

The background of the book cover is a photograph of ancient stone ruins. In the foreground, there is a low wall made of large, grey, rectangular stone blocks. In the middle ground, a taller, more complex structure made of similar stone blocks rises, featuring several small, rectangular openings. The ruins are set against a bright blue sky filled with large, white, fluffy clouds. In the far distance, a valley with green fields and a small town can be seen. The overall scene is bright and clear, suggesting a sunny day.

CLEO DARE

FAULTLESS

BOOK TWO IN THE MINORITY FLEET ADVENTURE SERIES

Faultless

by

Cleo Dare

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Editor's Preface

When I met Ruth Brown Jimenez in 2006, I didn't realize at first that she wrote under the pen name Cleo Dare. I soon learned that she'd published two romances, a space opera type of novel, and a number of stories. She and I hit it off immediately, and a friendship grew that included her partner, Chris Jimenez.

I got a chance to work with her on *Hanging Offense*, and she was one of the easiest people to edit—very inquisitive, ready to try different approaches, and not at all cranky about suggested changes. I was happy to hear she had a sequel underway for the scifi novel, but before she could put all the finishing touches on it, she fell ill with cancer.

Ruth and I conferred about *Faultless* right up until three days before her death. In my last conversation with her, she said, "Do what you think is right for the book, Lori. I trust you. Rewrite it if you think it needs it. I'm willing to share co-author status." I didn't need to rewrite anything. Ruth's vision stood on its own. The line editor and I tidied things up and smoothed over any awkward sections, and the story is finally ready for readers.

Ruth and I discussed a lot of her ideas over the years. I could see she was on the cusp of a breakthrough into new plots, new characters, and bigger, broader themes. Unfortunately, cancer cut short a promising writing career. I'm saddened that we'll never know what

other novels and stories this talented woman had to share. In my very last conversation with her, she emphasized how important it is to write. "Write now. Get it out there," she said. "Don't waste any time because you never know how long you've got."

I like to think that Ruth is now the Muse of lesbian writers. After all, her pen name, Cleo, is the same name as "Clio," one of the Nine Muses who introduced the Phoenician alphabet to the Greeks. When you need inspiration and hope, think of Cleo Dare—or of Ruth, the Woman Who Dared to write about her own heart's truth.

Lori L. Lake July 2012

Dedication

Faultless is the second book in the Minority Fleet series and sadly it will be the last as it is being published posthumously. Cleo Dare lost her battle with cancer in 2010 after giving us five books. I met Cleo (aka Ruth) in college more than thirty years ago and she quickly became my best friend and confidante. During our years together she had many jobs, but her first love was always writing. She often said that she wanted to tell stories that would bring joy to her readers, to teach them something new or maybe just encourage them to think.

I believe she accomplished all three goals with *Faultless*.

May, 2012 Chris Jimenez

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Chapter One

DOCTOR SYLVESTRE JENKS, short of breath from climbing in the thin dry air, plopped down on a remnant of crumbling adobe wall and wiped his brow with his sleeve. The mingling of sweat and dust streaked the shimmery fabric of his blue and white bodysuit.

"Gods, it's hot."

As far as his eyes could see, waves of heat rose from the desert basin far below and shimmered in the halcyon afternoon air. Otung's sun, Centauri B, but known on the planet by its native name Kerei, had bleached the midday sky to a pale eggshell blue. Feathery wisps of cloud hugged a broken column of red-trimmed buttes to the south but didn't venture into the empty vault of the sky.

"But what a view." Captain Danielle Artemis Forrest came up behind her chief medical officer and stared off, entranced, into the distance. "We're so high above the valley floor, Sly, it looks like we're suspended at the top of the troposphere instead of standing on the ground."

"The air is so thin," Sly said, "we're probably even higher than that, like in the stratosphere."

"Hardly, Doctor," Ma'at, the First Officer, who had just arrived, disagreed, "we would need environmental suits to breathe in the stratosphere." The Nhavan First Officer was indispensable, but at times Dani Forrest knew how uncomfortable her crew could be with Ma'at's intersexed status. Neither male nor female—but both—Ma'at was an enigma to many.

Dani Forrest ignored her officers and let her eyes travel down the sloping shelf of sparkling white gypsum sand they had just climbed to reach Kawanma ruin. At the lowest point of the valley, the Otung River flowed sluggishly south, weighted red with iron-rich silt.

In all the expanse, the only relief from earth tones and heat-washed blues was an incongruously green strip of trees that made up the gardens of the hot springs resort settlement of Hacienda Otung. It lay along the river, hemmed in on its eastern perimeter by the jumbled and sharp black teeth of an ancient lava flow.

"Why didn't we bring water?" Sly asked.

"You insisted we wouldn't need it," Dani answered. Sly wiped more sweat from his smooth black forehead before it dampened his curly dark brows. He was taller than the chunky, well-muscled Dani but not as tall as the angular Ma'at.

Knowing it would provoke Sly, Ma'at said, "I, of course, do not need it."

Sly jumped up. Heat brought out the worst in him. "Your Nhavan genes may make you immune to the desert heat, but they don't give you the right to look down on me!"

"I was merely stating a fact, Doctor," Ma'at said, her expression unreadable beneath her long unbraided page-boy cap of raven dark hair.

Despite the imperturbability of her face, Dani detected a hint of laughter in Ma'at's silver-blue eyes.

Face sweating, Sly said, "Ma'at, you do this just to get my goat!"

"Friends," Dani said, "I remind you that we're on vacation, not duty, and therefore—"

"And therefore," Sly shot back, "I don't have to listen to anyone. Least of all you, Dani." Sly lifted his finely-chiseled chin in the perfect imitation of a drag queen's pout and stamped away.

Dani shrugged her broad shoulders, the hard-won muscles rippling beneath her gold and green bodysuit. Sly's and Ma'at's tiffs were as old as the Ozkna mountains that floated serenely amethyst on the southwestern horizon, and just as unchangeable.

Mountains eroded away but the vast time it required made ordinary mortals view them as immutable. They were symbols of the unchanging, just as the churning muddy river far below was a symbol of the ever-changing.

Dani was not given to philosophical musings but Otung's empty stillness had put her in a thoughtful mood. It had been an odd choice of vacation spot, to be sure, a bit of a backwater. Ma'at had first seen the resort's listing and electronically tagged it, destining it for Dani's computer terminal. S/he had appended a polite question to the data: "Too quiet?"

Dani had thought it about right. Ma'at was the desert rat, not she, but Otung's sheer lack of sophistication as a tourist locale had struck a chord in her. How the ever-perceptive Ma'at knew she needed to break away to a place without the usual bright lights and big city, Dani couldn't fathom.

What had amazed her even more was that *Explora Command* had not only approved but strongly encouraged her leave. True, her starship, the *U.C.S.S. Boediceas*, was in spacedock for repairs but even so, she was sure they would turn down the request of a Minority Fleet commander like herself with the same lack of empathy with which they regularly assigned her and her crew to some of the least appetizing jobs in the quadrant.

In fact, after she received the last-minute command to park her ship for repairs at Spaceportal Two, she was certain her crew would be ordered to help the maintenance crew with every odd job that had been accumulating for the past decade. Instead, they'd been granted two weeks of paid vacation as long as they took it on any world but Spaceportal Two.

The unusually thoughtful treatment had taken her aback. Dani had grown accustomed, through the years, of living with the annoyances, both major and minor, created by the space military's institutionalization of her and her people's second-class status. Why being homosexual, bisexual, transgendered or intersexed should matter at all to the military and the public that paid for its services, she would never grasp. Sexual identity and orientation had proved, time and time again, to have no affect whatsoever on job performance.

Dani shook off what were pointless and, in any case, old and irresolvable concerns, and turned to newer and far more disturbing ones. She had tried to deny it but she had been deeply shaken by the recent suicide death of her friend and one-time lover Sherri Wilmstead, Commander of the *U.C.S.S. Sagittarius*, another Minority Fleet starship. Sherri had been a big woman, full of laughter and fun and, in bed, an easy giver and relaxed receiver of the womanly rites of love.

Personal grief aside, it was hard for Dani not to torment herself with doubts about how she would react as a commander if she sent her entire crew to their deaths, as Sherri had, by making a single command error. Clearly, for the fun-loving Sherri, it had been too much guilt to bear.

"Captain?" Ma'at stood at her elbow, the faint redolence of the wo/man's sweat tingeing the dry hot air. "Should we head back down?"

"Probably. Although I could stand here forever."

Ma'at raised a thin black eyebrow, inviting Dani to speak her mind. Dani trusted Ma'at completely. They had a close easy companionship, an emotional bonding between like minds and souls. That didn't mean Dani didn't find Ma'at attractive in an androgynous kind of way, with hir small high breasts and sleek narrow hips and didn't sometimes dream about hir in a sexual context. Nhavans themselves were pretty free and easy about sexual relations and she doubted her First Officer would blanch at an offer from her. But as Ma'at's commander, she could hardly pursue an amorous relationship with the wo/man.

She knew that since Nhavans possessed the genitalia of both sexes, they could enjoy sex with any gender. Homosexual and heterosexual relations, as mental constructs, didn't exist for them. Their most significant social concern related to sex was whether the bonding was a negotiated one for the purpose of reproduction or not and, if so, which partner of the bonding would sire and which would carry the child.

She knew that Ma'at herself had a full sibling (although hir parents' roles were reversed for that child from hir own conception) and six half siblings from different matings of both hir parents. No one on Nhavan thought this was peculiar. It was, in fact, the cultural norm.

Unfortunately, the United Coalition of Star Systems didn't agree. By law, Nhavans—who were physically and intellectually superior to humans—were limited to serving in the UCSS's Minority Fleet because they didn't fit into *Explora Command's* narrowly-defined heterosexist model of approved sexual modalities. It made no sense to Dani who thought it was an extraordinary waste of talent. Still, Dani's annoyance about the larger inequity didn't mean she didn't thank the Goddess daily for Ma'at's membership in her crew and the wo/man's enduring personal friendship.

"Your thoughts, Captain?"

"All right, Ma'at." Dani looked off into the blue-white distance. "Why does this view engender thoughts of timelessness? I thought only space could have such an effect. And yet, it's not quite like space either."

"Like space, this too has a vastness, Captain."

"So you think that's it? The mere perception of distance by the humanoid eye?"

"Perhaps." Ma'at clasped hir hands behind hir back, the billowing silver sleeves of hir Nhavan uniform tunic settling into semi-transparent folds against hir alabaster breasts. S/he wore calf-high black boots, and beneath her tunic, skintight black leggings that outlined a compact bundle of male genitalia at hir crotch. A wide lavender sash circled hir waist.

Ma'at said, "The difference may be accounted for by the fact that the perception of distance here is linked to identifiable land forms, such as the mountains and the river."

"Why should that matter?"

"It creates a set of visual comparisons that we do not make in space, which we tend psychologically to perceive as being without distance. Although we may understand the 'size' of space as a mathematical construct, it has no everyday comprehensibility to it."

Dani said, "Maybe it's why some people go space mad."

"Perhaps. Most of us were born and reared on planets. For many species, a periodic return to one's roots is revitalizing."

"Is that why we're here, Ma'at? To get you back to your desert roots? You've never invited me to vacation with you before, let alone drag along the irrepressible Dr. Jenks."

Ma'at turned to answer, hir expression neutral, but not before Dani caught the tensing of the Nhavan's shoulders that meant Dani had asked more than a simple question.

"Is that so suspicious, Dani? That I invite my friends to vacation with me?"

"You bet it is," Dani retorted. "Especially when, on top of it, you start lying."

"Nhavans never lie, Captain." Ma'at turned away, hir silver-blue eyes unreadable.

"You just did, Ma'at."

Dani waited but Ma'at offered no response to her observation. Eventually, Dani shrugged in resignation. She knew from long experience that there was little point in arguing with a Nhavan she'd just accused of violating one of the touchstones of Nhavan pride. As a species, Nhavans were much more addicted to honor and honesty than humans. Dani started alone down the path that would take her back to the garden and her accommodations at the resort.

Ma'at remained in place, gazing thoughtfully at the distant mountains. Then s/he drew hir eyes northward along the lava-ridged red mesas that rose on the western side of the river. Atop them, a string of cinder cones, volcanic plugs, and burned-out calderas made an already barren landscape appear even more stark.

The valley at hir feet was a rift valley, the pool of hot magma beneath its crust spreading with geologic slowness and splitting away, millimeter by millimeter, the western plateau from the high ridge on which s/he was standing.

One large caldera reflected Ketoi's bright rays back into his eyes. It was an anomaly in the desert, a freshwater lake filling the hollow where a volcano had blasted itself to bits in the distant past.

Ma'at turned to follow his captain back to the resort. It wasn't possible for a Nhavan to lie, s/he asserted to herself as s/he walked along. But under what circumstances did omission of pertinent data constitute a lie?

THOUGH NOT CROWDED, the grounds of Hacienda Otung were occupied by clusters of humanoids engaged in friendly chatter, some sitting on the low stucco walls that divided the Mediterranean-style gardens, some talking near the central shaded fountain. Some, Sly suspected, were more intimately coupled in the farther reaches of the place.

Sly sat alone at a patio table beneath a desert olive tree sipping the sweetened mint tea served at this hour of the day. Reminiscent of a mint julep, it had the same cooling, though not sedating, effect.

Before coming down from his room to enjoy the gardens and the tea, he had showered and changed into a casual but crisp pair of gold-toned shorts and matching muscle shirt that accented the dark chocolate of his skin. They were firmly on vacation now, even though it was only the first day, and he was glad to get out of the sweat-stained bodysuit that identified him as a military physician.

Sly was not vain but he knew he was sufficiently good-looking, even if middle-aged, to pick up just about any man he wanted. Particularly on vacation. The only thing that worried him was that Otung was too much of a backwater to find many men of his persuasion. Homosexuality was barely more tolerated in civilian circles than it was in military ones.

If he'd had his druthers, he would have grabbed a shuttle to one of the hot spots on Berskee where the men were accommodatingly friendly and the relationships un-entangling, but there had been an unbending insistence on Ma'at's part that Sly join his and the captain on this trip to Otung. Sly hadn't even been able to find Otung on the star map when he'd looked it up in his gay guide and, nagged by Ma'at, he'd barely been given time to pack for the trip.

The only reason the infuriating Nhavan had been successful in getting him to Otung at all was that s/he had lured him with Sly's other avocation: fly-fishing. Like his hoped-for quarry, Sly had taken the bait, hook, line and sinker. The word "fishing" had conjured up pictures of ambling along babbling brooks set deep in green flowering glades, fishing pole in hand, the world of *Explora Command* medicine a million light years away.

Instead, he had arrived to discover the Otung River was little more than a slow-chugging, shadeless, silted, irrigation canal. "There's no fish in that!" he had exploded at Ma'at. "That's worse than the polluted Mississippi back on Terra!"

"It's a river," Ma'at had replied, unperturbed. "I have been assured there are fish in it. Therefore, fishing can be engaged in."

"That's not fishing, Ma'at!"

"Doctor, as I said—"

"Ma'at, you wouldn't know a fish if it bit you on the ass!"

"I am perfectly capable of identifying marine creatures, Doctor," Ma'at responded, miffed. But—and Sly assumed it had been to mollify him—s/he had gone on to promise, "I will see if a fishing trip into the mountains can be arranged for you."

That had ended the discussion but not Sly's annoyance. Now he had no idea why he was on Otung except that he hadn't planned fast enough to be anywhere else.

At least now he was out of the dry heat of the desert, languishing in the shade, and enjoying the garden's well-designed scenery. Old and towering cottonwood trees formed the backbone of the garden's structure and offered the lion's share of the cooling shade. Beneath their protective, but open canopies, smatterings of glossy-leaved orange trees and sage-colored olives perfumed the air.

Wild grasses carpeted the ground where brick patios ended and flowering arid-loving shrubs crowded flowerbeds and pots. Fountains and pools splashed with water, cooling and moisturizing the scented air.

Native birds, not unlike Terra's sparrows and finches and jays, flitted among the olives, twittering as they went about their business. The pleasing oasis effect was made all the sweeter by contrast with the white heat of the desert outside.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sly saw a resort waiter point at him from the dappled shade of a cottonwood tree. He had noticed the good-looking waiter earlier but hadn't been able to catch the man's eye. A moment later, a long-legged woman, buxom and blonde, emerged from the shadows and strolled toward Sly's table. She was dressed in a crisp white polo shirt and a hip-length pleated tennis skirt. A tennis visor and dark glasses protected her face from the sun.

"Hi," she greeted him pleasantly, coming into the circle of shade over Sly's table and pulling off her glasses. Her eyes were a smiling cornflower blue. Just what he would have expected from someone so fair in coloring.

"May I sit down?"

Sly jumped to his feet. "Pardon my manners. Of course." He pulled one of the molded plastic patio chairs away from the table and offered her its seat. "Please."

Sly admired her backside as she settled into the chair. He might be gay but he was perfectly capable of appreciating good design in either sex. "May I get the waiter for you?"

"Oh, no," she said, waving his offer away, "he said he'd stop by in a minute. Why don't you sit down?"

"I'd be happy to," said a voice from across the table. Dani Forrest pulled out a chair and, without a glance at Sly, but an engaging grin for the blonde, sat. She had changed out of her uniform into a black close-fitting sleeveless top that showed off muscled arms and shoulders and also managed to round and lift her firm breasts. Her black slacks defined her strong hips and legs.

Sly resumed his seat. This was going to be interesting, he thought. Dani was clearly going to try to seduce this woman with her legendary starship captain's charm. She would probably succeed too, unless the woman was a dyed-in-the-wool heterosexual and oblivious to Dani's advances.

"I'm Dani Forrest," Dani said, her smile at full wattage, "and this is Sly Jenks."

"Sly?" the woman asked, giving him a look.

"It's a nickname, which hints at his rather nefarious character," Dani said.

"Dr. Sylvestre Jenks." Sly offered his hand. The as-yet-unintroduced woman smiled and shook it. Her grasp was firm and her hand was pleasantly warm.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Linda Davis. Lindie to my friends."

"What brings you to this out-of-the-way place, Lindie?" Dani asked.

Lindie smiled coyly. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Yes," Sly answered truthfully, "I would. I saw you ask the waiter to direct you over here."

"I asked him if there were any Terrans here. He's from Alpha Centauri himself but he thought you were probably a Terran. Was he right?"

"Oklahoma born and bred," Sly said.

"And you?" She turned to Dani, the coy smile still playing on her lips.

"Iowa. You?"

"Texas."

"Ah," Dani teased, "cowgirl."

"Farm girl," Lindie countered.

"Do you still live there?" Sly interrupted, mostly to stop them. The woman probably was gay. If she wasn't, she was certainly putting on one hell of a show of flirting with Dani.

"No. I'm a professor at Georgetown on Terra."

"Professor?" Dani's voice notched up in surprise.

Lindie laughed and it was a hearty sound that made Sly think of the open, rolling expanses of Texas.

"What were you thinking, Dani," Lindie teased, "call girl?"

Dani flushed. "I'm sorry."

Sly hid a grin. His captain was flubbing a perfectly easy pick-up. But he could understand how an hourglass-shaped body like Lindie's could send thrills of anticipation through most men and women. Hell, he was gay and she was even managing to tantalize him.

"Don't feel bad," Lindie said. "It happens to me all the time. I'm so used to it, it's funny. Although I don't usually get it from women."

"Sorry," Dani repeated, flushing again.

"Sorry I teased you. C'mon," Lindie said, patting Dani's shoulder, "let's start over."

The waiter appeared, much to Dani's obvious relief. Lindie ordered mint tea, and Dani followed suit, although he wondered if she would have preferred something a bit stronger. Sly requested a refill for his half-finished glass.

The waiter brought not only their tea but a plate stacked with triangles of very proper English cucumber sandwiches. Sly watched with amusement as Dani dug in. Lindie matched her sandwich for sandwich.

Sly nibbled, leaning thoughtfully back in his chair. If he knew his captain, she would stalwartly put her *faux pas* behind her. One of the character traits that made Dani a great leader was her gift for not letting the errors of the past interfere with the possibilities offered by the present.

This thought made him wonder if Dani was over the death of her lover and friend Commodore Wilmstead. He himself had found it impossible not to sympathize with

Wilmstead, and he was aware of the degree to which Dani not only cared for, but identified with, the other ship's captain. They represented, after all, two of only a handful of female starship captains in all of Minority Fleet. And now one of them was gone.

Could the flimsy excuse of superficial repairs to *Boediceas* have been a way for the top brass to unobtrusively order a diversion for Dani Forrest? On the other hand, there was no reason to suppose the enforced vacation was anything other than a coincidence. If anyone knew the truth, it was Ma'at, and Ma'at wasn't telling.

Sly reached for a sandwich and settled back to await developments.

WARREN ANTHONY TYSON rocked on his heels in the middle of the stuffy cook's lounge, an angry flush rising up his neck. His denim shirt, wet with the day's sweat, felt heavy on his shoulders. He wanted to rip at the snaps and throw it open. Only propriety restrained him.

"I'm sorry, Warren," April was saying. She sat at a tiny table in the lounge, her chef's hat flopping in emphasis. She yanked it off her curly mop of soft brunette hair and patted at her damp brow with its brim. "I'll barely make enough here this summer to pay for my own passage home in the fall."

"Cripes! I thought you wanted to get married!"

"Well, yeah, sure. Of course, I do. But not this year." She frowned in perplexity at the man who, at the beginning of the summer, had been so much fun to be with. One of the sons of a Settlement rancher, Warren had been born on Otung. There weren't many interesting sites in the area but what there were, Warren knew intimately. He had sneaked away from duty to take her to visit all of them on her days off.

He was good-looking, with sharp facial features and jet black hair and eyebrows. Resourceful and vigorous, his small frame and wiry body masked his true strength. She had found it easy, until recently, to overlook his unpredictable outbursts of violent temper. Now she questioned whether his proposal of marriage even had anything to do with her. Was it just a desperate attempt on his part to get off Otung?

"Not this year," Warren repeated, flipping around a broken chair and straddling it with a ferocity that jolted April. He drummed his fingers on the cracked wood of the table and glowered at her, his ice-blue eyes glittering. April felt her mouth go dry. The lounge door opened a crack and a small dark face peered in.

"Miss April, we got to—"

Warren whirled. "Go away!" The head vanished without another peep, and the door slammed.

"Warren!"

"Stop coddling him, April! He should be working under me."

"You know Aknee's too small for field work!"

Warren curled his hands into fists. A miasma of danger moved with him as he slid his hands across the table. April quivered.

"I should know, shouldn't I? I'm not exactly muscle-bound myself, but it hasn't made a lick of difference to the conditions of my enslavement!"

"Warren, don't start!" April felt a plunging sensation in her stomach. She was willing to grant the terms of Warren's "enslavement," as he called it, might be unfair but it was how his eyes snapped with fury and the muscles of his arms corded when he talked about it that scared her. She leaped up and twisted her chef's hat back into place on her head. "My break's over, Warren. I have to go and finish the setups for those dinners."

"Sure. See ya." Despite the casualness of his choice of phrase, Warren's voice was tight. April swallowed nervously and rushed past him. She opened the door with a profound sense of relief. God, she thought, the others were right. He was becoming too frightening to be around.

WITH APRIL OUT of the room, Warren felt free to yank his shirt tail from his jeans and rip open the snaps. The satisfying popping sound and cool air rushing against his chest calmed him a little. I'm getting too close to the edge, he thought.

It was dangerous to throw himself a lifeline like April. Dangerous because if she didn't come through, his fury might take a course he couldn't control. Warren took a deep breath and willed his fists to unclench.

He knew he was still sane because he didn't want April to become an unintended victim of an arrangement she had had no part in; an arrangement years old; an arrangement that was eating away at his character and his mental stability.

But who bore the heavier responsibility for his slide toward self-destruction? His father Zane, or Olmstead Neville, the owner of the resort? Or was it his older brother Jake?

SLY'S EXPECTATION OF further developments between Lindie and Dani came, not in the form of verbal parrying between them, but in the appearance of Ma'at, who approached their table, a glass of mint tea already in hand. The Nhavan looked smashing in hir evening uniform dress of a tunic of turquoise, maroon leggings, and a silver sash.

"Dr. Davis," Ma'at bowed hir head politely in the direction of the visitor, "it is indeed a pleasure."

"Dr. Davis!" Sly fumed at Ma'at. "How is it that you know her, Ma'at?"

"Dr. Davis is a widely-esteemed psychotherapist and comparative mythologist, Doctor. She is best known for instituting the practice of Interactive Questing at several major Terran universities." Ma'at's supercilious tone implied it was a failing on Sly's part that he had not recognized Dr. Davis on sight.

"Interactive Questing?" Dani interrupted to forestall an outburst on Sly's part in response to Ma'at's needling.

Lindie lifted her hands in modest refutation. "It's the revival of a very old idea in human myth-making. Not original at all."

"On the contrary," Ma'at rebutted, pulling out a chair and sitting down. "Dr. Davis requires her graduate students to undertake a Vision Quest to receive their degree. It is most original when applied to an academic setting."

"What do your students have to do?" Dani asked.

"Essentially," she said, "they have to grasp the principles of the hero's journey and apply it to their own lives. The Quest doesn't imply they have to forage in the woods and talk to animals, unless, of course, that happens to be their path."

"The hero's journey?" Sly's interest was piqued. "You mean like Jason and the Argonauts? Those kinds of stories?"

"Yes," Lindie said, "but every culture has hero and heroine stories. Hero mythology is rooted in the archetypes of the human psyche. Every person is the hero of his or her own journey."

Ma'at said, "An interesting way to view the vicissitudes of life."

"Seems vague to me," Sly said.

Lindie smiled. "Not really, Sly. There are identified stages in the hero's journey. Would you all like for me to outline them?"

"Sure." He shrugged. "We have nothing but time."

"Very well. The hero or heroine, whether through intent or accident, departs from the everyday cycle of life. This doesn't have to be a physical departure. It can be a mental or spiritual or creative departure. Joseph Campbell, the eminent Terran mythologist of the Twentieth Century, termed it Separation or the Call to Adventure."

"Girl," Dani quipped, "we get that call all the time."

Everyone laughed except Ma'at, though a faint smile edged the Nhavan's lips. "Tell us more, Dr. Davis."

"The hero, once called, promptly encounters difficulties. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, these elements are denied or repressed memories coming up from the individual's unconscious mind. In stories, these are often portrayed as monsters who will not let the hero go forward or as trials the hero must endure."

Sly asked, "You mean like the labors of Hercules?"

"That's one example, yes. Once the hero prevails over his unique difficulties, he is often granted a guide who provides advice or magic implements that allow him to successfully proceed through the unknown territory he now inhabits."

Ma'at said, "Similar, I would extrapolate, to Virgil guiding Dante through the Inferno."

"Or how about Don Quixote falling for Dulcinea?" Dani asked.

"Ma'at is correct," Lindie said, "but I would argue that Don Quixote encountering Dulcinea is a different aspect of the hero's journey, something Campbell called Meeting with the Goddess."

"Oooh," Dani teased, "that sounds like the best part of this."

Lindie ignored her and went on. "For the cycle to be complete, the hero then returns to the ordinary world to share the gift he or she has earned through his or her perseverance."

"What gift?" Sly asked, puzzled.

The same thought had occurred to Dani. She wasn't sure what "gift" of knowledge she had garnered from Sherri Wilmstead's death, and suddenly, she wanted the subject changed but before she could say a word, Lindie went on.

"Spiritual heroes, such as Christ and Buddha, return to transmit the wisdom or insight they have attained. Cultural heroes return with something of importance to their society. Prometheus and Coyote, for instance, are credited with introducing their societies to the dangerous but useful element of fire."

"But," Dani said, "you said everyone was a hero."

"Yes. We ordinary folks return from difficult periods in our life with a useful piece of inner knowledge or a new ability. Because we ourselves have changed, we change those around us. I'm sure each of you can think of numerous examples." She searched the pensive faces of her audience, then met Dani's eyes.

"No doubt we can," Dani said, forestalling comments from Ma'at and Sly, "but we don't want to bore you. Nor do we want you, in indulging us, to waste your vacation. Your time is valuable, and I'm sure you have better things to do." She didn't add that she hoped that time might include something more than talk with Lindie. Such as a dip in one of the resort's secluded mineral pools.

Lindie took a sip of her tea. "Oh, it's no bother. I enjoy challenging my students." She winked at Dani. "You know why I'm here."

Dani was caught off guard. Did she mean to imply Dani was a student? She felt irritated. Why would Dani know Dr. Davis' purpose on Otung? She was sure she'd never met her before. Yet something about the shape of her hands triggered a faint memory. Those same fingers, but smaller, and gripped around something hidden in the woman's palm.

"Sure," Dani said with a pretended carefree air that she hoped covered her annoyance and her bafflement, "you're on Otung to play tennis." She once again eyed Lindie's sexy tennis outfit.

"That too," Lindie admitted, chuckling, "and while I'm here, I'm going to take advantage of the opportunity to talk with some of the myth-holders of the Yutunda people. The literature on them is scanty."

"The Yutunda?" Sly lifted his glass to his lips and drained it.

Even though Kawanma ruin wasn't visible over the trees of the garden, Lindie gestured in the direction of the soaring half-crumbled walls that Dani, Ma'at, and Sly had visited earlier in the day.

"The people of the villages of Topotuk and Makapi on the west side of the river are descendants of the Yutunda people who built Kawanma. It's an unexcavated site. But I'm more interested in cultural artifacts than physical ones."

"Sounds like a busman's holiday," Dani said, now intent on ferreting out Lindie's true purpose.

"Oh, it is," she said, without taking offense. "They don't pay me for anything else."

Who? Dani wondered, befuddled again. Who was paying her? And for what? Studying the Yutunda? Explaining hero mythology?

In response to a question from Sly, Lindie expounded on the few known cultural practices of the Yutunda. She had an unrivaled talent for oration, but Dani found herself tuning out. One discourse per day on vacation was enough for her.

As she drifted away mentally, she noticed the light of the day was going. The air had cooled and the light had softened to a honey-gold. There was an expectant hush among the birds. She rose and slipped away.

MA'AT, TOO, WAS listening to Lindie and Sly with only half an ear. Hir eyes were on a group of four men, clad in white tunics and turbans, who stood in a tight knot off to one side of the fountain.

Their faces were angry and their gestures a study in controlled agitation.

Unfortunately, they were too far away for hir to make out what they were saying. One of the men was large and heavy-set. He seemed to be directing the conversation. Another was tall but lighter in build. The last two were of average human size. All four wore their turbans low over their foreheads.

The heavy-set man glanced in Ma'at's direction, froze, and then, turning his back to the Nhavan, steered the other men into the lengthening shadows of the trees where Ma'at could not see them well.

A white-coated employee of the resort came out of the building and moved among the trees lighting the torches that lined the walks and circled the fountains. Their waiter approached the table and invited them to adjourn to the open western terrace to enjoy the sunset while dinner preparations were underway.

Though s/he felt unsettled, Ma'at excused herself, rose, and strode quickly after hir captain.

AS DANI STROLLED along the tree-lined path to the terrace, the contemplative mood she had experienced atop the ridge returned. Was it something in the air? The food? The design of the gardens? Ma'at paced quietly beside her. Lindie's assured voice carried

pleasantly through the soft air far behind them where she strolled arm in arm with Sly, chattering away at him as if she'd known him all her life.

It was one of Sly's gifts to make others feel immediately comfortable and at home. Dani had never understood why his relaxed charm didn't work on Ma'at. She knew their constant bickering was more superficial than substantive but at times it tired her.

"Captain, did you observe those four men back there?"

Dani glanced at her First Officer blankly.

"They appeared to be behaving suspiciously. Perhaps they should be reported."

Dani looked behind them. "The guys under the trees?"

"Yes. The large individual and his three henchmen."

"They look like a bunch of chatty locals."

Ma'at pursed her lips in irritation. When no further comments came from her, Dani moved on.

Dani and Ma'at soon emerged onto a flagstone terrace that overlooked the valley and the river. A dozen of the resort's other guests were already there, leaning against the wall to watch the sunset. Dani's breath caught. The sun was sinking behind the western plateau and had painted the sky a startling array of colors, from deep purple and vivid orange to soft turquoise.

"Goddesses alive, Ma'at," Dani said, "you just don't see that in Iowa!"

"Desert sunsets are unique in their brilliance and color palette, Captain. The dust in the atmosphere and the angles of refraction of the light are responsible for the heightened visual effects."

"Oh, shut up, Ma'at," Sly reprimanded, coming up from behind them, Lindie hanging on his arm. "It's romantic. Don't ruin it with science."

Dani observed how he grinned at Lindie, who smiled back at him affably, but she relinquished his arm and walked off to look over the stucco wall that edged the terrace. Dani continued to feel a little breathless. In fact, she felt downright trembly. The sunset was stunning but it shouldn't leave her shaking.

Sly spoke up. "Good heavens, I'm feeling queasy. Women don't usually make me feel that way."

"It's not you," Ma'at called out. "A tremor has commenced."

A side-to-side shaking threw Sly to his knees. Lindie grabbed at the wall for support. Dani ran to assist her, her steps made uneven by the bucking of the ground. Ma'at flexed his knees and rocked in place.

In less than three seconds, the quake was over.

"Damn," Sly cursed, clambering up, "I scraped my knees and the palms of my hands."

A rumble in the distance burst into sound that cracked like thunder but was not accompanied by a flash of lightning.

"What in the hell was that?" Sly demanded. "It sounded like thunder!"

"We were lucky to be out here in the open," Ma'at said, "nowhere accessible to lightning. If lightning struck, it came out of a clear sky and we didn't see it. We might have been blinded by the nearness of a strike if we had."

Dani searched the sky but saw nothing unusual. The noise had not only been resoundingly loud but impossibly close. Now the sunset, serenely unaffected, was at the height of its ephemeral beauty.

Another ominous rumble reverberated across the Otung rift valley. After the sound wave rolled past them and echoed back to their ears from the mountains to the northeast, the air was still again.

"What in heaven's name is going on?" Sly said.

A resort employee came racing down the path. "Is everyone all right?"

"So it would seem," Ma'at answered.

Dani took a moment to assess the loose gathering of resort guests. Sly had fared the worst, but his injuries were minor. Nearly everyone else had been leaning against the wall at the time of the shaking.

"Please accept the resort's apologies," the employee said in tones loud enough to be heard by everyone on the patio. "Unfortunately, tremors are common on Otung. They rarely last more than a few seconds and cause very little damage."

There was a release of nervous laughter from the group. "No harm done," boomed the large man Ma'at had pointed out to Dani earlier. His speech was heavily-accented Coalition Standard. The two average-sized men with him nodded in agreement. The third, the tall spare individual, had his eyes on a petite woman dressed in a tailored business suit who stood nearby.

"Please return for dinner," the employee urged, turning back up the path. The petite woman, head held high and with a matter-of-fact expression on her face, stuffed a slim silver makeup compact into her purse and strode after the employee.

Dani met Ma'at's gaze, and in unison they turned to watch the four men trail after the woman and the resort staff. Other guests moved off the terrace as well, turning their backs to the sunset, which had faded to pastels. Ma'at stepped over to the wall, where Sly and Lindie stood.

"Dr. Davis?" Ma'at said politely.

"I'm fine. Not even a scrape."

Dani said, "Shall I escort you back to the lodge?"

"Sure," Lindie said.

Dani placed a hand on Lindie's back to guide her over the flagstones. She avoided Ma'at's gaze. Dani could see right through Ma'at's inquiring expression. She knew her First Officer had been gravely concerned for her ever since Sherri Wilmstead's death. Ma'at would be all in favor of Dani seducing someone—anyone—to get her mind off her maudlin worries.

They strolled back to the garden, this time with Lindie on Dani's arm. As Sly walked along, Dani watched how he swung his hands through the air, obviously trying to cool the stinging of his scraped palms. She was glad she hadn't tipped over like cloddy Sly had.

Later, the foursome chatted amiably over dinner, the earth tremor soon forgotten. As the evening lengthened into star-studded night, the lick and sputter of torch wicks and the periodic rustle of a breeze through the trees were the only sounds underlying the rise and fall of voices around them. Occasional laughter rose from nearby tables.

In a mellow state of mind, Dani convinced herself a few words of encouragement in Lindie's ear would result in the perfect finish to a pleasant evening. She was considering what those words would be when the warm darkness was shattered by the stumbling rush of their waiter toward their table. "Help!" the man screeched. "There's been a stabbing!"

"HE'S DEAD, DANI," Sly said. The only physician on the resort premises, he had been rushed to the scene but was too late to help. The victim had met his end in one of the service hallways behind the resort's busy kitchen.

The small stain of blood surrounding the wound was a copper green in color. Sly shifted on his heels and pulled a tightly-wrapped turban off the deceased's head. The hair was long and black and a row of studs lined the interior ridges of his ears.

"At a guess, I'd say he's a Deimeon."

Ma'at dropped to a crouch beside the doctor to take a closer look. "I believe you're right, Doctor."

The Deimeon were a humanoid species from the planet Coskeer who were not allied with the Coalition, although they were not currently at war either. An uneasy truce had been negotiated between the powers and it was unusual, but not unheard of, to come across Deimeons in Coalition territory.

"When will the forensic specialists arrive?" Dani asked, looking to Phideas Cobb, the manager of the resort. The perspiring human, in his shock, had raised both of his chubby hands to his cheeks and they remained planted there.

"There are no such specialists," Cobb wailed. "There are no police. Nothing like this has ever happened on Otung."

"Lucky you," Sly said under his breath.

"Doctors? Undertakers?" Dani persisted. "Surely there must be an undertaker?"

"No." The distraught manager shook his balding head. "The Yutunda cremate their dead and we...we've never had a death. Not in all the years I've been here."

"Government officials?" Dani tried again.

"No one. The Yutunda have a headman. We resort employees are the only off-worlders."

"There are the Tyson's," a female voice piped up. By her white hat, Dani took her to be one of the kitchen staff.

"It's not relevant, April." The manager flapped a thick-fingered hand at the employee and then returned it to his cheek.

"Tyson's?" Dani asked. She couldn't predict at this stage of the game what would and would not prove to be relevant.

"Zane Tyson," Cobb clarified. "A refugee from Mars Colony who got Settlement Clearance decades ago. He has a ranch in the valley. Two of his sons work here at the resort managing our agriculture."

There were some snickers in the crowd and a hiss to silence them but the hiss hadn't come from Cobb. Dani frowned.

"But he's not a doctor, policeman, or undertaker?"

"No. Just a rancher and farmer. He's the only other offworlder."

"This is a little unusual," Dani said.

"Not really. I manage the resort for Olmstead Neville who oversees a conglomerate of interests from his headquarters on Alpha Centauri. A son or daughter of Olmstead comes once a year to audit the books."

"And make sure," a voice stage-whispered, "Jake and Warren are still working." This time, instead of a hiss, a muted *thwunk* hushed the sound of the snickering. Dani surveyed the group. The young adult faces beamed back expressions of innocence.

She said, "I suppose, then, we'll have to handle this ourselves. Does anyone recognize the victim?"

Heads shook in unison.

"He's not a member of my staff," Cobb volunteered.

"Resort guest?"

"No."

"Isn't that a bit odd? How do you explain his presence here, Mr. Cobb?"

"Once in a while we get traders passing through who catch a meal with us. Usually, they are Paku, relatives of the Yutunda, who have settlements far up the valley to the north. The Paku never lodge here."

"Captain," Ma'at rose to his feet, "I believe I saw this man earlier in the evening in the garden and on the terrace. He was in conversation with three other men. Perhaps one of the staff will remember serving them."

Dani hadn't put that together—but then again Ma'at had vision and hearing considerably more advanced than humans. "Well?" Dani asked. She faced Cobb.

The manager shrugged, his eyes wide and helpless.

The woman named April spoke up again. "Aknee served them." She reached an arm toward the back of the cluster of staff and pulled forward a slight, olive-skinned boy.

"Aknee," Cobb asked, dropping his hands and pointing to the corpse, "do you recognize this man?"

"No-o-o." Aknee drew the notes out, his voice quavering.

Cobb tried a different tack. "Did you serve four men tonight who sat together?"

"Ye-s-s." The boy's eyes were wide in his face.

"What did they order? Did they tip you? Where did they go?"

Aknee, tongue-tied, buried his head against April's side and whispered up into her ear.

April nodded patiently a few times and then translated. "They didn't have dinner, only drinks. They placed a third drink order about an hour after sunset but when Aknee brought out the order they had disappeared. They made no payment for the last order. They didn't leave a tip. Aknee says Fredjia, who was tending bar, yelled at him for not bringing back any payment for the last round of drinks, so she can confirm what happened."

"What did the other men look like?" Dani demanded. Aknee looked in terror at Dani then whispered in April's ear again.

"Aknee says they were all dressed like this man, except one was bigger, the other two smaller."

"That matches the description of the group I observed, Captain," Ma'at confirmed.

April said, "Aknee says a woman joined them for a short while but left after the first round of drinks."

Dani wondered if the woman had been the same one they had seen on the terrace after the quake. "And then they just vanished into the night?" Dani's voice conveyed her incredulity.

Cobb shrugged again. "It is a resort, not a prison. If they came for drinks, that's what they got, not questions."

"But the woman," Ma'at indicated, "might be a resort guest."

"We'll get a description of her from Aknee and check into it." Dani concluded this line of questioning had played out. "All right, Cobb. Good enough." She looked down to where Sly knelt beside the body. "What do you make of the knife, Sly?"

"Standard issue," he said, drawing the blade from the wound. Except for the green blood that had congealed on it, the blade was no more remarkable than the common plastic

handle. "There are millions of these in circulation on dozens of worlds. The murderer probably brought it with him. It's virtually untraceable."

"You may have noticed," Ma'at said, "that security at the transport site was non-existent."

"It's a remote backwater," Cobb said, "and the Rules of Settlement are strict."

"The Rules of Settlement?" Sly asked.

"The Rules of Settlement, Doctor," Ma'at said, "are a civil version of our military Non-Interference Code. Otung, as we have already learned, is home to various native peoples in pre-technological stages of culture."

"Precisely," Cobb said. "Temporary visitors such as yourselves are allowed, provided you agreed to the provisions affecting your stay."

"What provisions were those?" Sly asked.

Cobb said, "Not to bring charged weapons or other techno gadgetry on your visit here."

"We read and agreed to the conditions before we arrived," Ma'at said.

Dani looked back and forth between Ma'at and Cobb. "We did?" she snapped.

"Captain, *Explora Command* regulations forbid the utilization of military-issue equipment in off-duty circumstances. I agreed on behalf of all of us to Hacienda Otung's provisions, which were, in any event, in accord with *Explora Command* regulations. It was a mere formality."

Dani shrugged, admitting the logic of it.

"So," Cobb hammered home his point, "there has never been any need for security."

"Until now," Ma'at said, and Cobb sputtered.

"People," Dani said, "any ideas as to where we go from here?"

"It would seem incumbent upon Mr. Cobb," Ma'at said, "to make a report of what few facts are known for the resort's owner, as there is no other authority, and to make provision for burial of the body."

"Ma'at," Sly interrupted, "if he's a Deimeon, his people will want to perform the Dead Song before—"

"Doctor," Ma'at said, irritation in her voice, "we don't know this man's identity, his family or their wishes for his remains. I assume there are no stasis or cryogenic facilities available

on Otung. Provided we ascertain his identity, we can, upon our return to *Boediceas*, notify his people. There seems little else that can be done at the present time."

"Keep an eye out for the other three men," Lindie said out of the blue. Dani had almost forgotten she was there.

"As well as the female suspect," Ma'at added. "If any of those individuals can be located, they should be questioned as to the identity of the victim and his purpose here, as well as their own."

"Cobb?" Dani sought the manager's acquiescence to Ma'at's suggestions.

Cobb heaved a heavy sigh. "It will be done."

Chapter Two

ALAN GOODRICK LOUNGED on his balcony, the cold motionless air of the desert pre-dawn draping him like a mantle. He was savoring his breakfast and eyeing the low ridge of dunes to the east in anticipation of yet another gorgeous sunrise.

The unpretentious luxury of Hacienda Otung almost made up for the seedy dives and greasy spoons he'd been forced to patronize for the past six months. In such genteel surroundings he found it easy to forget about Stella Farnsworth. He wanted to forget about her altogether and return to his normal life, but he was not the kind of person to break a deathbed promise.

Alan's father, Edward, had always called Stella *The Villain of the Piece*. As a child, Alan had thought it a long and curious name. When he was a teenager he had begun to suspect, from the veiled innuendo of his parents' conversations, that Stella was his Uncle Martin's mistress. Why this irritated his father, Alan could not begin to guess.

Alan had never met his uncle and, technically speaking, he hadn't met Stella either. Her position in the family had been one of mere passing curiosity to him until eight months before Uncle Martin was reported to have died. Shortly thereafter, Edward had taken ill with pneumonia and, much to the consternation of Alan's mother Bess, refused medical treatment.

Near death, Edward called Alan to his bedside and forced Alan to swear he would hound *The Villain* to the grave, if necessary, and retrieve his Uncle Martin's technological

masterwork, a device called FDet. "It belongs in the family," Edward had insisted, "and you must get it back."

Recognizing he had little choice under the overly-dramatic circumstances, Alan solemnly pledged to carry out his father's wishes. Frankly, a break from academia could not have come at a better time for him. He had just completed his undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering and was debating the relative merits of three universities for graduate study.

His only problem was that after six months of tracking Stella, he was no nearer to dispossessing her of the FDet than when he'd started. As the time dragged miserably on and failure dogged his heels, he felt increasingly unequal to the task his father had mandated.

Much like his Uncle Martin, he had a strong preference for tinkering with objects and conducting quiet scientific research.

Industrial espionage was simply not his forte. He was by nature a peace lover. Most disturbing of all, the idea that he might have to physically battle Stella to get the FDet left his mind in an unresolved uproar most of the time and his stomach in a tight knot.

The first fingers of the sunrise peeked over the horizon to gild the sky with the purest white gold Alan had seen yet. He settled back, raised his coffee cup, and once again gratefully allowed himself to forget about Stella.

JHIRIKU OF AOSTOLO, on the other hand, was not the kind of man to notice the sunrise which, in any case, didn't penetrate the thick walls of his landing vehicle or pierce the heavy blinds he had drawn over his view windows.

Unlike Alan, he was a man of action, even of violence. In this bidding war for FDet, he had no intention of losing. He would take the instrument back to Aostolo and, according to his own calculations, in less than a year he would be hailed as the Uniter of Tribes.

The fear the FDet would inspire on Aostolo would ensure the fealty of the other three significant headmen: Janu and Sthkis and Nkulut. Jhiriku could practically taste victory on his wide flat tongue.

It had a sweet flavor to it, like that of the axnat, the giant frogs of his planet. Skewered and roasted, axnat was his favorite dish. Unfortunately, he wouldn't be tasting victory or eating axnat until he was successful.

For the moment, since the only provisions remaining in his stores were pounded rye gruel, dried salted eel, and bitter tea, he saw no particular reason to rush getting up. Jhiriku stretched his well-muscled arms over his head, yawned, turned in his narrow bunk and fell back to sleep.

"WELL, CREW," DANI nodded at Dr. Davis to include her in the catch-all appellation, "did anyone solve the murder overnight?"

In the light of the bright new morning, Dani's single regret was that re-hashing the murder was all she had to occupy herself with during the night. She didn't consider herself a member of the old school but, even so, it would have been gauche to invite a woman to bed after the events which had capped their evening.

"I never gave it another thought," Sly answered, biting into an English muffin.

"Really?" Ma'at asked. "With your tendencies toward sentimentality, I would have thought—"

"Can it, Ma'at," Sly snapped.

"What did you *dream*, Sly?" Lindie leaned forward, a coffee mug cradled in her hands. Like the others, she was dressed in light khakis and a broad-brimmed hat that protected her face from the sun.

"I was on a boat. Fishing." Sly hissed the last word and glared at Ma'at.

"Catch anything?" Dani asked.

"No, a storm came up and rocked the boat."

"Did you sink or swim?" Lindie asked.

"Neither." Sly swallowed a chunk of muffin. "I just woke up."

"Was there another tremor in the night?" Ma'at asked of no one in particular.

Dani said, "I didn't feel anything."

"So what does it mean, Lindie?" Sly buttered a second English muffin.

Lindie pursed her lips in thought. "Water often means a new enterprise of some sort. You didn't catch anything, which may mean your unconscious doesn't have a clue as to the murder. The rocking is probably related to yesterday's earth tremor."

Dani asked, "Are you saying we're on a new enterprise of some sort?"

"Oh," Lindie laughed. "I'm sure of it. Aren't you?"

Dani didn't answer. She was beginning to recognize a pattern with Lindie. Whenever she asked a question, Lindie cleverly turned the question back at her. It was a skill she knew psychotherapists used in therapy. Well, Dani told herself, she wasn't a psychotherapy patient and she wasn't going to fall for it although she decided she was going to make Lindie fall for her. "I thought you were an academic, Lindie, not a working psychotherapist. Yet, you just interpreted Sly's dream."

"Teaching is my main focus, Dani. But you can't teach what I do without having studied psychoanalysis and undergone analysis oneself, of course."

"Of course. Freudian or Jungian?"

"Jungian. Much more to my taste."

"Mine as well," Ma'at said.

Lindie asked, "Have you undergone Jungian analysis, Ma'at?"

"No, but I am well-read in the subject."

"Ma'at," Sly said, "is well-read in every subject. I would be shocked down to my Oklahoma toes if Ma'at didn't know hir Carl Jung."

The discussion was interrupted by the noisy approach of a throng of tall, dark-skinned men dressed in knee-length tan tunics and bright mustard and russet turbans. Ropes of a polished green-black stone swathed their necks, and carved circlets of the same material snugly embraced their bare arms, wrists and ankles. The moment they reached the table, they stopped jabbering among themselves and pushed the much-shorter, rounder, and whiter Phideas Cobb forward.

"I'm so sorry to-to-to intrude," Cobb stammered, "but once again we seem to be in need of your investigatory abilities."

Dani rose from her chair and her two officers followed suit. "What seems to be the problem, Cobb?"

"These men are Paku traders. They are heading home to their village after completing a trading trip to the south. They had planned to make a rest stop at the village of Topotuk last night."

"Topotuk?" The name sounded familiar but Dani couldn't remember where she'd heard it.

"A Yutunda village on the western plateau, across the river. It's about thirty-two kilometers from here."

"Oh, yes." Dani recalled Lindie had mentioned the village the night before. "So?"

"When they reached Topotuk, they say they smelled the odor of death so they did not go into the village."

Dani frowned in annoyance. This was hardly turning out to be a quiet vacation. "I take it, on the basis of this odd report, you want me to go and check on this village?"

"The village mongrels, they say, lay dead at their guard posts."

One of the Paku men started to shout and jerk his index finger, in agitation, at Dani.

"What is he saying now?" Dani demanded of Cobb.

Cobb gave Dani a bland look. "I haven't the faintest idea, Captain. I don't speak Ibitti."

"You don't speak Ibitti? Where did you get this information then?"

"Aknee!" Cobb shouted over his shoulder. Aknee was thrust forward by two of the Paku men but the instant he saw Dani, a look of horror lit his face, and he squirmed from their grasp and dashed away.

"You have quite an effect on the boy," Sly said, making a stab at humor.

The Paku stared at Dani and one of them quite clearly said, "*konuk*." At this, the others murmured and bobbed their heads. As a body, they backed away.

"Now what?" Dani frowned. "Look," she said, advancing toward the men, "what is it you want me to do?"

They continued to back away, their eyes wide and fixed on Dani as though she might pounce on them or call down lightning from the sky.

"*Wasta!*" A powerful voice reverberated from the shade of one of the walnut trees on the far side of a fountain. The Paku stopped retreating and turned in the direction of the voice.

"Kana no coro." A broad-shouldered man with darkly-tanned skin and a curling mane of chestnut hair came haltingly up the brick walkway toward the assembled group.

The man continued to speak to the Paku in what Dani could only assume was Ibitti. By the time he reached them, his voice had taken on an almost teasing quality.

"Ana ta?"

The Paku men broke into grins. As he came more clearly into view, Dani saw that he walked with a limp, alternately dragging and rising on his inflexible right leg. She judged from his gait that the man had been fitted with a below-the-knee prosthesis.

Dani guessed the man to be in his mid-twenties. The amputation was a horrible disfigurement for one so young, Dani thought, and strikingly unusual in this day-and-age of such advanced medical treatment as that which *Explora Command* practiced. Perhaps on Otung the young man had not been able to get the medical help he required.

"Jake!" The tallest of the Paku cried and went forward. The two men met in mid-path and placed their right palms on each other's chest. They inclined heads for a brief instant and together intoned the word, **"Tala."**

Dani assumed it was an Ibitti greeting. **"Tala"** was followed by a number of other phrases, repeated with smiles on both sides. But in short order, the discussion grew somber and the Paku headman became agitated in voice and gesture. Jake listened intently. Then he stepped forward and extended his hand to Dani.

"I'm Jake Tyson."

Dani shook his hand. **"Captain Danielle Artemis Forrest. These are my officers, Dr. Sylvestre Jenks, and Commander Ma'at."**

Jake nodded. **"I've already met Ma'at."**

Ma'at inclined his head, not debating the point, and Dani wondered what the circumstances had been. It had always proved impossible to track all, or if the truth be told, even most of his movements as First Officer.

Dani gestured at the seated Lindie. **"This is Dr. Linda Davis."** Lindie rose from her place and came around the table. To everyone's surprise, she placed her right palm on Jake's chest, inclined her head and said, **"Tala."**

Jake Tyson flushed. **"Unfortunately,"** he joked, **"as tempting as it would be, the Paku do not greet women by putting their hand on their chest."**

Sly and Dani exchanged raised eyebrows. Ma'at smiled.

"No?" Lindie teased, not in the least put out. Dani marveled at her imperturbability.

"No," Jake said, "we clasp both of the woman's hands in ours, incline our heads, and together we say *Tala*."

With ritualistic care, he walked Lindie through the greeting.

"Thank you for showing me," Lindie murmured when the exchange was over.

"My pleasure," he said, looking into her soft blue eyes.

"Mr. Tyson." Dani felt a surge of jealousy course through her chest. She didn't know where she stood with Lindie and she wasn't in the mood to welcome competition.

"Yes, Captain." Jake dropped Lindie's hands. "I'm not sure how you became involved in this but—"

"Mr. Cobb is responsible." Dani waved in the direction of the manager who stood fidgeting between his guests and the Paku traders.

"I should have known. Phideas," Jake addressed him, "we do not normally ask guests, even *Explora Command* officers, to relinquish their vacation for the purpose of looking into internal problems on Otung."

"What do you want me to do, Jake?" Cobb came forward, waving his stubby hands. "We had a murder here yesterday. Now the Paku say we have a whole new set of murders! I am at my wit's end. I'm a hotel manager, not a police detective!"

Although the professions mentioned were different, the complaint sounded familiar to Dani's and she glanced over at Ma'at. Together, they eyed Sly who was famous for decrying being called upon to perform duties which weren't medical in nature.

"Apparently," the doctor responded archly, "this sort of thing is a problem everywhere."

Jake said, "Still, Phideas, you can't just—"

"It's all right, Mr. Tyson," Dani said. "We'll be happy to help if we can. What seems to be the problem?"

"The Paku are convinced Topotuk has been laid waste. They have many taboos regarding the dead so they didn't enter the village. You have to understand days of ritual cleansing would be involved if they had come into contact with dead bodies and—"

Dani held up her hand. "I get the picture. Mr. Cobb said it was across the river. How do we get there?"

"Zeebiti," Jake said.

"Zeebiti?"

"Otung's beasts of burden. The Rules of Settlement forbid high-tech forms of transportation."

"Let's get moving, then," Dani commanded.

"Follow me." Jake turned around to head back the way he had come.

"Just as I predicted," Lindie murmured in Dani's ear as they followed Jake.

"What? What did you predict?"

"The call to adventure."

Dani stopped in the path. "Are you saying I've fallen for it again?"

"You always do." Lindie grinned.

The quickest way Dani could think of to wipe the impish self-satisfied look from the other woman's face was to kiss her. Which, not having the slightest idea how Lindie might react, she did.

STELLA FARNSWORTH COULD not believe she had come so far only to be stopped by a murder. With agitated fingers, she twisted strands of her short auburn hair behind her ears. Edging forty, Stella had a tiny pixyish face and slender girlish body that had resisted aging. Her skin was a dark olive, and her onyx-black eyes were set off by cinnamon-hued brows.

Caught up in a whirl of frenzied thought, she paced between her bed and the open French doors of her ground-floor patio. How could this have happened? Her meeting with the four independent FDet bidders had gone smoothly enough the evening before.

Jhiriku of Aostolo, she recalled with crystal clarity, had asked for a two-day hiatus to compose his bid, and the other three bidders had accepted the provision without qualm. None had seemed in great haste to start negotiations so she had bitten back her urge to demand bids on the spot. Despite her own tendency toward impatience, she knew it was not wise to alienate the buyers by rushing them.

Just to prove she was not perturbed by the delay, she had shared a companionable drink with the four to seal future potential associations but left before any rituals of male bonding, eased by the loosening power of liquor, got underway.

Had those male-bonding rituals gotten out of hand? Had an excess of alcohol turned someone's biology nasty? Or had someone murdered a fellow bidder in order to increase their own chances in the competition for the FDet?

Stella prayed it was anything but the latter. But she had a strong imagination and that mental quality was making it difficult for her to convince herself the murder was an unrelated coincidence. Breathless from pacing, Stella plunked down on the unmade bed and leaned her chin against her hands.

She hadn't revealed the physical whereabouts of the FDet to the bidders but she hadn't hidden the technology either. Otung was so thinly populated she had not anticipated the need to do so. She didn't expect anyone to happen across it by accident.

On the other hand, it would be a snap to locate for anyone with the determination to find it. They wouldn't even have to know what it looked like. It was in plain sight and would stick out like a dead zebiti on the dinner table.

Stella lay back and laced her hands behind her head, staring up at the white stucco ceiling. In her rush to unload the FDet, murder and the potential theft of the equipment were not eventualities she had given consideration. Now, suddenly, she needed to incorporate them into her thinking.

Ever decisive, she concluded she needed two things and she needed them fast. One was a place to temporarily hide the FDet; the other was a personal bodyguard. Stella had been at Hacienda Otung for a week and had been watching the comings and goings of the workers at the resort. She was sure she knew just the right man for the job.

He was young and muscular, if a little on the spare side. He also exuded the smoldering insolence of a man who carried a chip on his shoulder but she had seen him work with fierce competence at his tasks around the resort. She noticed he worked alone and, with his snarling attitude, it was easy to guess why the other workers gave him a wide berth.

Stella sat up and slid her legs off the bed. Warren Tyson would be perfect. He was certainly nothing like the nerd who had been ineptly following her for the last six months. When she'd first noticed that young man, she'd been a little bit frightened. Then, as time went on and he never approached her, she wrote him off as harmless.

She'd grown accustomed to seeing him at odd intervals costumed in yet another amateur attempt at disguise and even came to think fondly of him as campy and cute. She'd been careful to keep playing his game though and pretend she'd never noticed him.

Stella rose and went into the bathroom. She'd wash and dress and then go down to the garden for lunch and devise a plan to entice Warren Tyson into her employ.

A TIMID KNOCK sounded at Alan Goodrick's door. Alan assumed it was the maid or perhaps room service coming to collect the remains of his breakfast.

"Come in," he called from the balcony.

"Mr. Alan?"

Alan twisted his head. It was Aknee, sliding into the room and crossing it in his soundless way.

"Hey, Aknee, how's it going?" Alan liked the teenager, and in the short time he'd been there, he and Aknee had become friends of sorts. "Come and see the sunrise."

Aknee came out onto the balcony and perched on the edge of a chaise lounge.

"Spectacular, isn't it?"

"Bad omen," Aknee said.

"Why?"

"Too purple for sunrise."

Alan pondered. It had been rather purple. "That's bad?"

"Not natural."

"Hmm. What have you got there?" Alan saw that Aknee was rolling and unrolling a dirty scrap of paper between his child-sized hands.

"You can do me favor?" Aknee asked.

"Sure."

"This message for *konuk* Forrest—"

"You mean *Captain* Forrest." The resort was too small for every guest not to be aware of the arrival of other guests, particularly notorious ones. Alan would never deign to approach such a well-known figure but, like everyone else, he knew she was on the

premises. He briefly wondered what it was like to walk around with the stigma of being gay and yet be in a position of such high authority in the military hierarchy.

"No. *konuk* Forrest. *konuk* is bad spirit."

"Forrest is a bad spirit?"

Aknee nodded. "Very much."

"How do you know?"

"Just know."

Alan shrugged. He wasn't going to argue with what passed for Aknee's logic. Aknee thrust the hand-warmed piece of paper into Alan's outstretched hand. "April take message and say to deliver it."

Alan smiled. April, he thought, should have been more specific in her instructions about who Aknee was to deliver the message to. Aknee was a master of literal interpretation. It enabled him to slide around any and all directives he considered insalubrious.

"You want me to give this to Captain Forrest?" Alan hesitated. "Please. *konuk* bad for me but not harm you." Alan unrolled what April had written on a torn strip of resort stationary:

The Riddle is not

the only test now. Treasure

the Riddler as well.

"It's haiku," Alan said.

"What?"

"A type of Terran poetry. In haiku, the first line has five syllables, the second has seven syllables, and the last has five syllables again. Who did April get this message from?"

Aknee shrugged. "Admiral something."

"Seems a bit mysterious, Aknee, but I'll pass it on to Captain Forrest if I can. I'm not that likely to run into her, you know."

"Good enough." Aknee smiled, relief evident in his face. His task completed, he sank into the softness of the chaise lounge, his tiny body all but disappearing, and gave himself over to an unauthorized moment of relaxation.

AT THE NORTHERN edge of Kawanma ruin, Jhiriku of Aostolo, Uall Bock—a native of Alpha Centauri—and Fenton Darius Lake, representing Trinity Ores Mining Consortium, met as agreed. It was hot, the sun approaching its zenith, and the ruins were deserted and the wind quiet.

Although the three men had no use for one other and even less trust, the previous night's murder had led to an unspoken, but well-understood, agreement that keeping a close eye on each other was smart policy.

No accusations were made but the air vibrated with wariness as the men moved and spoke with care. All appreciated the value of Jhiriku's suggestion that they search for Stella Farnsworth's FDet together.

No one raised the question of what would happen when they found the FDet. All of them seemed to know and each was supremely confident that he alone would take home the prize.

For free, of course. After all, how was Stella going to stop them?

Chapter Three

ALTHOUGH ZEEBITI LOOKED more like high-withered oxen than horses, riding one reminded Lindie of that girlhood delight, even to the first-day soreness of calf muscles, numb rear, and chafed inner thighs. Despite the discomfort, she hadn't felt so free in years.

The hot sun and empty horizon, the tang of animal sweat, and the eddies of choking dust the zeebiti kicked up as they trooped along took her back to the West Pecos region of her youth.

Her zeebiti, named Hotsie, was a barrel-chested mare. She was blue-skinned with a long coarse mane of white hair and big bovine ears that flopped out to the sides. Considering her size, she was surprisingly agile and quick.

Like the eland, the largest Terran antelope, zeebiti had twin spiraling horns and a dewlap hanging below their necks. Markings and temperament varied from individual to individual.

Lindie was relieved that her mare was steady and gentle. Ahead of her, the stallion Jake rode, named Kaba, was far more spirited. Behind Jake came Namba, who was laden with bulging panniers. Behind them, Ma'at swayed atop a massive mare called Wageegi. Lindie came next. Trailing her were Dani and Sly riding a pair of feisty fillies, Suki and Pushkto.

Packing the expedition's equipment and saddling the zeebiti had taken most of the remainder of the morning. The rest had been taken up by ferrying the party across the Otung River.

Still, it wasn't until they had ridden across an interminable series of dry washes on the western plateau and it was mid-afternoon that Jake called a halt for lunch. They stopped in what passed for an oasis, a sparse stand of spiny desert trees growing by a spring-fed pool.

Called Poskono or "Place of Trust" by Paku and Yutunda alike, the pool deepened with much-treasured rainwater on stormy summer afternoons. Jake explained the well-known watering hole was also a popular stopover for wild herds of zeebiti, karicats, the sleek, high-speed carnivores that preyed on them, and hycos, the mongrel-like scavengers that cleaned up afterward.

"Not really a place of trust," he joked.

After leaving the spring, they made their way single-file up a dusty trail that switchbacked between sun-baked mesas. The mesas were capped with ribbons of red lava that reflected hotly in the flat white light of the afternoon.

The trail wound down the far side of the first mesa and into a pocket of welcoming shade. Here, another mineral spring bubbled over rocks, flowing for a few precious meters before draining away into the dry sand of the wash.

Tussocks of grass straggled around the spring. The only other plants were clusters of spiny-leaved succulents and low-growing evergreens that snaked across the chunks of red lava rock tumbling over the terrain.

Jake called a second halt to water the animals. He swung his leg across the horn of the saddle, extracted his artificial foot from its stirrup and leaped to the ground. With lightning speed, he rolled onto his side to cushion his fall and minimize pressure at the juncture where his prosthesis joined his knee.

Lindie had seen him execute the same maneuver at lunch but familiarity did not stop her from cringing. As near as she could tell, it didn't disturb Jake, who, seemingly unaware of the reactions of others, jumped to a standing position from the ground, using his good knee as leverage. He grabbed Kaba's reins and led the stallion to the spring.

"If you think about it," Sly said, "it's as good a method as any."

"It took some practice, though," Dani said, drawing Suki to a stop.

"Not to mention sheer guts," Lindie said.

"How long do you think he's been missing that leg, Sly?"

"I'd hazard quite a few years, Dani."

"We'd better stop dawdling and get our zeebiti watered," Lindie said. "I'm so stiff, I may just try that dismount myself."

"I could catch you," Dani said.

"I doubt it. I'd just bowl you over into the sand."

"That's okay. It wouldn't bother me at all."

"Don't expect me to hang around to pick up the pieces," Sly said, propelling Pushkto forward with an indulgent twitch of the reins. He dismounted and Dani and Lindie followed suit.

Ma'at, hir zeebiti already efficiently watered, was rummaging in one of the panniers in search of refreshment. S/he brought forth bunches of grapes. The party perched on rocks and Ma'at shared out the stems of fruit. The zeebiti crowded companionably together and chomped down the spare grass.

"Jake," Lindie asked when they had refreshed themselves, "how much farther?"

"At a guess, eleven or twelve more kilometers. We should near Topotuk around nightfall. It's early autumn and the sun is not out as late as in high summer. The village is on the rim of a caldera so it's an uphill climb on narrow switchbacks."

"Ugh," Lindie groaned.

"Sore?" Sly asked.

"As the devil."

"I thought you were a rough-riding Texas cowgirl, Lindie," Dani ribbed.

"I am. It's just been a few years since my wild undisciplined youth." She smirked, her eyes on Dani as if daring her.

But daring her to...what? Dani wondered. That same image of small hands gripping something in tight fists flashed across her mind.

"We'd better get moving," Jake announced, pushing himself to his feet. He retrieved Kaba and led him to a ledge of flat rock jutting out from where the bank rose steeply.

From the height of the ledge, he was able to secure his good foot in Kaba's stirrup. Grabbing the saddle horn and using shoulder strength, he hefted himself up and swung his artificial leg over the animal in one smooth movement. He saw that everyone, except Ma'at, who was drawing Namba away from the grass, remained immobile, staring at him.

"What's the problem?" Jake flicked back the rim of his woven straw hat with some irritation. Dani cast her eyes at the ground in embarrassment and then scrambled to her feet. Sly did likewise. Lindie rose and mounted Hotsie without comment but with a thoughtful look on her face. Ma'at mounted Wageegi and set off after Jake, trailed by Sly and Lindie. Dani brought up the rear.

It had been a long time, Dani reflected, since she'd been in a saddle. Ships and the sea had been much more of an adolescent fascination for her than riding horses. Still, like any farm girl, she had learned the basics.

On the other hand, was she in or out of the saddle when it came to Lindie? Lindie hadn't resisted her kiss or slapped her in the face afterward the way a proper heterosexual woman ought to do. It wasn't as if Lindie didn't know Dani was a lesbian.

Being a commander in Minority Fleet was as blatant an announcement of her sexuality as wearing a pink triangle in a Nazi concentration camp. She knew her reputation, not only as a lesbian, but as an available single one, preceded her wherever she went in the quadrant.

So, she wondered, was Lindie bisexual or, at least, open to experimentation? Dani flashed back on the kiss and the flirting that had prefaced it. She had enjoyed that moment, had enjoyed the taking of Lindie's exuberant energy into her arms, had enjoyed pressing her lips against Lindie's.

But, if she was honest, she knew it didn't mean a damn thing. Lindie, with her good nature, probably viewed the incident as a joke or, worse yet, a slightly-taboo tale she would one day elaborate for her grandchildren.

Dani swallowed her disappointment and reminded herself she knew better than to pursue straight women.

The party of riders steadily climbed the flank of the second mesa, shrouded in shadow. After what seemed an eternity, they topped out, emerging into a sunlight much softened by the lateness of the day. The slanting light spotlighted the mesas with gold that flowed across the plateau, infusing every spear of grass and every cactus spine with a vibrant radiance.

Dani inhaled deeply, transported by the beauty of the scene. The trail had widened from a track into a road. Dani cantered Suki up to join Lindie.

"Doing all right?" Dani asked, keeping her voice polite and the dull, disappointed ache of her attraction under strict control.

"Fine," Lindie answered, turning her head. "You?"

"Great. Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Reminds me of home," Lindie said.

"Me, too."

"Iowa isn't a bit like this, Dani."

"I'll bet you've never been to Iowa."

"Not true. I have been there. Meandering river valleys, rolling hills, miles of corn. Not a single mesa or cactus in sight."

"Most of Texas is farmland too."

"I'm from West Texas. That open chunk of geography along the Pecos River that looks like this." She waved her hand at the empty golden expanse. "You don't remember, do you, Dani?"

"Remember what?"

Lindie smiled mischievously but didn't answer. Dani, mystified, but intent on matching her, grinned back, her eyes confident. "I'll figure it out, Lindie."

"I'm sure you will." She gave Hotsie an encouraging pat on the neck and rode forward without a backward glance. Dani, for her part, snorted in annoyance.

STELLA'S MANICURED FINGERS tapped impatiently on the ironwork table, its surface strewn with the remains of her lunch.

"Mr. Cobb, I tell you I never met those men before! I'm vacationing alone here and they invited me to their table for a drink. I thanked them for their company and left when it looked like they were in for a long evening of drunken revelry. I don't even remember their names."

"First Officer Ma'at of the U.C.S.S *Boedicea* thought s/he saw you with them on the terrace at sunset."

"Yes. That's when they invited me to join them. We were all a little shaken up from the tremor, and I was grateful for the opportunity to laugh it off with others."

"Would you recognize them again?"

"Of course. But that isn't much help."

He flapped a hand limply in the air. "All right, Ms. Farnsworth. Again, I'm sorry to bother you. If there's anything I can do to make your stay as pleasant as possible, just let me know."

Stella waved away the resort manager's apology. Her attention had been captured by the young man treading up the walk, a wooden packing case hefted on one shoulder.

"Oh, Mr. Cobb," Stella leaned forward, "there is one thing..."

"Anything, Ms. Farnsworth."

"This young man approaching—"

Cobb twisted his head and then turned back to her with a frown. "You mean Warren?"

"Yes. Warren. I'd like to hire him. To, uh, take an excursion into the countryside."

"Can you ride a zeebiti, Ms. Farnsworth?"

"I don't see why not."

"Warren," Cobb called over his shoulder, "could you come over here for a minute?"

"Cripes!" Warren stopped. "What in the hell is it now, Cobb?"

"Put the case down," Cobb ordered. "Ms. Farnsworth would like to hire you."

"Oh?" Warren set the case on the low wall that lined the walk.

"Yes." Cobb stood to take his leave. "I will leave the two of you to it. Just let me know the details, Warren. I wish you a pleasant excursion, Ms. Farnsworth. It's on the house."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Cobb. That is most kind."

"You are certainly welcome." Cobb turned, and with a narrow warning look at Warren, strode down the path.

"It may be on the house," Warren declared, once Cobb was out of earshot, "but I'm not doing it for free, lady." He crossed his arms over his chest and scowled at her.

"Did I ask you to?"

Warren was taken aback. "No. I guess you didn't."

"Sit down, Warren. We have a lot to discuss."

Warren sat, his eyes wary. "Like what?"

"You hate this place, don't you?"

"Maybe. Maybe not." He crossed his arms over his chest again.

"Don't play so hard to get, Warren. It's obvious."

"All right, I'll admit I haven't gone out of my way to keep it a secret. What's it to you?"

"I can help you get off Otung."

Warren leaned forward with a speed and intensity that startled Stella. "How?"

CAST INTO DEEP shadow, the riders approached a third mesa that rose above the plateau, and the trail narrowed abruptly to a single track that curved around its eastern flank. The air grew chilly with the onset of evening. After almost an hour of traversing steep switchbacks, the shadow was darker and the air even colder. Lindie reached under the cantle of her saddle for the jacket she had stuffed there and slipped it on.

The sharp odor of sagebrush rose to her nostrils and made her feel nostalgically at home. She strained to hear the twilight sounds of the desert but all she heard was the scrape of her mare's hooves on the trail and the creak of her saddle. She thought it likely the day creatures were settling down for the evening and the nocturnal ones hadn't yet emerged.

Scaling a switchback, she could see Dani riding on Suki below her and Sly swaying placidly on Pushkto above her. Both were too far away for conversation, and their outlines were growing less distinct in the gathering darkness.

How could Dani Forrest not remember her? For her, that single Iowa summer had been rich with new sights and smells and tastes, humid and unforgettable. She remembered every detail of her uncle's farm, from the round red silo to the jumbled pile of rusting tractor parts, the rustle of the corn over her head when she hid in the rows, the dank smell of the pig pen and frightening snorts of her uncle's prize hog.

Uncle Bailey had told her not once, but everyday, not to get too near his prize hog. So she visited the hog, the sow, and the piglets only if her uncle was with her. The antics of the piglets on their short little legs made her laugh and laugh.

She had been nine years old. Danielle, the neighbor girl, had been eight. In her mind's eye, she remembered Danielle's intent childhood face. Her will to win at every game they played and her poorly-masked chagrin when Lindie beat her stood out sharply in her memory.

Was Dani truly innocent as to Lindie's purpose on Otung? Or was she just pretending? The Admiral had assured Lindie he would inform her, which meant Dani was playing her own game of cat and mouse. But why? Lindie didn't know, but she would play along. If nothing else, it would make the job she had been sent to do even more interesting.

The train of zeebiti seemed to be slowing. Lindie peered through the purple twilight but could see little other than Pushkto's white-banded tail. Some distance ahead of her, Ma'at was doing the same thing.

IN THE DEEPENING dusk, Ma'at could see that the terrain had opened into a sloping plain. Behind the plain rose a massive dark uplift. Against its flank, a bunched cluster of squares gave the appearance of houses. But no lights shone through the dark gaps that Ma'at assumed were windows.

An unnatural quiet held sway over the entire area. For one thing, no native rodents or small mammals rustled through the grasses in search of food, no birds of prey swooped or called.

Ahead of Ma'at, Jake drew Kaba to a stop. Ma'at spurred Wageegi forward, passed Namba, and came up alongside him. Jake pointed silently at the ground. The lifeless form of a dog lay stiffly stretched there.

"The Paku reported the village mongrels dead at their posts," Ma'at reminded him.

"I remember. What's odd is that nothing has scavenged it."

"Even more curious, it doesn't smell."

"You're right." Jake's hand trembled where he held Kaba's reins.

"Strange. What's preserving it?"

"I don't know, Ma'at, but it's too dark to investigate now. I think we should make camp." He hauled on Kaba's rein and rode away from the village, down a grassy slope. "Let's move over here."

Ma'at turned and called out to the others. "We're heading this way." The dark shadows behind her wordlessly altered course. A few minutes later, Ma'at saw a blur of motion, heard a thud and a scuffle, and knew Jake had dismounted.

The area he had selected was grassy and level but buttressed on the windward side with a low shelf of lava rock. A brook no wider and deeper than Ma'at's hand flowed through the grass.

Ma'at dismounted and unsaddled Wageegi, then relieved Namba of her panniers. When everyone had unsaddled, Jake led the animals to the tiny brook. While they drank, he hobbled them loosely and left them to crop grass at their leisure. Dani made a ring of lava rocks and built a campfire.

The doctors Jenks and Davis prepared an evening meal formed of generous quantities of dried wild zeebiti jerky in dehydrated white gravy and mashed potatoes made from dried flakes. Fresh carrot sticks provided fiber, and a fruit cobbler of the native pineberry rounded out the meal. Five bottles of resort-brewed beer, jostled into warm sudsy flatness by Namba's swaying gait, made it all palatable.

"Delicious," Jake said when he finished the cobbler. "My compliments to the chefs." He winked at Lindie.

"You'll have to convey that to April," she replied smoothly, smiling at him.

Dani deftly changed the subject. "We're so high on the western plateau here and the air is so clear you can just make out the twinkle of lights at the resort." She pointed and everyone looked northeast, across the valley.

"I see them," Sly said, then looked upward. "The stars are twinkling too. Not something we see in space. I miss it."

"It's too damn quiet," Jake said.

"What do you mean?" Ma'at asked.

"Where are the night sounds? The hoot of burrowing owls and the rustle of rodents? Hell, I haven't even seen any creepy crawlies and, trust me, there are plenty of them out here."

"Anything poisonous?" Dani asked.

"Yes, but the nasties tend to avoid humans. Still, everybody should have at least a few ant bites by morning."

Sly snorted. "Why worry about ant bites? There are dead bodies piled up in that dark village killed by heavens knows what, and we're sitting here like lambs who could be led to the slaughter at any minute."

"Suffering from agoraphobia, Doctor?" Ma'at asked.

"I don't have agoraphobia, Ma'at. I have good sense. Which, I might add, plainly deserted me when I let myself be cajoled into going on this harebrained vacation."

Lindie laughed uproariously and the others, startled, gawked at her. She stopped laughing and said, "Sly's instincts are right."

"What do you propose?" Ma'at asked Lindie in mild annoyance. "That we break camp and head back to the resort in the dark?"

"No. I propose a ghost story."

"A ghost story!" Dani said, obviously startled.

"Heh, heh," Sly laughed. "Now there's an idea."

"I have never understood," Ma'at professed, "the human urge to relate disturbing stories, especially under conditions already fraught with anxiety."

"It's the principle of catharsis, Ma'at," Lindie said. "The ability to experience fear through the medium of a story exorcizes, or at least makes more manageable, the real fears that are being suppressed in a frightening situation."

"If you say so."

"The story I'm going to tell is not a traditional ghost story." She paused while Sly sighed audibly in disappointment. "But it contains a riddle that you all must answer. It's a long tale, so bear with me."

Ma'at drew her brows together as she thought of how puzzling human beings could be. Dani took a chug of warm beer, Sly settled back against a rock and Jake's eyes lit with interest.

"Long ago in India," Lindie began in a practiced storyteller's voice, "there lived a king. Every day for ten years, this king was visited by a beggar who gave the king a piece of fruit but who voiced no request and asked for no boon. Each day, the king passed the piece of fruit to his vizier who, in turn, tossed it into the tower vault."

"Sounds like a wasteful practice," Dani said.

"Yes, indeed, it was. One day, a monkey escaped the king's harem and attended the king's court. When the piece of fruit was presented by the beggar, the monkey snatched it away from the king and bit into it. In the center of the fruit was a priceless gem. The king was astounded, to say the least, and sent his vizier to check the tower vault. There, amid fruit in various stages of rot, was a gleaming pile of precious jewels."

"That we should have such luck," Sly muttered.

"Oh, but you do," Lindie said.

"We do?"

"Just shut up and listen to the story," Dani ordered.

"The following day, when the beggar appeared at the king's court, the king thanked him for the jewels and asked him what he desired in return for so much treasure. The beggar requested only one rather simple thing of the king. The request was that the king meet him alone at midnight at the local burial ground on the date of the next new moon, which, as you all know is a night without a moon. The king, put on the spot, had no choice but to agree.

"Naturally, when the king arrived on the appointed night, the burial ground, littered with blackened bones and charred skulls, was alive with howling ghosts and frightening demons engaged in gruesome revels. An eerie light and horrid odor permeated the locale, cast off by the smoldering funeral pyres of the newly dead."

"Funeral pyres?" Sly squeaked, his throat dry.

"India, old man," Dani said. "Got more than you bargained for, didn't you?"

"I can take it," Sly retorted.

"When he arrived, the king found the beggar in the center of the burial ground, drawing a magic circle on the charred ground. Now, for your benefit, but of course, unbeknownst to the king, I will tell you that the beggar was a sorcerer practicing black magic with the intent of gaining power over the spirit world."

"Naturally," Sly intoned, rolling his eyes. Lindie ignored him and proceeded.

"When the king asked the beggar what he wanted him to do, the necromancer ordered the king to cross the burial ground and bring back a corpse that he would find hanging from a tree. The king did as he was requested, found the body, cut it down with his sword, shouldered it and started back."

Lindie paused and looked at the collected faces of her audience, rapt in the flickering light of the fire. Even Ma'at's practiced neutral expression looked livelier than usual.

"Well," Sly shrilled, "don't stop there."

"Maybe she has every intention of leaving us 'hanging,' Sly," Dani joked.

Lindie said, "I just wanted to be sure you were all listening."

"We're listening," Jake assured her.

"Good. Now, no sooner had the king shouldered the corpse than it cackled with amusement. Clearly, the corpse was inhabited by a ghost. The king asked the ghost why it was laughing. The corpse didn't answer, but instead, flew back to the tree. The king cut it down again and resolved not to speak a word no matter what happened. The inhabiting ghost, on the other hand, was downright chatty and suggested to the king that they shorten their ghoulish journey with the telling of a riddle."

"Ah," Dani nodded, "the story within the story."

"Indeed," Ma'at said.

"Go on," Sly and Jake insisted.

"All right. The ghost told the story of an intrigue between the young prince of a certain country, his adviser, and a young woman of a nearby land. Having fallen for the allure of the young woman, the prince was set on making love to her but it was only through the intelligence of the adviser that a secret meeting was arranged. The meeting went off as planned but when the woman learned of the adviser's knowledge of the affair, she determined to kill him."

"Women," Dani teased. "They never change."

"Shh," Sly hissed.

"As it happened, the clever adviser was the cunning woman's equal and convinced the king of her country that she was a witch responsible for the death of that king's infant son. Left on the roadside to die a disgraceful death, the prince and the adviser rescued her and took her to their own country where she was made the prince's bride."

"Well, all's well that ends well," Sly clucked in obvious relief.

"Not quite," Lindie demurred. "You see, the elderly parents of the woman, burdened by their social disgrace and grieved by the loss of their daughter, died."

"There had to be something," Dani groused.

"Now here's the riddle," Lindie posited, "who was guilty of the death of the parents?"

"The adviser, obviously," Sly blurted out without hesitation. "He had the woman condemned as a witch and that's what killed the parents."

"That's ridiculous," Jake said. "No difficulty would have developed if the woman hadn't gotten it into her head to kill the adviser in the first place. So, it's the woman."

"The prince is responsible," Ma'at said. "He pursued an illicit affair in another country. The adviser was merely serving his master and, considering the times, it's doubtful the woman had the right to refuse the advances of the prince."

Lindie shifted her gaze to Captain Forrest. "Dani?"

"The king," she answered, setting the empty beer bottle on the ground between her feet.

"What king?" Sly and Jake chorused. Ma'at looked at Dani, intrigued.

"The king of the woman's country, not unlike the captain of a starship, is required to keep an eye on goings-on under his nose. This king was not only unaware of the actions of a neighboring kingdom's heir in his domain but, blinded by emotion over the loss of his infant son, he fell for the adviser's crafty lies and condemned an innocent subject to death. A woman, mind you, who he was obligated by his office to protect."

"A brilliant judgment eloquently rendered," Lindie crowed.

"Who's right?" Sly asked.

"In the original tale, Dani's answer is presented as the one chosen by the king carrying the corpse, but is it right? I don't know. All of your answers can be sustained with excellent arguments. That's why it's a riddle."

"By the way," Dani asked, "what happened to our king? The one carrying the corpse?"

"Well, of course, as soon as he answered the riddle, the corpse flew back to the tree and he had to go back to cut it down again."

"What, again?" Sly howled.

"Well," Lindie said, "the ghost did threaten that if he didn't answer, his head would explode."

"In fact," Ma'at said, "if I remember correctly, there are twenty-five separate riddles in this story. Are there not, Dr. Davis?"

Lindie smiled. "As always, Ma'at, you are correct."

"You knew this story, Ma'at, and you didn't get the answer right?" Sly's voice expressed incredulity.

"I gave what I considered to be a just and true answer, while, at the same time, recognizing the legitimacy of the other answers."

"Boy, that's Nhavan reasoning if I ever heard it!" Sly said.

"Reason is not always black and white, Doctor."

"Oh, will wonders never cease!"

Dani ignored her officers and turned to Lindie. "Do you mean to say that this isn't the end of the story?"

"No, it's not, Dani. Much like Scheherazade of The Arabian Nights, I will tell a tale every night. But, unlike Scheherazade, it is you who will be executed in the morning if you can't solve the riddle. Not I, if I don't tell the tale."

Lindie got to her feet and stretched her arms over her head. Four astounded faces gaped at her. She dropped her arms and grinned. "I was only teasing. Goodnight, all. I'm turning in."

UNDER DANI'S FEET, her bare toes tread through something grey and featherweight. She squinted downward and saw a layer of warm ash. But whatever she was carrying on her back was not featherweight.

It was hefted over her left shoulder and, curious, she turned her head to look. To her horror, she recognized the weight as the dead body of Sherri Wilmstead, still wearing her green and gold command bodysuit, her long red hair trailing down Dani's legs.

Dani stopped abruptly but didn't drop the corpse. She herself was out of uniform, wearing cutoff jeans and a dark blue T-shirt. Around her in the thick dusk, low fires burned. Ahead of her, a soft light glowed in a copse of trees. Dani started forward, making her way toward it.

As she got closer, she saw that the light radiated from between the closed fingers of an outstretched human hand. Lindie's hand. Lindie stood inside a circle drawn on the ashy ground and was swathed from neck to ankle in a purple robe that glittered with stars and crescent moons. On her head perched the tall conical cap of a sorcerer.

She smiled invitingly. "Dani, let's play." She opened her hand. On her upraised palm lay three glass spheres. Each was patterned with a cloud of colors that swirled around a pulsating core.

The dynamic spheres entranced Dani. She wanted to take them from Lindie's hand but she couldn't let go of Sherri Wilmstead. Shifting Wilmstead's corpse on her back, she reached out her hand. As she did, the weight of Wilmstead's body pulled her backward and Dani overbalanced, falling with the corpse into the layer of warm ash.

Dani woke up with a start and struggled upright, cocooned in the warmth of her bedroll. She looked around. The night was dark, the campfire only a wink of dying embers. Over her head, stars glittered in bright perfection. There was no moon.

Dark bumpy shapes around her on the ground indicated the presence of her companions. Other than the swish-and-stomp rhythm of the hobbled zeebiti, there were no other sounds.

Dani snuggled back into her bedroll. The moment her head touched the ground she was fast asleep again.

Chapter Four

THE NEXT TIME Dani awoke, the sun blinded her eyes and she heard friendly chatter all around her. She sat up and unzipped her bedroll.

"Hey, look" Lindie called from the other side of the campfire. "Sleeping Beauty awakes."

Dani eyed the other woman narrowly, running her hands through the tangles in her brunette hair. She smoothed the rumples of her slept-in khaki shirt, and then dived to the bottom of the bedroll for her pants.

"And to think," Sly ragged Lindie, "you didn't even have to kiss her."

"I could have forced myself," Lindie said, a playful twinkle in her eye.

"I couldn't," Sly joked, lifting a rinsed plate from a canvas bucket and handing it to Lindie to dry. Everyone laughed, except Dani, who gave Sly a sour look.

"You'd better not," Dani barked. She leaned back and zipped shut the fly of her khaki pants, thrust her legs out of the bedroll and pulled on her boots. She ambled over to the fire where Ma'at wordlessly handed her a mug of hot black coffee.

After it seared the roof of her mouth, Ma'at handed her a plate of charred and desiccated scrambled eggs and a piece of toast crosshatched with charcoal grill lines. Dani glowered but ate speedily because the others had already finished.

"So what do you think, Dani," Sly asked, "remind you of boot camp?"

"The food wasn't this good," Dani replied with a nod to Jake who, spatula in hand, was scraping out the egg film stuck to the bottom of the frying pan.

Jake grinned. "It's been a while since I've been on a camp out myself. I had no idea I'd missed it so much."

Dani handed her empty plate to Sly who was scouring the dirty cookware in a canvas bucket of soapy water.

"So," Dani said, "do we break camp?"

"I think we can leave everything here and walk up to Topotuk to investigate." Jake frowned down at the frying pan but Dani could see it wasn't the frying pan that was disturbing the young man.

Before Dani could speak, Sly asked Jake what was on his mind

"I haven't seen a single raven. There should be several fighting over the right to clean up our camp for us. I know the Paku said

people were dead, but everyone? No matter what the circumstances, someone should have come to greet us by now. We're camping in plain sight of the village."

"You're the local expert," Dani said. "What do you make of it?"

Jake said, "I'm baffled. Say, did anyone get bitten last night?"

They all shook their heads.

"That's strange, too," Jake said. "I've yet to come out here that someone didn't get bitten by something."

Dani, Sly and Ma'at exchanged glances.

"Mr. Tyson," Ma'at voiced the question in their minds, "are you saying you think *everything* is dead?"

"Well, not the plants obviously, but I have a bad feeling about this. You pointed out, Ma'at, that the dog hadn't begun to rot. In this kind of heat, that should be impossible."

"That should be impossible on any planet with which I'm familiar."

Dani stood. "There's only one way to find out, ladies and gentlemen. It's time we made a little visit to Topotuk."

UNLIKE LINDIE, STELLA had no prior experience riding any kind of living animal, and she didn't relish the prospect of learning to do so at this point in her life. But an excursion by zebiti was what she had told Mr. Cobb she was intent upon and it wouldn't do to, well, change zebiti in mid-stream, so to speak.

Also, pretending she was on a casual day trip with a guide was the least noticeable way to leave Hacienda Otung. She was dressed like any day-excursionist in comfortable khakis, a broad-brimmed straw hat, and tall leather boots.

Her plan, once she and Warren reached the FDet, was to tie-in to her landing craft's transporter to move the FDet to a little-used and remote cabin on the Tyson Ranch that Warren had assured her could temporarily house the equipment.

Stella's landing craft, *The Susan*, was hidden downriver. Such vehicles were illegal on Otung, and Stella had been careful to park it in an out-of-the-way location and transport herself to the coordinates of Hacienda Otung's transport disc as if she had arrived from outside the planet just like any other guest.

"Ready?" Warren made one last cinch on Boo's saddle, Stella's silvery-blue zebiti mare, and came around its prancing rump to where Stella jittered, rubbing her hands and tapping one foot against the packed ground of the stable yard.

Boo was lifting her head and pulling back on the reins looped around the hitching post. Warren grabbed Stella by the wrist, his ice-blue eyes snapping, and dragged her away from the animal.

"What do you think you're doing?" Stella demanded.

"Look, lady, you're spooking Boo!"

"I was just standing there!" She yanked her wrist from his iron grasp.

"Yep," Warren said, "that was enough. You've never ridden an animal in your life, have you? Or even been near one?"

"No."

"All right then. Let's go over the basic rules about zeebiti. Number one, they can sense fear."

"There's nothing I can do about that. If I'm scared, I'm scared."

"Not true," Warren answered. "What you fear is the animal getting out of control, right?"

"Yes," Stella nodded. "How did you know that?"

Warren shrugged. "It's true of most beginners. Fortunately, with zeebiti, the solution is simple. The way to keep Boo from getting out of control is for you to be calm and confident. She'll only get out of control if she gets anxious. She'll only feel anxious if you're anxious. Get it?"

"So if I'm calm and in control, everything will go fine?"

"You got it."

"I can do that. In fact, there are few things I do better."

"Okay. We'll see. Let's start with you and Boo getting to know each other. You're going to let her eat a carrot out of your hand, and then you're going to stroke her head."

Stella felt a shock of trepidation at the cool touch of the zeebiti's moist lips on her palm, but she forced herself to squelch her fear. Braver after a moment, she reached her hand up to stroke Boo's wide snout. The animal snorted and jerked her head back.

"Whoa, Boo!" Warren grabbed the reins.

"I'm sorry!" Stella cried, leaping back.

"It's okay. You just moved too suddenly. She needs to be able to see where your hands are. Try again."

Stella took a step forward.

"Deep breath. Calm down. No fear, remember?"

"I remember."

Warren took Stella's hand and guided it up to the side of the zeebiti's head and she felt the furred skin move under her fingers.

"See how her eye followed your hand?"

"Yes."

"Okay." Warren let go of her hand. "Just keep stroking her. I'm sure you've heard that old saw about horses, 'You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink?'"

"Of course."

"Well, it's mostly true of zeebiti too. Zeebiti are not as high-strung as I've heard Terran horses are but the same rules apply. You can't make an animal do what you want by mistreating her. Treat her in the way you would treat a person for whom you have great respect and you'll have no problems. You should have great respect for a zeebiti because, mishandled, she has enough weight and strength to kill you."

"How am I supposed to not feel fear when you tell me something like that?"

"Go back to Rule Number One. If you are calm and in control, Boo will be calm also."

"It's a paradox."

"No, it's not. Respect the zeebiti but don't fear it. You, not the animal, are in control. But that doesn't mean you can mistreat her either. You must respect Boo to control her."

"Respect, but control."

"In a nutshell. Now, let me help you mount."

"You like zeebiti, don't you?" Stella asked when she was safely in the saddle, astounded at her height off the ground and the sudden startling sense of a new perspective. The stable yard looked smaller, the world bigger.

"Only thing I do like," Warren murmured, circling behind Boo's rump to her other flank and double-checking Stella's footing in the stirrup.

"You're almost like a different person."

Warren frowned up at her. "You don't know me, lady. Now, here's the reins. Hold them together in both hands, but loosely, fingers like this." He positioned her fingers so she would have the best control of the reins independently but still be able to work them together.

"Turning her just takes practice and common sense. If you want to go to the right, pull gently on the right rein. Left, left rein. We're not going to be doing anything more fancy than going straight at a walk, so don't worry about it. If you need Boo to stop, pull gently toward you on both reins. Any questions?"

"Not right now."

"Good." Warren untied his mount, a blue-and-silver-striped colt named Oreon, and swung himself onto his back.

"Okay," he said, "give Boo a light pull on the right rein, toward me."

Stella pulled and to her delight the zeebiti's head turned and its body followed.

"See," Warren said, "how easy that was?"

All Stella could manage in response to that was the grin that had affixed itself to her face. She had too much else to concentrate on.

THEY RODE OUT of the stable yard, Boo giving an expressive snort as she tailed Oreon. Warren set a course to the south, along the east side of the river. He didn't know if Stella was being followed or was merely paranoid, but she had refused to cross the river at the regular ferry crossing below the resort. Her landing craft and the device she wanted stowed were both on the west side of the river. So was the Tyson Ranch and the cabin where he intended to hide the device.

Fortunately, about fourteen kilometers downriver, a barge belonging to Tyson Ranch was tied up on the west side of the river. Warren planned to borrow it to ferry themselves and the zeebiti across the water. Stella had assured him she could use a transporter tie-in with her landing craft to transport Warren across the river to get the barge.

The only fly in the ointment that he could see was that the plan left Stella in charge of the zeebiti for the handful of minutes it would take him to pole the barge back to the east side of the river. He hadn't defined this as a problem until he had observed her naiveté in the stable yard. But there was little he could do about it now.

He had no intention of backing out of the bargain they had struck. His job was to guard her life while she was on Otung and keep her secret equipment—whatever it was—safe and hidden.

In compensation for his services, she would transport him without charge to the nearest open Spaceportal and transfer 10,000 credits to an account he would establish in his name

once he was off Otung. Warren swore, if it killed him, he would keep his end of the bargain.

Warren liked the planet of Otung itself—the secret places and moods of the only home he had ever known—but leaving it seemed the only solution to his problems. In his mind, he saw again the moment that had changed the lives of the Tysons forever.

It had happened on a clear cloudless day when the air was crisp with fall. Warren's brother Jake, age seventeen, and their father Zane had yoked Hogwarth and Peelu, the ranch's two strongest zebiti stallions, to their steel-bladed plow. No mechanical technology was allowed on Otung so Zane had had to make do with an animal-drawn plow fitted with steel blades imported at great expense from Alpha Centauri.

Once they'd hitched the team, Jake noticed a loose moldboard. Warren, just twelve, watched as the two older men, on opposite sides of the plow, reached their arms and heads under its wooden beam to tighten down various fittings.

Without warning, a violent shaking of the earth centered under Warren's feet. The zebiti crashed forward in a panic. The harnessed plow went with them. In that split second of time, Jake threw himself with all the force he could muster under the traces securing the plow

to the zebiti. He bowled his father backward, thrusting him away from the leading coulter blade.

The plow, careening through the air at a madly tilted angle, crossed over much of Jake's body without harm. But the share, on touching down, sheared across Jake's right calf, slicing through the bone.

Warren looked on in horror as his brother bled, frozen in place, unable to help as his father quickly applied a life-saving tourniquet. It all happened so quickly...but in Warren's mind's eye, he could see the accident, over and over.

Although it was months before Jake walked again, he did recover enough through Zane's careful nursing to get around and work the ranch. But by then, Jake and Zane were bound together in a way that left Warren out. They shared a father-son bond he could never be a part of, a bond of companionship and respect he was not welcomed into.

Warren took to wandering the washes and canyons of the ranch accompanied by his best and only friend his spirited zebiti colt Andrew. He knew he felt different around the zebiti, and it had been astute of Stella to notice it, but perhaps not so astute to mention it. For one thing, it had sent him on this loathsome trip down memory lane.

The work arrangement he took such issue with hadn't taken place until two years later when he was a frustrated and sullen fourteen-year-old. Jake, through his own stupidity, fell deathly ill with a fresh infection in the maimed limb.

Zane, terrified Jake would die, sought help from his old Settlement pal and owner of Hacienda Otung, Olmstead Neville. Neville, ever keen to his own interests, agreed that in return for a ten-year term of Jake's and Warren's free full-time labor, he would pay for the finest off-Otung medical care for Jake and guarantee his recovery. Desperate, Zane signed the contract on his sons' behalf, and Warren, too young to grasp its implications at first, went to work at the resort.

Warren was now nineteen, having completed a mere half of the unpaid indenture. But he would be damned if he gave up another five years of his life. The sweetness of his adolescence had been denied to him, and he felt that denial as keenly in his soul as Jake had felt the share slice through his leg.

But now the hour of deliverance was at hand in the form of this tiny frenetic woman who had sought him out with her own bizarre agenda. Warren didn't care what she was doing on Otung. He didn't care what her equipment might be. He didn't care if she was as nutty as a fruitcake. She was his ticket to freedom.

THE CARCASS OF the village mongrel Jake and Ma'at had observed the night before still lay unmoved beside one of the posts that marked Topotuk's village boundary. Sly circled the dog, eyeing it with forensic interest, but didn't touch it. Dani and Ma'at watched his movements while Jake and Lindie hung back.

"Well?" Dani demanded.

"Without a sensor array, Dani, it's difficult to say what killed it. I don't see a single external injury or evidence of one, like a wound or blood. Nothing that looks like chronic disease either, such as hair loss or weight loss. No obvious infestations."

"Any wild guesses?"

"Doctor," Ma'at said, "perhaps an extremely rapid cause of death such as electrocution was responsible."

"It's a possibility but there should be burn marks," Sly said. "I agree with Ma'at though, that whatever it was, it killed the animal rapidly."

"What about decomposition?" Jake's voice sounded strangled.

Sly bent down and peered as closely as he dared at the dog. He straightened back up and grinned. "I'm happy to report there appear to be the beginnings of rot in this corpse. It's slow but it's there."

"You physicians take such a ghoulish attitude," Dani joked, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

"We do our best."

"Let's proceed." Dani gestured. "Sly?"

Sly faced the village and led off. The team passed through a barricade of thick posts and made their way along a beaten-down dirt track that formed the main thoroughfare of the village. The clustered houses were squat rectangles built of mud blocks with small spaces left open in the thick walls to serve as doors and windows. The flat roofs were formed of cross-hatched dried corn stalks. No decorations adorned the houses.

The track led to an open square that had plainly been at the heart of village life. It would have been less ghastly if the square had been deserted. Instead, sprawled motionless on the ground were humanoid bodies and, mixed among them, the bodies of domesticated animals.

"Gods." Sly turned his back on the scene and raised both hands. Everyone stopped.

"Dani, I don't know what killed these people, but before we go any farther, we need to be aware of the dangers here. If some unknown disease killed them, we could contract it. Even if it wasn't a disease, the decomposing bodies themselves are a danger to health. We don't have masks or gloves or formaldehyde or septic treatment of any kind."

"What do you think, Sly?"

"Much as I don't want to, we're going to have to investigate. If this thing is airborne, we'll have already been exposed. But, if it's not, I don't want more than two of us going in there. We've got our riding gloves and those will have to suffice for now. "

"All right, Sly, you and I will—"

"I'd rather take Ma'at."

Dani raised an eyebrow and tried not to look offended. "Very well. Ma'at, if you will accompany Sly. The rest of us will wait here."

Dani knew and trusted her officers. But she barely knew Lindie and Jake. Surreptitiously, she assessed their states of mind. Lindie's face expressed a mixture of curiosity and consternation. Jake's had turned an unhealthy shade of chartreuse. Dani felt sad and concerned for the young man. Unlike the rest of them, Jake knew the people of Topotuk personally. No doubt some had been friends.

Dani turned her attention back to Ma'at and Sly. They had reached the piled tangle of bodies, and although she couldn't hear their words, she saw them speaking as they gestured at one corpse and then another.

Neither touched anything. Then moved away from the square and made a reconnaissance of the houses, entering each for only a few seconds. In less than ten minutes, they came back to the waiting group.

"Any survivors?" Dani asked.

"None that we located, Captain," Ma'at answered. "It would appear that everyone in the village, including babies, was attending some kind of activity in the square."

"There are dead dogs and some kind of local fowl in the houses, but no people," Sly added.

"Analysis?"

"The only exterior evidence of injury is burns on some of the victims and traces of vomited blood on the ground. Otherwise, it looks eerily like everyone is simply taking a nap."

"Time of death?"

"Very hard to tell but, based on the state of decomposition which we have reason to suspect was slowed down by some agent or other, I'd say the night before last. That's without using any valid tools of analysis, Dani, so it's a wild guess."

"Jake," Dani turned to the stunned young man, "what time did the Paku come through here?"

"They said...they said—"

"Think back, Jake. Take your time."

Jake swallowed hard and shut his eyes. "They said they camped on the high ridge south of here and passed by a few hours before dawn yesterday. Only one man approached Topotuk. He was the courtesy runner, sent to pay a token friendly visit to any village whose territory is entered. He had this tale of death and that is when the Paku came on to the resort."

"They made good time," Dani said.

Jake said, "They run, Captain. They don't walk."

"In any event, we know that before dawn yesterday, these people were dead. I hope we can figure out what happened to them."

"I don't even have a theory yet, Dani. It looks like the kind of damage a stun bomb would do. You know, kill the living but leave everything else eerily intact."

"What about a virulent disease?"

"An epidemic might be able to act this fast but I've never heard of one that killed across species indiscriminately. I think the only way we can possibly tell what happened is by autopsy."

"The zeebiti," Jake said suddenly, as if roused from sleep. "Where are the zeebiti?" He turned and limped off to the right, the others following him. Behind the row of houses forming the northern edge of the village, was a spacious post-and-rail enclosure.

Sprawled across its trampled ground lay the bloated, blue-grey forms of a dozen zeebiti. They looked as if they had been felled where they stood. The corral, floodlit by the unflinching brilliance of the early morning sun was made doubly unnatural by the hush that reigned over it.

Jake stood shaking his head, and Dani could see he was shaken to his foundation. "Where are the carnivores and the scavengers? They should be feasting. The karicats, the hycos, the buzzards? Everything must be dead. Even the flies and the ants must be dead. Everything. It's unimaginable." He turned toward them. His eyes were wide. The blood drained from his face in a rush, leaving it dead white.

"Whoa, boy!" Dani leaped forward and caught Jake as he fainted. She eased his body to the ground.

"I'm sure it's emotional trauma," Sly diagnosed, kneeling beside him. "He'll come to in a moment."

"He knew these people," Lindie reminded them.

"I know." Dani stood. "Suggestions, anyone?"

Sly said, "Scavengers or no, we have to dispose of these bodies as quickly and as sanitarily as possible."

Ma'at nodded hir agreement. "They pose a potentially catastrophic hazard to all living creatures on this planet, Captain."

"Mass burial?" Dani asked.

"How are we going to do that? We don't have any equipment!" Frustration was plain in Sly's voice.

"Fire," Ma'at proposed. "It is the only purifier we can put rapidly into effect under such primitive circumstances."

"A good, if gruesome, idea," Sly seconded. "It will take less time and involve less contact with the bodies."

"What about the houses?" Lindie asked.

"Burn everything."

Jake's eyes fluttered open and he struggled to sit up. Sly, a supportive hand on his back, said, "Take it easy, Jake. You blacked out."

"I'm all right."

Dani searched the young man's wan determined face and came to a decision.

"Okay, people, let's get to work. Keep contact to a minimum and make sure you have your gloves on. We'll burn those, too, when we're done."

Mounds of drying alfalfa from the village's croplands were gathered and piled as near the bodies as Dani, Ma'at and Sly dared to approach. The corral, too, was layered high with the feed grass. Some of the strands were brought to Jake who twisted and tied them into thick torches. They would use the alfalfa to light the wood they had gathered from breaking down the fence of the corral as well as a well near the center of the village. Lindie walked back to their campsite to retrieve tins of cooking fuel from the panniers.

When she got back, the others set Jake's torches ablaze and threw them, like javelins, at the layers of alfalfa. The alfalfa caught and soon the wood began a slow burn. It would be hours before everything was gone, as the first flares of fire died to a light orange glow.

To finish the deed, Dani, Ma'at and Sly tossed more firebrands onto the corn-thatched roofs of the village huts. Mud would never burn, but they hoped it would be enough to destroy any corpses inside.

AKNEE, AFTER GETTING Alan to swear he would not hold him responsible, helped Alan saddle Korkorba, one of the gentlest zeebiti mares in the stable yard. They had been careful to hide until Warren and Stella set off. Aknee even made Alan wait a few more minutes on the outside chance Warren would return for something.

After Alan had mounted, Aknee whispered a few remarks into Korkorba's ear, at which she gave him a soulful look, and then Aknee prayed a short incantation over Alan before letting him leave.

"It's not as if I'm not smart enough to manage her," Alan hissed in annoyance from his seat high over Aknee's head.

"Smarts don't matter with zeebiti," Aknee corrected, "just patience. I prayed for luck. You gonna need it." The teenager gave a slap to Korkorba's flank and the zeebiti lurched off toward the open gate. Almost as if she knew where they were going, Korkorba marched placidly up the track leading to the top of the plateau, the same route Warren and Stella had taken. Heck, Alan thought, for all he knew Aknee had told her whom to follow.

Alan had eavesdropped on Stella and Warren's conversation the afternoon before by plastering himself behind the trunk of a walnut tree a short distance up the hill from Stella's table. He had missed some of Stella's low-voiced comments but caught all of Warren's responses, which had made it simple enough to put together their plans.

For the day's disguise, Alan had chosen a working cowboy's getup. When he bought the costume from a trader in antiquities on Spaceportal Two he had made sure the denim jeans were torn, the boots scuffed, the straw hat shredding apart, and the gingham shirt brown with old sweat. A blue handkerchief, just as filthy as the shirt, circled his neck.

Rusty spurs had been available but he had passed on them. To complete the image, he had scoured his cheeks and neck with dirt and wore his hat crammed low over his forehead. The hat scratched and the dirt itched but he considered it all in the line of duty.

Korkorba stopped when she reached the plateau, waiting for directions. Alan tugged on her right rein and Korkorba turned south. Small in the distance but plainly visible, Alan saw Stella's petite khaki-clad back jostled by every step of her zeebiti. A dark smear was all that was visible of Warren who was riding in front of her.

After twenty minutes of hyped-up anxiety, during which neither Stella nor Warren looked behind them, Alan relaxed. As time went by, his mind wandered off. In fact, he was deeply engaged in weighing the relative merits of the faculty at one of his university choices versus the high-tech equipment at another when Warren abruptly departed the trail and started to tack his zeebiti down the slope toward the river. Stella sat waiting in mid-trail.

Alan yanked Korkorba to a stop, his heart racing. It was apparent, even to his untrained eye, that Stella had never been in a saddle before. Which meant she didn't know how to manipulate the zeebiti down the slope and Warren would have to go back for her. When he did, he would see Alan.

Desperately, Alan searched the terrain for a place to hide himself and Korkorba. There wasn't any such place. Finally, he decided he should ride forward. It was less suspicious

than being stopped dead in the trail. He gave Korkorba a gentle slap and she started to walk again.

When Alan came up behind Stella, she heard him and turned in the saddle, her eyes wide in alarm. Alan tilted his head low and touched the brim of his hat to hide his face as Korkorba plodded slowly around Stella's halted zeebiti. Stella sputtered but didn't say anything Alan could make out.

Out of the corner of his eye, Alan saw Warren tramping back up the hill, a look of suspicion creasing his features. Alan pretended to take no notice of Warren and rode on as though he had real business down the trail.

"WHO IN THE hell was that?" Warren bellowed at Stella.

"Long story."

Warren frowned. "I thought this trip was top secret."

"Don't worry, it is. That man has been following me for six months, Warren."

"Six months!"

"He probably knows more about what I'm doing than I do. Although he certainly doesn't show it."

"Do you want me to do something about him?"

"You mean something violent?"

"Whatever."

"No. Let's just keep an eye on him. He won't be able to cross the river."

Warren grinned. "True."

"Help me off this damned animal, okay?"

"Her name is Boo. She's not a damned animal."

"Right. Respect to control. I forgot."

After she'd dismounted, Warren rode Boo down the slope to the riverbank. When he reached Oreon, he dismounted and gazed back up the slope. Stella was walking down, her eyes on her feet, minding her step.

When Stella arrived, Warren placed the zeebitis' reins in her hand. "All right, now," he instructed, "all you have to do is hold their reins while I'm across the river. The barge is tied over there, about 800 meters up. See it?"

Stella nodded. Upriver, a log raft bobbed against the brown of the water. She could just make out the flat wooden deck and railing.

"Good. Have you set the coordinates?"

"Yes. But it's a guess."

Warren scowled.

"Don't worry," Stella snapped, made irritable by the desert heat, her ineffectual tail, and the nearness of the zeebiti, "you're not going to end up in the river or anything. At worst, you'll have to walk a few hundred meters to the barge. Are you ready?"

Warren rubbed sweaty palms on the legs of his jeans and licked his lips. "Believe it or not," he said, "I've never done this before. Just read about it."

"You really are backwoods, you know. Never having transported is as unlikely as never having ridden in an elevator."

"Never been in an elevator, either." Warren's voice cracked.

"Look," Stella soothed, "it's normal to feel a little scared."

"I'm not scared! Just press the damn buttons or whatever and get on with it. I just don't know why you couldn't have crossed at the resort."

"Warren, we discussed that *ad nauseam*. It would have been too easy to tail me."

"You've got a tail anyway." Warren nodded his chin toward the top of the plateau, where Alan had come back into view.

"Forget about him! If he was a professional, I'd be dead already. I don't know what he wants but he's clearly incapable of getting it."

"Whatever you say, lady. You're the boss."

"Glad we got that straightened out," Stella retorted sarcastically. "Okay, here goes."

With one hand, Stella held both sets of zeebiti reins. With the other, she twisted the dial of the pocket-sized device that allowed her to tie-in to *The Susan's* circuits. With a hum and a luminous flash of sparkling lights, Warren trembled into waves of light and vanished.

"So far, so good," Stella murmured, watching the far bank of the river for his reappearance. It wasn't that he didn't. In fact, she saw him reappear at the same instant she felt a snap of the reins in her palm that seared her flesh and yanked her body upward so hard and fast that her shoulder screamed in agony as her muscles tore.

She spun around, her hat flying off her head, the reins gone from her hand. Oreon, eyes wide in panic, was rearing up, his hoofs flailing at the air. Boo, nostrils flaring, was backing away.

Without thinking, Stella leaped for the reins flapping above her head and Oreon's front hooves came down with crushing ferocity, one on each of her shoulders. Screaming in pain, Stella buckled onto the sand beneath the raging animal.

In freeze-frame motion, she saw the zeebiti's powerful hind legs bunching to leap. The massive body skimmed over her tucked frame, a spray of sand blasting her face as its rear hooves touched down and shook the earth above her head.

A sensation of searing heat suffused her skull. Instinctively, she reached up her arms to touch the top of her head. Pain, like that of a thousand knives, shot through her chest and limbs. The sensation, unreal in its intensity, left her breathless and she stopped trying to move.

She heard Warren shouting in the distance and her inept stalker screaming, but she couldn't make sense of their words. Concentrating on the sounds made her head pound so she stopped doing it. She stared up at the blue sky, stunned into immobility.

Funny that she'd never heard her stalker's voice before. It was rather high-pitched, but pleasant.

Funny that the zeebiti weren't any more familiar with transporter effects than Warren. Of course, she asked herself, why would they be? They probably had never been in an elevator either! She pictured the bulky bovine Boo stuffed into the tiny confines of an elevator and started to giggle. But giggling was painful too, so she stopped.

Funny how blue the sky was over her head. Funny, how it was shading from blue to dark orchid. Even funnier, the orchid thickened until it was an inky black that swooped down and enfolded her in its fluttering arms.

Stella closed her eyes and didn't think any more funny thoughts.

Chapter Five

ONCE JAKE'S TASK of tying firebrands was done, he limped back to camp, dragging his leg with the spent energy of an old man. Lindie followed him at a discreet distance. Lunch would be needed to restore the energies of the team, especially Jake's, and she took it upon herself to prepare it. Dani, Ma'at and Sly remained in the village, keeping vigil over the building fire.

When Lindie arrived, she saw Jake had settled himself on a rock. He clutched a water flask in one hand, a good indication she thought, of the choice to go on living. He had been staring into space when she first arrived, but now his eyes followed her as she moved around making lunch.

Lindie ignored the doused campfire—there had been enough fire for one morning—and spread a cloth atop the grass some distance away from the fire ring. She sliced a dark heavy loaf of bread into rounds, spread potted meat on the slices, and quartered all of their remaining supply of fresh apples.

"The headman of Topotuk was named *Laka-no-boka*," Jake said out of the blue. "I didn't see his body, but he must have been there."

"Yes, I'm sure."

"He was a friend of my father. They knew each other for many years and when—"

Lindie kept quiet, setting plates and knives out on the cloth.

"—when the plow sliced my leg apart, it was *Laka-no-boka* who came to my father's aid and saved my leg."

Lindie was loath to point out the obvious, particularly under the circumstances, but she didn't know if the shock had unbalanced Jake's mind. "You don't have your leg, Jake."

"I was crippled by the plow," Jake clarified, "but I had my leg. It was two years after the plow accident that I lost my leg."

"The same leg?" Lindie's brows went up.

"Yep. Good thing really, or I wouldn't be able to walk at all." He grinned but his attempt at humor was too thin under the circumstances to relax either Lindie or himself.

"What happened?" She asked.

"I went out on my own to hunt lkotni in the Ozkna mountains." He pointed and Lindie followed the sweep of his hand. The Ozkna formed a seemingly impenetrable mass of peaks and valleys on the southwestern horizon.

"Lkotni?"

"Mountain deer. They're cousins of the zeebiti, only bigger."

"Bigger? Sounds like you were trying to prove something."

"I was. I wanted to prove I could do everything with my maimed leg, not just farm work."

"To yourself."

"To myself," Jake said. "To everybody."

"I'm guessing something went wrong."

"Yeah." Jake's eyes looked into a private distance. "I brought down a lkotni, all right, but it was a pregnant doe. When I gutted her, I was so horrified when the half-formed fetus spilled out that I slipped on the blood and gashed myself in my bad leg. It was a long deep cut along the tibia."

"You couldn't walk home?"

"I started out but I didn't make it. That night, the weather turned cold, colder than usual for the time of year. I fell sick, the leg became infected, and apparently I wandered. It was days before my father and *Laka-no-boka* found me. By then, I was delirious with fever. I didn't even know who they were."

"Why would you kill a doe?"

"It was a trick of the twilight and the density of the trees. I thought I saw antlers."

"Both sexes of the zeebiti have antlers."

"But not lkotni. Only bucks, and their rack is substantial."

"You wanted to see antlers then."

Jake took a swig of water and made no reply to her insinuation. "*Laka-no-boka* broke the fever with herbs but the leg remained infected."

"So he and your father amputated?" Under such primitive circumstances, it had to have been a daring and dangerous, not to mention hideously painful, task.

"No. I resisted the idea. So *Laka-no-boka* sent to the south, below Dark Canyon, for some special high-potency herbs. They cost him two zeebiti."

"A very generous man. But you were not cured?"

"The infection cleared for a few days but then it came back stronger than ever and began eating away my flesh. We could all see the bone. That's when *Laka-no-boka* said he could do no more for me because the infection was beyond the physical."

"Interesting. Was it?"

"Was it what?"

"Beyond the physical."

"I don't know." Jake scowled. "I have great respect for the Yutunda but I'm not Yutunda. *Laka-no-boka* offered to do the Pobwasaka, the six-day intensive curing ritual."

"I take it you didn't do it."

Jake shrugged. "My father didn't think I would live six days."

"You're here. Something happened."

"My father made a deal with Olmstead Neville."

"The resort owner?"

"Right. Neville had me transported to the Medical Center on Alpha Centauri."

"Was that where they amputated?"

"Yes. Immediately, I might add. They created a custom prosthesis and gave me physical therapy. I got well and I learned to walk again."

"But something still bothers you," Lindie intuited.

Jake shifted uneasily. "Something still bothers me? Where do you get that?"

"I can hear it in your voice."

"I don't even know why I told you this. I never, and I mean *never*, talk about it."

"You're upset. We're all upset over what we saw this morning and what we had to do. These are people you knew personally, Jake."

"Yes, and none of them deserved to die like this. If it kills me, I'm going to find out who perpetrated this slaughter. I owe that to *Laka-no-boka*. But even the shock doesn't explain why I started babbling to you."

Lindie made no reply, intentionally focusing on arranging the apple quarters on plates. Jake pushed himself off the rock and limped over to sit on the ground cloth Lindie had spread out. He bent his knee, forcing his prosthesis under his opposite hip and leaned toward her.

"What do you do when you're not vacationing, Lindie?"

"I'm not vacationing, Jake." She looked him in the eye. "I'm a psychotherapist."

"Well," he said, straightening up in satisfaction, "that explains it."

"Does it?"

"You bet it does."

"You haven't told me what remains to trouble you about the Ikotni incident."

"Now that I know you're a professional, I'll have to give it some thought."

"All right," she said, "you do that."

NOT HAMPERED BY the difficulties inherent in maneuvering a log raft across strong river currents, Alan reached Stella first. Bright red blood streamed from a deep gash in her scalp, saturating her hair and soaking liberally into the sand. Alan whipped the dirty handkerchief from his neck, wadded it, and pressed it against the wound. The handkerchief was sodden in seconds and his hand ran warm and wet.

He pulled the handkerchief away and wondered what to do. The gash, even seen through her hair, was frighteningly wide. In desperation, he unbuttoned his even dirtier shirt, squared it into a thick pad and covered the gash, praying the blood would clot.

To apply maximum pressure, he settled his knees into the sand and leaned forward, the muscles of his thighs squeezing the makeshift bandage firmly against the top of her head. It wasn't a comfortable stance but it was the best way he could think of to keep the shirt in place.

He guessed sitting her upright would slow the flow of blood but without any way to determine if she had neck or spinal injuries, he was afraid to move her. Besides, she seemed to be unconscious.

"Stella," he whispered, staring down at her upturned face. Her eyes were firmly closed but her features gave the odd impression she had been smiling before she passed out.

In all of Alan's fantasies of when and how and where he would come face to face with Stella Farnsworth and reveal his purpose, he had not remotely imagined this. Most frequently, he saw himself in a dramatic face-off with her in his uncle's lab.

Like a comic heroine, Stella would put up a touching but unconvincing argument for her ownership of the FDet and then acquiesce to the clear superiority of Alan's claim. He, triumphant but not gloating, would leave the scene, FDet in tow. Justice would be served. No one would get hurt.

Unlike his father, Alan couldn't bring himself to see Stella as evil. But whether she was the devil incarnate or not, at the moment she was bleeding to death and Alan felt a human obligation to help her. His issue with her could wait, a state of affairs which left him feeling happily relieved.

The zeebiti, after bolting, had galloped a short distance upriver and now stood contentedly chomping leaves off the low bushes along the river's edge. Korkorba, also loose, had wandered over and joined them.

Alan heard a heavy thud and saw a splash of water as Warren leaped ashore from the barge. He sprinted, docking line in hand, toward a rotting post which listed toward the water, and threw a bowline hitch around it. The barge drifted downstream past the bollard and then shivered and bounced, yanked taut as the bowline caught. Warren watched it for the briefest of seconds and then barreled toward Stella at high speed.

"Holy shit!" He shouted at Alan. "Is she dead?"

"No. Unconscious," Alan called back. Warren was still a few paces away.

"Stella!" Warren bellowed at the top of his lungs and plunged into the sand beside her. He grabbed her by both shoulders and shook her.

"Jeezus!" Alan screeched. "What do you think you're doing? Her neck could be broken, you frigging jerk!" Alan's fist sailed through the air, missing Warren, but the movement rocked Stella's head.

"Oh, God," Stella moaned, "oh, God."

"Stella?" Alan loomed over her face, bracing his arms by digging his palms into the sand on either side of her head.

"Both of you," she hissed weakly, not opening her eyes, "just stop shouting."

Alan glared at Warren and the look of mutual hostility was returned.

"We'll stop, Stella." Warren scowled at the man whose name nobody knew. "How hurt is she?"

Alan stripped off his shirt and pressed the cloth hard against her head. "She's lost a lot of blood from her head. The zeebiti's hoof sliced her scalp open."

"Flesh wound or kick?"

"Flesh wound, I think. Let's hope he didn't actually crush her skull."

Warren's face was grim. "Have you found any other injuries?"

"I don't know if there's anything internal or structural." Alan's voice turned angry. "But you should never shake someone. So far, I've just tried to stop the bleeding."

"Good thinking," he said. "What about shock?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything beyond the first aid I learned when I was ten."

"I didn't even get that," Warren said. "Just the experience of living here. All right then, let's give her another minute. She did speak a little so she's probably going to be okay. I'll go get supplies from Oreon's panniers."

Warren stood and Alan's eyes followed him. "Since we don't know anything, maybe we'd both better start praying."

A look of bitter hatred came into Warren's eyes and he rubbed his hand hard over his chin. "Not much point in that," he said as he trudged off.

LUNCH WAS A solemn affair, everyone lost in their own thoughts. Sly nibbled at his potted meat sandwich, putting it down frequently and gazing off at the muddy ribbon of water which gurgled and eddied soundlessly far away in the valley. Dani ate with

an almost rabid hunger.

Lindie fiddled with her food, twisting her sandwich this way and that and staring at it as if she couldn't remember what it was. Jake had turned down a sandwich altogether but crunched, with grim determination, on apple slices.

Ma'at, alone of the group, did not take out what emotions s/he may have felt on hir lunch. S/he ate with hir usual dignified patience.

Dani's hands were filthy and her face sooty with smoke and grime. Tears brought on by smoke had left gray tracks down her blackened cheeks. Her companions looked much the same. What she read in their eyes was characteristic to each.

In Sly's, annoyance at defeat; in Jake's, a restless grief; in Lindie's, sadness; in Ma'at's, concentration. Whatever emotion showed, each person's eyes were bloodshot with smoke and red-rimmed with exhaustion.

Dani broke the long silence. "Lighten up, people," she commanded. "We did what we had to do."

No one responded to her command.

"That's an order," Dani barked, looking meaningfully first at Ma'at and then at Sly. She couldn't do much for their emotions, but she could rally her troops.

"Dani," Sly started tearing the remainder of his sandwich into little bits which he hurled into the air and watched smack into the grass a short distance from his feet, "I don't know what killed those people."

"So you said, Sly. No one's blaming you. There isn't much to go on."

"Damn, but I don't know why I didn't bring my equipment! My sensor array at least."

"Self-recrimination, Doctor, will not cause the equipment to appear."

"Damn it, Ma'at, there are times when your stoicism is not the response I'm looking for!"

"Be that as it may, Doctor—"

"People," Dani said wearily, "as we do not have the equipment, I suggest we start using our heads to assess the situation."

"Maybe," Sly retorted acidly, "Ma'at has already figured it out."

"Unfortunately, I have not. However, we have some facts. We remain in need of others."

"Are you suggesting further investigation, Ma'at?" Dani asked.

"Yes, although I do not think this is the time to carry it out."

"You have a hunch."

"Nhavans do not have hunches, Captain."

"Hunch, hypothesis, what the hell difference does it make?" Sly said. "You do have a working hypothesis, right?"

"Yes, Doctor. That is correct. Part of my hypothesis is that it may be unsafe for us to remain here. We are, in fact, fortunate not to have been killed last night or, frankly, at any time."

"Well then," Dani bustled up from her place on the ground, "we'd better get packing and head back to the resort."

"Captain Forrest," Jake said, "the Tyson Ranch is much closer."

"Where is it?" Ma'at asked.

"The ranch house is about twenty-two kilometers southeast of here, on a bluff overlooking the river. Right here, we're probably less than nine kilometers from the boundary of the property."

"Ma'at?"

"It *sounds* safe enough."

"You're not suggesting whatever wiped out Topotuk might have—"

"S/he's not suggesting anything, Jake," Dani soothed, giving Ma'at a warning glance. She did not want to see their young guide pushed too far in one day. "We appreciate your hospitality."

"Good. We can shower and grab a meal and get the zeebiti watered and fed. I'm sure my father and Olive will be happy to put us up for the night."

"Thank you, Jake. I assume there are no objections?"

"I'd love a shower and a hot meal," Lindie said.

"And a bed," Sly grunted. "I'm not used to sleeping on the ground anymore. Puts cricks in my back."

Dani rolled her eyes and the barest hint of a smile played around Ma'at's compressed lips.

"Well, it might be funny to you two," Sly growled, catching both of them, "but wait until you get to be my age."

"We'll wait, Sly," Dani said, standing, a smile in evidence. Sly, one last piece of sandwich clutched in his hand, raised his arm and aimed it at Dani's head. Dani ducked, but the tidbit, practically weightless, fell short of its intended target.

"THIS WAS JUST a day trip," Warren said. A flask of water, three bottles of juice, a clean shirt, a pair of scissors, a woven strap, and a bedroll were cradled in his arms. "We'll have to make do with what we've got."

"Any medical supplies?"

"Snakebite kit. Hip flask of whiskey."

"Useful," Alan muttered sarcastically.

Warren eyed him. "Seeing as we're stuck with each other for awhile, we might as well use names." He started to unwind the strap. "I'm Warren."

"I know. I'm Alan."

"You know? You don't have to be at Hacienda Otung long to hear about the notorious Warren Tyson, do you?"

"Nope," Alan said cheerfully. "About three days tops."

"Alan," Stella mumbled.

"I'm here, Stella." Alan loomed over Stella's face, still holding his position behind her head. His thigh muscles were cramping but he didn't want to complain.

Stella's eyes flickered open. "Do you have to...hang over me...like that?"

"I guess not," Alan slid back onto his haunches, feeling relief in his muscles. The shift eased off some of the pressure on the shirt padding the crown of Stella's skull. Gingerly, Alan peeled it away. The flow of blood had ceased. He saw where it had thickened to seal the wound, forming a dull gluey line. Stella moaned and closed her eyes again.

"That's why I brought the strap," Warren expounded, kneeling beside Alan. "We can crop her hair, wad up this fresh shirt, and tie it down with the strap."

"Okay," Alan said, scooting back in the sand, revealing the wound, which Warren saw for the first time. It was a bumpy ridge lined with the maroon-black of clotted blood.

"Ugh," Warren grunted. "Here's the scissors. You do it."

"Sorry, Stella," Alan apologized, chopping away a matted mass of her hair. Stella made no response. Warren popped open one of the juice bottles, took a large swallow to lower the level, and poured in a generous helping of whiskey.

"Stella," he bossed, "open your eyes."

Stella raised her lids with effort, as though they weighed several tons.

"You've lost some blood. You need to drink this juice but I don't want you to move. I'll just put a drop or two in your mouth at a time. All you have to do is swallow. Can you do that?"

"Think so."

True to his word, Warren dripped the juice little by little into Stella's mouth, giving her a break after a few minutes.

"Orange. Tasty."

"Yeah," Warren said, "it's got a little painkiller in it too. Let's do some more." He repeated the procedure and Stella started to look both more relaxed and more alive. When Stella had closed her eyes again to rest, Warren handed the whiskey flask to Alan.

"I don't need any," Alan sputtered, even though the idea held a certain appeal.

"It's not for you, jackass, it's for Stella. Pour it on her head but don't waste any. Whiskey is antiseptic."

Alan splashed the liquor across the wound and Stella gasped. "That burns!"

"Good," Warren answered, unperturbed. "That means it got where it was supposed to go."

"My feet," Stella whimpered. "I can't feel them."

Both men noticed for the first time that Stella's legs were curled back under her thighs. "Did Oreon kick you in the legs?" Warren asked, his heart pounding.

"No. I crumpled when I fell."

"All right," Warren said. "I'm going to straighten your legs but it's probably going to hurt. You tell me if it hurts too much. Alan, I'll need your help."

With Alan raising her hips off the sand, Warren shifted Stella's right foot, and then her left, out from under her thighs. Stella broke into a sweat but didn't say anything.

"Okay." Warren sighed in relief. "No injury there."

"Just pins and needles," Stella said.

"The way you fell," Alan analyzed, "and how petite you are kept you from getting stepped on. Getting stepped on could have been—"

"Can it, Alan," Warren interrupted. "Okay, Stella, what else hurts?"

"I can't move my arms," she admitted. "I don't know why." Frustrated tears brimmed in her eyes.

Alan felt a stab of fear. "Can you move your legs?"

In response, Stella flapped each foot out to the side.

"That doesn't make anatomical sense," Alan said. "You can't be paralyzed in the arms but able to move your feet. At least I don't think so."

"Then it's not paralysis," Warren deduced. "Can you move your fingers?"

Stella tapped her index fingers against the sand and the men breathed a joint sigh of relief.

"Do your arms hurt?" Alan asked.

"Yes. But my shoulders, chest and back hurt more."

"Stella," Warren said, "this isn't personal but I'm going to unbutton your shirt and take a look, okay?"

"Okay."

Warren unbuttoned Stella's shirt, pulled the tail from the waistband of Stella's pants and spread the cloth open. Stella's clavicle, from the outer rim of her shoulders inward to her neck, was a mottled landscape of blues and purples.

Warren whistled and Stella's mouth thinned in annoyance.

"Whoops! Sorry, nothing lewd intended. You've got some real shiners here, Stella, and by that I mean bruises."

He took the tips of his fingers and patted them across her right collarbone. Stella screeched in pain. Mercilessly, he repeated the procedure on the left collarbone. She repeated the yowl.

"Well," Warren diagnosed, "there's your answer."

"What?" Stella demanded weakly.

"Two broken collarbones."

"Get me," Stella ordered, "to my ship."

"Ship, hell," Alan blurted, "you need to get back to the resort and get some medical care."

"What medical care?" Warren asked snidely.

"The resort doesn't have a doctor?"

Warren shook his head.

"Not even a med tech?"

"No one, believe me. I know from personal experience."

"Well, what about that vacationing doctor? The one with that starship captain?"

"They haven't been at the resort since yesterday. They went by zeebiti to Topotuk with my brother."

"Oh, right. I heard something weird was going on at Topooku."

"Topotuk," Warren corrected. "Some visiting Paku traders said everyone was dead. My brother went to check on it."

"The one-legged guy is your brother?"

Warren nodded, re-buttoning Stella's shirt.

"My ship," Stella repeated.

"I don't know." Alan hesitated.

"It's closer," Warren pointed out.

"It has painkillers." Stella cinched the argument.

Warren and Alan bandaged Stella's head with the clean shirt, knotting the ends of the sleeves under her chin. Warren had changed his mind about the use for the strap. He folded Stella's arms at the elbows and brought her hands up to rest on her shoulders. He circled her torso with the strap, fastening her arms in place so that her collarbones would move as little as possible.

"It isn't a proper sling and swath," he said, viewing his handiwork, "but it'll do for now."

The men spread the bedroll on the sand and, shifting Stella one body part at a time, got her into it. Despite the heat, Warren zipped it up, hoping it would reduce the likelihood of shock. It would also help immobilize her upper body and pad her against the trauma of being moved.

They left her to rest while they hauled the barge as far up onto the riverbank as their combined strengths allowed. While Alan roped together two of the barge poles to form a makeshift stretcher, Warren rounded up the three grazing zeebiti and loaded them aboard the barge. He tethered them on short reins to the railing and hobbled their back legs so they couldn't kick.

He returned to Stella and dribbled more juice and whiskey down her throat. When, by her unfocused eyes, it looked as though she was not going to feel much pain, he and Alan slid the bedroll onto the rope-lattice stretcher, lifted her, and toted her the ten meters to the barge. They settled her on the deck as far from the zeebiti's hooves as they could in the cramped space and slid the poles from the stretcher. They would need them to maneuver the barge once it was in the water.

The barge, now heavy with zeebiti, required superhuman effort to shove it off the soft bank. Once it slapped into the water, Warren and Alan dashed through the shallows and threw themselves aboard. The barge bobbed on the current and started to drift downstream.

"We want to work her toward the middle of the river," Warren said, showing Alan how to pole the barge to guide it.

"This is neat," Alan said, feeling the barge glide across the waves in response to his efforts.

"Enjoy it while you can," Warren said. "When we get near Stella's ship, things are going to get tough."

"Why's that?"

"The river's strong. Our cargo's heavy. It's going to be near impossible to land this barge."

"Near impossible?" Alan shot back. "I realize I'm quibbling, but shouldn't you have thought of this earlier?"

Warren's face broke into an insane grin but he didn't answer. With a sinking feeling, Alan gleaned that Warren was one of those people who relished not only a challenge but also the potential for disaster. He frowned. "I sure hope you know what you're doing."

"Just let me worry about it."

"I will." Alan had to grant, in Warren's favor, that so far he had proved resourceful. Alan would have preferred to seek help from the resort but, all in all, the situation was not devoid of hope. He had little choice but to trust in Warren's knowledge of the barge and the river.

Alan hove on the pole and the barge sailed across ripples of current. The action was oddly satisfying. The brown water eddied and swirled below his feet, its powerful grace delighting him.

"I feel like Huck Finn!" he crowed. Warren guffawed. "Yeah, it's like that the first time. What I'd like to experience is more in the Buck Rogers category." "Buck Rogers?" Alan pondered the archaic reference. "You mean you've never been on a spaceship?" "Never." Warren shook his head keeping his eye to conditions downriver. "But soon I will be."

JHIRIKU, UALL, AND Fenton lounged companionably on the ground in a blind of trees on the west side of the river. They had arrived too late to observe Stella's accident with Oreon but it became clear to them all, after a short spell of observation, that she was injured.

They watched the behavior of the two men attending her with the dispassion of the audience at a stage play. The drama seemed to go on for hours and was quite entertaining, except the three watching had to invent the dialogue since they were too far away to hear it. They grew so cozy they broke out snacks during one of the slowdowns in the action and Jhiriku freely shared out the bottles of resort beer he had had the foresight to pack.

After what seemed an eternity, the two men on the opposite beach—stick figures, really, from the distance—loaded the zeebiti and Stella onto the barge and pushed off. The barge, caught by the current, glided down the river and was eventually lost to sight.

Jhiriku rose and swept pretzel crumbs from his voluminous tunic. "I don't think they're going far tonight, do you?"

"No," Uall said. Fenton nodded.

"What do you both say then to a fine dinner at the resort...on me?"

"How can we refuse such a generous offer?" Fenton stood.

"I can't," Uall announced. "Tomorrow is plenty of time to catch up with them."

With that, the three mounted their zeebiti and rode through the clear sunlight of the afternoon to Hacienda Otung.

Chapter Six

THE TYSON RANCH house was a single story adobe constructed in a U-shape. The western arm of the house contained the ranch's kitchen and common room with bedrooms and baths in the northern and southern arms. A roofed porch on the east overlooked the river. Within the U, open to the sky but protected from heat and sand-bearing winds, was a vegetable garden.

Before going up to the house, Jake led the team to the barn where he dismounted into a pile of hay. A teenage Yutunda girl, armed with a pitchfork, leaned out of a stall and greeted Jake with a shyly murmured, "*Tala*." She was dressed in jeans, cowboy shirt, and work boots.

"*Tala*," Jake answered, brushing off hay. "This is Ruby, everyone."

"Hi," Sly said, resting his palms on the horn of his saddle. Gods, he thought, but I'm tired! He was half-tempted to just fall off Pushkto, even if he did it with less finesse than Jake.

"Well, don't just sit there," Jake reprimanded, regarding the circle of bedraggled riders sitting motionless on their zeebiti. "Dismount, everybody. We'll unsaddle the animals and then I'll take you up to the house. I'll come back and help you, Ruby, with the other chores."

"Okay, Jake." Ruby flashed a row of strong white teeth in a smile, coyly tilting her head.

With Ruby's help, the zeebiti were unsaddled and the stiff-legged group made their way from the barn. Once outside, Sly sidled up to Jake and ragged him. "She's set her cap for you, Jake."

Jake laughed. "Ruby is Olive's daughter and I've known her since she was a little girl, Sly. She just turned fourteen and has developed what I believe is called 'a crush.'"

"Girls are very sensitive in that stage of their emotional development," Lindie said. "She'll get through it safely."

They were walking along the north wing of the house when an older man, strong in build, his hair white and his face wrinkled from years spent under the unforgiving Otung sun, strode around the corner, picking at his teeth with a toothpick.

"Son!" He tossed the toothpick to the ground and bounded forward.

"Dad," Jake said, smothered in a bear hug.

"I didn't expect to see you until the end of the week! What gives?"

"It's not good. I'll tell you all about it. But first I want you to meet these people."

Zane surveyed the soot-encrusted crew, releasing his son from the hug but still grasping him by the shoulder. "Jake, what in hell did you do to them?"

Dani smiled and stepped forward. Zane Tyson was easy to like. "I'm Captain Danielle Artemis Forrest of the *U.C.S.S. Boedicea* and these are my officers, Doctor Sylvestre Jenks and Commander Ma'at."

Zane's eyebrows rose. He shook hands with Dani and Sly and inclined his head as a welcome to the Nhavan.

"I am honored. We don't get *Explora Command* here often. More like never. But who is this lady?"

"I'm Linda Davis, Mr. Tyson. I'm not in *Explora Command*." She offered her hand, which Zane grasped and shook with a smile of pleasure.

"More's the pity," Dani murmured in an aside to Sly.

"You all look like you could do with a shower and a meal," Zane observed. "Why don't you come in and meet Olive and we'll get you taken care of. Talk can wait until you have some food in your bellies and some clean clothes on your backs."

"I'll be in shortly, Dad," Jake declined. "I have to help Ruby get the zeebiti settled."

"You go in and freshen up too, son. Okote is just cleaning up his tools from a plaster repair on the south wall. I'll ask him to help Ruby."

"Plaster repair?"

"We had an earthquake the day before yesterday. Didn't you feel it at the resort?"

"Indeed," Ma'at said, hir face impassive, "we did."

"SEE THAT TANGLE of bushes?" Warren asked Alan, pointing downriver. Glare bounced off the roiling water into his eyes.

Alan squinted. "Yeah."

"Okay. We're going to make for that. You keep edging the barge toward it. When we get close, I'll swim out in the water with the hawser. I'll try to moor the barge on those trees."

"Aren't they too reedy to hold?"

"Yeah, but it's the only thing I see for miles."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Keep poling. If you can, stick the pole straight down into the riverbed when I get ashore and try to hold the barge in place."

"Are you out of your mind?"

"Just wrap your body around the railing and your legs around the pole. It'll hold."

"You are out of your mind. What's our *worst* case scenario?"

"Worst case scenario, you float on down the river without me."

"No," Alan contradicted, "worst case scenario is the barge floats on down the river without either of us. Just Stella and the zeebiti."

"Don't even say that."

"Where does this river go, anyway?"

"It descends into an impenetrable maze of rock called Dark Canyon that, according to the Paku, hides one impassable set of death-dealing rapids after another."

"Oh, great."

"Okay," Warren's voice went high with excitement, "the stand of trees is coming up. Let's pole as close to the bank as we can." Both men jabbed deep into the water with the poles to force the barge past the river's stronger central currents.

When they were in a slower current flowing near the bank, Warren shipped his pole and kicked off his boots. After a moment's thought, he stripped off his shirt and jeans as well. Alan watched the ripple of the well-defined muscles on Warren's back and was surprised at his breathless reaction to their beauty.

"So far, so good," Warren judged, looping the hawser around his right shoulder, his eyes intent on the bank. "Keep poling to shore."

The tangle of bushes became identifiable as a few dozen low-growing olive trees that bunched where the river had carved a small cove out of the soft mud bank.

Alan's bare chest ran with sweat and he grunted fiercely with every jab of the pole.

"It's now or never," Warren announced, his whole body tensing as he dived into the muddy brown water.

Alan, mesmerized by Warren's disappearance, saw the other man surface a few long seconds later, swimming hard for the trees. Alan shoved the pole deep into the mud again and pushed off it with all his might, the effort making him dizzy. The barge jerked sluggishly toward shore. Oreon, joggled, snorted and pawed at the deck.

Alan ignored the zeebiti and watched Warren who was now only meters from the bank. His docking line had played out and his strokes had slowed. Without help, the weight of the barge would win the battle and drag Warren back into the main currents of the river.

Desperate, Alan inhaled as deeply as he could and jabbed the pole down hard. The water was shallower here and he got more purchase with the pole. He shoved off it with a ferocious howl of effort and the barge shot forward.

The forward motion unleashed the tiring Warren, who surged into the shallows and made a leap for the bank. Instead of reaching the shore several meters upriver from the cluster of trees as he had intended, he was right on top of them.

A tangle of roots and un-pruned limbs, they blocked his access to the shore. Warren dove into them and cast the hitch around a thick branch of olive tree on the far side of the tree's trunk. The hitch, dragged by the weight of the barge, shredded every thorn, leaf and side branch in its path. The mooring branch whipped forward, slashing Warren across the face before he could avoid it.

The tree shuddered, groaned, and bent at an unnatural angle toward the water, the thick branch giving every appearance of intending to snap from the trunk, but following a convulsion that rattled its half-exposed roots, the branch held. The barge jerked to a halt.

Alan, quick to respond, poled the barge upstream toward the cove. Warren stepped around the hedge and into the water, hauling on the docking line to pull the barge in. The silt in the cold water, coming into contact with his multiple lacerations, set his nerves on fire. But the work wasn't over.

While Alan held the barge in place with the pole dug deeply into the river bed, Warren unknotted the bowline hitch from the strained limb and tied a fresh clove hitch around a much stronger nearby trunk.

"Done." Teeth gritted in pain, Warren clambered out of the water and cast himself down on his back in the sand. Alan waited until the barge settled and then stepped ashore to view the prostrate Warren.

"Did you know," Alan asked, his heart in his throat, "that you are bleeding from nearly everywhere?" Naked except for a pair of tight black bikini shorts that for some inexplicable reason made Alan nervous, he saw the long shallow gashes that strafed Warren's chest, arms and legs. The left side of the man's face was purple with bruises. Blood trailed from both his temples. "Even your head?"

"Yep," Warren grunted, not moving. "I noticed. My shoulder hurts the most, actually."

"Looks like a rope burn," Alan diagnosed, crouching down to peer more closely at it. He was too anxious to touch Warren's body. "What caused the rest of this?"

"Olive thorns." Warren sat up. "Forget about me, Alan. We'd better unload the zeebiti."

"It's hard to forget about you. I mean—"

Alan was incapable of diagnosing his feelings about this bleeding man that he had so become deeply entangled with in a mere matter of hours.

"I'm hurt, but I'll live. Let's get to work unloading the zeebiti."

He lowered his palms to the sand to support himself and moaned in agony.

"All right, if you insist. And Stella."

Warren swayed dizzily. "And the whiskey."

Alan giggled. "Just sit tight, Warren. I'll get it. You sure as hell earned it."

LINDIE FELT REFRESHED in body and mind after shedding her begrimed clothes and scrubbing away the clinging redolence of smoke from her skin and hair. There were only two guest rooms in the house and Olive had given her and Dani the larger of the two. Sly and Ma'at had been offered the other.

Wrapped discreetly in a towel but with her hair still dripping, she tiptoed down the porch to her room and found that Olive had laid out clean clothes on the bed for her. Olive had also laid out her bra and underwear but they were still too damp to wear.

Lindie left them to dry and pulled on the substitute clothes. The faded jeans were too long in the leg and excessively snug in the waist. The sleeves of the patched gingham shirt trailed below her fingers but the front panels were hardly wide enough to cover her ample chest. Based on the sizing, Lindie guessed the garments belonged to Zane.

Just as she was struggling with the arduous task of zipping up the too-tight jeans, Dani entered the room. Her damp brunette hair, unbraided, trailed down her back. Her body was encircled by a towel cinched around her breasts.

She stopped when she saw Lindie. "That's quite an outfit," Dani said, her voice catching a little in her throat. "Are you sure you can fit into that?"

"I'm having trouble with the jeans," Lindie admitted.

"Here, let me help you," Dani murmured. She stepped across the room. With one hand on Lindie's zipper and the other hand on Lindie's crotch, she tried to pull the zipper upward. Less than a millimeter from Lindie's body, Dani's skin broke into a sweat.

"Aaah," Lindie panted, feeling the gentle press of Dani's hand against her pubis and inhaling the clean scent of Dani's hair.

"Aaah?" Dani repeated, her chin already resting against the hollow of Lindie's collarbone, her hands stilled.

"Dani?" Lindie asked.

"Lindie," Dani lowered her head. "If it's no, tell me right now because...because this is really close. It will be hard to stop."

"I'm open to—"

"Oh goddess, woman." Dani's hand slipped lower between Lindie's thighs and the hand poised on Lindie's zipper began to pull the zipper down instead of up. "Open, to me, means —"

"— yes. Yes. Go ahead." Lindie's voice was breathless.

"Go ahead," Dani repeated. She pulled back a centimeter and looked up into Lindie's eyes. "Have you ever done this before? Are you sure?"

"No, I haven't done it before. And yes, I'm sure."

Dani walked Lindie backward and eased her down onto the bed. She moved up beside her and, very gently, brought her lips down on Lindie's.

Lindie murmured at the softness of their touch and felt her own senses responding. She began to kiss and nibble and lick in concert with Dani, drowning in the warm melting sensation of Dani's lips against hers.

Lindie liked the force, the urgency, of a man's kiss, but this, this was heaven. Dani's mouth moved downward, traveling down Lindie's throat to the hollow between her collarbones. Her hands reached for the snaps of Lindie's shirt and then she was opening them, releasing Lindie's breasts from the overstretched prison of the faded fabric.

A moment later, Dani—who had only needed to shed her towel—was naked, her breasts pressing against Lindie's, their nipples meeting. Lindie felt a fire ignite in her abdomen and a desperate moan escaped her throat. "Oh, god, Dani."

Dani rolled Lindie on top of her, her mouth reaching for Lindie's mouth, her hands reaching up to slide the opened shirt from Lindie's shoulders.

Lindie moved down Dani's body, her eyes wide with interest, and took the other woman's breasts between her hands. "This is amazing," she murmured. "Your breasts are so soft, yet you are so muscular. Look at your arms. And your belly, it's so flat."

"It's those workouts with Ma'at. S/he's genetically much stronger than I am so s/he really puts me through my paces."

Lindie dropped her head to Dani's breast and took the hardening nipple into her mouth. Dani moaned, feeling energy pulse through her body. Lindie raised her head to move to the other nipple. "You haven't done this with Ma'at, have you?"

Dani laughed. "No. And this isn't the moment to talk about Ma'at. In fact, it isn't a moment for talking at all." She rolled Lindie over and started kissing her mouth again. Then she moved slowly down her throat and belly, kissing and gently nipping at her fair skin. When she reached Lindie's hips, she fully unzipped the jeans and pushed the resistant fabric down the other woman's thighs, revealing the thatch of golden hair at Lindie's crotch.

Lindie was panting, one arm thrown across her eyes. "Oh, heavens," she breathed. "What are you going to do?"

"What any lover worth her salt would do." She took a final yank at the jeans, pulling them off Lindie's legs and dropping them on the floor.

Dani knelt between Lindie's legs and began to kiss and stroke the supple skin of her thighs. Then she moved inward, her fingers caressing Lindie's silken hair. A moment later, Lindie gasped as Dani's mouth touched the center of her being.

After that, all of Lindie's concentration was focused in one tender locale and on one all-encompassing result. She moved with the dizzying sensations Dani produced in her,

building with longing and excitement until she felt her body open and lift, rising to a height of pulsating release that she had never experienced before.

The next she was aware, Dani was beside her on the bed, cradling her body against her own, stroking her hands down her back and murmuring gently into her ear, "You are so beautiful."

Lindie felt she was without a voice, almost without a mind. "I don't know what happened."

Dani smiled. "I know what happened."

"Is that...is that how women make love?"

"It's one of many ways. No one's ever done that with you before?"

Lindie shook her head. "No."

"Men," Dani disparaged. "I'll never know why they pass up such a divine pleasure."

Lindie laughed. "Well, they're sure as hell not going to in the future."

Dani frowned, but an indulgent grin played around her lips. "You mean this one experience hasn't turned you into a dyed-in-the-wool lesbian?"

"It was incredible, but I'm not sure—"

Dani grabbed Lindie's fingers and kissed them. "Please," she whispered, "don't say any more. Not now, anyway."

"Dani—"

Dani jumped off the bed and started pulling on the old pair of Jake's pants and shirt Olive had laid out for her.

"Dani—" Lindie sat up, her arms reaching to cover her naked breasts. "Please don't misunderstand."

"I'm not misunderstanding." Dani tucked the patched shirt into the jeans.

"Yes, you are."

"No. I've been here before, Lindie. I've made love with straight women. I know it's just experimentation on their part. It's just that sometimes, I can't help myself and I take the risk anyway."

"You're angry." Lindie dropped her head.

Dani felt her heart melt. "No, love." She came over to Lindie and

kissed her fully on the mouth. "I am delighted you allowed me. I just...Lindie you're gorgeous and you would drive any woman mad with desire...but I know not to have expectations."

"I'm sorry."

Dani laughed. "I'm not. I thoroughly enjoyed making love with you."

"I didn't do anything for you."

Dani headed for the door. "I promised Ma'at I'd meet with hir after I showered."

"You didn't answer me," Lindie called.

Dani grinned, a devilish look in her hazel eyes. "I can take a rain check."

AFTER SHE DRESSED, Lindie walked through the vegetable garden, her mind pensive, her eyes only partly taking in the many colors and shapes of native squash, chilies, eggplants and short-stalk corn. The exterior walls of the hacienda blocked the late afternoon sun so that only the eastern quarter of the garden was still sunny.

Lindie spied a white cat curled on a wood bench and thought the animal might settle her disturbed thoughts.

The cat opened a single inquiring eye and stretched, revealing lethal claws, but gave no indication of displeasure when she sat on the bench. "May I?"

She stroked the animal and it rose to settle into her lap, purring without hesitation. She gently stroked its fur and tickled it behind the ears which made it purr all the more loudly. She doubted domestic cats were native to Otung. This one had to have been imported from off-world.

Jake stepped from the door of his room and limped across the courtyard. Lindie watched him with fresh speculation as he approached. Did she still find men attractive or had she become as Dani put it, "a dyed-in-the-wool lesbian," as the result of one experience?

Why had she found Dani Forrest so attractive? Why had she made love with her? Or maybe the real question was, why hadn't she made love with a woman long before today? If, for no other reason, than to discover what it was like?

Jake was standing over her. "I see you've met Whistle."

"Whistle?" Lindie leaned down close to the cat and stroked its pink nose. "Do you whistle?" Whistle gazed up at her with indolent blue eyes but made no comment.

"When he was a baby he did," Jake said. "He was abandoned at the resort by a guest who shouldn't have brought him in the first place. Since he's a neutered male, we weren't too worried about his having much of an impact on the native ecology."

"He's gorgeous."

"So are you. Speaking of whistling, where did you get those clothes?"

"I assume they're your father's."

"Well, he sure as hell doesn't look like that in them."

Lindie laughed. "I should hope not. But let's not talk about me." Lindie didn't want Jake to flirt with her. Her experience with Dani was still too fresh in her body and mind and she needed time to sort out her feelings.

She patted the bench, inviting Jake to sit down. "If I recall correctly, there was something you were going to tell me about you."

"I said I'd consider it."

"How often," Lindie said, desperate that he proceed, "do you have such an opportunity? I mean, I'm not even charging you for my highly-honed psychoanalytical skills."

Jake laughed. "You're pretty persuasive, Lindie."

"Persistent, more like. You know I won't let you rest until you tell me."

"I'm beginning to see that." Jake clasped his hands in his lap and squinted into the waning afternoon light. "You know that old saw about how all happy families are alike but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way?"

"Psychotherapists can afford to take exotic vacations to pleasure worlds because of the truth of that statement. It's the backbone of psychotherapy. In what unique way is your family unhappy, Jake?"

"When I was five years old, my mother became pregnant with my younger brother, Warren. When it came time for her to deliver and she went into labor, right over there in that room," he pointed to the door of the guest room that Ma'at and Sly were sharing, "my father discovered that Warren was a breech baby. A breech baby in a particularly

awkward position. No amount of pushing on my mother's part or attempts to extricate Warren on my father's part had any effect whatsoever."

"He was stuck in her womb. How gruesome."

"My mother became exhausted, my father became more and more panicked and neither knew if the baby was even alive."

"You watched this?"

Jake nodded. "It was late afternoon, like now. The same time of year. I remember the slant of the sun in the garden. There was no one to baby-sit me. Besides, my father wanted me around to run errands."

"How did you feel?"

"Terrified, fascinated. Eventually, my mother motioned my father to the head of the bed and they held a whispered conference.

When he got off his knees, my father's face was ashen but

determined. I will never forget that look."

"What happened then?"

"He sent me to the kitchen to get an unopened bottle of whiskey. I could barely tote it, as it was nearly as big as I was and quite heavy. I don't know how I got it there without dropping it and breaking it."

"You were five?"

"I was just a few months from turning six. When I got back to the birthing room, it became apparent that my father must also have left my mother's bedside because he had something new with him."

"What did he have?"

"The knife he used for gutting lkotni."

"Can I be sick now?" Lindie asked.

"You asked for this."

"I'm sorry. Please continue."

"He took the whiskey bottle from me, ripped open the seal and, supporting my mother's head, poured a few shots down her throat. He doused her belly and the knife with whiskey to act as an antiseptic and then, last, took a swig himself."

Lindie shuddered.

"He made the incision quickly but I can still sometimes hear, on fall afternoons such as this one, my mother's screams. The only happy aspect of the affair was that her screams were followed by my brother's first hearty howl. He was alive. My father put Warren to my mother's breast and set about doing what he could to suture closed the incision."

"But—"

"She died in the night. I assume it was the blood loss and the shock."

"So the Ikotni you gutted brought back the memory."

"Yes. When that little crumpled Ikotni fetus tumbled out, I was suffused with guilt. I wanted to die."

"You nearly did."

"Yes. But all of it has been far worse for Warren."

"Why?"

"My mother, Alessa, was my father's true love. His soul mate, if you will. Together, they made the journey from Mars Colony and pioneered this place. They were alone and free. Wild. Masters of their destiny.

"When I was a baby, Alessa would ride bareback down by the river, naked as nature. She and my father explored the whole country from north to south, even Dark Canyon, which is said to be impassable. I remember her intense violet eyes and the long onyx-dark hair she would wrap around me when I sat on her lap."

"You believed, in the way children do, that you killed her."

"It was easy to believe. My father did not recover well from her loss."

"He projected his guilt onto you?"

"No. But he wasn't the same. Right off, he had the daunting task of finding someone to nurse Warren. He went to *Laka-no-boka*, who was already a friend, and a teenage girl of the tribe who was in the second month of nursing her own new baby, came to live with us."

"Olive?"

"Oh no, not Olive. Her name was Patapu and Warren and I both loved her. My father could not bear to speak to her. I realize now that his grief was unbearable. Patapu was very different from Alessa. She was sweet, placid, and patient."

"That must have helped you children."

"It did. We had an instant playmate in her little boy, Zodani, too. That was a novelty for me."

"But eventually she went home?"

"No. Patapu was estranged from Zodani's father and she was just as happy to remain at the ranch."

"What became of her then?"

"Unfortunately, when Warren and Zodani were both four years old—I was nine, going on ten—an outbreak of flea-borne plague killed many Yutunda, Patapu among them. She had gone home for a visit to her mother, leaving Zodani here, and contracted the disease in the village."

"The two of you were inconsolable."

"The loss caused Warren to regress to sucking his thumb and using baby talk, which only made my father more ambivalent toward him. My father is a fair man but I had to keep Warren away from him as much as possible in those years. He was too prone to blow up if Warren did something infantile."

"Poor Warren. He was only seeking the attention he desperately needed."

"To top it off, once the threat of disease was over, we lost Zodani. He returned to the village to be raised by his maternal grandparents."

"And your father did not seek for a new mother for you and Warren?"

"He saw no point in it. He decided we were old enough to carry our weight on the ranch."

"But Warren was only four."

Jake shrugged. "It's a harsh land, Lindie."

Lindie nodded in understanding. "How did Olive come to live here?"

"She sought refuge here when her daughter Ruby was a baby, a couple of years after Patapu's death. It was a similar circumstance to that of Patapu's. Olive's a healer and a

smart lady. She wisely made herself indispensable to my father and she's been here ever since."

"And Warren?"

"I guess he had lost too many mothers. He couldn't accept Olive."

"So," Lindie speculated, "the death of the Ikotni represented not only your memories of Warren's birth but all the failures of Warren's childhood."

"We didn't do well by Warren, Lindie. The *coup de grace* came five years ago. With the loss of my leg, Warren was indentured, without his consent, to the resort."

"How is Warren now?"

"Angry," he said. "Very angry."

APRIL YANKED OFF her chef's hat, tossed it on a nearby utility tray, and ruffled her fingers through her short hair. Grunting, she rolled her neck from side to side and then shook out her arms and hands. Knots of tension had accumulated in her shoulders from hours of cooking and hours of fretting about Warren.

Like most of the staff and all of the guests, she had gone out at noon to study the billowing cloud of mustard gray smoke that had wafted across the river from the western plateau. She couldn't imagine what a fire might have to do with Warren. He and the woman guest he was guiding were supposed to have stayed on the resort side of the river and been back in time for dinner. Heck, by tea time.

She knew because she had sneaked into Cobb's office and checked the itinerary Warren had filed for the day. It wasn't that she didn't trust him. After all, Ms. Farnsworth looked old enough to be his mother and she didn't see that Warren would be interested in her, even if he had seemed oddly keyed-up about the trip.

Because he'd been so on edge lately, she had made him a personal apricot and walnut cake, replete with cream filling and frosting. She had planned to surprise him with the treat, making the event a very private tea party, to be followed by a different kind of afternoon delight.

She had waited and waited for him in his room, finally falling asleep, but he had never showed up and she had awakened groggy from the unplanned afternoon nap. She rushed back to the kitchen to find she was a good hour late for her duty shift.

Jeremy, the sub-chef, had the beginnings of the evening's menu competently underway but it didn't stop him from threatening to report her tardiness to Cobb. Jeremy's sour mood, her disappointing afternoon, and playing catch-up on the dinners had wrecked her usual equanimity as well as her shoulders.

The worst of it was that the evening was far from over. The main course had gone out, but ahead were still dessert and coffee, to be followed by cleanup. Tonight, whether he liked it or not, Jeremy was going to oversee cleanup.

April stretched the tightness from her body, grasping a counter for support. Feeling only marginally better, she stepped down the familiar rickety stairs to the cool of the underground root cellar. There, an industrial-sized version of the cake she had made for Warren sat on a rack. Carefully, she carried it back upstairs and set it on a cutting table in the kitchen. Shoving her chef's hat back on her head and unsheathing the cake knife, she began to slice.

OLIVE WAS A short, friendly woman with amber eyes set in a round face that smiled even when her mouth didn't. Despite her chunkiness, she moved and talked at a dizzying pace, many sentences either unfinished or the conceptual leaps within them filled with a Yutunda version of, "You know what I mean."

Whether the listener stayed abreast or not, the conversation would end with Olive laughing or, at the very least, grinning. She was a natural entertainer, and it was easy for Lindie to see why Zane had made his peace with having her about the house and, from what Jake had intimated, sharing Zane's bed as well.

When they arrived, Lindie and Jake found the kitchen table set, piled high with food and surrounded by hungry diners. They learned, because Olive and Sly embroidered upon it at length during the meal, that Sly had gone straight to the kitchen after freshening up, donned an apron and, in his hospitable Okie-boy manner, helped Olive slaughter, pluck and fry the two hens that constituted the evening's entree.

He had also whipped up the fluffy mouth-watering biscuits that, at the beginning of the meal, had overflowed a platter only to be reduced now to the tiniest scattering of crumbs.

Sly was in his element. Like Olive, he was all grins, telling tales to her and Zane that grew taller by the minute. Dani, who lounged back in her chair, sated with the meal, did nothing to inhibit Sly's fish stories and in fact, leaned forward to elaborate once or twice.

It was by unspoken mutual consent that the group did not discuss the day's events while enjoying such a fine repast. To raise such a somber subject during the meal would have

been, at the very least, an insult to Olive as the cook and, by association, an affront to Zane's hospitality. But the moment, Lindie surmised, could not be far off.

Ma'at for one, arms folded across her small high breasts, seemed removed from the mood of the company. S/he frowned at odd moments. Lindie could not guess if the action was in response to Sly's exaggerations or an accompaniment to her own un-divulged thoughts.

Jake, too, seemed only to be pretending to pay attention and Lindie wondered if he was regretting the confidences he had shared in the garden. Whenever she glanced at Dani, Dani offered her a look of completely-innocent friendliness that belied their earlier contact.

Ruby, her body and hair squeaking with adolescent cleanliness, sat across the table from Jake. Despite the unparalleled novelty of the household's well-traveled guests, she might as well have been deaf and blind. She toyed absently with her food and stole glances at Jake, her attention wholly occupied by the object of her youthful obsession.

Sly was wrapping up a particularly colorful story of some clever out-maneuvering of an enemy on Dani's part when Olive threw her head back and roared with laughter. Sly downed some water to dampen his storytelling-parched throat. Olive wiped tears from the corners of her eyes and declared:

"Captain Forrest, you are some *konuk*, all right! Some *konuk*."

"*Konuk*?" Dani straightened up, suddenly attentive. "That's what the Paku traders called me. Only they didn't seem too happy about it."

"You told them this funny story, Sly?" Olive turned to the doctor. Sly shook his head.

"No. They said it just after seeing her. Nobody told any stories."

Olive squinted and, thrusting out her short neck and leaning her elbows across the table, studied Dani's face. Dani pulled back in surprise.

"Yes," she acknowledged, settling back again. "I can see why they said it."

"What?" Dani demanded. "What is it?"

"*Konuk* is a significant figure in Yutunda mythology, Captain," Olive said. "She is a woman-turned-goddess. She was a Yutunda shaman who did so many great things for the people that, toward the end of her earthly life, the gods offered her the gift of immortality."

"That doesn't sound too bad," Dani said cautiously.

"It isn't. But *konuk*'s immortality meant that she would leave the Yutunda people to live in the Land of the Dead deep in the earth. This created such a hue and cry that *konuk* promised she would come in the spring of each year to visit.

"They—my ancestors—were delighted with the compromise. But there was a catch. *konuk* said that if, when she visited, she saw that the people remembered the arts she had taught them, she would reward them with plentiful spring rain. But if they had forgotten the arts, she would remind them by jolting the earth."

"You mean cause an earth tremor?" Ma'at asked, also leaning forward in interest.

"Yes. And earth tremors are common in the spring on Otung." Olive smiled. "But most especially in dry years."

"But *konuk* herself has never returned?" Dani asked.

"Not in person," Olive said. "Of course, there are dances and potlatches to draw her forth or, at the very least, appease her and ensure good rain."

Lindie nodded sagely. "A *konuk*-type legend is not an uncommon theme in a people's mythology. There are many corollaries among humanoid groups. It is a story that explains both naturalistic events and acts as a cautionary tale to encourage the transmission of life skills to the next generation."

"Quite true," Olive said, unperturbed by Lindie's objective analysis.

"That's all well and good," Dani said, "but I don't see how it involves me."

Jake, who had been staring hard at Dani, gasped. "I didn't see it before."

Olive, for once not smiling, nodded. "Yes."

"Dammit!" Dani thundered, banging her fist on the table. "This is no time to keep secrets! Tell me."

"Captain," Olive said, "you are a dead ringer for *konuk*."

"A dead ringer? You mean I look like her?"

"An amazing resemblance," Olive said, her voice trembling a little, her bright face turning sallow.

"It's worse than that," Jake said. "Captain, you appeared on Otung on the same day as an earthquake!"

"Clearly a coincidence. Besides you all just pointed out earthquakes are common here."

"In the spring," Olive said, a glimmer of fear showing in her eyes. "It's autumn now."

"Olive," Dani expostulated, "you can't possibly believe that I am *konuk*."

"Captain," Ma'at pointed out, her voice wavering, "a Yutunda village, whatever the cause, was destroyed the same day you arrived on the planet."

"Destroyed?" Zane shouted. Olive blinked and her mouth fell open, too shocked to speak.

"Ah, ha!" Lindie blurted. "That explains the fearful reaction of the Paku to you. They had already been to Topotuk."

"Topotuk?" Olive cried, getting back her voice.

"What happened?" Zane leaped to his feet.

"Dad!" Jake levered himself too rapidly out of his chair. He grabbed the edge of the table to steady himself. "Dad, calm down!"

"All right, son, I'll calm down. I don't care one way or another about the *konuk* myth but I want to know what the hell is going on."

It was Ma'at who answered. "Mr. Tyson, with all due respect, we don't know what happened. We do know that everyone at Topotuk was struck down in a matter of seconds or minutes by some unknown cause."

"No one is alive?" Zane asked, his voice conveying stupefaction.

"Not only no one," Sly corrected, "but no thing."

"No thing?" Olive whispered.

Jake nodded. "The animals—" he choked and could not go on.

"We took immediate action, for sanitary reasons," Dani said, "to immolate the village: the houses, the animals, the people."

"*Laka-no-boka*?" Zane looked at his son.

Jake pulled himself together. "I have to assume he was dead, Father. We didn't have the luxury of doing a head count."

Zane Tyson steadied himself against the table and eased back down into his chair looking grey and weary. "I saw smoke," he remembered, "and smelled—" he looked to Olive, his eyes wide, his mouth slack.

"We Yutunda have always burned our dead," she said, "so we didn't—"

"You didn't think anything was amiss." Lindie reached out and touched the startled woman. "Olive, there is nothing anyone could have done."

"I understand," Olive murmured. "But I had many relatives, many friends in Topotuk. How can I grieve for so many at once?"

She wrung her hands and looked into Lindie's eyes, seeking comfort, seeking an answer, seeking anything. Lindie saw that Olive's face had aged years in mere minutes. There was no happiness there now.

Lindie got up from her seat and placed her arms around Olive. Olive hid her face in Lindie's shoulder but everyone could plainly hear the muffled burst of her first heart-rending sob.

Jake crumpled into his chair and dropped his head into his hands. Zane got to his feet and, with the slowness of an old man, crossed to Olive's chair. He laid his hands on her head and started to stroke her hair. Ruby, paralyzed by events, stared witlessly at the grief-stricken tableau encircling her mother.

Dani, gathering in the glances of Sly and Ma'at, motioned with her head. They stood and, following Dani, made their way outside. Dani headed downhill from the house toward the river. After awhile she stopped striding and her officers caught up with her.

"A private grief," Ma'at summarized succinctly, clasping her hands behind her.

"Which I am just as happy not to be privy to," Dani added, her stomach a knot of tension.

"We've seen a lot of disasters, Dani," Sly said, staring at the unceasing flow of muddy river, "but this one is heartbreaking."

"We must," Ma'at insisted, "identify what killed the people of Topotuk. Not ascertaining what it is and what danger it poses could result in the death of more beings."

"Including us, Ma'at?"

"Including, Captain, the Coalition."

Chapter Seven

APRIL KNEW SHE was taking the risk of losing her job by sneaking off before dawn without Cobb's approval, but she was genuinely worried about Warren. Not that she had any intention of tracking Warren and Ms. Farnsworth across the desert. She had hit upon a simpler solution. She would cross the river by the ferry at the base of the resort and ride

to Tyson Ranch. If Warren wasn't at the ranch, she would enlist the help of his father Zane in searching for him.

April walked Cora, a filly she had ridden on jaunts with Warren, onto the ferry and tied Cora's reins to the railing. She hadn't worried about borrowing the ferry. If anyone at the resort needed it later, they could haul it back across the river with its long heavy tow rope. A permanent tied line which shipped through rings on the ferry's starboard side kept it from floating downriver.

She lifted the ferry's pole from the deck and pushed against the mud bank with effort. The pole was cumbersome and heavy. There was a cold pre-dawn breeze riffing through her hair and it was hard to see in the gray light. April forced the pole down into the water. The darkened buildings of the resort shrank as the ferry pushed out into the river.

April poled several times and then rested, letting the ferry bob forward along its line. When she saw the wooden quay on the other bank as a series of dark uprights rising out of the black of the water, she thrust the pole into the water one final time and tensed in preparation for landing.

"I hope I can moor it," she said aloud, dropping the pole to the deck. There was a dull thud as the bow bounced against the quay and April was nearly thrown off her feet. She leaped off the vibrating deck and cast the docking line over the bollard, making fast the line. She stood, triumphant, her hands on her hips.

"Well, we won't win any nautical awards," she said to Cora, who was swaying with the motion of the settling ferry, "but we landed in one piece."

Cora snorted, but April wasn't sure whether it meant the zeebiti was impressed or merely resigned. April unhitched Cora from the railing and walked her onto the quay. Then she slipped the docking line off the bollard so the ferry could be retrieved if someone needed it.

She walked Cora up to the track that led to the Tyson Ranch and squinted back across the river. A handful of lights now twinkled at the resort. Staff and early risers, she supposed.

It was too bad Aknee had caught her saddling Cora but she should have expected it. By some trick of destiny, he was always in the right place at the right time. Either that, she thought, or he never slept and so had ample time to spy, gossip, and make deals.

April mounted the zeebiti and set off at a slow walk. Kerei was just beginning to lighten the velvety cobalt of the night sky with bands of dark turquoise. But the star would be high in the sky before she reached Tyson Ranch.

JHIRIKU'S SPACECRAFT WAS mushroom-shaped, a design unique to Aostolo. The stem, made of a flexible metal grid much like a stiff sheet of chain mail, retracted into the base of the ship during flight, leaving a rapidly-maneuverable dome that formed the bridge of the ship and provided a view in all directions.

For landing operations, the chain-mail stem elongated and supported the dome at a height that made it a secure command and scout post. Aostolo was a planet consisting of large tracts of swamp which were home to eight-meter-long humanoid-consuming eels. The stems of Aostoloan ships not only kept Aostoloans above the muck but deterred the eels, who could not get a purchase on the slick metal and climb aboard for a meal.

But even in a desert environment, Jhiriku's ship performed well. With the stem retracted, he could skim safely just above Otung's dunes, washes and canyons. Although he had broken his own rule about rising early, he had decided it was the least likely time of day for his ship and its movements to be detected. Jhiriku sailed along the plateau east of the river, heading south. In due time, he saw what he expected to see.

It was a personal landing craft, a dull pewter in the half-dark of pre-dawn. The shape and size were absolutely ordinary, the most basic of Coalition designs for a two-person pleasure craft. Jhiriku slowed to a hover and scanned the neighborhood. The Coalition ship was parked on the west side of the river, set down in a cirque of dunes.

To the north, the landscape on the western side of the river was dry washes twisting down from the mesas and draining the sparse spring rain from them. But this far to the south, the terrain gave way to an empty landscape of sand dunes. About ten kilometers south of Ms. Farnsworth's craft, the river narrowed abruptly and disappeared, cascading into a canyon that loomed over the dunes as a dark jagged wall.

In front of this rock face, almost indiscernible in its dull insignificance, was a low building of brown adobe. It looked old and ramshackle, the roof swaybacked. An attached open ramada, roofed with thin sticks, extended to the north. Jhiriku guessed the structure was abandoned or seasonal, probably part of the Tyson Ranch he had heard mentioned repeatedly at the resort.

The better-maintained U-shaped headquarters of the ranch, which Jhiriku had passed and noted in his mind a short while before, was not visible from his present position, hidden by the intervening terrain.

Jhiriku powered up and skimmed across the river. He figured he might as well be on the west side with everyone else. It would make keeping an eye on their activities that much easier. He searched west and south of the Coalition ship and decided to land in a trough between dunes. Elongating the stem of his craft, he settled it securely in the sand.

The dunes were just the right height to allow him to hide the bulk of his craft while still permitting him to see a sliver of Ms. Farnsworth's ship from his view windows. To the south, he could make out one wall of the abandoned cabin.

Unless the rising sun struck and glinted off the metal of his ship at just the right angle and one of the Farnsworth trio happened to be out to observe it, his presence would remain undetected. Jhiriku undid his seat latches and fished a resort-brewed beer out of his food stores.

He chugged it down and smiled to himself in satisfaction. Today, or maybe tomorrow—but surely no later—the FDet would be in his hands.

His hands alone.

PHIDEAS COBB SAT on the edge of his military-perfect bed in his pajamas, his pudgy hands repeatedly smoothing back the thin dark hair that circled the sides of his round head. Not only had Jake and Warren—both of whom should have reported back before last night—vanished but there had been another murder. Murders, actually.

Cobb trudged into his bathroom and in a mood of self-pity assessed his face in the mirror. There were dark patches under his eyes and his nose was a swollen purple. He had slept little and the shock of more mayhem had given him a miserable case of the sniffles.

Cobb dispiritedly squirted toothpaste on his toothbrush. He had accepted the post as resort manager on Otung largely because of Otung's character as an isolated backwater. Cobb did not enjoy conflict. He had had enough of that with previous lovers and previous bosses.

He was certain that his staff, while occasionally disrespectful— which Cobb construed as the natural rambunctiousness of the young—considered him an easy-going manager. Other than Warren, who exploded in rage on the slightest pretext, making Cobb jittery, he was on friendly terms with his permanent crew and each new crop of seasonal employees.

He enjoyed the gastronomic pleasures of life, which accounted for his being a bit on the hefty side, and didn't have much ambition beyond ensuring simple daily happiness. His philosophy of life, in a nutshell, was to let well enough alone. Thus it was that on this morning, he felt not only discombobulated, but utterly out of his element.

Cobb gargled with his usual mouthwash, which today stung his irritated throat, and stepped into the shower, hoping the hot water would soothe away his troubles all the while fearing that it wouldn't.

After he had dressed, he made his way, not without misgivings, to the natural ice cave behind the kitchen. It acted as the resort's deep freezer and was connected to the kitchens by the hallway where the first murder had taken place. He had saddled a disgruntled Jeremy and a silent Puwanza with the job of carting away the bodies and making a place for them in the ice cave the night before.

The first murder victim had been buried already, per the instructions of Captain Forrest, but Cobb was willing to bet that the wrath of that Coalition officer would fall on him if he buried these two new victims before Dani and her officers returned and had a chance to examine the corpses.

Cobb had no evidence, but he believed the two dead men were the ones Ma'at had suggested they search for and question. They certainly weren't staffers or hotel guests. Equally certain, they wouldn't be answering questions ever again.

Cobb pulled open the heavy door that guarded the ice-coated floors and walls of the cave. He poked his head in, and shivered in the rush of cold air. Two elongated burlap sacks took up most of the slick floor, leaving little room for the comings and goings of the kitchen staff.

At least Jeremy and Puwanza had had the good sense to bag the bodies. It would be hard to keep his people motivated to cook if every time they played pussyfoot with the corpses they had to look at them as well. Cobb prayed Captain Forrest would return before the day was out.

He closed and latched the door and went down the dim hallway to the kitchen. It was much quieter than Cobb liked a kitchen to be. His experience was that happy, laughing cooks made tasty meals. But this morning it was deadly somber in the kitchen. At first, Cobb attributed the mood to the all-too-near corpses and accepted that it couldn't be helped. Then he realized someone was missing.

"Where's April?" he asked, reaching for a deviled egg that sat on a serving platter. Jeremy, who was slicing rounds from a thick sausage and needed little prodding to report on April, griped, "She was late yesterday. She's late this morning. It isn't fair, Phideas."

"Has anyone checked on her? Maybe she overslept."

"It's not in my job description."

"No, but it would be the polite thing to do."

Aknee darted into the kitchen and scooped up the deviled egg platter. "Morning!" he crowed cheerfully.

"Aknee," Cobb flagged the elfin speed train to a stop, "have you seen April this morning?"

"Oh, yes sir. Yes."

"Where is she?"

"Saw Ms. April at stables."

"When?" Cobb's heart bounced in alarm. He couldn't have more staff hightailing off to god-knew-where. It was highly irregular.

"O-o-o-h. Before dawn, Mr. Boss."

"Before dawn! Did she say anything to you?"

Aknee shook his head. "No sir! She was busy."

"Busy? Busy doing what?"

"Saddling up Cora. Got to take platter, Mr. Boss. Got to go."

"Thanks, Aknee." Cobb waved him off and thought with rancor about his ill fortune. Three murders, three missing employees. What, in heaven's name, was he going to do?

"Well, if that doesn't beat all!" Jeremy exploded. "Who does she think she is?"

"Jeremy," Cobb made an effort to ignore the sub-chef's peevishness, "I know you can handle matters ably with or without April. Please carry on. If you need extra staff—"

"I could use another preparer."

"Fine. Send Aknee to wake Carmen. She's efficient. Then, if you would, please, put together a breakfast tray for me and have Aknee bring it to my office." Cobb might not have any idea what to do but he was certain of one thing. He wasn't going to make any decisions on an empty stomach.

Cobb exited the kitchen, sneezed wetly in the hall, and not feeling any of his usual joy in his job, dragged himself up the stairs to his office.

SYLVESTRE JENKS AWOKE hacking up phlegm and promptly diagnosed he was suffering from the lingering effects of smoke inhalation. He felt as if he'd smoked a whole pack of unfiltered cigarettes, something he hadn't done since the stress of final exams in medical school.

When he reached the dining room, he saw the others were already eating. Dani, her mouth full, pointed him toward a sideboard that held bowls of food. There was a casserole of corn, chile and squash; tortillas; sausage blended with potatoes; and an urn of coffee. Sly sniffed. "Umm, coffee."

"Coffee's one of the few foods we import from off-world," Zane said. "The climate is not moist enough to grow it and there just isn't any substitute for coffee."

"I grew up drinking a stimulant herb called zixoon, but Zane's right, there's no substitute for coffee." Olive sat cradling a mug of the dark brew in her hands. Her face looked swollen to Sly and her eyes bloodshot but otherwise she appeared calm.

"So," Zane said, getting down to business, "what are your plans? Are you going back to the resort?"

"I believe," Dani said, laying down her fork and wiping her mouth, "we have an obligation to do whatever we can to determine what killed the residents of Topotuk."

"Our intent," Ma'at said, "is to return there today to investigate."

"What are you looking for?"

"I don't know, Mr. Tyson."

Olive choked down her coffee. "Jake, would you check on the village of Makapi? After you've completed your investigations, I mean?"

"Of course."

"I don't have the...courage to ride up and check myself."

"Makapi?" Dani asked.

"The sister village to Topotuk. It's Olive's birth village. It is due west of here."

"Should we check there first?" Sly asked.

"Ma'at?" Dani tilted her head.

Ma'at frowned. "It would seem unlikely that two separated villages should be wiped out by the same event at the same time."

"Then no?"

"Captain, I have too little information on which to base a definitive answer. Nevertheless, I do not expect our investigations at Topotuk to take longer than the morning. Mr. Tyson," Ma'at turned to Jake, "will we be able to cover the distance to Makapi before the day is gone?"

"Oh, easily. If we finish at Topotuk by mid-morning, we will be in Makapi by noon."

"Very well, then," Dani commanded, "we'd better get moving."

THEY COULD SMELL Topotuk long before they arrived. The acrid odor of yesterday's conflagration lingered on the air. As they grew nearer, they saw eddies of ash swirling upward and drifting away to the northeast.

"We're damn lucky it was a windless day yesterday," Dani said.

"There were breezes," Sly shouted from behind her.

"Yes. But after Jake said there was nothing upwind that could catch fire, I worried about it less. It's a good thing their crops are on this south side."

"Speaking of crops," Lindie said, riding ahead of Dani, "who's going to water them?"

Dani felt her throat tighten at the sight of Lindie's voluptuous body swaying atop her zeebiti. Whether the pain was a spasm of longing or disappointment, she wasn't sure. When she had returned to their room late the night before after talking at length with Ma'at and Sly, Lindie had already been fast asleep.

Jake twisted around in his saddle. "The foods we plant are desert strains. They can go a long time without water. The real question is, who will harvest them?"

"No one," Ma'at answered from the rear of the train, "because no one will know if they are poisoned."

"They don't look poisoned," Lindie said, pulling Hotsie to a stop beside Jake and gazing at the rows of tall corn, spreading squash, and short bean and chile plants waving innocently on the slope below the burned-out wrecks of houses.

"How do you wish to proceed, Ma'at?" Dani asked.

"We should get samples of the vegetables upon our return," Ma'at conceded. "Even if we cannot analyze them here, we can test them in the lab once we are back aboard *Boediceas*, along with the few samples Dr. Jenks was able to collect. But my main interest is in viewing the caldera lake, which if I understand Mr. Tyson correctly, is the source of the water for these crops as well as a repository of food in the form of fish."

"You listen well, Ma'at," Jake said. "We discussed that on the day of your arrival when you talked about fishing expeditions."

Shall we then, Mr. Tyson?"

"Of course, Ma'at. The trail is over here."

STELLA, ON AWAKENING, discovered through the simple medium of pain that even the slightest movement of her neck caused a wave of nausea to wash up from her stomach and set her head to throbbing. Her arms were crossed over her chest in the shape of an X and held tightly in place by torn lengths of bed sheet.

She presumed she looked like a shroud-wrapped Egyptian mummy. She felt as old and filthy as one too. The men had left her dressed in her sweat-stained and blood-stiff shirt. She couldn't guess if the oversight had been the result of exhaustion or propriety.

Alan had gotten stuck with the job of slinging and swathing her arms as Warren, by then, was so stiff with pain and bruising that he could hardly raise a finger. Settling into a seat at the tiny multi-use table that formed the social and practical center of *The Susan*, Warren had downed some of Stella's painkillers and then started calling out first aid instructions to Alan.

When Stella was immobilized, Alan dissolved painkillers into more juice and dripped the drug-laced liquid into her mouth. His face hovering over her was the last thing she remembered.

She could not see the chrono but something made her think it was morning. *Oh*, she recognized, *it was the bittersweet tang of coffee. So prosaic, so welcome.* She guessed one or the other of the boys was up. Maybe it wasn't morning. Maybe it was just the middle of the night and for some god-only-knew-why reason they were awake. She couldn't lift her head to see.

"Alan?" she croaked. She heard a rustle and the setting down of a cup. Or was it cups?
"Warren?"

"Hi, Stella." Alan's head appeared first, followed by Warren's. Neither of them looked very good, she thought. Their mouths were slack, their hair uncombed, and their chins covered with dark stubbly growth.

Alan was still without a shirt. Smudges of gray showed under a pair of red-rimmed hazel eyes set in a rather innocent, boyish face. For the first time, her stalker looked not only human to her but horrendously young.

What she could see of Warren's face, beneath the highly colored array of slashes, puncture wounds, and bruises, was gray with fatigue. His shirt was streaked with dark vertical lines of dried blood.

"What do you know, Alan," Warren made a dismal attempt at humor, "she's still alive."

"Have you seen yourself, Warren?" Stella asked.

"I'm too stiff to raise a mirror," he joked.

"Look, you two," Alan interrupted. "It's always worse the first day after an injury. The body's natural painkillers have worn off and you feel everything."

"Thank you, Dr. Alan," Warren mocked.

"It's true," Stella said, "but, Alan, believe me, if I didn't know it from previous experience, I know it now."

"Sorry. What can I get you? Frankenstein here is still pretty useless."

"What time is it?"

"It's about ten in the morning."

"Ten? I slept that long?"

"Those were good painkillers, lady," Warren complimented. "Thanks."

"How many did you give me?" Stella demanded of Alan.

"Four."

"Four! Lord, Alan! Don't do that again! That many could have killed me."

"I took four," Warren contributed.

Stella looked daggers at him.

"You both slept like the dead, that's for sure," Alan put in. "On the other hand, I only dozed so I could keep an eye on both of you."

"Most kind of you, Alan. I'm sorry I yelled."

"It's okay. Are you hungry?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. I know if I have any more of that damn juice I'm going to throw up."

"How about coffee?"

"I'd have to sit up. How am I going to do that?"

"I spent half the night working that out," Alan boasted. "See this big sling I slipped behind your head and shoulders after you went to sleep?"

Stella grimaced. "Sorry. I can't turn my head to see it."

"Doesn't matter. I'm going to lift your upper body with it. While I do that, Warren will place behind your back the pillows I tied together to create a wedge-shaped support."

Fired up with enthusiasm, Alan went to retrieve the trussed-up mass of pillows. He held the invention aloft.

"Want to try it?"

"What the hell? You guys haven't dumped me so far."

The maneuver went more smoothly than Stella could have hoped. Alan wasn't a muscle man but he wasn't as clumsy as she had supposed him to be. Warren, doing his small part, slid the pillows into place with a speed born of painful necessity. Alan eased Stella back against the support and released the sling.

Stella's head swam with dizziness. Lying flat, she had been able to focus her eyes on the mens' faces but now they and the interior of the ship blurred into a gray fuzz.

"Dizzy," she whispered and closed her eyes. After a moment the vertigo passed and she opened them again.

"Better?" Alan asked.

"More interesting view, that's for sure." She saw the ship's console and bulkheads and the all-purpose table on which the mens' coffee sat in mugs, growing cold.

"I'll get fresh coffee." Alan smiled.

"What can I do?" Warren asked.

"You," Stella ordered, "can get in the sonic shower and get cleaned up. Toss those blood-soaked clothes down the recycle chute and order up some new ones. Did you put anything on those wounds?"

"Whiskey."

"Well, its time for a more high-tech antiseptic. You'll find some in the toilet cubicle. Now get going. Looking at you is depressing."

Warren's face fell.

"Don't feel singled out, Warren. Believe me, after Alan feeds me, I'm sending him to the showers too."

Stella's regret was she couldn't manage a shower for herself. She suspected asking the men to wash her body for her would be met with reactions of horror.

"Uh," Warren hesitated, "there's just one problem."

"What?"

"I don't know how to do any of that."

"Alan!" Stella hollered.

"All right, all right. I heard you. Which do you want first? Coffee or a clean Warren?"

"A clean Warren. I'll occupy my mind with fantasizing about how delicious the coffee is going to be."

"Okay. C'mon Warren. I'll show you around the ship's facilities."

Stella closed her eyes, listening as Alan said 24th-century technology to Warren. His approach was thorough and organized and he was patient with Warren's questions.

Stella found herself enjoying listening to the assured quality of his voice. It must have lulled her to sleep because she next found herself being nudged awake by Alan. The young man perched on the edge of her bed and held a spoon poised over a steaming bowl of soup.

"That's not coffee," she inanely pointed out.

"I decided you needed some real nutrition."

"Why is it that when you're sick, others feel they can make all the decisions for you?"

Alan ignored her obviously rhetorical question. "Open up." He dipped into the bowl and lifted a wobbling spoonful of broth teeming with noodles. "Just remember I've never done this before."

"I promise not to criticize." Stella slurped at the offered spoon and swallowed. "Umm, delicious. I take it you never had to handfeed younger siblings when they were sick?"

"I don't have any siblings, younger or older."

Alan fed her another spoonful. "What about you?"

"Siblings?"

"Siblings, spouses, kids."

"A much younger sister on Mars Colony. No...spouse." Stella slurped another spoonful.

"So, no children."

"That's a bit presumptuous, isn't it?"

Alan blushed. "Sorry."

"I had a son. Long ago."

This was interesting news to Alan. In all of Edward's rantings about the sins of the Villain of the Piece, he had never mentioned her having a child out of wedlock. Had the son been fathered by his uncle Martin? Was that the family secret that irritated Edward so much? Alan was intrigued but pretended casual disinterest.

"So, what happened to him?"

"I don't know," Stella said, swallowing down another spoonful of soup. "I lost him when he was a baby."

"Lost who?" Warren asked, emerging from the sonic shower, a towel wrapped around his waist. His dark wet hair flowed loosely over his shoulders.

"Heavens!" Stella said. "Is there any part of you that you didn't shred to pieces?"

"Just one part," Warren wiggled his eyebrows salaciously.

"Very funny," Stella said.

Alan tried not to focus on the image that came into his mind. Why should he have flashed back to a high school memory of Johnny Deitz with his long black hair falling to his shoulders? Johnny hadn't been wearing so much as a towel and Alan remembered the beauty of his physique and the raw naked power of his genitalia had left Alan feeling both excited and confused.

Stella was still talking. "I'd like to point out to both of you that I am old enough to be your mother."

"The way you boss us around proves it, too," Warren retorted, but he was grinning. Alan looked away from him and forced himself to repress the recollection Warren had brought to the surface.

"Feeling better, aren't you, Warren?"

"Yes...Mom."

Alan forced his mind back to the task of feeding Stella, silently cursing Warren for interrupting their conversation and distracting his focus from the goal his father had set for him. He dipped up one last spoonful of soup for her and reported, "Soup's all gone, Stella."

"It was delicious, Alan. Thanks. You didn't spill even a smidgen."

Alan carried the empty bowl away to the recycle chute. *Could the situation get any stranger?* Here was a woman he'd been raised, like a slavering attack dog, to seek out and destroy. Instead he was spoon-feeding her. When was he going to confront her with his real reason for being here? Come to think of it, why hadn't she asked who he was and what he was doing there?

"Alan," Stella said, almost in answer to his thoughts, "I don't know what your immediate plans are but would you consider helping me and Warren with something? Seeing as how he's a little torn up?"

"And you're a little tied up?" Warren jeered.

"Shut up, Warren."

"Help you with what?" Alan pretended ignorance. "I assumed you and Warren were on a sightseeing trip."

"Not entirely," Stella hedged. "I hired Warren to help me move the...um, a piece of equipment."

"Physically?" Alan was aghast. He'd never seen the FDet in person but, from the design specifications he'd read, he knew it was far too large and heavy to be moved by a hundred men, let alone two.

"No, not physically." Stella frowned at Alan.

"How then?"

"I have the transport coordinates for the current location of the equipment. What I need you two to do is locate and set in the coordinates for the new location."

"We're going to store it in an old cabin on my dad's property," Warren clarified. "All we have to do is ride over to the cabin, set in the coordinates and—"

"—transport it over," Alan finished.

"Right," Stella said. "You're more familiar with transporter technology than Warren. If you could do that part, I'd pay you. Handsomely."

Alan crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't know—"

"Oh, come on, Alan," Warren interrupted harshly. "Don't be such a priss. It's not going to be any big deal. You've come this far on our little adventure."

"Warren—" Stella said.

"I'll do it, Stella. I don't see how I can get out of it anyway." He glared at Warren.

"You can't." Warren's voice was hard but he was grinning the same idiot grin as he had on the barge. The grin's ghastly quality was more than a little compounded by beaming out from a mangled face presiding over a scored and bruised body.

Alan shuddered, feeling both dismay and an inexplicable stirring of anticipation. It was clear Warren was deadly serious about Alan's staying in their, "little adventure."

THE TRAIL TO the caldera lake started from the southwest corner of Topotuk village. After following a steep but steady incline through striated layers of red lava, it began a series of upward-angled switchbacks so tight it was difficult to pace the zeebiti properly for the turns.

At last, the investigatory party topped out on the barren ledge of the caldera and saw the lake below them. The water was a chalky brown, stained with streaks and blots of dark red. Flashes of silver-blue dotted its surface and an overpowering stench of rotting fish polluted the air.

"Good heavens," Sly said, "they *fish* in that stinking rust bucket?"

"Oh, gods," murmured Jake, his eyes wide.

"I take it," Ma'at said, "this is not the lake as you remember it."

"No." Jake shook his head. "How could something have killed the fish too? And what is that color?"

"Iron-rich mud, I suspect."

"How did it get there, Ma'at?" Dani asked.

"I expect it was churned up from the lake bottom, Captain."

"By what? A giant hand?"

"Are you suggesting vengeful gods, Captain?"

"I'm not suggesting anything, Ma'at. But I am beginning to suspect that you have a theory."

"Indeed, Captain. But I do not care to speculate in advance of the facts."

"Speculate. It's an order."

"Very well. Do you recall when we were standing on the terrace at the resort?"

"Sure," Lindie said. "How could we forget?"

"That damn earth tremor really caught me off guard," Sly recalled.

"Yes. But does anyone recall the rumble that followed it?"

"Yes," Jake answered. "I wasn't on the terrace but I thought it was odd that I heard thunder after the tremor. For one thing, it's the dry season, and for another, there were only a handful of clouds in the sky that day."

"Lightning has been known to strike out of a clear blue sky," Dani declared.

"True, Captain. You did order me to speculate."

"Speculate away, Ma'at. I didn't mean to interrupt you."

"My speculation is that the earth tremor we experienced at the resort precipitated an underwater landslide in this lake."

"And churned up volumes of silt from the lake bottom," Jake finished, scrutinizing the unnatural color of the water.

"Brilliant, Ma'at," Lindie complimented.

"A perfectly straightforward deduction."

"It sounds no more modest when you say it than when Sherlock Holmes said it," Sly said.

Lindie laughed. Ma'at ignored them and gazed upward, noting the position of the sun. "It's getting on to noon, Captain. Perhaps we should ride on to Makapi."

Dani turned to Jake. "Lead on."

Jake twitched Kaba's rein, his forehead furrowed in worried thought. The zeebiti turned in response and the other animals and their riders fell in behind him for the trek to Makapi.

Chapter Eight

ALAN SLATHERED ANTISEPTIC on Warren's numerous gashes, forcing his mind elsewhere, and then left him to the painful task of dressing while Alan showered. After the shower, Alan recycled his filthy cowboy costume and put on the fresh khakis he'd ordered up.

Warren forced himself stiffly out of a chair when Alan emerged from the toilet cubicle. "Let's get going before the whole day is gone."

"I'm ready."

"Wait," Stella called from the bunk. "Just one thing. I need that...um, my makeup compact. It's in one of the panniers."

"Jeez, Stella," Warren teased, "you don't need to get gussied up for us." Groaning, he knelt and rummaged through the supply pannier Oreon had been carrying. He pulled forth a small silvery disk. "Is this it?"

"Yes. Bring it over here and open it."

"You do it," Warren handed the disk to Alan. "I'll go round up Oreon and Korkorba."

"Good. I'll be there in a minute." Alan walked across to Stella's bedside and flipped the disk open. It was not a makeup compact. Inside was an array of multi-colored buttons. He tilted the display so Stella could see it.

"Okay. Punch the top blue button twice. Now, purple once. Yellow once. Green twice," Stella commanded.

Alan punched away. "Is that all?"

"Yes. You can close it now."

Alan flipped the disk closed. "What did that do?"

"Disabled the equipment."

"Good idea," Alan said, the sarcasm plain in his voice. Stella frowned again. Alan set the compact down on the bedside table.

"Can you manage while we're gone?"

"Yes. Just don't be gone long."

"We won't be."

LOPING ALONG ON the zeebiti, it took the two men only about thirty minutes to reach the cabin Warren had selected as the hiding place for the FDet.

"This is our Harvest Cabin," Warren said. "We only use it a couple of times a year." They dismounted and tied their zeebiti to the hitching post. It didn't look to Alan like it was nearly big enough to contain the FDet. "Is it empty?" "It has a dinky kitchen and some boxed supplies that Olive uses for canning pineberry fruit." Warren pushed open the door, which creaked its annoyance. "Oh yeah, the table too. I forgot."

The table, which took up most of the center of the room, was a scarred and unevenly-planed wooden contraption that had seen years of abuse. It was circled by a mismatched hodgepodge of wooden chairs. In contrast, on the table's surface, lay a highly-polished and exquisitely-carved bracelet of a green-black stone. Warren picked it up.

"The Paku must have helped themselves to some stored grub the last time they came through."

"This is payment?"

"Yep." Warren slipped the article into his pocket. "Let's stack these chairs along the wall and move the table outside. I described the cabin to Stella. She thought her piece of equipment would just fit in here."

Alan thought Stella was overly optimistic. "Let's hope she's right."

They moved the chairs and then carried the heavy table to the door. Getting it out the narrow doorway turned into a mammoth struggle.

"Did they build the damn thing inside here?" Alan grunted in frustration.

"Probably. My dad made it before I was born so I don't know. This was the original ranch house. Jake wasn't even born when my mom and dad lived here."

Finally, they cleared the door and then, both grunting and panting, dragged the table a short distance away from the cabin into the sand. Warren's shoulder and arm lacerations had been opened by the strenuous activity. Alan saw blood leaking through Warren's shirt in half a dozen places.

Leaving Warren to bleed and pant, Alan went back into the cabin, pulled *The Susan's* tie-in device from his pocket and keyed in the local coordinates. He went back outside and joined Warren at the table.

"I think we should go quite a distance away before we transport the equipment."

"Why?"

"Let's just say I'm safety-conscious, okay? We'll untie Oreon and Korkorba and take them with us."

"Okay." They untied the zeebiti and trekked up a short rise to the north.

When they were about three hundred meters away, Alan stopped and looked back at the cabin. "That's probably good enough." He scanned the area. "The only problem is there's nothing to tether Oreon and Korkorba to."

"I'll hold them," Warren said. "There's some grass here at our feet. It will keep them busy."

Alan grimaced.

"Don't worry, Alan. They know me. Stella was as green as they come. She didn't know a zeebiti from a tree. They're not going to rear like that around me."

Warren faced the zeebiti and wound their reins tightly around his fist. Their heads were already down, their teeth yanking at the grass. Like Alan, he saw the cabin but he was ensuring the zeebiti faced away from it.

"Famous last words," Alan grumbled. "Are you ready?"

"Ready."

"Okay. Here goes." Alan pressed down a single control. There was a moment of silence and then an explosion of light and sound. The FDet blasted the roof off the cabin. Wooden shrapnel flew in all directions.

A mountain-sized cloud of dust billowed out of the ruptured building and mushroomed into the air. A shock wave followed, rumbling past Alan and Warren. It terrified the zeebiti, who dug their hoofs into the sand, snorting and backing away, dragging Warren with them.

"Easy, easy!" Warren ordered, the authority in his voice soothing the alarmed animals. Oreon and Korkorba calmed quickly, their shocked brown eyes returned to normal size, their nostrils softening.

"What in the hell happened?" Warren demanded of Alan, his focus still on the zeebiti.

"I guess it didn't fit," Alan answered, his voice solemn. He gazed in awe at the massive white satellite dish that jutted a good three meters above the smashed roof line of the cabin. It looked both innocent and supercilious at the same time as if to say, in its obvious technological superiority, that it didn't need to take notice of anything so insignificant as a mud hut.

"Damn it to hell!" Warren howled, peering past the zeebiti and seeing the disaster for the first time. "My father is going to shit bricks!"

"He may need to," Alan quipped, eyeing the cabin's extensive structural damage.

"Shut up, smartass! Now what are we going to do?"

Alan shrugged. "Ride back to *The Susan*, I suppose."

"This is a nightmare." Warren towed the zeebiti over to Alan, his eyes trained on the immense white saucer which floated over the wrecked walls of his father's cabin. "It's just a satellite dish, for crissake. Even I've seen those. Why is Stella being so cloak-and-dagger about it?"

"Because it's not an ordinary satellite dish."

"Are you saying you know what this thing does?"

Alan nodded. "I'm afraid so."

When Alan read his uncle's design specifications for the FDet, he'd been struck by the device's adaptability and technological simplicity. In the beginning, the project had been legitimately funded by an arm of Geological Research Services within the labyrinthine bureaucracy of the Coalition. The small grant allotted had defined the parameters of what Martin Goodrick could accomplish but it was the FDet's intended use that had truly kept it simple.

According to Martin's papers, he had reasoned that any planet being assessed for humanoid habitability would, by its very nature, be the recipient of solar energy. So he had

designed the FDet to gather those wavelengths, restricting it to operating on ever-available solar power.

"So what does it do?"

"It's too complicated to explain," Alan lied. He knew that a magnification instrument suspended above the center of the dish acted to focus the solar rays and funnel them through a concentration of potent crystals that multiplied the solar energy many times over. That energy was then fed downward into a powerful and highly-specialized rock drill.

"You mean you just don't want to tell me."

"Trust me. You don't want to know what it does."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Ignorance is bliss."

Alan knew sensors in the drill detected the temperatures of the rock through which it drilled. When a pool of hot magma was detected, the drill ceased drilling and the magnified solar energy was diverted into the magma pool, heating it to hotter and hotter temperatures.

"That hasn't been my experience," Warren countered.

"Let me ask you this, Warren. Can you successfully complete your contract with Stella without knowing what this device does?"

Warren shrugged. "I guess so. If I'd needed to know, she would have told me." He took a close hard look at Alan. "What I really need to know is what your plans are, Alan. You've been stalking Stella to steal this thing from her, haven't you?"

"Yes and no."

"Yes and no?"

"I've been stalking her but I'd rather not steal the FDet."

"The FDet, huh? That's what it's called?"

"Yes. For short."

"Do you think she's just gonna give this FDet thingamajig to you?"

"That was my hope."

Warren snorted. "Fat chance."

"Then I'll have to steal it. I don't want to but I'll have to."

"I'm only gonna say this once, Alan. Don't steal it on my watch because you won't live to regret it. Whatever the hell it does, Stella is paying me to protect it...and her."

THE FAINT SINGSONG of human voices woke Jhiriku from slumber. To his chagrin, he had fallen asleep in his command chair. He promptly blamed it on the bottle of beer and his lack of sleep the previous night. He sat up and scanned the terrain through the strip of shielded view window.

Stella's craft had not moved. With the sun approaching its zenith, its silver hide glinted in the sunlight. Jhiriku scrutinized the area of the dilapidated mud cabin.

Tethered to a hitching post were two saddled zebiti. Backing out the door was a human, scrambling and ducking and tugging at some object. With much struggle, the object emerged from the door and Jhiriku saw it was a table.

A second human, on the other side of the table, emerged also and the two figures dragged the table away into the sand. Jhiriku recognized the two humans as the men accompanying Stella.

The second human went back inside the cabin and then emerged again a few moments later. He walked back to the table and started talking to the first human, who was half-lying on the table. Their voices were wisps of delayed sound, reaching Jhiriku's ears a few moments after their mouths formed the words.

He could not make out what they were saying but the first man straightened up and the two walked across to the zebiti, untied them, and started to head toward Jhiriku's craft.

Jhiriku sat up alertly. He wondered if his craft was visible. Tense seconds blinked by but the humans seemed preoccupied as they led the zebiti up the hill. In any case, neither looked in his direction. They stopped on a low ridge where another discussion ensued. The first human took charge of the zebiti, who bent their heads to the sandy ground. The second man turned back to look at the cabin. A split second later, there was a blinding flash for which Jhiriku was completely unprepared.

Instinctively, he leaped from his chair and ducked beneath his console. He heard a violent boom and felt his craft rattle. When the movement ceased, he jumped to his feet and looked out. A massive cloud of dust had puffed into the air and shards of wood and broken brick littered the ground.

Jhiriku could hardly contain his delight. Rising from the pulverized roof, like a grinning eyeless face, was what could only be the big circular dish of the FDet. It was bigger and grander than he expected. There would be much celebrating by his tribesmen when he brought it home in triumph to Aostolo.

He watched as the two humans mounted their zebiti and rode away in the direction of Stella's ship. Jhiriku observed them until he was satisfied that was their destination. He was reasonably sure they would not be coming back to the cabin for some time.

Success in this affair, he judged, had been far too easy. He could have sent even his stupidest second lieutenant, Gordco, on this trip without fearing failure. Everything had gone more smoothly than eels slithering through kelp beds. Eliminating his fellow bidders...well, there had been little challenge there. Finding the FDet...there had been no challenge there.

Jhiriku's delight metamorphosed into disappointment. What stories would he tell his tribesmen, who would expect glowing tales of misadventure and daring combat, upon his return? He paced his small bridge, deep in thought. Then the answer came to him.

Why not, before he disassembled and loaded the FDet to take it home, test it one more time? He could be sure then that it had not been damaged by the clumsy manner in which the two humans had transported it to the cabin and he would have a story to tell. Jhiriku smirked. He could even give the residents of Otung, few though they might be, one last thrill.

Jhiriku belted on his phaser, sealed closed the chest vent on the lightweight jumpsuit he had changed into that morning—he detested the tunic and turban disguise he'd donned for the last several days—pulled on his peaked tasseled cap and opened his craft's hatch. He grasped the last rung of the stem's retractable chain ladder and rode it down to the sandy ground.

He spread wide the earflaps and brim of the cap to protect his ears and eyes from the sun and started hiking, his knee-high hide boots sinking into the sand. He couldn't wait to take a closer look at the FDet.

THE VILLAGE PERIMETER of Makapi looked much like that of Topotuk but here the pack of tan mongrels that guarded the entrance posts was alive and barking. As the riders drew nearer, the barking changed to snarls and bared teeth.

Jake pulled Kaba to a stop and leaned down, extending a hand to one of the dogs. "Hey, Wuma, don't you recognize me? It's your old pal, Jake."

Wuma twitched her short yellow ears forward, cocked her head and whined. The other dogs stopped baying and straggled suspiciously forward, sniffing at the air.

"Yeah, yeah, it's me. I know it's been a long time but this is no way to greet an old—"

"Jake!" A big-shouldered man with an immense square head, wearing only a hide breech clout, strode through the mongrel pack. Dani gauged the man to be a few years younger than Jake, and solid muscle.

"Zodani!" Jake said. "*Tala*."

"*Tala!*" Zodani raised a huge right hand, palm forward. "You have with you friends?"

"Yes. Guests of the resort."

Zodani spread his bulky arms wide. "You are welcome to Makapi. I am Zodani, headman. Please dismount. We will care for your zeebiti." Zodani barked an order in his native language at the children and teens who had piled up behind him. One teenager ran forward and gripped Kaba's bridle. The others took to their heels and raced back into the village.

Zodani stepped to Kaba's side. Jake swung his right leg over the saddle horn and Zodani grasped Jake by the waist and lowered him to the ground without even a tremble of muscle.

Ma'at raised an eyebrow, sharing the expression with Dani and Sly. Four more teenage boys, also wearing breech clouts, ran up and each grasped a zeebiti bridle. Dani, Ma'at, Sly and Lindie dismounted and the boys led the animals away. Zodani turned and headed, with a regal air, into the village, passing between the towering entrance posts. Jake and his party followed.

As they made their way through the village, residents left their tasks of carving fishhooks, weaving rope, or grinding grain to trail after them. Most recognized Jake and waved. A few stared at Dani, pointing and whispering. By the time they reached Zodani's centrally-situated hut, Dani was sure the entire village was tagging along with them, including grandmothers and babies.

At his door, Zodani turned to face his visitors and, with a bulky person's grunt, sat cross-legged on the ground. After a calculated interval which Dani assumed indicated polite acceptance of the invitation to sit, Jake eased his artificial leg out in front of him and folding his good knee, lowered himself to the ground.

Jake shot Dani a compelling look and Dani sat on his right. On Dani's right, Ma'at, Lindie and Sly followed suit, the party forming a tight semi-circle facing Zodani. Behind them, the villagers sat all at once, creating a whoosh of air that rushed coolly up Dani's back.

"Water!" Zodani called. A hide flask was offered by a hand that extended out of Zodani's hut, the bearer remaining hidden. Zodani passed the flask to Jake, who took a small sip and passed it to Dani. Dani assumed this activity, mostly because it was conducted in silence, was part of a prescribed welcoming ritual.

She took a sip and passed the flask to Ma'at. The flask made the rounds of her people, with Sly handing it back to Zodani. Zodani reached behind him and the bodiless hand magically whisked it away.

"Very well!" Zodani pronounced. He glared with ferocity at Dani. Dani didn't know if the words and the look were a challenge or an invitation to introduce herself but she decided to assume the latter. She put on her best amiable smile.

"I am Captain Danielle Artemis Forrest—"

"You are not Forrest!" Zodani interrupted. "You are *konuk*. We have been expecting you."

"Expecting me?"

"Since the destruction of Topotuk."

"Sir," Dani said, her voice polite but firm, "with all due respect to your religious beliefs, I am not *konuk*."

"You are *konuk*!"

Dani hesitated. She didn't want the interaction to escalate into a fight. Strategically, she and her officers were at a severe disadvantage in terms of numbers. Instead, she changed tack. "How is it that you are aware of the destruction of Topotuk?"

Zodani snorted. "Our sister village? How could I not be aware of your godly wrath upon it?"

"My wrath?" Dani felt a powerful urge to shake her fist at Zodani's obduracy but under the circumstances, she decided it would only illustrate Zodani's point.

"Zodani," Jake said, "we come in peace. Even if Dani's arrival fulfills the *konuk* prophecy, we are not here to destroy anything. Olive asked me to visit with you."

"My greetings to Olive, my great aunt," Zodani said, bowing his head. "We have no quarrel with you Jake, or your esteemed father, Zane."

"And we," Jake proceeded with careful formality, "wish to extend our condolences to you. Your loss is our loss."

"Most kind." Zodani bowed his head low to his knees. "We are heavy with sorrow."

"Therefore," Dani tried again, "you realize we are not—"

"Pardon my confusion," Lindie interrupted, "but if Captain Forrest is a goddess who can wreak such havoc as that suffered by Topotuk, wouldn't it be wise to show more respect toward her? You know, in order to avoid a similar fate?"

Dani cringed in anticipation of all hell breaking loose but to her astonishment, Zodani's face broke into a charming grin. He had many bright straight teeth.

"Yes!" Zodani said. "If she had come yesterday."

"Yesterday?" Lindie asked, puzzled. "What is the significance of yesterday?"

"Ah," Zodani hummed, his smile broad. "Jake, you have here a woman of wisdom who asks the proper questions."

Lindie ducked her chin modestly and shot an 'I told you so' look at Dani. Dani pursed her lips in annoyance. Jake blushed. Sly, who was squatting on his knees, rolled his eyes. Ma'at remained motionless and expressionless, his eyes trained on Zodani.

"Yesterday," Zodani said, milking the attention of his audience for all it was worth, "Kathwalda had a dream."

"Kathwalda is a seer," Jake whispered to Dani.

"Kathwalda dreamt that *konuk* would come to Makapi but that we need not fear her."

"Kathwalda is wise," Dani suggested. *At least someone knew she was not the wrath-wielding konuk.*

"We need not fear her," Zodani shot Dani a look of irritation for the interruption, "because the departure of *konuk* from the Land of the Dead and her return to us did not have the blessing of the goddesses."

Ma'at's eyebrows shot up. Dani scowled. "This doesn't sound good," Lindie whispered. Sly braced himself for action.

"Meaning?" Dani snapped.

"Kathwalda dreamed that the goddesses desire the immediate return of *konuk* to the Land of the Dead and that if we carry out this request, Makapi will be spared destruction."

In the blink of an eye, Dani felt her arms yanked behind her back. Rope lassoed her wrists. She leveraged her body forward on her knees and kicked, but villagers she could not see jumped on her legs and another rope cinched tightly around her ankles.

There was an uproar of voices. Sly shrieked, "What in god's name do you think you're doing?" Dani heard a squeal of surprise from Lindie. From Ma'at, there was only a soft resigned release of breath.

Spitting dirt out of her mouth, Dani twisted her head to the right and saw that Ma'at, Sly and Lindie had all suffered the same fate. *What unbelievable stupidity! Had she forgotten every rule of first contact?*

Dani twisted to the left. Jake was untouched and untied. He had risen from the ground and was rushing toward Zodani, his fists raised. Zodani rose, looking unperturbed and towered over Jake.

Jake lunged for the leader's chest. As he did, two sizeable village men converged on Jake and dragged him backward.

"Damn you, Zodani!" Jake shouted.

A noose snaked out from one of his captor's hands and encircled Jake's wrists, binding them behind him.

"If you don't kick, Jake, we won't tie your legs," the other captor said. Jake stopped struggling. He glared at Zodani. "What in the hell is this? This is no way to treat guests!"

"I have no choice, Jake. You heard the dream. What would you do?"

"I'd apply some common sense! I never knew you to be superstitious."

"This is not superstition. It is a fact. You yourself have been to Topotuk. The destruction there is the vengeance of *konuk*."

"How do you know that?" Lindie demanded from where she lay pinned to the ground.

"Another wise question from the wise woman. Because she is wise, I will answer her."

"Thank you." Lindie's response was not without sarcasm. She blew grit from between her lips.

"The earthquake came without signs. Even before we learned of the destruction of Topotuk, we knew there was something evil in this earthquake."

"What kind of signs do you look for?" Lindie spat out more grit.

"The erratic behavior of the dogs and zebiti tells us an earthquake is imminent."

"Captain," Ma'at twisted her head toward Dani, "that is a scientifically verifiable observation on other worlds. Why should this earthquake have been without such widely-documented indicators?"

"Hrmp," Dani grunted in disinterest, her back aching from supporting four people. Ma'at's ability to focus on interesting scientific oddities at the most difficult of moments was sometimes more of an irritation than a help.

Zodani was still speaking. "What could the destruction of Topotuk be but the unauthorized reappearance of *konuk* to our land? Not only is her visit out of season but it is as if the breath of the goddesses killed our relatives. There was no earthquake damage at Topotuk."

Dani raised her head but could see nothing above the level of Zodani's quite substantial knees.

"The breath of the goddesses," Ma'at murmured, forehead resting on the ground. "Fascinating."

"I am the leader of my people," Zodani continued, "I have an obligation to protect them. I cannot ignore the word of a seer such as Kathwalda."

Dani, her neck muscles weakening from the strain, dropped her head back to the ground and tried to think of a diplomatic way out of the situation.

"Zodani, you can't just kill these people," Jake thundered. "They are officers in *Explora Command*! Forget the wrath of *konuk*! *Explora Command* will come and destroy you."

Dani closed her eyes and blew out a pent-up breath. Not only was Jake not right about *Explora Command*'s likely response to what they were sure to view as a private, if unfortunate, embroilment in local politics on Dani's part but threatening the Yutunda with the Coalition's might was a flagrant violation of the Non-Interference Code. Something for which she would also be held responsible.

"I do not intend to kill your friends, Jake."

"Well," Jake stammered, "that's a relief anyway. So—"

"The Land of the Dead will take them back with its own power."

"What?"

"They will be ceremoniously escorted to the Great Mouth."

"The Great Mouth!"

The discernible horror in Jake's voice did nothing to make Dani feel better. *What in the hell was the Great Mouth?* She twisted her neck and looked inquiringly at Ma'at. Ma'at shrugged and said nothing.

"It is part of the dream, Jake. It is the way we are to fulfill the will of the goddesses."

"You can't!" Jake cried. The earth shook and a distant rumble sounded. The people laying on the ground felt the tremble as a gentle side-to-side shockwave.

"Extraordinary," Ma'at murmured, mostly to himself.

"Ah, you see," Zodani proclaimed in self-satisfaction, "my words are true."

"Oh gods," Jake moaned. He hung his head in defeat.

"Jake," Zodani intoned, "you are the friend of my childhood. I have no quarrel with you or your family. In fact, I am most grateful that you have delivered the *konuk* and her companions into our hands that we may fulfill the goddesses' demands."

"Zodani," Jake drew his last card, "what would Olive say? She is a great seer also and your mother's cousin."

"She was a great seer once, Jake. But her powers have weakened in living apart from the village."

"Your mother, Patapu, lived apart from the village, Zodani, and yet you are headman."

"I am only headman because Gohkele appointed me his successor on his deathbed."

"What do you intend to do with me?"

"Nothing. You are free to go. Kaba will be brought forward—" Zodani snapped his fingers imperatively, "and you will be assisted to mount."

"I swear by *Laka-no-boka*, Zodani, I will be back with Olive. She will set you straight."

"You and Olive are always welcome in Makapi, Jake. Kathwalda is sure in her interpretation but she will welcome a challenge. We shall prepare for a Contest of the Seers."

An extended, "Ohhh," went up from the crowd of villagers, who had been listening in rapt silence to the exchange. Now an excited whisper flowed in all directions.

"I go, Zodani," Jake said, "but only to return."

"We await your return," Zodani said with ritual politeness. Then he nodded his chin. "Untie him."

One of Jake's captors loosed the rope from Jake's wrists and Kaba, saddled and bridled, was led forward to stand between Jake and Zodani. Jake's captors lifted him into the saddle. Once there, he glared at Zodani. "I can never forgive you for this."

"One day you will. You will see it from my point of view."

Jake flicked Kaba's reins and the majestic stallion pranced forward.

ZANE TYSON LEANED on his hoe, gauging the quantity of water rushing down the irrigation canal on its way to flood his acre of corn. A decade before, with *Laka-no-boka's* help, he had hand-dug the canal to divert water from a small tributary of the Otung River that flowed down from the Ozkna Mountains and across his land holdings.

The water eddied strangely, almost pausing in its flow for an instant, and then Zane felt an earth tremor pass beneath his feet. Was this the first wave of a major quake or just another tremor? He heard a boom like that of a distant explosion. Zane lifted his eyes from the canal and searched the sky.

As had been the case all week, the clear blue vault was empty of clouds. That meant the boom wasn't thunder. Zane frowned. He had lived through hundreds of tremors on Otung but never—before this one and the one earlier in the week—had any included post-quake rumbles, cracks, or booms.

Was the behavior of the magma beneath the Otung River growing more active? Not a trained geologist, he could only guess at the age of the calderas, cinder cones, and volcanic plugs on the western plateau, all evidence of a much more volcanically-active era. In his lifetime and the lifetime of *Laka-no-boka* there had been no volcanic eruptions or major earthquakes on Otung.

Zane remembered that Olmstead Neville had once told him Kawanma Ruin had been a village on the banks of the Otung. At some time in the immemorial past, a massive earthquake had lifted the village to its present high location, at the same time lowering the valley and dropping the river far below the village.

Zane, disbelieving Olmstead, had once asked *Laka-no-boka* about it when they were sharing a friendly glass of beer. *Laka-noboka* had verified the event, embroidering the tale with the Yutundan mythological significance that had grown up around it in the intervening centuries. *Laka-no-boka* told him the people abandoned Kawanma and moved

across the river to settle into their current villages on the fertile slopes of the volcanic calderas.

Zane's eyes scanned the southeastern horizon. He saw a tan haze obscuring the crystal-clear air. He squinted. It looked like a cloud of dust, spreading into the atmosphere with ponderous slowness.

Odd, he thought. There were only flickers of breezes rustling the quiet heat of the day, nothing with the gusty force required to create a dust devil. Besides, dust devils formed in the shape of tall funnels, not soft puffs. If there was no wind to have whipped up the dust cloud, where had it come from?

With his hoe, Zane lumped dirt into the irrigation canal and watched the flow of water slow to a trickle. He laid the hoe on the embankment and whistled for Rominki, his zebiti mare. She lifted her head from the grass she was nibbling and stared at him with liquid brown eyes.

"Come on, baby." Zane stroked her on the nose and grasped her bridle. "Let's go for a run."

She nuzzled his pocket meaningfully. He took the reins and grabbing the saddle horn, mounted into the saddle. "No carrots until later," he admonished.

She tossed her head and Zane laughed, turning her toward the southeast. The dust was still discernible but it was no longer a cloud. Its puffy shape had flattened, the edges lengthening into tails, driven by the stronger currents of the upper air.

Zane wasn't the kind of man to puzzle idly over an oddity and dismiss it. Dependent largely on his own resources, he couldn't afford to ignore anything in the environment that might impinge on his survival and the survival of his family. If it hadn't been imperative that he irrigate today, he would have joined his son and the *Explora Command* visitors in their investigation of Topotuk.

Zane patted Rominki with gentle firmness on the neck. "Let's go take a look, girl."

Chapter Nine

"I HAD NO idea being viewed as a goddess," Dani griped, "could lead to so much trouble."

"Mythologically speaking," Lindie quipped from the opposite corner of the storage hut in which they were being held, "anyone who aspires to godhood is going to run into trouble along the way."

"I don't recall aspiring."

Sly laughed. "You've always aspired, Dani."

"I'm ordering both of you," Dani said, "to cut the nonsense and start thinking of a way out of this mess."

Tall urns of grain formed a quadrangle in the center of the hut. The captives had been separated from each other, one in each corner, wedged in by the heavy urns. The separation made it impossible to work together to untie each other. As it was, they had to rise up on their knees even to see over the urns and talk to each other.

"If I could prove somehow," Sly speculated, "that the deaths in Topotuk were a result of natural causes, maybe Zodani would see the light."

"This is a religious matter," Lindie contradicted. "Such an argument would have very little force."

"Are you saying, Dr. Davis," Ma'at asked, "that Zodani is not likely to listen to reason?"

"I'm saying Zodani is, in his own opinion, already listening to reason. The parameters of reason, after all, are defined by a society's beliefs. It was considered perfectly reasonable, in fact efficacious, to burn witches in the 16th century on Earth."

"A fate we may soon enjoy ourselves," Dani said, "if we don't think of something."

But there was no time. The open rectangle of the door was darkened by a line of brawny village men, who trooped in and arrayed themselves around the room, two to a captive. The pairs gripped their charges under the arms and hauled them to their feet. When they were standing, Zodani entered. He had added a painted hide cape to his costume and adorned his wrists and ankles with feathered bracelets.

"The Great Mouth has been prepared to receive you," he announced.

"Zodani—" Dani entreated.

"Silence! From this moment, there will be no talk between us of Makapi and you of the Land of the Dead. Anyone who speaks—even if it be the *konuk*—will be gutted instantly."

A long curved knife appeared, as magically as had the water flask, in the headman's hand. He brandished it to emphasize his point. Sly leaned forward as if to open his mouth in protest but Dani frowned him into silence.

"Try to be happy," Zodani admonished. "This is a great occasion for our village. We act only as the instruments of the goddesses." Zodani bowed low to Dani and then stepped backward out of the door. In his place, four teenage girls flowed in, solemn smiles giving an air of regal pomp to their young faces. They were garbed in knee-length hide tunics painted with ceremonial designs in mustard yellow and maroon.

They went to each of their assigned captives and placed wreaths entwined with dried corn cobs, bright orange squash blossoms, and dark polished seeds around their necks. The captives' timepieces were slipped from their wrists and replaced with feathered bracelets. No one spoke.

Then each girl took her place in front of her captive. On a signal from Zodani, each captive, still flanked by a pair of guards, was led from the room. Dani was led out first, followed by Ma'at, Sly and then Lindie.

As they emerged into the sunlight and marched in procession through the village, the girls sang a song. The other villagers, surging along with them, skipped and twirled in accompaniment to the rhythm. Although Dani could not guess at the words or meaning, the song sounded like a happy one to her ears. A song of sweet triumph, she thought, as only children who are uninitiated into the misfortunes of life can sing convincingly.

Beyond the village's western precincts, it was a short walk up a rise to the southwest to the Great Mouth. As far as Dani could tell, the Great Mouth was a round narrow opening in the ground, perhaps twice as large as the abandoned well she had played near once as a child and been severely reprimanded for by the farmer whose property it was on.

She remembered the chilled air coming up from its opening had carried with it a stagnant miasma that turned her stomach and, curious as she was as a child, she had had no desire to learn what lurked in its dark heart.

The procession came to a halt and the song died away as well, ending on an irritatingly-unresolved high note. Dani cringed. Four men, giants like Zodani, stood around the opening, looking as businesslike as Khrars. Spread across the rock-strewn ground were coils of rope and woven hip harnesses and Dani realized each member of her party was going to be lowered through the opening and into...*into what?*

Was there a cave below the Great Mouth? If so, was it a narrow claustrophobic hole or a massive cavern? How deep was it? Would the lengths of ropes go all the way to the bottom or was there a moment when the victims would simply be let go to fall whatever distance remained?

Dani cleared her throat to inquire but Zodani, who had led the procession, turned on her with lightning speed, the tip of his drawn knife nicking Dani's breastbone. "I said 'no words', *konuk*."

Dani held her breath. There was more hope of surviving the Great Mouth, she decided, than risking wholesale slaughter of her officers and Lindie at the hand of Zodani. She let out her breath and forced her face into bland expressionlessness. Zodani eased the knife away from Dani's chest.

"Guwastoo!" Zodani waved the knife in the air and Dani was marched forward. One of the waiting giants, assisted by Dani's guards, had her step into one of the harnesses. Without speaking, he pulled the harness up Dani's legs to her hips and then walked her to the rim of the Great Mouth with her guards, where he turned Dani so that her back was to the opening.

The guards untied Dani's wrists and removed the ceremonial bracelets and neck wreath. The giant placed Dani's hands on the rope, pressing them around the rough circular surface. He nodded at Dani inquiringly and Dani nodded back her understanding, gripping the rope with both hands. The man walked backward, playing out the rope circling his hips. He stopped, rooted his legs in a wide stance, and nodded to Dani's guards.

One of them, also without speaking, pressed Dani lightly on the chest and Dani understood she was being given the opportunity to descend gracefully or be pushed into the hole. Dani took the former option.

Rappelling itself held no fears for her. Unfortunately, the harness was devised in such a way that she had little control over the speed at which her belaying partner chose to play out the rope. Dani looked behind herself and stepped down against the worn wall of the opening.

The rope was taut and Dani inched another step down. She nodded at the giant, who fed out more rope. In a few more steps, Dani was below the rim of the opening and her belaying partner disappeared from sight. The air was decidedly cooler and the daylight sounds of the above-ground world already fading away.

Dani paid close attention to her footing, which she could only dimly see. The sunlight grew fainter and fainter until she was in a murky twilight. As she descended, the opening narrowed until it was only a half-meter or so larger than her body. She felt a twinge of panic and sweat broke out on her forehead. What if the first scenario—that of a narrow tunnel—was the correct one?

No longer able to see her feet, Dani walked her booted foot another step downward, in pace with the giant's steady belaying. Her foot touched wall and then slipped. Into empty air.

Dani scrambled instinctively, tugging at the rope. Unmindful of her distress, the rope serenely continued to play out. Dani's other foot slid down the rock wall and slipped into empty air, the uncontrolled forward motion causing her shoulders to bang against the wall.

She exited the narrow tunnel with a whoosh and cold air rushed up at her, chilling her sweat-drenched face. She looked down but there was nothing to see but an unremitting

inky blackness. Dani descended through it at an undeterminable speed toward an unknown depth.

ALTHOUGH IT WAS the same distance, the ride back to *The Susan* seemed to Warren and Alan to take far longer than the ride to the cabin. The sun was hot and bright, the effect magnified by reflections from the light-colored sand. Adding to the problem, the speckled silver of *The Susan's* hull scattered light blindingly in all directions. Once they arrived, the men dismounted and unsaddled the zeebiti.

"I'll take them down to the river for a drink," Warren said. "Can I trust you not to murder Stella in my absence?"

"Warren, you know I'm not going to hurt Stella."

"How can I be sure?"

"I thought the mile-wide yellow stripe down my belly was as apparent to you as to anyone."

Warren shrugged. "It is. But you're less of a coward than you might think. For now, I'll just have to trust you."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

Warren led the animals away and Alan trudged up *The Susan's* access ramp. "Whew," he said, feeling a rush of broiling heat when he pulled open *The Susan's* hatch. "It's hotter than Sol in here." His nose wrinkled in distaste. "Stinks too. Stella?"

He received no answer so he went into the stifling cabin. Stella lay on the floor, her eyes closed, her face tight with pain. Her pants were dark with sweat.

"Stella!" Alan felt a shudder of fear. "What are you doing on the floor?"

"Cooler down here," she panted, her face crimson and beaded with droplets of perspiration. "Couldn't get the hatch open. Couldn't turn on the cooling system."

"Damn it!" Alan swore. "Where are the switches?"

"Console."

Alan rushed to the console and found the correct buttons. The low whir of a fan started up. He went back to Stella and knelt beside her on the floor.

"I'm burning up." Stella opened bloodshot, glassy eyes.

"The air cooling system is on. That should help."

"No. Internally."

Alan frowned and put a hand on Stella's forehead. He pulled it rapidly away. "Yow! I think I burned my hand!"

"Very funny," Stella muttered, shutting her eyes again.

"What's going on?" Warren leaned wearily against the hatch's jamb, his face pale, his shirt marred with bloodstains. "It's hotter than hell in here."

"Warren, she's feverish and I don't think it's due to the air temperature. Maybe her head wound is infected. We need help."

"I told you, Alan, there aren't any medical facilities on Otung."

"What about tracking down that *Explora Command* doctor?"

"He could be anywhere. Hell, he could have left the planet."

"Warren, we have to do something."

"Okay, I get the point. I'll saddle Boo—she's fresh—and ride to the resort."

"I'll stay here."

Warren paused and reconsidered. "I'll check at the ranch first. It's closer. Jake might have taken that doctor home to meet Dad and Olive. See you."

"Fine. Just get back as quick as you can." Alan gazed down at Stella with concern. What remained of her hair had lost its curl and lay in damp strings around her head. She looked so pathetic, Alan was moved. He felt badly about chopping her hair so crudely the day before.

Why am I feeling sentimental? He wondered. He got up, located a bowl and poured water into it. He fetched a washcloth and went back to Stella. He settled down beside her on the floor and dipped the cloth in the water.

When he touched the cool wetness to her cheek, she moaned. Alan wiped her cheeks and then her forehead, letting the cloth absorb the rush of heat. He repeated the process, adding her temples and throat to the routine.

"I feel a little better," she said after awhile, opening her eyes. "Can I have a drink of water?"

"Sure." Alan got a cup and dripped the water into her mouth until the cup was empty.

"Thanks for cooling me down."

"Sorry I forgot to turn on your cooling system. I didn't think of it."

"Alan?"

"Yes?"

"Why have you been following me for six months?"

Alan flushed crimson. "Jeez," he sputtered. "I knew I was bad at it. But...six months!"

"If it's any consolation, you got better as you went along."

"No, it's no consolation!" Alan rubbed his temples with agitated fingers.

"I especially liked your Beat Generation affectation. I longed to introduce myself but I hated to blow your cover."

"Damn it, Stella! Now you're just mocking me."

"You do owe me an explanation, Alan. I didn't report you, which I could have. Stalking is illegal on every Coalition world. Why are you doing it?"

Alan grunted in embarrassment. "My father, on his deathbed, ordered me to track you down and get the FDet back."

"Get it *back*? What do you mean, 'get it back'? Who's your father?"

"Edward Goodrick."

Stella started to laugh. The laugh had a hysterical out-of-control quality that made a shiver run down Alan's spine. *Great*, he thought, *she's delirious now*.

Stella choked for breath.

"Stella! Stop it!" He wanted to shake her but didn't dare.

"Oh," she gasped, "that hurt. Never laugh with two broken collarbones and your busted head resting on a hard surface. It's too painful."

"What happened?"

"Stress release," Stella diagnosed, still sobbing and chortling. Alan wiped them away with the washcloth. Despite her high color, she didn't look as feverish as she had earlier.

"What's so funny?" Alan asked.

Stella gazed on his face for such a long time, assessing the color of his eyes and the shape of his nose and design of his mouth that he started to fidget.

"What are you doing?" His voice conveyed irritation.

"Your first name is Michael, isn't it? You just go by Alan."

"Yes." Alan frowned. "My middle name is Alan. Is that what's so funny?"

"No. What's funny is that Edward Goodrick had no children."

Alan felt as if a cold hand had seized him around the throat. He jumped to his feet. "What are you saying?"

His father was right. Stella was a villain, more manipulative than anyone he had ever met, more manipulative than he could ever have imagined.

"Edward Goodrick was my father," he bellowed, his fear flaring into anger.

"Alan," Stella said with calm force, keeping her eyes locked on his, "Martin Goodrick was your father."

Alan felt a flood of heat surge into his chest and flow down his arms. He raised his fists into the air and shook them. "Martin Goodrick was my uncle and you stole his life's work!"

Strangely, Stella's eyes remained focused on his, yet there was no malice in them, only a deep sadness. Alan locked his hands together to regain control but Stella's onyx-black eyes did not let him go. They continued to regard him with an almost preternatural calm.

Alan loosed his hands and stumbled back into a chair. "I'm sorry," he murmured, contrite and confused. "I've never blown up like that before."

"It would be natural to be shocked."

"Did my Uncle Martin and my mother Bess—"

Stella smiled. "Oh no, Alan. Nothing like that."

"Well, then?"

Stella shifted uneasily. "It's rather a tangled web—"

"You started this, Stella."

"I really believed...I thought—"

"What?"

"That Edward would have told you the truth, Michael...I mean, Alan. It's wrong that he didn't. Even when he was dying he didn't tell you?"

"All he told me was to get the FDet back from you!" Alan realized he was screeching. His hands were curled into tight fists in his lap.

"But he didn't tell you who I was?"

"Of course he told me who you were!" Alan stood and started to pace in agitation in the cramped space. "You were the Villain of the Piece, the bogeyman of my childhood, a slut, a leech on my uncle, a third-rate scientist—"

"—and finally," Stella finished for him, "the thief of the FDet."

"Yes." Alan stopped and looked down at her.

"Oh, Edward could be such a poet."

"In the end, he did protest too much, Stella. In college, I came across your writings in scientific journals. That's when I knew his assertions about you were not true. In the end, I think you became his bogeyman."

"You say that, yet you obeyed his deathbed request to track me down."

"I guess I can't blame it all on him. I was curious, too. Apparently, I had good reason to be."

Alan sat again, gripped his hands together, and leaned toward her, anxious yet earnest. "What is this truth my father...uh, Edward, never told me?"

Stella looked away from his intent eyes, the eyes that reminded her so much of Martin, and bit agitatedly at her lower lip with her teeth.

"Is it that bad?" Alan asked.

Stella swallowed hard. "It's not a pleasant story, Alan."

It was Alan's turn to swallow hard. "Tell me anyway."

"When I first met Martin," Stella started with a sigh, "he and Edward were working together on a number of scientific projects. I was just a lowly research assistant but Martin took a shine to me. The moment he did, Edward took an instant dislike to me. They were very close and I have always believed Edward saw me as breaking up their tight relationship."

"I started to date Martin. Edward, whether out of oneupmanship or real affection, found a companion in Bess, another research assistant. Edward and Bess decided to marry. Martin and I just went along as we were. We were very involved in our research and didn't care one way or the other about marriage."

"Sounds pleasant enough so far."

"It was, up to that point. The four of us were even rather comradely. But then I got pregnant by Martin. Edward and Bess, who had been trying for quite a while to do just that, went to the doctor and discovered they were both sterile."

"Sterile? Both of them?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure? Both of them?" Alan jumped up from the chair and started to pace again. He was so agitated he could not feel the hard deck of *The Susan* beneath his feet.

"You are out of your mind! Isn't Bess my mother? Who the hell—" Panic rose into his throat.

"Alan—"

"Oh, my God! You said you lost your infant son. Oh, my God!" Alan raised his hands to his head and tore at his hair. "I can't believe this, Stella!"

"I'm sorry, Alan," Stella said. "I know it's a shock but I am your biological mother."

DANI MIGHT BE a starship captain and trained to handle crises but her heart was pounding anyway. *Was this when they dropped her?* She could tell by the force of the chill air rushing past that she was traveling downward with some speed. She could see nothing in the blackness. Yet the rope remained taut and she didn't sense she was in a free fall.

A moment later, her feet slammed into a solid, but angled surface, her knees buckled under her and, head tucked, she tumbled forward. She flipped over and landed on her back, the rough surface beneath her body ripping away a sizeable patch of skin as she slid to a stop.

Dani sat up. Overhead, she heard a whistling sound and next she felt her rappelling rope crash down on her head. She raised her arms to protect herself. The last of the rope whipped across her shoulders and fell away from her body.

Dani dropped her arms and looked around. There was nothing to see, nothing for her eyes to focus on in the darkness. The surface beneath her was cold. She stroked it with her fingers. It had a clammy, gritty feel.

She squinted upwards. Far above her, the Great Mouth was a twilight circle that looked, across the great distance, no bigger than her thumbnail. As she watched it, the twilight blinked out and went black. Dani was startled. The blackness shifted and appeared to move down as a shaft of twilight reappeared above it. Dani felt a rush of dizziness and paranoia. *Was something coming at her?*

Get a grip, she ordered himself. *It must be the next person descending into the cave.* Dani made an attempt to stand. She wobbled but kept her feet. Pain throbbed in her back and she gingerly checked the area with her hands. It felt bloodied and torn but she didn't feel anything other than surface scrapes.

She could hear what sounded like falling rain and decided it was a shower of pebbles dislodged by the travel of rope over rock. She had no idea where the person making the descent might be.

"I'm here," Dani called out for safety.

"Captain," Ma'at's reassuring voice said from some distance over her head, "I think you had better move. I can't see you but if you are where you landed, reason dictates I will land in the same location."

"Good idea, Ma'at." Dani scrambled away from her landing spot, praying she wasn't going to step off into a crevasse that would send her plummeting deeper into the cave. "The ground isn't level. They don't quite drop you, but you will hit with some speed."

"Thank you, Captain. Your voice gives me some idea of where the ground is." A few seconds later, Ma'at touched down with a controlled thud.

"Jump out of the way, Ma'at, because the rope's coming down." Dani had already picked out the distinctive whistle of woven hemp whipping through the air. Dani heard Ma'at roll and then heard the rope slam down.

"Okay?"

"Fine. It didn't hit me."

"Good. Luckier than me."

"Are you all right?"

Dani shrugged in the darkness, forgetting Ma'at couldn't see her. "I'm okay," she voiced aloud, "just a few scrapes and bangs."

She gazed upwards and saw the Great Mouth's twilight blacken again, filling with another body. Once the mingled shadow joined the overall darkness of the cave, Dani called out.

"Sly or Lindie?"

"It's me, Dani," Sly hollered. "This is worse than the goddamn transporter."

"Just goes to show, Sly, you should count your blessings when you have them."

"Yeah, yeah. So what's the deal down there?"

"It's not a soft landing, Doctor," Ma'at answered, "but not bone-shattering either."

"Speak for yourself," Dani muttered.

"Admittedly, you had the worst of it, Captain," Ma'at said. "You couldn't anticipate the location of the cave floor."

"Hell, I didn't know if there was a cave floor."

"Logically, the rope length—"

Ma'at's sentence went unfinished as Sly crashed into hir. Dani heard them roll and heard snarled imprecations from both of them. Ma'at's remarks were in impossible-to-pronounce Nhavan but required no translation. This time, Dani did not hear the whistle of the rope but it was the next topic raised by her First Officer.

"The rope, Sly," Ma'at admonished, hir voice coming as close to a screech as Dani had ever heard it, "we're tangled in it." This pronouncement was followed by a flurry of slithering sounds and then silence.

"Report," Dani snapped.

"I'm all right, Dani," Sly answered. "Ma'at?"

"I've been better."

"Anything serious, Ma'at?" Dani asked, making an effort not to laugh.

"No, Captain. Minor contusions. Other than knocking the breath out of me, Dr. Jenks kicked me in the head and the stomach. The rope grazed my face."

"Sorry, Ma'at. It's damn dark down here."

"I assumed the violence was unintentional, Doctor."

"Lindie!" Dani remembered. She stared futilely upward. "Where are you?"

"I'm coming down fast. You'd all better scramble!"

They took Lindie's advice and scattered. Miraculously, no one collided with anyone else this time.

"Ouch!" Lindie said on bumping into the ground. "That's going to bruise."

"She's definitely *Explora Command* material, Dani," Sly assessed. "She makes it sound like no more of an annoyance than a chipped fingernail."

"Which doesn't say much for the bellyaching of the rest of us," Dani retorted. "Now that we are all here, we need to take stock of our situation. Ma'at?"

"We have lots of rope, Captain. As our eyes seem to be of little use, I would advise we tie ourselves together. There is no reason to assume we are at the bottom of this cave."

"I had exactly the same thought, Ma'at. We will have to develop a method for moving about that will not cause one or all of us to step off into a bottomless pit."

"Should we move at all?" Sly asked.

"I have not had time," Ma'at responded, "to analyze the movements of air in the cave. If we could find a source of air, it might be advisable to go toward it on the theory that it might indicate an exit. I do not believe we have a method for reaching the Great Mouth from here."

"Nor do I. Any other comments, anyone?" Dani asked.

"I feel like Alice," Lindie mused, "fallen down the rabbit hole. What could possibly be next?"

As if in answer to her question, a circular covering stone was drawn implacably across the dim circle of the Great Mouth in a manner reminiscent of Terra's moon eclipsing Sol. They all stared upward, hypnotized by the slow blanking out of the last murky tatters of light they would see. When the stone was shoved home and the final crescent of gloom eclipsed, the people consigned to the Land of the Dead found themselves shrouded in unremitting darkness.

"HOW COULD THIS happen, Stella?" Alan shouted as he paced back and forth. "I mean, I'm not exactly one of those kids who grows up wondering who my real parents are. Edward and Bess were my real parents, for crissake."

"Yes," Stella said quietly. "And they did a fine job of raising you, Alan."

"What happened? You have to tell me what happened."

"Sit down and I will."

Alan sat. Stella took a deep breath.

"You have to understand that Edward was desperate to have a baby. I mean, he was obsessed by it. The fact that I was pregnant when I wasn't even married to Martin, while he wouldn't be able to get Bess pregnant at all just made Edward crazy."

"Didn't they consider the technological options?"

"Of course, but after awhile, with all their options exhausted...well, I don't know for certain but I must assume that Edward's mind became a little twisted. He became fixated by my pregnancy and its eventual result."

"Does that mean you just let him take me away from you when I was born?" Alan's voice cracked.

Stella rolled her head angrily and the movement made her grimace in pain. "Of course not! Unfortunately, Edward controlled the family purse strings. He was practical, not unworldly like Martin."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Well, Edward threatened to withdraw all financial support from Martin's work unless—"

"You *sold* me to Edward so Martin could continue his work?" Alan couldn't help himself: he leapt out of the chair again.

"No, Alan! No!"

"Well then, how in the hell—"

"Martin sold you. Martin and Edward made a deal. I didn't know anything about it—"
Stella's face paled.

"I feel sick." Alan bent over and gripped his arms around his stomach.

"Martin was so ashamed, Alan, of what he'd done. He lost you, he lost his brother—part of the deal was that he would not know on what world Edward and Bess settled with you—he almost lost me."

"And all for what?"

"To be able to pursue his work. It meant everything to him. I know that's hard to understand, but—"

"Why did you stay?"

"I didn't even know what had happened, Alan. It took me years to find out."

"Years to find out? What do you mean? That doesn't make any sense."

Stella laughed and it was a bitter sound. "Edward was a ruthless and clever man. The night you were born, he sneaked into the hospital and injected me with a memory-erasing sedative. Then he spirited you away.

"I had no conscious memory of your birth but when I was released from the hospital, I was suffering from a host of unsaid physical and psychological symptoms, including postpartum depression. At first Martin would only tell me I'd had a 'trauma' and that I would get better. He said he'd been told by the doctors not to discuss it with me.

"For the next three years, I lived in a fog, Alan. Martin married me but there was no joy in it for either of us. I wouldn't sleep with him, I wouldn't let him touch me because the unconscious part of myself knew something horrible had happened, something he was a part of.

"He buried himself in his work and I fantasized about suicide. Finally, I sought professional help. After a year of analysis, my psychiatrist—god bless her—tried an experimental drug on me that was being touted as a cure for amnesia."

"You remembered."

"I remembered and it was terrible. Without the psychiatrist to help me through those gruesome memories, I would have killed myself. I certainly wanted to kill Martin and Edward."

"But neither of you came to look for me."

"After months of my raining fire down on his head, Martin filled in the gaps in the story. In the end, I believed him that he didn't truly know where Edward had taken you."

"But the money?"

Stella nodded. "Twice a year, a sum of credits was deposited to a special anonymous account Martin could draw on."

"It couldn't be traced?"

"No. Years later, by accident, Martin came across a news article from Alpha Centauri that mentioned Edward. It was too far away for us to travel to but Martin sent Edward a message. They started communicating again in rare spurts. I'm sorry he couldn't motivate himself to search the galaxy for you, Alan but he wasn't...he just wasn't that kind of man."

"And you?"

"I went back, slowly, to helping him in the lab. Scientific research was my first love too. Over many years, we graduated from being work partners to being friends again."

"So, all wounds heal?" Alan's voice was angry.

"No. But they do close over."

"Lovers?"

"Yes, Alan, we became lovers again too. You can condemn us if you want but nothing, *nothing*, erased you from our hearts. We didn't know your name—" Stella's voice cracked and tears formed at the corners of her eyes, "—but we never forgot you."

"Somehow you learned my name."

"Eventually Edward told Martin your name was Michael. You were already a teenager. He reported that you were well, that you had the family gift for science, that you were growing up smart and strong. He was very proud of you, and so was Bess."

"I think they loved me. I loved them. I never consciously questioned their role in my life as my parents. I had no memory of anything or anyone else."

"Of course not. They gave you no reason to question their roles as your parents."

"I did think my father's, I mean Edward's, obsession with you inexplicable. When I got old enough to understand the innuendos, I suspected you'd had some kind of affair with Martin and that Edward, for some reason, couldn't countenance the idea."

"If only that had been all it had ever come to." Stella blinked and the two solitary tears flowed over the rims of her eyes and trailed slowly down her cheeks.

"Do you think Edward's taking me from you was—" Alan faltered, frightened by his own next thought.

"— revenge because Martin won my heart and not him? I don't think so. Don't go down that road, Alan. Keep the memory of your father a happy one."

"Which father?" Alan's voice sounded tortured.

"Edward. He raised you as his own son. He loved you as his own son. You didn't know Martin...or me."

"I read Martin's design specifications for the FDet. I read everything he wrote that I could find, both in my father's study and in published journals."

"I'm glad," Stella croaked, her throat dry. "Can I have some more water?"

Alan refilled the cup and dribbled the liquid into her mouth, his hand shaking. When the cup was empty, Stella closed her eyes and rested. Alan sat, rolling the cup agitatedly from one palm to the other.

"What now?" he asked.

Stella opened her eyes and licked at her chapped lips. "Contrary to Edward's assertions, Alan, I legally own the FDet. It is mine both by virtue of my labor in it and by the laws of community property. I have every right to dispose of it as I see fit."

"I understand." Alan hung his head, staring down into the empty cup.

"I'm not sure you do. As I said, Martin was not a worldly man. We had very little saved for our retirement. The grants allotted for my own research projects are so minuscule it is difficult to proceed from day to day. Even if my research should result in marketable products, it will not provide income for years to come, if at all."

"Meanwhile, you're not getting any younger."

Stella shot him a withering glance. "Just as a general rule, Alan, you never say that to a woman. Even if she is your mother."

"Sorry." He shrugged, a sheepish smile creasing his mouth, and Stella's heart thumped with a spasm of long-denied maternal longing. She bit her lip and forced composure into her voice.

"The point is, Alan, I need the money. The FDet is all I have."

Chapter Ten

TYSON RANCH HEADQUARTERS had been visible to Jake for some time but he could make Kaba move only so fast along the steep narrow switchbacks that descended the mesa. Jake's impatience, though, conveyed itself to the stallion, who whinnied and snorted, all his attention focused on the rock-littered narrow pathway. When they reached the flatland, Kaba required no urging from Jake but raced under his own volition toward the stables he longed for.

When they pulled up at the barn—Kaba in a heaving lather— Jake saw a stabled zeebiti he had never seen at Tyson Ranch. He recognized the animal as a filly named Cora whom he was sure belonged to the resort. Who would be visiting Tyson Ranch? Jake dismounted and set about unsaddling Kaba and brushing him down. As he was leading Kaba into his stall, he heard footsteps.

"Ruby?" he called. A young woman tore around the corner of the building but it wasn't Ruby.

"April?" Jake was stupefied. "What are you doing here?" Jake swung shut the stall door and Kaba bent his head into his feed.

"Jake? I thought maybe you were Warren. Where's Warren?" April came to a halt in the middle of the barn.

"Warren? Isn't he at the resort? Why aren't you at the resort? Where's Ruby?"

April laughed. "This conversation is starting to sound silly. Ruby's cooking up some lunch. I know it's past lunchtime but I haven't had anything to eat since before dawn."

"Ruby's cooking? Wher''s Olive?" Jake strode toward her, directing her out of the barn with an abrupt gesture of his hand.

"There you go again! I don't know. Nobody's here but Ruby and Okote."

"My father's not around?" Together, they walked toward the house.

"No."

Jake frowned. "Did you ride Cora from the resort?"

"Yes."

"Does Cobb know you're gone?"

April kicked at pebbles on the ground and didn't answer.

"I will take that to mean you didn't exactly clear it with him."

"Jake, Phideas is at his wit's end. Please come back with me." They turned the corner of the house and strode past the vegetable garden.

"Oh, hell, April. Cobb can manage on his own for a few days."

"Warren's missing, Jake, and I'm worried about him. Also, there've been two more murders at the resort!"

"Two more murders? Who?"

"Strangers, just like the first one. Not staff or guests. Speaking of which, where are your *Explora Command* tagalongs?"

"Now there's a long story. First, April, you tell me why Warren isn't at work." *If his brother had taken off on one of his irresponsible unauthorized jaunts he was going to...* Jake felt himself tighten internally. Actually he didn't know what he was going to do.

"He is working, sort of. He's trail guiding a female guest. But according to the itinerary he filed, they should have been back by mid-afternoon yesterday."

"The guest hasn't come back either?"

"No."

"Well, I can see why you're worried."

They had reached the door of the kitchen and Jake pulled it open, ushering April inside. Ruby was sitting at the table, swallowing down a bite of sandwich. Her eyes lit up at seeing Jake.

"I'll make another sandwich!" She jumped up. "April, yours is there." Ruby pointed and April sat to eat.

"Thanks, Ruby," Jake said. "I'm starving. But, what's going on? Where is everybody?" Jake walked across to an insulated cabinet and pulled a home-brewed beer from it. The cabinet didn't keep things ice-cold but it kept them cool. He opened the drink and took a swig.

Ruby sliced a dark loaf of homemade bread. "Your dad, I don't know where he is. I haven't seen him since breakfast. He said he was going to irrigate the corn patch, which he must have, because Okote says the ditch is damp. But nobody's seen him since."

Jake nodded, only mildly concerned. "He probably saw a fence down or something and went to check on it. What about Olive?"

"Olive left with Warren an hour ago."

"Warren?" Jake and April said together.

Ruby smiled, enjoying the effect of her bombshell. She smeared butter, which they churned from zeebiti milk, on the bread slices.

"He rode up on Boo, who was all in a lather. He looked awful too, all covered with bruises and scratches."

April's head shot up. "Was he all right?"

Ruby shrugged. "He was looking for that doctor who went with you, Jake."

"For himself?"

"No. He said the resort guest with him was sick. Olive said that the doctor had gone off with you for the day and offered to go and help. You know how Warren is toward my mother." She handed Jake the finished sandwich. It was stacked with slices of preserved lkotni meat, lettuce and tomatoes.

"Warren was surly about it at first but then he agreed and I saddled up Windgess for my mother. He rode tired old Boo back. I wanted to get Frakkpa saddled for him but he was too impatient to wait."

"Where did they go?" Jake asked, sitting down and taking a huge bite of the sandwich.

"Southeast, toward the river."

"April," Jake grunted after swallowing, "are you ready for more riding?"

April nodded, picking at crumbs. "I guess I'll have to be."

"Ruby?"

Ruby sighed. "I'll go saddle Frakkpa and Sandy. They're the only fresh zeebiti we have left."

"One more thing," Jake said, when she reached the door.

"What?"

"Until my father gets back, you're the boss of Tyson Ranch."

Ruby blinked in surprise. "I can do it," she pronounced, lifting her chin.

"I know," Jake answered. "That's why you have the job."

Ruby opened the door and went out, happier than it was possible for anyone to be.

WARREN SAID NOTHING as he and Olive rode, not merely because he always felt inferior around Olive but because he wanted to get back to *The Susan* as quickly as possible. Olive was not a physician but she knew as much about healing as anyone on Otung. She had wanted to go right to work on his assorted injuries but he had turned her down flat, telling her there wasn't time to fret over him.

When he provided her with a hasty sketch of Stella's injuries, she added a few extra items to her medicine pouch. He left out the transporter part of the narrative but he had not been able to think up any story that would explain two broken collarbones and a head gouge other than the actual truth. He guessed his unrehearsed explanation that the zeebiti had spooked at the sight of the river had not been believed.

It was going on two o'clock when they reached Stella's ship. He might have failed to mention the transporter but the ship itself was ample visible evidence of a violation of the Rules of Settlement. He watched Olive warily but could detect little reaction from her other than the silent pursing of her lips.

Warren helped Olive to dismount and led Boo and Windgess away to unsaddle, rub down, and water. When he finished those tasks, he left the animals to join Korkorba and Oreon grazing the scanty grass, and made his weary way up *The Susan's* entry ramp. He had chugged down a single beer at home while waiting for Olive to get ready but now he was dizzy from hunger and blood loss.

He watched with disinterest as Alan and Olive lifted Stella back onto her bunk. Olive settled down behind Stella's head and began easing off the blood-glued shirt that had acted as a bandage since the previous day. Stella's face scrunched in pain with each tug.

Olive dripped water on the shirt and pulled free the remaining edges. She examined the revealed pus-bulging wound. "Yes, it's infected," she said, as if in answer to an earlier question. "That's what's causing the fever."

Warren crossed to the food synthesizer and punched up a large coffee and a hot roast beef sandwich. He stared at the device, wondering what the sandwich would taste like. He'd never eaten beef.

"Alan cooled me down with wet cloths," Stella informed Olive.

"He kept you from getting into the danger zone. I'm going to have to clean the wound, Stella. It's going to hurt."

"Alan," Stella ordered, "give me something to bite down on."

Alan glanced at Olive, who nodded her agreement.

"My finger?" Alan asked.

Warren's meal pinged and he opened the synthesizer slot and pulled out his steaming tray of food. He carried it to the table and sat.

"Very funny. Fold up that washcloth and put it between my teeth."

Alan did as he was told and then put his hands on either side of Stella's head to steady her while Olive cut.

"Ready?" Olive asked.

Alan nodded. Stella closed her eyes.

Olive took an obsidian scalpel from her pouch, hunched forward, and sliced neatly along the ridge of the wound. It opened and goeey black blood rose in droplets which fell onto the blood-stiffened shirt at the base of Stella's head. With exacting care, Olive cleaned away the bad blood and the gathered pockets of pus. Then she scraped off the dark scabs edging the gash.

Stella, every muscle of her face rigid, like she was silently screaming. Her head strained forward in a natural desire to escape Olive's agonizing ministrations. Alan had to exert pressure with his thumbs on her forehead to hold her in place.

"Break," Olive called, laying down the scalpel and starting to prepare a cloth with a native antiseptic solution. They had run out of the ship's supplies medicating Warren's wounds. Alan relaxed his hands and Stella's head sank unresisting into the pillows. Her face was damp with sweat and she didn't open her eyes.

Warren bit into his sandwich and chewed attentively, thinking how fantastic it tasted. A heavier sweeter taste than lkotni jerky— smoother. He could tolerate eating it every day and he would...when he was off Otung.

Olive nodded at Alan, who went back to the task of restraining Stella's head. Olive swabbed at the cleaned wound and Stella jerked. Alan renewed his efforts.

"If it burns, that's good," Olive reminded. She went on swabbing until every segment of the gash had been thoroughly disinfected. Stella made strangled sounds through the washcloth.

"Break," Olive called again. Alan gratefully released his hands and pulled the washcloth from Stella's mouth.

"I'm glad that's over," she breathed. Her face ran with sweat.

"We're not done, yet," Olive corrected gently. "It's large, Stella, and will require suturing."

"That can't hurt anymore than what you've already done."

"You're right, it won't. You're through the worst. First, though, I'm going to shave your hair because that will make it easier to stitch." Olive pulled a wide obsidian blade from her pouch and shaved away swaths of Stella's blood-matted hair. The primitive blade shaved as close as any technologically-superior gadget Alan had ever seen. Olive then prepared another herbal solution which she swabbed along the edges of the gash.

"This will numb the area," she said. "While it does its magic, Alan, please dispose of this mess. Probably outside." She handed Alan the detritus from the injury, wadded up in the shirt.

Alan took it, glancing at Warren as he went by. The man seemed lost in a private ecstasy of eating.

"This time, Stella," Olive instructed when Alan had returned, "I will use Alan to help me pull the wound together while I suture. You're going to have to hold still on your own. Can you do that?"

"I think so. But I need the washcloth."

When he returned, Alan put the washcloth back in his mother's mouth and moved behind her head to join Olive. His eyes opened wide. Olive had threaded with some kind of animal gut a needle that looked, despite its delicacy, to be made of bone.

"Alan," Olive said, "after you disinfect your hands with that solution, I'll need you to press together the edges of the wound just in front of the needle. Okay?"

"Okay." Alan was both repelled and fascinated by what he saw. The edges of the gash were bumpy and bright red. The wound was filling with fresh clean blood but it was not spewing

out of Stella's head at the violent rate it had done the day before. The surrounding shaved patch of her skull was blue with bruising.

He pressed his fingertips where Olive instructed, drawing together the puckered skin. It flattened as Olive expertly pierced the edges and drew her needle across the small ravine, stitching the two sides together. Alan could see Stella would be left with a sizeable scar. Fortunately, it would be hidden by her hair when it grew back.

He tried to forget it was his mother's skin he was helping Olive sew together because thinking about it increased his already-high anxiety. Stella's earlier revelations had turned his life upside down.

"Done," Olive announced, tying off the animal gut. "Are you all right?" she asked Stella.

Stella spit out the washcloth. "Yes. Thank you."

Olive frowned at Alan, who felt ready to pass out. "You did a good job," she praised. "Nothing to feel badly about."

"I have to...go," Alan said. He crossed the room, numbly making his way to the food synthesizer. "Beer," he ordered.

The machine pinged and Alan carried the beer to the table and sat. Warren had finished his roast beef extravaganza and was leaning back in the chair, sipping at his coffee as if it were a fine liqueur.

"Stella," Olive said, "I'm going to bandage the gash with a fresh dressing. I'll coat it with antiseptic to treat the infection but we'll have to keep a close eye on it."

Without further ado, Olive set about preparing and affixing the bandage. When she was done, she came around from behind Stella's head and sat at Stella's side.

"You're a lifesaver," Stella said, twisting her head on the pillow. "I don't know how to thank you."

"I'm happy to help," Olive waved Stella's gratitude aside. "As for your collarbones, the boys did a pretty good job with the sling and swath but—"

"I would love to shower and put on clean clothes," Stella whispered. "If it's not too much trouble."

Olive leaned forward. "I thought so. There are some things young men just can't help with. Let me help you out of bed and then I'll unwrap you. Just remember you'll have to keep your hands and arms exactly in that position at all times." Olive helped Stella swing her legs out of the bunk and then walked her to the toilet cubicle. The two disappeared inside.

"I could live like this," Warren said He had ordered up chocolate chip cookies from the synthesizer and was chomping down on one.

Alan made no response, seemingly hypnotized by the beer bottle he cradled in his hands.

"Hey!" Warren leaned forward and snapped his fingers in front of Alan's face, "What's with you?"

"Just thinking."

"Thinking about how to steal that thing, right?"

"I don't know any more, Warren."

"Don't know *what* anymore? How to steal it or whether to steal it?"

"Whether. How. I don't know anything!" Alan slammed the table with his fist and jumped up from his chair. He seized the bottle by the neck and made for *The Susan's* hatch.

"Damn it!"

AS ZANE RODE toward the dust cloud, it dissipated into thinner and thinner bands, until, after twenty minutes, he could no longer see it against the pale blue of the sky. He rode on anyway. The plateau land that made up his ranch was covered with scrub grasses and the occasional bare-limbed tree rubbed raw of life by wild herds of zeebiti. Where there was a tree, there were natural hollows that caught the frequent but scanty spring rains and the occasional summer cloudbursts.

In late autumn, the wild zeebiti headed for the slopes of the Ozkna mountains, their coats growing long and thick in response to the cold. There, where forage and water were more reliable, they grazed through the winter. Their cousins, the lkotni, never came down from the mountains.

As Zane grew closer to the black lava embankment that formed the mouth of Dark Canyon, the terrain grew more desolate until he was crossing a series of dry washes. He knew Rominki didn't like tracking up and down washes with a rider on her back but he wasn't giving her an opportunity to balk.

The cloud had long dissipated, but Zane figured as he was this far south, he might as well check the Harvest Cabin. The Paku might have come through and left a gift for Olive. The Tysons used the cabin for a few weeks in early summer when the pineberry, a native species that tasted like a cross between pineapples and blackberries, came ripe for picking.

Pineberry grew everywhere in the twisted maze of Dark Canyon but nowhere else. Paku, Yutunda, the Tysons, Phideas Cobb—in short, everyone who was anyone—slept under the long ramada at Zane's cabin for the ten days to two weeks of the pineberry harvest.

Olive and Phideas, and those unlucky resort staff Phideas drafted for the job, canned pineberries until they dropped from exhaustion. Honey, produced by bees Olmstead Neville had imported decades before, was the sweetener Olive and Phideas used for the job.

The Paku and Yutunda mixed the berry with a sweetener they extracted in vast quantities each summer from a sap-producing plant in the Ozknas. The sweetener had a flavor redolent of limes and it gave a decided tang to the pineberry that was more tart than the Tysons and most resort guests could appreciate.

In late fall, the cabin was again alive with frenzied activity and evening entertainment for two weeks while the same group of people gathered to harvest the edible kiponut from a species of conifer that, like the pineberry, grew only along the ramparts of Dark Canyon.

In the last week, some of the party would go off to hunt lkotni and wild zeebiti in the Ozknas, which then had to be either feasted upon or butchered. The Tysons dried their meat for the winter; the resort's portion, once butchered, was promptly hauled away to the natural ice cave behind the resort's kitchens for freezing.

Zane breasted a wash and drew Rominki to a stop. He saw the Harvest Cabin but he could not believe what he saw. The ramada was intact but the roof...*what in hell had happened to the roof? What was sticking up through it?* Zane kned Rominki and they descended another wash. He urged her to cross it and did not spare her getting up the other side.

They topped out and Zane took another look at the jutting object. It looked astonishingly like a radio satellite dish. How had it appeared on Otung? Zane prayed no one else had seen it.

If, even after all these years, Coalition authorities believed there were violations of the rules under which he and Olmstead had settled in Otung's Rift Valley, they would yank his rights in a second. Zane couldn't afford that. He was too old and too established to move.

Zane spurred Rominki across a drift of sand dunes and up to the cabin. He tied her to the still-intact hitching post, automatically noticing the two sets of zeebiti prints and booted human footprints in the sand. The Paku went barefoot or wore soft moccasins which left a featureless depression, not tread marks. The prints meant either strangers or resort guests had recently been at the cabin. Not surprising, Zane thought, considering the something else that was at the cabin.

The door was ajar and a third set of prints, much larger than the first two, marked the threshold. Zane squatted down to take a closer look. The door swung open and he found himself staring up the metal nose of a triangularly-shaped phaser weapon. Its heavy-

bodied, square-jowled owner was dressed in a tan jumpsuit, tall wading boots, and an odd peaked cap. His yellow eyes were not friendly.

"Howdy, cowpoke," the alien mocked in an imitation of Coalition Standard slang, "I'm Jhiriku of Aostolo. Who are you?"

"Zane Tyson," Zane answered, standing up with slow care. "You're on my property."

Jhiriku chuckled, keeping the phaser pointed at Zane's chest.

"You mean your destroyed property."

Zane shrugged in an attempt at nonchalance. He assessed the strength of his opponent while keeping one eye on the phaser. "It does look a little wrecked but it ain't nothing I can't fix." He didn't think he could take this stranger down in hand-to-hand combat. He needed to wait for a moment when he had an advantage. He bid for time.

"What in hell is that anyway?" Zane lifted his chin toward the object jutting from his roof, hoping Jhiriku would turn to look. But Jhiriku was a skilled combatant. He kept his eyes fully on Zane.

"In Coalition lingo, it's called the FDet."

FDet. FDet, Zane thought, why did that sound familiar? A decades-old memory rose in his mind of sitting restively in a bland Coalition conference room while a passel of sleekly-clad bureaucrats weighed the merits of performing an FDet Survey of Otung. FDet Survey...what had an FDet Survey consisted of? He racked his brain but no answer emerged. Why, after 30 years, was there one here now?

"Mean something to you?" Jhiriku asked, tilting his head in suspicion.

"Not really," Zane answered truthfully.

"But it did for a moment," Jhiriku countered. He was not easily fooled. If he had been, he would not have gotten as far as he had in life.

"It just reminded me of something," Zane said. "Nothing to make a federal case out of."

Jhiriku, to Zane's surprise, laughed. "Federal case. Useful slang. I'm adding that to my vocabulary."

"You do that," Zane said, his arms hanging placidly at his sides. "But right now, I want you to tell me how this thing got here and what you've got to do with it."

"That's a big request, Zane Tyson, seeing as you don't have any firepower to back it up."

"Maybe." Zane shrugged. "But don't you think I have a right to know?"

"Maybe." It was Jhiriku's turn to shrug. "The problem is, you interrupted me in the middle of testing the FDet and I don't welcome such interruptions."

"My sincere apologies," Zane drawled sarcastically. *When would the moment to attack present itself?*

"Did you know this magnificent piece of technology has never been authorized for use in your precious Coalition?"

"No, I didn't know. But it begs the question. All electronic technology is forbidden on Otung. Something to do with the Non-Interference Code, which clearly is being violated by you as we speak."

"My heart bleeds," Jhiriku said snidely.

"That's my plan," Zane said under his breath and dived for Jhiriku's midsection. The big man went over with an exhaled "whoomph." Zane scrambled up and slugged him in the face but that was where his advantage ended. Jhiriku, his phaser not dislodged by the tumble, took aim at Zane's hip and thumbed the firing mechanism.

The invisible blast blew Zane backward. Jhiriku levered himself up with his elbows and assessed his opponent. Zane lay still but Jhiriku knew he wasn't dead. The phaser had only been set to temporarily paralyze the victim's central nervous system.

Jhiriku struggled up and walked over to Zane's tethered zeebiti. He unbuckled the animal's bridle, lifted it off its head and swatted the animal hard on the tip of the nose. The zeebiti, startled, tore away at a run. Jhiriku carried the bridle and reins to where Zane lay sprawled in the sand.

He rolled the man over on his chest, pulled his arms behind his back, worked his hands through the open grid of the bridle, and looped the reins around his wrists. Then, sliding his arms between Zane's shoulders and back, he dragged the unconscious man into the cabin.

He un-stacked one of the chairs and, using the reins, strapped Zane's hands and feet to it. Zane's head drooped forward and Jhiriku lifted his head and rested it against the wall. When Zane regained consciousness, Jhiriku would gag him.

Until then, he would go back to figuring out how the FDet worked.

Chapter Eleven

MA'AT, IN HIR calm composed way, had suggested they sit on the sloped floor of the cave in a row. The two doctors took the middle, s/he and Dani took the ends. Each, in the dark, struggled to unknot their belaying rope from their hip harness. Ma'at had postulated that one of the belaying ropes would be long enough to link them, several arms-lengths apart, in a chain. Each of the three officers would carry one of the leftover ropes.

"We'll need the extra ropes if anyone falls," Ma'at pointed out.

"If anyone falls," Sly retorted testily, "the rest of us will fall as well."

This was met by a dead silence, broken eventually by Lindie. "Why aren't my eyes adjusting to the dark? It's taking forever to untie this knot because I can't see it at all!"

"You're the doctor, Sly," Dani ordered. "You tell her."

"She's a doctor too," Sly demurred.

Dani snorted. "Damn you, Sly. Lindie, although we commonly use the phrase 'your eyes adjust to the dark', it's a malapropism. Human eyes do not adjust to the dark. They adjust to the available light. As there isn't any, they're not going to adjust."

"Of course!" Lindie said. "I'd forgotten. There are psychological ramifications, of course."

"Like what?" Dani asked.

"Hallucinations, for one. If the sensory deprivation continues long enough, there is a potential for mental imbalance."

"My nervous system is already producing optical effects. I can see lights dancing behind my eyelids," Sly said.

Dani's vision was filled with the same irritating light effects but she didn't care to say so.

"Intellectually," Lindie said, "we don't give much thought to darkness and why it represents the negatives of humanoid experience."

"Why do you think that is, Dr. Davis?" Ma'at asked.

"I think it's because in our era of 'round the clock artificial manipulation of light, we never experience complete and unremitting darkness like this. We don't fear the dark as the ancients did because we have the technology to overcome it."

"I'd sure appreciate some of that technology right now," Dani grumbled.

"Doctor Davis," Ma'at asked, "are you saying we should fear the dark?"

"No. But neither do I think it's wise to deny the reality of the basic human instinct to credit the dark with frightening psychological portent."

"We're afraid of the dark," Sly said, "because our nervous systems are not built to function in it. I doubt that the dark is much feared by bottom-dwelling ocean creatures or sonar-equipped bats."

"Indeed," Ma'at said. "Unfortunately, acknowledgment of the ineluctable fact that we cannot see in the dark does not equip us to do so."

"Need you be such a stickler for detail, Ma'at? I'm trying to be reassuring."

"Doctor, I see little point in extending emotional comfort when there is nothing to justify confidence in our survival in this environment."

"Ma'at! That's exactly *when* humans extend emotional comfort, when—"

"When what, Sly?" Dani interrupted. "When there is no hope?"

"Dani," Sly shot back, "this is very nearly hopeless. I may be the only one with enough guts to come out and say it but even Ma'at just implied it. We have no light, no water, no food, and no knowledge of this cave. It could run for miles and be inhabited by god-knowswhat!"

Lindie giggled. Dani sighed. "We can't give way to despair, Sly."

"I think, Dani," Lindie said, "Sly is saying we should acknowledge the reality of the situation."

"Are you agreeing with him?"

"I agree that, from a psycho-neurological standpoint, we are at a distinct disadvantage here and we need to be aware of the potential consequences."

"What are those?"

"The sighted human nervous system, as Sly pointed out, is not equipped to handle long-term visual sensory deprivation. As time goes on, not only will we become more subject to hallucinations but we will lose track of time."

"Our wrist chronos—" Dani started.

"—were lifted by those pretty girls," Sly reminded.

"So," Dani said, "we lose track of time. Under the circumstances, how important is that?"

"Dani," Sly put in, "Lindie doesn't mean anything as trivial as not knowing what day it is. She means our biochemistry will go haywire."

"Haywire?"

Lindie said, "According to a host of studies on extreme sensory deprivation—"

"—which you were supposed to read at Academy, Dani," Sly interrupted.

"—the subject's subconscious experience of time shortens but the subject is unaware of the change. For instance, sleeping for twenty hours is not uncommon but the subject may experience the sleep as lasting a standard eight hours. A single cycle of human female menstruation may take three months, instead of the standard one month, to complete."

"That doesn't sound bad at all to me," Dani joked.

"Captain," Ma'at put in, "the passage of time, whether marked by the revolutions of suns and moons, or artificially-regulated as aboard a starship, is the fundamental principle by which humanoid species maintain psychological control over what is actually a timeless and multi-directional flow of quantum energy in the universe."

"I thought, Ma'at," Dani countered, "that experiencing reality as timeless and multi-dimensional was one of the stated goals of meditation practice."

"Indeed, Captain. But humanoid nervous systems can only tolerate such states in limited dosages under highly-controlled circumstances."

"And the consequence of excess—" Dani queried.

"—is insanity," Sly finished.

"Lindie, is that true?"

"I don't know about meditation, Dani, but the effects of sensory deprivation are well-documented. As for tampering with humanoid subjects' experience of time, such techniques have been a favored means of psychological torture for centuries because the resulting psychological disintegration is so rapid."

"There's only one solution, then," Dani insisted. "We have to get out of here."

"How?" Sly asked.

"I assume we must look for an exit other than the Great Mouth, but I'm open to suggestions."

"There may be no other exit," Lindie voiced the obvious.

"It's possible," Dani said. "On the other hand, if there is another exit and we don't look for it, we have no one to blame for our fate but ourselves."

"Captain," Ma'at said, "it interests me that Zodani knew the exact distance to the floor of this cavern, or at least, to this level of the cavern."

"You're surmising based on the length of the ropes?" Sly said.

"Precisely."

"Which implies," Dani followed up, "that the cavern has been explored in the not too distant past by a person or persons from Makapi."

"Exactly."

"How will that help?" Lindie asked.

"There may be human artifacts," Ma'at answered. "Food supplies. More significantly, some form of lighting."

"Lighting?" Lindie sounded incredulous.

"Not battery-powered. Something more primitive. Like torches, perhaps."

"Of course," Sly countered, "it's possible these imaginary explorers carried the light and other supplies in and then carried them out again."

"True," Ma'at said, "but as we move about, we can keep our hands alert to anything that might prove useful."

"Is everyone ready to be roped together?" Dani asked.

"I'm ready," Sly said.

"Me, too," Lindie seconded.

"Ma'at?"

"I've simply been waiting for the rest of you," the Nhavan coolly replied.

"Figures," Sly huffed.

"All right then," Dani ordered, "Ma'at will do the honors. Let's all bear with whatever fumbling about is necessary to accomplish the job."

"I never fumble, Captain."

"Of course not, Ma'at."

Ma'at felt hir way past the doctors and then met hands with Dani who placed Ma'at's hands on Dani's belaying rope. Ma'at threaded the rope around Dani so that it came through the back of her hip harness.

S/he moved to Sly and knotted the rope to the front of Sly's hip harness. By feel, s/he threaded it through the harness, and around Sly's torso, repeating the same procedure as s/he had with the captain. S/he connected Lindie to Sly and then, finally, attached himself.

"Done," Ma'at called to Dani. "Captain, I estimate that it has taken twenty minutes to tie everyone together. Based upon the time you first decended, I believe it is mid-to-late afternoon on the planet."

"Good," Dani answered, rubbing her eyes with her fists. The unceasing streams and shards of colored light dancing on her retina were made all the more disturbing because her eyes were open.

Under circumstances of normal light, the phenomenon could only have occurred if her eyes were closed and then she could have opened them to make the pulsating images go away. Now it didn't matter whether her eyes were open or closed. The display continued unabated.

"Captain?" Ma'at repeated, wondering at the lag.

"Right, Ma'at." Dani dropped her hands back to her sides, a movement no one could see. "Okay, everyone, on the count of three, we will all shift from a sitting position to an 'at the ready' position on our hands and knees."

Dani counted and on three, followed her own instructions. She heard a unified rustling behind her.

"Ouch!" Lindie said. "Sorry," she apologized promptly. "Just banged my palm on a rock. I'm fine."

"I think," Dani said, "there is going to be a lot of hand and knee scraping. We will go slowly and I will endeavor to move dangers, such as rocks, aside. Everyone will be alert to anything unusual, such as light or air sources. We will stay in constant communication about our discoveries. Questions?"

"Which way are we going?" Sly asked.

"We are going in the direction I happen to be facing."

"Sounds as smart as any other choice," Sly wisecracked.

"Sounds like real life," Lindie corrected.

"Forward crawl!" Dani called. She shifted her right knee and the movement tugged lightly at Sly who moved a pace forward as well. Jerkily, the movement traveled down the line. They had all taken a step and not plunged into an abyss, Dani thought. So far, so good. They proceeded in a dead silence, the only sound that of their pants rustling over the cold damp surface as they crawled along.

After what seemed to Dani like an hour of slithering forward in pitch blackness over a reasonably-level, little-changing, pebble-strewn surface, she called a halt. They sat where they stopped, giving the cold dampness a chance to penetrate different body parts than their palms and knees.

"Damn, but it's cold in here!" Sly expostulated.

"It feels even colder sitting still," Lindie said.

"Cave temperatures," Ma'at corrected, "are constant."

"Yeah," Sly shot back, "a constant, chilly 12.8 degrees Celsius. We aren't dressed for this, Ma'at. We were dressed for a hot desert day. We'll succumb to the disorientation induced by hypothermia long before the sensory deprivation drives us mad!"

"Lindie," Dani interrupted Sly's tirade, "does the temperature feel constant to you or did you literally mean it feels colder?"

"I'm sorry, Dani," she answered after a moment. "I'm not sure."

"That's all right," Dani soothed. "But let's all pay close attention to subtle air movement and temperature differences. I want everyone to report even the smallest thing. It might make a difference."

"Can I report that I'm hungry and thirsty?" Sly grumbled.

"Sly—"

"Unfortunately," Ma'at supported the doctor for once, "it has been many hours since any of us ate or drank. That, as much as anything, can defeat us."

"No one's arguing the point," Dani said. "Does anyone have suggestions?"

"I suspect," Ma'at said, "that this cave is formed by limestone. If that is the case, there could be pools of mineral-rich water in here. We'd have to find one, of course, and once we do, it may not be drinkable."

"How would we find it?" Lindie asked.

"Stumble across it," Sly grunted.

"Maybe hear it," Dani said. "Does anyone hear dripping?"

There was a focused silence. Focusing on sound only made Dani more aware of the private light show she could not stop. *Why in hell was it so irritating?*

"I don't hear anything," Sly said, "except my own heartbeat."

"On the visual side," Lindie said, "I have lights whirling in front of my eyes."

"Ma'at? Dani?" Sly asked. "Are you two having any optical effects yet?"

"Yes," Ma'at answered. Dani didn't say anything. She didn't know why the question embarrassed her. It wasn't as if she wasn't human and limited, like every human, by certain physical factors. Still, she hated it when she found out what those factors were.

"Dani? I'm asking as the Chief Medical Officer."

"Yes, damn it. And I wish to hell it would go away."

"It really bothers you," Lindie said.

"Disability is not her strong suit," Sly whispered *sotto voce* to Lindie. "When she gets hurt, I have to strap her down to keep her in the infirmary."

"Sounds like fun," Lindie whispered back.

"Maybe to you, but not to me."

"All right, people," Dani said, steel in her voice, "Let's get moving again."

They crawled forward with aching slowness, feeling the surface in front of them with their hands. They could not have gone more than thirty steps before Dani, her hand making a loud splashing sound that echoed against the walls of the cave, announced:

"Water. I think I've found some."

ALAN STOOD A short distance away from *The Susan* nursing his beer, staring morosely in the direction of the Tysons' cabin even though the cabin itself wasn't visible.

He had read Greek tragedies in college but had never imagined being sucked into one. He wasn't an orphaned or adopted child who had spent his childhood wondering who his parents were and vowing to hunt them down in adulthood.

He *knew* who his parents were. They were Edward and Bess Goodrick of Alpha Centauri. His uncle was Martin Goodrick, a man whose paramour, Stella Farnsworth, had been an object of lifelong derision in the Goodrick household.

Yet Stella was not only his mother but, in an ironic twist, he had hunted her down. Now, the course he had been so single-mindedly set upon by Edward—to separate Stella from the FDet—was not only impossible to achieve, but immoral and illegal.

Edward had known Stella worked on the FDet as an equal partner; Edward had known Stella and Martin were married; yet Edward had made Alan swear he would not give up his pursuit of the FDet until it belonged, once again, to the Goodricks.

Edward also had to know Stella would reveal the truth of Alan's parentage when she learned his identity. Had Edward hoped it would not happen? Had he, in his hatred of Stella and lust for the FDet, blinded himself to the reality that Stella would reveal the truth? That somehow, even from death, he would be able to keep Alan from finding out?

Or, even more nefariously, had he *intended* it to happen? Had he sent Alan off to chase down Stella, not to recover the FDet, but to hear the truth from her?

Alan pressed the warm beer bottle against his hot forehead. This train of thought was giving him a headache.

He decided to focus on a different, more immediate, one. As risky as it was for Stella to seek out private buyers, he understood why she was doing it.

Although the FDet had operated without a hitch in test after test, its licensing had bogged down a number of years before in a geological subcommittee of the Coalition's civil authority. Irresolvable concerns over its potential illegitimate use had turned the FDet into a white elephant in official bureaucratic circles.

As Alan tracked Stella, he had made note of her encounters with various entities, both savory and unsavory. Early on, he recognized she was setting up a secret bidding process for the FDet. She had planned the culmination to take place on Otung which, he guessed, she had selected as the safest spot to run a demonstration of the equipment.

"So what's the big drama?" It was Warren, hands deep in his pockets.

"Big drama?"

"Yeah, all this play-acting crap."

Alan laughed hoarsely and chugged down the last of his beer. He flung the empty bottle at the sand. It buried itself by the neck, the butt of the bottle sticking out. Alan bitterly identified with it.

"The big drama, Warren, is that Stella is my mother. What do you make of that?"

"Whoaaa! Your mother? I thought you were trying to steal—" Warren stopped, searching Alan's face. "You're not kidding, are you?"

Alan shook his head.

"Cripes, you just found this out, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, how in the hell did you...Jeezus, who raised you?"

"My uncle, who, all along, I believed was my father. My father I believed was my uncle. I never even met him."

Warren frowned in confusion. "Who?"

"My biological father. Never mind, Warren, it's too hard to follow. It's like some kind of sick family joke."

"Families are sick jokes."

"While, at the moment, I couldn't agree with you more, I'm not ready to go that far."

"You would if you'd grown up in my family."

They both heard a thudding that sounded like the fast approach of zeebiti. Two figures breasted a dune and Alan shaded his eyes with his hands. "Who's that?"

"Speaking of sick family jokes," Warren squinted in order to make out the identity of the riders, "I think it's my damn crippled brother."

"Who's the other rider?"

Warren leaned forward, still squinting. "Shit. My girlfriend from the resort. Cobb must have sent her to look for me. He's such an ass. What we're about to have here, Alan, is a family reunion."

Alan's heart sunk. Warren had a girlfriend. So much for the mental track his train of thought has been choo-chooing down, even if it had been a ride filled with trepidation.

The riders came up on them and April practically vaulted from her zeebiti. "Warren!" she screamed. She stumbled across the sand and threw her arms around him. Alan watched Warren brace himself as if he wasn't at all pleased with the attention. On second thought, maybe he was wrong. Maybe having a girlfriend was just a cover for Warren. On the other hand, it wasn't as if Warren had expressed any interest in him.

"God, you look awful!" She stepped back and took a good look at him. "What happened to you?"

"Never mind that. What is going on in that bastard Cobb's mind? He shouldn't have sent you out here."

"Cobb didn't send me, Warren. He doesn't even know I left."

"Oh," Jake said, still in the saddle, "I'm sure he's figured it out by now and is probably getting sore about it. Warren, you should be at the resort."

"I should be at the resort!" Warren howled. "Why in hell aren't you at the resort?"

"Long story," Jake answered.

"Same here!"

"All right," Jake ordered, "let's drop it. But what is this?" Jake gestured at the parked landing craft. "You know this is as illegal as can be."

"Who gives a shit about that?"

"Warren, the Coalition can take our lands for violations of those rules. You know that!"

Alan watched Warren's face go from the flushed red of anger to the dark maroon of rage. "Let 'em take it," he shouted. "I'm getting off this god-forsaken planet anyway. This ship is my ticket to freedom, Jake, and if you do anything to stop it, so help me, I'll kill you!"

"Oh, right," Jake said, disgust evident in his voice. "I'd like to see you try."

Warren walked stiffly to the side of his brother's zeebiti and looked up at him.

"Get down off Frakkpa," Warren demanded, the sound of murder in his voice. "I don't want to hurt him."

"Hey!" Alan called, moving forward to intervene, but April beat him to it. She grabbed her boyfriend's elbow.

"Stop it, Warren!"

Warren shook her off. "This has nothing to do with you, April!"

April jumped away but squealed in appeal to the man still sitting astride the zeebiti.
"Jake!"

"He's right, April," Jake answered, his eyes on his brother. "It has nothing to do with you. If he's spoiling so badly for a fight, I'll give it to him."

With a tight smile, Jake dropped Frakkpa's reins, swung his leg over the saddle, and leaped right on top of Warren. Warren's breath whooshed out of his chest and the two men rolled over and over in the sand. Frakkpa neighed and pranced off, tossing his head in agitation.

Warren might have been taken aback by the strategy employed by his brother but he came up fighting. He rolled on top of Jake and furiously punched him in the jaw. Jake's head snapped back. Stunned, but only for an instant, Jake lifted his head from the sand and, teeth gritted, pushed Warren away from his chest with the sheer strength of his heavily-muscled arms.

Warren, neck muscles straining, snatched Jake's shirtfront and battled to stay on top of his brother. The shirt ripped apart in his hands and Warren tumbled backward.

Alan saw that Warren's shirt was streaked once again with fresh blood from the newly-scabbed gashes the fight was breaking open. "Hey!" Alan started forward to stop them, not wanting at all to get into the melee but feeling sick over Warren's injuries.

"What's going on out here?" Olive rushed down the ship's ramp.

"Olive!" Jake said, sitting up. He hardly got the word out of his mouth before Warren flew at him with force, knocking him flat. Warren took advantage of the moment to slug repeatedly at Jake's head.

"Warren!" Alan screeched.

"Stop it!" April shrieked.

Warren, sitting astride his brother's chest and panting with exertion, paused, his fists coiled.

"Why are you stopping?" Jake demanded, wiping at the blood running from his mouth. "Go ahead. Hit me." He stared Warren full in the eye. "No doubt I deserve it."

"Ah, shit," Warren hissed, lifting himself off Jake's chest and getting to his feet. "You're always the goddamn good guy. You won't even fight me fair and square."

"Look, Warren," Jake pointed out, sitting up and spitting blood into the sand, "be happy. You got what you wanted. You beat the crap out of me."

"That isn't what I wanted," Warren answered. He stared down at his brother.

"What in the hell did you want then?"

"I wanted justice."

"Justice?" Jake looked up at him, his eyes radiating annoyance. "Sorry, Warren. Nobody gets that."

TO KEEP HER mind off the knowledge that she was totally alone at the ranch and solely responsible for whatever might happen, Ruby had set for herself the chore of mending two zeebiti bridles in need of repair. It was late afternoon and finishing the preparatory work for dinner had taken longer than she expected. Her mother had assured her when she left with Warren that she would be home in time for dinner.

Ruby was walking to the tool shed to get her mending tools when she saw a saddled but rider-less zeebiti grazing along the ridge to the north. With the quick certainty of intuition, she knew the animal was Zane's prized Rominki. Her heart pounded. Something had happened to Zane.

Zane was the closest thing Ruby had to a father and she couldn't bear the idea that he might be wounded or dead. An image of him lying in the sand, dying, flashed across her mind. Even as she started to rush up the hill toward the animal, she was full of self-recrimination.

Why hadn't she worried about Zane sooner? Why hadn't she gone to look for him? He had missed lunch before so that had not concerned her at the time. But now she realized he hadn't just been gone for hours, he'd been *missing* for hours.

Oh sky gods, she thought. What should she do? Not even Okote was around. He had ridden up to Makapi to take a bushel of fresh vegetables to an ailing relative. She could easily catch Rominki but once she had done so, what would she do? She'd never heard of a zeebiti leading anyone to their rider. Maybe she could backtrack along Rominki's prints. It would take hours though.

Ruby looked at the sun and made an assessment. Sufficient light by which to view tracks wasn't going to last more than another two hours. Could she find Zane in that time? If she did find him and he was injured, what would she do then? Could she get him back to the ranch before dark?

Suddenly, Ruby felt she was in over her head. Then she thought of Jake. He'd only been gone for a little over an hour and she knew which way he and April had gone. Actually, she'd told them which way to go.

Since Olive and Warren had gone the same way, the track to wherever everybody was had to be clearly marked with zeebiti prints. Heck, it had to be practically a thoroughfare by now.

Maybe getting help from Jake and Warren wasn't as heroic as setting out on her own but it was probably smarter. Ruby made a quick stop in the barn, grabbed a bridle and set off up the hill to catch Rominki.

"WATER?" SLY'S VOICE echoed in the oppressive darkness.

"Captain," Ma'at called from the end of the line, "I repeat that the water may not be drinkable."

Without replying, Dani bent her elbows outward and dropped her shoulders to lower her face, guessing at the surface level of the pool. She drew back, startled, when water went up her nostrils. She sat back on her thighs and wiped her wet nose.

"Smells and tastes like mineral water," she said.

"Brackish?" Sly asked.

"No. Clean, but with a strong mineral tinge."

"Let me have at it," Sly insisted, feeling his way to Dani's side in the dark.

"Hmm," he said, "I don't think there's any algae growing in here. That seems odd."

"Not necessarily," Ma'at put in from behind him. "A high mineral content could preclude it."

"Yes," Lindie said. "I noticed the hot springs at the resort don't suffer from algae."

"But that's due to heat," Sly countered.

"Perhaps," Dani said, "the environment is so pristine in here there isn't any algae."

"Then we just polluted it," Sly pointed out.

"Cave environments do support uniquely adapted species," Ma'at said, "and eschew others. It's unfortunate the lack of light makes it difficult for us to study them."

"We want out," Sly carped, "he wants to study."

"I'm going to drink it," Dani announced. Everyone could hear her take a sip. Having lost the sense of sight, they had all become keenly aware of sound.

Dani rolled the liquid around in her mouth and swallowed. "Very pure clean flavor, light on the tongue, with just a hint of limestone. It tastes superior to any gourmet bottled water I've tried."

"Jeez, Dani," Sly cracked, "you'd think it was a rare vintage."

"It probably is, Doctor," Ma'at said, "perhaps found nowhere but in this single pool. Unfortunately, as you pointed out, we have already irretrievably altered it."

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained," Dani said repressively. "I assume everyone wants a drink?"

Lindie and Ma'at crawled forward, Lindie making her way to Sly's side by grabbing his boots and then feeling her way along his bent calf and up his torso.

"Hey!" Sly said at the unexpected intimacy.

"Where is this water?" Lindie asked.

"Just bend down," Sly instructed. Lindie did so.

"Ooh!"

"Sounds like you found it," Sly teased.

"If only we could mark the location of this pool," Dani said.

"With what?" Sly mocked. "Sonar?"

"Sonar would be great if we were equipped with it," Dani answered.

"Do you think," Lindie asked, "if we stay in here long enough we will become adaptive? Develop sonar and that sort of thing?"

"Sure," Sly said, "given a couple of million years and," he dropped his voice, "Ma'at or I would have to make love with you to create offspring."

Lindie's bright laughter pealed around the cavern, echoing off the walls. "Doctor Jenks!" she said, "Is that an invitation?"

"Do you want it to be?"

Dani rolled her eyes even though she knew the other two couldn't see her. She wondered, under the circumstances, if she would ever have another opportunity to make love with Lindie. It seemed highly unlikely.

"Captain," Ma'at interrupted, ignoring the banter, "we do have a kind of primitive, inexact sonar. Dr. Davis just demonstrated it. If we were precise about directing sounds, we could get an idea of the size of any space we are in. That way, we could avoid caves or passages that are narrow beyond our capacity to negotiate them."

"Excellent," Dani answered. "Let's try it."

"Yoho!" Sly shouted. The sound echoed back to them in a fraction of time too small to calculate without equipment.

"My guess would be," Dani said, "that we have entered a smaller cavern than the high-ceilinged one we were dropped into."

"I agree," Ma'at said, "but still sizeable."

As she said it, they all felt a stirring of the dead cold air and heard a whispery fluttering over their heads. The sound, never loud, faded until it was only a ghost of the original, echoed back to their ears in soft waves by the closeness of the cave's walls. "What was that?" Lindie whispered in awe.

"Probably," Ma'at said dryly, "residents *with* sonar."

"You know," Dani said, "in some Terran caves, there is a nightly migration of bats to the outdoors for feeding."

"It is difficult to ascertain their direction," Ma'at said, "but I think they were flying in the same direction we are heading."

"Let's follow them," Lindie suggested. "They may know something we don't."

"Or," Sly countered, "they could have already eaten and be returned. Remember, we don't know what time it is."

"They could," Lindie added, sounding defeated, "be doing something else entirely, like heading deeper into the cave to bed down for the night."

"Captain?" Ma'at queried.

"The officers of the U.S.S. *Boediceas* have never hesitated to take risks—"

"—even when we didn't know the parameters of the problem," Sly finished.

"How right you are, Sly. Let's go on. We will have to skirt around this pool, providing there is an edge to skirt. If we keep one hand touching the bank, we shouldn't wander off course or fall in. Back on your knees, everyone. We will continue our exploratory crawl. Ma'at, so that we may retain an idea of where this pool is, you are responsible for keeping a tally of steps as we move."

"Aye, Captain."

"Onward and upward," Sly said with grit.

But their course turned out to be downward. They crawled along the edge of the pool and when Dani sensed she was circling back around it—but having no way of being sure—she led them away from the water. Shortly thereafter, the ground began to slope downhill.

Dani went slowly, sweeping her hand in an arc in front of her. The ground could easily disappear around them into an abyss, leaving them stranded on a peninsula.

As they proceeded, the pointlessness of the entire activity began to come home to her. Why had they not simply stayed near the Great Mouth and hoped for rescue? At this stage, even if a rescue effort was undertaken, they could already be so hopelessly lost in the cave they'd never be found.

The more she thought about it, the more she worried. The cave could run for hundreds of kilometers. How many kilometers had they gone already? And in what direction?

Yet it was against her nature not to do something. She simply couldn't sit and wait for help to arrive. They had needed to locate light, water, and food. At least one of that triad had been found.

Besides, activity was motivating. It gave her people a sense of purpose. She knew she could not be trapped in a situation with two more loyal, resourceful, spirited, or imaginative officers than Sly and Ma'at but that didn't mean they were immune to cracking. Her leadership built a psychological bulwark against hysteria. As for Lindie, she couldn't imagine anyone more courageous or stalwart.

But how long could she keep up the shaky front of her leadership? She doubted they'd been in the cave longer than four or five hours and her focus was already eroding. If she'd made a fatal series of strategic errors, they would soon become obvious, not only to her, but to all of them.

A single error, under the circumstances, would be more than enough to seal their fates. Much as Sherri's single error had sealed the fates of the crew of the *U.C.S.S. Sagittarius*.

Dani felt, for the first time, a foreboding of death. It was one thing to face off Khrars. In that situation, there was the challenge of battle and the hope, if not of victory, at least of a speedy and honorable death.

But the thought of dying slowly of starvation or going, just as slowly, insane while crawling around on hands and knees in aimless circles through rooms and passages she couldn't see, toward or away from an exit that didn't exist, left Dani with her mouth dry, her heart fluttering and those damn lights swirling relentlessly in front of her eyes.

Chapter Twelve

WARREN STORMED AWAY on foot into the series of washes he and Alan had crossed by zeebiti earlier in the day. Alan sauntered after him at a discreet distance. April wrung her hands. "I don't know what to do!" she wailed.

"Let him cool down, April," Jake advised. He lingered on the ground, his jaw turning purple, his left eye swelling shut. Olive reached down a hand to him. When he didn't take it, she shook it insistently.

"Come on. Don't give me a big macho act, Jacob Willard Tyson. We're going to ice your face before it looks as bad as your brother's."

"All right," Jake said sourly, accepting her hand and getting to his feet. "What in hell happened to him anyway?"

"He wouldn't tell me or let me treat him. You could see he was already injured. Couldn't you have cut him some slack?"

"He wanted the fight, Olive."

Olive frowned repressively.

"I should go after Warren," April announced, biting her lip with indecision.

"April," Olive suggested, "take Jake's advice and stay." She turned and walked away to Stella's ship, Jake limping beside her. April trailed them uncertainly. At the ship's door, April looked across the dunes but Warren and Alan had disappeared. She shook her head and went inside.

"It was stupid," Olive rebuked, punching up ice from the food synthesizer.

"Hey! I didn't hit him! I just let him hit me." Jake sat at the table.

"I don't get it," April said, leaning against the doorjamb. "I don't even know what happened."

"Look, both of you. If we don't let Warren blow off some of his pent-up rage once in a while, he's going to explode all at once and kill somebody."

"Sounds very noble," Stella said from her bed.

Jake turned. "Who are you?"

Stella didn't give a direct answer. Instead, she said, "I take it you're Warren's brother. I'd like to point out he's a smart and talented young man. He just needs to get away from here."

Jake waved a hand in dismissal. Olive was securing ice to his jaw with a large strip of toweling. "He's wanted to get off Otung for a long time."

"Maybe you should have listened to him. I begin to see why he has some of the problems he has."

"Hey," Jake started out of his chair but Olive pushed him back down, "who are you?"

"I'm the person who's going to get Warren off this planet," Stella answered. April's eyes opened wide, Olive's rolled, and Jake snorted.

"At the moment, you don't look capable of doing much of anything. What is it with that mummy get-up? Is that the latest style on Spaceportals?"

"Shut up," Stella barked, "this is my ship and I can kick you out of it if I choose."

"Yeah?" Jake spit out. "This is my land and my planet and you've violated the Rules of Settlement. I'm going to report you to the Coalition."

"Go ahead," Stella invited, unperturbed. "Just remember, I might get a slap on the hand but you'll lose your settlement rights. You cut off your own nose if you make a report. Talk about poor incentives for you settlers, huh?"

"You knew you'd get away with this."

"I wasn't born yesterday. I have lots of experience with the Byzantine inanity of Coalition bureaucracy. Trust me, this is not a fight you can even score in, let alone win."

"I don't know who you are," Jake snarled, "but I hate you already."

"My heart is broken. And to think I wouldn't be here to make your life miserable if your brother hadn't saved my life."

"Figures," Jake grumbled.

"Looks like he gave you quite a shiner, too."

"Lady—" Jake rose threateningly. Olive set a steaming bowl of mashed potatoes on the table and shoved Jake down again.

"Both of you," Olive commanded, hands on her hips, "stop it. Jake, eat. Stella, I realize you're feeling cooped up—"

"—you hit that nail on the head," Stella muttered.

"—but you've gotten in enough digs at Jake. If the two of you can't be civil, I will not hesitate to gag you; and pitch him out. Understood?"

Jake nodded, his head down. Stella, who couldn't nod without pain, said, "Okay, Olive. It was still the most fun I've had in days. No. Weeks, months—"

"Stella," Olive said.

"Okay, okay. I'm shutting up."

"Thank God," Jake mumbled, slurping a spoonful of mashed potatoes down his throat without moving his jaw. Olive shot him a forbidding glare and turned to April. "What do you want to eat?"

April threw up her hands. "As a cook, you almost never hear that question addressed to you. What are my choices?"

Olive smiled and gestured with her thumb. "The synthesizer's over there. I'll bet you can figure it out for yourself."

April went across to read the menu on the food synthesizer and changed her mind. "You know, I'm not that hungry after the sandwich Ruby fed me. I think I'll go check on Warren." She headed out the door.

"Good luck." Olive sat across from Jake. He looked up from his potatoes and painfully twisted up one corner of his mouth in an apologetic smile.

"Why are you here?" she asked. "Surely, it wasn't to track down Warren."

"No. Matters deteriorated at Makapi."

"Deteriorated?"

Jake nodded. "The Dani-*konuk* thing. Kathwalda had a dream that if the village returned Dani to the Land of the Dead she would have no power to destroy Makapi."

"Oh, no! They believe she destroyed Topotuk!"

"Yep."

"They're holding her?"

"In a way. They told me they would—" Jake hesitated.

"What?"

"Put Dani and the other three down the Great Mouth."

"Oh sky gods! What is Zodani thinking?"

"You," Jake went on, watching her carefully, "have been invited to participate in a Contest of the Seers with Kathwalda." His mouth quirked. "Haven't had any good dreams lately, have you?"

"A Contest? Jake, I haven't—"

"Olive, it's their only hope of survival!"

"Jake, I haven't prepared. You can't just walk into a Contest with someone like Kathwalda out of the blue. I'm rusty. You know that."

"Olive, I've never been in the Earth Cave but it is rumored there are no exits."

"It's not a rumor. There are no exits. The initiation for seers includes a night in the Earth Cave. It's a night you never forget. The darkness is all-encompassing, the cold seeps into your bones in a way it never does outside, the air lies heavy on your heart, your voice echoes back to you—"

"Do you, as part of this initiation, look for exits?"

"Oh no. It's a ritualized vigil held in the main cavern but the many side caves and passages were explored in the time of our ancestors. Legend holds the cave extends infinitely in all directions and is full of wonders unknown on the surface. The skut-tut bats find ways in and out, but if there is an exit big enough for humans to slip through, it's never been found."

"Olive, they'll die in there."

"Yes, they will."

THE SURFACE DANI was inching along continued to slope downward. Dani followed it, wondering if the roof of the cave sloped down as well or was now high above their heads. She strained her ears but she heard no winged animals as they had at the pool. She detected no changes in air movement, temperature, or pressure. If the winged animals—she assumed along with the others, that they were bat-like creatures of some kind—had headed in this direction to dine out for the evening she could not detect where they might have exited.

The unchanging cold blackness suffused everything. She felt as if her body had become the blackness, as if it had soaked in through her skin, making her invisible. It was strange to have her eyes open, yet, in edging forward, not be able to see her hands move in front of her face.

For all she knew, they were literally descending to the Yutunda's Land of the Dead. Perhaps at the bottom of this hill there would be Cerberus, the giant many-headed mongrel who guarded the gates of Hades in Greek mythology, snarling a greeting. Dani could almost see the confounded animal. She shook himself out of reverie. It was too easy, in this kind of dark, to start seeing pictures in one's head. That way, as Sly had said flatly, lay madness.

Dani continued to crawl forward, searching the ground, one hand at a time, for changes in the surface. Her hands were rubbed raw and her knees were numb with cold.

"How is everyone doing back there?" Dani called, pausing for a moment.

"Okay," Lindie said, her cheer sounding forced.

"I could do with a cup of coffee," Sly answered.

"Ma'at?"

"Fine, Captain."

"Should we take a break?" Dani halted for a moment to listen for their answers.

"Why?" Sly asked. "Moving is keeping us warm and there isn't anything to do if we take a break."

"It is amazing," Lindie said, "how much time opens up when you don't have to cook or eat."

"Yeah," Sly said, "it's too bad you can't get by not doing it. Unfortunately, it's not optional."

"Doctor," Ma'at said, "you know very well that the average human can survive weeks without food and days without water."

Dani backed off her knees and sat, cross-legged, in the dirt or limestone sand or whatever it was. For all she knew, she was sitting on fossilized bat guano. Whether they admitted it or not, it sounded to her like her officers were taking a break.

"True, Ma'at," Sly was saying, "but that doesn't mean the average human is going to enjoy it."

"I am talking, Doctor, about survival, not pleasure."

"Humans," Sly retorted, "unlike Nhavans, have spent millennia perfecting the arts of enjoyment. The history of the race has been about progressing from hand-to-mouth survival to an orderly, reliable network of coordination that creates a flow of goods and services intended to satisfy basic needs."

"All races do that, including Nhavans," Ma'at retorted. "The very definition of culture is a surplus of food supplies that allows for the specialization of work which, in its turn, allows for the development of the arts and sciences."

"That's not a definition of culture," Lindie threw in her two cents worth, "that's a definition of civilization."

"I stand corrected, Dr. Davis," Ma'at said, hir voice stiff with dignity.

It reassured Dani to hear Ma'at and Sly arguing. They might be lost in an all-encompassing darkness with very little real hope of survival but that didn't stop her two best officers from engaging in their favorite sport of debating points they would never, in a million years, agree upon.

And they needed so little to set them off. It was a rare pleasure to hear Lindie, ever the professor, correct Ma'at. If she'd had the energy, Dani would have laughed out loud.

She felt a rawness in her throat as she resisted a surge of emotion. More than anything, she wanted these three people to live. She wanted them to go on arguing with each other for that next million years.

How was she going to ensure that? No matter how she looked at it, she was charged with their survival. She heard Sherri's final words again, the words captured on tape, the words she had said as she flew her personal spacecraft into the maw of the Planet eater: *The commander is responsible for the lives of her crew...and their deaths. I should have died with mine.*

She had been thinking about Sherri when she answered Lindie's riddle. The king was accountable for what happened in his domain. Like him, like Sherri, Dani was responsible for what happened to her crew, and to Lindie.

There was nowhere to go but forward, she thought, wherever forward led.

"If you all are finished," Dani said aloud, doing her best to sound like her usual upbeat self, "I say we go on."

"We're ready whenever you're ready, Dani," Sly answered.

"All right then." Dani got back on her knees and resumed the now-familiar process of sweeping and crawling. After a few minutes, she was shaken by a bout of dizziness. She paused, assuming it was disorientation induced by the dark.

She swayed on her hands. She coughed. She inhaled and felt a searing in her throat and lungs as though she were breathing fire into her body.

She coughed again, hard, and something spewed up. Was it phlegm? Was she getting sick? Had she breathed in a potent virus of some kind?

"Captain?" Ma'at called from the end of the line.

"I—" Dani gagged and fell flat on her face.

"Doctor," Ma'at yelled, speeding forward on hir knees, careening into Lindie without apology and scrambling over her in the darkness, "pull her back!"

Ma'at was fast and hir hands were on Dani's shoulders before anyone else could react. S/he flipped Dani onto her back and started dragging. "Back up the slope," Ma'at commanded. "Up! We must go up!"

The other two had no choice but to help and they dragged the dead weight of Dani's body along the ground, driven by the urgency in Ma'at's voice. They mauled each other in the process, tripping over their ropes but not stopping until Ma'at called a breathless halt.

"What in the hell, Ma'at?" Sly demanded.

Ma'at felt in the dark for Dani's face and, locating it, brought her ear down close to Dani's mouth. "She's still breathing," Ma'at announced.

"Yes, and she has a pulse, too. What got into you?"

Dani hacked, something wet spraying the two officers crouched inches above her.

"Yhick," Sly said, startled. "What is she coughing up?"

"I think you will find, Doctor," Ma'at answered, sitting back on his long thighs, "that it is blood."

"WARREN?"

"Go away, Alan."

"Sorry, I won't. You listened to my troubles, I'm going to listen to yours."

"Maybe I'm not gonna talk about them." Warren was sitting on the dun-colored slope of one of the washes, tossing rocks at the parched riverbed.

"Everyone does eventually," Alan prophesied. He settled into the sand behind Warren, placing his hands lightly on the other man's

shoulders.

"There's no point in talking about it."

"There's not much point in walloping your brother either."

"I'd never hit him before," Warren said, his voice conveying the surprise he felt. "It gave me some relief but I felt stupid too. I walk around with so much anger...ready to blow my top all the time. Then I get this great chance to beat the shit out of Jake and I took it. It felt great...for about two seconds. Then I just felt ashamed of hitting him."

"Was that because he didn't hit you back?" Alan started to gently massage Warren's shoulders, careful to avoid the places where his shirt was newly-bloodied.

"Maybe. That pissed me off. But that couldn't have been it. It's just...I just suddenly realized that smashing Jake's face in isn't going to solve my problems. It'd be great if it did, but it's not going to."

"So what is?" Alan asked, his hands moving up to Warren's neck. The sun was sinking behind the rock sentinels of Dark Canyon, blanketing the sky with a tapestry of woven gold.

"I don't know. Maybe beating the shit out of my father."

Alan laughed. Now there was an ironic idea, he thought. If I had wanted to beat the shit out of my father, which one would I pick? It wasn't as if both of them didn't deserve it.

Warren echoed Alan's laugh, starting to feel more lighthearted than he'd felt in a long time. "I guess you're right," he said, "that probably wouldn't work either."

Alan's hands were now in Warren's hair and he was stroking Warren's scalp.

"Alan?" Warren asked, his voice quiet.

"Yes?"

"What are you doing?"

"Oh, god." Alan's hands froze in mid-stroke. "I'm sorry. I was just—"

Warren grabbed Alan's hands and shifted around to face him. "Look," he said, holding Alan's hands, "are you that way?"

Alan hung his head. "I don't know. I'm so confused, right now. I mean I just found out my parents aren't my parents and I have no right to take the FDet from my mom and...and when I look at you, I feel something really powerful, really extraordinary."

"Has a man ever kissed you?"

"No." Alan felt his face flush.

"What about a woman?"

"No."

Warren leaned forward and kissed Alan on the mouth. Alan felt his stomach turn over and a swirl of dizziness in his head made him sway. Warren drew away.

"Well?"

"God. Warren, are you—"

"No. I had an affair about two years ago with one of the seasonal workers. We had a blast, but—"

"But what?"

"I want to get married, Alan. I want to have kids. It's not the life for me."

"Oh, great. So what do I do now?" Alan was almost wailing.

"Hey, cheer up." Warren grasped him by the shoulders and gently shook him. "I gave you a taste of the forbidden fruit. At least now you know what to look for. You and your mom will be getting off Otung eventually. You'll have plenty of chances."

"Jeezus. I don't know whether to thank you or hate you."

"You'll hate me now and thank me later. I'm not the right person for you."

"Couldn't we at least just—"

"—try a little more fruit?"

"Yes."

"Well, maybe—"

At that moment, April crested the dune and the men looked up, startled. Alan shrugged Warren's hands from his shoulders and got to his feet. "Damn," he muttered, glaring at Warren. Then he turned away and without looking back trudged dismally up the hill.

"Is everything okay?" April asked when they crossed paths.

"Yeah, sure." Alan couldn't hide his disappointment and his sarcasm was lost on April. "He's all yours."

April frowned but went on down the hill. "Warren?"

Warren lifted his hand to her, a welcoming smile creasing his features. A part of him welcomed the notion of a sexual fling with Alan, just as he had shared with Xappetu, but April was the person he needed to make his life complete. April smiled her surprise at the warmth of Warren's greeting, grasped his hand and settled down in the sand beside him.

"Beautiful sunset, don't you think?" he asked.

"Incredible," she said.

The gold had intensified to brilliant orange. As he watched, the orange shaded into a dozen hues of red: scarlet, crimson, ruby, salmon, coral, pink. It soared up the color scale to purple and then faded back to a cooler lavender. Finally, tiring, it settled to turquoise, shot through with celadon greens and pale yellows.

One thing Warren truly loved about Otung was the sunsets. Okay, two things, he amended. He loved the zeebiti. Okay, three things, he corrected again. The open wild country. He squeezed April's hand.

It was his bondage to Hacienda Otung that was the problem and maybe, just maybe, he was now mature enough to solve it. Maybe he didn't need to leave Otung. Maybe it was just time for him to grow up and negotiate terms.

There was plentiful land on Otung and he had the skills to work the land. Maybe Stella could help him in a different way. Maybe she could help him push through a Settlement of his own.

It was time to give back to Zane and Jake their debt to Neville. It had never been his debt. He had just gotten snarled in it. But now it was time to stand up to the two of them and hammer out an arrangement.

Maybe pummeling Jake had helped after all. It had not only relieved his anger, it had helped him recognize what he wanted. Jake had said nobody got justice but maybe Warren didn't want justice any more. Maybe he just wanted a future he could live with. He wondered if April would want to be part of that future.

"April, what about staying on Otung?"

"Staying on Otung? Last we talked, all you wanted was to get off Otung!"

"I might be changing my mind. I mean, look at this place. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yes, but...but what about everything you hate here? The resort, your brother, your enslavement...all of that stuff?"

"I think I know what to do about all of that now."

"You do?" Both of April's eyebrows had shot up her forehead.

"Yeah, I do."

"How—"

Warren caught her mouth with his and kissed her solidly, blocking out her murmurs of protest.

WHEN ALAN CRESTED the dune, he saw Stella's ship in the distance. The fading light of the sunset cast a pink wash on the indigo of the eastern horizon and the ship glowed a soft ivory against the tan sands.

Stella's ship. The Mother Ship. Ha, ha. Very funny, he thought, laughing at himself. He had acquired a mother, discovered himself, and been instantly rejected by his first flame. Wasn't life grand?

He was only a few meters from the ramp when a rider came over a sand dune at a gallop. It was obvious, even from a distance, that it was a young woman. Her long dark hair streamed out behind her and Alan thought he had never seen a rider with a better seat. She pulled the sweating, panting zeebiti to a stop in front of him and practically leaped from the saddle.

"Where's Jake?" she demanded without ceremony, her body pulsing with the keyed-up energy of adolescence.

Alan pointed up the ramp. "Inside. What's the matter?"

She didn't answer but ran up the ramp. Alan followed, also at a run. The overworked zeebiti stood and heaved.

"Jake!" she shouted. She crossed the threshold of the ship and saw Olive. "Mom!

"Ruby, honey," Olive jumped from her chair. "What is it? Why are you here?"

"Zane," Ruby panted, "Zane's missing."

DANI HAD STOPPED coughing and lay still, breathing with immense effort, every inhale and exhale sounding tenuous and ragged to the practiced ears of Sylvestre Jenks.

"Just take it easy, Dani," Sly suggested, his hands on the captain's ribs feeling the rise and fall of air. "You're going to be all right."

"Burning," Dani puffed.

"What's burning? Your lungs or something else?"

"Lungs. Skin."

"Skin?" Sly was puzzled but he retained his soothing bedside voice, even though there was no bedside and he couldn't see the patient. "Where?"

"Chest. Back. Face." Dani voiced on the next exhale.

Sly unbuttoned Dani's shirt and felt her bare skin. It did feel unnaturally hot but it did not feel charred. Dani unconsciously suspended her breath.

"Breathe, Dani," Sly ordered. Dani inhaled. Sly moved his hands down to feel the sides of her chest wall. As he proceeded down the ribs, he felt something sticky and wet. He reached under Dani's back and felt a leaking wound.

"You have an injury that's bleeding on your back."

"When I first landed," Dani said. "Hit a rock."

"It couldn't have bled all this time," Sly countered.

"No," Dani exhaled. "Opened when you all pulled me back."

"It's already clotting again," Sly said, pulling Dani's shirt down so she wouldn't get more chilled than she already was.

"Minor," Dani said.

"Yes," Sly said. "As for your face, it's probably scraped all to hell." He just hoped Dani didn't go into shock from an excess of injury because there was nothing to wrap her in to preserve her body heat. All of them were wearing just a single layer of light clothing. Worry over the quite deadly risk of hypothermia continued to gnaw at Sly.

"Okay." Sly sat back on his haunches, forcing his attention on the medical problem. "Inflamed lungs, coughing up bloody sputum. Sounds like an inhaled poison to me. Ma'at?"

"Carbon dioxide, to be precise, Doctor," the Nhavan said. "I believe it's what killed the Yutunda at Topotuk."

"Damn it, Ma'at! You knew this all along!" Sly accused.

"No. But the evidence has continued to mount."

"Carbon monoxide?" Lindie said. "You mean the gas given off by the burning of fossil fuels? That's outlawed. How could it get in here?"

"Not carbon *monoxide*, Doctor Davis," Ma'at said. "Carbon *dioxide*. The gas which is a natural end-product of animal respiration."

"What we breathe out is that poisonous?" Lindie sounded incredulous.

"Highly poisonous," Sly said, "in sufficient concentrations."

"The breath of the goddesses," Dani wheezed.

"Yes," Ma'at said, "a poetical and inexact description by Zodani but it was a confirmation of the theory I had begun to formulate at the caldera."

"What theory?" Lindie asked.

"Dr. Davis," Ma'at lectured, "pure carbon dioxide is denser than the air we breathe. But like air, it is capable of flowing through an atmosphere. It is not only a by-product of humanoid respiration, but a by-product of large-scale planetary processes such as those that create volcanoes."

"Ma'at," Sly objected, "no volcano spewed carbon dioxide into the air killing the people of Topotuk. There would have been visible evidence."

Lindie chortled. "Namely the volcano, Sly?"

"Yes, dammit. The volcano."

Ma'at proceeded. "I think what happened at Topotuk was highly improbable, what a human might call 'freakish', but it is not unique. In the 20th century on Terra, a similar event took place on the continent of Africa."

"Ma'at," Sly snapped, "just get to the point."

"Very well. I believe the caldera at Topotuk held a massive bubble of carbon dioxide trapped beneath the waters of its freshwater lake. Because there is a concentration of carbon dioxide in this cavern at low spots, I suspect the carbon dioxide is seeping up from the hot magma beneath the crust of the planet."

"We have heard repeatedly that the Otung Valley is subject to frequent earth tremors and there is clear evidence—such as the caldera itself—of past vulcanism. Both are indicative of a magma pool. I suspect much of the carbon dioxide gets released harmlessly into the atmosphere but in the case of the caldera, the water held it in place."

"For centuries, you mean," Lindie said, her voice conveying awe.

"Or even millennia," Ma'at said. "We know little about the geologic past of Otung. The volcanic explosion that created the caldera at Topotuk could be very old or quite recent."

"You're theorizing," Sly said, "that the carbon dioxide got released from the lake all at once, flowed over the sides of the caldera, down its flank, and through the village in a dense poisonous swath."

"Precisely. Invisible and odorless, it suffocated every creature that breathed oxygen in a matter of seconds. It was more rapid and more thorough than any plague. You will recall,"

Ma'at said, "that Jake was mystified by the lack of ordinary animal activity, including that of ants and spiders."

"Creepy," said Lindie. "I still don't see how it got out of the lake."

"The water was brown and the fish were dead," Sly recalled slowly. "Ma'at already told us, Lindie. Remember? When we visited the caldera."

"Oh, I remember. An underwater landslide triggered by the earth tremor."

"Presto, presto," Sly clapped his hands together and the sound echoed hollowly in the cave. "Instant death."

"It's only a theory," Ma'at said, not sounding anywhere near as modest as the statement implied.

"But probably the correct one," Dani whispered weakly from the ground. "It's amazing I'm alive."

"We barely yanked you back in time. As usual, it was Ma'at's quick thinking," Sly said.

"You know," Lindie said, "in hero mythology, after descending into the Underworld and overcoming whatever trials await him there, the hero is granted a boon—"

"—a boon?" Sly interrupted.

"A boon. A gift of knowledge, or wisdom, or insight that represents the fruits of the hero's labors."

"Oh, I get it," Sly said.

"Once he receives the boon," Lindie went on, "he returns to the everyday world to bestow the boon upon the waiting and inspiration-hungry millions."

"Your point, Lindie?" Dani puffed.

"We have received the boon, Dani. It's the knowledge of what happened at Topotuk."

"Well, little good it's going to do us now," Sly muttered.

"That's my point, Sly. The boon by its very nature implies return to the ordinary, everyday world. Without it, the hero cycle is not complete."

"You're saying," Ma'at said, "that from a mythological perspective, we must, of necessity, find our way out of here."

"Or be rescued," Lindie said.

"Intriguing," Ma'at said.

"You consider that logical, Ma'at?" Sly asked, his voice conveying astonishment.

"It has, Doctor, its own internal logic."

"Boy," Sly snorted, "will wonders never cease."

"Let's just hope," Dani breathed, "that Lindie's right."

Chapter Thirteen

STELLA AWOKE TO the new day, feeling that surge of strength that is the surest indicator that the tide of injury has turned. She opened her eyes. The gang of people crowding her tiny ship's cabin was up and about.

Jake was sitting in one of the chairs, his prosthesis off and his slit jeans turned up, rubbing his knee stump and looking irritable. Olive slapped his hand away, knelt in front of him and vigorously massaged his thigh muscles, oblivious to his grunts and moans.

April stood at the food synthesizer tapping in orders and then passing the resulting products to Ruby. Ruby arranged food-filled trays for Jake and Olive on the small table. Alan and Warren lounged in the console chairs, already busily eating.

Stella's landing craft had never been intended to water, feed, sleep, circulate air, and recycle waste products for seven people. She knew the ship was overtaxed and as much as she felt she had no choice but to play the role of hostess—she couldn't bodily remove her guests even if she wanted to—she prayed they would all soon be on their way.

The previous evening's dinner had been a hodgepodge affair with everyone ordering up their own meals and sitting down at different times. After Ruby's arrival and dire announcement, Olive and Jake had moved to take the console's two command chairs which swiveled to face the cabin, allowing Ruby and Alan to sit at the table and eat.

April and Warren had taken their dinners outside and lounged in quiet intimacy on the ramp until the night air grew cold. Olive had fed Stella lasagna, which, despite its ho-hum synthesized flavor, she dispatched with enthusiasm.

After dinner, Stella assigned the only other bunk to Olive and Ruby to share. April, who was small in stature, swiveled the console chairs to face each other, lowered the seat backs, and stretched her body across them. The three men tightly arranged themselves on the floor, head to toe, around the table. There was literally no other space.

The synthesizer pinged and April took her food tray and went to sit on Warren's lap. Ruby, who had already eaten, ordered up a cup of coffee and carried it to Stella. "Good morning," she chirped happily, "I'm your feeder for breakfast."

Stella smiled. "Thanks, Ruby. Giving your mom a break?"

"Yeah. Also, she says its good practice for when I have babies."

"That's good advice."

"What do you want for breakfast?"

"I'm starved. I'll take everything."

Ruby went off to punch up "everything" and Stella turned her attention to the breakfasting crowd.

"I assume," she said, "that someone has a plan."

"What we have," Jake glared at her, "are a lot of cross purposes." He looked at Olive, who had stopped working on his leg and was seated at the table again, smearing jam on a biscuit. "Olive?"

"All right, Jake," she said, sounding frustrated, "I'll do it but it doesn't mean I'll win the Contest. If I don't, you must accept the consequences."

"Wait a minute," Ruby said, balancing an overloaded tray while maneuvering around Olive and Jake, "what about Zane?"

"Warren and Alan will search for Zane," Jake said.

"We will?" They asked in unison.

"Yes, you will."

Ruby set down Stella's food tray on the bedside table. "What about me, then?"

"You'll ride back to the ranch with me and Olive. Somebody has to manage affairs there."

"I wanted to look for Zane!"

"I know, Ruby. But look, that's where I need you. Please." Jake's eyes pleaded and Stella almost laughed aloud at the all-too-obvious manipulation that Ruby, in her innocent adoration of Jake, seemed blind to.

"Okay." Ruby sat at Stella's bedside, hiding a Cheshire Cat grin which only Stella could see. Stella promptly revised her opinion of Ruby's innocence, remembering it wasn't always possible to tell who was manipulating whom.

"April," Jake said to the woman sitting on his brother's lap and shoveling cereal into her mouth, "you'll stay with Stella."

April nodded her assent, her mouth full.

"What are you and Olive going to do?" Warren asked, leaning his head around April's body.

"We have some resort guests to rescue," Jake said, "who have currently taken up residence in the Earth Cave."

"The Earth Cave?" Warren blew up. "Shit, Jake! You'll never rescue anybody from there."

"It's up to Olive, really. She's been challenged to a Contest of the Seers. If she doesn't win it, they'll die." Jake took a gulp of his coffee.

"Sounds like only a little pressure," Alan said as a quiet aside. April heard him and giggled.

"How did this happen, Jake?"

"Long story," Jake said, leaning down to lift his prosthesis from where it lay on the floor.

"I'm listening," Warren said, pushing April off his lap.

Jake shrugged without replying. Then, ignoring everyone's interested stares, he buckled his prosthesis to his knee, tested his weight on it, flapped his pants leg down, and stood. "Don't worry about it, Warren. Just find Dad. Okay?"

"I'll find Dad," Warren assured, getting to his feet, "whether he's dead or alive. But from this moment on, you're going to stop treating me like I'm your kid brother."

"You are my kid brother." Jake set his coffee cup down on the table.

"I'm your brother but I'm not a kid anymore. Get it?" Warren's body was stiff with tension.

A silence fell in the tiny, crowded room. No one moved, except Ruby, who twisted her head to look, a fork poised in her hand. Stella observed the dramatic tableau from her bed with intense interest.

Jake looked his brother in the eye. When he spoke, his voice held a note of respect.

"Okay. I get it, Warren," he said. "I get it."

"IT OCCURS TO me," Alan said, while he and Warren were saddling Korkorba and Oreon, "that it's possible your Dad saw or heard that explosion we created yesterday when we transported the FDet."

"Yeah," Warren said, cinching down his saddle. "I was thinking the same thing. He probably made a beeline for the Harvest Cabin to check on it."

"I think we should go there first," Alan suggested.

"Sounds like a plan to me." Warren made one last check of the fastenings of his saddle and then double-checked Korkorba's. Both men gathered their reins in their hands and mounted.

"The only thing is," Warren said, backing Oreon, "if all he did was check on the cabin, why didn't he make it home again? It's not that far."

"True. How did Rominki lose her bridle and wander off? Wandering off is one thing, but losing the bridle? That sounds like some kind of interference to me."

"Yeah. So we should keep our eyes peeled for any signs of trouble." Warren urged Oreon into a gentle trot. He didn't want to go so fast that he missed anything out of the ordinary but he didn't want to be all day about it either.

As resentful as he might be over issues he had with his father, this was not a good time to lose Zane. For one thing, he now wanted to resolve those issues, instead of just seething about them. He swore, if his Dad was alive, it was going to be the first thing they talked about.

"There's the cabin," Alan called when they breasted a high dune.

"Yep," Warren said, slowing Oreon to a walk. "I haven't seen anything peculiar. Have you?"

"Nothing. Let's hope he's at the cabin. I mean most of this is dry washes and shifting dunes. If he's lost, I don't know if we'd find him."

"He knows this country like the back of his hand, Alan. He couldn't get lost here."

"We didn't bring any weapons, did we?"

"Nope. Just our two fists." Warren raised them to emphasize the point.

"You showed you knew how to use them yesterday," Alan joked. "I almost thought you were going to have to use them again this morning."

"Me, too." Warren laughed.

"I was impressed the way you stood up to Jake."

"His reaction surprised me. I don't understand it. He's never treated me with respect."

"Maybe he was only waiting for you to demand it."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Sure it does. You made him realize you aren't the same person you were a week ago."

"I'm not the same person I was a week ago?" Warren asked.

"Hell, no. Events change people, Warren. You're different from the petulant bad boy I was told to avoid when I first came to Hacienda Otung."

"What changed me?"

"I don't know. Only you know. But it almost doesn't matter, because it happened. I'm different, too. I've learned so much about myself. That's what matters."

"I think maybe it was your mom."

"My mom?"

"Stella. She took me seriously and...she trusted me."

"You saved her life."

"We saved her life," Warren said.

Alan shrugged. "I'm just glad we did. I don't know her very well but I see possibilities for the future. She's crusty, isn't she?"

"Yeah. It was great the way she hated Jake on sight. April told me about it."

"Stella was warning Jake to lay off bullying you. I think she may turn out to be a good mom."

They rode in silence, down a slope into a dry wash and up the other side. When they topped out, Warren said, "You're lucky, Alan. You've had two good moms. I've had no moms."

"Not true, Warren. You've got a good mom. You've had three, actually. You just haven't appreciated it."

"Three?"

"Your real mom and your second mom—you told me you'd lost two moms—and Olive."

"Olive?"

"She really cares about you, Warren."

"She cares about Jake."

"Start paying attention and you'll see it for yourself."

"Hmm, I don't know." Warren sounded unconvinced. "Look, we're almost there. Anything look weird to you?"

"You mean other than the FDet sticking out of the roof?"

"Yeah, other than that."

"No."

They rode up to the hitching post, dismounted and tied the zeebiti. "Let's check inside," Warren suggested. They walked to the door and cracked it open.

"Wow!" Warren said. Neither of them had gone back inside the cabin after transporting the FDet so they hadn't realized the extent of the space it took up. There was hardly even walking room around its massive base. The cabin's kitchen cabinets had been smashed, the FDet reigning placidly over the ruins.

"Olive is going to kill me when she sees this," Warren said.

"I thought you didn't give a tinker's damn about what Olive—"

"Hrgggrrmph."

"What was that?" Warren asked. Cautiously, he crept around the perimeter of the FDet in the direction of the sound.

"Dad!"

Lassoed to a chair, tape adhering his mouth, was Zane Tyson.

"Hrggrmph," Zane repeated, bobbing his head up and down.

Warren jerked the tape away from his father's mouth in one fast movement.

"Criminy!" Zane swore, shaking his head to cool the stinging that burned his cheeks and lips.

"Sorry," Warren apologized. "I knew that was going to hurt like hell."

"Forget about it. "Warren, why are you here?"

"Ruby found Rominki wandering around without you and got worried."

"I mean the cabin. Didn't you run into—"

"They have now."

Warren and Alan whirled around and found themselves, much as Zane had, looking into the barrel of a massive phaser gripped in the hand of a sizeable humanoid. From his other hand dangled two zeebiti bridles.

"Welcome, gentlemen. I'm actually glad you've returned because I think it will take all three of you to move the FDet to my ship for me. After, that is, I set it off just once more. It's almost ready to test."

Jhiriku eyed a digital reading on the FDet's display console. The red numbers blinked mindlessly back at him.

"Yes, indeed," he repeated, "almost ready."

"I HAVEN'T SEEN that robe since I was a boy," Jake said in wonder when Olive emerged from her room. The full-length loose-fitting garment consisted of panels of cloth dyed with native plant dyes. The central panel was of a mustard color and the side panels were maroon. It was belted with a wide belt of lkotni hide, carved with stylized images of clouds

and wind. A turquoise turban—that dye color being both rare and precious on Otung—perched on Olive's head.

Ruby stared. "I've never seen that turban before, Mother."

"There was no occasion." Olive shrugged. "We're just lucky it's in good condition. Showing up in rags—even ritual rags—will not forward my chances with the spirit world. Not to mention convince the people."

Jake laughed. "We'd better get going."

While her mother dressed, Ruby had watered Frakkpa and Windgess. "The zeebiti are waiting for you," she said. "I wish I could go."

"Me, too," Jake reiterated, "but what you're doing here is essential."

"I know. Even if you can't rescue those other people, make sure the two of you don't get tossed into the Earth Cave."

"Don't even joke about it," Jake reprimanded. "That couldn't happen, could it Olive?"

"If the goddesses prove to be in a malevolent mood, anything could happen."

"I was looking for reassurance," Jake said, "not a prediction." They walked through the vegetable garden to where Ruby had tied the zeebiti.

"Everything will be all right. Regardless of the outcome."

"That's hard for me to accept."

"It's the nature of life."

Jake grimaced.

"You're going to have to help me mount," Olive said. "This kind of garb doesn't lend itself to riding."

Jake offered a leg up to Olive, steadying her until she was aboard the zeebiti, the robe draping along the animal's flanks.

"Good luck," Ruby called up to her mother.

"You be careful," Olive said. "It's a big job, running the ranch, but we know you can do it."

Ruby waved them away. "Just go. I'll be fine."

MAKAPI WAS ABOUT an hour's hard ride from the Tyson ranch. When they got there, it was apparent preparations for the Contest had been completed and the village was merely awaiting Olive's arrival.

In each of the four corners of the central square, pottery bowls filled with animal fats waited to be lit. In the center, a wide zigzag line of red sand demarcated the respective ritual territories of the two seers. For each, a complex multi-colored sandpainting had been painstakingly drawn out on the ground. The two seers would sit on the paintings for the ceremony.

Kathwalda's contained the stylized drawing of a couxnoo, a reclusive silver-furred mountain creature, much like a Terran bear, with many of the same qualities of swift ferocity. The eyes of the animal were white-blue and the painting was bordered with silver.

The couxnoo was Kathwalda's spirit guardian and was not unlike her. She was a tall, lanky Yutunda. Now in middle age, she sported a cascade of silver-streaked hair that fell to her hips. She was paler in skin coloring than Olive, tending toward a softer honey tint than Olive's dark sallowness.

Olive's painting was ringed with gold and turquoise clouds and, in its center, seated bareback on a majestic white zeebiti was a husky woman in flowing red battle dress, the Yutunda representation of the South Wind. The South Wind was Olive's spirit guardian.

Neither of the two seers had underworld spirit companions, which, at least, gave neither an unfair advantage over the other in a Contest in which the more frightening gods and goddesses of the Yutunda's underworld pantheon were likely to figure prominently.

The people of Makapi shouted greetings to Olive as she rode into the village. She responded with smiles and waves. In front of Zodani's house, she and Jake dismounted and two teenagers came forward to lead Frakkpa and Windgess away.

The villagers were dressed in their finest robes, each individual's colors granted to them or their elders in a vision at the time of their Coming of Age. Children below the age of puberty wore tan robes, belted with black.

Zodani greeted Olive with a massive bear hug, welcoming her with effusive ritual language. Olive returned the expected pleasantries until both were satisfied. Then, with a sweep of his hand, Zodani proclaimed the start of the Contest. Four young women lit the large lamps in time to the patter of drums tapped out by a quartet of old men.

Two young men came forward and took Olive's hands, leading her to her sandpainting. They were careful not to step on it, which would have negated its magic. Olive removed her

boots and with her feet bare, stepped on the painting, raised her arms toward the southeast, and looking at the sky, called on the South Wind.

Kathwalda was led in the same manner to her sandpainting. Facing Olive, she stepped on its colored pattern and, raising her hands to the southwest, called down the power of Couxnoo from the mountains.

The women then bowed to each other and sat. The drumbeats ceased with suddenness to be replaced by the hushed midday silence of the natural world. In the village, no human spectator spoke or moved.

The Contest, which would consist largely of focused concentration on the part of the two seers and such periodic announcements as they considered divinely granted by their guardians, had begun.

"WHAT IN CRIMINY does that thing do anyway?" Zane lifted his chin at the FDet. "And what did that jackass mean when he said he was glad the two of you had *returned*?"

Neither Warren nor Alan, now bound to chairs in the same manner as Zane—with their zeebiti's bridles and reins making an efficient substitute for rope—seemed inclined to answer.

"Warren!" Zane roared.

"Dad," Warren soothed, clearing his throat nervously and wondering when he was going to tell his father he wasn't working for Olmstead Neville anymore, "this is Alan. He seems to know what it does. Every time I ask, someone tells me it's too technical for me to understand. I think they mean it's too secret. Right, Alan?"

"Thanks, Warren," Alan muttered. "Well, sir," he said respectfully to Zane, "It's called the FDet, which is short for Fault Detector. In the simplest terms, it detects faults."

"Hrmph. Geologic faults, I suppose."

"Yes, sir. Not human ones, unfortunately."

Zane laughed and Warren chuckled. Alan breathed more easily.

"Too bad," Zane joked. "That would be really useful."

"Yes, sir," Alan said.

"That's what this big dumb hunk does? That's what all the secrecy's about? What a waste," Warren pronounced. "Even with the little geology I learned, everybody knows faults are located at continental and oceanic plate boundaries."

"True," Alan said. "Most are. But there are intra-plate faults that are difficult to detect and it is those quakes that frequently do the most damage to life and property, precisely because they are not as apparent as transverse faults or plate boundaries."

"So how does it work?" Zane asked.

"The FDet has a system that detects magma pools under a planet's crust. It then, very simply put, heats up that magma in order to intentionally set off a tremor. The tremor is measured and evaluated so that geologists can determine where the most damage from an intra-plate quake is likely to occur."

"Big deal," Warren hissed.

"It was intended to be used for determining the safest city building sites on new planets because, unlike familiar planets, there is no long-term disastrous experience to tell a community where not to settle."

"Ahh," hummed Zane. "I remember now."

"Remember what, sir?"

"Years ago, when I was trying to get my Settlement Request approved, there was a discussion about using this device to test exactly what you're talking about."

"But it was never used?"

"No. There were too few of us requesting Settlement here and...well, I think what really happened was somebody fudged the paperwork and pocketed the funding that had been allocated to test Otung."

"Whooeee," Warren whistled. "Really?"

"Well I don't have any proof, Warren. But one day my request was bogged down in the geology bureaucracy and the next day it was stamped approved. I sure didn't grease the wheels, so something else happened."

"That must have been very early on," Alan judged. "Later, the FDet technology itself fell into disfavor. It certainly wasn't expensive to use. It was designed to be used under primitive conditions for minimal cost."

"So what happened?" Warren asked.

"Exactly what's happening now. Some members of a Coalition geology subcommittee began to fret that the FDet would be used to intentionally set off unauthorized earthquakes or, at the very least, threaten to set off earthquakes. Just the threat of such a cataclysm could bring a city or a local government to its knees."

"Precisely my plan," Jhiriku said, coming around the base of the machine which obscured the captives' view of the rest of the cabin.

He leaned close to the digital readout and read aloud the numbers.

"Hmmm," he pondered. "What do you think, young man? Is that hot enough?"

Alan ducked his head. "I'll never tell."

"What's he gonna do?" Warren asked Alan.

"Set off a damn quake."

"What! Here? Now?"

"You'll affect yourself and us too," Alan pointed out, doing his best to sound calmer than Warren. "You're supposed to use the remote to set off the FDet."

Jhiriku shrugged. "I don't have the remote. Stella has it."

"You're insane!" Warren shouted.

"We should all at least be outside the cabin," Alan argued.

"What?" Jhiriku responded. "So you can escape? No. I don't think so."

"Don't you remember?" Zane put in. "You wanted us to move this damn thing for you after you tested it."

Jhiriku hesitated. "You do make a good point there." He moved behind Zane's chair and dragged it, with Zane bumping helplessly along, out of the room. Warren stared, his eyes wide, at Alan.

"You weren't scared jumping through olive thorns, Warren," Alan responded to his look. "Why be scared now?"

"That was nature. A challenge. This is a madman trying to destroy Otung, and us with it."

Jhiriku came back and dragged Warren away. A few moments later, he returned for Alan, his forearm muscles corded from the workout, but otherwise showing no signs of strain.

"Why are you doing this?" Alan asked, as he was being dragged across the debris-strewn floor.

"Don't you think it would be unscientific of me not to make sure the equipment works before I take it to my homeworld?"

"Maybe. What are you going to do with it there?"

"Scare some weasly warlords into declaring me emperor."

"Oh," Alan said snidely. "Is that all?"

"Isn't that enough?"

They were outside, the chair's legs making tracks in the sand. Jhiriku let go of the chair and Alan thudded on his back to the ground. Jhiriku bared his teeth in a victorious grin and walked away.

"He's going to do it, isn't he?" Warren asked, a few meters away from Alan, also on his back.

"I tried to talk him out of it."

"No dice?"

"Megalomaniacs are rarely swayed by logic."

Warren laughed. "You're funny, Alan. I'm really glad we met."

"Me too."

In the cabin, Jhiriku pulled down the lever that would send a massive energy pulse into the Otung Rift's artificially-agitated magma. The FDet's computer had calculated the pulse to excite the magma pool just enough to set off a moderate surface tremor.

The lever bottomed out, a high-pitched hum rattled the busted walls of the cabin, and a green light on the FDet's console switched off. Another light beeped red. Seconds later, the ground beneath Jhiriku's feet began to buck and heave.

BOTH SEERS HAD sunk deeply into a motionless state of concentration. Jake, unlike the villagers who gave every appearance of participating in the same eerie stillness, was acutely

aware of time passing. With every moment he became more inwardly agitated. The sun was rising to its zenith in a cloudless eggshell-blue sky.

He estimated the *Explora Command* people had been in the Earth Cave for close on to twenty-four hours. Even with what he assumed was extensive training in survival situations, they had to be hungry, thirsty, and cold by now. A worst case scenario was that they were lost or had tumbled over the edge of an unseen precipice.

Jake's eyes flitted from one to the other of the women. He wished Olive would do something soon. He didn't care what. A claim, however specious, to wisdom superior to Kathwalda's, or a challenge of Kathwalda's interpretation of her dream, or even a physical duel.

Just do it, he willed silently, staring intently at Olive from where he sat among the villagers on the first row of the sidelines. Even as he sent the thought, Olive's eyes snapped open and her right arm jerked into the air.

"*akwappta!*" she shouted. Every head in the village, including Kathwalda's, lifted and followed the movement of Olive's hand. Olive extended her index finger and brought her arm down, pointing toward the southern horizon.

Jake was struggling to recall what the Yutunda word *akwappta* meant—he thought it might be a fresh summoning of Olive's spirit guardian, the South Wind, but he wasn't sure—when all hell broke loose.

A flash of horizontal lightning electrified the southern horizon but Jake didn't have time to ponder the peculiar orientation of this phenomenon. Everywhere around him, people were being tumbled like playthings by a ground that had begun undulating in a waving motion made all the more nausea-inducing by its optical impossibility.

The waving ceased as abruptly as it had begun and Jake jumped to his feet. As he did, the ground fell away from beneath him.

Following a nanosecond of lag time, he fell with it, crashing to his knees, his prosthesis sheared away by the force of his fall.

A roar filled his ears, the roar of the ground splitting apart. Jake twisted his head and stared up in wonderment. Where before there had been the flat meeting ground of the village was now a ragged cliff. Boulders cascaded down its flank and dust cloaked its birth in a thick cloud, like a newborn wrapped in a fresh blanket.

The air everywhere was rent with panicked human screams, some from above the new cliff, most surrounding him on the subsided ground. Jake scrambled for his prosthesis and, hands shaking, buckled it back onto his knee.

He stood and waited to be tumbled again but the shaking of the ground seemed to have stopped. The trembling was his own. He took a step and began pushing hysterical people aside in search of Olive.

She was easy to find because she was one of the few people standing, neither moving or screaming. In fact, her feet were solidly planted atop her sacred sandpainting which lay untouched by the earthquake. The painting's perfection stopped Jake in his tracks.

"Olive," he whispered in awe, "did you do that?"

Olive turned her upper body toward him, her eyes focused on some far distance. The look she gave him was so blank he wondered if she was still in a trance.

"Olive," he called more loudly.

Olive's eyes came back to normal. "No," she answered. "I don't think so."

"You raised your hand. You pointed—"

"I felt an immense energy coming toward us, yes. But I did not call it into being."

"Where's Kathwalda?"

"There," Olive pointed, still seeming to be not quite of the normal world, "she's on the ground." Kathwalda's sacred painting had been cracked down the middle by one of the numerous tiny fissures that had opened in the ground. The seer, dusty and disheveled, sat on it, her face running with tears.

Those villagers who were unhurt and who had regained their presence of mind had begun to compare the all-too-obvious differences between the two spiritual contestants. The earth deities could not have painted a clearer picture of favor and disfavor if they had put in a personal appearance which, in a sense, they had.

Jake noticed the villagers, casually and taking care not to insult Kathwalda with either hurrying or staring, drifted toward Olive, surrounding her and her painting. They were voting, he realized, with their feet.

Chapter Fourteen

IN THE EARTH Cave, the first tremor of the quake was felt as a side-to-side rocking, like that of a boat riding out the wake of a larger vessel.

"What's that?" Lindie asked.

"Good Lord," Sly said, putting his palms down on each side of his body for stability, "not again."

"This does not strike me," Ma'at said, "as a safe location to be in during an earthquake."

"No shit!" Sly yelled, the rocking intensifying until all of them felt one last powerful roll that shuddered into stillness.

"Whew," Dani breathed in relief. "It's even more bizarre laying flat."

"Glad it's over," Sly added.

But it wasn't. Before anyone could comment, the ground shuddered again and this time was followed by a sensation that Sly had no time to describe to himself but which felt like a weight crushing his shoulders while at the same time he would have sworn he was being hurtled forcibly upward through the dark with nauseating speed.

The cascade of sheer sound and vibration that accompanied the crushing-thrusting sensation was beyond description. His body experienced this trinity of vibration as a traumatic package. Screams of sheer horror, including his own, buffeted him. He howled at the unrelenting darkness, staring face up at it as though it were alive and could answer his fear.

In the dark, Lindie grabbed her head and tucked it against her chest, folding down into a fetal position, feeling nothing certain but the cold surface under her. She wailed like a banshee, psychologically blocking the impossible sounds rending the rocks around her.

Dani, in pure anxiety, flat on her back, clawed with her fingernails at the hard limestone surface as if she could dig her way into the ground for protection.

Ma'at, after an instant, stopped screaming and, using a much-practiced meditation technique, threw herself with mental savagery through the wall of hir fear. The moment s/he did, whatever she was riding shuddered to a stop and reversed direction downward.

In the dark, Ma'at felt the ground s/he was sitting on vanish from hir sensory awareness. S/he assumed s/he would start to fall through the blackness. Instead, after only a nanosecond of suspense, both emotional and physical, the ground was beneath hir again.

Had s/he moved? Had it moved? If s/he had impacted with it, s/he hadn't, among the plethora of other sounds and sensations, felt the impact. S/he grabbed for the limestone surface with hir hands as if she could scoop it into hir arms. It was solidly there.

S/he calmed hir breathing and forced himself to tune into the manifold vibrations bouncing off hir ears. S/he promptly distinguished three distinct styles of screaming. Apparently, s/he was the first to get hold of himself. Everyone else was still expressing sheer terror.

But the great thundering single roar, the sound that had been a battering sensation beyond mere sound, had broken into a thousand smaller roars coming from hundreds of directions. Ma'at deduced s/ he was hearing the echoes of the original rock-rending roar bouncing off unnumbered cave walls.

Then s/he noticed other sounds as well: a rushing that sounded like water flowing by and sharp cracks and resonant booms that sounded like rocks shearing from their bases and tumbling down slopes.

S/he was certain the ground was no longer moving, if indeed it had moved at all. Using her kinesthetic sense, s/he perceived her body to be on substantially the same angle of slope it had been on, what? a few seconds, a few minutes? before.

S/he blinked her eyes and was baffled by the murky dark that met hir vision instead of the elemental blackness s/he had willed herself to accept since the moment Zodani had pulled the stone seal across the Great Mouth.

The lights behind hir eyelids continued to play merry games of color and illusion but did so against a pewter background instead of the accustomed black. Was s/he going blind? That didn't make any sense. S/he tuned into listening again.

The screaming had ceased. In its place, s/he heard a heaving which proceeded to a ripping sound like that of a deep human cough. It came from the location Dani had been occupying. It was followed by more sounds which sounded like coughing and then Ma'at realized they were all coughing, including himself.

The coughing was punctuated by a series of high-pitched squeals as if the sounds were being squeezed through a narrow passageway. Sneezing? Ma'at wondered. Dust, s/he concluded. The air was probably choked with limestone dust.

Ma'at meant to ask, "Is everyone all right?" but although the words formed in hir mind, they didn't come out of hir mouth. That was odd, s/he thought, hir heart revving up a notch in anxiety. S/he searched hir mind and realized s/he couldn't remember how to make thoughts into sounds.

S/he knew the sounds were supposed to issue from hir mouth but s/he wasn't sure how this process occurred. How did they get from hir brain to hir mouth? What did s/he do to make it happen?

S/he frowned and ordered himself to not think about it. Still, s/ he felt a surge of fear rise into hir throat. With an effort of will, s/he forced it back down. Calm, s/he thought. Calm. I am calm.

The first person to speak out loud was Sly. "God," he blurted and then started coughing again. Lindie sneezed violently and closely, making Ma'at's ear ring with pain. Ma'at felt his arm rise to punch in frustration but some other system of control stopped his arm before it flew through the dark toward the sneeze.

"Goddess," Dani seconded, her voice thinner than that of an emphysemic on her deathbed. "Report," she rasped.

Sly got in a brief "Here," before coughing again.

Lindie said, "Dani."

Ma'at heard a strangled sound and then sobbing and concluded Lindie was weeping. Dani's voice took on a little more strength.

"Ma'at?"

Ma'at formed the words, "Here, Captain," in his mind but, again, no words emerged from his mouth. Dani, of course, heard nothing and repeated, with more urgency, "Ma'at, report."

Ma'at started to tremble, a passionate desire to speak overwhelming his sympathetic nervous system. She tried to force sound, any sound, to come out of his throat but nothing came. S/he shuddered in dismay.

"Sly!" Dani shouted-whispered. "Where's Ma'at?"

"Lindie! Where's Ma'at?"

Ma'at, hearing every word and feeling a hot flush of humiliation rise into his face, waited rigidly for their inevitable discovery of him. Lindie stopped crying and, grabbing the hemp lifeline, followed it to Ma'at. She felt Ma'at's waist with her hands and moved her hands up his chest to his heart.

"Well?" Sly urged, practically on top of her.

"S/he's alive," Lindie answered.

"Ma'at!" Sly shouted, making Ma'at's traumatized ears ring again. "Are you injured?"

"Sly," Lindie assessed, still physically touching the proud Nhavan and aware of the trembling of the wo/man's whole body. "I think s/he just can't speak."

"What?" Sly barked.

A moment later, and adding to his trauma, Ma'at felt the doctor's hands on his throat, feeling around the area of his voice box. Lindie's hands gripped Ma'at's shoulders.

With control, Ma'at jerked his hands up and grabbed Lindie's hands, removing them from his shoulders. S/he had intended to push Lindie's hands away but, for some reason s/he dared not analyze, she kept holding them.

"S/he's shaking like a leaf but I don't detect any damage to his neck." The doctor's hands continued to climb Ma'at's neck and the Nhavan was overwhelmed with a feeling of loathing. Loathing for Sly, loathing for himself.

"I think it's short-term psychological trauma," Lindie diagnosed. "That can sometimes lead to an inability to speak."

"Possible." Sly dropped his hands and Ma'at heaved a sigh of relief which both Sly and Lindie heard. "Let's hope it's not an aneurysm or a stroke." Sly started to hack again and turned away. Ma'at gripped Lindie's hands, willing her to stay.

"Ma'at," Lindie soothed, her voice kind, "relax."

Ma'at's hands jerked powerfully and the trembling intensified.

"Look," Lindie went on in a low voice, "I know you're embarrassed at not being able to speak and I know Nhavan control is paramount. But psychologically, it's your powerful self-control which is at the root of the problem. All of us have different reactions to stress. The fact that the rest of us can talk right now doesn't mean you didn't weather the massive stress we all just experienced equally well. It just means you weathered it differently."

"We screamed our heads off," Sly put in.

Lindie felt Ma'at's grip clamp down on her hands and she almost cried out. Not a telepath, but naturally intuitive, she guessed the doctor's two cents were not being welcomed by the panicking Nhavan.

"Sly," she said, her hands still in Ma'at's death grip.

"Sorry," Sly huffed and moved away. "I'll leave it to you, Dr. Davis."

Ma'at's grip eased and Lindie felt blood throb back into her fingers. She could feel the pulse in Ma'at's wrist, beating against her skin. She sat quietly and breathed, willing Ma'at to relax. Ma'at's pulse, a leaping staccato beat, slowed down a detectable fraction.

Lindie assumed Ma'at could sense her thoughts through their hand contact. An experienced healer of mental disturbances, she focused on transmitting reassuring thoughts of peace and security.

She heard Ma'at take a deep breath and release it in a shudder. S/he took another deep breath and let it go and Lindie breathed in tune with hir. The trembling settled down to a light flutter.

"What are they doing over there?" Dani whispered to Sly.

"Some kind of telepathic thing, I guess," Sly whispered back.

Lindie felt Ma'at shiver. *Focus, relax*, she thought silently at hir. The shivering stopped and all Lindie heard was Ma'at's breathing, becoming slowly more steady.

Time passed in the cold dark. Not able to receive any communications from hir except what she could guess from holding hir hands, Lindie wondered how Ma'at was doing. Receiving no perceptible response to her thought, she said mentally to hir: Ma'at, we love you.

Much to her surprise, she heard a rapid intake of breath that sounded like a choked sob and she felt Ma'at's hands shake again. But this time, the shaking was different. It was not a violent trembling or a repressed shivering.

Ma'at's grip loosened on hers and the shaking seemed almost happy. Lindie realized the wo/man was experiencing something not common to Nhavans. Ma'at was crying.

After a moment, s/he released Lindie's hands altogether and said, out loud, but in a tone lighter than that of hir usual gravity, "Thank you, Dr. Davis. I am...well."

Lindie laughed. "You won't be when you see my bill."

"Indeed," Ma'at said, hir voice conveying her gratitude. "Whatever it is, I will pay it."

"Thank Goddess," Dani whispered.

"I always imagined," Sly whispered back, "that a silent Nhavan would be better than a talking one. Now I know I'll take the talking one any day over the mute one."

"It only goes to show," Ma'at answered, overhearing, "how wrong you can be, Dr. Jenks, when you posit an unfounded theory."

"I'm taking back what I just said," Sly retorted.

"I'd say," Dani said wearily, "you're both fine."

"Captain," Ma'at got back to business, as if none of the preceding drama had occurred, "I believe the earthquake opened up an exit from this cave."

"Why do you say that, Ma'at?" Sly asked.

"Look around, Doctor. It's still dark but even human eyes should be capable of detecting a slight difference."

"I detected it," Sly huffed. "I just assumed I was hallucinating."

"Ma'at's right," Dani put in, forestalling an argument. "I sense it. There is the faintest lightening of this darkness."

"Well, Ma'at," Sly said, "I guess it's you and I who are going to have to find where it's coming from."

"Let's get started," Ma'at said.

JHIRIKU DASHED OUT of the cabin as fast as his thick strong legs could carry him the moment the FDet armed and the ground began to heave. He threw himself into the sand on his belly and pressed a button on a small computing device bound to his wrist.

The shaking intensified and the sand flowed around him as though it was a great river, floating him along with it. The ground movement and the roaring noise felt, subjectively, to last an eternity. But when it ceased, Jhiriku, retaining his presence of mind, pressed another button and read what he saw in the display. The quake had lasted one minute and fifty-seven seconds. Not a great quake maybe, he thought, but not a mere tremor either.

He sat up in satisfaction and looked around. He had slid downhill a shorter distance than he expected. The FDet was now northwest of him and on top of a newly-created ridge. The adobe walls of the cabin had crumbled largely into dirt.

The few wooden roof beams not blasted to bits by the earlier arrival of the FDet had caved in around it, giving the impression it was to play the victim in a sacrificial bonfire. Radiating out from its listing base was a jagged ground fissure that appeared to be at least a meter wide. The fissure ran up the hill in a northwesterly direction.

Jhiriku stood and scanned the sands for his captives. Like himself, they were south of the cabin and the fissure and so had not fallen into it. Like him, they too had slid down the hill on rivers of sand.

Jhiriku trekked over to them and stared down at their shocked upturned faces. "Wasn't that fun?" he asked.

"Fun?" Zane snapped.

"Nobody drowned in the sand," Jhiriku pointed out.

"It was just a little...fun," Warren said.

"But not destined," Alan put in, "to become a big new recreational sport."

"We could call it chair surfing," Warren said.

Zane rolled his eyes but was secretly pleased at the boys' banter. "I'm just grateful we're alive."

"Which we wouldn't be if we were in the cabin. Right?" Alan asked, directing his question at Jhiriku.

"Utterly wrecked," Jhiriku said.

"Damn you," Zane said.

"And the FDet?" Alan asked.

"Not at its usual luster," Jhiriku answered, "but nothing we can't fix. Especially since I've realized there is an FDet expert among us."

"I'm not an expert," Alan denied.

"You know enough. So, while the rest of you bake here in the sun, this boy and I are going to check over the equipment. When it's ready to move, I'll come back and you can all work. So get some beauty sleep."

Jhiriku righted Alan's chair and unknotted the bridle which lashed him to it. "All right," he said, unholstering his phaser and aiming it at Alan's head, "you slip your hands out and then untie your feet. Don't be a hero."

Alan did as instructed and then stood.

"Good," Jhiriku said, "now march." He gestured with the phaser and Alan started walking toward the cabin.

When they were gone, Zane said tightly, "I'd like to know what in hell you have to do with all this, Warren."

"A guest at the resort hired me to safeguard a piece of equipment for a few days, Dad. That's all."

"And you thought the cabin would do just fine," Zane sneered. "You never did have any respect for property, Warren."

"I didn't know the goddamn thing was going to be that big!"

"Do you realize you've violated just about every Settlement Rule there is?"

"So report me if it makes you happy!"

Zane stared up into the hot blue sky, his long-term frustration with his second son something he would never understand. Warren was so defensive Zane found him nearly impossible to talk to.

"You know I'd never do that," he muttered, angry as much at himself as at Warren. "Why did you take the job anyway?"

"Transport."

"Transport? Are you telling me you want off Otung?"

"I've wanted off Otung since...since my indenture, Dad. You know that!"

"Cripes," Zane cursed.

"You know you've screwed me royally! What chance do I have? You haven't left me any choice but to leave. Everything is Jake, Jake, Jake."

"Jake behaves responsibly."

"And I don't? I, who work at the resort every day? And for what? For nothing, Dad! Just because you and Jake screwed me over!"

"Warren, I've heard enough of this—"

"No! It's my turn, Dad. You and Jake are not doing this to me anymore." Instead of his usual whining tone, Warren's voice expressed absolute certainty.

"What are you saying?"

"I won't work for nothing anymore. You have two choices, Dad. Either you settle at least 200 acres of river-access bottomland on me in recompense for the last five years of my labor at Hacienda Otung, or I transport."

Zane twisted his head to look at his son. He had watched Warren explode in frustrated anger time after time but he had never heard him insist on equal treatment or make a responsible demand.

"Are you ready for 200 acres?"

"What do you think?"

Zane pursed his lips and considered. After awhile, he said, "Where do you want the acreage?"

"Right here would do me just fine."

"All right," Zane said, looking skyward again, "it's yours. I'll even throw in the Harvest Cabin or whatever's left of it. The ramada might still be okay. If you want, we could all help you rebuild it."

"How could this be so simple?" Warren asked in disbelief. "I thought you hated me."

Zane sighed and chewed at his lower lip. "I never hated you, Warren. Circumstances made things difficult. I admit I got off on the wrong foot with you way back in the beginning. I recognize now that my anger at losing your mother kept me apart from you.

"Olive has ragged me for a long time about you. She's forced me to own up to the injustice of your situation. But I didn't know how to fix it without...messing your mind up further."

Zane twisted his neck to look at his son. "I regret the mistakes I made, Warren. But believe me, I don't want you to leave."

He stared transfixed at his father's face. "But...the land," he stammered.

"You never asked for land before, Warren."

"All I had to do was ask?" Warren's voice exploded in astonishment.

"I guess so." Zane smiled and then positively grinned at his son. Warren's mouth twitched uncertainly and then he too gave into grinning. Zane chuckled and the chuckle turned into a chortle. Warren joined in. In another moment, the two men, laying on their backs, trussed helplessly to chairs in the middle of a hot sandy nowhere, were roaring with laughter.

APRIL WAS IN the process of feeding Stella a forkful of spaghetti noodles. Because of the pasta's tendency to slip, slide and unravel on the precarious trip to Stella's mouth, the women were in a near state of giggling hysteria when the first waves from Jhiriku's artificially-generated quake slammed Stella's ship.

April was thrown from her chair onto the floor, banging her chin on Stella's bedside table and spilling the remaining noodles. Stella, unable to grip the bed and ride out the shaking, tumbled out and landed on April. After yowling, April clamped her arms around Stella's

mummy-wrapped torso and held on for dear life. Stella kept her own agony to herself but knew falling had done little for either her broken collarbones or her head.

Stars swam in front of her eyes. After a minute, the stars went away and the cabin settled down around her to a shaking and rattling driven by the earthquake, rather than the expression of an unhealthy internal state.

Luckily, April had efficiently locked down the cabinets after she'd cleaned up from breakfast. So although Stella could hear objects sliding first in one direction and then the other in the cupboards, nothing came flying out to collide with her mangled head and body.

Finally, the shaking and rattling came to a stop. Stella nudged April's cheek with her chin. "It's over," she said. April gripped her more tightly.

"No," the frightened girl said. "There might be after shocks."

"Not if I can help it," Stella muttered, facing the truth of what had occurred. Somehow the FDet had set off another quake. She had disabled it before Alan and Warren transported it. Which meant someone had tampered with it later, at the site, overriding the controls she had set.

Who could do that? As far as she knew, only Alan had the knowledge, but would Alan do something like that? He might have been sent to steal the FDet from her but it hardly seemed reasonable he would set off a quake. What benefit to him could there be from doing so?

Stella frowned, her brows crinkling in worried concentration. Did she have to re-think Alan yet again? Could he, having grown up with Edward, learned to be as cruelly and coldly calculating?

Stella reviewed the last few days in her mind and simply couldn't believe it. Alan had been nothing but solicitous toward her. Stella sagged against April. Nothing made sense anymore.

"What do you mean 'not if you can help it?'" April loosened her stranglehold and Stella drew a much-needed breath into her compressed lungs. As April drew away, Stella saw that there was blood smearing the girl's chin.

"Are you hurt?"

"No," April felt her chin with her hand. "It's just banged. I was more scared than anything."

"Everything's okay now," Stella repeated.

"You didn't answer my question," April said, squirming out from under Stella and crawling around on the floor to clean up the scattered noodles.

"It's too complicated to explain, April, but I know what caused the earthquake and we need to stop it from happening again."

April snorted. "Stop an earthquake? Boy, that bang on your head took more out of you than you thought."

"I'm not crazy, April. That was an engineered earthquake, not a natural one."

"Engineered? How can you tell?"

"That's beside the point. Trust me, I know."

April grimaced, but played along. "Okay, for the sake of argument, you know."

"So, will you help me?" Stella asked.

"That's what I'm here for. What do you need?"

"I need my makeup compact."

"Makeup compact?" April repeated in stupefaction. "Doing up your face is going to stop an earthquake?"

"You're worse than the boys, April. Just get it. Olive put it back in one of the panniers."

"Okay, okay." April walked past the table and dropped the dirty bowl and fork she had scooped from under Stella's bunk into the recycling chute. She rummaged through three of the panniers before she located a silvery disk that looked like an ordinary makeup compact. She carried it to where Stella lingered on the floor.

"Is this it?"

"Yes. Flip it open."

April did so. "Now what?"

Stella gazed stiffly at the multi-colored buttons. They wobbled before her tired eyes and it seemed like it had been in another lifetime that she had helped Martin devise the FDet, and in another life still that she had tried to sell it. It wasn't that she didn't remember how to set the buttons, it was that doing so gripped her with a sense of unreality.

She tried to shake off the feeling. Did she have a concussion? Probably. But she knew her reaction wasn't simply physical. Not only her head, but her heart, had been battered on Otung.

What was she going to do about Alan? And what if he was responsible for engineering the earthquake? Did they have a future? And if they did, what kind of future would it be?

"Are you okay?" April asked.

"Sure," Stella lied. "Why?"

"Your face turned gray. Maybe the earthquake shook you up more than you think."

"Just some pain. It's nothing."

"Maybe you shouldn't do this right now."

"I have to. This is the easy part. The hard part is going to be when the thing arrives."

"Thing?"

"You'll see." Watching April's every move, Stella instructed her in the sequence of buttons to push. First, she went through the series that would disable the FDet once again. She ordered April to close the compact. Then, indicating with her chin the transporter tie-in device that had fallen off the bedside table to the floor, she instructed April in setting the coordinates for a location just outside the perimeter of *The Susan*.

The last button she had April press on the tie-in device was lettered, "EXE."

MA'AT REVISED THE team's link system so that s/he and Sly were joined together for exploration, Lindie and Dani were joined together for safety, and Lindie had hold of a tether by which she could recall hir and Sly.

"We shouldn't be going far," Ma'at said, placing the tail of the rope in Lindie's hand, "but this will make it easier to find our way back if we are not successful."

"I feel like Ariadne," Lindie teased.

"But I," Ma'at said dryly, "am not the heroic Theseus."

"Let's hope," Sly put in, "there's no Minotaur to slay in this labyrinth."

"That would be just a bit much," Dani said.

"Although you never know," Lindie suggested.

"You are not the slightest bit of help," Dani grumbled at her.

Sly laughed. "Let's get out of here, Ma'at. I hear an argument coming on between these two."

"Agreed, Doctor."

Lindie and Dani could hear the slide of steps as the two officers, standing for the first time, edged cautiously away. Lindie shifted Dani's head onto her lap, which raised the other woman's back and chest off the cold surface. Her breath came easier.

"Better?" Lindie asked.

"Yes. Thank you."

"I do mean well," Lindie soothed, her fingertips strumming Dani's temples. Dani sighed. Now that she had another moment alone with Lindie, there wasn't much she could do with it. Not that she knew if Lindie would want her to do anything. Their contact had hardly been intimate since those few moments in the afternoon at Hacienda Otung. Dani had no way of knowing how Lindie felt about those few moments.

"I know you mean well, Lindie. There's just something about you. I feel...like an idiot around you. An insecure schoolgirl."

"When you were a schoolgirl, you weren't insecure." Lindie laughed. "You were the most competitive, egotistical girl I'd ever met."

"Ever met? Lindie, I know I keep getting the message from you we've met sometime in the past but—"

"—but you don't remember when or where."

"Don't you think it's unfair to hold it over me?"

"Maybe. But it has been revealing."

Instead of annoying her, the word revealing made Dani remember the dream she'd had the first night at Topotuk. "I had a dream about you," she blurted, unable to contain herself.

"Oh, you know I love dreams, Dani. Out with it."

"It was the night you told the story about the king hauling the corpse around the graveyard. In the dream, I was walking across the same ground you described, carrying a corpse, when I came to a clearing in the woods. You were there wearing a magician's costume—"

"Oooh! Long robe, tall peaked hat and everything?"

"Yes. Even the crescent moons and stars."

"Very nice, Dani! Very archetypal. What happened then?"

"You were holding something in your hand. As I approached, you opened your hand and there were three glass spheres on your palm."

"Ah," Lindie hummed appreciatively but didn't elaborate.

"They glowed with an inner luminescence—as if they contained galaxies—and I wanted to take them. I reached out—" Dani hesitated.

"Go on."

"The corpse I was carrying...the weight pulled me backward and I fell. Then I woke up."

"Were you able to identify the corpse in the dream?"

"Yes. I know who it was."

"Who was it, Dani?"

"It was Commander Sherri Wilmstead, a fellow starship commander and a friend of mine. A very close friend of mine."

"Is Sherri dead in real life?" Lindie's voice was gentle.

"Yes."

"How did she die?"

"She committed suicide after making a mistake. A mistake that resulted in the deaths of her entire crew. It was a command error, but an understandable one."

"The word understandable is a rationalization of the conscious mind, Dani, not what your unconscious holds to be true. In the dream you're carrying around Sherri's dead weight and it prevents you from achieving something you desire. What is really bothering you about her death?"

"She failed as a commander."

"Because she killed her crew?"

"No. Because she killed herself."

"In your dream, Sherri's corpse represents your shadow. Your shadow is composed of elements you are afraid of. What are you afraid of, Dani?"

**Lindie's question was met with dead silence. After awhile, she nudged the other woman.
"Dani?"**

"What I am afraid of is the single irretrievable error that I will make someday. The error that will kill the 400 people I'm responsible for. Or today, the three people I'm responsible for. If I kill them, will I do what Sherri did? Will I kill myself?"

Chapter Fifteen

ALL ALONG THE forced march to the cabin, Alan wondered if there was some way he could overpower the captor whose name he didn't know but whom, in his head, he had named Genghis Khan. Regrettably, Alan had spent far more hours sitting in cafes reading scientific journals and being distracted by humanoids promenading past his table than he had ever spent in a gym. Khan was not only huge, he was armed, which pretty much ruled out physical attack.

Alan wanted to think of something heroic, something that would save the day, instead of being pushed and pulled by circumstances. He'd had enough of that lately. Unfortunately, his brain wasn't coughing up any plans, clever or otherwise, that were likely to trick the ruthless FDet thief.

As they approached the cabin, he saw that its mud bricks had, for all practical purposes, crumbled away. The FDet didn't look too healthy either. It tilted alarmingly in the soft soil and Alan feared it was damaged. The general dishevelment of the cabin and the precarious angle of the FDet did little to discourage his natural tendency to prefer caution to bravado. But the cold nudge of the phaser between his shoulder blades forced him to review his preferences.

"You want me to go in there?" Alan squeaked, turning to face Khan.

"You're expendable, boy. I'm not."

"Ten minutes ago you were saying I was an expert. Experts are never expendable."

"Agreed. However, experts are *more* expendable than warlords such as myself."

Alan grunted in annoyance. "So, Genghis Khan, what is it that you want me to do?"

Alan's captor laughed. "I am honored. Who does not know and admire the terrible Genghis Khan whose legend has extended to many worlds?"

"Apparently you warlords do."

"Yes, we do. My name, boy, is Jhiriku."

"Well, Jhiriku," Alan answered, crossing his arms over his chest, "mine is Alan and you still haven't answered my question. What do you expect me to do?"

Jhiriku's voice was hard. "Check for damage. Disable it. Then start dismantling it so you and your pals can load it onto my ship."

"As you wish, master," Alan mocked, dropping his hands and giving Jhiriku a stiff half-bow.

"Very funny, asshole," Jhiriku sneered. "Don't do anything stupid. I'll have my phaser trained on you at all times."

"Yeah, yeah. You bad guys always say that."

"I suggest you take me seriously."

"Look, Jhiriku, if I could blow the FDet to Techno-Hell in a giant cloud of metal dust just to keep you from getting it, I would. Sadly, it's too simple-minded to harbor a self-destruct mechanism.

"Just go and do it," Jhiriku ordered.

Alan shrugged and turned to face what little was left of the Tyson's cabin. But," he muttered to himself, crossed what had once been the threshold, "it won't be as simple-minded when I redesign it."

Almost on tiptoes, so he wouldn't jar the massive dish and cause worst to come to worst, he made his way through the wreckage of the building to the FDet's control panel. He had to crouch down to see it because it was located on the underside of the tilting machine.

"Any damage?" Jhiriku called, from less than 20 meters away, but just outside what had once been the door of the building.

"I don't think so," Alan shouted. If only, he thought, if only I could think of something! But his mind was a complete blank. Maybe he'd been through too much, experienced too much to think logically.

"Stop fooling around," Jhiriku ordered, "disable it."

Alan reached up to touch the necessary buttons and got a good look at the display's readout.

"That's funny," he said.

"What's funny?"

"It's already dis - " Before he could finish the sentence, a flash of blinding light exploded around him. He leaped instinctively backward, tripping over a roof beam and falling onto his back. His eyes shut tight. There was an ear-shattering whine and Alan's hands jerked to cover his ears.

"Shit!" Jhiriku howled. The noise ceased as abruptly as it had started. Alan dropped his hands and opened his dazzled eyes. He had been so close to the transporter effect and so unprepared for it that his vision pulsed with the reverse-color aftereffects of its shimmer. Through the shifting patterns filling his eyes, he saw that the FDet was gone.

Alan raised his arms and triumphantly shook them, knowing that Stella had disappeared the Fdet. She was the only one who had access to the remote controls.

"What in the hell did you do, boy?" Jhiriku bellowed, advancing on him.

"I didn't do anything, you jerk." Alan leaped to his feet. "Sorry, old man," he crowed at the look of dismay on Jhiriku's face. "Foiled again."

Jhiriku grabbed Alan by his shirtfront and, using one massive fist, lifted Alan into the air, bringing the young man's face level with his.

"Where is it?" The warlord's eyes were wild and his voice was edged with a threat that Alan had no choice but to take seriously.

"I don't know," Alan lied.

"Yes, you do." Jhiriku lifted Alan even higher. "With just one thrust of my arm, I can throw you across that mud wall. It will break your back."

"I don't think that's necessary," Alan retorted. The way Jhiriku was holding him, his arms were being rubbed raw from his shirt cutting into his skin.

With suddenness, Jhiriku let Alan go and he fell to the ground, stumbling with the unexpectedness of it.

"Stella," Jhiriku pronounced. "Stella has it. Stella will die. Come."

Alan swallowed hard, his short-lived merriment at Stella's success choked into silence by the look of savage determination on Jhiriku's face.

DANI WAS SHAKEN awake by a rain of rocks pelting down around her. She rolled away from the barrage, forgetting she was tied to Lindie, and drew her with her. Their combined weights pulled them down the slope Dani had been pulled back from earlier.

Lindie's body tumbled over hers, her arms flailing out of control and striking Dani in the chest and back. Dani choked on dust and, in the grey murk could make out nothing about their trajectory. Unable to slow their motion, they bounced and slid downward until Dani smashed into a massive boulder.

"Yow!" Dani ached in every inch of her body. Luckily, the brunt of the collision had been taken by her shoulder and back. She lay breathlessly on her side, Lindie pressed tightly against her chest.

"Ooooh," Lindie groaned, her lips near Dani's ear. Dani coughed, her lungs choked with the dust the rock fall had stirred up.

"Lindie?" Dani coughed. A startling spear of light pierced the gloom, falling across their interlaced bodies.

"What's that?" Lindie shrieked, as if, having been denied light so long she no longer recognized it.

"My God!" Dani croaked. "Light!"

"Captain? Dr. Davis? Are you all right?" It was Ma'at's voice coming from somewhere high above their heads. Dani strained her eyes upwards but she couldn't see the Nhavan.

"Yes," Dani wheezed.

"Sorry!" The apology was Sly's. "We dislodged a rock that started a rock slide."

"We're okay," Dani reiterated, her voice nearly failing her in her combined pain and bliss. "Light! You found light!"

She wanted to bathe in it. She wanted to dance in it. She wanted to soak it deep into her skin, let it penetrate to the marrow of her bones. She thought she'd never seen anything more beautiful than the dust-mired shaft of murky haze that tinged Lindie's filthy flaxen hair.

"Hrmp," Sly snorted, spotting Dani and Lindie clutched together like desperate lovers. "We leave you two alone for a moment and look what happens!"

"We fell," Dani hissed, but she might as well have not spoken.

"You're just jealous," Lindie teased Sly, shifting away from Dani, to Dani's regret. Not that she was in any condition to take advantage of Lindie's nearness.

"Oh, yeah. Right," Sly retorted.

Dani rolled over into a sitting position, her breath coming and going in a wheezy whistle. She forced herself to get to her knees and then to stand, using the boulder for support.

She laid her cheek on the human-sized boulder and rested. After she felt better, she raised her head and looked over the shelf of rock through the murk. On its other side was the edge of a precipice, a precipice where before there had been only a gentle downward slope.

Dani felt her stomach turn over and she hugged the boulder hard. At the bottom of that precipice lurked a pool of carbon dioxide gas. A pool which, if she and Lindie had fallen into it, would have taken no prisoners. Dani shifted so that her back was against the rock surface.

"Captain," Ma'at called, "Dr. Jenks and I have some digging to do before there will be an exit large enough for us to crawl through."

"Carry on," Dani waved weakly. She looked upwards and picked out Ma'at and Sly in the half-gloom, their linked rope dipping across the tumble of boulders between them. They were crouched high up on the rock slide, looking from Dani's perspective, like gargoyles perched on a Gothic cathedral.

Dani assessed the unstable gray mass of jutting stones and the distance upward. Her breathing minimal to the point of suffocation and the tissue of her lungs on fire, she slid weakly down the rough face of the boulder until she was seated on the ground again. One leg folded under her, the other bent at the knee. She rested one elbow on her upturned knee, her other hand falling limply to rest on her thigh.

Now that she'd seen light in all its glory, she thought, she was going to die. Why was the universe always so damn ironic?

Lindie came over and sat beside her.

"It's good to be able to see you," she said, "even if you do look a fright. Your face is shredded." She touched Dani's cheek and the woman winced.

"The truth is I can't go on, Lindie," she gasped. "You'll have to leave me here."

Lindie grinned. "We're not going to leave you here, Dani, even if we have to make a rope sled and shred the rest of your body dragging you up those rocks."

Dani chortled humorlessly. "No," she whispered, "I can feel it, Lindie. I'm going to die here."

"Dani, do you remember how in your dream you were walking around a cemetery carrying a corpse?"

"How could I forget?"

"What does that bring to your mind? To anyone's mind for that matter?"

"Death?" she rasped.

"Are you afraid of death?"

"Not usually."

"But today you are?"

"Damn it, Lindie!" It was an angry curse pronounced with all the force of a sibilant whisper.

"Dani, this cave, put in mythological terms, is the belly of the beast. Our experience in it constitutes a dark night of the soul."

"Meaning?" Dani snapped.

"It means you're confronting some of your greatest fears at the moment."

Dani choked and Lindie looked her squarely in the eye. "I'm guessing death in the abstract isn't what's on your mind, Dani. It's *this* death. It doesn't mirror your unconscious projection of how a warrior should die, does it?"

Dani shuddered. Lindie was right. That was exactly her thought. What difference did it make how she died? She knew she was angry at Sherri for throwing her life away, yet at least it was understandable. But what was her death going to mean? The big zip. She saw the summation of the Coalition report: *Regrettably, Minority Fleet Captain Danielle Forrest interfered in local politics on a Coalition off-world on her own time, not Coalition time, and met her death by misadventure.*

Not exactly the obituary she was hoping for.

"Dani," Lindie said, "go back to the dream, to the moment you reach out for those glass spheres in my hand."

"Lindie—" "What are those spheres? Don't they remind you of something?"

"No, dammit!"

"Keep looking."

Dani strained her mind, forcing herself back to the dream, to the copse of trees and the circle drawn on the ground, to Lindie's outstretched hand and the glowing spheres.

As she watched, Lindie shrank down to child-size. The magician's robes vanished to be replaced by denim cutoffs and a white T-shirt. Lindie's chubby face, ringed with bouncy blond curls, smirked in challenge and in her grimy fist were clenched three of Dani's childhood marbles—her prize Shooter and two Cloudies.

"Marbles!" She wheezed. "The spheres are marbles! You were there that summer in Iowa. You kept beating me at ringtaw."

Lindie laughed. "Not by the end of that summer. You became unbeatable. My appearance on Otung intrigued your unconscious because you had repressed those memories. I suspect that's why I was in your dream."

"But why were you wearing a magician's costume?"

"Meeting me within the magic circle dressed as Merlin could represent a meeting with the Goddess, which is also part of the hero's journey. Or you could be identifying me with the evil necromancer in the king and the corpse story."

"I don't think so," Dani whispered. "You freely offered me the spheres. I didn't have to fight you to get them. It didn't feel evil."

"Nothing is purely good or bad."

"The *Boedicea*," Dani gasped.

"The *Boedicea*?"

"I don't mean to be rude, Lindie, but you're not the Goddess."

Lindie nodded sagely. "Perhaps then, I am a stand-in for the Goddess."

"Yes, a representation. The *Boedicea* will always be my Goddess. The crescent moons and the stars on your robe are other worlds, other solar systems. The marbles are the potent crystals which make warp drive possible." Dani's head drooped. "But I'll never see either again."

"Dani." Lindie extended her empty hand, palm up, to the dejected woman. "Drop Sherri's corpse and take the spheres."

"WHAT THING?" APRIL asked Stella again.

"It should be materializing outside right about...now," Stella answered.

April walked to the closed hatch door and opened it. Just coming out of a purple shimmer was what looked to her like a giant satellite dish. Her mouth fell open.

Painfully, Stella raised her body from the floor. Once on her feet, she was struck with a wave of vertigo.

"Hey," April said, rushing over to her. "You shouldn't try to stand by yourself."

"April, there's something I have to do. Will you help me?"

"Stella, you're not well."

"If you don't help me, I'll just have to do it myself."

"That doesn't leave me much choice," April grumbled.

"No. What's it gonna be?"

"Okay. I'll help you. What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to get my tools."

"Tools?"

Stella nodded. "We have to disassemble the thing that just appeared and hide it."

"We can't move that, Stella! It's humongous!"

"We don't have to move it. The transporter will move it. We just have to unbolt the sections."

"You mean I have to unbolt the sections."

"Sorry. Yes. I'll direct you."

April tossed her head and sighed. "All right. I'll go get the tools."

LINDIE WAS CERTAIN, perceiving the sudden full weight of Dani's head on her shoulder, that she was asleep again. Lindie didn't move, praying a short rest would work some kind of restorative magic on the other woman's battered body. Her mind wandered back to the pleasure she had experienced in Dani's arms. It was different from intimacy with a man...deeper, more satisfying, definitely worth exploring.

Her fingers stroked Dani's hand, tracing between the fine, well-defined bones. It wasn't as if she was in love with Dani Forrest. Falling in love with someone like Dani, who spent all of her time tramping around the quadrant in a starship, wasn't such a good idea anyway. But she had most definitely enjoyed the experience.

Lindie still wanted to discover what it was like to give that pleasure back. It didn't seem likely that it would happen now. Dani was too severely injured for participating in much of anything in the way of sexual athletics any time soon.

She could hear Ma'at and Sly moving back and forth on top of the rock slide and occasionally see shadows cast by their bodies. After what seemed an eternity, Ma'at came a short distance down the slide.

Unaware Dani was asleep, Ma'at called out, "Captain, we're ready. Are you able to climb?"

Dani shook herself awake with a snort.

"I'll have to be," she mumbled.

"It may be safest," Ma'at advised, "if you and Dr. Davis climb side by side. Otherwise, the person in the lead could dislodge rocks onto the person below. Dislodging a key rock could bring down the whole slide."

"Ma'at is always ready to offer all available data," Sly said sarcastically, coming into view. "Dani, can you make it?"

"Yes," Dani wheezed, forcing herself to her feet. "I'll crawl if I have to but I'll get out of here."

"Can you do it?" Lindie asked quietly, standing up.

"Let's just say I'm declining your offer to shred the rest of my body."

"Let's go then."

Centimeter by centimeter, they crawled upward, checking every stone on which they intended to place a hand or foot for stability. Ma'at and Sly waited above them, watching their every move. Unstable stones plunged downward at their touch but neither of the climbers slipped. There was a concentrated silence in the cavern filled only by Dani's horrible hoarse panting.

When the climbers reached the waiting officers, Sly patted Lindie, the person closest to him, on the shoulder. "Great going!" he said.

Dani wheezed, bent double.

"Dr. Davis?" Ma'at offered Lindie a hand. "Would you care to go first"?

"All right. By the way," she whispered to Ma'at, "it will take both of you to get Dani up here and through that hole."

Ma'at nodded hir understanding. She untied Lindie's rope from Dani's harness and Lindie stepped up to the opening. Placing her hands through it, and grasping the tough tussocks of grass growing on the ground outside, she propelled herself through it into the soft sunlight of the autumn afternoon.

"It's marvelous," she called, turning back to look down into the gloom of the cave, hardly believing now that she was outside, that she had ever been trapped in such unremitting darkness.

"One down," Sly said. Together the two officers worked their way down the few steps to where Dani now lay on her side among the dusty boulders, breathing shallowly.

"Dani," Sly asked, "can you move at all?"

"Have to," she whispered, her eyes shut. The idea seemed somehow impossible.

"Dani," Ma'at said quietly, "we're almost out. If you can't move under your own power, we'll make a rope sling and carry you."

"No," Dani gurgled. She shifted onto her hands and knees. "I'll crawl."

Ma'at and Sly crawled beside her matching her aching slow pace. When they reached the hole, Dani tried to smile but the result looked more like a rictus of death. Despite its

macabre effect, Lindie gave Dani a wide grin of encouragement and reached her hands down to her through the narrow hole. Dani weakly grasped them.

With Lindie pulling and Ma'at and Sly pushing, they forced Dani's nearly-limp body through the close-fitting opening. Once out, she lay on the sun-warmed ground, unmoving, gasping for breath.

Sly wiggled out next, accepting but not requiring Lindie's assistance as, like Ma'at, he was built narrowly in the chest and hips. Ma'at, fastidiously waving away the help of the two doctors, slipped through the hole with the ease of a greased eel.

After the perpetual darkness of the cave, the sunlight seemed to all of them to be a mysterious living force. For a short while, they simply absorbed it, no one moving or speaking. Finally, Dani rolled onto to her side. "Well?" she demanded between whistles of breath.

"I have been considering, Captain," Ma'at said, without missing a beat, "that what we need is transportation."

"Transportation?"

"A zeebiti would do nicely."

"Where are we going to get a zeebiti?" Lindie asked.

"Makapi seemed to have an adequate supply."

"Ho, ho," Sly laughed, "so now we're going to become zeebiti thieves? That's probably as bad here as being a horse thief was in the Old West. Rustlers got hanged for that sort of thing."

"If the Contest Zodani mentioned is underway," Ma'at went on, unperturbed by Sly's argument, "I should think the villagers would be distracted."

"Maybe, maybe not," Sly quarreled.

"If anything distracted the villagers," Lindie corrected, "I should think it would be the earthquake."

"Even better," Ma'at said. "If there is a state of panic in the village, we are far less likely to be observed. I surmise, from noting the relationship of the sun to where we are, that we exited the cave several hundred meters to the north of the Great Mouth."

"Ma'at! We don't even know how much time passed or what time of day it is. Is this the same day? The next day? Three days later?"

"Doctor, no matter how long we were in the cave, it's apparent it's not long past noon now. That's approximately identical to the time of day we were dropped into the cave."

"Twenty-four hours?" Lindie considered. "That feels about right. I think it's the next day."

As it turned out, Ma'at's prediction of their location was not only correct but, to their advantage, the earthquake had busted the fencing of Makapi's zeebiti corral. Upon cautiously breasting a small hill, s/he and Sly saw a narrow valley filled with zeebiti lazily cropping grass.

Two of the group wore bridles and it was on these that the officers focused. Sly, understanding the animals intuitively in a way Ma'at did not, took the lead in approaching one of them.

The zeebiti, a small-bodied white filly, tweaked her ears at his approach. When Sly stroked her cheek and then casually put his hand under her chin and grasped the bridle, she wasn't even startled. Sly walked her over to where Ma'at stood watching him.

"Not bad, eh?"

Ma'at tilted his head. "A hidden talent, Doctor. What is 'bad' is that we don't have a saddle."

"She'll have to ride her bareback."

They led the zeebiti to where they had left Lindie and Dani. They were both silently weighing their next problem, that of getting Dani aboard the animal.

"Whatever we do," Sly said out loud, "we only get to do it once. This zeebiti isn't going to tolerate our monkeying around for very long. Or maybe I should say 'horsing around'. They seem a bit like horses."

"Good point, Doctor. I suggest the old-fashioned Wild West mode of carriage. We should be able to accomplish that with a minimum of 'horsing around'."

"Across the withers such as with baggage and corpses?"

"That's what I mean."

While Lindie held the zeebiti by the bridle and soothed her with nonsense words and pats on the nose, Ma'at and Sly lifted Dani and laid her across the zeebiti's withers. Sly walked around to where Dani's head was hanging down.

"Comfortable, Dani?"

"Actually, I can breathe better like this." The fact surprised her because the zeebiti's coarse hair tickled her nostrils and pressed against her mouth.

Sly nodded. "Gravity will help force more oxygenated blood through your lungs. On the downside, too much blood is going to get into your head and you'll be dizzy if you try to sit up."

"Not going to sit up," Dani mumbled hazily, already feeling the effects. "What's going to keep me on?"

"Lindie's going to lead and Ma'at and I are going walk alongside and hold onto you."

"Ready?" Ma'at said from the other side of the patient zeebiti. Hir hands were lightly securing Dani's knees.

"Let's go," Sly said, grasping Dani's elbows. Lindie faced forward and pulled on the zeebiti's bridle. The filly started off with a jerk and Dani slid toward Ma'at who leaned in and stopped the motion.

"Sorry," Lindie called. The zeebiti settled into an unhurried swaying walk. In a few minutes, they topped a hill and found themselves looking directly down into the village.

Lindie stopped in shock and the zeebiti stopped with her. She could hardly believe her eyes. The central ground of the village had been split in two with its southern half now occupying a lower ground level. The buildings along the fault line had broken apart, their northern halves looming over the cliff that had rendered the village.

"Wow," she summarized. Most of the villagers were gathered in a cluster below the new cliff. A few milled aimlessly about in the upper village.

"Fascinating," Ma'at said.

"I think I see Jake," Sly pointed. "It looks like he's at the center of that cluster of people."

"Yes," Lindie said. "I see Olive and Zodani, too."

"Have they spotted us yet?" Dani's voice was slurred.

"No," Ma'at said.

"I have to sit up," Dani said.

"No, you don't," Sly shot back.

"Yes. Must be strong. Need triumphal entry."

"Hmm," Ma'at murmured. "She's right, Doctor. We are supposed to have gone down to the Land of the Dead. We do not know what the reaction will be to our return—"

"—but," Lindie said, "the more alive we look, the better. *konuk* especially needs to create the impression that death cannot conquer her. Even if it can scrape her up pretty badly."

"Thanks a lot," Dani muttered sarcastically.

"Why?" Sly asked.

"Because if they believe her immortal, or at least more powerful than their own magic, they will not attempt any other methods to kill her...and us."

"Sounds like a valid objective," Sly said. "I sure don't want to go through that cave experience again. Can you look immortal, Dani?"

"If I can sit up," Dani said groggily, "I can put on a show."

"I'll move her legs toward the rear of the animal," Ma'at described, "and then I'll put her right leg over. You move her hands toward its head."

"Right." In concert, they shifted Dani until she was laying down the zeebiti's back, one leg on each side, her head resting against the neck of the animal.

"Dizzy," she said.

"It will go away in a few minutes," Sly assured. "We'll wait until your head clears."

"I wonder," Ma'at said as they waited, "what conclusion the village has drawn regarding a second earthquake, particularly as sending us to the Land of the Dead was intended to prevent the very disaster we see spread below us."

"I can't be sure how this culture will handle this disaster," Lindie answered, "but it is a mythological and sociological given that a culture will always find a way to interpret such phenomena in a manner that is most likely to allay the group's feelings of guilt and fear."

"Are you sure?" Sly asked.

"Cultures that don't do so tend to self-destruct, just as people that don't do so, tend to self-destruct. Although many people claim to live in a state of constant anxiety, heavy burdens of unrelieved guilt and fear can only be tolerated for short periods. The psyche always seeks a livable balance."

"Profound," said Ma'at.

"I'm ready," said Dani. She sat up straight on the zeebiti, her fingers tangled in the animal's profuse mane, her knees locked against its flanks. They moved forward slowly, Ma'at and Sly edging in closely on each side of Dani to help her stay astride the animal's back. The filly stepped gingerly down the slope that led to the village.

As the bedraggled entourage approached, a few flabbergasted villagers in the upper village stared at them open-mouthed. One ran toward the cliff, shouting. A few heads in the outer ring of the cluster around Zodani and Olive turned in their direction. Neighbor nudged neighbor and, in an inwardly-flowing wave pattern, members of the group turned to stare.

Dani and her entourage drew to a stop at the rim of the new cliff.

"Greetings!" Lindie shouted, raising her arm high in the air. The wave of amazement had reached the center of the group. Zodani, Jake, and Olive seemed to see them at the same time. Zodani visibly recoiled, Olive's eyes went wide, and Jake waved wildly. There were cries of astonishment from all around.

"Silence!" Lindie shouted again. "*konuk* will speak!"

Dani blanched.

"Tell them, 'Look what you have wrought. Did you think you could send me to the Land of the Dead against my will? Let this earthquake remind you not to sin against the gods.'"

Ma'at stepped forward. "I am the spokesperson of *konuk*," s/he said theatrically, "hear my words." S/he then repeated what Dani had said and stepped back again. There was a murmur among the people, some heads turning to look at their neighbors but most turning to look at Zodani and Olive to see how they would respond. Olive raised an arm and called for silence. A hush fell. Olive stepped forward.

"Great *konuk*," she proclaimed, infusing the moment with the required drama, "please do no more harm. The people have suffered and are repentant." Even across the distance, Dani thought she saw a glitter of humor in Olive's eye. Dani smiled inwardly but was careful to keep a straight face.

She leaned down and whispered to Ma'at again. "Tell them, '*konuk* accepts their repentance and will depart in peace.'" Ma'at stepped forward and repeated the message. Relief was evident on the faces of the gathered individuals. Some started smiling and waving.

Dani, the job over, sagged on the zeebiti's back. "I feel like pond scum."

"You did what you had to," Sly reassured.

"No harm was done," Lindie said, turning the zeebiti and leading it along the cliff. "Your words fit seamlessly into their cultural reality."

"I'm glad of that," Dani said, "but I'd rather not think of how many violations of the Non-Interference Code have been perpetrated by us since our arrival on Otung."

"But we're on vacation," Sly argued, moving alongside the zeebiti, his hand protectively on Dani's knee. "I thought we couldn't violate the Non-Interference Code on vacation."

"We're still *Explora Command* officers," Ma'at countered.

"We're not in uniform, we have no phasers or sensor array equipment, which I damn well wish I did have."

"That doesn't remove our identity as—"

"Sounds like a gray area in the rules," Lindie put in.

"Everything's a gray area when it comes to regs," Sly retorted.

"People," Dani said over their heads, "we have to maintain this facade of strength until we are out of sight of the villagers. Let's not make it any more difficult."

The group fell silent. They had walked eastward for fifty paces before Lindie saw an area where the fault line, no longer a cliff, narrowed to a pencil-thin line on the ground that she felt the zeebiti would cross without balking. Firmly, she changed direction, leading the filly south. It stepped over the line.

"Where are we going?" Sly asked.

"Back to the ranch, I hope," Dani said. "Back to the Ponderosa."

"Ponderosa?" Ma'at asked in confusion. "Is that not a conifer-bearing species of the genus *pinus*?"

Sly and Lindie laughed, enjoying Ma'at's befuddlement.

"I do not understand the reference, particularly as this desert region seems to not contain any members of the genus *pinus*, let alone *Pinus Ponderosa*."

"Nor," Sly said, still chuckling, "are we going to enlighten you, Ma'at. You'll have to track down that old—and I do mean old—reference yourself."

Chapter Sixteen

ALAN MARCHED BACK across the route he had come, Jhiriku's phaser aimed, once again, at his back. As he went, his feet trampled his earlier footprints into oblivion. It was a fitting metaphor, he thought, for his life, which right now seemed to be a purposeless running back and forth, a crossing out of his previous gains. He had just met his mother and now Jhiriku was going to force him to lead him to her so he could kill her. What kind of cosmic explanation was there for that?

He trudged on and stopped when he reached Warren and Zane, still trussed to chairs on their backs in the sand. In the vast empty space, their knees jutting helplessly into the pale sky, they appeared to Alan—already in an existential mood—like a retro art exhibit gone sour.

"Hello again."

"Hey," Warren twisted his neck to look backward at them, "how'd it go?"

Alan suddenly found himself laughing hysterically. Zane raised a questioning eyebrow at Warren. Warren shrugged. "Beats me. He may be a friend but that doesn't mean I know him very well."

"Shut up!" Jhiriku ordered Alan. Alan doubled over, still guffawing, and gripped his stomach. Tears rimmed his eyes.

"I'll shoot you if you don't stop." Jhiriku was careful to keep his distance.

"Oh, shoot me," Alan said, dropping to his knees and trying to get himself under control. He stopped laughing and wiped at his eyes. "Well, I guess I needed that."

"You've been through a lot," Zane said.

"So has Warren," Alan pointed out.

"Enough," Jhiriku commanded, "of the pats on the back." Jhiriku grinned. He was proud of his masterful use of Coalition slang.

"What happened?" Zane asked. "Is the FDet so damaged this jackass has lost interest in it?"

Alan giggled and looked as though he might break into uncontrolled laughter again. He snapped his fingers together like a magician. "It vanished into thin air right before our eyes. Stella must have transported it away."

"Clever trick." Zane pursed his lips in admiration.

"We will go to her ship and take it back," Jhiriku announced. "Untie your friends, Mr. Expert. Just remember if anyone tries to attack me, I will be able to kill at least one of you with this phaser. Surely that wouldn't be worth it?"

Alan lifted Zane's chair upright and started on the knotted bridle. "If I was sure you'd get me," he said bitterly, "it'd be worth it."

"What can be the reason for this hero talk?" Jhiriku asked.

"You'll never know," Alan answered. He didn't know what he would do when the moment came but he was not going to let Jhiriku kill his mother. He released Zane's wrist knots. The older man's arms swung forward and Zane started rubbing circulation back into them.

"There are always ways to find out what little secret you're harboring," Jhiriku challenged.

"Nope, sorry." To Zane, Alan said, "Can you undo your feet?"

"Of course." Zane reached down to unknot the trailing loops of the reins binding his ankles.

Grunting, Alan lifted Warren's chair and body and started untying Warren's wrists.

"What's he gonna do?" Warren whispered.

Alan, his back also to Jhiriku, whispered, "He's planning to kill Stella. We'll have to think of some way to get that phaser away from him when we get there."

"Maybe we could—"

"Stop whispering," Jhiriku barked, coming up on the two of them. Alan released Warren's wrists and bent down to untie his ankles from the legs of the chair. Zane had finished untying himself and was standing up, stretching his arms over his head.

"You're done," Alan said and stepped back. Warren stood.

"Sure feels different." Warren, too, stretched his arms over his head.

"I want you to walk abreast of each other two-arm-widths apart," Jhiriku commanded. "If you try to run, I can easily shoot all three of you. This phaser is of a non-Coalition design. It has an advanced wide-array setting."

"That sounds useful," Alan said sarcastically.

"Turn and march," Jhiriku ordered. The three captives spread apart the required width and began to walk.

THE TREK FROM Makapi to Tyson Ranch had slowed to a snail's pace. The slowdown was influenced not only by Dani who, clinging desperately to the filly's mane rasped painfully at every bump, but by the extreme exhaustion of the other members of the party.

They trudged mindlessly, without wasting breath on talking, beneath what was now a hot afternoon sun. Hypothermia no longer worrying him, Sly began to fret about dehydration, just as deadly an enemy.

Unfortunately, there would be no water or rest until they reached the ranch. Sly wondered if they would make it. He berated himself for not suggesting that Zodani make amends to *konuk* by putting them up for a day in order to allow them all, especially Dani, time to recover sufficiently to travel.

Despite Lindie's persuasive argument, he didn't think it had been a wise choice for *konuk* to pretend to invincibility in front of the village. Now they were all suffering for taking that approach.

They were coming up on a stand of scrubby trees growing on the bank of a dry wash. It offered little shade and was not much to behold.

"Stop," Ma'at commanded, when they reached it.

"Ma'at," Sly complained, "why bother? The more time we spend out here, the less likely we are to survive. I don't care how close that damn ranch is, we're all going to succumb to dehydration real soon."

"We are stopping, Doctor," Ma'at replied evenly, "because help has arrived."

"What?"

"Look behind us."

Sly turned. To his relief, he saw Olive and Jake riding toward them. Ponied to each of their zeebiti were two additional saddled animals.

"Thank God," he breathed. Dani, too weak to lift her head, didn't seem to notice. She went on clinging to the filly's mane, her noisy breathing the only indication she was still alive.

"Sorry, we took so long," Jake said, pulling up. "*konuk's* announcement added to the general chaos. But when things got under control, Zodani was duty-bound to shower us with his amends in the form of supplies. Then we had to round up zeebiti."

"Better late than never," Lindie said.

Jake leaned forward on his zeebiti. "What's wrong with the captain?"

"Carbon dioxide poisoning," said Sly.

"It is, I believe, what killed the villagers of Topotuk," Ma'at added.

"The breath of the goddesses." Olive nodded thoughtfully and dismounted. "Others have died from it on Otung in the past but no one knew the reason for it." Olive's zeebiti lowered its neck to crop at the grass at its feet. She walked over to take a look at Dani.

"Sorry to be rude," Lindie apologized, "but we haven't had anything to drink or eat in... oh, we don't know how long."

"Of course," Jake said. He threw his leg across his saddle and performed his familiar jump-and-roll dismount. He levered himself up from the ground and untied a rawhide water flask from his saddle. He unlatched Lindie's rigid hand from the bridle and handed her the flask.

Lindie offered it to Sly. "Dani first?"

"No. Go ahead. We have to get her off the zeebiti. As for the water, start with small sips. If you hit your stomach with a lot of it after all this time, you might get stomach cramps."

Olive took over from Jake the task of holding the filly's bridle and, with Ma'at and Jake on the side of the zeebiti where Dani's head drooped, Sly disentangled the captain's stiff hands from the animal's mane.

Dani fell forward and into the waiting arms of Ma'at and Jake. Together, they carried her to the patch of meager shade beneath the trees and laid her on the ground. Sly took the flask from Lindie and followed them.

Olive walked the filly back up the hill in the direction of Makapi and let go of its bridle. She slapped it on the flank. "Go home," she shouted, waving her arms in sweeping circles. The zeebiti took off at a run.

"I take it," Lindie said as Olive joined them and sat, "that *konuk's* statement was effective."

"Exceedingly," Olive said. "She took exactly the right approach."

"Lindie deserves the credit," Sly said, searching among the pile of foodstuffs for something appropriate to feed Dani. Lindie shrugged modestly.

"What was the village's reaction to the earthquake?"

"I think an interpretation is still being hammered out. It will be a while before Kathwalda regains her status in the community. Of course, the earthquake was sheer good luck."

"But you knew it was going to happen," Jake said. "Everyone saw you raise your arm and point to the south. How did you know?"

"I was so deep in meditation and so close to the fault rupture that I simply felt the first tremor before the rest of you. The direction was easy enough to ascertain. I just took advantage of the situation."

Sly snorted and picked out an oblong fruit with a pink rind. "I thought you seers were supposed to be more spiritual than that."

"Like any profession, being a seer is largely a practical matter," Olive answered. "You, Dr. Jenks, are a seer in your own way."

"I am?"

"Of course. You see a complexity of symptoms and behaviors and from that you draw forth a diagnosis. That is more than science because you are using other powers that you possess, including those of intuition and experience."

Sly peeled away the fruit's rind, tossing it into the sand. "Well, this is one diagnosis I didn't make. Ma'at put two and two together."

"The breath of the goddesses," Olive repeated, looking at the tall Nhavan who had his legs tucked neatly under his, calmly crunching on a nutmeat.

"Indeed," s/he said. "Whether a culture believes their gods dwell underground or in the sky, carbon dioxide could qualify as their breath."

"Very poetic of you, Ma'at," Sly said, slipping a segment of the juicy pink fruit into Dani's mouth.

"Thank you, Doctor. I should point out there is nothing illogical about poetry."

"Ma'at always has to have the last word," Sly said to no one in particular.

"Here on Otung," Ma'at went on, ignoring Sly, "carbon dioxide from ancient volcanic processes is still venting to the surface. I am surmising the carbon dioxide that killed the

residents of Topotuk was trapped beneath the waters of the lake in the caldera. It was released by an underwater landslide."

"But Captain Forrest?" Olive asked.

"She encountered a pool of it as we went deeper into the cave."

"May I ask," Jake interrupted, "how it is that you escaped the Earth Cave?"

"For us too," Ma'at answered solemnly, "the earthquake was 'sheer good luck.' The segment we were located in uplifted slightly above the surrounding ground."

"And, thank heavens, enough to dig our way out," Lindie added.

"The luck was that you weren't killed by falling rock or buried alive. As far as anyone knows, the cave runs for hundreds of kilometers. Searchers might never have located you."

"We were very nearly killed by falling rock," Lindie said. "At least Dani and I were."

"It is curious," Ma'at said, "considering the extent of earthquake activity we have experienced in our brief visit that the Earth Cave has not been altered by earthquakes in the past."

"There is something curious about these earthquakes altogether," Olive said.

"How so?"

"First, it's not earthquake season."

"Earthquake season?" Lindie asked.

"No, it's not. Earthquake swarms on Otung are concentrated around the lengthening days of spring. There is no tribal memory of an earthquake of this force taking place outside that season."

"There have been theories put forth that earthquakes on some planets are clustered around significant time frames in that planet's orbit around its star," Ma'at said.

"What else strikes you as curious, Olive?" Jake asked.

"The fact that the animals haven't acted odd. They normally get keyed up before an earthquake."

"Do you have enough data to propose a theory?" Ma'at asked.

"Unfortunately, no," Olive said.

"Wait," Jake said. "Warren. Warren has something to do with this."

"Warren? Jake, give the boy a rest."

"Olive, think about it. Did Stella say anything to you about what they were doing? You were there longer than I was."

"Yes, I was and no they didn't. But I don't see how Warren could have anything to do with an earthquake. And Stella is injured."

"Well, maybe he doesn't. But Stella...she's a sly piece of work. I don't think sustaining a head wound and broken collarbones would stop her from doing anything."

"Just because she put you in your place a few times, Jake, doesn't mean she's sly."

Lindie raised an eyebrow at Jake. "What's all this?"

"I'll tell you later. My suspicions may be unfounded but I think they're worth checking out."

"Indeed," Ma'at said, intrigued. "Is this Stella a resident of the planet?"

"No. She's a guest of the resort but she has her own landing craft. It's parked in the southeastern quadrant of our ranch. Warren seems to have had something to do with that, at least."

"Isn't that in violation of the Settlement Rules?" Ma'at asked.

"Absolutely."

"That would seem sufficient basis for suspicion," Ma'at said, "but not condemnation."

"Will you go with me to investigate?"

"Indeed. The matter warrants investigation."

"Lindie?"

"Oh heck," she hummed, "why not? I'm already filthy. What's one more adventure?"

Jake grinned. "You've got spunk, that's for sure. Olive?"

"I'm all spunked out. I've had enough for one day. I'll help Dr. Jenks in getting Dani back to the ranch. There we can formulate an herbal remedy to start healing her lungs."

"It's agreed that we split up then? Dr. Jenks?" Jake asked.

"About time somebody asked my opinion," Sly grouched.

"Sorry."

"It's all right, son. The entire vacation has run this way." Sly shot Ma'at an aggrieved look. "Why should it be any different now?"

Ma'at crossed her arms but didn't rise to the bait.

Sly went back to feeding his patient. A tinge of color had returned to Dani's face and her breathing was not quite so labored.

"I think she may be able to get underway again," Sly assessed, standing up. "How far is it to the ranch?"

"About five kilometers."

"Dani, can you ride that far? We've got a saddle for you this time."

Dani whispered and Sly leaned down to hear her. Sly laughed. "You never quit," he accused.

"What did she say?" Lindie asked.

"She said if we tied her hands to the saddle horn and her feet to the stirrups she could ride for days."

"It's not a bad idea," Jake said, "because if we don't and she falls off, you and Olive will never be able to lift her back on."

The panniers were packed and loaded onto the three zeebiti going to Tyson Ranch. Dani was tied upright to the saddle of one of the laden animals. Her head drooped with weariness but she didn't keel over in the saddle.

"Good luck," Olive wished the others as they mounted. "Jake, bring me back a report on Stella's health."

"If you insist," he said, spurring his zeebiti. Ma'at and Lindie followed his lead.

"What's wrong with this Stella?" Sly asked Olive as they and Dani set out at a slower pace.

"A spooked zeebiti reared up and came down on her."

Sly grimaced sympathetically.

"She fractured both collarbones and grazed the top of her skull."

"A serious head injury?"

"No, just a surface wound, fortunately. I had to put in fifty-two stitches."

Sly whistled.

"Warren and Alan did a sling and swath for the collarbones, which I checked and re-did for her. I think she'll heal just fine. The incident was several days ago now. She was pretty chipper the last time I saw her, which, hard as it is to believe, was only this morning."

"I'll have a look at her if you like but right now the captain comes first."

"I understand. Once Jake gets this bugaboo out of his head about her, we can invite her up to dinner at the ranch. Jake's right that she's quite a character but I'd characterize her more as 'one determined woman' than as a 'sly piece.'"

STELLA WAS TAKING the afternoon sun on her ship's ramp when Jhiriku's three captives marched into sight over a dune. When

Alan saw her, he shouted at the top of his lungs.

"Stella! Run!"

Stella, still bundled like a mummy, her legs curled under her and her eyes closed, didn't look up or move.

Couldn't she hear him? Alan felt panic shoot through his veins. Jhiriku topped the dune behind his captives. Stella chose that moment to open her eyes and look in their direction. To Alan's consternation, she smiled. He was sure, if she'd been able to wave, she would have done so.

"Hi," Stella called.

How could she just go on sitting there with a smile? Alan was dumbfounded. If she'd seen Jhiriku, she must have seen his phaser.

"Stella!" He screeched again. They were only fifty meters from the foot of *The Susan's* ramp.

"Oh, Alan," Stella reproved with a cheerful smile, "don't be such a worrywart. Jhiriku and I are old friends."

"Friends? Can't you see his phaser? He's planning to kill you!" As frustrated as he felt, Alan didn't dare wave his arms. Even if they were all going to be shot in the end, he didn't want to rush Jhiriku. It was irrational, he knew, but every second of life he was able to steal away from Jhiriku's phaser was a personal victory.

"Such an embarrassment," Jhiriku said, waving his phaser apologetically. "I am so sorry, Stella, for this young man's rudeness."

"No apologies necessary, Jhiriku. Am I correct in assuming you came to negotiate for the FDet?"

"Yes, you are. It's here?"

"It's in a safe place. I am further assuming it meets with your satisfaction. I notice you tested it yourself, a minor issue I can—if the price is right—be convinced to overlook."

"I am completely satisfied," Jhiriku admitted.

"Then I am ready to hear your offer."

Jhiriku raised his weapon suggestively. "I offer you your life, Stella." His voice was cool and businesslike.

Stella laughed. "How fair of you, Jhiriku. But what of the other bidders?"

"They changed their minds."

"With a little persuasion from you?"

"A little."

"I would say more than a little. Mr. Cobb?"

Out of the shadow of the doorway stepped the resort manager. Alan gasped. Behind Cobb stood April. Both were holding phasers.

"Jhiriku of Aostolo," Cobb declared, "I have in my possession a warrant for your arrest." He unfurled a piece of paper, which rustled in the light breeze.

"A warrant! By whom and for what charge?"

"The United Coalition of Star Systems. The charge is murder. Actually, three murders."

"Did I mention," Jhiriku said, "that my phaser is set to wide-array? That I can blow all of you to bits with just one shot?"

"You did," Warren said bleakly.

"That seems so extreme, Jhiriku," Stella said coolly. "I took you for a smart businessman."

"I am a smart businessman, Stella. I have made you an offer. Now I make an offer to Mr. Cobb as well. Your life too, Mr. Cobb, as long as you ensure my safe passage off Otung."

"Well, uh..."

"Just throw your phaser into the sand, Mr. Cobb," Jhiriku said smoothly, "and you won't get hurt. And tell that pretty wench with you to do the same."

Cobb fidgeted nervously. "Okay." He gave in and threw the phaser. It sailed over Stella's head to thud dully in the sand. Alan couldn't believe Cobb was giving up so easily but he was too dumbfounded to say anything. Cobb turned to April. "April, do what the man asks."

"I don't want to!" April shrieked.

"Just do it!" Cobb ordered, his voice rising.

"Ah, heck," April said, and threw the phaser away from her. It too thudded into the sand. "Good choice," Jhiriku congratulated April. "You'll live much longer not playing the heroine. Now, Stella," Jhiriku went on, turning his attention back to her, "the FDet."

"Ah, yes, well—"

"Mother," Alan screamed. "Just give him the goddamn thing. It's not worth your life."

"Mother?" Jhiriku said, both eyebrows shooting straight up his wide forehead. He guffawed. "That's rich, Alan, my boy."

Alan had had enough. He didn't care if Jhiriku had twenty phasers. "Oh," he howled, whirling to face his captor, "so you think that's funny, do you?"

Alan stammered to a stop, his eyes going wide at what he saw rising behind Jhiriku. Jhiriku spun toward that which had transfixed Alan's attention but he was too late. A tall figure in a torn and dusty, lavender tunic dealt a crushing blow on a point where his collarbone joined his neck. The phaser fell from his massive hand.

"Damn Nhavan," he swore, and crumpled to the ground. The Nhavan so rudely described lowered his hand, inclined his head, and bowed formally.

"Commander Ma'at, *U.C.S.S. Boediceas*. I believe I have met some of you, but not all of you."

"God," Alan blurted, "I nearly blew that."

"No harm done," Ma'at said.

"April and Phideas and I saw Commander Ma'at sneaking up behind Jhiriku," Stella said from her place on the ramp. "That's why we were stalling him with all those dramatics but we had no way to tell you without letting on to Jhiriku."

"And I think we did a great job," Cobb said with satisfaction. "He believed it completely. I never thought of starting a dinner theater at the resort but now—"

"How about singing waiters?" April suggested.

"Singing waiters, hmm. Not a bad suggestion, April. Warren, you wouldn't want to—"

"Nope. Sorry, I've quit, Phideas. I'm going to be a rancher." Warren's pride was evident in his voice. He looked at April, still hovering in the door. "Do you want to be a rancher's wife?"

April wagged her head back and forth, putting on a great show of hemming and hawing. "Oh, I don't know, Warren."

"Please?" Warren begged. From his pocket he pulled a carved bracelet of glinting green-black stone.

April raced down the ramp and threw herself into his arms. "Is this my engagement ring?"

"It's a bit large. How about making do with an engagement bracelet until I find a Paku craftsman to make you a ring?" He slipped it over her wrist.

"Okay," April murmured, looking into his eyes. Warren kissed her on the mouth.

Phideas and Zane clapped their approval. Alan stared down at the sand. Stella, unable to clap, shouted a bravo. Ma'at inclined her head. Lindie smiled, and Jake, who was leading the zebiti over the dune, stopped and stared at his brother whom he had never seen in such a posture of gleeful exuberance.

"Well, what do you know," Zane pronounced, clapping Warren on the back, "the last thing I expected out of this mess was an engagement. Congratulations, son...and daughter-in-law."

Chapter Seventeen

SOAKING IN A hot bath, sipping down tasty but potent herbal broths, and surrendering to deep sleep did wonders for Dani. Though far from well, she was sufficiently perky to attend dinner, to which Ruby wheeled her in Jake's old wheelchair.

Olive and Ruby, despite the extraordinary demands of the day, still managed to whip up a substantial and varied dinner. The main course of tender chunks of Ikotni in a rich stew with potatoes and other native root vegetables was seasoned to perfection with herbs Olive grew in the garden. The meal was rounded out with biscuits and cornbread, a salad of bitter fall greens, and beer.

The two ranch women got help, if only at the last minute from Lindie, April, Jake and Phideas, who—making use of Stella's transporter, operated by Ma'at—got from Stella's ship to the Tyson Ranch in the twinkling of an eye.

The second group of transportees consisted of Alan and Warren and Stella. The three re-materialized together, the two men holding Stella between them. Once they reached the kitchen, they settled Stella down at the table, where, unable to help the others, she made the acquaintance of Captain Forrest.

Last to arrive, and making it just before dinner were Ma'at and Zane. They rode the zeebiti home with the still-groggy Jhiriku tied securely to one of the extra animals.

Although there were volumes that needed to be said, those assembled were so hungry there was no conversation during the meal. April, quite accustomed to the task, fed Stella between bites of her own dinner.

Observing that the frenzy of eating was winding down, Dani broke the silence. "I recognize," she said, putting down her glass of beer, "that it is not genteel to say so, but it seems to me that Ms. Farnsworth has been the source of a great deal of trouble on this planet."

Stella gasped, choking down a mouthful of food, her face turning scarlet.

"Hey," Alan shouted, slamming his fork down on his plate. After all the anxiety he'd been through on Stella's account, he wasn't going to stand by and watch as his mother was raked over the coals by a passel of vacationing *Explora Command* muckety-mucks.

"It is true, Alan," Ma'at said, "that Ms. Farnsworth has violated a number of Settlement Rules for this planet. Which, I might point out, is a civil—not a military—matter. Artificially engineering earthquakes with equipment that carries a banned status may or may not violate other Coalition provisions."

"I am the legal owner of the FDet," Stella declared, "and the technology was not banned. It's status was tabled and suspended."

"Such a fine distinction," Ma'at said evenly, "may not excuse your actions when the matter is made known to the applicable agency."

The high crimson color drained from Stella's face to be replaced by a pasty white.

"Ma'at, stop it!" Sly ordered. "Ms. Farnsworth is not well enough to be debating the point with you." Sly had taken a brief look at Stella's extensive, if healing, injuries after her arrival. Zane, who up to this point had been wolfing down food as though he had never eaten before, put down his fork and leaned congenially forward.

"I personally," he drawled, "have no intention of filing a complaint against Ms. Farnsworth. Phideas, what's your take on it?"

Cobb made a quick swallow of the stew he had been savoring and wiped his mouth with a napkin. "No charges as far as I'm concerned. I do want her to identify the three dead, if she can."

"I will be happy to do so," Stella said. She offered Zane and Cobb a grateful smile.

"Speaking of the dead," Olive asked, "what about the village of Topotuk?"

"Both legally and morally," Ma'at answered, "I do not think Ms. Farnsworth could in any way be held responsible for the event that destroyed the village of Topotuk. The Otung River Valley is a known geologic hot spot and the precise chain of events that acted upon one another could have been set into motion at any time in Topotuk's history by any earth tremor. To say it was the result of an earthquake artificially-engineered by Ms. Farnsworth would be nearly impossible to prove."

"Thank you, Ma'at," Stella said.

"That settles it then." Dani smiled broadly at Stella.

"But I thought—" Stella stammered, taken aback by Dani's change of heart.

"I was just soliciting views," Dani assured her.

"Sneaky," Stella retorted.

"No," Sly said, "in *Explora Command*, we call it 'good leadership skills.'"

"Ms. Farnsworth," Dani said, ignoring Sly's quip, "if no one here holds anything against you, I don't either. However, I am curious what your plans are for the FDet."

"Mom?" Alan interrupted, his face flushing as everyone looked at him. "This may be a bad time to ask, but would you consider a scientific partnership? We could redesign the FDet until it was so tamper-proof it satisfied the Coalition's concerns."

There was a silence around the table, all heads turning to Stella. She had lowered her head but everyone saw her blink at the tears pooling at the corners of her eyes. Stella bit her lip to stop them.

"Son," she answered, "that would be wonderful. I would love that." She sobbed once and the tears she had tried to stop flowed over the rims of her eyes and down her cheeks. She couldn't raise her hands to wipe them away but April grabbed a napkin and dabbed at her face.

"This is the most ridiculous injury imaginable!" she blurted. Then she started to giggle and, after a moment, the rest of the table joined in her humor.

"A toast," Lindie intoned, raising her beer. Everyone lifted a glass, April raising hers and Stella's.

"To all of us for overcoming inner and outer demons." Lindie looked meaningfully at Dani and then lifted her glass high, saluting the entire table. "And to future partnerships, whatever they might be."

Dani raised an eyebrow. Lindie winked back at her and Dani felt her heart rate speed up. The idea that she and Lindie might get together again excited her.

"Speaking of demons," Dani said aloud, her eyes still holding Lindie's, "you never did tell us, Lindie, how the story of the king, the corpse and the evil sorcerer ends."

"I know," Lindie sighed. "I was going to make you answer a riddle every night but circumstances didn't permit it."

"These riddles you were supposed to subject us to," Ma'at asked, "they went beyond mere curiosity on your part, didn't they?"

"Yes, I was—"

"Riddles?" Alan interrupted. "That reminds me!" He patted his shirt pockets and then dug into his pants pockets. "Darn!"

"What is it, Alan?" Warren asked.

"I recycled my cowboy costume on Stella's ship."

"I'm glad you did. That thing stunk."

Stella wrinkled up her nose. "Why does it matter?"

"I put April's message for Captain Forrest in one of the pockets."

"Message?" Dani asked.

"Oh," April chipped in, "I remember it. It was in haiku and it was from Admiral Sunkee."

"Admiral Sunkee?" Dani was shocked down to her toes. She glared at Alan. "You had a message from the Admiral and you never got it to me?"

"Truthfully, Aknee was supposed to get it to you. I'm sorry. In all the excitement—" Alan apologized. His brow wrinkled. "It said...April, help me remember."

"It said," she closed her eyes in concentration, "The riddle is not the only test. Treasure the riddler as well."

"What a memory!" Warren said, impressed.

Dani turned to stare at Lindie. "Sunkee sent you?"

"So you really didn't know?" Lindie laughed. "And I thought you were playing hard to get, Dani. First pretending you didn't remember me from childhood and then pretending you didn't know Sunkee had sent me to test specialized reasoning abilities of the three of you."

"Ma'at!" Dani turned in accusation to her First Officer. "You knew. You made us come here."

"I only knew, Captain, that we would encounter Dr. Davis and that we were to allow her to accompany us on day trips, should we take any. Beyond that, I knew nothing."

"Didn't you ask for more details?"

"Of course." Ma'at sounded miffed. "The answer I received was that 'the mission was a riddle and I should be alert for riddles'. At first, I thought Dr. Davis had engineered getting us to Topotuk where we would be tested in some way but then it became quite clear neither Dr. Davis or the Coalition would have engineered the destruction we witnessed at Topotuk. Interestingly, Topotuk posed a riddle of its own."

"Which," Lindie said, "you ably solved, Ma'at. My job, Dani, was only to present a series of riddles to the three of you in order to assess your dominant reasoning styles."

"But why?" Dani asked.

"Well," Lindie said, "all I know is that *Boediceas* has a rather odd diplomatic chore for her next mission which requires that you have the abilities to dance angels on the heads of pins and split hairs into infinitesimal fibers. The people you are visiting value these abilities highly."

"You would think the High Command would know enough about us to just send Ma'at," Sly observed. "Sounds like hir cup of tea."

"Yes and no. The Admiral wanted a picture of your combined styles. He thinks you might be more successful acting as a group. I, for one, agree."

"But," Dani said, "you've failed in your mission. We only heard one riddle."

"True. But I observed the three of you extensively under conditions of high stress. I can still make my report. Of course, I should require you to solve one last riddle—"

"Tell us the end of the story," Dani said with the excitement of a child. "I want to know what happened to the king."

"Very well."

After Olive and Ruby had cleared the table and brought out a dessert plate piled high with dried fruits and plump nuts, Lindie framed the king and the corpse story for those of the group who had not heard it before. Then, for the benefit of all, she began the unheard segment of the story.

"As the night dragged on," Lindie started, "the king found he knew the answer to each riddle and, in order to keep his head from exploding, he felt obliged to answer. Each time he did, of course, the corpse went flying back to the tree and he had to tramp back, cut it down, and start back across the burial ground again. But finally, the ghost inhabiting the corpse put forth a riddle the king couldn't answer."

"I can't believe he finally stumped the king," Dani said.

"Well he did. Here's the final riddle. A widowed chieftain and his son were out hunting one day and came upon a double set of female footprints, one large and one small. The larger suggested the beauty of an aristocratic mature woman, the smaller the delicacy of a young lady.

"On the spot, the two royals swore an oath that, should they find the women, they would marry them and, as befit their station, the chieftain would marry the possessor of the larger prints; the son, the possessor of the smaller.

"As the story goes, the two did come upon the women, who proved to be a queen and her princess daughter, both of whom were escaping a desperate situation in their own country which had resulted from the death of that country's king.

"The women agreed without hesitation to marry their rescuers. However, there was a complication. The possessor of the large footprints proved to be the princess and the possessor of the smaller, the queen."

"It's always something," Dani said. Lindie's audience laughed.

"So what happened?" Olive asked.

"The men married in accordance with their oath and the two women became pregnant. Now, here's the problem. How are the two male children that were born related to each other?"

"Uncle and nephew," Sly said promptly.

"But," Ma'at said, "which is uncle and which is nephew, Doctor? They would both be uncle and nephew to each other at the same time. Linguistically, there is no term for such a relationship in any language with which I am familiar."

"Anyone else?" Lindie asked.

Her audience was silent, everyone pondering the problem. Even Dani seemed dumbstruck. Finally Lindie said, "That was the king's answer, too, silence. And because he could not answer the riddle, the corpse did not fly back to the tree and the king was able, finally, to cross the burial ground."

"And that's it?" Dani said, trying not to sound disappointed.

"Oh, no," Lindie answered. "There is still the sorcerer to deal with. Because the king had been so patient with his bizarre task and such a good sport about the riddles, the ghost in the corpse rewarded him with the information he needed to overcome the sorcerer."

"But," Warren interrupted, confused, "I thought the ghost was a bad guy."

"Such a transformation is a common theme in humanoid mythologies and dreams. The king in this story, Warren, is the ego. The 'trial' the ego is undergoing occurs because the ego is not paying attention to and meeting the needs of the whole personality.

"The ghost—what Carl Jung would call the shadow—is part of the king's larger nature and appears in frightening form because the ego has ignored the needs and potentials of the king's full personality for too long.

"However, because the king is willing to undergo the experiences necessary to mature as a person, what at first appeared as frightening—the ghost—now becomes friendly, the helper or guide."

"Huh," Warren grunted, crossing his arms and rocking back and forth.

"Aahh," Dani breathed. Finally, she knew what the gift of Sherri's death was. She would always carry Sherry with her but no longer as a dead weight. A good commander needed a good ghost to remind her that her life and the lives of her people hung by the thread of every single decision she made. Sherri would be her ghost and her guide.

She couldn't deny her fear of making the wrong decision but she couldn't allow that fear to keep her from fulfilling her destiny. In her mind's eye, Dani reached out and grasped from Lindie's hand those whirling, pulsating, cloud-infused spheres.

"So how did the king overcome the sorcerer?" Sly asked.

"The ghost suggested that when the sorcerer—whose goal was absolute dominion over the spirit world—asked the king to bend down and offer worship to him that the king request a demonstration of the technique. When the sorcerer did so, the king was to draw his sword and cut off the sorcerer's head.

"The king took this advice and, as a result, saved not only his own life but freed the spirits who would have fallen under the sway of this evil entity. In the original Hindu story, Shiva himself, the Lord of the Universe, appears to thank the king and offer him many worldly and heavenly rewards."

"Huh," Warren repeated, still uncertain.

"You just did this yourself, Warren," Olive said.

"I did?"

"Sure," Olive said. "You overcame the 'evil' of your resentment toward your brother and your father. When you stopped blaming everyone else for your problems and started looking for solutions, you found a way to work things out."

"Every person," Lindie declared, smiling at Warren, smiling at Dani, smiling at them all, "is the hero of his or her own life."

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