Comets, Kael, don't you think I want to? If there was any way . . ." He rubbed his forehead a moment. "If they catch me, I'm dead. You know that. There's little chance I can get away even alone. If I take you, I would only get us both killed, and then there would be no one to help Father."

"But you promised," the boy whispered.

"I know. I really thought we could do it. But I realize now it's impossible. You've got to stay here while I get help. You'll be all right. You're young. They'll just think I used you. They'll go easy . . ."

An ugly thought hit Kael in the pit of his stomach, but he shoved it back. No. Rath would never lie, not to him.

"I'll be back. I will. I promise. You just hold on." Rath stared down at Kael's pale face, but the boy dropped his eyes.

"Kael . . . ? Please. I need your help!" He hesitated, his eyes pleading. "Father needs your help."

Wearily, Kael nodded.

"They'll be burning through that door any minute. I need a head start. Come over and I'll show you what to do." He turned to the shuttle-control console.

"When I tell you on the interphone, move these two levers up, the black first and then the red. That'll lower the shield in sector four to let me through. After I'm jettisoned, lift this access cover over on the side console and push each of this row of toggles up. They'll activate all the antiboarding gates and seal up the ship behind me. Then use the ensign's blaster and

cut this cable below the console. The interceptor tube gate will have to be burned away, or the cable spliced, or they'll have to scab into the control circuitry. Whichever, it should give me a half hour. I've spiked the laser computer and search radar; so once I'm out of here, they'll not find me."

Kael listened, his shoulders slumped in resignation. "This, this, these up, and then burn the cable?" he mumbled.

Rath lifted the boy's chin, demanding his gaze. "I'll be back, Kael. Oh, damn. I wish . . ." He reached out and drew the youth to him, but Kael stiffened in his arms. A moment later Rath was gone.

Kael waited numbly, his hand on the black lever, his eyes on the digital console clock. A minute went by . . . two. The shuttle ignition light blinked on. There was a buzzing noise and smoke at the bulkhead door. A voice cracked over the shuttle com.

"Now, Kael! Let 'er go. See you, Buddy. I'll bring help." The radio silenced.

There was more noise from the door, but the seal still held. Kael pushed the black lever, followed it with the red. When the muffled roar and rumbling vibration abruptly ceased, he lifted the row of switches, picked up the blaster, and burned the cable. Carefully he set the weapon back on the lip of the console.

Lifting his gaze, he stared at the screen's blank raster. A chilling loneliness filled him. His hands gripped the edge of the console as tears of frustration finally spilled over and slid down his cheeks. He didn't feel the stunner hit.

For a long moment, Kael sat wrapped in the memory. Gradually, he returned from it, once more becoming

aware of the scout and the mountain and the sun on his face. The silence stretched out, neither offering to break it. Kael stared at the pass, unable to face Tjan, knowing the contempt that he must be feeling. Still, it was over—the horrible secret told. Whatever happened between them now, at least there would be no more lies. And there was some relief in knowing that.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

That all?" Tjan asked quietly, breaking the silence.

"Except for Minth and Orran." Kael lifted his head, managing somehow to meet the scout's gaze. "I never knew it would turn out that way. I never . . ." He shuddered.

"Oh, God, Tjan. I killed all those people, your people, just as surely as if I had held the ax. I created your Hellwalker . . . and I gave you a war. Some friend. I wouldn't blame you if you cut me down right now—"

A blast of angry disgust cut him off. He flinched, waiting for the retort. But as quickly as it came, the disgust was gone. Pity came through and touched him, then dissolved into a sad understanding.

"You were used, Kael. That snake-hearted brother of yours was skillful; but then, being psi, he knew all about that, didn't he? What a fiend—to manipulate a child, especially one that trusted him. And to leave you there alone to bear the guilt." His lips curled in loathing.

Kael stared at him, disbelieving what he heard. He started to speak, but Tjan went on, stopping him.

"It's no sin to be used. It happens to a lot of us." An inner pain narrowed his eyes as he searched the

Vondorian's face. "You made a child's mistake, that's all. And you've more than paid for that."

"You're wrong!" Kael countered. "I know he used me. I knew it that night when he left me. But I let him go. I knew, Tjan. I knew. I was a cadet. I wasn't a child. And all the rationalization in the universe isn't going to ease that guilt. It won't bring back your dead, and it's not going to stop this war."

"It's not your fault, Kael. Stop torturing yourself. He left you in shock. You weren't thinking or responsible. You couldn't help yourself."

"You don't know . . ."

"Oh, come on, Kael. I know you. And I'm getting a pretty good feel for your people. They would never have allowed you to remain on your ship or sent you here had there been any doubt of your innocence. It speaks well for you that they would entrust you with such a demanding mission as this, knowing your involvement." He smiled a little. "They must know you a lot better than you know yourself."

For a moment memory drew Kael. He stood before his father again that last night in the corridor trying to reassure him of his stability. But Kilor had known, as empathetic fathers always seem to know—had known and feared, but had let his son go.

And the Council? He had felt their quiet, contemplative study, as they asked him to volunteer.

"Sure they knew," Tjan said, taking Kael's thoughts. "You can hide such things from yourself, but not from an interested party, especially one with the perceptive abilities telepaths have. I think they must have felt it was something you had to reconcile in a face-to-face confrontation with yourself. They might have needed you, but somehow I think they must have realized you needed this experience." The

scout cocked his head. "You must be very highly regarded up there."

Kael shook his head slowly, trying to focus his thoughts again. He looked back at Tjan, the old question still hanging in his confusion. "All this . . . You've lost so much, yet you don't hate—"

"Oh, I hate, Kael, but not you. Not that poor, confused child in you who acted out of love." Tjan's voice was low and intense. "I'd have done the same thing. No, my friend. What happened at Minth was not your fault. Stop torturing yourself."

Kael stared, as the emotional confirmation of Tjan's words dissolved the gnawing loneliness and the cold that filled him.

"On top of it?" Tjan's words came with questioning soberness.

Kael nodded and smiled. "A half million people . . . and I chose you."

"Fate," Tjan said, smiling back.

"We call it star-crossed." Kael's smile faded as he turned serious again.

"Tjan." He hesitated briefly. "There is a way out for you, from the isolation when I'm gone."

The scout leaned backward warily, a frown flickering across his forehead. "A bonding?"

Kael nodded.

"Your friendship bond, eternal, one-time, very special, and all?"

"Very special."

"You offering it to me?" Tjan asked, almost in a whisper.

Kael nodded.

A muscle twitched at the corner of the scout's mouth, and for a moment he glanced down. When he looked up again, it was with proud determination.

"You're a hard one to refuse, Kael."

Kael's mouth opened in surprise and then closed under a frown. "Refuse?" he asked.

"Come on, Kael. You can't use a bonding for a crutch. You told me yourself only the deepest of friendships warrants it. To do it while you feel this guilt would dishonor the whole thing."

"I didn't mean it for a crutch," Kael said. "If it were only that, I couldn't do it, either. We have a good friendship—"

"Look at me, Kael. I'm a woodsman, earth-bound, next to you, a near-barbarian. This has been but a moment, a drop in space and time. Curiosity has bound us together. And purpose."

"And friendship."

"How long will friendship be remembered when you're journeying between stars and I'm down here in the wilderness? We're too different, Kael. Give you a month and you'd be bored to death."

"I don't think so. I've yet to feel even a touch of boredom when I'm with you."

"A bond has to grow. Isn't that right? The friendship must be one that can be mutually shared and given and strengthened. What can I give you? I know nothing of your universe but the stars at night."

"You give me stability, ground under my feet. And what's all this talk about giving and being? Hell, Tjan, you've got more sense than all the educated geniuses in Vondore's blue towers. It's because of our differences we're drawn together. And it's those differences that can make this bond special. We complement each other, don't you see that?"

"Do you see that, Kael?" Tjan asked quietly, searchingly.

For a moment the Vondorian didn't speak. The words had come easily, supplied by his subconscious

on a wave of emotion. It took him that moment to realize that what he had said, he really meant. When he nodded, it was with conviction.

"All right," Tjan said. "Suppose we do complement each other. If we were to bond"—he motioned Kael to hold back—"if we were . . . just supposing, now, how would that help me when you're gone?"

"It's in the bond," Kael began eagerly. "Somehow, in a bonding, space and time are dissolved. There is no limitation to our telepathic reach. It's of the spirit. Filtered through our mortal bodies, it's boxed in. But a bonding sets it free. Those bonded are linked to each other wherever they are."

"Clear across space?"

"Clear across space. Even in death! But that's not all. A bond opens up a whole world of mind powers. In time, if the joining is a good one, we might even learn to travel as spirits and visit face to face."

Tjan's eyes were bright, reflecting the awe he felt. But then again he shook his head.

"What's the matter?" Kael asked, perplexed at this new refusal.

"I can't do it, Kael. I can't even imagine such things. Those are star dreams, things you're born to. I'd be lost in them."

"One step at a time, like climbing the mountain, remember? I didn't think I'd ever make it to the top, either. It comes as your understanding expands, and it's a climb we make together."

"Are you sure, Kael?"

"As sure as any of us can ever be."

Tjan's eyes closed tightly. He rested his forehead in the palm of his hand. Kael waited for the decision, as nervous as a youth proposing. At last Tjan straightened.

"Star-crossed or fools or both?" He grinned self-

consciously at Kael. "So—How do you . . . How is it done? Will it take long?"

Kael blinked, wondering if it was an acceptance or not. He nodded. But in a moment shook his head.

"No—not long . . . Not long at all." He was relieved, grinning with a growing excitement. A bonding. Something every telepath looked forward to, dreamed of from the first awakening. So strange to have it come like this, in this alien, faraway world. For a brief moment he felt sadness, knowing he would be leaving. But just as fast came the thought that it would only be for a time: bondings were forever.

The scout was waiting, watching, feeling his own excitement rise. Yet, there was also a nervousness in him, a knowing of duty neglected, of time passing, of purpose divided.

"Now?" Kael asked.

Tjan hesitated. "I think I'd better . . ." He nodded over his shoulder at the pass. "Give me a moment, okay?"

The heat from the sun-baked rocks and dirt reflected up and sweat rolled from Kael's forehead and down the back of his neck. He could imagine what his face looked like—his hands and arms were streaked with sweat and dirt. Not exactly the best of conditions for a bonding, but it would have to do. He hoped those who waited would understand.

Time seemed to pass in slow motion. At last, with in-drawn breath, the scout straightened and turned around.

"Not there?" Kael asked.

"Not yet." The scout squirmed until he was more comfortable sitting on his crossed feet, and then looked over expectantly.

"Now?" Kael asked.

"If you're ready."

Rubbing his hands on his kilt, the Vondorian took one last look around and returned his gaze to the Orranian.

"There has to be a judgment first. You must know my character and I yours. If what we find is acceptable, then the bonding can take place. All will be revealed, Tjan. There are no secrets in a bonding. Okay?"

The scout hesitated, swallowed, and then nodded.

"It's all done by the subconscious, but we start it with a conscious command. Tell it what you want, and then let it do its work."

Tjan eyed him uncertainly, his expression clearly stating that Kael was kilometers ahead of him.

"It's simple, Tjan. Really it is. Just relax and tell yourself that you want a bonding judgment from me. Make sure you identify me—keep me in view constantly until the images begin. And that's all there is to it. Your mind does all the rest. I'll be doing the same thing—we'll be going through it together." He paused, still feeling a hesitancy in the scout's mind.

"Do you want to wait?"

Tjan shook his head.

"Okay! Let's do it then. Fix me in your mind."

Their eyes met and for a moment nothing happened. Then Kael was falling backward through a white light, whose brightness increased until it blazed with blinding intensity. He stood in an immense cave—a cave void of shadow, its marble walls whitened almost to invisibility. Tjan faced him, his own brightness making him semitransparent. At his side stood a white-robed, hooded personage; and behind it, a multitude of such figures paled in the distance.

Kael glanced to his right and saw himself similarly accompanied. He could see no distinct faces under

the cowling, but he sensed that his companions were well acquainted with him. Forebears, they were, all standing in witness.

The presence at Tjan's right stepped forward and took from the sleeve of his robe a scroll that unrolled as he began to read. In a deep, dispassionate voice, he laid bare all that was Tjan, the good and also the evil. The heads of the multitude behind him nodded with each revelation.

It was a good reading; only a few times did Tjan bow his head. When it was finished, the spokesman rolled the scroll, replaced it within his robe, and stepped back.

Immediately, Kael's own mentor opened a similar scroll and began to read. Kael listened, apprehensive, yet in awe, as his own character was weighed. He watched Tjan's eyes as he waited to hear that which he still feared. But the incident passed without judgment, and the reading ended. Kael glanced at the reader questioningly, not quite believing that his guilt stood unlisted. But the reader, now silent, had already moved back. Looking beyond him at those who were behind, Kael saw them nod in affirmation. A feeling of peace surrounded him, wide and deep. It seemed as though it were a gift from the souls of everyone there.

It was true, just as Tjan had said. The events of that horrible day held him without condemnation. He closed his eyes as the tightness left his chest. Opening them a moment later, he saw that the scene of judgment was gone—the personages, the cave, even the light. Tjan sat across from him, his face still a mirror of awed astonishment. Their eyes met for a moment, finding in each other that grounding reality they both needed.

The words of the witnesses again went through his

mind in simple review, yet with vivid clarity. When it was finished, Kael spoke.

"Tjan?" he questioned, his voice seeming to come from far away.

"Yes," the scout answered simply. And then, as if the word had broken the spell, he grinned. "Yes, yes, yes. Do you have to ask? Isn't it written all over me?"

Kael grinned back, relieved, his own anticipation building.

"So—what do we do now?" Tjan asked.

"What we did before. Tell yourself what you want, and then concentrate on me. When I signal, send a probe. I'll meet it halfway. As soon as the probes meet, don't push anymore, but stay with me. Don't back off. The probes must remain in contact while the bonding is effected. When it's done, you'll feel it."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

The scout shook his head slowly. "Now?"

"If you're ready."

Tjan's head lifted, a nervous smile tugging at his lips. Kael met his gaze, raised a hand to signal, and sent his probe. As it touched Tjan's, time and space dissolved. Kael hardly felt the beat at first—it was but a warm feeling. But it grew fast, filling his mind and then his body. Like a great sweeping hand, it wiped out all the hidden loneliness, shadows, and darkness. He was free, vital, alive.

The throbbing ended and Kael drew his probe back. Still, he kept his eyes closed, savoring the feelings that held him, as memory secured them indelibly in his mind. Feeling the presence of Tjan's life force within the bonding link was an odd, but comfortingly good sensation. Still, it would take some getting used to, having it with him constantly. It would be even harder for Tjan, with his gift so new

and having so little experience. The scout would feel shyness even more than himself. Kael would have to take it slowly, moving with the needed respect and consideration, and give him time.

Kael's thought halted for a moment. He grinned to himself and glanced at his bond-mate. It was good. Very, very good.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was some time before the spell of the bonding left them, but they roused finally. Tjan still wore a dreamy smile as he glanced at the sun to check his time. But the smile vanished, as did the other traces of his preoccupation, when his attention shifted to the pass below.

They're here? Kael asked, alerted by the scout's sudden gravity. He leaned forward to search the blue-green floor of the mountain passageway.

Just the horse soldiers—but the others won't be far behind.

Tjan reached for the tiny bird cage and, loosing the ties, raised the lid. The homer fluttered up, circled once, and headed north. The scout watched it for a moment and then turned back to the pass. Unable to discern anything out of the carpet of trees and brush, Kael sat back and waited.

How close do you have to get for contact, Kael?

The scout's abrupt inquiry brought the Vondorian forward again. *At least half a kilometer, less if possible. The closer we are, the more control I'll have, the more effective the probe. I don't want to overwhelm Rath, but he's got to know for sure who I am.*

Tjan nodded thoughtfully. *It'll be dark in three or four hours; by that time this mountain will be spitting*

Nisja. Rath's probably with his spearhead. What do you think about trying it now?

Kael worried the problem as he searched the pass. He still could see no troops, but if Tjan said they were there, they had to be there. He preferred the feel of darkness—it would give cover. But it would also give Rath time to bring up his full army. If Rath refused to meet him or decided to fight, he could order a thousand men after them, and surround himself with a thousand more. It would be impossible to get close enough to finish the job himself. Laedry would have to . . . if he could. Sure as hell the pilot wouldn't be able to rescue them in the dark with the army spread all over. He turned back to Tjan.

You're the soldier, whatever you think.

I know it's risky, but I think we have a better chance going now. With both of us listening, we should be able to keep out of their way.

We can sweep probe partway, but once we get in close, you'll have to shield. If Rath thinks I'm coming alone, he might meet me. If he senses you, he'll never consider it.

Tjan looked at Kael and rubbed the back of his neck. *You really like to do things the hard way, don't you?*

You don't have to come, Tjan. You know that.

Sure. You'd let me go alone, too. Going to call Laedry now? There was an undercurrent of concern in the question.

Kael nodded. We need him in range.

You going to tell him about us?

Not yet. I want Father to hear it first from me. Don't worry, Tjan, they'll understand.

The scout shrugged and then turned back to his survey. The pilot was monitoring. It took only a

moment to alert the *Seeker* as to their plans. That done, the two of them started crawling toward the heavy cover below them.

A number of patrols were out as well as scouts, and it took the telepaths over two hours to work their way across the pass. Long shadows laced the ground as they neared the Nisja line. The enemy's thought-murmur, at first a low hum, grew identifiable: hate, lust, brutality, a strange brittle excitement oddly lacking in fear. It made Kael nauseous.

He signalled Tjan, and the scout shielded. They moved forward very carefully now, with Tjan relegated to sight and hearing, and Kael's own attention trained ahead. At last Kael felt close enough. Nudging Tjan, he crouched in the tangle of undergrowth on the edge of a small stand of saplings, while the scout settled behind him in an intensive surveillance.

The Vondorian couldn't see the enemy troops as they moved through the trees fifty meters ahead, but he had no trouble probing them. He did it twice, both times with the same finding. Rath was not there. It took another moment to find a soldier who knew where he was.

Rath's with his cadre back in the main force, Kael informed Tjan. He'll be rejoining this bunch at second moon.

The scout didn't answer, but quickly dropped his shield and sent a sweeping probe to their left. Kael caught the presence at the same instant. It was a small party closing in stealthily. A telepathic swing to the right found another group approaching in apparent coordination.

Taking sword in one hand, knife in the other, Tjan quickly backed out of the confining grove. Kael reached for his laser and then hesitated as he looked

at the thick stand of timber about him. Fire could be as disastrous as the enemy. Reaching for his sword instead, he followed the scout.

The blade was only half drawn when three gray balls suddenly whirled through the air toward him. They spun wildly around his face and in seconds wrapped his throat tightly with leather thongs. Before he could react, another set of the balls snared his feet, and he fell.

Struggling back to his knees, he dug at the band around his neck, feeling his eyes bulge as he fought for air. A blow pitched him forward onto the spongy soil, and rotting pine needles filled his nose and mouth. A second kick from the side rolled him half over. Balanced on the edge of consciousness, his eyes focused on the twisted grin of a desert-darkened face, and then all was black.

Consciousness came slowly, dragging with it the realization that he still lived—a perception that brought him little comfort. He was lying face down, his arms folded behind him, lashed securely to a length of branch. He coughed as a cord cinched around his neck, and a foot planted itself in the small of his back. The cord tightened and he coughed again, twisted his head and tried to roll. A brutal kick in the ribs left him motionless and gasping.

The foot left his back, and he was abruptly yanked to his feet, a Nisjan guard at each end of the branch. Pain gripped him—this time with such intensity that a moan escaped his lips. His arms felt as if they were being ripped from his shoulders. When the soldiers released their hold, he staggered and dropped to his knees. Immediately he was jerked upright again, and another spasm of pain shot through his body. Somehow, he stayed on his feet.

Even as he steadied himself, a pull on the tether pitched him forward. Stumbling, he quickstepped ahead, trying desperately to keep from falling. A groan came from behind him.

Tjan? His probe reached out, and his own misery was momentarily forgotten in his concern for the scout.

Behind you.

Are you okay?

Yeah . . .

Sorry, I—

My fault, Tjan cut in. I should have known.

Kael's breath caught as a branch swung back, stinging him across the face. *What hit me, anyway?*

A tribolt. They're used for herding sten. Damned effective. He was quiet a moment. *Kael, can you stop them—put them out of business?* There wasn't much hope in the question.

Not alone. Seven's too many . . . They'd kill us before I could get them all.

What about me? Can I—

No! You don't have the intensity or control. Trying it prematurely and untrained would probably cause you more hurt than it would them.

Tjan was quiet again. The tether was a nuisance, but it didn't strangle. Kael fought it subtly, making the guard pull him, lagging as much as he could. Tjan's frustration was very evident, and Kael could feel the hopelessness within himself. Trussed as they were, escape was out of the question, and they both knew that when they reached the camp there would be even less chance of escape. And there were only a few hours before Rath would arrive.

We'll just have to wait for an opening, Kael reasoned.

Well, Tjan returned with gallows humor, at least we'll have time and opportunity to reconnoiter.

"Move up!" the patrol leader barked, and without warning Kael went for a short drag. Only by the most resolute will and clenched teeth did he keep silent. When they yanked him to his feet again, he followed as directed, and there was no further lagging.

The sun was setting as they entered the Nisja camp and made their way toward a squad tent. The presence of the prisoners spurred a lot of excited jeers and taunts that followed them across the grounds; along with dark thoughts of the night's coming entertainment.

The patrol halted in front of the tent, whose high-pitched roof and walls of skin were light-and-shadow-proof. The flap opened, silhouetting a burly man in a wash of torchlight. Stepping through, he let the flap fall behind him, and faced the prisoners. He was half a head shorter than Tjan and coarse featured, with black, oily hair held back by a leather sweatband. He looked Kael over arrogantly, heavy black brows pulling almost together in a studied frown. Then he moved to Tjan.

"Well, so we have company!" he said, a mocking grin adding to the sarcasm in his voice. "And we thought sure we would be drinking alone tonight. This is a rare treat and we're sure as hell pleased to see you." He rubbed the stubble along Tjan's chin with the back of his hand.

"Tsk, tsK . . . No time to freshen up?" He cocked his head to one side. "What *have* you been doing with yourselves? Huh? And where are the others? There are others, aren't there? We can't let them feel left out. You give us the location of your camp, and we'll extend them a special invitation. We can't have them missing such a fine party, now can we . . . ?"

The mocking voice had turned cold, with an edge to it that demanded an answer. Kael felt a chill cross his back. Tjan said nothing, as he continued to stare past the officer into the deepening twilight.

"Speak up!" the officer suddenly exploded, clouting the scout sharply across the mouth. A trickle of blood ran from a split lip down Tjan's chin, but the youth set his jaw and continued his silent staring.

The officer turned to Kael. "Forgot your manners, too?" Kael only looked into the shadows beyond.

"Help them find their tongues, Morat," the officer ordered, turning abruptly to reenter the tent.

Kael didn't see the flap close. A fist slammed low in his stomach, doubling him over, and then came again to meet his jaw. His head snapped back and he staggered sideways, unable to catch himself. He landed on his arms and excruciating pain engulfed him, so intensely that he scarcely felt the foot that dug into his ribs and then struck again in his side. For a moment he blacked out—a short moment . . .

Yanking him to his feet, two guards held him upright while a third, expressionless and sullen, pounded him. Unconsciousness came again and again, but he was revived each time, and the beating went on. He sagged against the truss, aware of the pain in his arms, but almost beyond feeling. He prayed for unconsciousness, real unconsciousness, even death. And then the deep blackness came.

Pain was waiting when he awoke. He ran his tongue along his teeth, tasting the bloody grit that coated his mouth. He had lost only one tooth, but the rest were loose. He tried to open his eyes: the left one was swollen shut and the other puffed to half-sight. He could barely make out the flicker of torchlight above

him. Giving up the physical effort, he began to probe the area telepathically.

They were in the tent. Tjan lay beside him, while a guard stood alone to his left. The officer and two others were speaking quietly behind him. So . . . only four Nisja in the tent . . . Kael mentally reached for the awakening scout.

Don't move, Tjan. Put them off as long as we can.

Where are we? The thought was dulled with pain.

In the tent. How're you doing?

I think . . . they cracked some . . . ribs. It hurts to . . . breathe.

Hold on. We'll figure something.

But what? Desperately, Kael tried to think, but pain was jumbling his own reasoning. He had to move away from it, had to free himself—and in a hurry. Time was running out and this could well be their only opportunity to escape. Neither of them could stand much more punishment, and faking it longer would only bring Rath and his methods.

It was difficult, but Kael finally made the psychic break to objectivity; and in that vacuum of sensory impressions and feelings, a plan came. It was a desperate one, but success was inherent in that very desperation. He touched Tjan again lightly, letting a sliver of hope cross the link.

Be ready, bond-buddy. A little luck and we'll be telling this bunch goodbye.

Before the scout could answer, Kael drew his legs up and groaned. He tried to lift his head, to get his battered eyes to open. The officer motioned to the guard, who stepped toward the prisoner and hauled him to his feet. Kael's knees buckled but the soldier drew him upright again and held him there. Through his one bruised eye, Kael saw the officer approach.

The Nisjan stood with hands on his hips and

studied him coldly. His eyes flicked from the Vondorian's face to his body and back.

"Want more?" he asked softly.

Kael squinted through his one eye and shook his head.

"Good, good." The Nisjan rubbed his hands together. "Zola"—he turned to one of the men behind him—"get a stool for our guest." A collapsible hide-covered stool was tossed to the guard, who caught it one-handed, placed it, and eased Kael onto it.

The Vondorian drew in a couple of shallow breaths and squinted up at the Nisja leader. "If I talk . . . no more beating?" The exhaustion and despair was heavy in his voice and not all of it was feigned.

"Of course."

"Free my arms . . . ?"

The officer nodded at the guard. "Release him, Talender, no need of that now." He raised an eyebrow at the guard and smiled mockingly at Kael.

"I believe you'll find us quite obliging. A pity, really, that all this was necessary."

The other men joined the Nisja chief, standing at each side and slightly behind him. Zola had his knife out, and was methodically cleaning his nails.

The guard bent and worked at the bonds. As the straps came loose, the branch fell—and so did Kael's arms. Pain ripped through his shoulders and a moan escaped before he could silence it. Closing his eye tight as the agony passed into his neck and back, he waited with breath held for his control to return. Even after the pain had subsided, numbness kept his arms unresponsive at his side. He would need time . . .

"Want a drink?" Kael opened his bruised eye, focused it on the canteen the officer offered and then on his numbed arms. He licked his bruised lips.

"Can't . . ." The tingling was starting.

"Maybe in a minute, huh?" The officer handed the canteen to Zola and leaned toward Kael.

"We talk a little bit first; then you can drink and rest. You would like to rest?" Kael nodded. "Fine. I must warn you, though, it will not go well if you lie . . . But then you would never do that, would you?" His lip curled in a sneer.

"So—how many Sor on the mountain?"

Kael swallowed, glanced at Tjan, who was to all appearances still unconscious on the ground. "A patrol," he muttered.

"Speak up, man. How many?"

"Eight. Six others and us." Kael sighed miserably.

The officer studied him, considered the answer, and then nodded. "Where?"

Kael shrugged and took his time to answer. "They were behind us. Could be anywhere now." He rubbed his arms against his legs. It felt like a swarm of needlers had covered them and were all stinging at once.

"Your rendezvous?"

Again Kael spaced his words, drawing the answer out as he bought time. "A clearing half a kilometer west of the lower end of the falls. There's a tall dead pine above it." He flexed his fingers.

"When?" The officer's voice continued, still viciously soft, but relentless.

"Second moon." Kael opened and closed his right hand, lifted it slowly and rubbed his left shoulder. The officer's gaze followed the movement and then sought the guard's eyes. As Kael dropped his hand to his thigh, it brushed his belt, barely hesitating there a second. He could feel the guard move in a little closer behind him as the officer went on.

"Very good. Now, what of Jolan?"

Kael looked up at him and grimaced, as he drew a smoking crease across the man's tunic from throat to heart. The officer swayed a moment, disbelief filling his eyes as pain wiped the mockery from his lips. Even before he fell, Kael had turned the laser from the throat of one astonished officer behind him to the other. In the same instant, Tjan kicked up into the guard's back and kidney, knocking him sideways. A telepathic blast from the Vondorian silenced the guard, and again the weapon did its work.

Grabbing the guard's knife, Kael quickly freed the scout and helped him to his feet and then to the stool. Tjan's pallid face and labored breathing were ample evidence of the sudden pain that release from his bonds had caused.

Kael shook his head. *Just sit still for a minute—it will pass. As soon as you can, get your arms to moving. It takes time to work that numbness out, and I don't know how much more we have. I'll get our things.*

Resheathing his own weapons, Kael walked to the two dead officers and removed their robes. He shrugged into one, pulling the hood up around his neck, so as to partially conceal his face, and then turned to the scout.

By the time Tjan was fitted into the other robe, he was getting partial response from his hands. Keeping a wary eye on the tent opening, they flexed their numbed muscles a few minutes longer, judging the risk worth the wait, should they be challenged. At last, Tjan nodded his readiness and with one last glance at each other, they backed out of the tent opening. Saluting as they let the flap fall, they walked casually around the side and into the shadows behind the tent.

A small fire had been kindled twenty meters off and a number of soldiers huddled around it. The guards'

torches cast pale, flickering light in the darkness, but most of the camp was deep-shadowed, and the troops scarcely glanced at them as they sauntered back toward the horse corral. They were challenged once by a sentry, but he didn't cry out.

As soon as they were beyond the camp, they shucked their robes. Quickly cutting a strip from his own, the scout wrapped it tightly around his ribs and held his breath as Kael tied it. With nothing else to be done, they fled into the timbered darkness to the west, hoping to make the mountain before their strength dissolved.

They were still some distance from refuge when, too weak to continue, they crawled into a tangled thicket of vine-covered brush. Having considerable difficulty breathing, exhausted, and aching, the scout somehow managed to listen while the Vondorian explained psi healing. Kael stayed with him long enough to see it implemented, and then called his own healing forces into action.

Beri, the first moon, had risen and set, and Ferro was just above the mountains when Kael woke to an outcry. He listened, motionless, wondering if it was real or dream. Tjan was still asleep, his breathing deeper, less labored. No other sound came. Still the uneasiness hung on, and Kael probed the near darkness.

A low, muffled call stopped him.

"Keeley? Keeley?"

The man's voice was coming toward them, and for a moment Kael panicked.

"Ahh—damn!" Horror and revulsion carried the sound.

At that moment Kael felt another presence. Pathetic in his despair, the second man begged soundlessly for death, a hollow mind crying out from an all-but-

dead body. For a moment that mind registered shock, followed by a strange feeling of gratitude—and then it was gone. The first hesitated only a moment and then quickly retreated.

Kael sat up, shook Tjan awake, and struggled to his feet. Ignoring the aching stiffness, the pain that movement caused, he forced himself through the brush to that place where his telepathy had picked up the two men.

Tjan followed him, half asleep and grumbling. He caught up with the Vondorian near a patch of moonlight. A Nisjan lay there, half in light, half in shadow, a knife plunged into his chest. For a moment Kael didn't see the thing twisted around the dead man's leg.

"Spiny," Tjan murmured. He swallowed and shook his head. "First time I ever thought I'd be grateful for one of them."

"Yeah . . . me, too." Kael studied the face, recalling the man's despair evidenced only moments before. It was an unfamiliar face, young, dark, but it could have been his own. He shivered and, pushing Tjan sideways around the area, hurried the two of them on into the night.

The sky was glowing with the first hint of dawn when they reached the gully that shielded their base camp. The horses were still there, Channon's too. Kael hoped the scout was just holed up somewhere. Freeing their two, they mounted up and headed west.

It was full daylight when they emerged from the forest. The bogs of the Misty River lay a couple of kilometers ahead of them. Just looking at them, the plains seemed peaceful enough, but it wasn't hard for Kael to imagine a patrol or lookout hidden in the occasional clumps of brush.

Tjan wheeled his horse and headed into the timber again. "Best to let the horses go. The Nisja will be watching the Jolan road. Be a lot safer for us to cross the swamps and take one of the farm roads north."

Kael followed the scout well back into the trees, where they unsaddled the horses and left them to graze. Returning to the edge of the forest, the Orranian paused to make one last survey of the land between them and the river, and then moved them out into the tall prairie grass. They reached the bogs without incident. Tjan led them instinctively across the quaking ground, crossing sections that shouldn't have supported a rat, bypassing others that appeared solid.

The psychic healing had done its work. Much of the stiffness and pain they had felt early that morning were gone now, though a growing weakness, hunger, and thirst stalked them. Neither of them complained. It had been auspicious, their escape. Kael thanked his god more than once that morning. Too, rest and food were all they needed—and they were nearing both.

Tjan hadn't worried about the river—the channel was broad and shallow, and the current wasn't swift. It would have been no problem ordinarily. As it was, the stream came near to finishing them both. On the far bank they dropped, still half submerged in the river's edge, and lay there for a long time before finding the strength to continue on. Yet, in spite of the near disaster, the water had been soothing, and it had ended their thirst. So, after the rest, they moved on, somewhat renewed.

They headed for a small farm beyond the river to the east. The hay-covered, uneven ground ended behind the house, and they approached warily, mentally searching the area beyond. The yard was quiet,

vacant—no people, no wagons, no animals. Tjan disappeared into the barn.

Kael waited for him, feeling an eeriness in the silence. He started for the building just as the scout came out leading an unsaddled horse.

"We'll have to double up. There were just two and Channon will need the other one," Tjan said, as they mounted. He guided the horse north along a deeply rutted wagon trail.

The empty farm foreshadowed their ride. Nothing was moving along the entire route and the subsequent farms were as vacant as the first. Occasionally Tjan would pause near a farm building and wave; and in reply, a homer would wing up and streak toward Jolan. A kilometer from the town cutoff, Tjan's sharp eyes recognized Captain Tzarno approaching, flanked by a half-dozen other mounted soldiers.

The captain's expression was filled with concern as he rode up to the pair. "Lanfree." He smiled and returned the scout's salute. "Good to see you. I got your . . . bird." His expression of concern changed to surprise as he recognized Kael, and he shot Tjan a sharp glance as if demanding an explanation.

I don't think he's going to accept another of our stories, Kael. Tjan's observation held its own question.

The Vondorian blew a long breath and nodded. "I can explain, sir," he said drawing the captain's attention back to him.

Captain Tzarno cut him off with a short word. "Later." He turned back to Tjan. "So. Nisja are on Minth? What else is going on up there? And what has happened to you two?"

"We spent a few hours as guests of Hellwalker's spearhead, sir. They didn't like our attitude and we

didn't like their hospitality . . . Anyway, I was able to learn a bit while we were there. Hellwalker has come in with ten thousand infantry and about four hundred cavalry. They aim to take Jolan and use it as a base to move on Tae-Sor. They're moving fast, as their food supply is low. They didn't get the meat they expected from Minth, so they are depending on Jolan and the farms south of here to replenish their supply. But I see you've already cleaned out the farms."

"Most of them." Captain Tzarno rubbed his chin as he absorbed the information. "Have you had any contact with Channon?"

"No, sir. We didn't wait for him."

"You expect the Nisja to attack right away?"

"Well, they know we got away, and I can't see that they have anything to wait for. Rest, maybe, but . . ." He shrugged.

Tzarno nodded thoughtfully, gestured with his hand at the city gates, and they all broke into a canter. At first glance the city reflected the road south, for the streets were empty except for a few wagons piled with belongings ready to be moved out. The marketplace and community well stood vacant and the houses and shops were shuttered and locked.

"Did they evacuate the whole city?" Kael asked Tjan as they passed another empty cross street.

"The civilians have been sent to Tium. But the city isn't as empty as it looks; there's about five thousand men hidden here. You wouldn't know it, though, would you?" Tjan smiled.

The army had taken over Scout Headquarters and the building swarmed with military—officers, runners, aides—all of whom snapped to attention as Tzarno's party entered. He put them at ease, motioned Tjan and Kael to the bench, and took the other officers with him into his office.

Two runners stood near the door, waiting. Kael could feel their curious, sympathetic stares, and he smiled to himself. They should have seen him yesterday. He leaned back, let his head rest against the wall. Oh, for a bath. A real, herbed, hot *Seeker* bath. *Seeker! Oh, dear God! I've done it again.* Kael looked at Tjan in frustrated despair and sagged. *They're going to kill me, Tjan. If Rath doesn't do it, they will.*

Can you still get hold of the Seeker? Tjan asked, immediately concerned.

Probably . . . but . . . Kael looked around the room and then at the ceiling.

Wait a few minutes—we won't be here long.

The captain's door opened and the men filed out, their faces solemn, drawn by the thought of battle. Tjan straightened and nudged Kael, and the two of them saluted. The men returned the salutes, paying them both the honor of a smile and nod as they did so.

Tzarno's aide beckoned the runners, handed them each an envelope and dismissed them. He watched them go out, then nodded at Kael and Tjan, and closed the door behind them, leaving them alone with the captain.

Tzarno was seated behind the desk, his hands clasped together, leaning forward expectantly as they entered. He motioned Tjan to a side seat and gestured Kael to the straight chair facing the desk. The battered Vondorian seated himself and then stared uncomfortably at the floor, not knowing how to get started. The captain's eyes narrowed in a questioning frown.

"Well?" he said curtly.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Kael released a long breath, lifted his head, and met the captain's gaze. "My name is Kael, sir, but I'm not of your people. I am of Guarnt, of the Galactic world of Vondore."

The captain's eyes widened and his back stiffened as though a rod had been passed down his spine. His lips opened slightly and then closed.

"I was sent here to find and return a man, a Vondorian fugitive, recently found to be living here. With no diplomatic relations set up between our governments and—with war threatening your world—there was no time to develop the necessary connections. Therefore my leaders felt it expedient that I carry out my mission in secret. It was never intended that I should become involved with any of you, or with your planet's politics: that I have done so is strictly due to my own bungling, and unforeseen circumstances."

The captain was staring at him, a strange half-smile barely curving his lips. Kael wondered if the man was hearing anything he said. Apparently he was, however, for he nodded for Kael to continue when he hesitated.

"We seek only that man, nothing else, sir," Kael assured him again.

"The man . . . ?" The captain tilted his head a little in question.

"His name is Rath. You call him Hellwalker."

Captain Tzarno blinked, the name abruptly breaking the spell of Kael's explanation. Settling slowly back in his chair, he sifted the young alien's words. It was a frown that met Kael when the Sor chief nodded him on again.

Kael continued with his story, giving him only that information that was pertinent and vital, concluding with an apology. "I'm sorry that I felt it necessary to lie to you before, sir, but under those orders I had no alternative."

The captain nodded and stood up. For a long moment, he looked at the young alien. "Galactic." He shook his head wonderingly. "You know, there isn't a man of us that hasn't had dreams of meeting one of you someday."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate your understanding . . ."—he hesitated—"because I have a request to make." The captain's eyes narrowed. "I must ask you not to let this information go any further, at least until after I've accomplished my mission. And . . . may I be allowed to join your forces in this battle? It seems to be the best way of getting to Rath at the moment."

The Sor chief's frown deepened and he rubbed his chin uncomfortably. "I don't know . . . The Council should be informed immediately." He walked across the room and stared at the wall map without really seeing it, then turned back abruptly.

"Look at yourself, young man—you're in no condition for battle. If you should be additionally injured, or killed—I'm afraid I don't have the authority you're requesting."

"Does anyone, sir? I have to make certain that Rath

doesn't get away again. If I become a pawn of politics, how can I complete this mission . . . ?"

Captain Tzarno walked slowly back to his desk, again studying Kael with a deepening frown. "Why are you alone, Kael?" he asked at last. "Your people have the power to crush that whole army. Why don't you just destroy the lot of them, and stop this war?"

"We don't have the right," Kael returned quietly. "Orran is not ours. But Rath is. He's our responsibility and he has to be removed. So far, though, he's managed to surround himself with Orranians, and confronting him openly in their midst could have put us in a position of being forced to kill some of them. We are forbidden to do that. Besides, it would have solved little in the end. There would still have been the war. We hoped in taking him in this manner that we could persuade him to reverse his manipulation of your people."

"Manipulation?"

"Rath is telepathic; he has certain mind powers . . ." Kael hesitated. "His cooperation with me could make the aftermath of this conflict less traumatic. But in any event, he will and must be removed."

"And you?"

"It is my responsibility," Kael sighed. "I didn't intend to become so involved, and the repercussions of my actions are undoubtedly going to reach all the way to Federation Central. But I *am* here alone and there *are* valid reasons. I have a defense of sorts, but there is none to warrant greater involvement of our ship."

Captain Tzarno listened thoughtfully. "All right, Kael," he agreed finally. "You have risked your life and reputation for Orran—I guess I can see you through this. But I want you with me, by my side."

"Sorry—I have to get to him," Kael argued quietly.

The captain closed his eyes, sighed wearily, and then nodded. "Lanfree," he ordered, turning to the scout, "stay with him. Don't let him out of your sight."

"Yes, sir." Tjan came off the chair to stand at attention as the captain walked to the door and called his aide.

"Hanley, get these men to the quartermaster for a change of uniform, have them checked out at the clinic, feed them, and send them to the barracks for some rest." He turned back to Kael.

"I'll send for you if and when things warrant it." He hesitated and Kael wondered if it was his imagination that made him think the captain was looking at him a trifle enviously as he dismissed them.

It was early afternoon when they rode out to join the captain. Southward toward the mountains, Kael could see the gray, billowing dust cloud that was Hellwalker's army. Watching it boil toward them brought a catch to his breath. It was here—the war, Rath, all the things he had dreaded yet had been forced to face.

He thought of Laedry hovering above, shielded from view; and of the *Seeker* beyond him, waiting. He wondered what his father was thinking, and he winced as he remembered the hurt and frustrated anger that had met him when he made his report. It must not be easy sitting up there, waiting, worrying, unable to do anything. The Commander had called Kael's job difficult. The youth shook his head. Right now, he wouldn't trade places with his father for anything.

The hours of healing sleep had again worked their miracle. The swelling was almost gone from his eyes, and although bruises still marked his flesh, the re-

maining tenderness and stiffness were hardly noticeable. In fact, he felt quite fit; and surprisingly, so did Tjan.

But then, he should have expected it. The scout had proved an apt pupil of the telepathic healing process the first time Kael had demonstrated it back in the forest. He'd been clumsy, as inexperienced apprentices are, but he'd made it work. And following Kael's lead, he'd initiated his own reinforcement in the barracks without seeking further help. Aside from an aching discomfort in his left side, Tjan had little to complain of, either.

They skirted the local garrison, entrenched a little north of the Jolan cutoff. The token force of a thousand men had been chosen as bait for the Nisja trap, and Kael hoped the ploy would work. He couldn't imagine them fighting as they now stood—their weapons and armor . . . Armor? The term seemed ludicrous. Woven reed mats and leather shields reinforced with a few metal straps; breastplates, girdles, and armlets of hardened leather. Their meager ironworks had produced steel weapons, but almost nothing for protection. It would be a bloody battle.

The Jolan cavalry was lined up in front of the foot soldiers, also a small force, hardly more than fifty men. How many, he wondered, would see the sunset?

Captain Tzarno was busy when they arrived, but he sent Officer Hanley to bring them in, just as a reconnaissance runner was reporting.

"The Nisja march a line two kilometers long, sir," the soldier began, "twelve abreast and in forced gait. The soldiers seem strong and fresh in spite of the march. Our scouts figure there are ten thousand infantry, close to four hundred cavalry, and an extra mounted cadre. The lead infantry are the meanest-

looking sons of hell I ever saw. They have shaved their heads, blacked their eyes, and painted themselves blood-red to the waist. It's grotesque!"

"What about Hellwalker?"

"He's riding a big black directly behind his lead. His hair has been dyed and his skin darkened, but there's no concealing his height and bearing—or that he's in command."

Captain Tzarno studied the scout thoughtfully and then nodded.

"Where's your second?"

The scout's face fell and he dug his foot into the dirt. "One of their advance scouts got him. I killed the devil and wounded another one. I don't think he got far. I hated to leave Markin, but . . . He was a good man, sir."

Tzarno nodded again. "You did well, son. Report to your unit."

Time drew out interminably as the Nisja horde drew nearer. Spread across the road and adjoining fields several ranks deep, the Sor skirmish line waited—stoic, uneasy, watchful. Although he was a part of it, Kael felt strangely detached, almost as if he were watching some great memory screen.

Miniature figures formed out of the clouds of dust, grew into toy-size soldiers and then into men. Kael searched them for his brother, knowing it was too far, and yet anxious and impatient. As his tension grew, he had to fight his emotions to make himself stay calm. This was Hellwalker, he told himself over and over, not Rath—not the brother of his youth.

About three quarters of a kilometer away the enemy lead stopped abruptly at a trumpet blast. With the next blare, the line divided. The front ranks swung apart, six to each side. They were immediately replaced by men from behind who divided again,

following the first lines to either side. In minutes twenty ranks of a two-hundred-man line were set up, with succeeding ranks continuing to fall in behind. Near the middle of the line, just behind the second rank of painted spearhead, rode several of the mounted cadre.

The Nisja cavalry rode up alongside the forward lines of the waiting infantry, crossed before them, and assembled up front in their own assault line, their lances up in readiness.

With nearly a quarter of the Nisja column in ranks, Captain Tzarno hand-signalled his bugler. He beckoned Tjan and Kael to him as the Sor trumpet sounded, its lonely tones echoing across the standing army. Helmets were placed and the Sor battle cry went up. The ranks stiffened as the cavalry moved slowly ahead.

Across the battlefield, the Nisja attack signal blew, and as a keening howl rose from the desert army, their cavalry rode forward to engage. The horns were blown again and the massed troops followed.

Kael watched them, appalled yet fascinated with the primitive maneuvering, still feeling more spectator than participant. The cavalry clashed just south of the Jolan cutoff in a wood-cracking, yelling crush of mounts, men, and lances. Horses reared, screaming in terror, throwing their riders and trampling them. Swords flashed and men fell as their riderless, blood-splattered mounts broke and ran.

"Now?" Kael whispered. He looked at Captain Tzarno, his mind full of the death before him. The foot soldiers had closed to half the distance. "Now!" he begged.

As though they heard, the Sor cavalry began to disengage, first singly and then in groups, peeling off

and fleeing from the contest back toward the city gates. In a moment, it was a wild rout—every Sor cavalryman racing for his life. A fresh yell went up from the Nisja as they gave chase.

A trumpet blared from the enemy ranks and a detachment broke from the enemy's forces, surging after the horse soldiers toward the city. Sor guards moved to close the massive gates behind their fleeing cavalry, but the Nisja were too close. Their mounts smashed the men down, and Kael looked away, the sight indelibly stamped on his memory.

A ripple through the outnumbered Sor infantry lines drew his attention back to the field. The men were slowing, some even stopping. The Sor forward lines floundered and began to break up as the men turned and fled back into their own ranks. The succeeding lines fouled. The bugle blew the charge again and again as the onrushing enemy bore down upon them. And then, as one confused, chaotic mass, the northern infantry also routed. With the rear ranks surging through those before them, they stumbled over each other, dropping their shields and their spears as they retreated.

But the trumpet blasts only spurred the disciplined Nisja troops on. Another column split off and wheeled toward the city, cutting off the plainsmen who sought the safety of the walls. But the city seemed forgotten in the Sor panic as the men raced northward along the Jolan road.

Fed by the pandemonium, the Nisja spearhead bolted after the fleeing Sor with a chant for blood that rang even above the general battle cry. As they closed the distance between, the rear ranks of the Orranian army pressed forward even harder, real terror in their faces.

The fleeing troops bore down on the high ground where Tzarno and his officers waited, and the captain barked an order bringing the Vondorian around. Kicking his mount, Kael drew alongside Tjan and then fell in behind the others as the party moved out.

The two armies covered the first kilometer at a run; the second came harder and slower as the afternoon heat took its toll. The athletic, handpicked Jolan troops managed to stay ahead just far enough to draw the Nisja, and Kael found himself marveling at the courage of those rear troops who held back deliberately, offering running skirmishes, enticing the enemy on.

Half a kilometer farther and the Nisja reached the first of the road-lining rock fences through which the Sor had already passed. Seeming to sense danger, Hellwalker signalled recall. When the bugle blew, the funneling lead paused, but there was defiance and questioning evident in their posture. Recall sounded again and Hellwalker gestured them back; but with a bloodthirsty yell, they waved their weapons in the air and again took after the retreating Sor.

A third time the Nisja trumpets blew retreat, and Hellwalker's officers also gestured wildly, but the thirst for battle, so well reinforced by Rath's telepathic manipulation, overruled the order. Slamming his ax into the dirt, Hellwalker rose in his stirrups and for a long moment glowered after the advancing lead; then reseating himself, he again ordered the general charge to be given.

Glancing back, Tjan slapped his thigh and let out a yelp, and a grin of triumph spread from ear to ear. "They took it, Kael. They took the bait!"

Bait . . . Kael's stomach turned. There were men back there lanced through, armless, trampled,

wounded, and dead. For bait? So little did the word say. He watched the soldiers behind him, caught in the drama, yet still not feeling himself a real part of it; and his horse began to lag. After a few minutes, Tjan slowed up and waited for him.

"Stay up front until we turn, Kael! We're fair game for a lance or arrow, mounted." Tjan shouted it as Kael caught up with him, but his voice barely carried above the din. The Vondorian nodded and kicked his horse to a faster gait.

The meter-and-a-half-high stone fences stretched behind now, and the raised sides of canals and ditches cut through them, smoothing out at the road to channel under the sideless bridges and rise again on the opposite side. In the distance, whitewashed homes, barns, and sheds seemed almost painted on the green of field and grove.

The Vondorian turned again to watch the Nisja, wondering if Hellwalker's acute senses would feel the added presence too soon. It was impossible to make out the riders, but there was a black horse among the visible mounts. Its rider rode stiffly, almost as if he were unaware of the action about him. It was a figure, a posture, Kael remembered well. He felt the catch again in his throat. "Hellwalker," he repeated to himself, hammering the thought. "Hellwalker."

What was in that twisted, tortured mind? he wondered. What did Rath think of the unfeeling brutes he had created? Did he know the cruelty and lust in their hearts? Did he see the death around him? Was he aware of anything but his own anger and hatred? Hellwalker . . . How the name fit.

The confusion and noise of the two running armies was providing a fair cover for the ambush. Even Kael, who was watching for it, had felt little of the hidden

Sor forces. But the farther north they fled, the more there was to feel—and Hellwalker and many of his troops were already deep into the funnel, squeezed compactly in the narrow roadway between the fences.

Kael's lagging had placed him in the front lines of the fleeing Jolan troops, and the foot soldiers were all around him now. The eyes of the men bulged from their reddened, perspiring faces, and their dust-ringed mouths were wide as they gasped for air. Yet underneath, there was a change brewing, a strange excitement and anticipation was beginning to surface.

Kael looked back again. Rath still rode like a statue, turning neither to right nor left. Kael could almost sense the fury in the set of his shoulders. As he watched his brother, he found feelings of his own taking hold—anger and sorrow and helplessness. Suddenly he wanted to strike out, to hit, to hurt—anybody. It was an insane urge, irrational, and yet it gripped him. He clenched the reins until his nails dug into his palms.

The horse stopped and everything moved on around him. He had the strange feeling that he was afloat on a crest of crazed humanity. He could hear Tjan shouting, could hear it inside and outside. And he could feel the insistence in the voice and the fear—but he couldn't move. He could almost see Rath. Almost . . . His horse lurched forward suddenly, almost unseating him, and he spun around to see Tjan's frustrated face.

"For God's sake, Kael! They're almost on top of us."

The scout yanked Kael's rein near the bit, pulling the horse after him. A scream pierced the din behind them. Kael glanced over his shoulder and saw a

plainsman fall less than twenty paces away with a spear through his back.

"You damned fool!" Tjan yelled, as he tugged on the rein trying to pull the horse. Kael's foot found the mare's flank and the animal stumbled forward.

They were almost at the end of the third field and the mind-murmur of the hidden Sor soldiers was strong now, strong enough for Kael to readily pick it up. He glanced over his shoulder, wondering how long it would take Hellwalker to notice it. It was so obvious, so loud. It had to register if he was receptive at all. But was he? Could he hear anything when so filled with anger?

Kael's breath caught as the Nisja leader's head suddenly swung right and then left. Brutally, Rath reined his horse in and the animal reared and pawed the air, scattering the men around it. Grabbing the trumpet from the man beside him, Rath himself blasted the signal for retreat; blew it rough and forcefully, but full of panic. For a second the air bristled with static. The charge broke, even the advance lines halting, as they sensed the desperation in the call. Turning, he blew the ragged notes again and again, the sound sweeping between the fences. And on the last note came the Sor call to attack.

The routing Sor army, only minutes before the picture of undisciplined terror, turned, closing its ranks; while all along the road from behind the protection of the fences rose the hidden bowmen of the plains. Between the archers, steel-tipped pikes suddenly angled above the low wall like teeth in a giant maw.

In that second, Hellwalker was off his horse, wedging himself between the animals, while his mounted cadre followed suit. As his spearhead, looking wildly from right to left, realized they were snared, the first

volley of Sor arrows caught them. Bewildered, the men tried to force their way back, but the advancing army behind them were themselves hemmed in too compactly to move.

The *thhip* of arrows and the twang of the bow strings, the thud and cry as the shafts struck home, formed a kind of rhythm that mixed in with the beat of Kael's heart. In minutes, the Nisja dead and wounded were heaped in the narrow lane.

The spearhead went for the fences, but the pikes rose to meet them and the arrows continued to sing. Noise and confusion heightened, while the battle action slowed, until it seemed to Kael that he was viewing the carnage in slow motion.

Unable to cross the fences, the Nisja lead turned on their own, climbing roughshod over the men before them, beating them down in their mad attempt to escape. There was a strange crackle as lances shattered, caught in the press of the yelling men and wounded animals.

As the Sor troops continued to press forward, the Nisja gave way, stumbling over their dead and wounded, unable to clear the jam that kept them from any effective resistance. The Orranian archers moved with them southward behind the fence line in advance of their own men, keeping the Nisja in cross fire, and leaving the pikemen and infantry to guard the fence from assault. The fields were peppered with reinforcements from the rear lines of the now advancing Jolan detachment and the hundreds coming in from the paralleling fences and canals.

All along the road back to Jolan, Kael knew, the Sor troops would be closing in, surrounding the stretched-out enemy line. With the hidden forces in the city to seal the southern end, the noose would be drawn. His thoughts should have been exultant, but

Kael felt only a cold nothingness. One thing only now held his mind.

Sliding to the ground, he left his mount and began pushing forward on foot, heading toward that area where he had last seen Rath. Between two plainsmen, he suddenly found himself in the middle of the fighting. Directly ahead of him a red-faced, sweating Nisjan stood, his sword still impaling a young Sor. With a yank the enemy retrieved his blade, shoved the dying man aside, and thrust at Kael. Without thinking, the young telepath lashed out, and the man dropped his weapon and stumbled backward as he clutched at his head. One of his comrades, thrusting out in his own battle, caught him in the side. A scream turned to a gurgle as the man doubled and pitched forward. The second Nisjan stared at him, momentarily stunned. A familiar short sword struck him across the neck, and he, too, fell.

Kael met the scout's warning glance and his shake of the head with a grim expression. They moved out together, stepping over the bodies, plunging again into the melee. Although the ranks of Nisja had thinned in the deadly cross fire, those left fought with maddened desperation; and it was only by slow, watchful maneuvering that Kael and Tjan made their way among them.

Kael hadn't noticed that Tjan had been drawn away until a silent warning snapped him about. Even then, he didn't see the sword as it slashed his left shoulder. A glance showed a neat cut, paralleling the fading surka scar, already spilling red.

He dodged sideways, bracing to meet the next sword thrust—but it didn't come. Instead, the man suddenly grimaced and keeled over at Kael's feet, a stiletto piercing his spine.

As Tjan fought to reach his side, a Nisjan club

reached out and grazed his head. The scout sprawled, and for a brief moment the bonding channel was void. It was as though a light had gone out inside Kael, leaving him dark and empty. Yet instantly, the life force was there again, and Kael looked up to see the Nisjan club angle for its finishing plunge.

A beam of light winked and severed the man's arm at the elbow, smoked across his chest, and collapsed him soundlessly. Kael saw the shocked horror of the men fighting beside the fallen desert soldier, but he ignored it, his only thought being for Tjan's safety. Whether it was fear of the laser or his expression—or both—Nisjan and Sor alike backed away, allowing him a corridor as he strode toward the unconscious scout.

And then, suddenly, everyone was scrambling past him—Nisja rushing in retreat, ignoring him, their eyes fastened on something down the road; Sor running, following the fleeing enemy. Wondering what drew them, Kael gave a quick glance behind him.

The fence had been breached both above and below the place where Hellwalker had been, and Nisja were pouring through. Those at the rear were engaged in furious jousting with the Sor as they waited to follow. Kael watched a Nisja soldier mount the fence only to take a pike which thrust him back into the arms of his own men. They, in turn, pushed him forward again, like a shield, as they forced their way through the defending Sor.

The sight knotted Kael's stomach and he stooped again to Tjan. Carefully, he turned the scout onto his back. Tjan's eyes opened, stared without recognition for a moment, and then focused. He tried to rise but pain gripped him, and Kael pushed him back.

"Stay down. You're all right here for the moment." More brown-clad plainsmen ran by, and Kael followed them with his eyes. The knot of enemy was much smaller now and the ground around the breach was heaped with bodies. But still the fighting went on.

"It's almost over," he murmured, turning back to his friend. "They don't need us now. Give yourself a few minutes."

The bleeding from his shoulder wound had slowed, and there was feeling in his arm again. It ached, and there was little guessing as to the reason for his faintness. It would do them both good to rest a moment.

"Where is Hellwalker?" Tjan murmured.

"I don't know." Kael looked back at the nearly deserted road. There was nothing now where Rath had been but bodies and dead horses. "He's either with the dead, or he's gone over the fence. Either way, he'll wait for us. There's nothing he can do, no place he can go anymore."

It surprised Kael to realize his sudden lack of interest in his brother—funny how a club blow could turn a lifetime of objectives upside down. In the moment that Tjan had taken that clubbing, when Kael had feared that he had lost the scout because of his own impatience, his whole thinking had been upended. Perspective had suddenly changed; and with it, a lot of priorities. He still didn't understand it all, but he did know that for the time being his place was at the scout's side.

The roadway was almost deserted now, except for the dead and wounded. He could see the troops fighting to the south; he could hear the clash of weapons and the shouts across the fence; but even

that was dying out. It was a strange ghastly calm that was now settling over the clamorous, gruesome battle ground. Even the moans of the wounded found their place in it.

Moments passed and at last Tjan sat up.

"Think you're all right?" Kael asked.

The scout nodded and rolled to his knees, staying there until his head was clear, and then stood up. A strange new feeling filled Kael's heart as they walked across the body-heaped battlefield—a fear, a lonely sadness that he couldn't quite control. It settled in his stomach as they sorted through the dead in that place where Rath had stood. The smell of sweat and blood and ruptured gut hovered over the road, and it was all Kael could do to hold down his own nausea as they checked the piles of bodies. Hellwalker was not there.

The heaviness settled upon them, foreboding, as they worked their way toward the fence and the areas of breach.

In the field behind the wall, the Nisja were being herded into groups and searched for weapons. Kael's quick glance showed none standing with the stature of his brother. He winced a little, picturing Rath dead. But in that, there was almost a feeling of relief. To have it over . . . nothing to confront . . . only to return a body . . .

They were still checking the dead and wounded when Captain Tzarno found them almost two hours later. Kael could feel the captain's question form and then die unspoken. He sighed.

"He's not here, sir. We've searched the area . . . They've double-checked . . ." Kael pointed to the Sor infantrymen around them. "He's . . . just gone."

There was desolation in his last words. He'd tried to keep it out, to not reveal his fears and despair. But there had been too many disappointments—he had failed . . .

"He can't go far, son. There's nowhere to go. The whole army has been bottled up—we have them all. Jolan is ours and the long road south. Hellwalker is too striking a figure to hide for very long. He'll be found. They may already have picked him up with the stragglers they're bringing in." He turned to his aide.

"Hanley, scare up a couple of mounts and get these two back to Jolan." He nodded at Kael again. "Don't worry, now—we'll find him." Tjan saluted; and wheeling his stallion, the captain rode back the way he had come.

As they waited for the horses, Kael went back once more to the area where he had last seen his brother. He stood in the spot and looked at the fence, seeing it as Rath would have done. The first breach had occurred about fifteen meters north of him, the second about twenty meters to the south. Between the two breaches was a canal and bridge.

Bridge . . .

Kael walked to the edge of the log planking and stared down into the muddy bottom of the canal. There were a dozen bodies in the channel, mostly in desert green. He lowered himself over the edge and dropped to the ground; and Tjan silently was there beside him. They turned together to the darkened area beneath the bridge, where a number of other bodies lay in shadows. Seven they found—three Sor, and all had died by the sword.

Kael studied them in the dim light, uneasy, although not really knowing why. The mud showed signs of much struggling; it must have been a hot

battle while it lasted. But there was something . . . He rubbed his knuckle along his chin and scowled at the bodies. And then he saw it . . .

Three of the Nisja were sun-darkened, their faces almost black in the shadows. The fourth was as light as his plainsmen enemies. He didn't need to call Tjan; the scout dropped with him beside the body. Further checking revealed what Kael had suspected. The fourth enemy was not enemy at all.

Kael's eyes lifted, met Tjan's. So . . . Rath had switched clothing. Masquerading as a Sor, he could be anywhere. They left the canal slowly, both their minds pondering the new turn of events. Hanley was approaching with mounts as they made their way back to the road.

"Then you think he engineered the two breaches to draw attention and cover his own escape?" Captain Tzarno's tone indicated he'd already accepted the explanation.

"Looks that way to me, sir," Tjan said. He glanced at Kael, who stood moodily silent, looking out of the office window. "It had to be a desperate move; he sacrificed an awful lot of his men."

The captain nodded. "It would explain why no one's seen him since the ambush." He slumped in his chair and let his fingers drum a dull staccato on the desk.

Kael was aware of their talk, but offered nothing. His mind was busy with its own questioning as he played and replayed the battle scenes, trying to piece the puzzle together, to get some idea of where Rath might have gone. The sun was low in the sky, and the windows in the building across the compound were splashed with gold. It would be dark soon.

There were no supper fires this night, no smoke

trailing in the sky from the rooftops. It would be a lonely sleep in the little city, but at least its occupants had been spared. Tomorrow, the people would return and life would go on, the battle interlude for most of them no more than a memory.

The thought caught at him and he straightened. "Tjan?" The scout turned and Captain Tzarno looked up. "How far is it to that little village where the Jolan evacuees were taken?"

"Tium? Oh, it's about ten kilometers cross-country from where we were."

"Any natural barriers between?"

Tjan thought a moment. "No. It's mostly farmland."

"How far is Tium from here?"

"Fourteen kilometers." Tjan frowned, reading the direction of Kael's thinking. "It's possible, I suppose. It would be easier to hide in a crowd."

"Captain Tzarno, sir. It's probably only wishful thinking, but I would like to check it out."

The captain studied the Vondorian, a frown furrowing his brow as he considered the request. "Why not just alert the company stationed there? They can have a search made very quickly."

Kael's objection was courteous. "But, sir, knowing Rath, I think we might have better success if we don't announce our intentions. If he's there, I'll find him."

Still, Captain Tzarno hesitated, and so Kael went on.

"I have my own backup, and"—he nodded at Tjan—"if the scout is allowed to accompany me, I won't be alone."

The Sor leader rested his chin against his fist and eyed the two young men. At last, giving his head a slow double nod, he stood up.

"All right. Go with him, Lanfree. I'll give you an

hour's lead, but I'm alerting the company captain there, and if you don't report back to him by that time, he'll come looking for you."

Kael straightened and gave the captain a grateful smile. "Thank you, sir. Now, with your leave, we had better be on our way."

A quick round of salutes—a murmured "Good luck, men" followed them as Tjan swung the door closed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

They rode in silence for a time, at last feeling the healing peace that pervaded the evening. Except for an occasional patrol, the road was deserted, the shadows reaching out, deepening along the rock fences. Fences . . . Kael shuddered, remembering the afternoon. Already, it seemed a dream, except for the gnawing ache in his shoulder and the fatigue. He thanked the gods again that their wounds had not been more serious.

Odd, how calm he felt. It was almost as if . . . this was the way it was meant to be. Somehow, he knew that Rath would be there waiting. Not Rath, the Hellwalker—but Rath, the brother.

He could feel Tjan with him, his presence as comforting and strengthening as the peaceful evening. So much Kael owed to him, so much he had learned from the scout—of living, of accepting life in all its phases, of taking joy in its tiniest form. So much . . .

He frowned, his conscience giving him more than a nudge, as it refused to be put off again. No telling what the next hours would bring. It wasn't fair to any of them to delay it any longer. He signalled Tjan and they stopped.

"There's something we have to do," he said, an-

swering the scout's unasked question. He reached for his tele-booster. "Someone you have to meet."

Tjan's face paled. "Now?"

Kael nodded. "Now. Don't worry, Tjan, he's an old hand at reading character. But stay with me—we'll have to do some patching and it might take a few minutes."

"Laedry . . . ?" Tjan murmured uncomfortably. "What will—"

"Will you stop your worrying? It'll be all right." Kael sent the call and was answered immediately.

I read you, Kael. Problems?

Patch me through to the Commander, will you, Laedry? I need to reach him if it's possible.

He's sticking close; it'll only be a minute. There was a short wait and then his father was there, his thoughts warm through the link.

Yes, son? Have you found Rath?

No, sir, not yet.

Are you all right? Your shoulder—

It's fine. There's no problem. Father . . . I want you to meet someone, Kael blurted out, not knowing how else to say it. *It's a long story, and I don't have much time. But Father, I want you to meet Tjan Lanfree . . . my Bond.* Kael waited for the shock and astonishment, but it didn't come. Instead, his father answered with a quiet gentleness.

I wondered if you were going to tell me.

Kael's own jaw dropped and he looked at Tjan. *How did you—*

You let it slip when you reported in after the battle. I guess in all your despair in losing Rath you forgot to cover it. Tjan was there, the channel was obvious. He hesitated and then went on. I only wish you had talked to me before—

Please, Father—

Don't misunderstand, Kael. I'm not condemning it. It's just that . . . it will not be easy for the two of you, being permanently separated. You know . . .

We know, Father. But it's a good bond: it will endure. He is worthy. Will you meet him, know him now, before . . . ? Kael swallowed and bit his bottom lip.

Of course, Kael. I would like that very much. Patch him through to me.

Kael projected the mind bridge. Straightening, Tjan unconsciously brushed at the dirt on his tunic and then combed his hair with his fingers. His face had paled, was almost gray. Kael could feel the scout's apprehension and knew that it also registered with the Commander.

Father, my Bond, Tjan Lanfree. Tjan, Commander Kilor, my father.

He could feel his father's probe cross and touch the scout. Tjan opened to him, willingly, but nervously. The moment stretched and then a certain approving satisfaction permeated the link. Kael sighed and relaxed. He could feel the tingle of excitement and anticipation, and he wondered why he had hesitated. It was so right—the two of them—why had he been so afraid to tell his father?

The judgment finished and the Commander was quiet for a time, as though he were coding and filing his feelings. It was Tjan who finally bridged the silence.

Sir, he began, his thought almost a stutter, I am honored. I . . .

It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Tjan. I wish it could have been at a better time. The Commander's greeting was firm and warm. I do hope you will forgive my intrusion. I wanted what I am about to do to have meaning. Fathers can be fathers, as you will undoubtedly find out one day. He paused as he drew Kael in.

It seems a fine bond, son. I believe I have a duty to perform, and as our time is short and circumstances prevent a court reading in Guarnt, we will let it be recorded in the ship's log. There was another short pause and then the Commander went on.

Tjan Lanfree of the Planet Orran, bonded as you are to Kael of the House of Kilor, Fifth High Clan of Thaarn, of the Galactic world of Vondore, so let this be known. Be thy name added to those who bear the name of Kilor. You are henceforth granted all kinship rights. Be it therefore witnessed and entered this day upon the Log of the Starship Seeker.

Welcome to the family, Tjan.

The uneasiness in Tjan's eyes gradually turned to a questioning wonder. He glanced at the Vondorian for confirmation, and Kael nodded, smiled, and then sent his gaze upward in a gentle reminder. Coloring with confused embarrassment, Tjan struggled to get a probe together, and the fluster was evident as his thoughts crossed Kael's mind bridge on the way to the *Seeker*. Kael couldn't help grinning to himself.

I'm sorry, sir, Tjan apologized. It's just that it's such an honor. I didn't . . . Thank you, sir. Thank you very much.

I'm afraid that it's an honor in thought only, Tjan. There's little else that can come of it with interplanetary relations as they are. I wish you could come back with us; I would like very much to know you better and to have you with the family. But as that is not possible, it seems we will have to be content with this much, and look forward to deepening relationships at another time.

Yes, sir. But the thought stands, and I thank you for your name. I will honor it.

A feeling of warmth filled the *Seeker* end of the

link. Yes . . . *I'm sure you will.* A sigh followed. *I know, Kael—time is short. But I feel much better about all this now. I only wish there could have been more time for the two of you.*

There will be one day, Father.

So there will. Be careful, Kael—I know your heart is full right now, but don't let all this distract you. Keep your mind on your task.

Yes, sir. We have to get on. Thank you, Father.

Good luck to both of you.

Kael felt his father leave, and for a moment the link was empty. And then Laedry was there, warm and friendly.

It's great, Kael and Tjan. I couldn't help monitoring. You take care, now, and stay close. The thought was sincere and held no regret or judgment. A muscle pulled in Kael's cheek and he stopped to control the waver in his probe before he answered.

We will, Laedry, and . . . thank you. Emotion broke through with the thought, and suddenly shy, Kael hurried on to finish the communication. *We'll check in as soon as we find out anything definite.*

I'll be here.

The sky was streaked with red and yellow as the sun approached the horizon. Kael replaced the booster and smiled at Tjan, and they urged their horses forward. Nothing was said as they hurried on, but there was a closeness of thought and emotion that filled the silence between them.

In the distance they could see the smoke and sprawl of the refugee camp. Sporadic tents appeared beside the road, increasing in density as they rode on. Log and stucco homes, washed with gold by the setting sun, dotted the countryside. The tiny dwellings, their windows reflecting the light, became beacons of welcoming warmth.

"You said Rath had bonded," Tjan murmured suddenly.

"The last summer he was home. A young scientist, Garik Auf Lantis Ni Saelle, a brilliant geneticist, as ambitious as Rath in his plans for righting the galaxy. I think it hurt Father more than he ever let on that Rath chose to ignore the adoption."

"Do all bondings go through the same judgment that we went through?"

"It's part of it."

Tjan frowned, and Kael studied him a moment.

"He was not always bad, Tjan. There was a time when I thought he was about as perfect as a man could get. I was just a kid, but there were many who thought as I did. He was gentle and generous. I can remember more than one time when he used his last credit to buy a decent meal and some clothes for some derelict who'd forgotten what a decent meal and clean clothes were, and then scoured the city for a job for him. I can remember him taking more than one lonely, struggling youth and giving him the time and strength and purpose to succeed. I can remember a very plain girl whom he convinced was beautiful and whom he then asked to marry him. He loved building things, making them better. He loved children—"

"What happened?"

"I don't know for sure. But I think maybe his needs got ahead of his honor."

"I don't think . . ."

"Rath wasn't a god. He had his weaknesses, his faults. He had a lot of pride. He believed in his dream, his destiny to improve civilization. He could not tolerate failure—in himself or in others. In all the years of my youth I don't remember him failing at

anything. He was always first, always the best, always the leader. Nor could he take reproof. The one and only instance I remember of his being chastised for some questionable action, he bore it in anger and he never forgave.

"Rath needed ever-increasing accomplishments to fulfill the goals of his dream. He needed the successes, the prestige. Success became both motivation and fulfillment. One day it became more important than honor, and the man and his dream fell."

"Do you think he will listen to you?"

"I don't know. We were close. I loved him, still do. And in spite of the difference in our ages, I think he really loved me. I thought when I started all this that there was a good chance that we could talk, that he would listen. But he is changed." I just don't know . . ."

"What if . . . ?"

"I have to bring him back . . . one way or another . . ."

Tjan said no more and they continued on in silence another kilometer.

"Where do you think he'll be?" Tjan said at last. "Even in a crowd and in plains garb, he's apt to stand out. His likeness is known by many in Sor. He can't hide long."

"Probably make a disguise of some sort, something that would cover his head and body . . ."

"Not many wear that kind of cover in the summer," Tjan observed, "old women, priests, healers—very few. He's too tall for a woman—"

They reined in their horses to wait for a small herd of dairy sten to clear the road before they moved on.

"Even disguised," Kael mused aloud, "he'd need a retreat. There are a lot of refugees in town. Where

would no one expect him to be?" His eyes met Tjan's as they both echoed the same thought.

Church.

A small tremor caught at the corner of Kael's mouth. "Yeah, maybe that would appeal to Rath. Seems as good a place as any to start."

They slowed their horses again to pass through a group of refugees returning to the camp from the village. The smell of pottage and fire-bread hung on the air. Children chased each other through the roadway, their cries and laughter signalling their unexpected holiday. Stopping at the sight of uniforms and weapons, the youngsters braced smartly and saluted, as respectful as any subordinate to his officer. The two young men returned their salutes with solemnity as they moved between them.

The increasing outbound traffic had finally slowed their horses to a walk. Impatient but resigned to the pace, Kael scanned the area as he rode, his eyes drifting across the tent-crowded fields and up the road toward the village marketplace. The vendors had stayed late, selling their wares to the refugee crowd. But now as dusk gathered, the square was rapidly emptying as the farmers closed their stalls, gathering their few remaining items on their hand-carts.

Some distance ahead, moving with them toward the town center, was a young woman and a small boy. She clutched a large basket in one hand, the boy's hand in the other. A dark green shawl draped her shoulders and over it billowed a cloud of reddish-gold hair. In spite of himself, Kael's heart skipped a beat.

"Idiot," he muttered to himself, "that's all you need."

Still, he couldn't help watching her. Something

about her was oddly familiar. As they overtook the two, the young woman glanced up, her eyes widened with surprise, and she spun to face them. For one sinking moment Kael's world turned upside down.

"Kael! Tjan! You're all right." Excitement bubbled in her voice. "We've been so worried."

"Chala, what are you doing here?" Tjan sputtered, reining his horse around to face her.

"They blocked the roads between here and Tae-Sor. We couldn't get the children out." The answer was for Tjan, but the smile was for Kael.

The Vondorian returned it, with his mouth if not his eyes, and with a shake of the head. It appeared Fate was going to play out her cards to the bitter end.

"But what are you doing in Tium?" Tjan persisted, exasperation coloring his voice. "How come you aren't in the city?"

"We came after the children. Remember, I told you they were here with her relatives. When Sera's husband was called into the militia and we knew the Nisja were coming, she got really worried and persuaded a friend to bring us here. She didn't want to take a chance on anything happening to them." She paused and frowned, as her gaze flicked from one to the other.

"You look exhausted, both of you. The war is over, isn't it? You're not still on duty?"

"Just mopping up. We had to check out some things in this quadrant," Tjan explained. "Where you headed?"

"Back to Tsol's, the other side of town." She nodded at the boy. "We brought a basket of food—bread, eggs, berries, a few vegetables—to the market. The place has been packed with people all day." She glanced at Kael.

"Can you come home with us for a little while? Supper will be ready at sundown. We have plenty, if you like soup and bread and cheese."

"Love to . . . tomorrow, maybe. Got some work to finish up," Kael answered, keeping his voice level, his emotions well in check.

"Sorry," Tjan added. "We could give you a ride home, though. Be dark soon; not good to be out with the streets filled with strangers." He extended a hand, and the boy, who had been quietly observing the conversation, reached for him. Catching the small wrist, Tjan drew the boy up and swung him around to sit on the saddle blanket behind him.

Tjan . . . ! Kael's thought had a hard edge to it. The scout glanced at him. We need to get them out of here, Kael. You don't want them in the middle of this mess, do you? Patience, man, it'll only take a few minutes.

Kael pushed himself back onto the cantle, passed his reins to the scout, and reached down for the girl. Seating her sidesaddle on the skirt in front of him, he wordlessly put his arm around her, took back the reins, and nudged the mount forward.

Her hair brushed his face as they rode. It smelled of flowers, and memories returned of cerci ringing the trees in the park. Chala glanced up, her eyes wide, hiding nothing. Not daring to meet them, he studied the road.

He had to concentrate. He couldn't afford the distraction, not now. Think of his mission . . . that was it, concentrate on his mission.

She settled back a little, wisps of golden hair floating up, curling about his face. He could feel his resolve slipping, and he frowned at himself, at the feelings that kept asserting themselves.

Why did she have to be here? Why now, in the middle of this? He stared at the road, feeling the

closeness of her, the quiet soothing presence of Tjan, and the ache of loneliness twisted into a heart-wrenching knot. It was wrong, all wrong, to be given so much and then be forced to leave it all.

The road turned to the right, continued on two hundred meters, and opened on a large square. At the far side stood a steep-roofed, high-walled stucco building. Two lamps burned beside the large double doors, bisecting the otherwise plain front. Flowers, fragrant in the early darkness, bordered the two low steps and the path that led to the street.

Kael quickly surveyed the street and its occupants. Women in groups of three or four visited together in the waning light, while off to the left a gathering of men animatedly discussed the war. A number of youngsters played "touch and run" across the square as they waited for their elders. Nothing unusual.

Turning to the building, Kael probed its interior. The church held a number of worshippers. Carefully, he sorted the individuals, working from the back of the room to the front. He had checked perhaps half when probe suddenly met probe. For a moment they held, neither pushing nor retreating, neither giving identification. As the other abruptly broke off, Kael retreated.

There had been no need to warn Tjan; the scout had witnessed the whole through the bonding link and had shielded instantly. Still, Kael motioned him away as he quickly dismounted. Passing the reins to Chala, he turned without a word to the scout.

Take them home, Tjan.

I'll send them on with the horses.

You, too, Tjan. Quickly, before he senses you. I have to talk to him alone. Please.

"Kael? Tjan!" Chala's eyes flicked from one to the other. "What's the matter?"

Before either could answer, the church belched a shoeless group of worshippers into the street. They paused outside the door, looking at each other in bewilderment. As they glanced over their shoulders at the portal, whatever had spooked them apparently gave them another invisible shove, for stumbling over each other in near terror, they fled not only from the building, but from the square.

The street talk broke up as the loiterers watched the worshippers flee. Suddenly uneasy, they gathered their children and hastened after them.

Kael's jaw tightened as he motioned again to the scout to leave. Tjan scowled, dropped his gaze, and then met Kael's once more.

I'll be back.

Nodding impatiently, the Vondorian gave Chala's horse a slap that sent it trotting. Tight-lipped and still frowning, Tjan silently wheeled and kicked his own mount after the girl's. Kael watched them for a moment before turning back to the church. A quick call found the pilot waiting.

Rath's in the church, Laedry, and he knows I'm here. I'm going in. Can't risk losing him again. Get down as fast as you can.

Breaking the link before Laedry could object, Kael replaced the booster and reached for his laser. In the evening's heat, the weapon felt strangely cold in his hand. The sound of his boots was muffled on the packed dirt of the square; indeed, all sound seemed hushed as he approached the half-open church door. He hesitated, listening, trying to see what lay beyond. Nothing moved, no sound, no pulse of energy. At last, drawing in a deep breath, he warily stepped inside.

The heavy door creaked as he shut it behind him. The room smelled of sweat, ironwood, and burning tallow, country smells grown so familiar the past

weeks. A quick survey showed an empty room, log beams overhead, white plaster walls cut by several long, narrow windows, each curtained with golden drapes. Between the windows, outreaching rings of candles cast their flickering light; while a larger ring hung above the altar at the far end of the chapel. Worn woven mats covered the floor, their surface frayed with the indented marks of much kneeling. Near the door a raised platform held a number of sandals and moccasins.

A shadow at the rear quarter of the altar drew his attention. Someone knelt there, head bowed, in dark cassock and hood. Kael studied him, wary, yet in spite of himself nervously eager. A feeling of moment gripped him; it was all he could do to restrain himself, to allow his brother the first move.

And it came, a questioning probe, curious, wary—as yet without threat.

Still on guard, his agitation increasing, Kael opened to him, felt the old familiar probe move inward. In that instant, time dissolved as memories came flooding back. Hell lay forgotten, the years of hurt and guilt and loneliness. The emotional pull of the past in that touch became almost more than Kael could bear. Emotions reached out, wrapped the other with a fervor that almost brought tears . . .

For a moment . . . until he felt the detached, sterile coldness that returned.

He drew back, confused. Didn't Rath know him, he wondered? But he had to know. Didn't he feel? Had he grown past feeling? Was there no warmth of recognition at all? No! . . . Once more he reached out, warm, welcoming.

Rath's coldness spread, dampening all emotion, killing memories even as they birthed. His brother's probe moved like an ice-tipped feather among his

thoughts, weighing, searching, as Kael sought his own understanding. It seemed that the moment would stretch into eternity, when suddenly it ended.

Apparently satisfied, the figure rose and stepped out to face him. Although hood and half-light shadowed his features, Kael could still feel the intensity of his gaze. Slowly, the man raised his hands and pushed the hood back, letting it drop around his neck.

Kael swallowed as the candlelight illuminated his darkened hair, formed shadowed hollows and highlighted planes in his gaunt face. A familiar face, yet somehow unfamiliar. Only the eyes were the same. Always it had been so. Always the eyes had dominated. Paled almost to transparency, they seemed to shine with a glow of their own.

With a flick of the wrist, Rath released the robe tie, pulled the garment from his shoulders, and let it slide to the floor. Firm-muscled under the tight-fitting Sor tunic, Rath rested his hands confidently on his hips, and gave Kael an indulgent, almost welcoming smile.

"Ah . . . little brother, what a surprise. Tell me, has it been you all along?"

Though an amused curiosity carried the question, behind it Kael felt a weighing judgment. Before Kael could answer, Rath nodded to himself.

"Truly, you have grown."

"It's been a long time, Rath," Kael said simply.

"So it has. Many years, many changes. And what brings you to Orran?" Rath's head tilted in question. "I would not think you one to break the Isolation Edict."

Kael sighed. "It seems I've lost my brother," he murmured. He steadied his gaze, meeting Rath squarely. "We heard rumors that he'd been seen in Orran. I came to find him."

"Alone?"

Again, that weighing curiosity, the questioning behind the questioning. Always the tactician, Rath.

"For now."

Rath's eyebrows knit slightly as he mused the answer.

"The years have gone well with you?"

"Well enough."

Rath nodded thoughtfully. "They did not deal harshly with you?"

"No. You were right about them being lenient with a boy . . ."

"Still . . ." Rath's eyes narrowed as he studied him, and a frown settled across his forehead. "There was pain . . ."

"Much pain."

"But you have forgiven."

"I have tried to understand."

Rath nodded, the frown disappeared, and he raised a hand to slowly rub his chin.

"Why then, young Kael, do you seek your brother?"

"First, to give him a message from his father."

An almost imperceptible tremor went through Rath's body. The muscles tightened about his lips.

"His father is well?" There was a peculiar quaver in his voice, as though he forced the question.

"And wanting to see him."

A shadow crossed his eyes, a darkness that filled even his words when he spoke again. Gone was the curious interest, the near-warmth; in its place was bitterness and anger.

"The dead do not travel." The words were flat and, for the first time, filled with warning.

"My brother is dead?"

"Years dead."

Kael bowed his head. "Show me his grave and I will return his body to its own soil."

"Impossible. He does not wish to be taken to his home soil. He vowed never to return, and I gave him my promise."

"But you must return," Kael said softly, his eyes again lifting to meet those of his brother. "You've broken laws that place your eternal soul in jeopardy. To deny it, to refuse to face up to it is to relinquish all—for you, for all of us who still hope."

For a long moment Rath stared at him, and then shook his head. "They sent you . . . the dirty bastards."

"I asked to come, Rath, and there is no choice but to take you back."

"Isn't there, now." Rath studied Kael, his eyes narrowing in assessment. "I bear you no ill will, Kael, and I don't want to hurt you"—he drew himself up, sucked in a long breath—"but I won't go back. Not with you, not for them. There is only death for me there. Death and a hell you could never understand."

"What have you made for yourself here? Is this not a hell of your own making? At least in justice there is peace—"

"Peace? Justice?" Rath's eyes flashed like points of fire on a sword blade. "What do you know of justice? What can any of you see through your own narrow minds? What do you know of man's promise? What do you care if the creative genius of a thousand years is crushed by a handful of brainless bigots?"

He leaned forward, his finger tracing circles in the air, as his voice lowered, filled with loathing. "They're all fools, blind men in a bottle, following each other around in an unending circle of mediocrity. There is

no justice in your world, Kael. Only stagnation and death."

"There is rest in death—"

"Rest?" Rath's mouth twisted in bitter rebuke. "Stop ignoring the real world, Kael. I'm not an old man, half dead and cold inside. My life is before me . . . My destiny! I have dreams. Dreams, Kael. Remember? We dreamed together once . . . All this"—he made a wide sweep with his arm—"is nothing. Practice . . . Experience. Orran has been an unfortunate experiment, but my future was never here. My dawn is yet to come."

"You still believe . . . ?"

"I will, Kael, as long as I am."

"But it's impossible. You're a fugitive . . ." Kael shook his head.

"Nothing is impossible if you believe. You believed once, Kael."

"I did, but . . ."

"But not now . . . ? Then there we differ. True visions require dedication." The near-pleading intensity in Rath's voice died, leaving for a moment a disappointing hollowness.

"I don't know," Kael said, wearily, "but it doesn't matter what I believe, anyway. We're men bound by honor, and honor demands that you return, Rath."

"Whose honor?" Rath spit out sarcastically. "Yours? Mine? Father's? The Federation's? Honor is relative, Kael. My life is more important to me than anyone's honor. I won't go. If you think you can take me . . ."—he flashed a thin smile—"then do it now . . . little brother."

A searing pain accompanied Rath's last words. It stabbed with such intensity at Kael's mind that he reeled in agony. Wary though he had been, the attack had come with no warning, and had caught him with

his shield down. Struggling through the mental blast and the resultant upheaval in his mind, Kael fought desperately to place it. At last successful, the burning ceased and he gasped for air. Raising his hand, he realized that he no longer gripped the laser. He glanced at the floor.

"Lose something, little brother?"

Rath's question came softly, with disappointment, and with an increase of telepathic pressure, a feeling of hot steel ever banding tighter around his head. Nausea filled him as cramps knotted his stomach.

Desperately, he tried to gather his own counterforce, but Rath's unrelenting attack was so intense that Kael could do no more than maintain the shield. The pressure continued to increase, requiring more and more of Kael's own concentration and energy to counter it. He didn't consider breaking that concentration again to search for the weapon. The shield was his only defense. If Rath penetrated it, he would kill him.

Would kill him! The shocking thought struck like a blade, the desolating reality of that knowledge harder to bear than the pain. He sank to his knees, his legs no longer able to hold him.

Rath's white face was muscle-tight with concentration, the eyelids half closed, his thin lips parted a little. He stood easy, his hands still resting on his hips, no outward sign of the tremendous forces he was unleashing. He appeared as unconcerned as if Kael were a poisonous viper about to be dispatched.

This was not his beloved brother. This was not the Rath of his youth, the hero of heroes, the savior of mankind. That Rath was dead. It was Hellwalker he faced—Hellwalker who would kill . . .

As understanding filled Kael, horror wrenched

him free from his enervating despair. He had gambled and lost. He had not found a brother, he had found a madman, and the madman had to be stopped. But how? Each second found him weaker. He could hardly maintain his shield against the force of Rath's attack. There was no way he could get off a counterstrike, no way to break the brutal thrust. All he could do was try to hold on long enough for Laedry to arrive with backup.

Oh, God, if only he'd waited, hadn't attempted it alone. He was so damned impulsive, never weighing the consequences. But he had so hoped . . .

The psi-steel pressure grew unbearable. He could almost feel his eyes squash, smear against the jellied mess that had to be his brain. Breathing became agony, as his racing heartbeat throbbed in his head.

Laedry . . . he pleaded.

I'm almost there, Kael. Hold on. Tjan's thought rasped through the bonding link against his scorched mind like a saw, tearing. For a second Kael knew only pain. In the next, terror found him.

Get out of here, Tjan!

No way. Talk is over, Kael.

He'll kill you.

Not if I can help it. He can't take us both at the same time. You hang on until I get there.

Don't, Tjan! For God's sake, don't! You can't block—

Excruciating pain drove all else from Kael's mind as the shield ripped. Struggling desperately, Kael tried to reform it, but the rent remained. Hatred poured through, like tongues of fire, burning, strangling him.

"So you die, Kael. What think you now of death?" Rath's crazed, strangely sorrowful voice rode the fire. "And you fail, also. Before Father, Vondore, before

God Himself—you fail. How does it feel to fail, little brother?"

Others . . .

"Will come? Undoubtedly. But even if they succeed—and who is to know of that?—Father will find no joy in victory." Hatred darkened the name, spit it out with loathing.

Why . . . hate . . . ? The thought shattered almost before Kael got it out.

"Father? Have I not the right? Hasn't he made me what I am today? Hasn't he robbed me of all that should have been mine? He, it is, that is responsible for your death, little brother. Curse him, for he kills you, not I.

"Ah . . . so much pain." Rath bowed his head for a moment, as a feeling almost of sadness briefly cooled the fire. "Give it up. Don't prolong it; you only make it more difficult for both—"

A sound, the rasp of a heavy door opening, broke Rath's train of words. His attack wavered and broke. Instantly, a backwash of fury struck Kael from the bonding channel, halting the quick-drawn gasp of air in his throat.

Unnerving in his attack, brazen, undaunted, his hatred lashing wildly at the startled man before him, Tjan struck. Stunned, uncertain of his own position, Rath retreated behind his own shield. It took only a moment, though, to ascertain the lack of control and discipline in his new opponent. Once that was determined, his superior ability quickly stopped Tjan's thrust. Frantic, fighting with everything he knew to give Kael that moment he desperately needed, Tjan held on.

As the young Vondorian struggled through the mire of pain and weakness, cursing the too-little

strength he had left, he felt the scout's attack thrust collapse—and then the mental cry as Tjan's shield fell. Recoiling from the wash of pain and anger that spilled through the bond-link as Hellwalker's fury seared, Kael watched the scout stagger, saw him drop to a knee, wrap his head in his arms as the pain engulfed him.

Desperate, Kael launched a half-formed attack of his own, surprisingly with enough force to momentarily stagger his brother, causing him to break his thrust at Tjan. Immediately, Rath turned his anger again on the younger Vondorian. Summoning all the concentration he could, Kael fought to hold him. But he had lost too much. His probe faltered, fell, and he held once more behind a shield rapidly disintegrating.

Caustic laughter echoed across the room. "A Bond, Kael? An Orranian? A primitive? Oh, little brother, you disappoint me."

Once more the door squeaked behind Kael, and Rath's attack instantly ceased. Three faces turned in concert as the door slowly swung ajar and a young girl slipped through the opening. Kael froze, recognition bringing horror. As Tjan struggled to his feet, Rath's gaze flicked to Kael and then settled once more on the girl.

She took a step toward her brother and staggered. Her eyes widened and she dropped without a sound.

"No!!!"

The scout's cry cut the air even as she fell, carrying all the terror and hatred of a desolate soul. His arm swept forward in an underhand fling of his sword.

Fire exploded through Kael's bond link, as the scout twisted to his knees and pitched forward. As if in slow motion through the glaze of pain Kael

watched the swishing sword cartwheel home, saw his brother duck the blade only to catch the hilt full in the face, bowling him over backward.

For a moment Kael felt nothing, no being, no movement, no thought—not even pain. And then it came—emptiness, a void wide and dark. Like a vacuum, it pulled at him, drained him. The bond link was empty . . .

Tjan was gone.

Realization turned to shock and then to anger, an anger so great, so filled with despair that whatever love Kael had ever felt for Rath was burned out of him. Power seized him from somewhere, deep energy from his own pit of hell. His brother, stunned by the sword's blow, spit blood as he struggled back to his feet. With full intent Kael faced him, focused his rage, and hurled it.

Rath's eyes widened, filled with pain. The hilt mark darkened in the stark face as he flung an arm out to steady himself. Blood streamed from his nose, mouth, and a torn eyebrow, splattering the front of his tunic. Clutching his head, he staggered sideways, fell against the altar, then slid off, writhing on the floor.

Coldly, Kael pressed his attack, watching the man tense in a great convulsion and then go limp. For one moment longer, he stared at the being who had been his brother, and then, expressionless, he reached out mentally and probed the body. He found it empty, the life force fled.

Suddenly he was trembling, violently ill, nausea mixing with the burning in his head. He retched, and the spasms sent waves of tearing contractions through him. Through and over the pain and nausea was a growing feeling of desolation more terrible

than all Rath's anger and hatred. Forcing himself to move, to look, to touch, he turned to his friends.

Through the shadow of pain and candle light, Kael could barely see the two as they lay a bare arm's length apart. He tried to stand, but his shaking legs refused to hold him. Gritting his teeth he dragged himself towards them, first to Chala, to that loneliness, unable to face yet the deeper emptiness of the other.

He studied her face, the shocked grimace of pain it still held. He reached out, touched her cheek. She gasped, drew in a short breath, and then another. He stared, disbelieving what he saw. It was impossible . . . but she lived. She still lived.

In the midst of that revelation came a faint pulse from the bonding link, a feeble pulse—but a pulse! He froze, breath held.

Tjan . . . ? Tjan?

No response.

For a long moment the link was empty, and then it came again, so faint he almost missed it. So, he hadn't imagined it. Tjan's spirit did linger. He had not yet crossed the veil of the dead.

In a moment he was at his bond's side. Carefully, rolling the scout to his back, Kael cradled his head and shoulders in his arms. Drawing a deep breath, forcing himself to concentrate, to ignore the terrible pain it caused, he formed a searching probe.

By will alone he pushed that probe through the seared bonding channel and on through the void beyond, the pain intensifying, until his body was drenched in sweat. On he searched, following the fading, drumming pulse of Tjan's spirit, until he found him.

The scout was bound in agony, an agony so exqui-

site it was slowly draining that fragile wisp of life that yet held him. Kael touched him, assured him that Chala lived, that Kael too lived, that it was over, that Rath was dead. Gently, he drew him back, lingering a moment, letting the scout draw from his presence.

A sudden wind blew dust around the heavy door and then died.

Laedry? Laedry!

Coming in. Rath?

Dead. The flair of pain caused by the simple exchange almost drove Kael from consciousness.

The door flew open as the shuttle pilot and his three-man squad burst into the chapel. Nodding one of them toward Rath, the other two to check Tjan and his sister, Laedry knelt at his friend's side.

"Damn, Kael, I'm sorry. I came in as fast as I could."

"I know. It's . . . all right . . . I had . . . good second . . . here, too . . . Better . . . get us back . . . fast, Laedry . . . Rath's . . . about . . . finished us."

One of the crewmen stood up. He nodded at Kael, gave him a grim smile. "They're both alive, Laedry, one barely. We load 'um?"

"Who—"

"Tjan . . . sister . . ." Kael blinked rapidly and forced in a deep breath. "Take 'um . . . Laedry. They'll . . . die here."

The pain was making everything a blur. He could feel the dark of unconsciousness closing about him.

Laedry shook his head. "No time for command decisions, get them on board. Stretchers . . . Move 'em out!" Laedry's voice was tight and commanding.

"Thanks . . ."

Kael closed his eyes, drew in a long breath. A pain-quieting numbness accompanied the expanding

dark, and Kael was sinking, and there was little he could do about it. There was just nothing more to fight it back with.

"Let it go, man," Laedry said. "It's over. Ease off."

Relaxing at last, Kael welcomed the darkness.

CHAPTER EPILOGUE

Kael halted his ambulator at the entrance of the small infirmary room. A tall blond stood near the bed with her back to him, reading a wall monitor.

"All right if I come in?" he asked.

The girl glanced over her shoulder and smiled. "Sure, Kael. He's coming around, should be opening his eyes anytime now."

"Thanks for paging me, Daeenna."

He guided the floating chair to the bed and cut its power. The med-tech returned to the screen, and Kael settled back to wait. He watched the subtle play of muscles in Tjan's face, an aged face, thin and drawn, still holding that gray pallor of the acutely ill. But today at least a spot of color showed in his cheeks.

"Looks better, doesn't he," the girl murmured, coming around the end of the bed to join Kael. She shook her head. "He is an amazing one, your Tjan. Not many initiates get such a burn and live to tell about it."

Kael nodded at the girl and smiled. "He is not your ordinary initiate."

"So I hear." She grinned back. "Well, I'll be next door. Call if you need anything."

"Thanks. I'll look in on Lani and Chala later."

Kael watched her leave, and then turned back to the scout. With the agony gone, Tjan's face seemed almost serene. If he could just preserve that serenity, he thought, rubbing a knuckle nervously along his lower lip. If only there were an easy way to tell him. After so much pain and shock, who could know what another blow would do?

Tjan's eyebrows lifted, smoothed out, and then wrinkled over a grimace. He raised his hand to his forehead as his eyelids blinked open.

Laying his apprehension aside, Kael leaned forward. "Hi, brother," he whispered, drawing the scout's gaze.

Tjan's brows knit in a questioning frown, and then he brightened. "Kael . . . You're all right?" He tried to lift himself, but the Vondorian held him back.

"I'm fine. Hardly a battle scar."

Tjan grunted and searched the Vondorian's face, not at all convinced.

"Don't like your combat much," he murmured finally. "Choose a sword any day."

Kael smiled and squeezed his wrist. The scout's eyes closed a moment. When he opened them again, he looked around the room, his gaze taking it all in with wonder. The illuminated, lifelike panorama displayed on the hemispheric walls gave the very real impression that this was a rooftop in the center of a great city. Blue cylindrical towers, marble-smooth, sparkled in the light of two suns—a ball of gold and a pale blue companion.

"Guarnt?"

Kael nodded.

"I'm on the *Seeker*, aren't I?" Tjan murmured in awe. His lips suddenly tightened, as he made a quick re-survey of the room.

"Chala?"

"She's here, too."

"Is she—"

"She's going to be fine, thanks to you interrupting Rath's attack. They're keeping her sedated—better for healing. But everything is going well. She's next door with Lani."

"Lani still out of it?"

"Lorjahl thinks you and Chala may be just what she needs to bring her around. There's little for her to relate to here on the ship. A few more days—"

"Days . . . ? How long have we been here?"

"Eleven, Orran time."

"That long?" Tjan stared in disbelief. "We've held you, your whole ship, all that time?"

Kael sobered, and for a moment didn't answer. "You didn't hold us," he said finally. "The ship was ordered back. We cleared it with your people and brought you with us—you and Chala and Lani. You would have died if we'd left you . . ." He hesitated, feeling the disruption in Tjan's mind.

"But . . . we will be coming back?" the scout murmured.

Kael slowly shook his head. "It's not likely."

"Not ever?" What color there had been in his drawn face was now gone. "What . . . what will happen to us?"

Kael could read the deeper questions behind the spoken one, the fear and the concern of one who had somehow lost control. How would he and his sisters make it out there in space? How could they function in Kael's world? How could he care for himself, let alone two sisters, one of them who could be sick for a long time . . . And Laniya . . . what of all they had planned?

"Hey, none of that now. You quit your worrying," Kael said gently. "You're all coming home with me. We're brothers, remember? Legally. You and Chala and Lani are now officially wards of my father. When we get back, Lani is going to get the best treatment in the galaxy. And you? Your future is wide open, Tjan, anything you want it to be. You have skills that are sought and paid for by ours and a hundred other worlds. And you didn't come without position. Your Elders made your commission permanent, said you were to be their legate . . ." Kael paused, smiled thoughtfully. "Tzarno saw to that."

"Anyway, that can come later. Right now we're going home. It's your home, too. We're family now, and you have a place with us as long as you choose to live on Vondore."

Tjan's face was still ashen, and there was a numbness in his mind that worried Kael. He wondered if the scout had heard anything he said. Eyeing his friend with growing concern, Kael tried again.

"I'm sorry, Tjan. I know what it must mean to you—Laniya, your people, your way of life . . . But we couldn't leave you there to die. And Chala and Lani would have had no chance, either."

Tjan stared past him at nothing—a blank, lost look in his eyes. Kael could feel the scout's loneliness, the fear that gripped him. He hesitated, not knowing what else to do or say.

"Will *you* be there, Kael?" The words came in a whisper with a loneliness so familiar that the Vondorian shivered. He shook his head as if chastising a child.

"Do you have to ask? We're on this run together. Bonded—remember? You'll have me around for a long time, like it or not. That's what it's all about. Of

course I'll be there, me and a lot of others. You are family now. We're going home, Tjan. You, me, Chala, Lani, Father—all of us, together."

His grip tightened on the scout's arm as he sought the means to reassure him. Tjan looked around the room again, taking in the strangeness of the alien environment.

"Home?" Doubt still accompanied the word.

"All *that* is display, Tjan. I said home. You know—that place where you're loved and . . . needed."

Tjan's gaze dropped. For a long moment he was silent, and then he sighed. "I'm an idiot at times, you know that? Hell, Kael, what's this after what you and I have been through? We're alive—what else is important?" Weariness alone remained in his face as he looked once more at the projected city.

"Where is it?"

"What?"

"Our home? Can we see it from here?"

"No . . ." Kael bit his bottom lip and tried to stop trembling. "The towers are in the way. It's back up here in these hills fifteen, sixteen kilometers. I have a projection clip in my cabin—pictures of everything. Wait until you see the garden and the waterfalls. It's a beautiful place, Tjan. You'll like it there. All of you."

The scout looked back at Kael, a trace of color once more showing in his face. "Trees?" he asked.

"Place borders on a forest."

"A waterfall, too?"

Kael nodded again, blinking rapidly. "And a sister who's not shy at all, and Kaedron's an impossible twelve-year-old who is going to show you every bug on the hill before you get in the door." He paused, pressed a knuckle against his lips as though trying to contain the flow of emotion. In a moment he went on.

"Soon as you're feeling better, Father wants to

come down. He's been looking in and is eager to meet you. And when you're up to one of these runabouts we'll go see Chala and Lani. In a few days I'll show you the ship's learning center. You'll be speaking Vondorian in no time."

"Whoa! One thing at a time. You're making me tired already. Besides, there are more important things to consider right now."

"Oh, like what?"

"Food. Like what do you folks eat up here? I'm starved." He grinned. "Join me?"

"Any day," Kael said, smiling back. "Any day."

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ISBN 0-812-55707-7

A Tom Doherty
Associates, Inc. Book