

as much of a problem for the miners as the fact that they had suddenly been saddled with the care of an infant-and a female one at that! Yet, having no desire to stop working a profitable asteroid belt to bring the child back to their base, they had no choice but to keep and care for her as best they could. In a few days, they loved her as they would a child of their own. Then the child's unusual qualities became obvious-she could purify water and air, she learned with astonishing speed, and she matured even faster. Within the single year of their voyage she grew as tall and mature as an adolescent human girl.

When they did finally have a large and valuable enough load to return to their base, they found that MME had been taken over by a larger company, Amalgamated Mining. This change in ownership, as well as Amalgamated's desire to assume all control over the waif whom they had named Acorna, proved unacceptable to the three miners. When they and their "ward" fled, officials at Amalgamated pursued them with claims to ownership of the ship, which was the miners' only means of livelihood-untrue claims which could nevertheless keep Gill, Rank, and Calum tied up in Federation courts while their resources were drained by legal expenses. In desperation the miners turned to Rank's remarkable Uncle Hafiz, the wealthy and more than slightly shady owner of an interstellar financial empire.

was fascinated by Acorna's short horn and delighted by her precocious ability to understand the numbers he loved most-gambling odds. He demanded that the miners leave Acorna with him and clearly planned to keep them prisoner until they complied. Rafik outwitted his uncle in a series of clever maneuvers which freed them but left them on the run from even more enemies than they had had before: not only the minions of Amalgamated Mining, but also the Kezdet magnates who had caused the wreck of the ship whose identity they had "borrowed." In addition, they had a third enemy they did not even know about. Hafiz Harakamian was so impressed by the way in which Rafik had outwitted him that he decided this nephew was quite clever and crooked enough to be a worthy heir to the Harakamian financial empire -in contrast to his worthless, bungling son, Tapha. Hearing about his father's plans to disinherit him in favor of Rafik, Tapha decided that the only way to keep his inheritance was to find his cousin and kill him. After a precarious time spent moving from system to system, trying to sell off their payload without being caught by any of their numerous pursuers, the miners were finally captured by Pal Kendoro, a young man working for Delszaki Li. Li had been a friend of the real owner of the ship whose identity they had borrowed, and when his agents discovered the ship's beacon again in use they assumed the miners had killed the owner and hijacked the ship. Although based on Kezdet, Delszaki Li was no friend

shelter so high that they never "worked off any debt, but remained in perpetual bondage. Few survived to adulthood, and those who did were so debilitated by years of poor food and crippling work that they had no energy to challenge the system that had enslaved them.

Heir to a financial empire that rivalled that of Hafiz Harakamian, Delszaki Li had first freed his own interests of any connection -with the Kezdet child-labor system, then had begun working secretly to help the enslaved children in any way he could. Although physically disabled by a wasting neurological disease which had almost totally paralyzed him, he was still brilliant and wealthy and was able to recruit others to his cause-among them Pal Kendoro and his two sisters, Mercy and Judit. The Kendoro siblings had been among the orphans brought to Kezdet for slave labor, but Judit had escaped by winning one of the scholarships established by Delszaki Li to encourage education among the bonded children, and by hard work she had soon earned enough to buy her young brother and sister free. Now grown, all three were determined to take whatever risks were necessary to free the children who remained in bondage. Their attempts to effect peaceful change by educating the enslaved children and helping them to demand better conditions were continually frustrated by the wealthy class that controlled Kezdet's government, and by the time he encountered Acorna, Delszaki Li was on the verge of despair. It seemed as

supply. Before he met Acorna, Mr. Li had subtly acquired the mineral and mining rights to Kezdets three moons - Maganos, Saganos, and Tianos - seeing in them a possible place for the children he wished to rescue from Kezdet's factories and mines. None of the planetary mining companies wanted to bother with the problems of building moon bases when it was so cheap to use child labor on - or rather below - the surface of the planet. But Li's plan was ambitious as well as altruistic. He meant to use his great fortune to create mining bases on the three moons, where the children he freed could work part-time and be schooled part-time. With love and care and decent nourishment, upon reaching adulthood they should be ready to take over the mining bases and make them truly self-sufficient. But until he met the three asteroid miners and their "ward," the mysterious unicorn girl, Acorna, Mr. Li's plans had moved so slowly that he despaired of their coming to fruition in his lifetime. There were too many problems for one man to overcome: the entrenched opposition of the wealthy families of Kezdet, the bureaucratic obstacles which the Kezdet government threw in his path, and, most of all, the fears of the children who had been taught from arrival on Kezdet to flee strangers-even benevolent ones. When the factory owners would not admit to employing children, and the children themselves had been trained to hide, how could they be found and freed? Once it was clear that Calum, Gill, and Rank had not caused harm to his friend, but had

do nothing where she saw obvious cases of need, she became entangled in any number of projects that aroused the wrathful attention of Kezdet's ruling class - rescuing one child from a brothel, another from begging on the streets, giving shoes to the barefoot slaves of a glass factory and using her horn to heal their wounds. The furor aroused by her actions forced the Child Liberation League to forgo their years of patience and incremental improvements in favor of a bold stroke for freedom.

While the miners worked desperately to get the first of the planned moon bases in condition to receive children, and Delszaki Li fought Kezdet's bureaucracy to get permission to open the base, Acorna solved the problem of finding and freeing the children. They might have been taught to flee strangers, but the mystical rumors which identified Acorna with the protective saints and goddesses of the children's manifold belief systems ensured that she alone, of all the beings on Kezdet, was accepted by all of them. Believing that the silver-haired girl with the horn on her forehead was an earthly manifestation of Lukia of the Lights, or Epona, or Sita Ram, at her call they came willingly from mines and factories and followed her without fear. With the help of Calum, Rafik, and Gill to implement plans for a working mining base on Maganos Moon, and the sometimes over-enthusiastic help of Acorna to reach out to the neglected children of Kezdet, Delszaki Li had the immense gratification of seeing his plan be-

brought to Maganos. Rafik's cousin Tapha had died in an attempt to assassinate him, and Rafik felt it was his responsibility to work with his uncle Hafiz and learn the ins and outs of the Harakamian family businesses that he was now slated to inherit. As for Calum, he was as taken with the shy, quiet Mercy as Gill was with her more outgoing sister, but he felt that with the defection of his comrades it was even more his responsibility to help Acorna in the search for her home, especially as it was his mathematical analysis of the partial results given them by Dr. Zip that had narrowed down the possible location of her home planet to a searchable sector of space.

Even Acorna was not romantically untouched; Pal Kendoro had fallen in love with her, and she was, like any young girl, flattered though distressed by his devotion ... but unlike most young girls, she had to wonder whether their two species were even compatible! In any case she felt that she could not commit herself and her life to this young human while she still did not know where, or even if, others like her might exist.

Where did she truly belong? And how much time did she have to find a suitable mate? In the three years that had elapsed since the establishment of Maganos Moon Base, she had matured from an adolescent into what appeared to be a fully adult female other kind. Knowing nothing of her origins, she had no way to guess whether her body would stabilize or whether she would age and die as rapidly as she had matured.

who might approach her, they had grown into the habit of shielding her from the world, screening her mail, and otherwise treating her as someone to be sheltered and hidden. Sometimes it seemed that it would take another revolution to free Acorna from her well-meaning friends, and as Accrual Qiwf begins, just such a revolution is about to take place. . .

for her as the meeting dragged on - just as dreaming up all these new ways to stop her and Calum from starting on their mission to find her species' home world had become an obsession for Pal.

She tried to compose herself, remembering that it was probably even worse for Calum. He considered finding her home world his first duty to her, even before his love for Mercy. The sooner Acorna could release Calum from that self-imposed quest, the sooner he and Mercy could marry. Acorna understood why some other friends were reluctant to see the AcaSecki depart. Gill and Judit were happily settled now, overseeing the care and education of the bondchildren still arriving to study and work at Maganos; and Rafik was presumably satisfied with his new career as assistant and heir apparent to his uncle Hafiz, the head of House Harakamian. But couldn't they see that Calum needed to complete his quest for her home planet - and that she needed to find her own people before she could be content anywhere?

Pal continued inexorably to read on from the notepad in his hand. "Supplies and munitions are still not completed. But right now" - and he looked directly at Acorna and then Calum, shaking his head sadly - "the worst problem is that of reinstalling and testing the AcaSecki's defense system. My people estimate it will take at least four weeks to be certain that the new defenses are accurately installed this time."

ting until they gave up the search?

Calufti shot a second, almost accusing glance at Mr. Li, who was floating quietly in the chair which allowed him such mobility as his increasing paralysis permitted. Some people had made the mistake-sometimes a fatal mistake - of underestimating Delszaki Li because of his great age and the debilitating neurological disease which had all but paralyzed him. Not Calum! He was all too aware of the clear, penetrating mind encased in that ancient body. Delszaki Li was a force to be reckoned with- benevolent, powerful, astute, and, Calum thought wryly, about as straightforward as a spiral staircase in an Escher print.

Calum knew that Mr. Li found it hard - deep in the heart which Acorna's beauty, charm, bravery, and intelligence had thawed - to let her start out upon her search. He did make every appearance of helping to secure her ambition of finding her folk; but he was easily tempted into thinking up new ways to delay her actual departure. And Pal Kendoro, his personal assistant, was not limited by even the pretense of wanting to help Acorna on her quest! He considered himself in love with Acorna, could not or would not see why she couldn't settle down happily with him while remaining in ignorance about her own race, and absolutely did not want her going off alone for months, possibly years, with Calum. Neither of Pal's sisters could con-

be fair to Mercy; she should not be tied down while he went away on a quest of unknown duration. But right now, all Calum's good intentions of calm, rational behavior had gone out the nearest air vent as, once again, Pal seemed to be sabotaging the start of their voyage.

"If you think," Calum went on, his anger apparent in his acid tone of voice, "that a lousy defence system is going to stall us another few months, you're crazy. Crazy!" And he scissored his hands to emphasize his denial.

"Why we should require a defence system," Acorna jumped in to support him, "so far beyond what was originally designed for that class of ship, I do not know."

"Is not sensible to send you so far without every possible consideration taken for your safe return," Mr. Li said,

"We have communications devices that can reach a habitable system soon enough to summon help if the long-range missiles, the mines, the warheads, and the laser cannon do not dissuade a pirate," Calum went on. He was seething with resentment.

"First" - and Acorna held up one of her blunt, two-jointed digits - "what could a ship the size of our scout possibly have that anyone would want?"

"You," Pal said in an unequivocal tone.

port of call would never recognize our ship in the next one. And he has already taken long enough to supply such multitudinous identities!"

"You, Acorna, are valuable for so many reasons and to so many people," Pal said, his tone almost as angry as Calum's had been, "that of course House Harakamian desired to support you with alternate documentation and drive-emission camouflages."

"Nineteen of them? Requiring six months to develop? To be any safer, I would have to be dead already!" Acorna said, unusually sarcastic for her characteristically gentle self. "You can stay here, safely, and let Calum find your folk," Pal said, desperation creeping into his tone.

Acorna straightened her narrow shoulders, tossing the magnificent mane of silvery hair behind her. "These are my people we are trying to find. How will they know that Cal is on a genuine search unless I am with him to represent myself? We know so little about my circumstances." She shook her head sadly. Her brilliant silvery eyes filmed over, ever so slightly, with the melancholy that was deepening within her daily, almost drowning her with an urgent need to be resolved. Sometimes, at night, she was nearly overwhelmed by the intensity of her need to find her own kind. "Why was my life pod evacuated from the ship in the first place? Who did it? Enemy or friend? Why was it done? To save me or to destroy me without trace?"

it lovingly. "I will not tarry a moment longer than necessary to hurry back to Kezdet and you. You will receive a message the moment we have found my home world."

"I know this, Acorna," Mr. Li said in a gentle, understanding voice. He nodded as if he were patting her hand, an action he could no longer perform. Acorna bent her head, touching his hand with her horn, wishing she had the power to eradicate completely the wasting disease which slowly consumed him. She could, and did, ease his discomfort. But she need not stay for that; there were medicines which did as much as she could to alleviate his pain. And she was more and more "urged" to begin the search. Before it was too late? The phrase sprang into her mind. Startled, she looked up at Mr. Li's black eyes, wondering if he had a vestige of telepathy. But she saw nothing other than his real love and concern for her.

"Acorna, my love," thundered Declan Giloglie, "you're not going without the best defenses we can fit you out with, and that's me final word on the subject!" Calum heaved a dramatic sigh. "I see there's no changing your minds."

Acorna glanced at Calum, aghast at this apparent collapse of resistance. The side of his face that was turned toward her, away from the rest of the group, flickered in what might have been a brief wink.

here until she understands."

"Oh, no, you won't," Pal said. "That's my job."

"Convince me later, Pal," Acorna said sweetly. "Right now- since we are all agreed on the necessity for installing the revised defense systems - I wish to go over some matters of the ship's living space with Calum. I am afraid we may need to completely remodel a portion of the interior."

"By all means," said Delszaki Li, beaming in a way that reinforced Acorna's belief that this talk of the new defense system was just another taradiddle designed to delay her departure yet again.

"Make whatever changes you wish. My architect will accommodate. " Li bowed to Acorna.

Once they were alone on the AcaSecki, Calum looked at Acorna. "You didn't really want to redesign the living space again, I trust?"

"You don't really want to wait six more weeks, which will probably turn into six months if Mr. Li and Pal can arrange it, before we take off, do you?"

"No I" they both said in chorus. "We're well enough supplied for the initial voyage right now," Calum said thoughtfully.

"If something happened to distract the others for just a little while ..." Acorna murmured.

On their return to the base, it seemed that distraction might just be at hand. Pal and Gill were fuming out loud at one of the com techs, who had

node where they think they might find their target, and I thought we had trained all the com techs never to acknowledge anonymous messages!"

Acorna put her hand on the techs shoulder. He was young enough to have been trained at Maganos in the past two years, thin enough to have come from one of Kezdet's factories before that, and he was shaking under her hand. She sent soothing, calming impulses to the boy until she could feel that he was steadier.

"If you upset the people who work here for no reason at all, Gill," she said, "how can you expect them to remember your wishes? Do not worry," she said to the tech, "it is a small matter, soon forgotten."

"That's what you think!" said Pal darkly.

Acorna shrugged. "I've never had an anonymous message before, so there is no reason to suppose this one is the beginning of a flood."

"Never - had -" Gill plunged both hands into his curly red beard and tugged as if he were trying to root it out. "Why, we must have bounced half a hundred of these confetti jobs back in the last week alone!" He glared at the younger man. "Didn't you tell her, Pal?"

"I didn't think," Pal said unhappily, "it would be a good idea to mention that we were screening her mail. ..."

"You were WHAT?" Acorna demanded in outraged tones. "Gill, whatever gave you the colossal gall to intercept my personal messages? And

small puffs of steam coming out of the miner's ears.

"I knew it wasn't a good idea to tell her," Pal said.

Gill glared at him. "You could have explained why we had to do it!"

"Did you hear her give me a chance to get a word in edgewise?" he replied. "Besides, you could have explained, too, and I didn't hear you saying anything!"

Gill's deep laugh rumbled through the coin center, and he wiped his sweating forehead. "You've a point there, young Pal. Tell you what, let's get a printout of all the messages we've deleted in the past ten days or so. That'll explain it to her without us having to get that word in past the young lady's offended fury."

"Where'll we send it? The mood she's in - "

"No matter what kind of a mood she's in," Gill said, "you can't stalk off very far on a lunar mining base. And you should be able to guess as well as I where she'll go to let off steam. Why don't you give your sister a call, let her know what to expect?"

He leaned over the desk and began explaining to the com tech exactly what arcane procedures he'd have to follow in order to retrieve the massive amounts of "junk mail" that he and Pal had deleted from Acorna's files before she ever saw them.

mind, "but perhaps you will have a cooling drink before you quite explode with indignation? Iced kava, perhaps, or madigadijuice?"

"If you are trying to make me forget about it," Acorna said, seating herself, "I should tell you that it will not work! I am no longer to be treated as an ignorant child!"

"Of course you are not," said Judit Kendoro understandingly. "You have grown up quite amazingly in the last two years. You never lose yourself galloping in the park anymore, or get into fights with street vendors, or ..."

Laughing, Acorna stopped her. "Enough, please! I do not deny that I did some very foolish things when I first came to live with Mr. Li - but remember that nearly two years aboard a mining ship is not much preparation for social life on a planet! And I was much younger then."

"That's true," said Judit, "and Gill and Pal now realize that they were wrong to screen your mail for you."

Acorna looked at her suspiciously, "Then why did they not say so? And how do you know?"

"Did you give them a chance to apologize?" Judit asked. "Or did you just stalk off in high dudgeon, O mature and sober woman of the world? Pal guessed where you would go and called to tell me that he and Gill would be sending your intercepted mail from the last ten days over as soon as it

right here on Maganos and would have no need to send me any mail. Gill is making a joke."

"Well, this one seems to be addressed to you," Judit said, picking a flimsy at random from one of the boxes. "Don't you want to read it?"

"Let Karina, Psychic Healer, make your fortune?" Acorna read aloud. "What is this about? I do not know any Karina, and if I did, why would I wish to join in partnership with her to sell my healing abilities at so much for each millisecond of time expended? It sounds like a most immoral notion to me!"

"It may not be the most immoral notion you come across today," Judit said softly. "Read some more."

By the time Acorna had worked her way through half a box full of requests for money, suggestions for a line of gilt plastiflex visors called "Acornas," offers of partnership, and demands that she submit herself to some research institute or other for immediate examination, she began to understand why Gill and Pal had been so protective. Judit, for her part, silently blessed the men for leaving all the heartrending pleas for help and healing at the bottom of the heaviest box, where with any luck Acorna would never see them. She would never be able to resist those cries for help ... yet to heal even one percent of those who needed her would so sap her, energy that she would be unable to do anything else. We must find a

his or her way to Maganos ... to be followed by newscasters, charlatans, and the terminally ill.

The fiction that Acorna's healing abilities had faded as she matured would be exploded the first time Acorna's soft heart was touched and she touched her horn to an ill or injured person.

The only solution, after all, was for Acorna to leave Maganos before she was tracked down here. And even if she never came back ... she would come back. Judit blinked away incipient tears and set about the task of persuading the lost youngling of an alien species, whom she had come to love like a younger sister, to leave immediately.

It was not, after all, much of a task. So, feeling as if she was doing something heinous, she contacted Pal's missile-defense supplier and told him that Mr. Li wished that the installation would take longer.

Mendaciously, she also told Pal that she had received a call to that effect: there was some difficulty in supply. She told Calum, who exploded, and Acorna, who gratified her by assuming the most rebellious expression ever seen on that lovely, tranquil face. Judit decided that frustration would have the desired result.

It did. Calum and Acorna made discreet plans, stowed the few items they wished to take with them on this history-making voyage, and took off without waiting for permission. The AcaSecki had been "ready" for all prac-

gines, corn units, whatever. Calum and Acorna were up, up, and away and into the star-studded sky while those nearest and dearest to them slept.

Calum had spent the entire first few hours whistling happily or chortling at having escaped so deviously. It eased Acorna's nagging conscience that he evidently suffered from no guilt about their precipitous departure. She herself still felt pangs of grief and guilt about sneaking away without a proper farewell to Gill and Pal and Mr. Li - not to mention Rafik, who had been away, as usual, on business for his uncle Hafiz. But she could not have said good-bye without warning them ... and it had seemed essential to take advantage of Judit's offer to keep all three men busy and out of communication until the AcaPecki was well clear of Maganos.

"Are you sure even Rafik won't be able to deduce our course, Calum?" Acorna had asked when they were outside the heliopause of the Kezdetian primary.

"Not even Rafik, Acorna. He may be subtle in dealing with people, but I'm the engineer and navigator," Calum said proudly.

"But they all know our destination: the Coma Berenices quadrant."

"Ah," - Calum's smile was devious as he held up one finger - "there are nine and sixty ways of getting there, and we're taking almost, but not quite, the most illogical. I don't trust Rafik not to think of the most illogical, so I plotted in the course he is least likely to suspect. Therefore, there is no

"Well, in that case ..." Acorna allowed herself to be reassured, at least that they could not be followed and talked out of their project by Rafik's eloquence. "I am surprised, now that we've been gone nine hours, that they haven't discovered we've gone."

The com unit bleeped. "You spoke too soon," Calum said. "Urgent you return to Dehoney immediately. Ace-" Calum's hand disconnected the com unit.

"Well, I'm surprised it took them so long."

"Ace?" Acorna asked, blinking a little anxiously. "Maybe we should at least listen to the message? It sounded like Provola."

"So? They all know we respect Provola and might listen to her, where we've given UP listening to them!" His tone was caustic.

"But she's never been an alarmist," Acorna responded, weighed down once again with guilt about their stealthy action.

Calum shrugged. Provola Quero was now in charge of the Saganos operation; she couldn't have anything that urgent to say to them; she was probably just relaying the expectable protests from Acorna's other "guardians."

"We can't swerve from this departure, Acorna, love, or they'll just find another way of stopping us."

which were far stronger than they looked. "Easy, girl, what's not where?"
"My escape pod."

"What? But it was there when I inspected the ship five days ago.

She followed him as he ran to where he knew, damned well certain he knew, that the escape pod in which they had found her five years ago had been carefully netted in. The net was still there, but the escape pod was not. "Blast Pal and his retrofitting nonsense. It was there." He picked up a piece of the netting as if by shaking it he could restore the missing escape pod. "They must have removed it for safety before they started their damned defense installations. The tubes would have had to be settled against the inner hull. Damn!" And he forcefully threw the netting down again.

"Oh, well, it is not all that essential," she said, now taking the role of comforter. "After all, there is no counterfeiting me," she said, giggling as she swept her hand down her obviously alien length.

"Yes, but the glyphs ... they might establish your lineage or rank or something."

"We have holos of them in the files. For that matter, I can draw them quite well, you know."

the valve to the nutrient reservoir has been tampered with. Damn it."

Her mild cussword surprised Calum enough, but the fact that she had not spotted the problem earlier was even more unnerving to him. Acorna was usually instantly aware of the slightest change in atmosphere or water.

"It's just fed the entire stock of trace elements into the water supply at once - zinc sulfate, copper sulfate ... no wonder the chard looks so sick!" Acorna sighed deeply.

"Something the matter with your famous nose?" Calum asked, since Acorna could often just smell an imbalance.

"The ship has many new smells, most of them chemical. I guess I thought it was just normal." She paused, thinking. "Maybe we should listen to Provola's entire message. 'Ace* ... where you shut her off, could have been the beginning of 'accident' as well as the start of my name."

"So we will now dutifully listen." Calum keyed in the interrupted message. Urgent you return to Dehoney. Supervisors report lists a broken valve in the hydroponics' unit, which was to have been repaired first thing this morning. Only you left before they could repair it. There was a hint of humor in that final sentence, and Acorna winced. Advise immediate return to effect such minor repairs which could totally damage entire hydroponics and grazings if not made. It won't take long. The plea was unmistakable even in Provola's unmistakably prosaic tone.

and the alfalfa will have to go; if it's picked up even a small percentage of that zinc, I'll come out in spots."

"Now just a moment," Cal said soothingly, and twirled his chair around to the astrogation-control panel. A flash of knowing fingers across the touch pads, and he beamed. "We're not that far, spatially speaking, from Rushima. We can stop there ... two, three days. Basic agri world, colonized by the Shenjemi Federation. It'll have everything we could possibly need."

"Well, I suppose I can exist on what's available," Acorna said with a sigh. She swallowed hard and scratched a bit, thinking about how near she'd been to chewing her way through her original notion of lunch-a long swath down the alfalfa bed.

hideout. He slept, when he slept at all, curled around himself like a sprout coiled within its pod, trying to hold on to the warmth of his own body. It was so dark and cold under the mats . . . almost as cold as the empty space that surrounded the Haven. . . .

He was not, he told himself firmly, going to think about that. He curled up, arms wrapped around his knees, and drifted off into an uneasy doze. The hard white surface of the tank was soft, he was floating, spinning, and the stars floated around his head. ... No, they didn't. If you were spaced without protective suiting, your eyes and everything else exploded, and you couldn't see anything!

Markel jerked awake, shivering. He wasn't going to think about his father, Illart, floating forever in absolute cold and darkness, empty eyes gazing unseeingly on the stars that he had loved. He wasn't going to think about anything except the immediate practical problems of surviving another day on the Haven without getting caught.

Huddled in another cramped position, he worried at the problem with his conscious mind. A person could get warm enough in the heating vents that led to the food center. He would try that in a little while, but he didn't dare now; he was so tired, he might fall asleep in the vent and be scalded to death when the steam blasted through to clean and sterilize it. He would have to wait, and if he timed it right, he might be able to nip out of the vents

them suspicious. Illart's. They knew his father was dead-everybody knew, had seen. . . .

Markel struggled soundlessly against the dream of space, the cold and the brightness of distant suns and the pressure of his own blood exploding outward; he snapped out of the nightmare once more and felt his heart thumping in his chest. It had all happened so fast, almost as quickly as the dreams that trapped him whenever he tried to sleep.

Only three, no, five shifts ago he had been safe in his own quarters, and the only thing that worried him about the quarrel between Illart and Sengrat was that Ximena would take her father's side. She'll never look at me now, he had thought-as though she had ever noticed him before! But he'd been a child then.

Five shifts ago. Or was it six? It seemed terribly important to remember. Somebody had to remember. Somebody had to tell the truth, counteract the lies they meant to spread about. . . about the ones who could not speak for themselves anymore. The ones who would never be warm again.

The quarters Markel had shared with his father were spacious by Haven standards, as befitted Illart's rank as one of the three Speakers of the Council. Naturally there were separate sleep bunks for the two of them, with their own carefully engineered storage areas for personal belongings; any citizen among the Starfarers was entitled to that much space, and any

came from the vids he called up on his personal console, and he never had figured out why anybody would want to swing one.

The Old-timer generation was full of quaint sayings like that, like their insistence on calling a period of two and a half shifts a "day." Ximena said it was better just to humor the old folks and not to demand explanations for all their quaint old folk sayings.

Anyway, it wasn't the presence of the other two Speakers that had made the sitting area so crowded that Markel had retreated to his sleep tube with his personal console; it was Sengrat. Really, Markel thought, it was Sengrats overinflated ego that seemed to fill up all the space and use up all the oxygen. The man had a voice like a file going through sheet metal; once you started letting it get to you, it could saw through earplugs and ruin your enjoyment of a good classic music vid. Markel blinked twice to stop the vid. No sense in letting his pleasure in the ancient music be ruined by irritation at Sengrat. He would just wait until the visitors left.

Sengrat was always going on about something; it seemed he never agreed with any of the Council decisions. And Illart said he wouldn't speak up during open Council; he just sat there and simmered and waited to buttonhole one of the Speakers in private, later, and tell them how wrong they were. Right now he was disputing the decision to leave their present orbit

make Amalgamated Mining cede Esperantza back to us-and if they did, they couldn't repair the damage they've already done to the planet. Its time to move on, make a new life for ourselves."

"Are you saying we should have accepted Amalgamated's joke of a re-settlement offer?" Gerezan, Second Speaker, inquired. "A bit late to be arguing that, don't you think?"

Markel could tell without looking that Sengrat would have flushed a deep purple. His anger came out in the plummy resonance of his next words. "Don't twist my words, Second! I'm not the one who's living in the past-you three, and the Council members who follow you around like dullbots, are the ones who do that. You're still talking as if we could get Esperantza back and settle to dirt farming. I don't want to do that. I'm not even interested in that. Our 'case' against Amalgamated was settled in Federation court - "

"Unfairly," Andrezhuria cut in. "If we can get evidence of the bribes Amalgamated paid out and the records they had doctored, we'll have grounds to reopen it. And we will get it; the kids in my data study group are sharper than any dirtside hackers, and they're getting through Amalgamated's data firewalls one at a time. Until then, our mission is to keep the story of Esperantza alive. Not to let anybody forget what an injustice was done, not to let Amalgamated get away with it!"

our case. Sure, we got a lot of popular sympathy, but I bet the government's going to be nervouser and nervouser the longer we hang around here. All three governments," he corrected himself after a moment's mental review of Khang Kieaan's troubled political situation.

"We don't need to request anything of Khang Kieaan," Sengrat snapped. "We had their communications system under total control. That should have paid for all the maintenance we need."

"Exactly how do you figure that?" Gerezan asked. "They weren't going to pay us to run their planetary communications when they had a perfectly good working system of their own."

"But they didn't, 'Zan," Sengrat purred. The rasping tone was gone from his voice now, and Markel pulled the vid plugs out of his ears to hear better. When Sengrat's voice softened, he was happy; when Sengrat was happy, there was trouble coming.

Sengrat'd sounded just that way, smooth and velvety and jovial, when he told Markel that Ximena was too old for him, and he didn't want any good-for-nothing teenage kids hanging around his daughter.

"They didn't have a working system of their own," Sengrat went on, "not while we'd intercepted all communications to make our own 'cast. With a little diplomacy, we could have gotten a contract from the Night Sky Light-

are exhausted from three generations of constant fighting. The NSL is the clear technological leader; with a little help from us, they could control Khang Kieaan now. We'd be doing a public service, really. End the fighting now, instead of two or three generations down the line. And ensure Haven's survival." He sounded as though he was beaming, turning his face this way and that so that all three Speakers could get the benefit of his confident looks.

"We don't interfere in other planets' internal affairs," Illart said. "In case you've forgotten, that is part of the original charter agreed upon when we decided to refuse Amalgamated's resettlement offer and live on our colony ship until we got justice. We offer to all other peoples the respect and non-interference we desired for ourselves. That is the way of the Starfarers."

"Your way, you mean," snapped Sengrat.

"The Council's way," Illart corrected him. "You wish to discuss changes in the charter, Sengrat? If so, you should have convened a full Council meeting instead of buttonholing the three of us privately. Nothing less can change the original charter."

"Nothing is less likely to change it," Sengrat riposted. "I already know it's no use going through the Council; they'll do whatever you three want. And you're living in the past. I should warn you that not all the original Starfarers see things your way. And the political refugees we've taken in from other

"She said you'd do that." The metallic rasp was back in Sengrat's voice. "That's why I was chosen to present the opposition point of view to you. The Palomellese and other newcomers are underrepresented in Council - "

"That will change with time," Gerezan put in quietly. "They have the same voting rights as any other Starfarers."

"Some of us," Sengrat said, "don't think we should wait any longer. Some people don't see any point in trying to work through the Council; whoever selected, it's you three Speakers who run it, and Nueva was right- your minds are stuck in the past. I'm looking toward a future in which the Starfarers are truly free, not begging for favors from the Federation, but expanding in space and answerable to no planetary bureaucrats. If you're wise, you three, you'll join me. It's past time for some real changes around here."

"Always so pleasant chatting with you and hearing your views, Sengrat," Illart said. "Are you sure you can't stay for kava? It's a new strain, compliments of the genetic researchers from Sun Behind Clouds. They think we might actually be able to get enough yields from this strain to justify raising our own kava on board. Of course they don't understand dark-roasting, so I'm afraid it's not as strong as you like it, but there's a nutty flavor reminiscent of hazelnuts that I personally find quite enticing."

that whole words and phrases were drowned out by static. All Markel could make out was, "Kava shipment. . . message. . . . Xong . . . join. . . ."

Oh, great, he thought. Another political refugee, sneaking a cry for help out in the kava be-aiu. Just what they needed, one, more person on the overcrowded Haven. Or maybe fourteen or fifteen more people, he reflected gloomily. These Kieaanese ran to large families.

He had just inserted one earplug when his father's yell of excitement all but pierced the other ear. "Xong who?"

"Not Hoo," the voice on the speaker crackled, "Hoa. Ngaen Xong Hoa." Gerezan and Andrezhuria burst into excited babbling until Illart hushed them.

Whoever this Ngaen Xong Hoa might be, they seemed to think he would be worth his space on the Haven. Markel put the vid system aside again and wriggled out of his tube. Might as well find out what all the fuss was about. He would take his vid off into one of the service tunnels later and enjoy it in peace and quiet. The desire for privacy had long ago inspired Markel to explore all the nooks and crannies of the Haven -where a slender boy could fit unobserved.

He knew every supposedly unusable space where outmoded equipment had been yanked out and sold for scrap, as well as the whole system of the

as well," said Gerezan. "Why give him extra time to think about some way to put Ngaen Xong Hoa's research to unethical uses?"

"Oh, come off it, Gerezan. Even Sengrat couldn't think of a way to misuse a weather-prediction system!"

Illart cleared his throat. "I'm not so sure about that." He tapped the data screen set into the wall behind Gerezan. "Here's the complete text of his message."

Although still slender enough to fit into the air vents, Markel was already a good head taller than Andrezhuria. He had no trouble seeing the screen over her head. Ngaen Xong Hoa-and Markel still didn't know who he was-requested political asylum on the Haven because he feared that one of the three governments of Khang Kieaan would misuse the results of his latest research.

"Oh, he's just saying that to make sure we'll have him," Andrezhuria said blithely. "And of course we will. If he's finished the model he was discussing at the Chaos and Control Seminar, we should be able to sell it to agri planets for enough to take care of all the Haven's maintenance problems forever!"

"Not sell," Gerezan said. "Rent. We keep control of the model."

"Are we counting our chickens before they're hatched?" Illart inquired dryly. "We don't even know he's still working on the same thing. He may

Greene. Even if Johnny was of the same generation as his father, he wasn't as stodgy as the original settlers. He'd only joined the Haven a few years earlier, after a nearcalamitous escape from MME when Amalgamated had taken over the large mining company and caused huge redundancies among the specialists. In some ways Market found Johnny could bridge the gap between his father's generation, who could remember digging and growing things in dirt, and the young people of his own generation, who had been raised in space. "What's a weatherman, anyway? I looked it up on the ship's net, and all I could find was some junk about solar winds. I don't see how that's going to make us rich!"

"Oh, that's space weather," Johnny Greene said. "Ngaen Xong Hoa's work is on planetary weather systems, and he's the prime researcher in the field. Although last I heard, even he hadn't solved the chaos aspects."

"Who cares about planetary weather?" Markel demanded. If dirtsideers didn't like being rained on, why didn't they live in space like all sensible folk?

"Markel," Johnny said sharply, "stop pouting and use your brains! I know you've got some, heard 'em rattling round in there just the other day. Turn on a couple of processing bits, will you? Okay, so space colony ships like Haven don't care about dirtside weather, neither do lunar colonies or high-tech cities in domes. But there are still plenty of people out there who live

one quadrant to another without meeting a neutron star."

"You think so, do you?" said Johnny. "Well, here. I'll give you references to the latest weather-modeling theories, and you can download a complete data set on Khang Kieaan's current weather. We'll likely be here another two-three shifts to collect Hoa, so you'll have plenty of time to predict . . . oh, the rainfall over the Green Sea, and the expected high temperature in the central plains area, that'll do for starters. Just take a look at the models, decide which one works best, and . . . what was it you said? . . . plug in the numbers. Then we'll see how close you came."

Markel hadn't come to Johnny for extra homework, but he'd learned that if he did what Johnny Greene suggested, it usually worked out to his benefit in the long run. Besides which, once Johnny had given him a learning assignment like that he wouldn't talk to Market at all, not even to tell tales of mining adventure among the asteroids, until Markel could show that he'd done the work. So he copied the references over to his private storage files, set the system to download Khang Kieaan's current weather data, and skimmed papers on weather modeling while he waited for the data to come in.

He was waiting when Johnny came off duty two shifts later. "This stuff is crazy," he complained. "Look, I programmed three different models-well, okay, I didn't have to do them from scratch, most of the code was in files

"I gave it the same data set the others had."

"It's more persnickety. The other two models are designed to give you their best guesses regardless of how close on they are - sort of the way traditional weathermen operate. This third one"-Johnny tapped the printout-"won't give a prediction that can't be relied upon. And it just happens that planetary weather is what we call a chaotic system-meaning that its adjacent solutions diverge exponentially in time. Such a system is very sensitive to the initial conditions, which means that a very slight change in the starting point-like the fluttering of a butterfly's wing-can lead to enormously different outcomes."

"Then this last model is a joke," Markel muttered.

"Nope. It's making a point: that none of the existing models is accurate. Did you look at the author's name?"

"Ngaen Xong Hoa. That's the guy who's supposed to be delivered with the last load of supplies from dirtside," Markel said before realizing that he probably wasn't supposed to have read the memo detailing exactly how the Haven planned to collect their scientist . . . even if there was nothing particularly new about the plan. "So?" Markel went on hastily to distract Johnny from the fact he'd been hacking into Council memoranda again. "They're all excited about getting somebody who tells you Zen proverbs about the sound of one butterfly wing clapping?"

form, apply a series of nonlinear equations, and . . . oh."

"Now you see it?"

Markel nodded. "If you don't stop with the initial data set, but keep entering small changes as they're monitored ... but then you have too many variables. In fact, you could have an infinite series of variables. So you can't define your nonlinear system until you know how many variables you're dealing with, but you can't tell how many variables you need until you've defined your nonlinear system, but ... my head hurts," he groaned. "But, okay, okay, I see what you mean. If you follow this path through the program, you don't get a Zen proverb, anyway."

"Good. What do you get?"

"Probably a system crash," Markel said absently, studying the complex system of data structures and temporary processors that would have to be created, and then, "Johnny! You told me to implement a model that would've brought the Haven's computer system down?"

"Actually," Johnny confessed, "I didn't think you'd get that far. I thought you'd get bored by the time you'd implemented even one model, and then you'd bring the results back, and then we could have looked at the discrepancies between the prediction and what was actually happening dirtside, and that would be enough to convince you it wasn't so simple."

in to run his sim games, you know," he chuckled, referring to the time Markel had used up sixty percent of the system's resources to simulate a series of space battles in real time for one of his war games.

Markel flushed. "That was a long time ago," he muttered. "I was just a kid then ... fifteen. ..."

"Last year," Johnny grinned. "Sixteen is, of course, ever so much older and wiser than fifteen."

There was a tap on the door.

"Johnny?" called a soft voice that sent Markel's heart rate into fifth gear. Ximena Sengrat opened the door a crack. "I am sorry to disturb you," she said, "but the corn unit to your quarters is malfunctioning again." Johnny snapped his fingers. "Damn wiring!" he said. "I really gotta get in there with some duct tape."

As Markel, Ximena, and everybody else knew, Johnny had the highly unauthorized habit of disabling the com system in his personal quarters whenever he got tired of the continuous flow of scratchy, squeaky announcements from Central; so they gave this "explanation" all the attention it deserved.

"My father thought you would wish to know," Ximena went on, "that Dr. Hoa is now on board, and he has brought with him the code for his new weather-modeling system. The Council feels it might be tactless to try to

thought, he would've taken her for a Council member herself instead of just somebody's kid running an errand. She sounded as if she'd been in on the discussions. Sengrat was probably right . . . she was too old for him. She'd never look at a sixteen-year-old kid.

"They want all our best mathematicians and computechs to familiarize themselves with Dr. Hoa's model en route," Ximena went on. "So I'm afraid you two will have to give up your sim game, or whatever you were playing at."

Markel wanted to protest that he had not been playing sim games, he was way too old for that kid stuff, but realized saving so would only make him sound younger.

"You're supposed to study the math, Johnny," Ximena said, "and Markel, you're assigned to the team to analyze the code."

"Me?" Markel's voice broke on the word in a humiliating croak, the sort of thing that hadn't happened to him since he was thirteen . . . except around Ximena. "But of course," Ximena said, dark eyes wide as if she couldn't imagine why he was surprised. "We couldn't do without you on this, Markel Illart. Everybody knows you're the fastest computech on the ship."

A part of Markel's mind noticed the way Ximena said "we," as if she identified herself with the Council, but most of his mind was floating off into

entitled, "On Certain Aspects of Chaotic Systems and Operations Theory," outlined a global-weather model that was both more general and much more elegant than the one Johnny Greene had had Markel working from. And yet... ?

Markel frowned at the screen. Once you cut through the code to the underlying structure and mathematics of the model, this seemed essentially the same as the one in the earlier paper. True, Hoa had replaced his flip comment about the butterfly with weather predictions graded by reliability, but it was still true that until you got into the infinite loop of adding variables and revising the nonlinear-equations system, there were no predictions Hoa graded as reliable enough by his standards. He still had not solved the problem of the unpredictably large results owing to small variations that, according to Johnny, plagued all attempts to model complex chaotic systems.

Markel had just reached that point in his reasoning when Illart announced that it was time for their sleep shift. Under the circumstances, the only thing he could possibly do was wait until his father started snoring and then sneak a portable console into his sleep tube to try out the new model for himself.

Despite Johnny Greene's certainty that the built-in checks in the system would prevent his inadvertently crashing the ship's computers, he decided

the portable console and lay with his arms behind his head, thinking. If Dr. Hoa's work was this far from completion, why had he found it necessary to flee Khang Kieaan?

Next shift, the Haven was settling into orbit around Rushima, and Illart was too busy preparing to negotiate for the Council with Rushima to answer Market's questions. Markel wound up, as usual, perched on Johnny Greene's cluttered worktable in the CaN, or Computation and Navigation.

"Hoa hasn't actually been working much on the prediction model since that paper you first saw," Johnny said, supporting Markel's deductions of the shift before. "He's a meteorologist by trade, not a mathematician, and he says what that model needs is some new mathematical insights-and he sure hasn't got them."

"Then why did he really want to leave Khang Kieaan? The original work has been out for over a year. Isn't it a little late for him to worry about somebody misusing his research? Besides," Markel added, as snidely as befitted somebody who'd been up for most of his sleep shift comparing a cleverly disguised "new model" with its virtually identical predecessor, "you can't even use this one, let alone misuse it."

"Oh, don't underrate Hoa's work," Johnny said, "it's the best weather-prediction model going, and even if it's not long-range or perfect, it ought to

your brains that way."

"I'm not- " Markel began. Johnny hushed him with a hand signal that dated back to the time of his first arrival on the Haven, when he'd spent hours playing Miners and Martians with a lonely kid whose father was wrapped up in Council business and in grieving for a mother Markel could barely remember. That waggle of the fingers, Markel remembered, meant, "Hush, we are observed."

And the slight crook in the thumb meant "Follow me silently."

The "Garden" was actually the part of the Havens hydroponics unit that was open to general view: a network of narrow trails on the spongy damp flooring of the unit, past flowers and fruits and greens that had been carefully trained to drape over the edges of their ugly tubs. Markel had never seen the point of it, but the Starfarers of his father's generation, who had actually wanted - wanted! he thought in amazement-to become dirt farmers, who remembered living dirtside in the inefficient alternation of light and darkness that didn't fit human biorhythms, insisted they needed this gardenlike section to remind them of their past lives.

Today, though, there were no visitors other than Johnny and him. Probably everybody was too busy 'preparing for the Rushima negotiations, or too anxious to hear the results, to take time for smelling the flowers.

about a baby elephant who got into terrible trouble and had its nose pulled until it became a trunk, all because it refused to stop asking annoying questions.

"You haven't actually told me anything yet," Markel pointed out, "except that there's something to tell. Now that I know that, of course I'm going to be curious." He grinned at Johnny.

"All right. I told you Hoa hasn't been working on the weather-prediction model for over a year, and that's true. This paper we've been given to read is just a rehash and slight improvement of his earlier stuff, put out to convince the heads of his research lab on Khang Kieaan that his more recent work has not been productive and that he is going back to the prediction model. The fact is that his experiments have been quite successful. Terribly successful," Johnny added in somber tones. "He didn't want them to fall into the hands of any of the three Khang Kieaan parties for fear that whichever party had it would use his work to destroy the other governments, and probably destroy the planet in the process. And there were too many people involved in the work to keep it secret indefinitely; even though he was the only one who knew all the parts of the project and could put it together, he was afraid some lab assistant or graduate student would let out enough to get the head of the lab interested. He had already converted his notes to a single datacube and erased all his working files, and he was prepared to

that you shouldn't be asking questions right now. Sengrat, because if we can find a useful application for the work, he'll be in charge of building the equipment needed. I don't know who else. Not many."

Markel could tell when he was beaten. "You could at least tell me what it's about."

"I could at least get my head ripped off by your father for breaching security to the extent I already have," Johnny muttered. "Look, kid. If I tell you the general area Hoa's been working on, do I have your word of honor that you'll stop asking questions, and you won't hack into the ship's system to get any more information on it, until it's released for public consumption? He's taking a big step here. He doesn't trust his own people to use this work wisely, but he does trust the Starfarers. Do you have any idea what that says about the reputation men like your father have built up in a decade of fighting for justice? And do you see what a betrayal of Hoa's trust it would be if we let word of the results spread as soon as we knew what he'd been working on?"

Dry-mouthed, Markel nodded. "Okay," he said. "You have my word I won't ask any more." The next thing cost him an effort to say, but he managed it anyway. "You don't even have to tell me what it's about, if you don't want to. Besides," he couldn't resist adding, "I bet I can guess."

exaggeration to say that he can call down lightning out of the heavens."

True to his word, Markel did no more investigating of Dr. Hoa's recent research. Instead, he put in a casual quarter of an hour answering the questions the electronic math tutor had Allocated for that week, then decided to revert to last year's childish pursuits and play a few rounds of SimArmageddon. But the console beeped a warning at him instead of bringing up the sim game, and neon green capital letters flashed a message on the screen.

YOUR ACCESS TO GAMES HAS BEEN RESTRICTED UNTIL YOU WRITE THAT TERM PAPER FOR THE LANGUAGE AND COMPOSITION TUTOR. LOVE, ILLART.

Markel hated actually composing papers-language was so clumsy compared to the pure, sparse beauty and rigorous meanings of mathematics and computer languages. He felt sure that he could easily enough hack his way around whatever restrictions Illart had imposed. No First-Gen Starfarer could know his way around the Haven's computers the way the children of the Starfarers did. But Illart would probably consider that dishonorable.

With a sigh Markel settled down to think over the assignment. Research and write the biography of an adult with whom you are personally acquainted. Verify all statements with documentation and interviews. Where there is a conflict between documentation and the personal account, re-

offense at anything Markel wrote, but he was a slippery customer; Markel had already discovered that Johnny was vague about certain episodes in his past and that a lot of his life had somehow slipped through the bureaucratic meshes of the galactic Lattice.

Everybody else would be doing some First-Gen Starfarers; Markel cringed at the thought of hearing all those histories of the Theft of Esperantza from various points of view. He would have to do something different . . . there was that woman Sengrat had mentioned, Nueva Fallona of Palomella. She must be quite old, at least thirty, but Markel wouldn't mind interviewing her one bit. He thought about glimpses of a curtain of straight, iridescent, reddish bronze hair, a firm chin, eyes that always seemed to be looking into some distance only she could see. And she was intriguing, with that slight limp and the elegant cane she used, made of a reddish bronze to match her hair, turning her disability into an affectation. Probably she'd been tortured by the Palomellese government and was too proud to talk about her past sufferings. Yes, she'd definitely be an interesting subject. Besides, Markel would bet nobody else in his age class would think of doing a Palomellese; it wouldn't have occurred to them that they could access Palomella's databases via the Lattice. True, there'd be just a little hacking involved . . . but it was research for an assigned paper, Markel told himself virtuously.

the kitchens and get a bowl of hotchpotch for you?"

"No, thanks," Illart said. "They sent in food between shifts, so we wouldn't have to break for mess."

"How come?" Market thought he knew the answer, but he wanted the satisfaction of hearing it from his father. "You always said it was a good idea to break up long meetings, give everybody a chance to simmer down."

Illart rubbed the back of his neck with one hand, and Markel knew from the gesture that his father was suffering one of the agonizing tension headaches that had plagued him ever since he took over from Andrezhuria as First Speaker. Perhaps it was time he handed over to Gerezan. Markel slipped out of his tube and squatted behind Illart to rub the tense cords of muscle in his neck.

Illart sighed with relief. "That's better. You've your mother's touch. When I came in hot and sweaty and aching from the fields, Aiora used to rub the ache out of my muscles as lightly as a butterfly's wing."

Markel could almost remember the scene -or was it just that Illart had reminisced about it so many times? All that Markel could truly remember of their life on Esperantza was the communal creche where Illart had left him for the long hours of daylight after his mother died. He couldn't even remember what his father had been like in those days; he was usually asleep by the time Illart came in from the fields to collect him. He'd been looking

justice, to admit that he for one didn't really want to go back to Esperantza or any other dirtside life. Crowded and dilapidated the Haven might be, but it was far more home to Markel than any vague memories of dirtside life.

And he mustn't let Illart guess that, ever. It would hurt him too much. "So tell me about the meeting," he said instead. "How come you didn't break for mess, and didn't 'cast any of the discussion?" Usually, although not always, the Council meetings were broadcast on a separate channel for any interested citizen to view through the data console.

"We were discussing . . . classified matters," Illart said. "Why would the negotiations with Rushima be classified?" Market asked in his most innocent voice. "After all, everybody knows that's what we're here for."

"They're not going well," Illart said.

"I'm not surprised. After I looked at Dr. Hoa's weatherprediction model, I can see why they might not want to pay for it. Its not that much of an improvement on current systems.'

"Yes, but they don't know that yet," Illart said. "They haven't seen the code . . . they just said no thank you, they've had three years of bad harvests planetwide and they owe so many back taxes to the Shenjemi Federation that they can't even imagine throwing away their credits on high-tech frills. The wording," he added dryly, "is Rushimese, not ours."

some of the other Council members thought we might be able to use that research to convince the Rushimese that they needed our services." Illart sighed again. "If Hoa's work were accurate enough for us to guarantee a season's worth of good growing weather, and if we could afford to wait around during that growing season, it might not be such a bad idea. But he doesn't have that kind of control yet, as Nueva ought to know; she's seen the abstracts Johnny Greene put together for all the Council members. I pointed out that we couldn't predict what would happen if we started discharging pulsed energy into Rushimas ionosphere-we could cause terrible catastrophes on the surface- and do you know what that woman said?" Illart's voice rose in indignation. "That it didn't matter what happened; if we could make their weather interesting enough, they'd be very happy to pay for our services. As if we'd stoop to running a 'protection' racket-pay us or we'll destroy your climate! None of the original Starfarers would stoop to such a thing. Naturally, Andrezhuria and I quashed that idea. But it took forever. Some of the Council actually couldn't see that Nueva was proposing to threaten Rushima until I spelled it out for them in plain language, over and over. The funny thing is," Illart said, yawning hugely, "Nueva herself didn't seem to be that unhappy when I made it clear that we'd never consider such an unethical procedure. The other Palomellese on the Coun-

A dream of flashing lights, laser pulses calling lightning from the clouds, cities going up in silent waves of flame, resolved into the steady three-pulsed flash of the cabin lights that signaled an emergency alert. Markel half fell out of his sleep tube, rubbing his eyes, and turned to Illart for an explanation of this emergency.

Only Illart wasn't there. He must already have gone to deal with the problem . . . but what sort of emergency could call the First Speaker out in the middle of his sleep shift? For engineering problems, Sengrat would have been called; for computer systems, Johnny Greene or one of the other hotshots who carried the CaN. Much as Markel respected his father, he knew that Illart's high position on the Haven was due not to technical expertise but to his reputation for probity and plain speaking. Illart wasn't even that much of a diplomat; when they needed somebody to weasel-word around some system's regulations, Gerezan was the Speaker they called upon to phrase the careful sentences. Well, it was dumb to stand there trying to guess what had happened instead of using the ship's information channels. Markel turned toward the main data console built into the wall of the sitting area, but before he touched it, the screen came to life of its own, casting an eerie pale glow over the darkened chamber. "FREE CITIZENS OF THE HAVEN!" blared the speakers. For once, the sounds came through clear as a bell, with no ominous cracklings in the back-

Speaker. On the other side of the bay stood those who must have been on shift when the emergency, whatever it was, had occurred; their faces were bright and alert, and they were wearing crisply pressed black fatigues. The majority of them seemed to be Palomellese, although Markel recognized Gerezan, Third Speaker, and Sengrat standing with them. With mounting disbelief Markel saw that two of the Palomellese had drawn phasers and were aiming them at the other side of the bay. He had no time to see more before Nueva Fallona's sharply chiseled features filled the screen.

"Free citizens of the Haven," she began crisply, "you have been betrayed, not once, but over and over again through the years, by those who pretended to care for your welfare above their own. This ship, our only home, is in grave disrepair, and the Haven has no funds for refitting and repair. Yet the Speakers of Council who are supposed to guard your fate have paid no attention to your desperate situation; they care more about acting the part of noble and disinterested statesmen than they do about protecting those who depend on them! Furthermore, though they pretend to have a system of democratic elections, the fact is that the power of Council is controlled by the three Speakers, and they have not changed since the first charter of the Starfarers."

Markel frowned. That was true, now he came to think of it. Andrezhuria, Gerezan, and his father had shifted the burden of being First Speaker from

"As a loyal Starfarer, I can no longer stand aside and see this travesty of a government go on until our tanks are empty of -water and our atmosphere is poisoned by failing recyclers," Nueva went on. An abstract part of Markel's mind was impressed by the way she harped on the issues that would immediately excite any space-faring group, while the rest of him was beginning to panic. Something terrible was going to happen. He knew about Nueva and the rest of the Palomellese now; he had to tell Illart immediately, before whatever this was went any further.

The cabin door would not move under his hand. He tugged at the latch to no avail; it wasn't stuck, it was electronically locked. Probably by a command from Central Systems.

"At the eleventh hour we have found a way to salvage ourselves through the work of a new Starfarer, Dr. Ngaen Xong Hoa," Nueva said from the screen. "Proper application of his research can give us the power to control the weather and communications of any planet we visit. Rushima and many others will pay well for the use of this technology, but the faint-hearts who control the Council will not permit it. They would rather see you suffocate in a dying ship than take the risk of using new technology!"

Illart started forward. "No!" he shouted. "That's a lie, Nueva, and you know it! Tell them what Hoa's system will actually do to a planet! Tell them that you don't know the effects of using it, that nobody can predict-"

nals, but they weren't homicidal maniacs. They meant to exile the Speakers to Rushima. It was a crazy plan, but it wouldn't-it couldn't-last long. The Starfarers would never stand for this . . . would they? For the first time he felt uneasy about the sight of Gerezan and Sengrat, fully dressed and alert, standing comfortably among all these armed Palomellese.

Andrezhuria spoke into the silence left by Nueva's last words. "I will happily take a lifeboat to any system you name," she announced, "rather than lend my countenance to your extortion schemes. But we'll be back when the Starfarers realize what you're up to!"

Nueva's smile did not reach her eyes. "Back? Oh, no, I don't think so," she said softly. "Whatever gave you the idea we meant to waste precious resources like lifeboats and oxygen tanks on the fools who have already wasted so much of the Haven's substance? If you won't earn the air you breathe, then you can find your own-out there." She gestured with her phaser toward the door to air locks at the end of the cargo bay.

"Now, just a minute, Nueva," Gerezan protested uneasily. "I never meant - "

"No? Then you, too, are a fool," Nueva said. "Perhaps in sentimental vids people leave their enemies alive, to recover and strike at them again. On Palomella we learned better." She nodded at one of the other armed Palomellese. "Esposito, the prisoners here are those who cannot be reha-

farers from Esperantza, the sort of people who would have agreed with Illart that it was unthinkable to use Hoa's weather control as a weapon against peaceful planets. How much of this had been planned? An extended Council meeting, to make sure that all the dissenting members would be sleeping on the next shift; easy then to surprise the CaN and Engineering departments, and to round up unsuspecting, sleeping people for. . . .

"NO!" Markel hammered at the door, weeping tears of rage and fury. On the screen, the image of his father said, "Esposito, quit waving that thing around, somebody's going to get hurt. If you're going to run this ship, you'd better learn to think ahead."

Illart sounded so calm that Markel thought for a minute he had secret control of the situation, that in a moment he would snap his fingers and the Palomellese would discover themselves outmanned by a large force of armed Starfarers. But instead, Illart strolled toward the air lock as casually as if he were going for a walk in the Garden. "Aiora, my love," he said to the slowly opening door, "it has been too long." He looked directly toward the screen for just a moment. "And we leave those behind who will remember and avenge this treachery." That was his farewell to Markel. Later Markel realized that Illart had not mentioned his name because he did not wish to remind Nueva Fallona that he left a son who would never forgive his exe-

shoulders. Without another word she stepped forward through the inner doors of the air lock, hand in hand with her former husband Ezkerra. The other prisoners followed her, one by one, some protesting, others accepting their fate in benumbed silence.

When the inner doors closed behind them. Market went temporarily mad, beating on the unyielding door and twisting at the walls until his hands were raw and bruised. This could not be happening-it was some sort of nightmare! "No nightmare," said a raw voice he hardly recognized as his own. "You knew what Nueva Fallona was. You knew, and you did not tell Illart." He had a debt to pay for that failure, a task Illart had laid on him in those last words: to remember and avenge. And he could accomplish nothing by crying like a baby or wrestling with the doors as if they could hear his desperation. Markel put his grief aside, and with it the last of his childhood, because he did not have very long to decide what to do before the new guards came for him. They must know that he would never swear loyalty to the regime that had killed his father. Even if they were blind enough to believe in any oath he took, wouldn't the words choke him?

There was only one alternative: he must not be there when they came. It was a good thing he knew the secret insides of the Haven so well. In the icy calm that he had imposed on himself, Markel mentally went over at least three separate ways to exit the cabin without using the locked doors,

strange ship that has been in orbit about our world for the past six hours."

An irritated crackle came from the speaker, ending on a note of inquiry. "But of course I am aware of it. House Harakamian's defenses are, as I am sure you are aware, planetwide; and information, my dear Quiabriel, is the first requisite for proper selfdefense."

But Hafiz had not been aware of the reason why Quiabriel was enlisting his aid. When he learned of it, his eyebrows rose in surprise-not so much at the news that beings similar to the horned girl Hafiz had once sheltered were apparent in vids transmitted from the strange ship, as at the discovery that Quiabriel knew all about his unicorn visitor of four years previously. Something was very wrong with the Harakamian security arrangements, to allow Quiabriel access to such information!

But concerns about his private security system vanished when the broadcasts coming from the ship were transmitted forward to the Harakamian house screens.

What it was broadcasting was not a known language but files of the most awful atrocities he'd ever seen committed, inflicted by vicious-looking members of an alien race on what Hafiz instantly identified as members of Acorna's species. Some, and these must be the males writhing within their torture structures, had larger horns, were obviously taller than Acorna, but helpless. Then the awful visions altered to a spatial map, showing the

celebrated his 110th year of life, "what do we do?"

Misra didn't sound desperate, but there was an edge to his voice. "Is there a channel from our satellite open to the horned ones' ship?"

"Of course, and everyone with any linguistic ability is trying to analyze their language."

Hafiz grimaced. He did have a cube of Acorna opening the Maganos Mining, but he didn't have Rafik, who might or might not remember the few words Acorna had initially used before she had sopped up Basic Universal Interlingua like a sponge. And, as far as Hafiz knew, the escape pod was at Maganos Moon Base, too, and he'd no cube of THAT to display.

Quiabriel had wondered if the vids were some form of threat, but to Hafiz it was obvious that the horned folk felt some warning was required to another sapient race standing in the path of such a viciously predatory race as those videoed.

Hafiz shuddered at the thought of Acorna's lovely slender body encased in any of the instruments of torture displayed. And then at the thought of his own in a similar condition.

"What else is being done?" Hafiz huffed. "As the Third Prophet said, 'Before thine own life and thine own honor, redeem and protect the house from whence thou earnest.' First we must protect House Harakamian-then

"Exactly," Misra said with great satisfaction. "I must contact my heir immediately. ..."

"You have six minutes before the Shield goes up."

For the first time in his life, Hafiz wondered if the Shield, which had cost so much and had been kept so secret, would prove sufficient to the need. As soon as he sent a message to Rafik, he would initiate his own special invasion procedures. They would have been sufficient against any known hazard, but he didn't like the look of these new predators. Especially if the little Horn ship had felt obliged to warn any other sapient species it encountered.

Why could he not remember the few words that Acorna had said to him in her own language?

"Ah!" Now they came floating back to him. "Awi," she had cried in her sleep once. "Awi, Lalli..."

"Misra, I must speak to these Horned Ones!"

"Why? Have you suddenly a method of learning their language unknown to us?"

"For once, Methusalitic relic of a thousand of an era no longer even understood, stop asking questions! PATCH ME THROUGH!"

saying the Horned Ones' equivalent of "Praise to Allah, at last someone who speaks a civilized language!"

That attempt at communication had backfired, but at least he had a vid of Acorna to show, taken secretly two years ago -when she had visited him, and kept by Hafiz for his private enjoyment. When he displayed the pictures of young Acorna romping on the grass and dancing to her own music on the Singing Stones of Skarness, he saw the amazement of the envoys increase.

They fell silent, but their moving eyes and animated gestures indicated that a lively discussion was going on. Why could he not hear it? Oh, well, what difference would it make if he could? He wouldn't have understood what they were saying anyway.

When he also produced the graphic of the inscription on her escape pod, they became so agitated that he wondered if he had turned the information about Acorna over to the wrong sort of Horned Ones.

Hafiz had never been good with charades as a method of communication, but he had the sense to record the movements: the blunt two-jointed hands mimicked a small member of their species, then outspread and uplifted arms and a universally understood expression of query.

In response he nodded, smiled, and gestured to the latest height of Acorna to indicate her maturity.

cube, slotted it in with the Uhuru's code, and sent it off. No sooner had he done that than a great shadow seemed to float through the window and over his house. The Shield had been put in place.

Lost was any contact with the courier ship, and he could not be certain that the message had made it through that device and on to Rafik.

"Well," Misra's acid voice now violated his ears, "did you find out anything?"

"If I did, that damned Shield, ten thousand djinnis fly away with it and drop it into the hell of molten rock, may have prevented it getting through to where this information will be most valuable. Rafik HAS to have that information."

"They call themselves Linyaari," Misra said with that odiously superior tone he so often adopted. "We know their planet of origin, but it has been totally destroyed by these invaders whom they call the Khieevi. They have reestablished a home world only to be forced to run again from these . . . these things. They thought to warn us, and they have other couriers doing the same task in the hope of finding some group strong enough, or militarily advanced enough, to overcome the threat the Khieevi so obviously are. Let me remind you that all communications would now cease even if the Shield were not in place, in case these . . . predators . . . have equipment able to detect even planetary-based signals."

n't have, somewhere, a source of information about ALL the House's business plans, as well as a code key that would allow him to forge his uncle's authorization. In that sense at least, one could always trust one's family. . . . But to do exactly what? Rafik couldn't protect Acorna and manage Hafiz's business simultaneously. Hafiz paced his study and could not decide which choice would cause him most distress.

Rafik was somewhat surprised to receive a message from his uncle, who should know that the Uhuru was already orbiting Laboue and that Rafik would be reporting in person shortly. The message had obviously suffered some damage in transit, and the only word that came through un mutilated was

"Acorna's ..."

Rafik fired off a request for a repetition of the message while he waited for confirmation of his first message, requesting permission to land. The com board gave a warning beep; Rafik glanced over to see that his second message had been returned as undeliverable. There was still no response to the first one ... and a new series of beeps alerted him to the possibility that there would be none. Laboues main communications satellite had stopped transmitting. "Check alternates, display visuals, trace," Rafik snapped, and the visual-display screen came up showing a sphere of cloudy gray, to all appearances completely enclosing the green planet

What sort of threat had that little ship posed, to make Hafiz take the unprecedented step of shutting Laboue off from the rest of the universe with the Shield? Should he stay and try to help from here? After a moments agonizing debate, Rafik decided against it. He had every confidence in Uncle Hafiz s ability to take care of himself. Besides, if this confidence should prove to be misplaced for once, Hafiz would surely not be pleased to see his heir run into the same noose that had captured him. And that garbled message had said something about Acorna... perhaps to warn of some danger threatening her? Clearly his duty was to return to Maganos Moon Base at once, to check up on Acorna, and once there perhaps to enlist Delszaki Li's aid in finding out what disaster had cut off his uncle's communications.

On board the Balakiire, joy and confusion almost overwhelmed the Linyaari envoys at this evidence that one had survived who had long been considered dead to them. They were not, however, so overset that Me-hreenya, the communications specialist, failed to copy and trace the single message that emerged before a shield impenetrable even to their sophisticated equipment blanked out transmissions from the planet below.

Among themselves they did not bother to speak aloud; after so many months of travel, the small crew were all perfectly attuned to one another's

Khieevi. How could one of the survival pods have come so far, to be in the possession of these barbarians?) Thariinye, young and beautiful and arrogantly male, prided himself on his unemotional analytical reasoning. The thought-streams of the whole crew blended, coalescing and separating like partial conversations at a very crowded party.

(We don't know they are barbarians. They may be perfectly civilized people.) The thought-shape that accompanied this concept was of a group of hornless unicorns with flimsy, soft hands and feet. If Khaari had been speaking, the words that went with this thought-shape would have been "people like us."

(Then why won't they treat with us? Anyway, they look like carnivores to me. Did you see those pointy side teeth?)

(We still don't know all the properties of the device Vaanye used to destroy the ship; his research notes went with him. But we can postulate it was developed as an offshoot of his research into space topology and transportation.)

(Who cares about the research! I want to find Feriila's child!)

(Neeva, calm yourself. That they have a vid does not prove that they have the child, only that there has been some previous contact with our kind. The vid was of a young girl; its been three ghaanyi since the explosion; if Feriila's youngling had lived, she would be fully grown by now.)

side effect, the youngling's escape pod was transported into this sector.)

(A lot of "maybes" there.)(Okay, you explain how they got hold of a pod from a ship that was supposed to have been destroyed down to the molecular level three ghaanyi ago.)

(I'm sure she survived. I'm sure of it. The barbarian was holding his hand up to show us how much she'd grown. And that word he kept saying-"Acorna"-that must be what they called her.)

("Acorna"? That word was in the transmission that was sent just before the Shield closed down. It was the only signal I picked up clearly. But it was enough to send that neighboring ship out of orbit.)

(Can we follow it?)

(Of course we can, if Melireenya will give me details of the ship's signal. I didn't get this for nothing.) Khaari tapped the crescent-shaped silver medal that proclaimed her a senior tutor in the Navigators' Guild.

(Might as well do so, then. It certainly doesn't look as if we're going to get any more out of this lot of barbarians. Why did you have to scare them with those vids of Khieevi tortures, Melireenya?)

(Me? I like that! It was your idea to start with vids instead of first collecting enough samples of the language to run the LAANYE, Thariinye!)

democratic fashion of the Linyaari, it was now Neeva's turn to take the lead, and he was obliged to support whatever decisions she made in her own attempt to initiate contact-even if those decisions did seem to him, as now, to be excessively guided by personal concerns.

To be even more than fair, Thariinye reminded himself that a possible missing one of the Linyaari should be of the greatest importance to them all. It was just coincidence that this particular one, if she lived, might turn out to be Neeva's sister-child.

All the same, he felt embarrassed both at his failure and at this public reprimand, and was eager to distinguish himself before the older envoys; a desire which was to cause far more trouble than this brief squabble on board the ship. Cloaked and shielded, the Balakiire followed Rafik's Uhara at a discreet distance, a momentary darkness in space that hovered always in the other ship's blind spot. For fear of alerting their quarry, the Linyaari shut down transmissions with their home base, difficult in any case at this great distance from the civilized world; but within the ship, they discussed their next step endlessly until everybody's thought-patterns converged by minute increments onto the same plan. They had been mistaken to try and skip the language-acquisition phase of initiating contact with a new people; this would, therefore, have to be their first priority after they discovered the other ship's destination. beginnen

make

thought-contact with Others who showed signs of being as "linaryii," in their

own way, as the Linyaari themselves. With highly advanced technology but no

experience in learning second languages, they had taken the obvious step of

devising a learning device that, given a sample of an alien language, could be

used in a few overnight sleep-training sessions to connect the forms of that

language with the thought-forms of basic Linyaari communication. The device

did have the one minor drawback-that it was necessary to establish some

rudimentary dialogue with one of the aliens first, as a basis for further learning;

and they had learned through experience that it could be extremely difficult to

get cooperation before proper communication was established. The nesters of

creatures with a unique ability to disappear into shadows. The Linyaari had slowly established trust over a long period of cautious contacts, until the dharmakoi learned that not all Others were predators and came trustingly to converse with the large horned ones ... a lesson the Linyaari now regretted teaching them, since the dharmakoi had greeted the first Khieevi with the same trust and hence were now extinct. Memories of the time it had taken to gain the trust of the dharmakoi had inspired Thariinye's suggestion that they initiate contact with vids from Khieevi torture ships, showing these barbarians what a mutual enemy they and the Linyaari had. At the time it had seemed like an excellent idea. Now they had returned to their basic contact methods, with a slight difference that was argued out while they followed the other ship. (We don't have time to spend months taming a barbarian. Besides, they are

by an emotion, or rather, by the haughty repression of all emotion; they seemed to

float in a cold empty space.

(It wasn't a total failure,) Melireenya pointed out. (We did learn that your sister-child

may be alive and in this sector, Neeva.)

(I'm just saying that next time I'd like to have a little more meaningful dialogue

and a little less hand waving, all right? It's clear we can't do anything until we

have their language.)

(I didn't say we don't need the language, I said we don't have time to sit outside

their burrows and win their trust little by little, like the Second Envoys did with

the dharmakoi.)

(So what do you suggest, Thariinye-always-in-a-hurry?)

(Isn't it obvious? We'll have to catch one. The one -we're following is handy.)

(That's unethical! We can't deprive a sapient being of liberty without its understanding and consent!)

negotiations.)

(If they are so khievii that they kill strangers who come to them peacefully,

there's no point in negotiating. Those are not the kind of allies we need.)

(Agreed, Neeva, but if you don't terribly mind, I would prefer not to die finding

this out!) Khaari thought with a wry twist other mind that set all four Linyaari

laughing in agreement.

(Perhaps if we could win the barbarian s consent after we have captured and

tamed it. . . ?) Melireenya suggested.

(Bending our laws instead of breaking them, Melireenya?)

(Any good system must be flexible,) Melireenya stood up for herself.

(Hmm. Well. . .)

(We might want to use the barbarian as an envoy, too, rather than speaking

with them directly. Just at first, while we're finding out what happened to your

sister-child. It might be better if they think it's one of their own people inquiring,

Linyaari

code of ethics slightly. After all, our forebears who devised the code governing

first contacts never envisioned encountering something like the Khieevi.)

(I should hope not! Who could imagine anything like that?)

(But now that -we know such beings exist, it is only rational to amend our code

accordingly. Ethical interspecies contact should not require that -we put ourselves into avoidable danger.)

(Ah, but which is more important-our danger, or the fear and anguish we shall

inflict on this hypothetical captive barbarian who will have no idea what is

going on?)

(We can dampen the fear and anguish.)

(Even if it were ethical to mess with its^ mind, we don't know the effects we

might have on its memory. This one may know something about our little lost

one; we daren't use it for a teaching tool.)

their memories of the desired information. Rather, they would ascertain the ships destination, then intercept and board some other ship headed for the same destination, relying on signs and whatever telepathic abilities this species might have to make it clear that they came in peace and meant to harm no one. If one of the barbarians on the ship would come with them willingly, they would use it for a language sample and maybe later employ its services as an envoy. If not, they would let the ship go on its way and try to think of some other stratagem. In either case, since they would be physically present on the vessel, they would have the power to heal any fear experienced by the barbarians during this brief captivity, as well as to blur their memories of the experience so that they would be hesitant to speak of it to others. (What if we find we cannot heal this species?) Neeva fretted. (And even if we

clashed horribly with her personal colors of lavender and creamy white. And the shuttle was fully booked, every seat filled, and in some cases overfilled; the

old woman next to her filled up her own space and overflowed into Kanna's.

And somebody quite nearby had been eating Thai food: the whiff of garlic and

cilantro quite overpowered the usual shuttle smell of carpet cleaner and recycled air. Karina whiled away the long wait for takeoff by explaining to the

old woman next to her, who was going up to try to identify a long-lost great-nephew

or something of the sort, how extremely trying she found experiences like this, with the crowd of humanity pressing so close against her.

"I know just what you mean, dearie," the old bat said comfortably. She shifted

position and propped her legs up on Karma's cariyall. "They don't make these

shuttle seats near big enough for full-figured women like us, do they?"

Karma glanced at the old broad's shapeless bulk, bulging out of a shiny stretch

of

water falling onto smooth stones. Karina had been tinkling gaily ever since. "It

is the presence of so many souls, each with its own weight of misery and

secret fears and bodily pains. I am a Sensitive, you see: I can feel these things." She pressed a hand to her heart.

"Me too," her seatmate agreed amiably. "I feel it most particular after I eat fried

foods. Looks like that's where it's getting you now. A burning pain, like, right

under the breastbone?"

"Not in the slightest," Karina snapped. "Besides, I never eat animal fats or take

alcohol."

"Can't be too careful when you get to our age, can you?" The old woman

chuckled comfortably and reached into a capacious silver-mounted traveling

bag. It looked as if she were bringing out her portable photo album . . . and it

limit her

healing work to those with whom she felt a certain spiritual oneness. At

first

she'd thought her seatmate might turn out to be one of those-the gaudy

display

of rainbow-flashing rings and bracelets on her fat white wrists and fin-

gers

suggested someone who could pay adequately for healing whatever

pained

her. Now Karina began to think it would be wiser to pass the rest of the

flight in

contemplative silence.

She announced that it was time for her personal meditation, leaned

back, and

closed her eyes, trying to ignore both the plump thigh pressing against

hers

and her seatmate's agreement that a little nap after lunch was a good

thing at their age. Irritation would interfere with the alpha waves, and she

wanted to

arrive on Maganos projecting a serene calmness that would reassure

this

it, which was why she had acknowledged Karina's fifty-seventh message. Now

she would take the unicorn girl under her wing, teach her how to use her powers for the good of all without exhausting herself and, above all, without

simply giving it away as she'd done during her weeks on Kezdet two years ago.

The very thought made Karina feel slightly ill. Never mind; once she and Acorna were partners the girl would learn better.

Karina fingered her pendant of opalescent moonstone set in silver and visualized a pink light of love all around herself, reaching out to envelop

Acorna in its roseate glow. She felt an answering pulse, alien and surprisingly

strong, and definitely welcoming. Wonderful! The shuttle couldn't be more than

halfway to Maganos, and already she could feel Acorna's presence ... it had to

be the unicorn girl, didn't it? Karina willed herself to sink deeper into trance. It

was awfully hard to concentrate with that silly speaker squawking at them

from the babbling, grumbling minds all around her.

A firm tap on her shoulder and a warm, mint-flavored gust of breath broke the
trance.

"Have one of these, dearie," her seatmate said, holding out a mint that
had

suffered from being clutched too long in a hot, sweaty palm. "Wonderful
for the
motion sickness, they say."

Before Karina could explain that she never permitted her mind to experience

such illusions as motion sickness, the shuttle gave a sickening swoop
and a

sideways lurch that took her breath away, then steadied. Someone
across the

aisle made retching sounds. Karina had to close her eyes and remind
herself

firmly that she -was thinking of Higher Things and that motion sickness
was a

false messenger. Someone farther up the cabin gave a faint shriek that -
was

frightened nor amazed to see a tall, silver-maned being with a golden horn

stepping lightly through a door that should have been closed and double-locked

until the shuttle entered the artificial atmosphere of Maganos. Outside the open door could be seen a stable, sourceless, golden glow where there should have been empty space, blackness, and immediate death for all the shuttle passengers.. "Don't scream, you idiot, it's only Lady Lukia!" one of the passengers admonished another, using one of the names by which Acorna had been known during her brief stay on Kezdet.

"She's comin' to take me, and I don't want to be took!" cried the girl who'd first screamed, burying her head in her trembling arms.

The unicorn-person said something in a liquid, slightly nasal language, and touched the girl's head. She looked up, trembling, and met those golden eyes.

The old lady beside Karina was clutching the arms of her seat, white-knuckled,
and saying prayers under her breath. Karina realized that the other shuttle passengers had no idea what was really going on.
"Excuse me," she said tightly, pushing herself out of the seat and starting for the aisle. "Excuse me, please, thank you, if you could move your knees a little, sir, thank you. Sorry about that, there's nothing to worry about, it's me they've come for. ..."
Finally, disheveled and breathless, she reached the aisle amid disgruntled murmurs about people who didn't have the consideration to go before they got seated and people who ought to pay for two shuttle seats if they were going to take up all that space.
foists, Karina thought. We've been lifted into Another Dimension a.n2
Acorna

go

away with aliens no matter how benevolent, Karina walked down the aisle and

held out one hand gracefully to the unicorn-person.

"It's all right," she said. "I know you've come for me. Don't worry about these

others; they're not used to psychic manifestations on this plane of being."

Acorna-for surely it must be she: there was no other like her-tilted a long,

shapely face and said something like, "Llirivhanyithalli? "

"Charmed, I'm sure," Karina replied. Why hadn't anyone mentioned that Acorna

didn't speak Basic Interlingua? Oh, well, they could communicate on a psychic

level. She beamed and projected, as strongly as she could, the image of herself and Acorna together and surrounded by the rosy pink light of perfect love and

accord. When Acorna still looked puzzled, she put one hand to her moonstone

pendant and asked it to lend her its energies for the projection.

threat?)

(Not in these carnivores.) Thariinye had watched randomly captured vids from

intercepted satellite transmissions while they had followed the other ship across space to the lunar base where it had landed. (They bare their teeth to

indicate sociability and greeting.)

(Oh, all right, if you say so. Anyway, I suppose we can reassure it later.)

Karina let out a sigh of relief as Acorna turned those large golden eyes back

upon her and extended a ... hand? Whatever- the digits were thick and clumsy

compared to human fingers, but soft like a hand. Karina grasped the offered

hand and felt a twinge of unease. Was she picking up some trouble from Acorna's mind? Or was it the fact that Acorna's eyes were golden, not silver as

in the stories? Or was it the fact that she seemed taller and more muscular

than Karina had pictured her? Almost masculine in her aura. Perhaps it was the

door. "I need to get my bag."

That occasioned another interlude of panting, wriggling, and apologizing
as

Karina fished her carryall out from among other passengers' feet. She
emerged

from the struggle flushed and anxious that Acorna would have become
impatient, so she did not demur when Acorna gestured that she was to
go first

up the aisle and through the door. The golden glow outside the door
blinded

her, and she thought about Higher Powers and stepped into it with com-
plete -well,

nearly complete - Love and Trust anyway.

Only when the other ship appeared in the glowing light, when she saw
even

more unicorn-people excitedly awaiting her appearance, did Karina re-
alize that

she was just as badly off as the other passengers on the shuttle.

She didn't have a clue what was really going on.

four.Rudhlma, Unified Federation Date 334.05.17

a message beacon. As he and Acorna saw no need to leave a message that would undoubtedly not be retrieved until whenever the colony remembered to look for messages, they thought they would simply identify a decent-sized settlement and land there. Rushima, being new with only one generation born on-planet, would not be startled or surprised by a single ship arriving. They could pay for anything they needed by transferring credits from the Li Alining Company to whatever credit institution the Rushimese nominated. But as the Aca[^]ecki made its approach, Acorna frowned. "This is the sickest-looking agricultural planet I have ever seen. Whatever can they be growing? It looks all brown, and yet this is the summer for this hemisphere. Something should look green. Even the forests look sick."

"You're right. Maybe we should try the northern hemisphere. This planet, it

Acorna said. "Floods?" "Sure looks like 'em," Calum had to agree. "But
planetwide?"

That just doesn't figure into"-he tapped out some directions to the
screen

showing the Galactic - "the sort of weather they're supposed to have."

Then they overflowed a vast wasteland with withered trees which had
given up

the struggle to survive without the rain they required. "If they don't do

something quickly, erosion will ruin this land forever," Acorna said, for
she had

studied ecology along with many other subjects during her years aboard
the

mining ship. They continued on, over a low range of mountains, covered
with

sun-seared vegetation.

"Noah, you been at it again?" Calum said facetiously, to cover his shock
at the

devastation: one area of land drowning next to one that had been sun-
baked to

extinction.

since

their landing had stirred up the drowned soil.

"Phew!" Calum said, turning his head away from the smell that now rose

to

their nostrils. Acorna's nose twitched, but her main concern was food,

not

water.

"What's happened?" she asked. "Think the soaking's reached the sewage-disposal

units?"

He pinched his nostrils. "I'll just get me a set of plugs." He paused as he

passed Acorna: there were no plugs for her wider nostrils. But then she

wasn't

as particular about smells, bad or good, as he was. She seemed to like

them

all-the more intense, the better.

"There's no one around, either," Acorna said, shielding her eyes to peer around and adjusting to the odor. "I don't understand this."

Her digestive juices gurgled in complaint. She hadn't seen a need to ra-

tion

there. I'll"-he

looked down at the water surrounding them-"wade over to the buildings
and

see what I can see. Maybe even ground transport . . . delete that:

what we'd require is aquatic transport." He looked at the landing ramp.

"Doesn't look all that deep." The ramp's edge was only centimeters into
the

flood.

Blithely he stepped off, into water up to his ankles. The next step had
him in

water up to his knees. And he grinned sheepishly back at Acorna.

"Must've been a rut or something," he said.

"Well, I can at least help us see where we're going," she said, and,
kneeling on

the ramp, bent over so that her horn touched the water. A few swirling
motions

and the silty, smelly floodplain cleared magically. She dropped her nose
into

the clear water and drank. "Hmm, rather nice without the effluvium.

There were

fertilizers dissolved in the water, too."

across to the

hill."

With that, she started off, splashing through the water at a dead run, occasionally leaping a few strides, her delighted laughter trickling back to him.

Now that he could see through the water, Calum stepped over the minor ruts

that had nearly sunk him before Acorna purified things. The grooves in the dirt

had probably been made by vehicle wheels on the soft ground of the landing

area. Odd that they wouldn't have paved this area over with something solid.

Still, this was a new colony, and most likely it didn't have time or money for refinements.

Time or money for much at all, he decided when he saw the condition of the

airfield buildings. They had an uninhabited and disused look to them, with

dumped all this water on what was supposed to have been growing here. A

badly warped and distorted sign over the door, half-covered with mold, read,

LOADING CENTER WEST-AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

When he touched the door panel, it was slimy. Wiping his hand, he pressed

harder for admittance, and, creaking badly, the door gradually opened.

Obviously no one had been here for yonks. It must have been in use once, for

there were benches, tables, openings in the sidewall which had led to a ticket

counter, and to a weighing office. The size of the platform suggested heavy

cargoes had been shifted through here.

Only one door was locked, and that gave -with just a little push, as the damp-soaked

locking apparatus fell from the softened wood. Calum had hit pay dirt-
he'd

found the main office, to judge by all the files. Someone had spent time

lessly

several times before he decided that there was nothing powering it.

Frowning, he went back outside to see solar panels on the roof. Not much

would rot or otherwise damage the materials from which such panels were

usually manufactured, but they did have to have at least four hours of sun to

operate. Clouds were already gathering to the west. Rather fast, he thought,

remembering they'd landed in clear skies and hadn't even seen a weather front

moving in on their approach from the west. Odd that! And there wasn't so

much as a breeze to ruffle the flooded field.

He caught sight of Acorna in her grazing posture and was delighted that she, at

least, had had some luck. He hoped he'd have his share as well. There had to be something wrong for the solar panels to fail. Possibly the cable connecting

climbed

down and splashed to the AcaSecki, got a belt of the tools he'd need,
and

waded back to the building.

It didn't take him long to splice the cable and, since he rather thought
there'd

been some sunlight, maybe he could just rouse someone on this planet
on the

com unit. He headed into the rundown building. Power he had, and he
sent a

brief message, asking to be met by someone in authority at the field so
he

could transact business in acquiring new seeds for a hydroponics tank
system.

Then he trudged back to the AccSecki to get himself a bit of lunch and
await

the arrival of anyone who'd heard the call.

That was why he didn't see Acorna waving frantically in his direction, or
hear

her distant voice trying to warn him of the flotilla of assorted water ves-
sels

fervently grateful for the hasty departure that had precluded his suggesting

that Mercy might accompany them on the journey-ostensibly to provide Acorna

with feminine company, that would have been his excuse. His sweet, gentle

Mercy had already been exposed to too many dangers in her time -as a spy for

the Child Liberation League within the offices of the corrupt Kezdet police. She

didn't need to deal with floods, famine, riots, and whatever else was now coming their way, clearly spoiling for a fight.

He girded himself quickly with an arms belt, snapped on the field that would

keep them outside and him safely within the ship, and just made it to the hatch

before the first of the paddled boats arrived with its cargo of many men and

women. Most of them were carrying sharp-edged or heavy tools; all of them

wanted to

keep folks far enough away from the ramp so that he could grab a stunner if he

needed to.

"I'm Calum Baird ottheAcaSecki. We've had a 'ponies failure and need to buy

plants and seeds from you." "Plants and seeds, he wants," a bearded man cried, laughing almost

hysterically. That was the general mood of those who poled or paddled their

craft to surround the AcaDecki. They kept repeating his words with variations

of derision and angry frustration.

"This is Rushima, isn't it?" Calum asked, perplexed. "What you bastards have

left of Rushima, you mean," the spokesman said, and the muttered growls of

his companions did nothing to reassure him as to the general hostile mood.

"We're from Maganos Moon Base at Kezdet on our way to Coma Berenices on

"Hey, now, he could be telling the truth," a tenor voice suggested. A young man in a raft with ten-centimeter sides glided to the side of the Aca()eckt, and read out their current alpha-numeric identification code. "That's not a Starfarer ID. Could be from Kezdet."

"So could half the pirates in the galaxy," said the leader, who evidently was all too aware of Kezdet's lax registration laws, which attracted all sorts of illicit business, "and if those Starfarers are as far-flung as they keep telling us they are, could be one of theirs anyhow. But it's shortly going to be ours. ..."

There was movement as some of the bigger men slipped into the water and started for the ramp.

"Hey, the water out here's clear," a woman said, astonishment and delight in

Water, water, everywhere nor any Drop to Drink-the phrase popped in from some distant corner of his brain.

"I did it." Acorna stepped gracefully around the after section of the ship. She also held her hands up, not that she could have hidden anything in the short, skintight tunic she was wearing.

"Purifying water is one of our skills."

Calum closed his eyes in what could have been prayerful exhortation. Acorna

had learned a great deal about humans during her experiences 'with Kisia

Manjari and Didi Badini's attempts to kill her, but she was still far too trusting.

These people might have softened a little during their brief talk, but they had started out as a mob out for vengeance. And, if purifying water just happened

to be a must for this section of a waterlogged planet, Acorna might find herself

an unwilling resident of Rushima.

slightest

signal -with the fingers of one hand, trying to convey the necessity of boarding

the ship as quickly as possible. Even the few who were out of their boats

wouldn't be able to move as quickly through the water as Acorna could.

"Can you tell us what has happened to your planet? For something most disastrous has," she said in her sweet and calming voice. Kven Calum began

to feel more serene, less anxious. He blinked. With water still dribbling down

the corners of his mouth, the spokesman regarded her with considerably less

animosity than he had accorded Calum.

"Them Starfarers"-he ^erked a finger heavenward- "they're running a bloody

bandulu bidness." "Huh?"

"Protection racket," the young man who'd read iA\le AcaSecki's registration

translated. "They offered to give us weather-prediction services for a fee, and

and there's no point in trying to raise anything in this." He pointed to the floodland. "And if we tried rice, they'd fry us."

"WHO?" Calum and Acorna said with such incredulity and outrage that their

chorus provided more evidence of their innocence than any eloquence.

"Starfarers," was the universal reply. "They've been making a mess of the

weather."

"Starfarers? I thought they -were just a political protest group," Calum said.

"They've been 'making it rain'?" Acorna was still dumbfounded and glanced at

Calum, but she was also surreptitiously moving nearer the ramp.

"Can you manipulate weather like that?" she asked Calum with such incredulity that it provoked sour laughter from several sources.

"Not with any accuracy," Calum said, "and you have to work off existing weather conditions." The spokesman gave a hollow laugh. "Well, then, they got 'em some kin' obeah

beyond any you know. They got half our fields soaked and t'other half dried up

like a desert, and it ain't gonna get better till we pays up."

arrival seemed to have eased.

"And how'd you fix the com unit?" the spokesman said.

"A new length of cable was all it needed, and the sun we had this morning."

"First sun we've seen in yonks." Then the man gestured to the flooded land.

"Not that it'll do much good. We're promised"-and his expression was sour-. . .

another six inches of rain if we fail to accept their 'protection.'"

"You say this has been going on since the Starfarers arrived?" Calum asked.

"By the way, I'm Calum Baird, Li Moon Alining Enterprises, and this lovely lady

is Acorna DelszakiHarakamian."

"Know those names," the younger man said. "You're connected with the House

Harakamian?" he asked Acorna, and didn't seem to realize that she had edged

closer to the side of the ship, nearer the ramp.

"Mr. Delszaki Li and the House Harakamian are my guardians," she said

ramp. "I'll just get you one, shall I?"

Calum's left hand depressed the field-generator switch, and he gave her a nod.

With a nimble and unexpected leap, she was on the ramp and moving inside

while Calum reinstated the protective field just in time to slow the startled

Flouse, who had lunged forward after Acorna only to find his arms slowed as if

swimming through cold molasses.

"That is," Calum said crisply, feeling more able to take a firm line now that

Acorna was safe, "we'll trade our water-purification services for seeds-
legumes

and broad-leafed greens for choice. Oh, and zinc and copper sulfates to
replace the trace elements our system accidentally dumped. We'd only
need

small quantities." Flouse's expression showed his disappointment at
Acorna's escape. But she

was smiling at him so charmingly that he shook his head, abashed, and
shrugged.

blackmailing you," Calum said. "Unauthorized interference with a developing

planet is a serious offense."

"Tell them!" half a dozen voices chorused as even more fingers pointed skyward.

Joshua pointed to the group in one of the motorized boats. "Jason?" he called,

and the man at the tiller answered with a loud "Yo!"

"You got the security code. Get us some chicka-chicka peas and greens seeds.

And bring a few seedling chard and rhubarbs. And a canister of Solution B." He

turned back to Calum and Acorna, showing his eagerness to complete the deal.

"Anything else?"

"You wouldn't happen to have alfalfa seeds, would you?" Acorna asked wistfully.

"A sack of alfalfa it is, ma'am. Now, lemme see this purifier of yours'

"I'll just get one," she said, and before Calum could ask her what the hell she

said,

shaking his head. "Boiled water isn't the same, and we couldn't even bathe or

wash clothes without the smell staying in. Flooded out our sewage system by

the third week, and we hadn't a chance of stopping it. Some folks"-
Flouse

jerked his head in a northerly direction-"have tried sending tankers just to get

our water to keep crops going, but the convoys keep getting blown up by

lightning. Midday, at that, and not a blink of warning. Just zap!" - he brought

both hands together in a resounding slap that momentarily stopped the kids

playing - "whole damned convoy's crisped."

"How do they expect you to pay them if they've ruined your economy?
". "They'll lift the weather controls if we agree to supply them with all their food

and the other agricultural stuff we were producing to pay off our colonial debts."

Calum

quickly saw that the Rushimese would be left with barely enough to feed their

own families. "Any idea where they came from?" "Dunno. They're mighty short

on explanations." They both could hear metallic whangs and bangs echoing

down the companionway, and Calum had to pretend he knew exactly what

Acorna was doing . . . when he was dying of suspense and anxiety.

But while she was contrapturing whatever she was making, he found out all he

could extract from Flouse and the others. The return of the launch coincided

with Acorna's reappearance at the hatch, carrying a length of ordinary three-centimeter

pipe, with valves on each end which were obviously meant to be attached to an intake point of the main town water supply. "Now, this purifier

has interstellar patents from here to the last century," Acorna said, pointing to

in Flouse's eager hands. That was when he noticed the small slice that she had taken from her horn. Was she going to be read a riot act when they were safely away from here!!! Calum did not forget to switch back on the field that separated them from the crowd. But they had what they needed, and so did the Aca()eck.l.

"I promise you, we'll send out word of this to the authorities as soon as we're clear of planetary interference," Calum said. "Now, if you'll just step back, we'd best be off."

Acorna had disappeared the instant she had the 'ponies' replacements, so it was up to him to get them safely away.

Calum carefully lifted the AcaSecki in low-energy mode before touching the thrusters lightly enough to move far enough away from the flooded land to

would as soon as he had a finger free. As far as he knew, there was no process that could deliver rain to one area of a planet, lightning on command to another, and relentless sun to bake a third. That was undoubtedly why he didn't check the screen until he felt the unmistakable yank of a tractor beam ... a very powerful tractor beam . . . snatching the AcaSeckl right off her ascent and inexorably into the maw of a massive spaceship, no doubt owned and manned by the Starfarers.

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Calum tried desperately to send a Mayday to Maganos, but they'd been ahead of him all along, and his signal bounced harmlessly back.

Calum was damning himself left, right, and center before Acorna came running to the bridge.

"Well, I've a few choice words for such scummy piratical opportunists.
..."

She was so angry her horn glowed, and Calum buried his head in his arms.

He'd done it now. Truly he'd done it. How was he going to save Acorna from

this? He only hoped the Starfarers had been so busy with their felonious extortion that no hint of a strange species with a horn had reached their com

unit.

"Acorna," and his voice cracked in his anxiety, "could you pretend to be a

pet?"

"A pet?"

"It's the only thing I can think of."

Acorna stood very still, her tall form dwarfing him in the pilot's chair. She gave

a little sniff, her wide silvery eyes regarding him. "I don't think they'd buy that."

i

"Then let's play it as cool as possible."

"While I can't be a pet, Calum, I can be a Didi," she said, and was off down the corridor, shouting over one shoulder, "You be the pet, this time, Calum. Just bright enough to speak when spoken to." He reviewed that in his mind as he felt other things happening to ??????????????, like the clang of metal against the main hatch. They were unlikely to be able to break through, but what if they decided to blow or shoot the hatch off? Better to surrender and maintain the ship intact. He quickly keyed in a code and turned off the system with the special switch he himself had installed. Let 'em try to break that, he thought with some satisfaction. Then he switched on the exterior speakers. "Wait a damned minute, willya?" He flipped off the security lock on the hatch. Anyone could open it now from outside. "I'm coming. I'm coming. Doan like no one messing up the ship. My

side to

side of the narrow passageway before falling in an embarrassing heap
to the

deck.

"Really!" came the sultry remonstrance from an Acorna Calum didn't
recognize. He blinked, as much to clear the shock of that backhanded
blow as

to make sure his eyes still functioned. "Was that necessary? Poor Ca-
lum

doesn't have many brains anyway, and the ones he's got don't need to
be

rattled. He'll do whatever you tell him anyway. He's been trained to."

The attention of the heavies was immediately focused on the vision in
black.

Calum vaguely remembered Judit, Mercy, and Acorna giggling over
some of

the outfits that had been concocted to either emphasize or hide her
horn. This

outfit was not only skintight, but the high collar disguised the long fall of
Acorna's silvery mane. It was cleverly attached to the ravishing black
hat which

tainly didn't down there." She pointed a contemptuous gloved hand down, indicating

Rushima, which they had so obviously just left. Acorna's gloves effectively

disguised the differences in her hands, and her cloven hooves were hidden

within the apparently stack-soled boots just visible under her long pantaloons.

"What's a Didi?"

A disembodied voice echoed outside. "Bring them aboard. I want to question

them if they've been on Rushima," said a woman's voice.

"Anything you say," drawled Acorna's imitation Didi Badini in what Calum

decided was an excellent imitation of the real bonk-shop owner's voice.

With an elegant swaying step, Acorna the "Didi" made her way past the first of

the guards, deliberately brushing against him in such an enticing fashion that

Calum hoped she wasn't overdoing her role.

obvious henchmen, he was immediately hauled away, probably by the man

who had backhanded him. As his collar was tightly held by whoever kept pushing him forward, he couldn't be sure. But he was pushed down a few miles

of antigrav tubes to the bowels of the enormous spaceship and shoved into a

bare cell. It was equipped with two slabs of some plastic, strapped up against

opposing walls, a sanitary appliance, and that was all. Not even a water supply.

"Nor any Drop to Drink," he murmured, then reminded himself that this cell was

likely bugged. So he released the fastening on one slab and sat down on it.

And began to worry about Acorna. Could she pull off her fancy-dress persona?

And what good would it do? These people were the type who'd think nothing of

spacing superfluous bodies. He was suddenly not so happy to have been cast

"Oh. And you had no luck on Rushima?" This seemed to amuse the woman.

Acorna snorted contemptuously. "If it isn't flooded out, its desert or burned

out. Not what I was toFd to expect," Acorna said indignantly. "No one would

even come out to speak to us, no matter where we landed. Ruined one outfit in.the wet, and another has sand just driven into the seams." She let her voice

flatten with annoyance. "Wasted time and fuel. As I said, I'm Didi Badini. ..."

She cocked her head, as if she expected to be informed of her interrogator's

name.

"Welcome to the Haven, Didi Badini. I am Captain Nueva of the Starfarers."

"You wouldn't happen to have a few excess . . . children, or females ... or even

that sort of male type ... I could relieve you of?" Acorna said.

"We've . . . sort of ... relieved ourselves of the excess."

find a few replacements, you know. Tastes get jaded so quickly."

Nueva made a motion, and two of the guards behind her grabbed Acorna by

the arms. She could have thrown them off easily enough, being far stronger

than she looked, but unless she also had Calum, displaying any of her discreetly concealed abilities was futile and possibly dangerous to them both.

As she was turned and taken off in the direction Calum had been hauled, she

saw that the AcaDeckl was tightly held by deck clamps fore and aft.

"Let's see how quickly your tastes jade," Nueva said, with an unpleasant laugh.

Over her shoulder, Acorna saw Nueva signal a waiting group of men and

women, carrying various kinds of testing equipment and tools, to board the

ship.

Acorna didn't think that Calum would have forgotten to disable the AcaSecki

force-field

lights. So another timeconsuming puzzle would keep her from being totally jaded. Insane, maybe, but not jaded. Did they fill the cells in order? Or

had Calum "een pushed into the first empty one . . . since this Nueva person

had boasted of relieving herself of excess personnel? After using the sanitary

appliance, -with a deft but concealing shift of her pantaloons, Acorna unfastened one of the two slabs and lay down on it. She also decided to keep

in character. She didn't doubt for a moment that anything she said would be

monitored. So why had they separated her from Calum? Two people in the

same fix would certainly exchange information. Oh, dear, perhaps she had laid it on a bit thick that Calum was useless. At that moment she would have given

anything to be comforted by her "uncle."

She was roused from a restless sleep by a hissing noise and, as she lay prone

then.

The child slowly let a rope down through the opening. She stood on the slab,

thinking to assist by being closer to the vent. But instead the kid made violent

gestures for her to refasten the slab to the wall.

As if she'd never been there. Good thinking. There seemed to be just enough

rope to reach her outstretched hands.

If this if all the've got, we'll never reach Calum even with the slab down, she

thought.

She heard a soft, interrogative "Mmm?" from above, as if her rescuer was

afraid to say out loud, "Come on, what are you waiting for?" Somewhat dubiously, Acorna gave a tentative pull on the rope. The thin youngster who

was her unexpected savior couldn't have enough muscle to pull her up, light as

she was. But he had tied the rope to something reassuringly secure. Hand over

out of

the cell. Her rescuer quietly replaced the vent grill, screwed the fasteners back

in, and began to re-coil his rope. Once more he put his finger to his lips, then

began to wriggle along the tube, looking back once to indicate she was to

follow.

Fortunately, Acorna's gown was made of a fabric much more durable than it

looked, but the fashionable boots that hid her oddly shaped feet were very

clumsy and might make enough noise to be heard. How she finally got them off

she never knew because it involved contortions of her lithe body she'd never

had to make before, even in her self-defense exercises. Lying on her back, she

sort of inched her feet up to where she could grab the boots and untie the

that they made better, and much quieter, progress along the tube. She wondered once or twice if her blood pounded more loudly than her body slithered, but no alarm was sounded..She did sneak a peek through the other vents, but Calum was not in any of the three cells she could see into. The apathy of the detainees did nothing to reassure her about his safety.

They came to an intersecting tube, and the boy swung his body expertly to the left and wriggled down it. How long she followed him in this snakelike fashion

Acorna had no idea, but suddenly they were in a much wider place-wider by comparison, at least-and she could sit without hitting her head on the ceiling.

She was breathless and dry-mouthed from all her exertion.

"It's safe enough here. We can talk now," her savior said, but his voice was

only a faintly raised whisper, warning her that their "safety" was only relative.

"What about Calum?" she whispered back.

she said. "But first, I should thank you for rescuing me. I am Acorna. ..."

She let

her voice trail off as she could not decide how else to identify herself.

Was it

safe to tell this unknown rescuer of her connection with the houses of

Harakamian and Li? It might be better to find out a little more about him first.

"I'm Market Illart. My father . . ." He gulped. "They ... the ones who caught you .

. . they're not Starfarers, not really. They were refugees we were helping out,

and then that Nueva had a coup and spaced practic'ly all of the First Gen. I

couldn't do anything, they'd locked the cabins. I couldn't do anything," he

repeated, his voice rising dangerously.

"No, of course you could not," Acorna said at once, though she was not at all

clear on the situation-except that her rescuer, having shed his self-confident

place

through all her recent gyrations, she could touch his head with her concealed

horn, to help relieve his anguish. The hands that he held to his face to muffle

his sobs were bruised and bloodied as well as filthy. She could, and did, heal

them. If he was to be of any further assistance to her, he needed to be whole.

She left the dirt, having no water anyhow to clean him up. That reminded her of

her own thirst.

"I'm terribly sorry, my dear," she said, hoping that he could feel the sympathy

and reassurance she longed to give him. "How long ago did this happen?" "Days, weeks, months it could be. It ... it isn't easy to keep track of time up

here." His voice wobbled dangerously.

"No, it certainly wouldn't be," Acorna agreed at once, "and I can't tell you how

grateful I am to you for rescuing me."

Markel's eyes lit up, and for a moment he seemed to have put aside his
grief
and his too-adult mannerisms, to be a normal cocky teenager enjoying a
chance to boast of his expertise. "Oh, I know every tube and conduit in
this
ship. I can go anywhere, and I can even listen in on their corns. They
think
they're so smart. Well, they're not all THAT smart. I even know where
they
came from. They got on board the Haven by pretending to be Palo-
mellese
political refugees, but what really happened was Palomella decided to
dump its
worst criminals and scarmed us into taking them on. That Nueva was
running
an extortion racket on Palomella, and now she's trying the same thing
on the
Haven. If only I'd warned Dad before-" He broke off and swallowed hard.
Acorna realized he was fighting back a sob, but the gesture still made
her

Acorna sensed that he needed bolstering up, needed to think more about what he could do and less about the past that he could not change.

"I'm very thirsty," she said wistfully. "And, when I think of the floods there were down on Rushima. ..."

He reached behind his back and pulled out a water bottle, complete with nipple, the kind used for free-fall supplies.

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Acorna said, and there was no need to feign pleasure for Markel's sake. She enjoyed a long, luxurious drink of the water; it tasted stale and metallic, and she would have liked to purify it before drinking, but she didn't want to insult the boy. "Go ahead," Markel urged when she paused after that first restorative drink. You can have all of it," he added with a casual flick of his ringers. "I've got more whenever you need it. Are you hungry?"

vegetables."

Markel looked slightly relieved at this statement. "That's as well because it's

much easier to snatch plants than anything else, like cooked food. Finish your

drink. We're not far from the 'ponies."

Acorna's stomach made a joyful noise she was certain would echo down the

tubes, but Markel had already turned to lead her to food. She slipped the bottle

into one other boots-as long as she had to drag these things along, at least

they could be useful as carriers. The laces were long . . . maybe if she could

add them to Markel's rope, they'd be long enough to reach Calum.

Over the other reeks of the ship, Acorna smelled vegetation: lots and lots of

different kinds of vegetation, and the slightly chemical smell that her sensitive

nostrils could identify as 'ponic nutrients. She wondered wistfully if the seedling chard she had planted on the Aca[^]ecki would ever leaf for her.

knees. The scent of chard drew her like a magnet, and it was fortunate indeed that it was nearer to her than the root vegetables he was deftly, and cleverly, harvesting. She noticed that he was careful to take only the small ones that were likely to be culled anyway. He took carrots and turnips and potatoes and several other brightly colored things that she did not recognize. Hybrids, probably. She carefully augmented his selection with chard leaves, then some lettuces, and one head of cabbage, stuffing what she could into her other boot.

She was glad she hadn't been wearing the boots for very long before using them as food and water carriers.

The surreptitious harvest didn't take long. Both Markel and Acorna had nimble hands and were agile on their hands and knees. They gathered up their booty

She took chard next, then experimented with the dark red thing he handed her,
and that was good, too. Well, almost anything would have tasted good to her at that point.

After those sorely needed restorative mouthfuls Acorna thought again of Calum. He, too, would be hungry and thirsty. If only she knew where he was

being held!.She tapped Markel's shoulder as he was chewing away at a raw potato and

indicated she wanted to speak. He nodded but cautioned her -with a finger across his lips to speak quietly.

"My friend will have no food or water. If only you could figure out where he is

being kept, could we get to him with something to eat and drink?"

Markel considered and finally gave a sharp nod. "He'll be in the secure area,"

he whispered, "where they keep the important prisoners."

Acorna's heart sank. "I tried to make them believe he knew nothing."

need it, too! Sometimes they 'forget' to feed the folks in detention. I hate it," he

whispered. "I keep thinking, what if somebody dies, and I could have saved

him . . . but some of the ones they throw in the cells are Palomellese. If they

found out I was free, they might sell me out to gain favor with Nueva."

Acorna's heart ached at the decisions that had been forced on the boy, decisions that would have been heartbreaking for a mature adult. "Well, I can

assure you that neither Calum nor I will sell you out - no matter what happens!"

Balaklire, Unified Federation Date 33.05.17

Once she got over her shock at being surrounded By unicorn-people instead of

facing just one, Karina realized that she might really be onto something here.

The entire rest of the populated galaxy thought that Acorna was the only one of

her kind. But here were four more of the unicorn-people-and she was the one

strange

nasal words and didn't try to understand. The trick seemed to be not to think

about it, to convince the busy part of your head that you were actually thinking

about something else and Just sort of accidentally overhearing their conversation.

In the first minutes on the unicorn-people's spacecraft, Karina found that trick

quite easy to pull off. Everything was so different, so ... magical? Or just alien?

She couldn't decide. The soft, flowing draperies they wore, the glowing translucent horns on their foreheads, the couches where they reclined so

gracefully, even the gentle radiance that lit the interior of the spacecraft all

spoke to her of a Higher World guided by thought and love, the Upper Realm

she had so long been seeking to contact. But when one of them went through a

But every time she achieved the kind of calm that was supposed to bring connection with one's spirit totem and access to higher levels, she lost that sense of almost understanding what the unicorn-people were saying. It was most irritating and not at all what she would have expected. (Do you have enough data from its thought-images to use the LAANYE yet, Melireenya?) (Not quite, though I have learned that it is a she-creature.) (Had to be, with those engorged mammaries. Don't they hurt?) (Well, those could be the result of some kind of illness. They certainly don't look natural, do they? But her images are distinctly feminine . . . what I can read of them. You've noticed how weak her transmissions are? And every time I think we're communicating,

things and

listening to her grunt their names, it'll take forever.)

Something heavy and sharp-edged dropped into her lap and interrupted Karina's meditations and earnest efforts to establish communion on the spiritual plane. "Hey!" she exclaimed, opening her eyes. "Be careful what

you're tossing around, will you - Ohhh. ..." Her indignant comment died away

into a long gasp of awe and wonder as she lifted the ten-inch, doubly terminated quartz crystal. "Now where did you get that, I wonder?"

(Well, that came through loud and clear. She doesn't like us dropping rocks in her lap.)

(She likes the rock, though. Look how she's holding it!) (Great, we can generate

as many of those as we need from the spare-parts assembler. Maybe we can

use them as trade items. Go on, now, get some more complete utterances from

her. The LAANYE needs syntactic data as well as semantics, you know!)

images

directed at her by Melireenya.

(We got a burst of transmission when we gave her that crystal. Maybe she

wants another one.)(Maybe we should just drop something heavy on her foot and see what she says.)

(Thariinye, when are you going to grow up?) After a bit of tinkering, the spare-parts

assembler was able to produce not only quartz crystals but also a number of other crystalline mineral specimens. They started with the varieties

of quartz, showering Karina (gently) with rose quartz, amethyst, and citrine;

then, for variety, Thariinye adjusted the assembler to produce other silicates

such as tourmaline and iolite, orthoclase and microcline. He was particularly

proud of a large, tabular orthoclase with a bluish white sheen in two directions.

Their biped seemed impressed by it as well.

sis mode

with a sigh of relief.

(That was a job and a half! These beings can't concentrate at all!)

(Oh, well, it's done now. Let's eat while it's analyzing, then we can put

the

LAANYE in sleep-teaching mode and in a half turn we should be able to

talk to

it, I mean her, with mouthnoises.)

(What do you suppose she eats?)

(I hope she likes sprouts.)

Karma wasn't the least bit unhappy to be offered a vegetarian meal. Al-

though

her hosts worried back and forth at each other about the poor variety of

foodstuffs and the drab flavor of shipgrown fruits and greens, Karina

found the

meal, at least, to be everything she would have imagined spiritually ad-

vanced

beings to ingest. She had been a little worried that the unicornpeople

would be

too spiritually advanced to require any nourishment beyond a little wa-

ter. The

sweet and

embarrassingly juicy-the first one she bit into felt like an explosion of sweetness in her mouth and startled her into a minor coughing fit. After that

she took the berries with respect, to offset the tart flavor of the yellow thing

that wasn't exactly an apricot, and found that the combination made a reasonably satisfying dessert.

After the meal they showed her a tiny cubicle, high enough to accommodate

the unicorn-people but barely wide enough for Karina, and after some puzzlement she worked out what the facilities were for and how she could use

them. That solved another problem she'd been trying not to worry about and

left her feeling quite confident that she would be able to handle anything else

that came up. And after all the excitement and that really very filling meal of

salad and strange fruits, she was quite tired and more than willing to lie down

cause I'm

the only one who can navigate you out of here.)

(Self-thinking is un-linyarii.)

(Huh! I'm Liinyar, and I'm doing the thinking, so by definition it's linyaru.)

(This younger generation,) Neeva sighed toward Melireenya. (We would never

have talked like that. There's no telling what Thariinye and Khaari will do next.)

(So maybe it's a good idea Khaari doesn't learn their language. In fact, we

might be better off if Thariinye didn't either.)

This last comment inspired Khaari to take her turn with the LAANYE after all,

sleeping on a reclining chair in the control cabin since the barbarian female

was snoozing on her usual couch. As for Thariinye, he was already stretched

out on his couch, wearing the headset that connected him with the LAANYE.

He hadn't even waited to make sure the barbarian was comfortable . . . but the

main cabin, they could talk to Karma in her own tongue.

Which was very nearly the same as knowing the Basic Interlingua used for

trade, diplomacy, and war in all the worlds inhabited by Karina's people.

It was easy enough to explain, now, that they were relatives of Acorna's who

had been searching for her.

(This is not the entire truth,) Neeva fretted. (It is even an untruth, if we allow her

to believe-as she surely will-that we came to this portion of the galaxy in search of our lost little one. Should we not tell her of the Khieevi, and that we

came to warn her people and seek alliance with them?)(All things in their proper time,) Melireenya replied. (Remember how the people

of that first world were so frightened that they closed themselves within an

impenetrable shield? If those harboring 'Khornya (for so Linyaari tongues had

rendered her name, turning it into something pronounceable in their language)

should do the same, we might NEVER get her back!)

any pause in the conversation; she was still exclaiming in delight over how quickly they had picked up her language.

The Linyaari envoys were equally delighted when Karina confirmed their hope that Acorna was to be found here, on the lunar base to which the shuttle had been bound.

"I had a Lattice note from her, out of this node, just a few days ago," she told them. "Oh, then you are acquaintances-You know our little 'Khor-nya?'"

Neeva asked eagerly. "How does she? Has she been well treated here?"

Karina looked down. Much as she longed to claim acquaintance with Acorna, was there any point in doing so, when a few hours would prove the claim

false? "We have not met in person," she evaded, "only in correspondence. But our auras are attuned." Surely a Lattice note from one person and an

She

had been fondling them and playing •with them ever since she awoke.

"Will she be conceerin ... worriid," Thariinye substituted the easier-to-pronounce

word, "that you were not on the shuttle?"

"Oh, no," Karina said unguardedly, then tried to retrieve matters. "That is," she

said with her tinkling laugh, "we didn't have a definite arrangement. We just left

it that if I did not hear from her that this was not a good time, I would be coming to Maganos within the next few days. Synchronicity, you know"- she

waved her plump little hands vaguely-"all will manifest for the good of all; we

need only maintain the appropriate space in our hearts. But I am quite sure,"

she said earnestly, "that she is looking forward to finally meeting me on this

plane." "Plane flies through atmosphere," Thariinye said, puzzled. "Atmosphere is not

on this moon."

have been

confused by some idiom of their language. What is the Linyaari for what she

said?)

(I don't think you can say it in Linyaari.) "I hear you," Thariinye said aloud to

Karma, having picked this up from the LAANYE as an all-purpose phrase

meaning, "I don't know exactly what you mean, but let's not argue about it."

Rafik's worries about Acorna grew to monumental proportions when he reached direct-communications range of Maganos Moon Base and got no

satisfactory answers to his queries. All he wanted to know was that Acorna

was still there and unharmed. All he got from the corn techs working the boards at Maganos was static, missed connections, and finally a bland statement that questions about Acorna were to be passed directly to Delszaki

Li.

"Fine," Rafik said, "patch me through to Mr. Li's suite."

Delszaki Li was visiting the new mine workings on the far side of Maganos.

"The man's old and paralyzed and confined to a hover-chair, he's not going to

be hopping around Maganos like a performing flea!"

"Mr. Li has a very good hover-chair," said the com tech. "State-of-the-art. And,

uh, the light gravity here means that he has more energy, of course. Less,

umm, strain on the muscles, you know?"

"Ten thousand bazaar dogs and Shaitans take the hoverchair!" Rafik shouted

into the mike. "He doesn't USE those muscles, what difference does gravity

make?"

"Transmission unintelligible, please moderate volume," the tech said. "Signal

fading ..." Her voice slowly dissolved into a crackle of static. Fuming, Rafik

decided that he would just have to wait until he landed on Maganos. Then he

officer. "These idiots just ahead of you in the queue come from some backstars subspace where apparently nobody flies by the regs; according to

the pilot they just make it up as they go along. She's having a hell of a time

following my instructions-keeps saying, 'I hear you,' and then doing something

completely different."

Rafik had a moment's regretful thought for the ancient days of the First Prophet, when in some parts of Earth the Book of the Prophet was interpreted

to mean, among other things, that women were not allowed to drive.

When he finally docked, he was in a tearing hurry to reach Delszaki Li's private

quarters and much too worried to care about the very odd design of the ship

that had held up the queue for so long, or the plump little woman in fluttery

lavender draperies who was clambering down an exit stair much too steep for

let him take a slightly illicit shortcut and hitch a ride on a conveyor belt
that
was supposed to be carrying pulverized material to the oxygen-
extraction
plant, allowing Rafik to arrive at Delszaki Li's quarters shortly after
docking
and a good ten minutes before he was expected there.
"Where IS she? Is she all right?" he demanded as he pushed through
the iris
door, too impatient to wait for it to retract its flexible membranes fully.
Gill and Judit were sitting in the anteroom, holding hands. Judit looked
as if
she had been crying; Gill turned red at the question.
"There is no reason to suppose Acorna is in any difficulty," Judit said.
Gill swallowed. "Of course not. Acorna can handle anything that comes
up, and
Calum . . . well, Calum is very smart, you know, Rafik." "Calum," Rafik
said,
"doesn't have the common sense the Prophets would give to a canary,
and if

and

communication -with Laboue.

"And you think there may be some danger to Acorna? "

"Whatever it means," Rafik said, "it can't be anything good. Communi-
cation

and trade are the basis of House Harakamians wealth. With Laboue
closed off

like this, Uncle Hafiz can't check the odds on any of his, umm, inter-
planetary

operations, or keep tabs on the competition, or do any of his other,
umm,

normal financial and commercial procedures. He wouldn't have done
this

unless something out there had really scared him." He thought this
statement

over for a moment. "In fact, I wouldn't have said there was anything that
could

make Uncle Hafiz nervous enough to forgo a quarter percent profit on
the

Skarness Relay . . . which he will have lost through not being there to
authorize

They're not just a curiosity-they're a communications system. Hafiz broke the code. Those rocks know what's happening on Skarness, no matter where in the galaxy they happen to be."

"How?"

"How does a clam in an aquarium in the desert know when it would be high tide if the desert were underwater?" Rafik shrugged. "They know, that's all. At

first the Stones weren't all that useful, because they aren't interested in human affairs-they think we move too fast and die too soon to be studied-but Uncle

Hafiz got one of them to make a small side bet on the Relay with him, and now

they're all following it. He'd sent to tell me to lay off all our bets just before that

last message and the Shield closing down . . . but without his authorization, I couldn't do it."

invoking

the Shield. So we don't need to worry about Yukata Batsu or any of that southern continent lot. Uncle Hafiz has effectively divided the universe into two

separate boxes," he said somberly. "One box contains Laboue, the other holds

the rest of the universe . . . including whatever threat motivated him to take this

step. And whatever it is must concern Acorna."

Judit drew a deep breath. "Then . . . perhaps it's for the best that things have

turned out as they have. Don't you think. Gill?". "Could be," Gill agreed. "After all, if even we can't find her, what chance is

there that these mysterious enemies will do so?"

"CAN'T FIND HER?" Rafik echoed in shock and outrage. "What-how-Shaitan-begotten

spawn of a cretin, you can't have lost the girl on a lunar base this size!"

"Rafik, you really must make an effort not to pick up your uncles habits of

speech," Judit reprimanded him.

preparation of the AccSecki had so frustrated Calum and Acorna that they not

only took off before the ship was ready but failed to follow the navigation plan

Calum had filed, so that by the time their getaway was discovered, it was

impossible to follow them.

"Impossible?" Rafik repeated, raising his straight dark brows a fraction of an

inch.

Gill gestured helplessly. "You know Calum. He's not only a brilliant mathematician, but a devious s.o.b. There are innumerable ways to navigate

space from here to the Coma Berenices quadrant, and trust Calum not to take

the most logical-the one in his filed nav plan-nor yet the least logical, because/

we checked that already. There's absolutely no way to predict -what path he

will have taken."

Rafik would have disputed that, and had already asked for star maps on

much to

her increasingly confident statement that Acorna had invited her as to the

Linyaari ability to soothe and calm the minds of those physically close to them.

Neeva and Melireenya had risked showing themselves to the guards on duty at

the docking station just long enough to project calming thoughts of "I haven't

seen anything unusual" and "This is a friend of Acorna's."

Once she entered the interstices of the lunar base, though, Karina had to make

her own way without the help of the Linyaari projections. She had done remarkably well already, ascertaining from "casual" conversations with the

people she encountered that either Acorna was to be found with Del-szaki Li, or

that gentleman would be able to tell her where she was. No one saw any reason

to question Karina's statement that she was a friend of Acorna's and an

smother any

doubts. But here, in the anterooms to Delszaki Li's private quarters, she met

her match.

The secretary-receptionist who guarded Mr. Li's privacy knew Rafik by sight

and had passed him through without question. But Karina he did NOT know-and

he was as disinclined to admit somebody who was not on the list of accepted visitors as Karina was to give up so close to her goal. The resulting

altercation drew first Judit's attention, then Rafik's, and finally Gill's. They

opened the iris door in time to hear Karina "explaining" with some heat that

she and Acorna had been in correspondence for some time, that they were

closely linked on the spiritual plane, and that it was now their destiny and the

will of the stars that they should also be together on the physical plane.

"Stars didn't send me a directive," the secretary said, deadpan.

business, but nonetheless a galling situation to a man used to making his fortune by the timely use of information.

"Nutcases," Gill answered, retreating back into the room behind the secretary's

station to make his explanation. "People heard about the healings Acorna did

on Kezdet, you know. Can't keep something like that secret. We've put it about

that her healing abilities have faded as she matured, but that's not enough to

deter the really determined nuts. We've also spread rumors that she's at half a

dozen different houses Mr. Li owns in different systems. I think I know how this

one got onto her, though-tell you later," he muttered in an undertone as Judit

opened the iris again and went through to the secretary's station.

"I am so sorry to disappoint you," Judit said sweetly, "but Just now Acorna is

..."

conscious attempts to focus or channel her psychic abilities, came through to the anxiously waiting Linyaari as clearly as a minor explosion. (Oh, my head!

Tell that female to damp her modulations, will you?) Thariinye complained.

(I can't tell her anything,) Melireenya thought, rather acidly. (She thinks you're

in charge, remember?)

(She recognizes natural brilliance when she sees it.) (Hmph. She probably

comes from some culture that has a peculiar caste-ranking system. Maybe

they're graded by physical height.)

(In that case, she must be pretty low-caste. I've been looking through the

screens at the others other race who come in and out here. And have you

noticed-)

(Not now, you two!) Neeva put in. (Melireenya, you're supposed to be monitoring the female . . . Khariinya. What's happening now? Who are "they,"

lowed

that -with her own questions. "Why won't you let me see Acorna-and why are

you lying about it?"

"None of your business," Gill said firmly. "Only people on the list of approved

guests are admitted to this suite, young lady. You're not on the list-so I strongly suggest you leave now, before we call Security to have you put out."

Karina felt the secretary's mocking eye upon her. She was sure she was turning red with embarrassment, but she stood her ground a moment longer.

"I must see Acorna. Truly . . . you don't understand . . . and I can't tell anyone

but her . . . but it is not just for my own sake. There is something she must

know. Oh, please!" She was almost in tears. "Please, you don't understand, its

terribly important. If she knew, she'd want to see me, I just know she would."

that must have persuaded ever so many silly girls to believe whatever he said.

And he radiated truth and sincerity this time, whatever she had felt from him before.

The silver-set moonstone at her throat was cold and dull. And try as she might,

Karina could not persuade herself that she "felt" Acorna's presence anywhere near them.. "I... I see," she said dully.

Declan Giloglie's blue eyes blazed with a triumphant light that renewed all her suspicions. Karina consciously breathed deeply and thought of Peace and

Love. "Well, in that case," she said, "I suppose I may as well go on. I certainly

don't want to waste my time looking for somebody who's not even here!" The

tinkling laugh was a little flat, and her voice trembled slightly, but that might be

(How should I know? She doesn't look, either. You can't transmit images of your surroundings if you never look at them properly. All I can see in her mind right now is blue.)

Karina widened her own eyes and looked straight into Gill's until he released her hands and stepped back. "Well . . . that's that then," he said. "Sorry for your disappointment."

Karina visualized herself floating in a cool blue cloud that absorbed and masked her utter fury.

(Shit! Now I've lost her completely!)

As the door to Delszaki Li's private suite closed behind him, the secretary looked at Karinawith a touch of pity.

"You're not the only one with a sob story, you know," he advised her, not unkindly. "Take more than that to get in to see Acorna . . . that is, it would if she were here," he added, remembering Gill's story. Not being privy to

her

home planet. Everything she owned and as much as she could borrow had

been barely sufficient to pay her way this far.

But she did, she reflected, have private transport ... of a sort. And she did owe

it to the Linyaari to go back and tell them . . . well, perhaps not exactly what

had happened . . . they wouldn't understand the nuances; she would be false to

the underlying spiritual truth if she told them the bald literal truth, wouldn't

she?."You are quite right," she said instead. "I shall return to my personal ship at

once."

On the way back, she concentrated on her breathing until she had attained a

state of spiritual tranquillity in which she was no longer deceived by the superficial appearance of events and felt quite able to convey the basic truths

of the situation to her Linyaari friends.

they -were

flowing across the body of the ship.

"Have you seen our 'Khornya?" Neeva asked, pronouncing the newly learned

words slowly and carefully.

"Acorna, not Kornya." Karina sank back onto one of the couches in the main

cabin. "No, I told you, they're keeping her prisoner. There's an absolute brute

of a man guarding the rooms, he won't let anybody in, and a red-bearded

Viking giant who tells the most terrible lies you ever heard. Would you believe

it, he actually tried to convince me that Acorna wasn't there at all! And the

other two gave quite contradictory stories."

Neeva frowned in concentration as she tried to follow this burst of speech.

"But you said she was expecting you . . . had invited you to visit her. Why

would she go away? "

cried, too indignant for caution-"she may never even have seen my first
fifty-six
messages!"

"Your what?" asked Neeva, now thoroughly confused.

Karina remembered that she was supposed to be a close friend of
Acorna's.

Well, she was. On a spiritual level. "Never mind, that's not important.
The

important thing is," she said, enunciating clearly, "there is something
very

sinister going on, and I intend to find Acorna and rescue her from these
people!"

All four of the Linyaari looked at one another for a long time. Karina had
the

oddest feeling that a very intense argument was going on, though none
of

them actually said anything. She half closed her eyes and tried to sense
their

auras. Breathe slowly, she reminded herself. Listen to your breathing, <i
till the

with the minds of those people on the shuttle, making them forget that
their
flight was interrupted. We must not go on to put this one at risk from her
own
kind.)
(Besides, she hasn't accomplished much so far.) (She has found where
'Khornya is being held, and has ascertained that she is a prisoner. That
is
enough to go on. One of us will have to free her.)
(Oh, dear, oh, dear. I see more fooling with their minds coming up.)
(We are going to have to do that in any case. Have you looked at the
screens
showing us the docking area recently?)
(Of course not, I've been trying to understand what Khariinya was say-
ing.)
(The other barbarians are behaving oddly.)
(So? It's not as if we knew what was normal behavior for them.)
(I think they are curious about our ship.) (Why? It's a nice unobtrusive
vessel,
nothing gaudy.) (Not by their standards. Look at the other ships docked
in this

the long plain sweep of the main body; and above all, no color, not even
a
discreet touch of gilding or a splash of crimson to delight the eye.
And by now, quite a number of the short, hornless bipeds were gathered
so
near to the Linyaari ship that the screens offered only a foreshortened
view of
them, pointing and talking excitedly among themselves. (Perhaps they
are
admiring our tasteful decor,) she suggested without conviction.
(I'm afraid it is more than that,) Melireenya agreed reluctantly with
Thariinye.
(Nobody would choose to make ships look so dull and plain, so it must
be that
they do not know how to protect painted surfaces against atmospheric
abrasion or meteorite damage. This ship must be quite an oddity to
them.)
(How could a race be so sophisticated as to travel in space, colonize
many
systems, even build bases on airless asteroids such as this, and still
remain

tention to

us.)

(I am afraid you are right.) Neeva suppressed a sigh of disquiet. Start bending

the ethics of the Linyaari, it seemed, and there was no limit to how far they

might get bent. The other three envoys had assured her that the only questionable action they would have to take was to make the crew and the

other passengers on the space shuttle a little bit unclear about what had happened mid-flight. But just by being here, they had already exposed

the hornless bipeds to a superior technology. Now one of them would have to

leave the ship in order to exert a calming presence on the people who were

obviously so curious about it. And who knew what that might lead to?

(Don't worry, Neeva. I'll take care of everything,) Thariinye thought blithely.

The base of Neeva's horn ached. Thariinye would not have been her first

projected cloud of (You haven't seen anything unusual) and (Everything's all right), he went down all the way to the ground level and casually strolled among the bipeds there. The little group gathered near the ship was breaking up now, the members of the group moving away briskly in different directions as if they had suddenly remembered something they were supposed to be doing and couldn't imagine why they were wasting time staring at what was, after all, just another spaceship of the hundreds that docked at Maganos.

Melireenya chuckled at the sight. (Thariinye must have added a bit of "Urgent business" to his projections, to clear them out so fast!) (I wish he wouldn't. We shouldn't fool with their minds any more than we have to. And-Thariinye! Where do you think you're going?) The young fool was following several of the bipeds toward the guarded exit from the docking

that I

am one of them, why should I not go on into the base and seek out
'Khornya

right now, before her captors have time to hide her elsewhere?)

(He may be right, Neeva. Khariinya's visit may have alerted them.)(But
you do not know where she is! The base is large. . . .)

(Not large enough to hide another Linyaari. I shall simply wander until I
sense

her presence; then I shall ask her how she is held and what would be
the best

way to free her. I am not entirely stupid, Neeva.)

And since she could not think of any better plan, Neeva let him go with-
out

further protest.

During his first minutes inside the base proper, Thariinye kept letting his
calming projections slip as he was distracted by the oddities of this alien
construction, then hurriedly projecting extra soothing feelings to relax
and

distract surprised onlookers. AS he cataloged the alien peculiarities, he
left

central complex to other parts of the shielded base, were so dark and low that

Thariinye felt almost as if he were exploring a mine. After cracking his head on

a projecting air vent and catching his horn a really painful blow at a slit-opening

door of unfamiliar design, he learned to stoop slightly, walk slowly, and watch the way ahead very carefully for obstructions.

The high dome of Maganos Central, with its seemingly extravagant aerie of

scaffolding in a spiderweb design spiraling to the top, was as much a physical

relief to Thariinye as a shot of oxygen would have been. But the design itself

distracted him for dangerous moments. The spiraling web of scaffolding was

hung with green plants that dangled invitingly downward, and in the light gravity of this moon he could easily have jumped high enough to browse at

will. What was this place-some sort of cafeteria?

Central,

she'd have stopped and tried to chat him up if they hadn't been so behindhand

with the monthly report; whereupon her partner gave her a very odd look and

said that the monthly report wouldn't be due for another six shifts, and did she

think she might be coming down with something?

Retreating to lean against a gently curved wall, Thariinye maintained his shielding and watched the barbarians hurrying back and forth until he concluded, with some reluctance, that the greenery must be merely an atmospheric purifier and not a buffet. At least, nobody else was nibbling on

those tempting new leaves..(Thariinye, you greedy pig! You're supposed to be looking for our 'Khornya, not thinking about brunch!)

(Yeah, yeah, but Neeva, you should just see these plants!) But, reminded of his

duty, Thariinye tore his gaze from the succulent new shoots and leaves just

surprise

or strong emotion:

Oh, Jussi, why did you leave me? . . . grubble grubble grubble . . . pay-day's next

shift, then I can get OUT of here . . . grubble grubble grubble . . . Lukia, Lady of

Light, help me now!

Startled, Thariinye swiveled to look at the source of that last thought, a grubby

kid weaving between the adults so rapidly that Thariinye would have lost him

but for the strength of his projections. The words meant nothing to Thariinye,

but the image of a radiant Liinyar girl in white-silk robes that accompanied

them riveted him.

A sudden thought of "Saints preserve us, what's THAT!!!" accompanied by an

image of himself enlarged to ten feet tall and glowing with a strange radiance,

formed the image so clearly.

The miner who'd called on the saints stared after Thariinye but could see

nothing unusual among the swirling streams of passersby. Ramon Trinidad

mopped his forehead and decided not to mention to his mates that he'd had a

vision of Acorna. They already teased him enough because he had a small icon

of the Virgin of Guadeloupe superglued to the dashboard of his operator cab at

the loading station; if he told them he'd been seeing visions, he'd never live it

down. All the same, it must mean something that the Lady had appeared to him

like that, all in a blinding flash it was, and then vanished. She must be warning

him that he'd been marked out for something special.

Ramon Trinidad marched down the corridor to Mining Ops HID more jauntily

than he'd moved since coming to Maganos. At first he'd thought this job,

them

out into the long, lightly shielded corridors of the active workings. The kids had

their own saints ~ Lukia of the Lights, Epona, Sita Ram..The urchin whom Thariinye was following was also headed for Mining Ops HID,

and praying desperately that he'd get there well ahead of Ramon Trinidad; so

the image of Lukia of the Lights kept lighting up in his thought-patterns, guiding Thariinye like a flashing beacon.

Bored by Rafik's intense study of the star maps which were projected all over

the walls of Delszaki Li's office, Gill stood up to stretch his legs and wandered

over to the one wall not devoted to mapping the outer reaches of the explored

and unexplored parts of the galaxy. Rafik had been unable to commandeer this

wall because it was filled with vid-screens on which, at any moment, random

scenes of the moon base were displayed. Although no one's private quarters

whatever views he desired. When touching the pad became too difficult for him, the engineers had offered to make the display voice-controlled like his new hover-chair, but he had refused, indicating that it was too tiring for him to issue unnecessary commands and that he would prefer a random display which he did not have to control. Now the images on the more than twenty screens changed constantly, on a randomly activated timer, giving a constantly varying panorama of Maganos Moon Base activities.

Gill stared unseeingly at an image of the glittering dome over Maganos Central, with its overarching glass panels and its garlands of greenery, until it shifted to a view of the bakery attached to the cafeteria, where a cook was setting out trays of fresh pastries in preparation for the shift change, then to an overhead

in his heart that he thought for a moment he was imagining her on one of the screens before him; then his shout surprised Rafik into dropping the laser pointer with which he had been tracing one of the AcaSeckl's possible routes on the larger star map for Pal and Delszaki Li.

"What in the name of the Djinni Djiboutis -" Rafik began before remembering Judit's request that he not swear like the descendant of twenty generations of Arab-Armenian rug merchants.

"What are you playing at, Gill? We're trying to get some work done over here, if you don't mind!"

"Acorna," Gill croaked. "I saw her ... on one of these screens. She's not gone, Rafik; she's right here on Maganos!"

"She can't be . . ." Pal said, and then, ". . . can she?" Here on Maganos, and

to shift

scenes before I could identify it."

"There she is!" Judit cried, pointing at a screen in the far upper right section of

the wall.

"That's one of the new workings," Gill said, "somewhere in III."

At the same moment Pal said, "But that's not Acorna." The picture switched to

an image of the docking facility. "Damn that bloody automatic timer, can't we

turn it off?" Gill demanded. "And are you out of your mind. Pal? Just how many

six-foot people with golden horns do you think we've got around here?"

"More than one, evidently." Pal folded his arms with the gesture of a man who

is not to be shaken from his opinion, no matter how impossible and illogical it

may seem to the rest of the world. "I would know Acorna among a thousand of

her kind. ..."

somebody to hustle down to Ill... no, I don't know which subsection, there

aren't but six open, surely we've got enough security people to cover all of

them? Why are you fooling around looking for office supplies, girl? We've got

an emergency here!"

"Is searching for manual controller," Delszaki Li put in, his dry and slightly

amused whisper cutting through the fog of Gill's emotional bellowing.

"My

suggestion. You countermand?"

Gill stared. "It still works?"

"Override," Li whispered. "Useful if I wish to see something longer than five

seconds . . . but someone else must push pad, now."

Judit scabbled through a clutter of carved jade tokens, laser pads, used betting slips, fact-flimsies with access codes scrawled on the back, and unlabeled datacubes, and finally held up the control pad with a cry of triumph.

"No, she isn't," Pal insisted.

Mr. Li whispered a command, and his hover-chair carried him across the room

to float before the screen showing Mine Working HID.

"There he is!" the other kids who were in the training session squealed when

Hajnal darted into the open area around Ramon's sledge and slid the last

twenty feet, triumphant, stopping himself just inches short of the piles of rough

lunar rock that marked the end of the workings. "Didja get it? Didja get it?"

"Hajnal, Master Thief of Kezdet, strikes again!" Hajnal boasted, pulling open his

jacket to reveal an extremely nervous, long-eared, white-fronted marchare. The

marchare squeaked and leapt out of its hiding place with a powerful thrust of

its long rear legs. The other children scrambled to catch it.

"Ow! It scratched me!"

workings is 'aunted if 'e sees the blasted hanimal, is 'e now?"

"Poor little marchare," crooned a girl who cradled the nervous animal in her

arms for a moment, petting it until its eyes stopped rolling and the long nervous ears stopped twitching. "Didn't mean to scratch anybody, did you.

poor little frightened thing? Hajnal, I don't think we oughter put him in the

toolbox, he'll get scared."

"If you don't stop petting him, Eva, he'll go to sleep on us, and we'll lose our

chance."

The little fiends of Kezdets first graduating class had been working on Ramon

Trinidad for weeks, trying to convince him the combination power unit and

loading station he operated was haunted by the ghost of a mining engineer

who'd been killed in an accident so grisly nobody who knew the story was ever

dead engineer. But Ramon was beginning to doubt their unsupported stories. It

was time for some hard evidence. They were counting on the scrabbling and

squeaks of the third-shift pastry cook's pet marchare, concealed in a compartment in the back of the sledger, to provide that evidence. Hajnal, proud

of his past as a free thief on Kezdet and no factory slave, had boastfully volunteered to "borrow" the marchare without the cook's knowledge.. "It's mean, putting him in that dark little place," another girl piped up. "Let's not. He's so cute!"

"Cute," Hajnal said darkly. "Lemme tell you, you wouldn' think 'e was so bleedin' cute if you'd had to carry him through Central under your shirt, and 'im

gougin' tracks in your belly every time he startled!"

"Sita Ram wouldn't like it," Eva said.

"Huh! Lukia don't mind. She 'elped me get away," Hajnal boasted.

Eva's eyes widened. All the children seemed suddenly to be looking up, over

Hajnals head. Slowly he turned, certain that Ramon had spoiled his plot by

over the bright being.

"I knew you were here, Acorna, I knew? you wouldn't just leave us without

saying good-bye," squealed Khetala, who had known Acorna as a person

rather than a vision of goodness. She threw herself on the tall, silver-haired

being in an unrehearsed_ and decidedly unwelcome-embrace.

"Get off me!" Thariinye sputtered in his own tongue. In the panic of the moment he could not remember the words the LAANYE had implanted in his

cortex a few hours previously.

There was a smaller girl clutching his tunic, now, marring the elegant drape of

the fabric, and a boy jumped up and down and swung from his arm as if he

were some kind of climbing toy. Why hadn't that plump little woman warned

him that the moon base was full of children? Pre-pubes, their psychic abilities

(Need to get

back to work).

"But I do see you. Lady Epona, I do! I do!" squealed the smallest girl.

Khetala, the oldest of the group, loosened her embrace and backed off a step,

puzzled. Why had she thought this was Acorna? It was obviously only a tall

miner . . . she squinted . . with silver hair . . . and a horn. . . .

"Don't you remember me. Lady Acorna?" she asked, hurt and puzzled..Hajnal was too high on success and escape even to be touched by the

projections. "Whaddaya screechin' about now? I know my Lady Lukia of the

Lights!"

Thariinye gritted his teeth and redoubled the force of his projections, but the

children were jumping up and down, shrieking with excitement, and far too

hyper to receive the calming influence he was trying to put forth, even if they

"Lookh, yuuu hiteli twerpis," he hissed in rage, "I-aam- naat-a-ghirill! See?"

And, just as the security guard requested by Gill arrived at the workings, Thariinye yanked open his blue tunic to display irrefutable evidence that he

could not be the "lady" these brats were greeting so ecstatically.

The guard, unlike the children, was affected by Thariinye's projections; so he

saw nothing unusual in the sight of a sevenfoot horned male with a cascade of

silver hair falling down his neck. What that male was doing, however, was both

unusual and strictly forbidden on Maganos Moon Base.

"You'd better come along with me, mister," he said.

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That's Hoa," Markel mouthed in Acorna's ear' as ????? down the vent at the

first of the innermost security cells, much smaller and more closely guarded

than the row where Acorna had been kept.

"Who?"

protection money."

"He?" And Acorna looked down again at the dejected, darkhaired man sitting

with his head in his hands. What she could see of his skin had a faintly yellow

cast that reminded her of Delszaki Li and made her instinctively wish to trust

him. "Then why's he here"-she pointed one hand down-"and not up there with

them?"

"Because he trusted our Speakers-my father and Andrezhuna and that Gerezan." The last name was expelled like a Gurse, and, in the light from the

cell below, Acorna could see the tears begin to form in Markel's eyes. He brushed them aside with impatient fingers, taking a deep breath. "He didn't

know about what they"-Markel jerked a contemptuous finger upward-planned.

He was scared stiff that the governments of Khang Kieaan, where he used to

live, would've figured out that he couldn't just predict weather, he could

only

Nueva and those traitors Gerezan and Sengrat planned a coup and got rid of all

the rest of the First Generation. ..." Markel gulped.

"Like your father." Acorna laid a sympathetic arm about the thin shoulders,

thinking proudly of his loyalty and resourcefulness. "Did you escape before

they could . . . you know ..."

He nodded. "They don't know the half of what I know about the Haven. I could

do anything to this ship . . . sometimes I think I ought to be making more trouble for them, only I don't want to wreck it and kill a lot of innocent people.

The other SecondGeneration kids may be pretending to go along, but they

shouldn't die for it. I could do anything," he repeated, "if only I knew what to

do. ..."

In that pause, Acorna softly asked, "Like being able to release the clamps on

nies is

being blackmailed. And my planet that I'm being held hostage."

Markel gave a little snort, muffled by his fingers. "You're not a hostage, you're

a prisoner. They got better things to do than collect ransom for hostages. They

can hold up -whole planets for Acorna gulped, happier than ever that she was

no longer trapped in that cell, vulnerable. But Calum was still a prisoner. And, if

they had no need to take hostages, Calum was in greater peril than she'd

originally thought. They'd have to work fast. She was considering priorities

when suddenly she saw that Hoa's face was turned up to the vent. She gave

Markel a discreet nudge.

"Oh, oh," he mouthed back at her, and would have led her away, but she

stopped him.. "He didn't intend this to happen . . . and he looks ill. I think they've hurt him.

"He'll have to be quiet," he said.

"I doubt that will be a problem," she replied, and helped Markel unscrew the vent.

Dr. Ngaen Xong Hoa's slender frame made it through the narrow vent with no difficulty, but he was so weak they had to help him far more than Acorna had

expected; he did almost none of the work of climbing. When he was finally in the tunnel, she realized why he had been so helpless. Even in the bad light,

Acorna could see what had been done to the man's hands and arms.

Pretending to bend lower to reset the screws on the vent, Acorna made sure

her horn touched-through the fine fabric of her hat-both mangled hands.

Urgently now, Markel directed them away from the empty cell and around a

bend in the tubes and over to the other side of the prison block. At the intersection, he firmly placed Dr. Hoa against the curving side and, finger on

Might not

get another chance. Any way you Gan help me locate him?"

Acorna closed her eyes. If only her horn had the power of locating people as

well as healing them! Maybe it dou, she thought. . . I've never known another of

my kind). How do I know what I can do?

She composed her thoughts and tried to visualize Calum's features, but all she

could sense was the aura of misery that filled the whole area around the cells .

. . and something about . maps? She shook her head, trying to clear it.

How

could she concentrate on finding Calum when she kept getting this feeling that

somebody was lecturing her on how to color a map? It felt as if there was a

whole geography class going on somewhere under her right hand ... no, not

geography. Strange, half-familiar words floated into her head.

"Conjecture . . . lemma . . . simple closed curve. . . ."

looking up so fast that he nearly lost his balance. "Acorna? What the-"

"We're rescuing you," Acorna explained patiently.

"Who's we! And do you have anything I can copy this down on? I don't want to

lose it, and the trouble with drawing diagrams in the condensation on the wall

here is ..."

"Ten thousand devils fly away with your diagrams and drop them in the dung

of the camel pits of Sheol!" Acorna ripped out a variation on one of Rafik's

favorite curses. "Do you want to wait around until they come to torture you into

releasing the hold on ^as. AcaSeckit Or do you think you could drop your

mathematical conjectures long enough to climb up this rope?"

Calum gave a dubious glance at the slender rope and the narrow space of the

air vent through which Acorna was whispering to him, then looked back once

regretfully at the drawings he had traced on the wall of his cell.

shoulders were really wedged firmly into the vent his feet would doubtless be
at a convenient height for Nueva's attentions.
"She likes playing with matches," he said.
Calum made one last convulsive effort, freed his broad shoulders, and wiggled upward into the tunnel, clutching the rope.
"Oh, well," he said, as Acorna exclaimed over his scrapes, "it's only skin,
plenty more where that came from."
They replaced the vent, went back around the curve, and collected Dr. Hoa,
who was trembling violently in reaction to his salvation.
"I am not a man of violence," he whispered in apology. "I am a scientist.
.. and I
was trying to get away from people like these. Now we are all trapped.
..."
Acorna touched his cheek with her horn and the spasms stopped. Toward the
end of their passage, they had to tie the rope around his shoulders, and
Acorna

behind

them.

Acorna was glad to oblige. While she was at it, she also assessed the scientist's other injuries and healed them. He had been badly knocked about

before the Palomellese even began their systematic destruction of his fingers

and hands; she could not blame him for having given them enough information

to use his research, nor for the fear and despair that had all but overwhelmed

him in the tunnels. But as she soothed his bodily aches, he seemed calmer and

more in control of himself. When she was finished, he caught her by the arm,

his eyes once more alive with intelligent curiosity.

"Ki-lin?" he asked in a bare whisper that would not reach Markel, occupied with

eavesdropping.

She smiled and put her finger across her lips as their young guide so often

Acorna did not have to warn him to take small, slow sips and accustom his body to water again.

Markel was grinning with delight at whatever he was hearing on his ear-
phone.

He kept listening, but occasionally would whisper at what was going on.

"They found Hoa missing first, then checked the rest of the cells. They haven't

a clue how he and Calum got away, and they got into an argument about it and

haven't yet checked to find out that you're gone, too, Acorna. That's as well.

Gives us more time to figure. ..." The boy paused, pushed the device more

securely into his ear, his eyes blinking angrily. Then he relaxed and smiled

again.

"I got to meet someone. And fast," he said, taking out the listener and carefully

restoring it to its pouch on tube wall. "You stay put and stay quiet," he

torted

knuckles and torn, burned skin she had seen before her healing touch had

soothed them. She shivered and tried not to imagine what deliberate cruelty

had inflicted those injuries.

"I don't much like this," Calum muttered. "How do you know we can trust the

kid? ".Acorna gave him a chilly look. "For starters, he just saved us both from

imprisonment and you, at least, from torture. Then there's the fact that his

father was killed resisting the coup that put these people in power-

"So he says. How do you know he's telling the truth?"

"Well, we're free, aren't we?"

"Are we?" Calum stretched until one elbow banged into either side of the

tunnel where they crouched.

"Damn!" Acorna exclaimed. "Why didn't I think of asking Markel to send a

message to either Shenjemi or Maganos-or better, both?"

She

swallowed hard, forcing down the half-masticated bits of carrot, so that she

could listen once again.

After an interminable wait she heard slight noises coming toward them- but

they sounded like the movements of a large man, not like Markel's quick,

delicate crawl. She threw a blanket over Dr. Hoa in the faint hope of concealing

him from whoever had discovered their hiding place, and looked at Calum with

wide, frightened eyes. He squeezed her hand reassuringly- at least, she assumed he meant it to be reassuring.

With her acute hearing, she registered before Calum did that there were two

people approaching them, the smaller one in front.

"It's all right," she whispered to Calum, "Markel's bringing someone."

"That," Calum whispered, "is exactly what I was afraid of."

"Acorna?"

around,

then at Acorna, and he, too, goggled.

"Damn," Acorna said out loud. In her hasty attempt to conceal Dr. Hoa, her hat

had come off. And her horn was visible..Calum began chuckling. What was so funny about the situation? A moment

ago he'd been sure Markel had betrayed them, now he thought it was funny

that her horn was in plain sight?

"It's all right, Acorna," Calum said, "and so is Markel, if he's hanging out with

this worthless space drifter."

The man with Markel chuckled in his turn. "Might have known if there was

trouble, you'd be mixed up in it somehow, Calum. But what were you thinking

of to get young Acorna into it?"

Acorna gasped in surprise, and the man turned to her. "No, you don't know me,

but I've heard plenty about you."

"Oh?"

office, but..."

The man in the holo looked much younger, his head thrown back in carefree

laughter. This man's features were the same, but now they were drawn in the

lines of strain and watchfulness that seemed to mark everybody who had

survived Nueva Fallona's coup on the Haven.

"You could have told me," she scolded Calum.

"Didn't have time," Calum defended himself. "Look, I didn't know he was going

to show up here."

Markel looked about anxiously. "Where'd you stash Dr. Hoa?"

Acorna reached over and gently raised a corner of the cover to show the exhausted doctor sleeping, the tiniest of smiles in the corners of his mouth.

"Is that a relief!" Johnny exclaimed, when he saw the scientist. "I don't know

how you did it, Markel. . ."

"Very carefully," the boy said, sitting with his arms resting casually on his

you stop the bleeding? I could've sworn you lost some skin back there!". "Oh, it was A- " Calum began, then stopped as Acorna gave him a warning

shake of the head. It wasn't that she didn't trust Markel, but he was being asked

to assimilate a lot at one time. And if something went wrong . . . she refused

even to consider that. There would be time enough to explain her unique

healing capabilities when they got out of here-and they would! "~a fuss about

nothing, as it turned out," Calum substituted for what he'd been going to say. "I

sure thought I was going to get scraped raw on the way out, though!"

"Markel," Acorna said urgently, "can you get messages out as well as eavesdrop on their communications? We ought to alert the Shenjemi Federation about what's happening to Rushima- and send to Maganos for help, too."

"Might could," Markel allowed. "Have to tap the main power lines to boost a

and

threatening to space the next incompetent who manages to lose a prisoner.

"They"-Markel thumbed his chest bone-"have got to be found. Oho!"

And he

sat bolt upright a moment, then relaxed again. But the sparkle was gone from

his eyes. "Sengrat's just pointed out that I was never accounted for in the

original coup . . . and Ximena reminded him that I used to know ways about the

ship in the tubes and stuff." The way he emphasized her name warned Acorna

that Ximena was, or had been, someone special to Markel. "They really are on

Nueva's side; they're not just going along to save their own skins," he said.

"Even Ximena ... I used to like her. I don't understand people like that."

"Neither do I," Acorna told him.

"You're a couple of charming innocents," Johnny told them, "but I for one

the

searchers ragged," Markel reported. "Then Sengrat suggested they should use

gas. He's still underestimating me." Even as he spoke, he was rooting through

yet another hiding place and came out with one hand clasping breathing masks

and the other emergency oxygen bottles.

Acorna smiled. "We won't need those."

Johnny shot Acorna a wondering look.. "She is Ki-lin," murmured Dr. Hoa, who had awakened during Markel's excited

report. "Her horn purifies water and air and heals. Does it not, most gracious

lady Ki-lin?"

"I am not Ki-lin, Dr. Hoa, but the rest of it is accurate," she said.

"See? She has healed my hands and arms from what they did to me."

The

scientist shoved one sleeve up to show a slightly wrinkled but healthy forearm

with a few patches of paler skin replacing the deep burns. "And the rest of me,

persuade me I'd been imagining it, when the truth is Acorna healed you?"

"We thought it might be hard for you to accept," Calum said. "Some people don't believe. ..."

Markel looked reverently at Acorna. "Even with a demonstration? What an asset for our side! They're never going to get their hands on you, lady. Not

while I can still breathe."

"I'll see that's a long, long time," Acorna said.

Then Market pressed the earpiece and held up a hand to stop any further talk.

"Yes, that's what they're going to do. Ximena is small enough to make a search

once the air has cleared up." His face clouded over. "She doesn't want to ... I

thought maybe she wasn't as bad as the rest of them . . . but she doesn't care

about what happens to us, she's just afraid I'll survive the gas somehow and

ship

would make a better command center than this tunnel . . . we could send our

messages for sure, and maybe even get clean away if Markel can disable the

Haven's grapples."

"No problem! Can't you see, we're already at Red 32 x Blue 16, all we have to

do is take a side route through Blue 16-24 and cut across at the intersection of

Green 48 ... well, never mind," Markel slowed down as he sensed the bafflement of his companions.

"I'm just a simple techno-nerd," Johnny said. "I don't happen to keep a 3-D

color map of the ship's maintenance tunnels in my memory."

"It's real easy," Markel said. "I'll tell you all about it when we have time." "That," Johnny said hollowly, "is exactly what I'm afraid of."

"Huh?"

"Never mind!" Johnny gave Markel a friendly push. "Get going, 0 friendly native guide. Lets hit the road ... or rather," as Johnny caught Markel's startled

these," he

mused over a collection of tools, rapidly making his selection. He stuffed the

necessary items into another backpack, draping thermal covers over everyone's shoulders, even Dr. Hoa's, and then, lifting up a corner of the tube

wall, shoved whatever remained into the opening. It took a few hard pushes to

get the opening to resume its normal shape. The area was back to normal.

Markel had left no signs of his presence.

"This way, now," he said, pointing before he took Dr. Hoas hand.

Later Acorna would wonder how they had managed that exodus. The healing

properties of her horn were prodigious, as well as its air-purifying abilities; but

the constant effort of making the air around them breathable eventually exhausted even her. And there were other problems. They did not have the

luxury of sticking to the "safe" routes Markel had mapped out for himself;

knees, hands, and other portions of their anatomies they could not keep from touching the hot metal.

"Lousy insulation," Johnny muttered, as Acorna laid her horn up and down his thigh where the material of his pant leg had been seared away.

They rested every time they reached a double tube crossing because there

Acorna and Johnny could stand upright and ease their backs.

"You do know where you're taking us, young'un?" Johnny asked.

"I told you, Johnny Greene, I know this ship like no one else, First or Second Generation. What's the matter, can't you take the heat?" Markel asked so

fiercely that Johnny held up his hands in mock self-defense.

"Lay on, Macduff," the spacer said with a smothered laugh, "and damned be he

who first cries Hold, Enough! That is," he added, "if you and Dr. Hoa can manage, Acorna? ".Acorna wanted nothing more than to be through with this claustrophobic

front of

the other smaller vessels that were part of the Haven's force.

"And that is their first mistake," Markel said with great satisfaction.

As if he hadn't been crawling for days through narrow tubes and inspection

conduits, Markel made space on the worktable and started plugging his equipment into some of the power-tool sockets. Everyone else flopped down,

exhausted, on the metal floor. Acorna was certain she would retain the honeycomb pattern of the room's floor on the tender parts other anatomy, but

it was worth it to stretch out at last. The cramped journey through the tunnels

had tried her sorely; for once she envied Calum his lack of inches.

"Ha! They haven't found anything, and it's going to take them days to inspect

the entire network," Market said. He rubbed his hands together and glanced in

the direction of the AcaSeckl. He tried to peer in other directions, but his view

himself at Johnny's sharp nudge and shot a quick apology in Acornas direction. "But that doesn't get us out of here."

"If we could get to the AcaSecki and power up," Calum asked Markel, "could

you patch into the Havens command centers from there and disable their

communications and other systems?"

"Nothing to it," Markel nodded, preening a little.

Calum stood, shakily, and pointed at the window. "Lemme have a look?"

Markel moved aside. Calum grunted. "You're sure there're only three here

now?" Markel nodded. "What we need is a diversion . . . that is, if you can get

us out of this storage room."

"No problemo," Markel said, and, taking an odd-shaped bit of plastic from a

thigh pocket, inserted it into the door. They could all hear the light "snick" as

the lock was opened. "Only now what? Soon as I open the door, we're in clear

sight of at least two of the guards."

length of

thick steel bar which he had quietly "acquired" during their passage through

the tunnels. Acorna looked around the supply room and found a heavy mallet,

which she swung about to test its balance.

"That looks good," Johnny said, reaching for the mallet, but Acorna shook her

head.

"Find your own weapons," she told him. "I like the heft of this."

Johnny's eyebrows shot up, but he made no further protest.

"I did mention, didn't I, that she's very independent?" Calum asked drily.

"You didn't tell me the half of it," Johnny muttered, rummaging around the

cluttered room for something he could use as a weapon. He settled on a length

of thin cable that he carefully knotted around a pair of screwdrivers.

"I've got a better idea than using the good doctor as bait," Calum said.

"Markel,

you said you could hack into hangar security and disable the grapples on the

guards went running toward the ship, and Markel and his followers were out of the storage room before the guards spotted them.

One of the two guards on the catwalk pounded on a device on the wall before

he followed his companion down to the hangar floor. The three guards made

straight for the AcaSeckil and the attackers made straight for them.

Acorna let her hammer fly at the nearest guard as he lifted his stunner. Her

weapon shattered his hand and sent his stunner skittering across the metal

floor, right to Market's feet. Markel picked it up and downed the top one on the

ladder, while Johnny, coming out from behind the bulk of a small shuttlecraft,

tackled the third guard before he could raise his weapon. Calum looked around, puzzled that there was no one for him to attack.

"That was too easy," he said.

Markel was taking the stairs to the catwalk two at a time, and running along it,

lock the hatches, Acorna felt more secure once she and all her friends were

inside the AcaSecki.

"Well done, Markel," Johnny said, throwing an arm about the boys shoulders.

"But what do we do now? Once they see us leave, they merely latch the tractor

beam on us and haul us back aboard. Unless you can disable that. ..."

"Yes, that much I can still do," Markel said, "but..."

"The AcaSecki's fast," Calum said, "but, even with the tractor beam useless, I'd

be surprised if the Haven doesn't have laser cannon and missiles." Markel

nodded, looking mournful. "Both- and there's no way I can get into those controls."

"You mean there's some security on this ship you haven't worked around?"

Johnny pretended amazement, but Markel looked so hangdog that he patted

the boy on the back and told him it didn't matter; there was more than one way

AcaSecki was not likely to go unnoticed for long, no matter how cleverly Markel disguised his jamming of the communications between the harbor and

the main deck; and they could hardly hold the little ship like a besieged fortress. "Well, we'll jump through that spacewarp when we come to it," Johnny said with a shrug, accepting the inevitable. "Better get on with it-
no

telling exactly how much time Markel can buy us with his system manipulations."

Calum started the reactivation sequence while Acorna was busy framing
a

spurt code message, which she thought should go to Maganos, Kezdet (in case

Mr. Li was at home), and Laboue.

"I'm thinking of Rafiks Uharu, too," Calum said. "Won't take more than
three

seconds a spurt, and it'll quadruple the chances of one message getting through."

"First of all we send one in clear to Shenjemi Federation," Acorna said,
and

"This is some ship," Market said, awed.. "You can say that again," Johnny added, equally impressed as he helped Dr.

Hoa into one of the conformable chairs. "You got a galley on board?" he asked.

Acorna pointed.

"Is there a shield over the hangar entry, Markel?" Calum asked. "Our messages

could bounce right back at us if there is."

"I took that off when I disabled the grapples," the boy said absently, far more

intent on prowling around the room, running his hands over the soft fabrics

and looking into compartments in the furnishings. "There's so much space for

everything," he said, standing in the middle of the room, arms outspread and

turning slowly around.

Johnny came back with a tray full of steaming cups which he offered first to Dr.

Hoa and then to the others. "A pick-you-up," he explained. "This ship isn't just

risk their firing at us; we'll just have to hope that everyone's too busy
looking
for us to see us," Calum warned.
"Gotcha," was Markel's insouciant response.
"On my mark," Calum said, raising his arm, "NOW!" He reactivated the
ship
and waited tensely through the seconds before the corn unit would be
ready to
function. "Anything on your end, Markel?" After a moments silence, he
toggled
down the spurt relay.
"Wait!" Market cried from outside the ship. "What? You don't-" The boy's
cry
was too loud to miss, and filled with an unidentifiable emotion.
Calum hit the toggle for the spurt relay and punched in the shutdown
sequence
for the ship in three quick, deft motions.
"I'm sorry," he said to Acorna. "The Shenjemi message got through, I
don't
know about the coded spurt to our friends; it was processing the multiple

and the others were so busy chasing us, they weren't paying attention to the other passengers. Nueva and her gang've been taken prisoner. I think the Starfarers-at least what are left of them--are back in charge again."

"I think we stay right where we are until we know that's what's happened,"

Johnny said, and gestured for Calum to close the hatch manually. "And let's not reactivate the AcaSecki just yet. If everything's okay, we have plenty of time to let our friends at home know-and if it isn't, we don't really need to alert anybody who didn't notice that one spurt. We'll just listen in for a bit. You can patch in to the bridge using Havens systems, can't you, Markel?"

"I think so."

With shaking hands, the boy began to do just that.

Maganos, Unified Federation Date^I.OS.IS

hariinye was too stunned to resist the security guard's firm hold on his arm.

(Is this what you consider "having an inconspicuous look round"?)

(I told you he was too immature to be trusted with this responsibility.)

Wincing, Thariinye closed his mind to further contact. All right, his mental

powers were as acute as ever . . . but what he heard from the three enraged

ladies on board the ship was not in the least reassuring! He would just as soon

take his chances with the barbarians. After all, they were a puny lot; he could

crush this man's skull with one kick from his powerful hooves, if he chose to.

(Thariinye! You'll do no such thing!) ,

(I am shamed that any blood kin of mine should even contemplate such a

khievii action.)

(Much too immature. I told you so.)

"Oh, do stop nattering at me!" Thariinye snapped aloud, but in Linyaari.

"Don't know what kind of foreign gabble that is, mister," the stolid security

guard said, "but iggerance of the law ain't no excuse. Ifnyou don't speak

the protests of the other children. "I know the Lady, and she is like this one,
but. . . different. Mr. Li will know what to do."
The guard hurried Thariinye away before the children could start any more
fuss.
"What. . . law . . . of yours ... do I break ... by existing . . . in this form?"
Thariinye had to concentrate to get the words out;
it was a harsh, tongue-mangling language, this "Basik."
The guard looked Thariinye straight in the chest . . . about where his eyes
would have been if he'd been the same height as this puny biped. So that much
of the projection was still working! The man certainly behaved as if he saw
nothing unusual in Thariinye's appearance ... so what was it that had alerted
him?
"I ain't interested in your beootiful form and figure, mister, and neither are

The guard's anger lifted his thought-stream momentarily out of the dull "grubble, grubble, grubble" of normal thoughts and gave Thariinye a devastatingly clear image of a tall, handsome, silver-haired biped making

sexual overtures to a group of shrieking children, followed by associated images so disgusting he hastily closed his mind against them. He was so

shocked that he did not even try to persuade the guard to forget his memories

and let him go.

(You idiot, Thariinye! They must have a nudity taboo.) (Nobody TOLD me!) (I

knew we should have taken longer to study the culture.)

"Lucky for you Mr. Giloglie ordered you brought directly to Delszaki Li's private

rooms," the guard said, steering them through a side corridor that opened onto

an antechamber lined in crimson silk, -with yellow patterns on the hangings.

"There's some as would have you lynched for even thinkin' about what you just

just

inside the next room, a spacious chamber furnished with soft couches and small tables.

Thariinye ducked to get through the oval opening and redoubled the force of his projections.

(You aren't seeing anything unusual. I'm really very boring. You want me to go away.) The dark-topped biped swayed and put one hand to its forehead.

The

gesture tightened the fabric across its chest so that Thariinye was able to see

its enlarged mammaries, large enough to indicate it was of the same gender as

Khariinya but nothing to compare with hers. Perhaps it was an immature member of the species ... a nymphet?

"I don't know what's coming over me," she said weakly. "I thought. . . but I did see ..."

devil

have you ..."

This one slowed, and the same confusion crossed his features. "Wait a minute.

I thought..."

He backed up through the doorway by which he'd entered, glanced up at

something, and looked back at Thariinye. "I don't get it," he said, and rubbed

his eyes. "On the vid . . . but you're not. . ."

The hiss of machinery behind him became louder; the red one stepped aside,

out of sight, and a very aged biped mounted on a floating box maneuvered

through the doorway. Thariinye had an instant impression of fragile, paper-dry,

wrinkled skin around a withered frame, bright dark eyes, and a piercing intelligence.

(I deduce some kind of telepathic damper,) the new biped thought.

Thariinye sighed in relief. (Then your people can hear with the heart as well as

the aged being's

first experience of mind-speech, why was he taking it so calmly? And how had

he figured it out so fast?

(You young people are so easily excited.)

Thariinye felt the dry amusement in the old being's thoughts.

(Confirmation of a long-discussed hypothesis is gratifying, not frightening! As

for deductions, I could conceive of no other hypothesis which would account

for the fact that your image appears as one like Acorna on the vid-screens, yet

all who see you in person take you for a man like us.)

(Except those blasted kids!)

(My species often claims that children's sight is purer and more truthful than

that of adults. Is this then true?)

(They're too immature for thought-speech. I suppose you could call that pure-I

call it damned inconvenient!)

(There are more of you?)

(Introduce us AT ONCE, Thariinye. How could you be so rude? This is clearly

not a barbarian but a truly hnyarii being.) (You are so inconsiderate, Thariinye!)

The aged biped's dark eyes widened, and he let out a hiss of comprehension.

"This is wonderful," he whispered aloud. "Judit, you will please make ready tea

for . . . how many?"

(There are four of us.) There didn't seem to be much point in concealing their

number when this being had so rapidly deduced so much about them.

"I don't see what is so wonderful!" said the female addressed as "Judit"-terrible,

tongue-mangling name; how would he ever manage to say it?

"We speak in mind," the old one said in his husky whisper. "I hnd is much less

tiring than manipulating vocal apparatus. You will please learn art of mind-speak

as soon as possible, my Judit. Perhaps these new ki-iin will be so kind

There was a gasp of amazement from the younger bipeds gathered around the

old one as Thariinye dropped his cloaking projections and stood before them

as himself: a seven-foot-tall Liinyar male in the pride of health and youth, as

good a specimen of the race, in his own humble opinion, as they could hope to

find.

The momentary silence was broken by a slender, darktopped biped - with a

facial structure resembling that of the female, but -without the enlarged glands

on its chest.

"I told you that was not Acorna," it said smugly.

(WHERE IS SHE? Oh, sorry. I did not mean to shout at you . . . but we are most

concerned for the fate of our 'Khornya.)

(Is long story. You wall please to take tea first, then when all are calm we will

discuss what is to be done.)

trate it.

Once admitted to the innermost chamber, Thariinye understood how these

beings had so easily seen through his calming projections. The vid-screens

transmitted the input of mechanical image-sensing devices which, having no

thoughts, fears, or emotions, could not be confused by the Linyaari art of

projecting illusory feelings.

(Really, Thariinye. You should have realized that beings capable of some

limited form of space travel would have other mechanical devices.)

(Huh! I don't recall YOU mentioning the possibility. Aunt Melireenya.)

(The boy is right, Melireenya. We are all culpable of underrating these beings

and their intelligence. Already we have discovered that their technology, though crude, is effective and that at least one of them is capable of clear

clear

mind-speech. They may well have other surprises in store for us.)

you,

do you understand?)

(No fear, Neeva. Now that the old one has closed his mind to me, I am having

enough trouble saying ANYTHING in this horrible language of theirs. It hurts

my mouth to pronounce the words, and they are so dim they never understand

anything until I say it three times.)

Actually, Judit was pleased that her facility -with languages extended to being

able to decipher Thariinye's accent. He had wakened sooner and spent less

total time with the LAANYE than the older Linyaari had, and it showed in his

difficulty with Basic Interlingua phonemics. Her name was rendered as Yuudhithe" and as for his apology for violating their culture's nudity taboo,

well, it was a good thing she'd had some idea what he was talking about, or she

never would have figured it out.

and conserved his energy for the upcoming meeting.

There were fine beads of sweat along Judit's hairline, and she could feel

a

tension headache gripping the back of her neck before Pal brought the other

three Linyaari to Mr. Li's inner room.

(At least you haven't gotten into any more trouble while w6 were on our way.)

(You can relax now, Thari. We'll take care of everything.)

"Missiter Li," Thariinye said, "allow me to initraduuse mi khomipaani-ans." He

would have gritted his teeth if it had been possible to do so while working his

mouth around the harsh syllables of the alien language. Wasn't it just like

Melireenya to come swanning in and take over after he had taken the risks and

done all the really hard work? "Neeva of the Renyilaaghe, visedhaanye ferilii.

Melireenya of the Balaave, gheraalye ve-khanyii. Khaari of the Giryeeni,

Gill nodded stiffly; Rafik bowed; Pal took the envoy's hand and bowed over it,

touching his lips to the back of the blunt fingers so like his Acorna's. The pupils of Neeva's eyes narrowed briefly to silver slits, then widened again. The

fleeting expression was so like Acorna's that Judit felt tears spring to her eyes.. "We are honored to make your acquaintance," she murmured for Mr. Li,

unaware that he was already speaking to the newcomers in their own private

manner.

(Is indeed great honor to be the first of our race to greet others of Acorna's

kind.)

(Not exactly the first. But that first lot wouldn't even-)

(Thariinye!)

Delszaki Li glanced at Judit, and she moved closer to him, the better to hear

his labored whisper. "Can they understand languages other than Basic?" he

(Not to be concerned. Takes some time to understand obscure idioms of Basic,) Li responded. He quickly called up the image of the Jade Palace to shield his mind once again, lest the Linyaari pick up some hint of his innermost thoughts. "Judit, be polite to our guests," he reprimanded her, "speak Basic, and slowly." Judit blushed and apologized for her carelessness and gave no sign that she had acted under Mr. Li's orders to begin with. Delszaki Li was severely embarrassed to confess to the Linyaari that he had lost track of Acorna only shortly before her own people came for her, and he made no effort to conceal his feelings from them. (My house is shamed. I will tell you that we took all possible care for Acorna from day of her finding, but how will you believe this when now she is lost? Descendants of Li will be

accident to the hydroponics section of the Aca^ecki- "

"On't-day ee-bay inay uch-say ay uny-hay oo-tay ell-tay em-thay allay
ou-yay

ow-knay," Gill interrupted. Lacking the multilingual background shared
by Li

and the Kendoros, he had independently come to his own conclusion
about how best to converse privately in front of beings who could learn
Basic

overnight.

"Why not?" Rafik demanded.

Gill glanced at the envoys. "Ee-way on't-day ow-knay oowhay ey-thay
eally-ray

are-ay," he said. "Ey-thay ight-may eebay ee-thay eople-pay oo-whay
arooned-may

Corna-Ay."

Rafik put his hand on Gill's arm and drew the larger man into the ante-
chamber.

"Stop making a bloody fool of yourself with that pig Latin," he whispered.

"We've got no reason to mistrust them."

"We've got no reason to trust them, either," Gill returned in a furious
whisper.

with the

Linyaari and find out what they have to say about Acorna? "

By that time the tea Mr. Li had requested was ready, and the small social

ceremony helped to alleviate the strain all parties were feeling. Knowing Acorna's tastes, he had ordered a blend of herbal tea with alfalfa for the envoys, served in the handleless cups favored by Acorna, while the humans,

with their more slender and more flexible digits, drank smoky Kilmembemba

Oolong from cups with delicate porcelain handles. Melireenya took pains to tell

Judit aloud that she had noticed and did very much appreciate this evidence of

attention to their tastes.

"Is no trouble," Mr. Li whispered, so that humans as well as Linyaari could

understand them. "We have learned much from our beloved Acorna. Now we

hope to learn more from you. Origin of Acorna is still mystery. Gill, you will tell

had

lost their jobs and almost lost their ship, to protect her from becoming the

ward of Amalgamated Mining and subject to whatever experiments their Linguistics and Psych department could dream up, but his affection for Acorna

came through underlying every word and moved the Linyaari envoys deeply.

He skipped the tangled tale of her adventures on Kezdet and ended by explaining that Calum had come up with an ingenious theory for locating Acorna's home world and that he and Acorna had just taken off in search of it-unfortunately

without filing a navigation plan..(One chance in mitanyaakhi!) Neeva silently exclaimed. (Vaanye could not

possibly have foreseen that the explosion would not only transport Acorna out

of danger but would bring her to another populated sector of the galaxy . . . and

into the hands of these good Linyaari who raised her as one of their own.)

Linyaari. We

should tell them the truth of our mission.)

(We don't know that all of them are good people. From this man Ghiil's story

alone it is clear that some, at least, of this race think nothing of experimenting

on other sapient beings. Such behavior strikes me as more khievii than linyarii.

Let us go slowly here.)

"So," Gill finished, "that's what we know about Acorna. And what we're all

curious to find out is, exactly how did one of your younglings come to be floating in our sector, in a pod that couldn't have kept her alive many more

hours, with no signal to alert anyone to her existence? You folks seem mighty

concerned for her now; strikes me you've come a long way to retrieve somebody who seems to've been thrown out with the trash in the first place."

He rested his big, heavy-knuckled hands on his knees and looked from one of

"Well?" Gill challenged as the silence after his speech stretched on and on.

Most of the humans in the room waited eagerly for the Linyaari complement to

Gill's story; only Rafk, once more absorbed in his star maps and calculations,

-was oblivious to the mounting tension as the Linyaari looked at one another

but did not speak.

(We love Acorna as our own child,) Delszaki Li told them. (We 'will not give her

over to those who may have sought to destroy her in the first place.) He repeated his words aloud so that the other humans could understand the

statement. Judit nodded firmly, Pal folded his arms, and Gill merely shifted his

weight a little forward, like a man in a bar anticipating that fists might soon

start swinging.

(The red one does not look so linyarii now, Neeva. He looks quite capable of

chance of finding her as they do; in fact, if this Khaalum's deductions are correct, she may reach Home before we do!)

Thariinye snorted aloud. (They may be very nice bipeds, but their technology

has some major gaps, and most of them can't even mind-speak. I shouldn't be

surprised to learn that this Khaalum has gone haring off in absolutely the

wrong direction. At least find out where they think he might have gone before

you tell them.)

While this silent colloquy went on, Delszaki Li murmured with Pal and Judit in

rapid Old Magyar. "They are concealing something from us; I can sense the

shields in their minds. Also there is fear and guilt."

"They'll have to tell us more before we give away anything about Acorna.

You've said too much already," Pal said, then bit his lip. He had never before

at the lines of light Rafik's calculations had produced on the projected star maps.

Thariinye felt much the same. All three of the senior Linyaari were looking at

him with deep disapproval, as though taking reasonable precautions against

an unknown race were a khievii act on an ethical par with eating one's young.

He could not remove himself from the mental discussion, but he could- and did-

leave the tea table to stroll across to the wall of projected star maps, where he

leaned over Gill's shoulder and studied the display with growing interest. It

was difficult to read, and showed the heavens at entirely the wrong angle, but

as he began to understand the alien notation he was able to mentally map

these images onto the three-dimensional picture of the stars in space that he

this point about so far, so it will always be the same length as that-over-there."

Afterward comes the laborious process of translating the intuition into Line AB

and Point C and so forth and so on..Thariinye, looking on as Rafik muttered calculations and traced lines of light on

the projection, was able to follow the logic of Rafik's thinking in these intuitive

terms. And when he touched Rafik's arm, waggled his eyebrows, and suggested that an arc be minutely widened to cover a slightly greater subsection of space, Rafik frowned, nodded, and changed the light-diagram

without the necessity of a word being said. But at the next suggested course

correction, Rafik shook his head violently. "You don't understand," he said.

"We know there is a fault in the hydropon^s unit." He had to repeat that very

slowly before Thariinye waggled his eyebrows to show comprehension. "They

the quickest route nor the worst one. Something shaped like a cork-screw

•would appeal to the shifty bastard. And that would bring him out somewhere

near here." Rafik tapped a point representing a distant sun to bring up a closer

view of the system. One panel darkened, then displayed a glowing white outline within which was shown a reddish sun with only three planets orbiting

it, two far too close to support the temperate-region greens Acorna favored.

Thariinye reached out and touched the image of the third planet. It looked right

to him: a little larger than Home, far enough from the sun to be in the right

temperature range, slightly tilted in its elliptical orbit. Two moons, one large

enough to cause tides, the other a mere speck, orbited the planet.

The panel beeped, the color of its glowing outline changed to green, and a

close-up view of the selected world appeared. Thariinye studied the

hurt his mouth framing a question in this awkward language.

"Ag settlements," Rafik said, "and one spaceport." He indicated the six-armed

star set toward the bottom of the chain of blue marks.

(Neeva. They are heading in the right direction.)

(Wonderful!)

(No. Not wonderful. Come and look!)

Thariinye extended his hand with an imperious gesture. Rafik raised his own

brows, but after a moment looking in the young Liinyar's eyes, he gave him the

laser drawing tool.

"Res-taare fiirist diispla?"

After a moments pause, Rafik said, "Oh-restore first display? Sure." He snapped his fingers twice. The panel showing a close-up view of Rushima.faded back into the general picture. With swift, sure gestures Thariinye

sketched many parallel lines of light, originating at the far upper right of the

screen and approaching the human-settled portion of the galaxy at an oblique

for which 'Khornya is bound. We have no more time to debate -we must trust

these barbar .. .) He jammed the brakes on that thought. (... these linyarii

beings.) They had better be truly linyarii, for all their sakes!

Neeva's pupils narrowed to threadlike lines of silver as she took in the devastating message of the star map. She could not make the mental translation to their notation and angle of view as rapidly as Thariinye had done.

(Navigation Officer! Do you concur with Thaaris conclusion?)

Khaari rose and joined Thariinye close to the display. After a moment her own

pupils narrowed like Melireenya s. (About the Khieevi he is correct. Envoy. As

for the route supposedly taken by 'Khornya, I cannot say. It is certainly a possible way to approach our sector . . . but it seems unnecessarily roundabout.)

(This dark one has explained it to me,) Thariinye broke in. ('Khornya left without the permission of these beings. They believe she has taken an unusual

route in order to avoid messages ordering her to return.)

trace of accent in certain syllables. "We . . . haave not been . . . enitirely
open
with you. We haad anyother purpose in comiin to your people."
"Is obvious," Li whispered. "Was wondering how long it would take you
to
admit it. Now we speak freely?"
"Yes, fireeli," Neeva said. "Iss little time." (Calculate expected time of ar-
rival of
Khieevi fleet. Navigation Officer! You will aid. Computation Specialist
Thariinye! I want an estimate before they ask for one! It is time to take
action!)

Maganos, Unified Federation Date 554.05.18.Neeva began to tell the
story of the Khieevi invasion of the First Home,
haltingly in the beginning, then with more assurance as her tongue be-
came
accustomed to the awkward syllables of the speech called "Basik."
"Vhiliinyar we called it: 'Home of the People.' What need for another
name?
And our star was called 'Light of the People.' Other stars, other lands,
we
named as we first ventured into space: named for their position, for their

three

Linyaari in their own tongue, a soft ritual plaint of mourning that needed no

translation. "We see that your race has seeded itself over many star systems,"

Neeva continued. Have you, then, experience of the Khieevi already, that you

protect yourselves by this diversity? "

"Population pressure," Gill said. He gave a quick estimate of we rate at - which

human populations tended to expand, given sufficient food, and Neeva's pupils

slitted to silvery lines. "I see! We do not reproduce so quickly," she said with

regret. "Many generations will pass before the People recover from the devastation created by the Khieevi. Your race may yet be more fortunate. Even

though they destroy one or many worlds, yet will others of you survive and

replace those who are lost."

They. . .

they do not Communicate. They destroy;

and before they destroy, they torture. Of their tongue we have too few samples

for the LAANYE to analyze; of their physical structure we know only what is

shown on the broadcasts they have sent to cow us into submission.

When

their first ships appeared in our space, we sent envoys to them, as we have

come to you, in peace and friendship. Those envoys never returned, but we

know their fate from the images sent back to us. I think I will not show you

those vids; there is no need to harrow your hearts with the images engraved on

ours. Our envoys, and all of the People who have subsequently fallen into

Khieevi hands, have been tortured to death as slowly as Khieevi arts permitted.

make war

on or harm beings whose grief and pain you could feel, through telepathic

contact, as clearly as your own. Gentleness and empathy had been bred into Linyaari culture until any other way of being was all but unthinkable. And

although they had, in their explorations of space, encountered other sapient

aliens, none of those races had been so well developed or so powerful as to

force the Linyaari to learn the arts of war-or even of elementary self-defense.

The only real change caused by their encounters with other races had been the

development of the LAANYE, the linguistic analyzer which allowed them to

acquire a basic understanding of alien languages from a relatively small speech sample.

"Strange that they would develop such a device when they had no prior experience of language translation," Rafik commented sotto voce.

such task. Is only logical these most intelligent beings would turn to technology for solution."

Rafik shrugged. Having been brought up trilingual, in the Arabic and Armenian

of his family house and the Basic of interstellar commerce, he could not even

imagine a world in which all intelligent beings spoke but one language and

regarded other tongues as codes to be broken by communications software.

"From the Khieevi," Neeva said, "we learned the arts of war . . . but not quickly

enough. First we fled them, abandoned Vhiliinyar rather than commit violence

against other sapient beings . . . but not all. Too many of the People refused to

believe the evidence of the Khieevi 'casts; it was beyond their comprehension

that any beings could attack others in this fashion. They learned . . . too late . . .

Neeva went to the star map and asked Thariinye to make it display the
Coma
Berenices quadrant. With Rafik's help, the projection was changed, and
using
the laser pointer, Neeva traced lines of light showing the Linyaari dis-
persion to
planets in other systems, far enough away, they hoped, to evade
Khieevi
notice. This flight had bought them enough time to adapt their technol-
ogy to
space war and defense systems, and also time enough to establish
certain
stringent rules for all their people. "No more Linyaari shall die under
Khieevi
torture," Neeva told them. "We have all taken a vow to die at our own
hands
before falling into the claws of the Khieevi. For some years this was not
necessary. Having conquered Vhiliinyar, and our neighboring world of
Galleni,
the Khieevi did not move again for a time. But we did not cease our
studies and

"Galleni thiinyethilelen, fiinyefalaran dharmakoi," murmured the other Linyaari.

"One of our foremost scientists, Vaanye of the Renyilaaghe, had adapted his

researches into the topology of space to weapons research shortly before his

death," Neeva told them. "He had discovered a way of temporarily collapsing

the dimensional fabric of space at a selected point, which created an inordinately large and destructive explosion at the point of origin.

Vaanye had

told us only that there were a few minor side effects to use of the weapon, such

as the fact that it destroyed whoever employed it as well as the intended target,

when he and his life-mate made the mistake of taking a short cruise in order to

show their first youngling to ... me." Neevas pupils narrowed into vertical silver

lines of distress. "My sister Ferilawas Vaanye's ... wife," she explained, "and I

an error which cost Feriila her life, for Vaanye's cruise coincided with the

Khieevi discovery of this star system. Our new planetary defenses thwarted

their first attack-but Vaanye, in space, had no such defenses. For three ghaanyi

we have believed that Vaanye destroyed Feriila, their youngling, and the ship

rather than allow them to be captured by the Khieevi. We were astonished to

discover that an escape pod from Vaanye's ship had survived the explosion

only to be transported to this remote sector of space . . . and even more surprised to find that my sisterchild had been raised to maturity among you."

"Ha!" Pal exploded. "So you didn't come for Acorna."

Neeva inclined her head with a graceful gesture that indirectly reproved Pal.

"No. Since our present planetary defense systems have at least temporarily

detection. We felt it our duty to discover if any other sapient races might exist

in the path of the Khieevi fleet, and to warn them if such existed."

"Did you know they were coming this way, then?" Gill asked.

"There were several paths they might logically have taken. We sent groups out

in all such directions." Neeva paused, her pupils narrowing again. "Not all

ships made a successful escape from the remaining Khieevi . . . but ours did,

and we were instructed to continue on our way. Recent transmissions from

narhii-Vhiliinyar-you would say. New Home-have emphasized the urgency of

our task, as it is now known that a large Khieevi fleet is indeed making a sweep

toward this sector of space. We hope to make alliance with you, to share our

technology and what we have learned of the Khieevi with whatever resources your race can muster, that they may not fall upon you unwarned as they did us.

Who had told them to look for her here on Maganos Moon Base? And why had

they been so secretive and indirect in their first approaches on Maganos? But

Neeva's last statement thrust all his previous questions into the background.

"Great Gods, woman," he roared, "do you mean to tell us these beasts are

headed for Rushima? Why the devil did you draw it out so long? Rafik, send a

coded spurt to Rushima immediately! There's no time to waste!"

"Gently, Gill," whispered Mr. Li. "Is important to know all salient facts. Right

action can arise only from right understanding."

"I should think the action needed is obvious enough!"

"Declan Giloglie," said Judit firmly, "chill."

Gill subsided into his chair, muttering into his quivering red beard, and Rafik

looked at Judit with new respect.

"How did you do that?" he murmured in her ear.

and

beg."

Rafik intercepted a meaningful glance from Mr. Li and, abandoning this badinage, he slipped out of the room to consult with Li's secretary about the

fastest route by which to send a coded spurt-message to Rushima for immediate transmission to the Acadecki. The message would have to have a

header that would persuade Calum and Acorna not to reject it unheard, yet it

must not contain anything that would start a general panic on Rushima. Hmm .

. . Wasn't Rushima an outlying colony of the Shenjemi Federation? Best apprise the Federation, too, of the situation ... or as much as could be encapsulated in the very condensed but fast-traveling spurt. Let the Shenjemi

decide whether to defend or evacuate Rushima; Rafik's first responsibility was

to get Acorna and Calum out of there at once. Then perhaps the Linyaari

velocity to converge on the Rushimese system as various parties put forward

their suggestions for mobilizing a defense against the Khieevi attack. Gill

pointed out that Kezdet's own Guardians of the Peace had a large space fleet at

their command, testimony to Kezdet's acquisitive ways and tendency to demand "taxes" or "reparations" from neighbors on the slightest excuse.

At his command, the star-map projector displayed a fleet of golden rhomboids

moving from Kezdet toward Rushima, but taking a far more direct route than

that presumably chosen by Calum. "They could be there within five days."

"You can't be serious!" Judit flared up at him. "Shake hands with Kezdet, count

your fingers," she quoted a proverb popular in this and neighboring star systems. Pal nodded his agreement. Having escaped the infamous system of

child bondage on which Kezdet's old industrial empire had been built, a system

"True," Rafik nodded, "but he did save my life by disarming the bomb
Tapha
meant to kill me with. Whatever else you may say against Des Smirnoff,
he's no
coward."
Gill snorted. "Maybe not, but he's still an idiot. Remember who let Tapha
get
past security with that bomb in the first place? No, thank you. We don't
need
clowns like Smirnoff and Minkus in this operation. They're liable to get
your
whole hand blown off instead of just taking a couple of fingers!"
"This insignificant old person has dealt with Kezdet for many years and
still
has all fingers intact, though unfortunately not functioning," Mr. Li
pointed out.
"But Kezdet fleet is designed for small-time piracy and aggression on
weaker
neighbors. Gill, not for defense against armada. Send Guardians to
Rushima is
to sign their death sentence."

small portable com unit which he had set to display all

incoming messages from Shenjemi-or Rushima.

"More or less."

A voluminous spurt from Shenjemi was still being expanded and de-coded; the

words scrolled across Rafik's screen as he watched.

"First, they request proof that this so-called attack on Rushima is not a hoax,

and they want to know what connection this message has with the spurt they

recently received from Rushima claiming the planet was under attack by space

pirates."

"The Khieevi-already?" Judit paled.

"I don't think so," Rafik replied. "The Rushimese seem to think they're being

attacked by some group called the Starfarers. . . . Now, where have I heard that

name before? Oh, yes. . . . Uncle Hafiz mentioned them once; they used to be

space station into a mobile colony and have been wandering around for yonks,

staging protests and doing odd jobs in space to finance themselves.' He frowned. "But they were always very ethical.. . obnoxiously ethical. I can't see

them turning to piracy, no matter how hard up they were. This must be some

other group with the same name."

"Besides," Gill said, "Rushima s not exactly the ideal target for pirates, is it?

What sort of loot could they take off an ag planet? Loads of grain? Some nicely rotting silage?"

"To get back to the Shenjemi Federation," Rafik said, "they have sent a spurt

direct to Rushima requesting confirmation and have as yet received no reply;

third, Rushima's ROI-return on investment," he translated for the Linyaari, "is

too low to justify the expense of a full-scale defense. They are considering

(Khaari?)

(I'm working on it!)

(Between one and two enye-ghanyii,) Thariinye announced.

Khaari sighed and rolled her eyes. (I hate to admit it, Neeva, but the brat's

probably right. I'm trying to get you a closer estimate.)(Brat! I like that! You're only one age group ahead of me, Khaari!)

(Children, quit squabbling! I can't hear myself think!)

After a few minutes' consultation with Judit and Gill, Neeva said, "If the Khieevi

observe Rushima and choose to take it, they will probably begrnn operations in

... I think eight to"-she counted on her digits for a minute, murmuring-"I do

wish somebody would add arithmetic capabilities to the LAANYE; I cannot add

in base tenn." She muttered to herself in Linyaari for a moment, then lifted her

head. "Yes. Two-tenn to six-tenn of your days."

"Twenty to sixty?" Gill asked hopefully. "Or twelve to sixteen?"

reached us

just ahead of the Khieevi?"

"It's a whole lot better than getting here just after the invasion," Pal pointed

out.

"Let's just hope the Shenjemi Federation get their collective finger out in time."

Gill said. "And in the meantime, let's have Acorna out of there. Rafik, what

word from Rushima? They must have received our spurt by now."

Rafik shook his head. "It didn't get through." "WHAT? ? ? " Gill lunged half out

of his chair. "What did You do wrong'

"Chill," Rafik said firmly. He was disappointed to see that the word was not

effective when it wasn't delivered in Judit's calm voice. "Look, Gill, nothing is

getting through to Rushima right now. The Shenjemi couldn't raise a reply

either. And the AcaSecki isn't receiving OR transmitting."

"If these Khieevi have already got there-"

mured a

few words, then tapped the screen again. "Unlikely. The Galactopedia says

Rushima is noted for its temperate and even climate. Atmospheric and ionospheric storms are virtually unknown." "In any case," Mr. Li put in, "dare not wait days, or even hours. Someone must

go to warn Rushima, and to bring Acorna and Calum back. Here, we continue

to resend spurt message, make plans for defense, encourage Shenjemi to

evacuate Rushima."

"And what happens if the Khieevi bypass Rushima?" Rafik asked.

"They find richer pickings closer in," Gill said grimly. "Depending on their tastes. . . . Neeva, what do these Khieevi want?"

Neeva shook her head. "You know the fate of our envoys. We have never

established communication; whatever they want, it is not that. I know only what

they do. They destroy."

"Do they colonize the planets they take? Are they looking for living space?"

and the thoughts of the other Linyaari.

"Valleys and green hills become plains," he said, straining his voice to communicate what he perceived to the others. "Orchards and cities are leveled. All native life is destroyed, down to the insects in the air and the bacteria in the earth. A river becomes a foul marsh breeding clutches of small

Khieevi in the thousands. Dry land is an ocean of grass in which the mature

Khieevi fly. And the bones of the Linyaari are piled in monuments."

"The Mongols meant to do the same to Western Europe, once," Rafik said. "It

would have been in the"~he paused and flicked fingers swiftly over the string

of amber beads knotted in his belt-"in the thirteenth century, Old Reckoning.

Chroniclers of the time say they advanced like locusts, devouring and destroying all before them, and attacking so swiftly that the mounted knights of

the West had no time to assemble a defense. Impregnable walled cities went

to other planets."

Neeva drew in her breath in shock at this revelation.

(Did you hear that? Their own histories recount such behavior!)

(Have we made a mistake in seeking alliance with them? Perhaps they are more

khievii than linyarii after all.)

(What choice did we have?)(I think we are safe enough. They, too, have no choice. How could they ally with

the Khieevi, who destroy anyone who lingers long enough to communicate

with them? They must help us to turn back the Khieevi, else their own worlds

will suffer as did our Home.)

Gill thought the Linyaari simply had nothing much to say.

"Very interesting, Rafik," he said. "But the Mongols did not succeed. I've seen

Earth; its not a featureless steppe, and Europe has cities and monuments

dating from long before the time you mention. So what turned them back?"

Pal and Judit turned to Rafik, hopeful. •' Rafik shook his head slightly.

"Me?"

"You and Delszaki Li are the brains of this outfit," Gill told him blandly.

"Me, I'm

just a simple, horny-handed son of the lunar regolith. You two work out how

humanity is going to exterminate this swarm of killer bees, and I'll just pop off

to Rushima and fetch our Acorna home again. Mr. Li, what's the fastest ship

Maganos has available right now?"

"Wait just a minute," Rafik protested. "You'll go for Acorna? Excuse me, but I

believe I have some interest in this matter as well."

"And I," said Pal.

"You're not going anywhere without me," Judit said.

"You two can't go," Gill protested, "Mr. Li needs you. And Rafik has to stay

here and think."

"I could think just as well on board a ship as anywhere else, Rafik said, "and

only by some other aliens."

He paused, appalled at the magnitude of the task, so described.

"What we need, in fact," he said finally, "is Uncle Hafiz." He pounded one fist

into his palm in frustration. "And he is walled up behind the Shield, where no

one can communicate with him ... or the rest of Laboue ... at all." (Walled up behind the 'Shield'? Khaari, I have a bad feeling about this.

Do you

suppose that first planet we approached . . .)

(Oh, no!)

(Oh, yes.)

Aloud, Neeva said, "Where is it, this Laboue?"

"Not on the maps," Rafik said. "My uncle and the others who make it their

headquarters prefer their privacy. And I am sworn to House Harakamian now;

on the lives of my unborn sons, I may not tell you its location."

Neeva nodded. "Tell us nothinn, thenn," she acquiesced, "but I am not forbiddenn to tell you that before we approached you onn Maganyos . . .

scenes broadcast from Khieevi torture ships, to make them aware of the danger. We received a brief vidcast from the planet. . . there was a biped

.. .

human .. . dark as you, Rafik, who showed us pictures of Acorna and a drawing

of her escape pod. That was how we learned of her existence. But before we

could question this human further, the entire planet was shut down under an

impenetrable shield that blocked all communication, even visual transmission.

Our only clue was a message sent from the location we had been communicating with, indecipherable but for the one word 'Acorna.' That message went to a ship which then departed hastily in this direction; we followed the ship to Maganos in the hope that its owner might lead us to Acorna."

She inclined her head gracefully toward Rafik. (Khaari, point out the location of

that first planet on these maps.)

Khaari took a light-wand and illuminated a star some distance from Maganos

probably correct. And you know," he went on in a slightly more hopeful tone,

"perhaps it's not Uncle Hafiz's brains we need so much just now . . . perhaps

what we need is the Shield. If such a device could be installed on every inhabited planet, beginning -with those in the direct line of the Khieevi fleet. . ."

"But the secret of the Shield," Pal pointed out, "is presently behind the Shield,

together with your uncle's invaluablely twisty mind. So perhaps our first priority

ought to be finding some way to crack the Shield. Surely Hafiz has told you

something about how it functions?" "Nothing," Rafik admitted. "I am not sure he even understands it himself. The

genius of our House is in finance, not technology. But we always hire the best

technicians."

"Then the engineer who designed and installed the Shield ..." Pal began.

"Martin Dehoney," Rafik said. There was a moment of silence.

while we ..."

"Oh, no," Rafik said. "I'm going, too."

"And we," said Neeva. "Acorna is my sister-child; it is my responsibility to see

to her safety. Besides, our ship is faster than any your people could design."

Rafik's teeth flashed white under the thin dark line of his mustache.

"We'll just

see about that!"

"As for planetary defense," Mr. Li put in, "House of Li has excellent liquidity, as

does House Harakamian. Why not hire mercenaries from Kilumbemba

Empire?" Gill whistled through his teeth. "The Red Bracelets? If anybody can

take out the Khieevi, they should be able to." Delszaki Li's personal bodyguard

was rumored to have served -with the Red Bracelets at one time, and he had

never met any human being tougher or more frightening than Nadhari Kando.

centage

of profits in captured alien ships, alien technology could be powerful lure."

"And," Gill said slowly, "they're probably bored right now. The Kilumbemba

Empire hasn't expanded in several years. The Red Bracelets are expensive to

maintain and dangerous when bored, but Kilumbemba aren't release them

from their contract for fear of a revolt in one of the new, um, 'acquisitions.' It

just might work. Rafik, you and Delszaki are the best negotiators; before "we go anywhere, why don't you see if we can subcontract from Kilumbemba for the best part of their mercenary space fleet?". "And pledge Uncle Hafiz's credit to support them, I suppose," Rafik said with resignation. "Not that I don't think it's money well spent," he hastened to explain, "but Uncle Hafiz is going to kill me when he comes out from behind

the Shield."

"He wouldn't grudge the credits to save Acorna," Gill pointed out.

of talk

upsets our guests." He felt it would definitely be unwise to tell the Linyaari

about Yukata Batsu, Hafiz's chief competitor on Laboue, and his unpleasant

habit of keeping trophies from his defeated enemies . . . including the ears of

Hafiz's own son, Tapha. Hafiz himself had been more upset about Tapha's

stupidity in letting himself be captured than about the mutilation, but somehow

Gill felt the Linyaari were not used to taking such matters in their stride. They

are still not sure we're civiliw) enough to 2eal with, he thought. Maybe we '3

better not let/hem Listen in on the negotiations with the Kilumbemba mercenaries, either. And on the excuse that Rafik and Delszaki Li needed

absolute privacy for this ticklish task, he offered to escort the Linyaari on a

"As long

as Thariinye does not lose his temper again, we should have no trouble."

"Just keep us away from those blasted kids," Thariinye said.

Since the raison d'etre of Maganos was the education and training of the

bondchildren liberated from Kezdet, Gill found this directive rather difficult to

follow, but with Judit's help he managed to keep the Linyaari occupied for

some time in childfree areas of the base. Indeed, Provola Quero alone would

have been able to lecture them indefinitely on the design of the base living

quarters, mining facilities, and engineering shop; but even the Linyaari thirst

for knowledge was eventually satiated by the seemingly endless string of facts

and sketches at Provola's disposal, and at last Gill could think of nothing but to

bring them back to Delszaki Li's rooms before they became too tired to

mouth and took a sip of the amber-colored liquid. "He"-he jerked his head toward the

sleeping Delszaki-"is a genius at this. I think he might even be able to teach

Uncle Hafiz a thing or two," he said with surprising generosity. "Would you

believe he's got Kilumbemba underwriting half the costs of the expedition,

because they feel it's to their benefit to keep the mercenaries busy and in

training rather than having them at loose ends where they might stir up trouble? Although I'm not sure they realize it yet," he added thoughtfully.

"The

way Delszaki put it was that we would save Kilumbemba a lot of money by

paying half the retaining salaries of the mercenaries for the duration of this

expedition. Which means that effectively they are still paying half the costs . . .

and then House Li is covering seventy percent of the remainder. I only had to

would

have a controlling interest in the expedition now, and if he was right about the

profits to be made from exploiting Khieevi technology, the lion's share of those

profits would go to House Li rather than House Harakamian. Insensibly Gill

began to feel more confident about the whole project. The Linyaari were so

convinced that no one could withstand a Khieevi attack, they'd infected him

with their pessimism-but Delszaki Li was no man's fool, and if he was already

maneuvering to control profits, he must be counting the war as good as won.

"The only problem is," Rafik went on, "I did have to throw in a little extra inducement to Admiral Ikwaskwan."

"Admiral?" Gill said sharply. He had heard the notorious leader of the Kilumbemba mercenary forces called many things, but never anything

so

flattering as that.

saying

at first," Gill told him. "What have you been drinking to make you think
Hafiz is

going to be happy about teaming up with a-a-" It wasn't so much that
words

failed him, as that Judit's presence inhibited him from using any of the
words

he felt to be appropriate. "With Ikwaskwan," he finished weakly as a fa-
miliar

smoky scent, wafting through the air, distracted his attention. He took
another

deep sniff and recognized it. "MY BEST SCOTCH, THAT'S WHAT
YOU'VE BEEN

INTO!"

"I earned it, weasel-wording and sweet-talking Ikwaskwan and half the
Kilumbembese Cabinet -while you were playing tour guide," Rafik said
without bothering to move out of the way of Gill's furiously working hands.

"Judit, call

off your husband before he damages these precious vocal cords. Oh,
and by

the way, we had a spurt-message from the AcaSeckl."

doubt that means they've defeated the entire Khieevi fleet single-handedly; it

probably just means they've outwitted those space pirates Rushima was complaining to the Shenjemi Federation about. That should be well within

Calum's and Acorna's abilities," Rafik said with sublime confidence.

"Did you tell her to get out of there?"

"Couldn't. The AcaSecki's not answering; they must all be on Rushima, and

Rushima isn't transmitting. I expect the space pirates knocked out their satellite communications. I did send a long spurt telling Acorna about her

people showing up here, and that we'd be with her in five days. If anybody

picks up on the AcaSeckl, they should get that much."

"You didn't tell her about the Khieevi?"

"That sort of message is not something you want to leave lying about a ship's

com system until somebody is inspired to pick up," Rafik pointed out.
"What if

him more

impatient than ever to take off. The hours they would have to wait for the Kilumbemba forces to mobilize dragged like lead.

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What do we do now?" Calum asked. "Wait until the dust settles and there's

someone we can talk to about leaving?"

"I think we better be sure they know it's us who are leaving and not some of the

enemies escaping," Acorna said. "I'm going to check on my 'ponies.'" Calum watched her go. He hoped there was enough there for her to eat. He also

hoped that she was going to change out of those rags and into some outfit

suitable to the real Acorna.

"Anyone else for a bite to eat while we talk this over?"

He looked first at Dr. Hoa, who hadn't moved since sinking into a seat.

The

man's color was better and his expression more alert. "Are you feeling well

enough for a meal?"

"Why should I do that when I might just have to do a flit again'

Johnny closed off his nostrils and raised his eyebrows. "In this fresher air, ol'

buddy, you stink. So do I, I'm sure, but not quite as badly."

Calum, whose back was to Markel, grinned. He hadn't wanted to mention the fact.

"If you happened to have any clean clothes, Calum," Johnny went on, "I could

sure stand a change myself. Any old ship suit'll do."

"Second cabinet in the first cabin on the right. And there's a sanitary unit directly opposite the bunk."

Dr. Hoa was on his second cup of tea and looking far more alert when Acorna

came back, wearing more normal attire. Then both Johnny and a far cleaner

Markel showed up, although the boy looked a trifle surly.

Markel took the cup of tea and some finger foods that Calum had defrosted,

and went to the place where he had deposited his equipment. He put in the

all. I gather someone had the sense to gas the searchers in the tubes?".For a moment, Markel stared in astonishment at his friend. Then his expression

was both smug that he had actually been a crucial element in the rebellion and

surprised. "How'd you know how they got them?"

Johnny shrugged. "That's what I would have done. Nueva, Dom, Sen-grat, and

the others would have^ been so intent on wanting to get at least Dr. Hoa back

into their hands, they'd've depleted their guard points." He waved to indicate

the guards they had overcome. "We'd've been up the crick without a paddle if

the full complement of guards had been here in the hangar. Then he grinned at

Markel. "Whaddaya bet that Kerratz, Andreziana, and Zanager led the revolution?"

Markel's eyes went wide. "How'dyou know?"

He ruffled Market's hair. "You were doing all you could in your fashion, Markie,

he

found the mouthpiece in his backpack and attached the speaker J-bar.

"I need

to speak to Andreziana. This is Markel."

Johnny Greene and Calum both gestured for Market to patch in the Acadecki's

system so they could hear, too. Market shook his head emphatically, but Johnny caught him by one ear and gave him such a malevolent glare that

Markel capitulated just in time for them all to hear the contralto voice of Andreziana.

"Where the hell have you been, Markel? "

"Clearing the decks so you could act, of course," the boy replied, laughing.

"Caught 'em all napping, didja?"

"No, we caught them hunting in the tubes for you. So we closed 'em off and

gave them a dose of their own," the girl replied.

"S-spaced?" Markel looked slightly green.

"We didn't have a lot of choice," Andreziana said. "They refused to surrender. I

Fallona and her group weren't that popular with their own people after all." "So, what did you promise the Palomellese to get their cooperation?"

Markel

asked, accepting the change of subject.

"They'll take a landfall on Rushima and help undo the damage done for the

chance to stay on."

"Won't we have to go through the Shenjemi Federation for permission for that?

At the very least, they'll want to sue the Haven for the havoc caused,"

Markel

said, dubious.

With an arm around Markel's shoulders, Johnny positioned himself to speak

through the J-bar. "John Greene here, 'Ziana, and congratulations on handling

the retaking. That'll all be on log, and I think we can reason with the Shenjemi.

We've sent a message about the condition of Rushima, by the way. ..."

"You did WHAT?"

wounded?"

"Sure we do." The girls voice softened. "Did you think we could manage

a

bloodless revolution? Why? We've some medics...."

"But you do not have a ki-Un," said Acorna, elbowing her way beside Calum.

"What the shards is a ki-lin}"

At that point. Dr. Hoa angled his way between Acorna and Calum. "Very good,

very unusual, useful, miraculous person. Saved me. Saved Markel, saved

Calum. Save you pain and healing time."

"Who's that?"

"Dr. Hoa-and this is the ki-LIn."

Acorna took a deep breath. "For what now appear to be very sensible precautions," Acorna said, her voice rippling with amusement, "I disguised

myself as a procuress when my ship was captured by Nueva and her gang. I

am, however, Acorna Delszaki-Harakamian."

If Johnny and Markel were jumping up and down in dismay at Dr. Hoa's

infirmity deck and some people who'll die if we can't clear that gas out of their lungs," the man said.

"I'm on my way," Acorna said, and gave a decisive nod at Calum, who was staring hopelessly at her.

"C'mon, we'll all go. Lock down your ship, Cal, will you?" Johnny Greene added. "Just in case there are some survivors creeping down to the hangar."

With some regret, Calum did as Johnny suggested. He had been thinking of

trying to raise regular contact with Delszaki Li's headquarters on Kezdet . . .

just to allay any fears Mercy might have for his safety if the original spurt had

gotten through . . . but Johnny was right. It was too soon to cry safe and far too

soon to omit any possible precaution.

Before they reached the end of the hangar deck, there was banging on the

hatches that had been locked against Nueva's group.

"That'll go down well with the Rushimese and the Shenjemi," Johnny said with a wry grin.

As soon as Dr. Hoa reached the bridge, 'Ziana, the late Andrezhuria's daughter,

greeted him with considerably more warmth than she accorded those accompanying him. One eyebrow went up at the sight of Acorna, but she

politely did not comment on Acorna's unusual appearance. Her face composed, Ziana was sitting in the bridge command chair, which dwarfed her

slight figure. Her bandaged hands dangled from the armrests, but not far from

the festoon of weapons hanging to her lap from the belt she wore. Not much

taller than Calum, slender, with fair hair braided tightly in many small strands

and tied together at the base other neck, she looked her age, not the pnnGipal

in a major coup. She certainly didn't look as if she could have been capable of

as, with a

querying lift of his brows, he nodded toward one of the empty chairs on the

port side of the bridge.

"Go to it, Doctor," she said, gesturing with one graceful, if bandaged hand.

Blood had leaked down her forearm and clotted.

Acorna sucked in her breath and looked at Johnny, who gave his head the

slightest of negative movements.

"Who're the strangers. Market?" Ziana went on, steeping her bandaged hands

in front of her. It was a gesture, Acorna instinctively felt, that had been one

other mother's.

"Acorna." Markel might have been introducing a reigning planetary leader for

the pride in his voice. One of the teenage boys lounging around the bridge

snickered. Markel bristled, relaxing when Acorna touched his shoulder.

"You

one shoulder: the sear mark of the stun bolt was partly visible.

So swiftly that no one could have stopped her, Acorna was beside him,
her

derided horn performing its miracle.

"Hey, whaddya go and do that for?" The boy raised his unharmed arm
to push

her away, but she had already retreated.

"Hey." His tone was completely different. He peeked first at the now
healed

flesh, then pulled off the rest of the bandage and saw clean, pink skin.

"Hey,
how'dyou do that?"

"However she does it, I'll have some of the same, if you wouldn't mind,
Acorna?" 'Ziana said, holding out her bandaged hands. "Can't really use
the

fingerpads with all this on me."

Although Acorna was as delicate as possible in peeling back the wad-
ded

fabric, little flickers in 'Ziana's eyes showed how painful the process
was. Her

did.

Thank you. And, you, Brazie, I didn't hear your thank-you." Brazie of the multicolored hair stammered out his gratitude, still fingering the now smooth ex-wound.

"You're both welcome. Anyone else?" Acorna asked, looking around at those who occupied the bridge.

"Aw, it ain't much," one of those beside Brazie said, but his companions pushed him toward Acorna. Another pulled up the rags left of the back of his

shirt and revealed encrusted welts. Acorna had never seen anyone whipped and beaten, but, when she maneuvered the boy into the light to assess his

injury, she knew that that was what had been done to him. Calum uttered a low whistle.

'Ziana now turned to Johnny Greene and Markel. "I need to talk to you two,"

she said, once again in that firm, uncontradictable voice. "You were within an

picked me

up because they were short a docking expert. Esposito and I had had a couple

of run-ins. . . ."

'Ziana chuckled. "So you had. Dom never liked you either."

"True, though I had no intention of cutting him out with Nueva. She wasn't my

type. But that's all history, 'Ziana. Let's talk about now. You've control of the

Haven, but are there enough competent people left after two sets of wholesale

slaughter to staff and crew a ship of this complexity?"

"My mother didn't raise me stupid, Johnny. Any more than Illart did Markie-boy

here." 'Ziana was slightly contemptuous. "Then you do have someone who

can dampen the electromagnetic resonances in the navigation controls," Calum said, pointing to some orange flashing lights on one drive control board.

'Ziana swore and swung down off the command chair to take a closer look.

from the look of the signals its giving." He pointed to a board several positions down.

"You a pilot or something?"

"I've belted around the system for most of my life and never lost a ship,"

Calum

said. "All modern ships use about the same basic controls . . . just some are

bigger'n others, like this one." "He's an expert and very experienced pilot," Acorna said. "Approved and

recommended by both Delszaki and House Harakamian."

"Who's them?" Brazie asked, frowning in suspicion.

"Only two of the biggest interstellar firms," another lad said, and came up to

Calum, extending one hand in greeting. "I'm Kerratz. My father was ..." and

Calum surmised that the father had been one of those spaced, ". . . teaching

me his specialty. I've had a little time on the board, so I could take it over-if

you'd do the calculations. I wouldn't want to do them, and be wrong."

should get a gang together and see what damage is done?"

Calum turned politely toward 'Ziana.

"Go to it, Neggara," 'Ziana said, waving her off. "You help her, Brazie, Dajar,

Foli. You've had a long enough rest now. And Rezar," she added, pivoting on

one heel to address a tall, well-built boy cultivating a fine mustache on his

handsome face, "you take the com board. This bridge needs to be properly

controlled."

Then she turned to Johnny with a "how'm I doing?" glance that was challenging.

"What's happening on the decks below?" he asked. "There may be some good

'uns among the Palomellese who can spell your folk."

'Ziana didn't much like that suggestion from the expression on her face.

"Well, you'll be standing long watches, then," Johnny said with an indolent

shrug.

'Ziana nodded agreement, but, as Acorna walked away toward the door, her eyes spoke volumes of gratitude to the spacer that 'Ziana's pride would never allow her to utter.

"You've done well, 'Ziana," Johnny said, then chuckled. "Nueva's mistake was in not spacing the whole kit and kaboodle:..First AND Second Generation."

"You're damned right there," 'Ziana said as she resettled herself in her command chair, "but she considered us 'kids!'" She snorted as she steepled her fingers.

"A mistake for several reasons," Johnny said suavely. "How about communications below? Are they in working order?"

"Most of 'em," said Rezar, surveying his board. "Some holes, but call here to the bridge anywhere you can. I'll patch you through." He began running a diagnostic on the system.

tsking

over something as Johnny and Acorna left the bridge.

"Surely those children cannot run a ship this size?" Acorna said.

"Oh, I dunno about that, Acorna," Johnny said with a grin. "Seems to me

I

heard that Cal, Gill, and Rafik had you managing a lot of basic controls
before

you were three years old."

"My species evidently matures more quickly than yours," she said.

"And those kids who put down Nueva's coup were apprenticed, as a
matter of

course, to specialists once they turned fourteen."

"They can't be much older now," Acorna protested.

"On the contrary," Johnny said in a very droll tone, "they are much,
much older

... now." With a hand under her elbow, he signaled her to jump to the
level they

were nearing on the shaft. "If they're beginning to find out how compli-
cated it

is to do it all themselves, it'll make my job easier."

"Calum?" Rezar asked. "Could you come look at this? I don't know this kind of code." Calum had been overseeing several panels for the appointed novice crew as well as giving Dr. Hoa a hand with the math. ["Never my strong suit, Mr. Baird."]

"Well, it is mine, and you've merely inverted the matrix that defines non-linear diffraction process interaction too soon-or tried"to; the matrix can't be inverted, so you have to transform it to this form first. See? Now you get the right answer."]

"That's beamed at Rushima, which no longer has any corn units. Broadcast on a wide beam so we're catching the edges of it. Use the finer tuner and put it up on screen. No, this toggle.

The message immediately began blaring from the bridge speakers until Rezar figured out how to modulate its volume.

it can get it."

'Ziana regarded him steadily. "But this ship caused the damage.

"Ah"-Calum held up one finger-'yes, my initial message to them said

Rushima

was under attack by the Starfarers."

"The real Starfarers"-Ziana indicated herself-"are once again in control of Haven. Our ..." she had to swallow before she could continue, "...

mothers

and fathers believed that peaceful protest "would allow us to use some uninhabited world as a new home, since Esperantza was destroyed."

"You have been traveling a long time," Calum said kindly.

"The Shenjemi could demand reparations from us. . . ." she said.

"Not you . . . and you've logs to prove it," he said, pointing to a ceiling

device

that was the visual log of all proceedings on the bridge. "I can answer as myself. Shall I? And we can sort the Haven's part out later. We have to

give

some answer. The Rushimese are in a bad way down there."

"We've been in a bad way up here, too, Baird."

"Ah, but I can restore much of the normal climatic pattern in just a few days,"

AcaSecki, a

private vessel. I sent the message you received. The planet has been under

attack, and the first thing to go were the satellite communications."

"Baird? Calum Baird? No such name exists on the planetary roster."

Blidkoff was plainly skeptical.

"Because I'm not Rushimese," Calum said. "I'll repeat. I am Pilot Calum Baird

of the AcaSecki, a private vessel. We had a 'ponies problem and thought

Rushima could help us with it. Instead, we had to help them by informing you

of the attack. The whole planet's in a bad way. They're going to need a lot of

help to get sorted out down there."

"View please," Blidkoff answered, his skepticism coming through loud and

clear.

'Ziana was wagging her arms in protest, but a grinning Rezar made a frame

around Calum's face, indicating that he'd broadcast just the face. Calum

their failure to communicate through normal channels?"

Pompous brain^ regoUthic Q'wt, Calum thought to himself, keeping his smile

intact. "Storms, floods, and drought."

"They must be inventing disaster to get off paying their taxes. That planet was

selected for its incredibly boring and stable climate."

"It's a large planet, Blidkoff," Calum said, no longer willing to be the victim of

the man's incredulity. "And as your first spurt informed you, these disasters

were artificially created by their attackers . . . who have now been disposed of,

but the settlers are in dire need of basic supplies to help them start over. You

do what you want. I promised Joshua Flouse I'd send you a Mayday. I have.

Good day to-"

"Now, let's not get in a huff, Pilot Baird. Joshua Flouse . . • eff-eel-o-"

"U ess ee," Calum finished.

assistance."

"That's your problem, Blidkoff, and I'm sorry for the Rushimese, but at least

I've kept my promise." And Calum himself cut the connection.

A buzz interrupted the silence on the bridge.

"He wants to talk to you again," Rezar said, looking hopefully up at Calum.

Calum looked around at 'Ziana, who seemed in an equal quandary.

"You kids got rid of the nasties, but now what?"

He could see 'Ziana swallow.

"Now we have to carry the can for those Palomellese bastards' mistakes,"

Rezar said.

"That's what being adult is," Calum said gently, feeling sorry for so much shit

dumping on these teenagers who, only a few weeks ago, probably had been

nice normal kids, fussing because no one would take them seriously.

"We should have a meeting about this," Kerratz said.

"Yeah, a meeting," Brazie agreed hastily, nodding nervously.

Hoà's help."

And then I am taking myself and my weather program out of reach of anyone

else," Dr. Hoa said.

"I think I may be able to help you there, Dr. Hoa," Calum said. "How much

longer do you need?"

"Oh, I'm just starting, Mr. Baird. What was done to Rushima cannot be undone

as quickly, but we're making progress. Yes, indeed, we are making progress.

Now, would you check my Equations again? I shouldn't like a simple error on

my part to undo what I've been able to accomplish so far."

"But this is your program, isn't it?" Calum said as he went to the doctor's position.. "Oh, it is, but I always had a mathematician assisting me. Meteorology is

science, my boy, but mathematics is a black art."

"Did you want me to help with the damage reports, 'Ziana? " Johnny, returned

Johnny concentrated on checking out the essential functions of the Haven, and

apart from some damage by weapons fire -fortunately only stunners had been

used rather than missile handguns ^-the hull had taken no integral damage.

The conduits would need further flushing and venting to remove the traces of

the gases used . . . and any remaining bodies had to be found and removed.

Not the most agreeable of duties, but it needed to be done. When Johnny

looked around to see whom Markel could suggest for the task, the lad was

gone.

Markel, in fact, had gone back to the quarters he had shared with his father to

see if any of his things were still there. The rooms had been trashed. He took

one look and pressed the lock. He'd find himself somewhere else to stay. He'd

to be

done about it soon. So he made a quick selection of clothing and new ship

shoes-Acorn had healed all the cuts and bruises he'd acquired in his adventures, but ship shoes would add to his new dignity. He also picked up a

tool belt and a notepad, since his was still on the AcaSecki, with the few personal items he had managed to save when he decided he'd better not be

found by Nueva or any of her conspirators.

He did wonder that there were so few people in the corridors and halls.

Maybe

'Ziana should make a shipwide announcement that Second Gen had complete control of the Haven.

Then he shafted over to 'ponies, which was looking very sad indeed, though

Neggara and her group were already planting some vats.

"I need some stuff for Acorna. She'll be using up a lot of energy healing, you

know," he said.

that

was what this ship was operating on right now.

Neggara was shaking her head. "Don't understand it. According to the manuals, they aren't enough to do what they have to be doing in terms of

restoring clean air to the entire ship."

"We got lucky, I guess," Markel said, and picked what he thought would be a

useful bouquet of greens and some early legume pods for Acorna.

What Neggara didn't know wouldn't hurt her-or Acorna- but, as he left the

'ponies section, he did worry that the Lady would not have enough strength

both to heal the wounded AND purify the ship's air. However, he had managed

not to smirk with his covert knowledge of who was really responsible for the

fact that they weren't all gasping for breath on the Haven.

Acorna was just bending over an unconscious Palomellese with serious
stun

in small groups, watching her surreptitiously.

Markel waited just out of Acorna's range until she had finished the current patient.

"Gotcha something to help you," Markel said, holding out his bouquet to her

just as one of the senior medics started to protest his interference.

Acorna held up one hand, then smiled with weary gratitude for his thoughtfulness. She couldn't know it, nor did Markel realize the significance of

his altruism, but seeing that Acorna was fed was probably one of the first

unselfish things he had ever done. Even in rescuing her, he had been acting

out of selfinterest.

"And I think you'd better be down when you've eaten ... you look absolutely

transparent," Markel said, giving a level and accusing glance at the medic. "I

don't see anyone bleeding to death," he added, having made a quick

closer and

took her arm as if by right.

"You haven't used up all the private compartments, have you?" Markel asked..This way." The medic ushered her into one of the cubicles.

"We're'very

grateful, lady, and didn't realize that you..." Markel firmly closed the panel on

the apologies.

"There's not much selection in 'ponies, right now," he said, placing his gleanings on her lap.

"Doesn't matter," she said, stuffing chard into her face and chewing with weary

efficiency. "Anything green'11 do fine. There are so many more - "

"Who can probably recover just fine in the usual way, Markel cut in firmly. "We

need you more to keep the air fresh in this ship with the 'ponies in the condition it's in."

Acorna gave a weary sigh, munching on the legumes and the stalks, too.

"You can't do everything yourself, you know," he said. "Isn t there anything

to feed

the Palomellese with. I'll be back in a flash."

As soon as he exited the compartment, the head medic caught him.

"Is she all right? We didn't. ..."

"Well, it takes a lot of energy to do what she does, you know," Markel said,

trying to make out Acorna was worse off than she was to be sure they wouldn't

interrupt her until she'd had some rest. "You don't happen to have any vegetable ration bars up here, do you?"

They did and loaded Markel down with as many as he could carry. He took

them in to her. She had finished all the fresh greens-if that was what you could

call the limp leaves-and gratefully shed the packaging film protecting the first

bar. She ate nine before suddenly she seemed to collapse inward and sprawl

across the bunk.

"Acorna?" Markel reached for her delicate arm, even if he hadn't a clue where

he told the head medic, then snagged a fourlegged stool,
which he put against the door. He sat, crossed his arms over her chest,
and
assumed his role as guardian.

He was also asleep, head drooping over one shoulder but supported by
the
door he guarded, when Calum and Johnny came down to find Acorna.

"You know," Johnny said thoughtfully, hands on his belt and elbows
cocked to
the side, as he looked down at his protege, Markel might turn out to be a
fine

man after all. Though"-he wagged a finger at Calum-"never tell him I
said so."

1 8 8 ANNE McCAFFREY AND MARGARET BALL

"Last thing on my mind," Calum said, making a cross over his heart.

So they waited until Acorna emerged from the room, and just managed
to catch

her guard before he fell into the compartment. His reflexes had him on
his feet

and in a defensive position against the -wall before he was awake
enough to

Acorna affectionately smoothed Market's hair.

"Yes, it did." She looked past Johnny to see the head medic eagerly approach

her. "There's an urgency-"

"Well, it will have to wait," Johnny said firmly, taking Acorna by the arm.

"The

bridge has need of Acorna right now!"

In point of fact, it was the 'ponies system which needed Acorna, and she did

what she could to clean the air.

"How much of that gas was used?" she asked, sneezing.

"The kids wanted to be sure," Johnny said at his driest.

"We could rig blowers," Calum said, remembering how they had managed to

clear air in the early days of Maganos Moon Base. "What sort of equipment is

available, Markel?"

"Well, we can find out easy enough," Markel said, and turned toward the nearest shaft. "But it'll have to be from the bridge computer."

"I'll go back to the infirmary then," Acorna said, starting in that direction, but it

have done too much, Acorna . . . and we have other problems to solve now that you cannot help with."

"What?" "First, we must repair the damage to the Haven. Then, Dr. Hoa has

promised to work on his weather program, to see if there is some way he can

control it so as to correct the damage done by our ship and his science to

Rushima ... if they will accept the offer." Andreziana's emotional and physical

exhaustion made her look, briefly, much older than her chronological age.

"Whether by use of Dr. Hoa's technical expertise, or by the work of our own

hands, we must make what reparations we can to the settlers of Rushima. That

is our problem, not yours."

"The Shenjemi Federation . . ."

"Have realized that the situation is critical, yes," Johnny Greene said, "and help

Hours turned into several days, as she fell into a deep healing sleep from which she awakened at intervals only long enough to consume immense quantities of the most mineral-rich greens the Haven could provide. "I wish I could get her dirtside," Calum fretted. "Rushima's a mess, but she needs to run, and breathe air that hasn't been recycled, and eat something that didn't grow in a vat."

"I think that can be arranged," Markel told him. Calum had been watching over Acorna too obsessively to pay much attention to the repair work on the Haven or the ongoing discussions with the Rushimese. "Hoa's ready to work his weather magic now, but we're going to need to temporarily resettle the Rushimese from the worst flooded area while he arranges a few minor cataclysms to fix things up."

"Good idea," Calum approved absently. "Now, Acorna-"

landing craft." "Sounds good to me," Calum said. "Soon as she's really awake, we'll get started."

Acorna was clearly healing herself in these periods of deep sleep, restoring the energies depleted by her efforts on behalf of the Starfarers and their wounded ship, and he had no intention of interrupting that process. He returned to watching over her obsessively, feeling more relieved than anything else that

their friends on Maganos did not know to transmit queries to the Haven.

After

sending a "Disregard previous message, everything's all right," from the AcaSecki immediately after they were sure the countercoup had succeeded,

he'd shut down \heAca<)eck and joined in the work of rebuilding the Haven. He

did not particularly want to communicate with Maganos again until he could

assure them Acorna was perfectly well. Call him a coward, but there were some

ground

refuge would ease his churning mind.

"There is really NO point at all in such ferretlike isolation. There hasn't been a

single explosion registered on the equipment. There haven't been any landings

anywhere. Am I a slave, to live in prison, or a woman, to dwell in purdah?"

His pacing had brought him back once again to that portion of the garden

where the Skarness Stones were located. Although his establishment was

completely underground, and shielded by formidable appliances, he could

actually stand just beneath the position of the Stones.

He clapped his hands to summon a human servant. "Bring me a thin rod, of

metal, not silver nor gold, but base metal, of two arm-spans' length. No, misbegotten -whelp of a djinni's basest lusts, how should I know where such a

procedure which he had invented for communicating with the Stones
from this
underground refuge; and if they wondered what sort of devotions re-
quired this
equipment, why, let them wonder!
The manual labor of placing a stepladder was beneath his dignity, but
by great
good fortune he hit the D Stone with his first try. Then, placing his fore-
head
and both hands on the rod, he tapped out his urgent query.
"Has Laboue been invaded?"
There was no immediate answer. He hadn't expected a prompt reply-but
he
expected some reaction. Besides, it was undignified for a man of his
eminence
and prestige to remain in this semisubservient posture, even if he had
taken care not to be observed. Also, the metal rod was beginning to wear a
groove
into his forehead. He daren't relax either his grip or the contact with the
rod

just what that cryptic message did mean. "Clear skies" because the weather

was fair; "clear skies" because these monsters had landed; or "clear skies"

because whatever had been headed toward Laboue had gone around the

planet?

He convinced himself the last interpretation was the most likely, since no

detection equipment known to mankind could have pierced the shell currently

protecting the inmates-and there was no truer definition of those who resided

on, or under, Laboue right now. So it had to be safe. The Stones would not

have lied to him. They didn't know how.

Hafiz did get in touch with Quiabriel as protocol required.

"I'm going above, Quiabriel. I must be in touch with my people, to reassure

them. I will report on the condition of the surface once I have ascertained if any

in order and as fitting My children'?" Hafiz replied genially, while vowing that some day Quiabriel would pay for the tone of voice he had just used to the Head of House Harakamian.

The process of unshielding and rising took time. Hafiz had the ladder placed in one of the upper rooms, at the tallest window near the ceiling so that he could countermand the action if he found reason to do so.

He saw no danger, as his dwelling made a stately ascent into the fresh, clear air of Laboue. All around, of course, -where other gardens should be, and other dwellings hidden within them, there was blank and featureless space.

For the Shielding provided Laboue with a sterile desert surface in some places or rampant, impenetrable jungle vistas which clearly said to any observer that this planet wasn't worth further inspection.

associates also ranged from moderate concern to the hysteria that characterized Rafik's.

"It's nice to know that I've been missed," Hafiz said, until he realized that he

had also missed out on a fine coup and a large profit. He got more and more

upset as he began to tote up just how much money the isolation had cost him

in terms of deals unanswered and missed opportunities. When he got his

hands around the necks of those . . . those . . . what had they called themselves? . . . Linyaari, he would show them not to deceive the Head of

House Harakamian with such dramatic hoaxes.

Yelling for his servants to ready his spacecraft and telling his chief steward to

report to Quiabriel, Hafiz almost ran to the hangar in his anxiety to be airborne

and back in the midst of the world from which he had temporarily excluded

factured

scenes shown by the Linyaari?

He was already demanding a nav plan for Twi Osiam when he calmed down

enough to wonder, again, whether the scenes broadcast to Laboue might not

have been real and not a hoax. After all, the people who had broadcast their

warning were Acorna's folk. He'd never known her to lie ... but of course, his

beloved nephew had raised the girl so she would value truth. A pity, that. . .

with better training, she might have been most useful to him in the business

dealings of House Harakamian. But she was so incurably candid that he suspected her species could not be other than straightforward. And why would

they have shown their own species being tortured if there were not some

substance to their outrageous claim that this part of the galaxy was in danger?

to seal

a contract.

He got back the signal, which meant the Uhuru was recording the message.

Now where was Rafik? If not on board his ship, he had better be doing business for House Harakamian. He received back the somewhat reassuring

report that the Uhuru was currently docked at Maganos.

What but a threat to Acorna could have taken Rafik from his assigned business

deals to Maganos? And should she not be apprised of the arrival of others like

her? Worry and concern and a kindly desire to give Acorna this news in person

inspired Hafiz to do something he had not considered in all his adult life: he

put aside his business plans for a purely personal trip to Maganos Moon Base.. "At least the time of travel need not be a total loss," Hafiz told himself. Some at

least of his complex business dealings could be rescued by long-distance

"Rushima? Grushima?" Hafiz was totally outraged. He'd never heard of the place and tapped in a request for information, trying to control his temper.

After all, he had authorized Rafik to operate on his own, finely tuned instincts. .

. . "An agri planet?" he bellowed when the information came up. "Sponsored by the Shenjemi?"

Hafiz's dealings with the Shenjemi Federation had not been all that remunerative, and Hafiz made his value judgments on profits made. He'd had few enough from the Federation.

"Why has Rafik gone off to Rushima anyway? It almost sounds as if he is

following Acorna. What possessed the girl to take off just when her people

appear in our space? Provola had better know exactly what's happening, or I

may have to wait until Rafik's firstborn son shows what promise he might

Hafiz

had no way of finding out that Mr. Li had briefly collapsed after the strain of the

past few days and had been ordered to bed in Maganos's small hospital facility. The secretary who should have been receiving visitors and directing

inquiries was instead hovering outside the closed doors of the hospital unit,

waiting to hear of the recovery of an old man he had come to love like . . . well,

not a father . . . more like a great-grandfather.

To be fair, Li had no reason to expect any need for his services; since the

triumph of the Child Liberation League had obviated the need for secrecy, Mr.

Li had more and more left the day-to-day management of his financial and

business affairs in the hands of trusted subordinates. Furthermore, when he

visited Maganos he considered himself "on holiday" and expected- and

ganos,

was not privy to the tale brought by the Linyaari envoys, had little to offer when

Hafiz finally located him.. "Acorna and Calum left first, in the AcaSeckl- " Hafiz began. "You know about

that?" The secretary was stunned. "I should," Hafiz said, "she's my ship.

Continue, please." "Well. Everybody was worried about that. The ship wasn't

fitted up properly, you see. ..." The secretary started off in some detail about

the remodeling and improved defense plans for the Acadecki, which he did

know something about, until Hafiz interrupted and very politely suggested that

the man go on with his story about what had happened to cause a mass desertion of Maganos and Delszaki Li's collapse.

"Well, um, they arrested this . . . person," the secretary went on doubtfully, and

wondered why his own tongue seemed to be fighting him. Of course it had

steely-eyed glare that somehow brought to mind much worse things than simple assault... archaic words like bastinado and strappado floated through the secretary's jangling brain. Once released, he told Hafiz everything he could; unfortunately, that wasn't enough to allow any reconstruction of what had been going on in Li's private rooms. Other ... "people" ... had come... • For some reason, he had a hard time describing them or even remembering their appearance; all he knew for sure was that they were good people who meant no harm, and there was nothing unusual about them. "And how," Hafiz inquired silkily, "do you 'know' all that?" The secretary shook his head. "I just know. ..."

Judit, Gill, and Pal had all gathered with Mr. Li to speak with them, and so had Rafik when he arrived. They kept the door closed, and the secretary couldn't

There wasn't much left to tell. The strangers had left in their splendid ship;

Judit, Gill, Pal, and Rafik had all left in the Uhuru;

Delszaki Li had been so fatigued that despite frequent short naps while the

talking went on, he had collapsed immediately after their departure and had

been resting in the high-security medical unit ever since.

"They won't let anyone in to see him," the secretary said. "They just keep

saying he's resting comfortably and doing as well as can be expected and all the usual blather." He looked at Hafiz with some hope. "The doctor might let

you in."

But the Harakamian will meet its match in a youngish, tired doctor whose first

medical experience had been as a volunteer to patch up bruised and broken

children on the day of the Liberation, and who revered Delszaki Li as a near

saint.

body."

Consumed with curiosity, he decided to pass the time until Li awoke or a message came from the Uhuru by finding out what had been done since his

last visit to complete the mining facilities. A sudden thought struck him as he

turned to make his way to the engineering offices. "Ah ~ Provola didn't take off

for the back end of beyond also, did she?"

Reassured that Provola Quero was in her office as usual Hafiz made his way

there after leaving instructions that any news was to be forwarded at once to

Provola's office, the suite which was kept for him in Maganos's living quarters,

and any other place he might conceivably be found.

The door to Provola's office was open, and from some distance Hafiz could

hear a tearful voice pleading with Provola Quero and that woman's calm, cool,

Provola Quero, with her ascetically cropped head and single tight braid-
and in

Hafiz's estimation, a true woman like this was worth ten of an engineer-
female

like Provola.

"My dear Mr. Harakamian," Provola said with more warmth than Hafiz
had ever

heard in the woman's voice before. She was not his type, and not even
feminine in her appearance, but she was an excellent manager. She
turned to

the female. "I must ask you to leave now."

"But where can I leave TO?" was the tearful reply, plump white hands
with

beringed fingers wide open in appeal. "I only had enough credit to get
here to

help darling Acorna. ..."

"And why, my dear ..." Hafiz paused to allow for an introduction.

"Karma ..." both women said at once..Hafiz could not resist seizing the
delightfully plump white hand now extended

in supplication to him. And he kissed and stroked it while with his other
hand

outside.

"But she does," Karina insisted, and then his name dropped into the proper

slot in her retentive memory, "dear Mr. Harakamian."

"Let us discuss this matter in the privacy of my quarters," Hafiz said at his

most persuasive and in his silkiest tone. He hadn't seen a woman of these

delicious proportions in so long. Nowadays the emphasis was on trim, slim,

svelte, bony feminine figures, and he'd about given up the hope of finding one

that would be so enticing to him. It was an added attraction that she seemed to

know something about Acorna's present situation.

Karina's eyes widened. "You have rooms here . . . on Manganos'

"I have many personal and business connections with the House of Li," Hafiz

explained, leading her toward Living Quarters A. "A suite of rooms is kept

littered the floor, never having been put back in their individual cases; a natty suit in lime green and fuchsia lay crumpled at the entrance to the shower cube; and a half-empty glass making rings on the polished Tanque purple-heart wood of the nearest table testified by its smell that the recent occupant of these rooms had taken to heart the Second Prophet's relaxation of the restrictions on spirituous liquors.

"My heir," Hafiz growled. "Soon to be my ex-heir if he does not mend his ways'." He activated the wall console and requested a thorough cleaning for the suite, then suggested to Karma that they should repair to one of the small dining rooms off the main cafeteria instead. "And when Rafik comes back," he said, "if he comes back, I shall enroll him in the Personal Hygiene and Cleanliness classes taught to the children of Maganos, for clearly he is in sore

recognized him instantly from his resemblance to Rafik. If she had in fact done

so, it would have been a remarkable feat of imagination, since Hafiz was six

inches shorter and thirty pounds heavier than Rafik, and his creased face, now consciously amiable, bore a strong resemblance to that of a crocodile hoping

that some day another fat, brown child would tumble down the bank. However,

to Karina, hungry and stranded for days on a strange planet without credit,

Hafiz looked truly beautiful as he led her to a small dining room where he

requested a tray of cream pastries and his special blend of kava.

"Now, dear Karina, do tell me how it happens that a friend of Acorna's should

have been left in this sad plight," Hafiz invited her, "and what you would like

me to do to the villains who abandoned you so."

"Oh," Karina said, "they are not villains, they are Enlightened Beings, and I am

expect of Acorna's race - "

"The Linyaari are here?" Hafiz interrupted her. Although he had put aside both

his current business dealings and the tempting thought of making an exclusive

trade agreement with the first sapient aliens to contact human civilization in

order to look after Acorna, now that he was actually at Maganos and nobody

seemed to be panicking on Acorna's behalf, he could not help thinking how

lucrative such an arrangement might be ... and that he, as one of Acorna's two

guardians, should by rights have first pickings. He had not reckoned on her

other guardian somehow magicking the Linyaari to his residence first.

"Well, not anymore. They went after- "

"Ten thousand Shaitans! I should have known that crafty old dog of an unbeliever would get ahead of me!" Hafiz drummed his fingers on the tabletop,

can you ever forgive me?"

Karina's eyes darkened with a sorrow that was not entirely due to the fact that

she had not quite finished the last of the pastries. "But we've only just met!"

"And I look forward to many delightful hours improving our acquaintance,"

Hafiz assured her. "And although my business is pressing, I refuse to leave

unless you promise me that you will take proper care of yourself and eventually retire to my suite to rest. You must eat to keep up your strength and

to maintain your exquisite beauty." He called for a portable console and left

orders for Karina to be able to request anything she desired at the charge of

House Harakamian..That should be safe enough, he thought cynically; there was nothing to buy on

Maganos Moon Base except food and the simplest of basic necessities.
Later

talks.

His first order of business was to extract from the secretary the terms of any

trade agreements that had already been filed. With any luck there had not been

time to put anything on disk. Opportunity abounded when a man was prepared

to take advantage of it. Then, if Li was still not available, he could while away

the hours of waiting by courting his lovely Karina. It seemed his trip to Maganos would be profitable in more ways than he could have ever predicted.

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It was nearly six days before Acorna started staying awake for more than a few

minutes at a time, but then she returned to normal within a few hours of her

last awakening.

"You mean those poor people have been waiting all this time only for me?" she

exclaimed, horrified. "Calum, why did you not go on without me?"

"We should've taken vids," Markel said. "Acorna, you have been awake, off and on-vertical, anyway. Just long enough to use the facilities and devastate our chard and spinach beds. Then you'd stagger off without saying a word and go back to sleep."

Acorna shook her head. "I cannot believe it."

"Next time we will take vids!"

"There won't be a next time," Calum said. "I'm not letting Acorna -wear herself out to that extent ever again."

The Rushimese required that the AcaSeckl land first with only Acorna and Calum on board; they did not trust vids of Acorna speaking to them from the Haven.

"I just hope that you'll be able to convince them that the kids really want to

Calum chuckled weakly. "And to think we thought we were saving time
by
skipping out of Maganos before the repairs were complete! If we'd
waited until
the 'ponies were fixed, we wouldn't have been caught up in this mess,
we
might have been well on our way to searching the Coma Berenices
quadrant by
now. . . . Well, my mother always told me, 'Haste makes waste,' but I
was
always in too much of a hurry to listen to her."
"It rs not a waste if we are able to help people desperately in need,"
Acorna
said, but her lovely eyes clouded over at this reminder of how much time
the
stopover at Rushima had cost them. "Someday we will find my people . .
. and
you know, Calum, if we had waited for Pal and Mr. Li to agree that the
AcaSecki
was ready, we would still be on Maganos!"

be delayed and delayed here, where they had barely begun their quest.

"The settlers are arriving," Acorna said. "Let me see what I can do to get them

organized, and you can try to raise Maganos. She gave him an understanding

smile. "Mercy, I mean, all our friends, will want to know what we are doing."

Calum found that he did not particularly like being "understood." One of the

many things he liked about Mercy was that even if she could guess what he

was thinking, she never told him so!

Oh, well, soon enough they would be on their way out to the Coma Berenices

quadrant, and he could apply himself to nice straightforward problems of astrogration instead of the most chaotic, unpredictable problems of all. . . people.

Still, this might well be his last chance to communicate with Mercy in private; it

was thoughtful of Acorna to give him the opportunity. For the first time in days,

clearer

as the Aca^ecki's computer expanded the compressed message. As the face

on the screen became recognizable, Calum sat upright and tensed.

What was Rafik doing in this sector, close enough to send compressed visuals? Had their first message from the Haven gotten through after all, sending Rafik on a wild-goose chase to rescue them? He'd never live that

down. . . .

Rafik's first intelligible words, once the entire spurt was expanded, proved this

was not the case; the call for help had not in fact been received, but the "all

clear" message had. And Rafik was coming on a completely different errand.

Calum listened with growing surprise, replayed the message not once but

twice to make sure he had understood it correctly, then set the corn receivers

on "automatic." He had to find Acorna at once!

the Rushimese would be more likely to trust the good intentions of the Second-Generation kids who now controlled the Haven. But Dr. Hoa had warned that the process of draining and drying the area through weather modification was likely to be brutal; even with Calum's mathematical help, they could neither predict nor control effects with the accuracy desirable when working over populated communities.

Calum was rather disconcerted when he came out to find the landing area deserted, while Acorna stood fetlock-deep in the clarified water, absentmindedly picking up and tasting small floating strands of filamentous algae. "Hey, where'd everybody go?"

"They are building rafts," Acorna informed him, "to ferry their possessions across the pond. There was some discussion of asking us to set down in a

thing to

tell you. Acorna, we don't need to go on in the Aca<)eck. There'll be no need to

test my program to find your home."

The jubilant note in Calum's voice startled Acorna. "What are you talking about?" She had never seen Calum like this before. His eyes blazed, and his

fair hair stuck up in an untidy quiff along the top of his head.

"I've heard from the Uhuru. Rafik is coming here." "Rafik?" She felt slow and

stupid, unable to think clearly. Something very important was about to happen,

or had happened; she couldn't tell which. It wasn't about Rafik, though; so she

focused on the details to slow down the important thing, which she was not

ready to hear. "But he was not on Maganos or Laboue. How did he know we

were here?"

"He was on Maganos -when our message got through. And you'll never guess

"I guess so." Calum scrubbed one hand over his head; the short yellow hair

flattened like hay under a great wind, then sprang up again, quivering with

excitement. "I mean, he must; I gather only the second message got through.

The first one must have been killed when I shut down so fast. But there's other

news. Acorna, he's not coming alone. Like I just said, we don't need to go on

with the search for your home."

It had been the first thing he'd said, and she had known at once what it must

mean. She had been holding the meaning away from her, bracing herself

against it, trying to keep him from saying it with all her questions about Rafik.

But it could be delayed no longer.

"They have found us," she said, slowly, and regretted it the next instant. Half

the bright exultation drained from Calum's face.

Rafik?" "They have their own ship, of course. They think it is faster;
Rafik is not so sure, but he wanted to be sure you had the news before
they
reached Rushima. He thought it might be too great a shock if you saw
them
without warning."

"That was . . . considerate of him." Shock? What was that? This numb-
ness
through which she moved, half-disembodied, half-sinking under feelings
she
did not recognize-was that shock? She felt as if she had been poisoned;
her
limbs tingled, and her eyes could not take in the light that had been
there a
moment ago. If she had really been poisoned, though, she would be
able to
heal herself. And this moving darkness was not something she could
heal with
a touch other horn.

"Acorna?" Calum sounded far away. "Acorna! Are you all right? I
thought

think? But you shouldn't . . . you don't get sick."

"No more I do," she agreed, with another smile. "I think I was a little dizzy for a

moment. It was quite a shock, you know." She thought of the disappointment

that Calum must have been loyally concealing. Such a good friend ... he and Gill and Rafik had always been so good to her, the only family she had ever

known. He had wanted to discover her home himself, not have the location

handed to him. The least she could do now was play up to him.

"And, Calum, now we will not have to wait months to find out whether your

deductions were correct. My . . . people will surely be able to tell us the exact

location from which they came. Won't it be interesting to find out whether it

matches the destination we chose on the basis of your program?" He could

still have the satisfaction of being proved accurate ... if he had been correct.

time to decide whether we were worthy to know them." Calum blithely condensed what Rafik had already abbreviated, the Linyaari discussion over

whether humans were linyarii or khievii. "Oh, by the way, they call themselves

Linyaari, although I expect it just means something like 'People' in their language. Their technology is way beyond ours in some respects—apparently

they've got some kind of automatic language-learning system. The ones who

are coming already speak Basic, so you'll be able to talk to them right away,

isn't that great? And best of all, Acorna, one of them is your aunt!" Calum

beamed as if he were giving her a wonderful present.

"Talk to them?" Acorna said faintly.

"Yes, right away. Although now I think of it, you probably won't need to use

Basic. If they're telepathic, you must be, too. You'll just be able to merge minds

with them."

can

change that," she said firmly. "But I ... I need to think. Do you mind if I go out

for a run now? I can think better in the fresh air."

"All right, but be careful, won't you? All that heavy weather's done some funny

things to the terrain. You don't want to go spraining an ankle or getting your

mane snagged in a wire fence," Calum warned, exactly like any overanxious

parent who can't quite grasp that his or her child is grown-up..The fetlock-deep water slowed Acorna and forced her to lift her feet high as

she set off at a steady pace for the distant horizon. She had to stay constantly

aware of minor changes in the underlying ground which she could not see

through the mud her running stirred up. She was grateful for the difficulties of

running; they were a welcome distraction from her thoughts.

All too soon, however, she reached the edge of the lake bed and was running

grass there might be living roots and the promise of new life in a gentler season. Was there a similar promise for her, of life ^ an environment that was

truly hers? Or was she a misfit, neither of the Linyaari nor of the race that had

fostered her? As Acorna's pace evened out she found unwelcome thoughts

and fears once again plaguing her. Her people . . . did that mean Calum and

Rafik and Gill were no longer hers? Calum had asked her not to forget them,

but was the truth not more likely to be that they would soon forget her?

What had she ever been to them but a burden and a complication?

They'd lost

mining time to raise her from infancy, lost their jobs to protect her from

Amalgamated's unethical scientists, and then had been thoroughly entangled

in her crusade to rid Kezdet of child labor ... a cause they might sympathize

with, but would surely never have undertaken but for her. Even now their lives

him to be present when Acorna met her own people? And as for Calum-
would

he ever have undertaken the long and risky voyage they'd planned if he
had

not felt it his own duty to restore Acorna to her home? Certainly he had
not

seemed all that disappointed to learn the voyage and search were no
longer

necessary.

As she breasted the hill and began loping down into the long valley be-
fore her,

Acorna decided that the three ex-miners would probably be only too
happy to

hand her over to "her people" and know their responsibility to her -was
ended.

And what other? She was supposed to be ecstatically happy at being
reunited -with

her own race. Wasn't that -what this whole voyage had been about?
Now

Acorna faced the fact that she had never really imagined an end to the
voyage.

her, but what else would there be to link them? "Linyaari," she whispered to
the wind, trying out the unfamiliar word. "Linyarri? Liinyar?"
The word evoked no recognition in her, any more than the syllables of
her
native language that Gill and Rafik insisted she had pronounced when
they first met her. "Awi," she'd said aloud then. "Lalli." They were nonsense
syllables to her now, nothing more.
Calum was occupied with figuring the rate of thrust required to take off
the
mass soon to be inserted into the spaceship when Acorna got back to
the
AcaSeckl, tired and sweaty from her long run. She used most of their
fresh
water in frantic showering, afraid the approaching Linyaari would be dis-
gusted
by the sight of a hot, sweaty, barbarian relative, then purified the water
and let
it trickle back into the tank. Wrapped in a dark green towel, nervous over
the

Now, as she surveyed the available choices with mounting dismay, perhaps
sublimating her fear over what the next few hours might hold, clothing
assumed an importance it had never before had for her.
All she had brought were plain ship's coveralls and an assortment of
gaudy
disguises such as the one she had donned while pretending to be a
Didi. All
the disguises were frothy and elaborate, to match the large, lavishly
decorated
hats she used to cover her horn; they were not to Acorna's taste at all.
She
would not meet her newfound relatives in something she considered
vulgar
and garish-but would they be insulted if she wore only her everyday
ships
coveralls? What would such highly civilized beings wear? Did they dress
for
dinner, like the characters in historical vids? Maybe they were clothed in
shimmering force fields of light and would think anything she donned
quaint

What if

they think I look barbarian and provincial? What if ... and I can't even talk to

them," she exclaimed, flinging up her arms. "I don't remember-" The towel

slipped, and she made a hasty grab for the top edge just in time to avert disaster. "I don't remember any words of their language. My language.

They're

telepathic. I'm not, so -what if I'm some kind of a mental defective by their

standards? You said they had trouble deciding whether human beings were

worthy of an alliance with their race, and look what they had to study-Gill,

Judit, Rafik, Mr. Li ... if they aren't good enough for the Linyaari, how will I ever

measure up?" Her eyes were silver lines in dark pools of distress, and she was

beginning to make the whinnying sound that was as close as she ever came to

sobbing aloud.

had come from her recent shower. He wished to God Judit were here, she'd know how to calm Acorna down. Or Gill. Or even Rafik! Why did it have to be

him who was stuck with the task? A man didn't specialize in mathematics

because he had a rare talent for human relationships. All Calum had was

reason and logic, and he made one more attempt to apply it.

"Acorna, how do you know you're not telepathic? If it only works between

members of your race, and you've never been around any others - "

"I just know," she interrupted him. She had thrown a second towel over her

head and shoulders and was rubbing vigorously as if to dry off her hair; her

voice was muffled by layers of fuzzy fabric. "I'd have felt something before now

if I were a telepath. I shouldn't be surprised if they exposed me at birth. You

know the ancient Greeks used to do that with defective offspring, or even

you see? After all, the mountain thing wasn't totally reliable-look at Oedipus."

"Who's he?" Calum was completely out of his depth now.

"Really, Calum," Acorna said in tones of freezing superiority from the depths of

her covering towels, "don't you read anything? He was exposed because of a

prophecy that he would murder his father, only a shepherd took him in and

raised him, and then one day he met his real father at a crossroads and they

got in a fight and of course Oedipus didn't know who he was, so he killed him,

and then . . . well, after then he behaved most improperly, all through not

knowing anything about his origins, and I think eventually he blinded himself.

So you see why I can't meet them."

"I see you're talking a lot of nonsense," Calum said. "I never met this Oedipus

of accident, that's all, and no doubt they'll explain it all when they get to Rushima."

Acorna had dropped the towel that covered her head and was nodding silently.

Under the illusion that he had calmed her fears, Calum made the mistake of

adding, "Now why don't you just get dressed; pick out some pretty thing; you

want to look nice when your people get here."

"You don't understaaaand," Acorna wailed, and was off again, hiccuping and

whinnying. Calum patted her shoulder and prayed to the Gods of Balanced

Equations that Gill, Judit, Rafik, somebody who understood females would

reach them before the Linyaari showed up and wanted to know why he'd been

upsetting their foundling. But to his great relief, she calmed herself quickly

enough and was once again—at least on the surface—the quiet, sweet-tempered

"Might as well take the first load of settlers to high ground, then go on to the Haven from there," Calum decided. "But they'll have to leave their goods here for now, except for what each one can carry; when I get the kids dirt-side, they can do the heavy lifting.

That decision, announced by Calum, caused a furor, which only Acorna could calm. As she waded through the lake, speaking quietly to each group of settlers with their raftload of treasured personal possessions, the cries of outrage died down and the Rushimese farmers grudgingly poled their rafts back to the soggy "shore." Once there, Joshua Flouse displayed the talent for leadership that had made him spokesman for this settlement, quickly separating each pile of personal goods into those that were too fragile to be left and those that might reasonably survive Hoa's weather modifications if

personally

stowed a tea set brought at great expense from the Shenjemi home,
piece by

fragile piece, and then cursed himself for wasting time with such trinkets
when

he saw Acorna wading through muddy water with twin infants clinging to
her

neck and caressing her horn. By the time the Acadeckl was filled with
refugees,

Calum and Acorna and the able-bodied men and women of the settle-
ment,

who'd chosen to see their weakest members to safety first, were all ex-
hausted

and dripping with mud and sweat. But the labor seemed to have been
good for

Acorna; or perhaps it was the twitters and coos of the babies who were
entranced by her horn and silvery mane that had restored the shine to
her

eyes. The settlers' hard-won calm almost disintegrated, though, when
Calum

exclaimed fiercely.

The imminent danger of a riot was averted when Acorna stepped out of the

ship before Calum could stop her.

"I will stay with you," she said in her clear, sweet voice, and the uneasy group

subsided at once.

"Well, if she stays....". "You're a damned fool, Kass," somebody said to the burly man who'd begun

the protest. "Oughta know there's no funny business when the likes other is

involved."

"Ow'd I s'posed to know that?" the unlucky Kass protested. "Never seen nothm' like her before, did I?"

"Just gotta look at her . . . besides, she cleared the water for us, didn't she?"

Acorna gently urged the people away from the base of the ship and waved at

Calum. "Go on," she urged him. "Everything will be all right."

Not without misgivings, Calum lifted off once the settlers on the ground were

people

to be helped into some semblance of organization, too many piles of
hastily

abandoned household goods which the owners had left with anxiety and
a

great many last-minute messages: "Mind and keep all my things to-
gether and

don't let that Auntie Nagah be poking around in them. ... Be ^re they
stow those

datacubes of mine somewhere safe and dry, that's the only library on all
Rushima. . . . Now be sure and keep that table upside down, see, one of

the
legs falls off if you pick it up the other way, but 'er's a good table and
solid."

Solid " 'er" certainly was; Acorna had to enlist the help of Flouse and
Kass to

get it carried as far as the soggy bank. "Leave it there," Flouse said. "I'll
ask

one of the dryland settlements to send a motodray-all ours are fair ru-
ined with

this wet, see?" He wiped his sweating forehead. "Blest if I know how old

in an

unending stream down her face to join the silty water of the acres-wide shallow

"lake."

Acorna recognized the young mother who'd protested against her children

being taken off without her.

"They will be all right," she said quietly, sitting down beside the grief-stricken

woman without regard for her own clothes. "I promise you that. And very soon

Calum will come back for more people, and you will be with them again, in a

nice dry place where you can get them clean and they can sleep dry and warm;

won't that be better?". "They'll be frightened without me!"

"But you'll be with them very soon," Acorna repeated, "and in the meantime . .

. they do have your own elders from this settlement to watch them, and Calum

himself is very good with children."

"Looks," Acorna repeated, "are deceiving." She did not add that it was her appearance, not Calum's, which was deceptive; the settlers had accepted her strange looks with surprising equanimity. She did not wish to remind them of her alien nature by explaining that she came of a race which could apparently grow to physical maturity in just four years.

By personally promising to see that the young woman was taken on the very next shipload, and talking in a low, soothing voice, Acorna got her somewhat calmed down; and that calm seemed magically to spread through the crowd.

This was shattered as the roar of a ship's engines filled the air and all but drowned out the voices of those on the ground.

"Oh, good," Acorna said cheerfully, "see, here's the Accu)ecki back already. ..."

a wall of steam clouds.

As the clouds cleared, Acorna saw a craft not dissimilar in shape to the U-class

starships of Delszaki Li's fleet, but ornamented with gaudy scrollwork of scarlet-and-gilt ribbon shapes that curved about the hull. She blinked and

rubbed her eyes. How did they do that? No decorative paint could survive

repeated searing journeys through a planet's atmosphere ... no paint known to

humanity, she thought with a flash of panic, and suddenly the ship seemed

utterly and completely alien.

Around her there were sudden cries of fear, and the young mother beside her

leapt to her feet with the evident intention of running away. Acorna jumped up,

too, if only to keep the girl with her; if these people ran in panic, this frail young

woman and many others might slip and be trampled . . . who were these new

"There is nothing to be afraid of," she said, trying to keep her voice from shaking. She raised it slightly. "You don't know who is in that ship, but I know.

These are more of my kind. You aren't afraid of me, are you? Well, then! They've come to help, not to hurt you."

As her commonsense words percolated through the crowd, the momentary

danger of a panic-stricken flight passed. The settlers were still nervous, Acorna

could feel that in the tense movements of their bodies and the way they stood

poised on both feet as if ready to fight or flee; but they were listening to reason

again.

If indeed it was reason ... she could not be sure that this alien ship held her

own people, could she? And yet, beyond all reason, Acorna was sure of it,

even before a hatchway too far up the side of the ship opened and let down a

Ruthima - Unified Federation Date 334.05.25

There she is ... my 'Khornya . . . our 'Khornya!

(We must tell her . . . them . . . now. It would be wrong to keep them in ignorance, Neeva, and there are surely enough of us here to prevent any panic.)

(Let me greet my 'Khornya first. Can we not have this one moment in peace

without being reminded of. . .)

Acorna had a confused image of something alien and terrifying, something like

a metallic ant heap writhing with hatred and destruction.

(As you will. But she must be told soon.)

They were within speaking distance now, lifting their long, elegant legs clear of

the muddy water with each delicate step. Behind them, Acorna recognized

Nadhari Kando, Delszaki Li's personal bodyguard. She had no energy left to try

and figure out what Nadhari was doing here; all her attention was on the beings

feeling

dull and stupid, and suddenly all too aware of the sweat that soaked her coveralls and the mud that ornamented them in soggy brown blotches.

(I thought you said she was old enough to speak "when Vaanye and

Feriila

took her on that trip, Neeva! What's the matter with her? Is she retarded,

do

you think?)

(Probably neglected. They -wouldn't know how to care for one of us.)

Well! In all her childish fantasies about finally meeting her own people, she'd

never imagined anything like this! Acorna blew out an indignant "Whuff!" through her nostrils and lifted her head proudly, forgetting the mud on

her

coveralls and all her doubts about being acceptable to these Linyaari.

"There is nothing the matter with me," she said slowly and clearly, "except that

I am afflicted with inconsiderate relatives. I used to imagine all sorts of things

about the people of my race, but one thing I never thought of was that they

than I

did!"

Acorna frowned, puzzled. It was true - she had not understood the only thing

that had been spoken; and yet they had said those other things . . . hadn't they?

(Oh, my dear 'Khornya! Have you never heard mind-speech before?)

(Of course she hasn't, Neeva. Remember, barbarians raised her.)

(Don't pay any attention to Thariinye, my dear. He is incurably rude . . .

hardly

linyarii!)

The untranslatable word carried, in mind-speech, all its connotations of "real-people-

like-us," "civilized," "sapient," and "ethical."

Acorna started to speak, then deliberately closed her lips and thought at the

others.

(Perhaps ... I am not. .. linyarii.. . either. It is true ... I was raised by these people

joy, and

mourning for the parents Acorna could not remember, and absolute, unconditional welcome.

(You are both linyarii and Liinyar, and you are ours,) Neeva thought with absolute conviction. (I am Neeva of the Renyilaaghe, visedhaanye ferilii of this

expedition, and you are 'Khornya of the Renyilaaghe, my sister-child. Your

parents were Feriila and Vaanye of the Renyilaaghe; you have Feriila's eyes.)

And Neeva's clan memories surged into Acorna: a blue-green grassy world of

rolling hills and bright streams. A tall man with eyes the deep silver of the

shadowed grass, who smiled and tossed a laughing baby up in his arms; a

sweet-faced woman whose silver eyes were the mirror of Acorna's own; feast

days of flowers and singing, little furry animals that chattered in the trees. . . .)

"My dream!" exclaimed Acorna aloud.

est

memories, and it had been in her mind even before that, for Gill and Ra-
fik had

told her that as soon as she learned a few words of Basic she had oc-
casionally

wakened speaking of strangely colored skies and demanding angrily to
know

the name of an animal they had never heard of.

Haltingly, Acorna told Neeva of the fragments she retained from a
dream that

had always left her feeling safe and loved. "There was a garden where
the

grass was soft and almost blue, and someone held me up to see the
singing-fuzzies

in the trees. ..."

"No dream," said Neeva, and the silver pupils of her eyes narrowed to
vertical

lines. "That was a garden in the clan-house of the Renyilaaghe. Your
father

Vaanye used to take you to see the thiliiri in the trees there; he said you
sang

memories, you will share them all as we do." Underneath the spoken words

Acorna could hear a cry of grief and pity. (How could you survive so, all alone?).(I was NOT alone,) she thought, and her own memories of Gill and Rafik and

Calum flooded into Neeva's mind.

(I see,) said Neeva in a much-altered tone. (We had not expected there could be

a bonding. . . .)

"Not a bonding, not like that," Acorna said, since Neeva's sense of bonding

meant a physical, sensual tie. (They nurtured me, taking turns. . . .) She touched

horns again with her aunt and let loose a myriad of scenes from being bathed

as a small child in a small sink to her sampling all the plants in the 'ponies, to

understanding "no," and then learning how to read and write, and how to do

more important things like find rhenium where they didn't know it would be,

grown

Liinyar male looked like . . . well . . . Acorna forced her thoughts away from that

area.

(Yes, deformed. They nearly took it off.)

(They nearly what?) All four Linyaari cringed, and the male actually put a quick

hand up to his horn, as if protecting it from the very thought of such an action.

(So you see, I owe much to Gill, Rafik, and Calum. They never, ever left me

alone.) j

(Yes, my dear child, we will express our gratitude for their care of you in a

substantial manner.) Neeva drew Acorna a little farther away from the clutch of

settlers who were distinctly interested in what was going on.

"I ain't heard 'im say much at all," the young woman complained. "Just touchin'

them horns together like stags back on Shenjemi. And they ain't neither of

cushioned her against the horrible scenes of torture that the Khieevi perpetrated on helpless Linyaari Acorna pitied the poor victims and understood why her parents had wanted to spare her from it and give her that

one slim chance to live.

(We are also here to warn this quadrant of the galaxy that the Khieevi are on

their way here,) Khaari said, nuzzling Acorna with her horn to reduce the shock

that did, indeed, shudder its way through Acorna..She broke their hold, looking about in shock at the poor bedraggled settlers.

(Be easy, Acorna) Khaari said sharply. (You are broadcasting fear, and they will

sense it. Melireenya, help us dampen this. Thaari, you, too. As I said, help is on

its way. This Rafik has called upon an army. . . .)

"Is that why Nadhari's here?" Acorna managed to peek over at the short woman who was standing in a parade-rest position, not seeming to look at

anything, but, if Acorna knew the woman, and she did, seeing everything. Only

ship.)

"No. I promised that I would stay here until the Aca^eecki comes to take another

load away from here. And these are not the only ones that must be protected,"

Acorna said, backing away from her own people. "I can go nowhere until the

entire planet is evacuated if the Khieevi things are coming this way."

"We can take zum in our ship," Neeva said, glancing over and doing a mental

count of the heads she could see. "But not all."

"All, or I don't leave this planet."

(It is obvious she is linyarii,) Thariinye said in a bored tone. (Only females will

support a lost cause.)

(Be still with such foolish talk, Thari. We must get her to safety. And I do not

think we will have much time.)

(The armies are coming. We know that.)

(But when? And soon enough?)

ship was the AcaSecki. He did not see the Linyaari ship. But his instrumentation had shown that the Linyaari ship had been far enough ahead

of even his superfast Uhuru to have landed, collected Acorna, and been back

before he could arrive. Calum was there, and Rafik charged angrily toward the

one familiar face, only to stop and stand stock-still when he realized that the

man next to Calum was familiar, too.. "Johnny Greene, what in the name of misbegotten imps, djinni, and Shaitans

are you doing here?" But he thumped Johnny on the back with more enthusiasm, Calum thought, than he had ever displayed on being reunited with

his old mining partners. "Is Acorna on the bridge? Where's that fancy ship of

the Linyaari? I know they made it to Rushima ahead of me."

"We expect them at any moment, Rafik," Calum said absently. He was absorbed in counting the other old friends who were even now disembarking

from the Uhuru. Judit, Pal, Gill. . .

lessly-"it's

rather a lot to explain. Now where's Acorna? "

"On Rushima."

"You left her alone? On Rushima?" Rafik's coffee brown face faded to a dingy

gray.

Calum gave Rafik a dirty look. "I'm sure you would have arranged everything

much better if you'd been the one to get kidnapped by Palomellese space

pirates. Forgive me, all I managed to do was rescue us"-actually Markel should

have gotten the credit for that, but Calum was past being reasonable-"help

recapture the Haven, and work out the mathematics needed for Dr. Hoa to

reverse the weather devastation on Rushima. She's needed there now to help

with relocating the settlers to high ground, and so am I. I just stopped to get a

working party of kids off this ship."

planet is

exactly what we need for them. Maybe a whole different system."

It was Calum's turn to goggle. Quickly Rafik filled him in on the threatened

invasion which had brought both the Uharu and the Linyaari to Rushima.

The corn unit on Johnny Greene's belt squawked suddenly.

"Armed force approaching. ..."

"That'll be the Red Bracelets," Rafik said, and added, "I hope. . . .". On their way to the bridge he sketched the situation for Calum and Johnny, who relayed the information to the Haven's young crew so that no further

explanations were needed when they reached that area. Full-screen displays

gave a view of nine approaching ships: a dreadnought, flanked by two battle

cruisers and six destroyers, all of whom were capable of carrying light fighters

within as the fleet now angled down to the same plane as the Haven's position.

Rafik gave a sigh of relief. "Yes, they're our people ... so to speak. We've

over his shoulder. "Then who're these guys?"

The scene altered, and, although the screen's magnification had not been

changed, it was obvious that another triangle of nine ships-of-a-kind design Rafik

had never seen before-was also closing fast on this same position.

"The Khieevi?" Calum asked.

"Must be," Rafik said. "I got a- well, a picture in my head from Neeva, she's

Acorna's mother's sister. ..."

Her aunt...

"I think they've got a different kinship structure. She calls herself mother-sib to

Acorna, and the feeling I get is that it's more like a second mother than an

aunt."

"What the hell difference does that make with the design of the Khieevi ships?"

"None, but that's them," Rafik said, pointing. "And they're still far away, because close-up, Melireenya says the smallest of them is twice the size of the

turned red,

Pal stared straight ahead, and Judit dropped her eyes.

"Rafik thought we shouldn't risk starting a panic among the Rushimese,"

Gill

mumbled.

"It was your idea, actually," Rafik said.. "Whatever! Anyway, we all know now; and what are we going to do to protect

those people from what's coming at them?"

"First step," said Calum, "is to get Acorna and the Linyaari up here, find out

what exactly they know about these Khieevi. These mind-pictures you're talking about can't be any substitute for a good discussion of strategy and

tactics. And as soon as the Red Bracelets are within range, we need to get their

head honcho in on the talks. You stay here and work on opening communications with the Kilumbembese, Johnny; I've got to collect Acorna."

"I'm coming with you," said Pal in a tone that brooked no argument.

When the Aca[^]ecki returned to settle in the extensive but shallow mud puddle

settlers. Actually it wasn't that so much that bothered him; it was the fact that

Acorna was neither with the four envoys nor alone. The tall, overbearing young

male who'd been arrested by a security guard on Maganos was by her side,

bending over her with an attentive expression that made Pal want to deck him.

Behind them stood Nadhari Kando, apparently relaxed . . . until one noticed

that she was lightly balanced on the balls of her feet, hands free, eyes constantly scanning the space around Acorna for possible threats.

"Look at that oversize . . . stallion," Pal muttered to Calum in tones of disgust,

as the other man joined him. "Making time with my girl while we've got an

emergency on our hands!"

"I don't think she's your girl now. Pal," Calum said sadly. "I don't think she's

any of ours, now."

"Yeah, but-"

lie on

the spur of the moment. As he moved through the crowd, grinning and repeating his tale about a purely temporary glitch in the resettlement and the

need to get help from these aliens in preparing adequate facilities for all the

waiting settlers, Calum could almost believe it himself. Certainly none of the

Rushimese questioned Pal's story, though Calum thought he saw a quizzical

look on the face of Joshua Flouse—a man who, as settlement leader, had undoubtedly had his own experience with making up plausible tales.

Even Pal, though, could not keep the whole group of settlers calm without the

help of the Linyaari. That became evident as he began, like a good sheep dog, cutting out the aliens and neatly herding them out of the crowd and back to the

AcaSecki. He had to get them one at a time, and as each one left, ripples of

unease stirred through the crowd, only settling when the remaining Linyaari

Linyaari

information about the Khieevi correctly. She and Thariinye were the last but

one of the Linyaari to come aboard, followed by Nadhari Kando, who was

taking quite seriously her orders to guard Acorna at all times; only Neeva

remained with the Rushimese.

"She's not coming," Pal reported.

"Oh, yes, she is!" Calum started down the steps, prepared to bring the Linyaari

Envoy Extraordinary to safety by force if necessary, but Acorna caught his

arm. "Calum, one of us must remain here," she said in an urgent undertone. "If

I am truly needed to interpret-"

"You are," Pal said in a firm tone that brooked no argument.

"Then one of the envoys must stay." Her pupils narrowed. "I wish it were not

Neeva . . . but we Linyaari cannot all leave."

"I don't see why!" How quickly she had identified herself with them: "we

"It is true, Calum," Acorna said. "They . . . we . . . can put forth an aura of peace and calm that will keep the settlers from panicking. But if we all go, and the AccSecki as well, they will surely think we are abandoning them."

Calum thought grimly that this might well be true, unless the Linyaari and the humans on board the Haven could come up with some way to protect an entire continent full of far-flung, scattered settlements from imminent invasion.

Right now, he'd kill for the secret to Uncle Hafiz's planetary shield. But with the only man capable of installing it and making it work buried six feet under on some distant planet, the Rushimese -and anybody else on the surface of Rushima-were dangerously, potentially fatally, exposed.

But he did not wish to say this to Acorna, nor to confess that his own immediate objective was to get her to the relative safety of the Haven.

Rushima

Rushimese to

their fate. He would bring Acorna and the Linyaari back to the Haven,
but after

that he would be free to use the AcaSecki up to the last minute in ferry-
ing the

Rushimese . . . where? The Haven could hardly provide space, let
alone life

support, for all the farmers in this and other settlements. Perhaps there
were

caves where the people could hide.

He would worry about it later, Calum decided, as he broke all records
and

several safety regs in his eagerness to blast away from Rushima and
get

Acorna to safety.. . and, as a minor objective, to get her out from be-
tween Pal

and Thariinye, who had strapped in on opposite sides of her with the
evident

intention of glaring at one another and exchanging barely veiled insults
all the

way back.

"Admiral Ikwaskwan to Haven, regarding your request Denied. My men came to fight the enemy, not to baby-sit civilians. It is not in our contract to perform transport services for these . . . farmers!"

Rafik spoke into the recorder. "With respect, Admiral, we believe you will find that Section 19, Subsection iii, Paragraph (b) of your contract requires you to operate under my direct command in all matters not specifically military.

I do

hope we can resolve this matter amicably; penalties for forfeiture are explicit

and ... ah ... rather steep. I fear my uncle is not at all of a forgiving nature in

such matters." He hit the code and transmit buttons and sat back with a sigh

as the response was compressed for spurt to the lead ship of the Red Bracelets.

Seconds later, another transmission was received, this time accompanied by

with us,

Rafik. You had better take me along for this personal discussion he wants."

"And me," said Nadhari Kando in her low, gravelly voice.

"You're going nowhere," Rafik said briefly, "and neither am I. Really, Gill, one

would think you had learned nothing of the art of negotiating from all those

years of watching me in action! Uncle Hafiz would not have chosen an heir so stupid as to conduct difficult bargaining sessions on the opponent's home

turf." He thought that over briefly. "Well, Tapha probably would've," he conceded, "but Uncle didn't exactly choose Tapha." Hafiz had expressed no

particular grief when his dim-witted, conceited son had died in an attempt to

assassinate Rafik before he could be disinherited in Rafik's favor, and none of

his friends believed this was because of his iron control of his feelings. .
.. He

they're

heavily armed and outnumber us by a factor of thousands? As for later .

..

Ikwaskwan is, I'm sure, quite as well aware as I am that time, distance,
dead

witnesses, and lies can blur the definition of just what was or was not a
direct

battlefront decision. No, we will have to find other methods of persuad-
ing him."

"To do what?" Calum, a latecomer to this discussion, demanded.

Rafik briefly explained to him that on the nearest star system to
Rushima, but

well out of the current sweep of the Khieevi fleet, they had identified a
planet

with acceptable gravity, atmosphere, and water where the Rushimese
could

take refuge until the battle was over ... if the Kilumbembese mercenary
fleet

could be pressed into service to transport them there.

"Will we have time?"

wan to

come aboard the Haven rather than the other way round. All he could say was

that there had been an exchange of compliments in which Rafik so carefully

veiled whatever threats or bribes he was offering that it would take the twisty

mind of a Harakamian ... or a Kilumbembese mercenary ... to figure out what

was going on. All he knew was that Rafik sighed when the exchange was over

and commented that this could be expensive, and he hoped Uncle Hafiz and

Delszaki Li were prepared to pay for cost overruns beyond the scope of the

original contract.

"You're bribing him to move the Rushimese?"

"I am hinting that cooperation will not go unrewarded," Rafik corrected

Calum's surmise. He sighed again. "We'll doubtless have to commit ourselves

served

with the Red Bracelets; but something in her cold, expressionless stare put

him off. He had heard that Li's bodyguard did not discuss her past; it would be

impolite to bring it up now. Risky, too. Decidedly risky.

Acorna turned and looked up at Thariinye. "Cannot we help, too? If it is a

matter of persuading . . . you were so good at calming the Rushimese!"

"Calum tells me you did pretty well at that yourself!" Pal exclaimed.

•

Thariinye smiled and patted Acorna's shoulder. "Little 'Khornya will learn, but

she is unpracticed. Best to leave this to those with the experience to be tactful

and diplomatic."

(Well, that leaves you out, Thariinye! I'd sooner have 'Khornya handle it; at

least she knows how to be nice to people!)

(Will you just get off my case, Khaari?)

(Never a hindrance, dear child, but we do not wish you to exhaust yourself.

Thariinye, Khaari, save your energies for this visitor; do not waste yourselves

in quarreling.) Melireenya's firm intervention quashed the momentary altercation and brought the four Linyaari together in at least superficial unity-for

Acorna unconsciously moved to stand with her kinsfolk as they drew closer

together.

When "Admiral" Ikwaskwan boarded the Haven, Calum understood why he had

not been afraid to negotiate on Rafik's turf. He was accompanied by a squad of

mercenaries in dark gray uniforms, each man visibly armed and alert. Calum

noticed that some of them wore one red bangle on the left wrist, others two or

even three, while Ikwaskwan himself was bare-armed. Some kind of rank

bomb..Rafik smoothly agreed that it was desirable to take all possible precautions

when visiting, mentioned with a deprecating smile that the Haven was itself not

without weaponry both offensive and defensive, and said that he personally

would deeply deplore any dissension which should cause injury to their honored ally.

(Meli, are you sure these "humans" are on our side?)

(No . . . but at least they are not Khieevi.)

(That is beginning to seem less and less of a recommendation. Like us in form,

perhaps, but hardly in ethics.)

(That may not be entirely a bad thing. If they meet their friends with weapons in

both hands, what do you suppose they do to their enemies?)

(Thaninye, you have abominable taste. Besides, if they are so suspicious, they

will likely destroy one another before the Khieevi even arrive.)

The Linyaari continued their internal debate. Acorna listened, wanting to cry

tional

compensation would be granted his troops for the service of ferrying dirt farmers from one planet to another.

Rafik cleared his throat and prepared to equivocate to the best of his not inconsiderable ability; but before he could speak, Nadhan Kando sauntered out

from her semiconcealed position behind the group of tall Linyaari.

"Hi, there, Ikki," she said, her usual gravelly drawl muted to an almost husky

tone, "it's been a long time."

Not long enough! was written on Ikwaskwan's bony face at sight of Nadhari,

but he had too much self-control to voice the feelings. "Nadhari Kando. I had

heard you were dead."

"The rumors were gravely exaggerated," replied Nadhari without cracking a

smile. "But since we appear to be on the same side again, Ikki, I hope you are a

little better at carrying through your plans now than you were then."

came of

that credit exchange from Theloi?".Ikwaskwan licked suddenly dry lips.

Nadhari waited patiently, thumbs hooked

into her belt, one knee slightly bent toward the man she called "Ikki."

"Or did the data get lost when his second-in-command was assassinated?"

Nadhari prodded. "Remember? Everybody thought it was

counterrevolutionaries, but no one could explain how they'd gotten hold of the

plans for our camp. Very clever of them to go straight to Skomitin's tent and

back out again without getting caught, wasn't it?"

"So delightful to talk over old times," Ikwaskwan said with a tight-lipped smile

that did not reach his eyes. "We must have another little chat some time, Nadhi

dear, but just now I am needed at my own bridge. Rafik Nadezda has indicated

that there is some urgency about this little population transfer, and you know

my feelings on honoring the wishes of the client."

tem, also

a map of the settlements to be evacuated here on Rushima."

Rafik nodded, stern and unsmiling. "All necessary data shall be at your disposal. . . Admiral."

Not until the closing of the outer ports indicated that Ikwaskwan and his bodyguard were physically off the Haven and on their way by shuttle back to

the flagship did he allow himself a long sigh of relief.

"Nadhari-" he began, but the quiet woman had vanished.

"Who were those people she was talking about?" Gill asked.

Calum shook his head. "Never heard of 'em. Meant something to Ikwaskwan, though. Ikki?"

"I don't," Rafik said gravely, "believe I want to ask. We owe her, though . . . and

I'd better get busy transmitting those orders!"

(See, Khaari? These humans aren't so bad after all. They settled everything

quite amicably.)

(It must be that a pretense offeree is part of their greeting ritual,) Thari-
inve

either out loud or mentally. Her kinfolk seemed to have totally missed the point of that tense, threatening conversation; but why disturb them, if they were happy with their own interpretation?

fourteen

Riuhlma, Unified Federation Date JJ^ 05.26

If some of the Red Bracelets were offended at being ?????????? I assigned to evacuate settlers rather than to strictly military tasks, two of the newest officers were complacent at the prospect. Ed Minkus and Des Smirnoff joined in the grumbles of their unit but then Smirnoff, in a surprising volte-face, volunteered himself and Minkus to pilot one of the shuttles that was to be sent to outlying areas. Although most of the small settlements on Rushima consisted of clusters of homes and storage sheds along the single primitive road that snaked through the eastern part of the main continent, there were

ers

might not even hear the 'casts since their equipment might be down or damaged. Some individualists were prone to turning off their com systems for

weeks at a time. Ikwaskwan reluctantly agreed to send a few low-flying shuttles

to seek out stragglers, although he was adamant that all his people should be

back at their stations well before the ETA of the Khieevi force.

"You crazy, Des?" Ed Minkus grumbled as they prepared to board the shuttle

assigned them. "Never volunteer for anything, that's what you told me was the

first principle of surviving in this outfit."

Des Smirnoff laid one finger to the side of his bulbous nose and winked, while

saying in a loud voice that echoed through the hangar, "Why, Ed, didn't we

swear an oath of loyalty to the Red Bracelets? And doesn't a loyal comrade

clambering into the pilot's seat of his own shuttle.

Ed started to ask what all that nonsense had been about, but Des silenced him

with a sign. The chatter of takeoff instructions filled the cabin; Des went through his checklist and said nothing that was not strictly business until their craft was well on its way to a landing on Rushima. Then he slapped the corn

unit off, turned to Ed, and grinned.

"You always were thick between the ears, Minkus."

"Not thick enough to put myself out for work I don't have to do," Minkus grumbled. "Ikwaskwan's not fool enough to send all of us on transport duty.

Some lucky sods will get to stay behind, manning the battle stations and polishing command chairs with their rears, and we could've been among them."

Des snorted. "Not bloody likely, with us so new there as to've accumulated no

seniority and no friends with strings to pull! We were for this duty, my friend."

"So you thought volunteering would make you look good?"

what the evacuees left behind in their hurry?"

"But we're supposed to ... oh," Ed said as understanding belatedly dawned.

"You aren't going to look for settlers at all, are you? You're going to look for

places they've already left!" He guffawed. "Neat trick, Des. Okay, we'll take it

easy and say too bad, couldn't find no stragglers, Captain Ce'skwa, ma'am!"

"We will not take it easy," Des contradicted him. "We've got just six hours

Standard and who knows what goodies to collect and stash in that time."

At the rendezvous landing they were met by a sweating dirt farmer who offered

them their choice of datacubes or a handdrawn map showing where he thought

most of the outlying settlements -were. Des was about to spurn the paper map

when Ed discovered that the datacubes were in a format incompatible with the

quadrant.

"Eager for work, Smirnoff?" Ce'skwa said drily. "You surprise me."

"Hope to continue doing so, ma'am!"

As she turned to the next pair of pilots, he continued under his breath to list

the ways he'd like to surprise the uppity, interfering bitch, then snarled at Ed.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Get going! We've only five and three-quarter

hours Standard left to collect ... all these poor, unfortunate souls," he finished

with a sanctimonious smirk..The first two places they flew over looked not only deserted but too poor to be

worth looting: ramshackle huts whose roof timbers had been lifted off by some

freak wind, the interiors soaked by torrential rains. "Nobody's lived here for

some time," Des grunted, "if you could call that living ... and if there was any

good stuff, it's long gone or buried in mud. Whoever built here was an idiot

that

had devastated the forest at the top of the hill. Des's eyes sparkled, and

he

guided the shuttle to a landing place on a barren outcrop of rock above

the

building. "Now this looks more like it!"

The scramble down to the building was rougher than it had looked from
the air;

the thin layer of topsoil over the rocks had been washed away by
pounding

rains, leaving a barren, slippery surface with precious little to hold on to
and

not even any good footholds. Ed wished that Des had landed in one of
the

waterlogged fields below the house instead, but he knew that saying
anything

would only ignite Smirnoff's temper and would not spare him the slip-
pery

descent. He took his time, though, testing what miserable footholds he
could

could bring to mind that he wouldn't break his neck on the last fifteen feet of the descent.

He was dangling by one hand, eyes closed, feeling for the ledge that had

bruised Des on his descent and praying that the burly man hadn't broken the

rock off entirely, when a bellow of delight from within the house startled him

into letting go and dropping the last few feet.

"Minkus! Get your worthless butt in here and help me shift this stuff!"

"Shit," Ed said, not exactly in reply, "I think I broke something."

"You better not have, ol' buddy," was the response. "If I have to choose between carrying you back to the shuttle or carrying this load of furs, well, the

furs have some market value. ..."

With this encouragement, Ed limped as far as the outer door of the house-more

of an elongated cabin, really-and decided that his right ankle was not really

Kezdet.Guardians for embezzlement, peculation, and abuse of suspects to a degree

that revolted even the other Guardians.

It had been after one of those drinking parties and the subsequent blackout

that Ed had wakened to find himself dressed in a gray uniform and being

addressed as "Scumsucker," by the broad he had quickly learned to call "Captain Ce'skwa, ma'am!" What followed had been the most strenuous and

miserable weeks of his life; Captain Ce'skwa had a talent for convincing them

that they would really rather attempt whatever bonecrunching, muscle-tearing

"exercise" she assigned than explain their failure to her.

And that had been the officers' training; his and Smirnoff's experience in the

Kezdet Guardians had at least bought them a single red bracelet apiece on

entry. He didn't even want to think about what the rank and file of the mercenaries went through as basic training.

Even if you could hide them, she'd be bound to notice the smell. I'm sorry, Des.

We need to look for smaller stuff."

Des scowled. "Do you know how much furs of this quality would fetch in the

Zaspala Imperium? And I've got a perfect fence . . . uh, buyer; my cousin Vlad

has a furrier's and tailor's emporium, caters to the Zaspala aristos. Shit!"

And he signaled his acceptance of Ed's strictures by whirling the bundle of

furs around at arm's length, then tossing it at the open cabin door. Ed dodged.

The bundle landed with a thud, the bindings split, and furs spilled out into the

thick black mud left by the rains that seemed to have assaulted this whole area.

Des dropped his blaster and went through the cabin with the recklessness of

rage, spilling out food stores in case they contained jewels or antique money,

he

demanded of the ceiling.

"He is," cackled a dry, crackling voice behind them. "OneOne Otimie, explorer,

trapper, prospector, and misanthrope extraordinary, at your service, gentlemen! Don't do anything reckless, now; I ain't real familiar with this here

de-vice, wouldn't want to set it off accidental like."

Both men turned slowly to see a dried-up little stick of a man in the doorway,

holding Des's blaster with two dismayingly shaky hands.."Broadcast said as the enemy was comin', and we was to clear out," One-One

said "with a cackle, "but I don't reckon on leavin' my place to no invaders,

nosirree! You fellas was tumble careless and noisy. Give me plenty of time to

hide out up yander." He jerked his head toward the cliff they'd descended with

such pains.

Des glanced at Ed and moved his head slightly to the left. Ed knew what he

back

into his chair. "You've been captured, tortured, pursued for generations.

You've had your home world disintegrated, and you have still developed

NO

TACTICS to fight these Khieevi?

Gill, Calum, and Ikwaskwan looked equally confounded by Melireenya's remonstrative expression.

"Linyaari do not kill."

"That's fine and dandy if someone isn't trying to kill you," Johnny Greene said.

"You mean all you've been doing since those . . . those devils started extinguishing your race was run and tell everyone the wolves are coming?"

Rafik asked, still staring with disbelief at the calm Linyaari.

"No, we have . . . designed defensive weaponry," Thariinye said, not at all liking

Rafik's reaction. "We have designed ships-"

"Which can outrun them," Rafik finished for him, as Thariinye drew himself up

to his not inconsiderable height with indignation. "Fine, fine. Do you know

Nor are you in that fancy fast ship of yours. The chips are down, the game is

up, and it's here or never." Rafik finger-combed his hair back into order because he had been emphasizing his words so vehemently, his longish hair

half covered his face.

"We, too, are armed and ready," Khaari said firmly. "They" - she pointed to the

phalanx of Khieevi ships-"have missiles of great strength, capable of destroying all but your largest ships ..." Khaari found herself unable to get out

the syllables of the mercenary leader's name. ". . . Add-mee-ral," she got out.

"They attack and attack until the ship is so ... made holes in ... that it can no

longer return fire."

"That's not tactics," Rafik muttered, "that's suicide. At least"-he glanced thankfully at Ikwaskwan - "we've the proper attitude and experience to hand.right now." He went to the screen. "Have your ships power enough to flank

them, Ikwaskwan?"

depart this system before the Khieevi arrive? Thus no one will be harmed."

"This time," Rafik said. "Your own experience has shown that running away

won't work forever. And we barbarian bipeds have a strange reluctance to hand

over real estate we've worked hard to claim."

Acorna felt enclosed in an isolation cell from all that was said around and

about her. Somehow, in those few moments she'd allowed herself to envision

her "own kind," she thought they'd be ... well, wiser. More aloof, more self-contained:

not that Melireenya wasn't, but Thariinye stood there with this supercilious expression on his face, which didn't become him at all, and he

obviously loathed Rafik for making all Linyaari seem craven. But, if you weren't

raised to kill, or hate, or scabble for a living as her Kezdetian children had,

why would you need to know tactics?

weapon we have. We dare not use it against the Khieevi because it destroys

the destroyer as well. So we do not mention it until there is no other recourse.

Do not fault us that we have been tardy in learning the skills of aggression and

the weapons of defense. Had we not come to warn you, you would not have

known the threat approaching you now.)

Though Melireenya stood on the opposite side of the conference room, Acorna

was abruptly "in" the room again and not isolated from her kind or her defenders.

"So, let's get this tub"-Rafik paused to bow a smiling apology to Andreziana-

behind the moon, where it is not immediately apparent to the enemy converging not so slowly but very surely upon us. You don't want to have a few

of Admiral's Ikwaskwan's gunnery officers stay aboard the Haven, do you?"

"I'm gunnery officer," Johnny Greene said, appointing himself into that

assigned, and Acorna was alone.

('Khornya,)-Thariinye leaned into the room again, smiling an invitation at her-(

you're with us.)

Calum pushed past Thariinye and got her by the arm. "You'll be on the AcaSecki. Rafik thinks we can move nonessentials about and make room for

more ammunition. Even if we didn't fit in the extra banks Pal wanted, if we have

enough ammunition, we'll achieve the same effect. More or less. If we get the

chance."

Acorna accompanied Calum, but she bestowed an apologetic smile on Thariinye and a soft (good luck) as she passed by him. He was still watching

her when she and Calum took the grav shaft down to the hangar level.

What Rafik thought of as nonessential was not so regarded by either Calum or

Acorna, but in the end they acceded to his demands, and racks of additional

This was done with great effort and much sweating and swearing, finished just in time to hear the Klaxon that warned of an important message about to be given.

"Captain Andreziana here. Ikwaskwan reports that Rushima can be considered cleared of settlers. There is one shuttle still missing, but it is expected to report shortly.

"We will now proceed to our assigned position. All escort ships please prepare to disembark. And good luck, AccSecki, Balakure."

"Good luck to you, Haven," Rafik said, reaching across the control panel to open the comlink. He settled himself in the pilot's chair, and, turning his head, said, "Prepare to leave the hangar."

"Hey, I pilot the Aca^ecki," Calum said, pushing at Rafik to leave the chair.

Thariinye and Khaari Calum and Rafik sounded..(Not a bit like that undersized egotistical by-blow of a twilit and a barsipan,)

said Thariinye's voice in her head.

(Do be quiet,) Melireenya said at her firmest.

Despite the speed at which Rafik prepared the AcaSecki for takeoff, the Linyaari ship had already slipped out of its hangar position and was speeding

to take its position in the battle line. fifteen

AccSecki, Unified Federation Date 534.05.26

The Kilumbembese mercenaries got back in the nick of time from ferrying as

many of the Rushimese to safety as possible. As the combined space force of

the Kilumbembese, the gaudy Linyaari courier ship, the three armed pinnaces

of the Haven, the Uham under Nadhari's command, and the AcaSecki-with

Rafik in the pilot's seat-ranged themselves in their assigned battle positions, a

certain steely calm descended in the main cabin of the AcaSecki. The pinnaces

This meant that each of the larger ships could bring its port or starboard missiles into action, swing around, and come back to deliver a second blow to

the attacking ships. If any of the Khieevi ships should break off for a direct

attack on the helpless planet, the smaller ships should attempt to slow their

progress and/or their landing.

"Naval maneuvers need not be complicated, especially when we have never

fought with you before," Ikwaskwan said. Rank would have preferred a more

sophisticated or subtle attack, but he had none to offer. These weren't asteroids he was attempting to make surrender their valuables, but sapient-although

that was not a certainty-aggressors who had managed to terrorize the more sophisticated Linyaari. At least more sophisticated in some areas of

technology.

The Khieevi liked to fight, so a fight they would get. Only this time the buggers

Khieevi vanguard, Rafik prayed to those warrior ancestors with a fervor he had never before used. It was Gill who triggered the AcaSeckl's missile ranks. He heard Acorna applauding, then Calum raging at Markel . . . who shouldn't be on board this ship . . . and then Gill tapped him on the shoulder. "We're reloaded. Your turn." This time, Rafik snarled as he sent more missiles after the first lot and recoiled at the bursts of flame and spewed fragments as the AcaSeckl's missiles contacted and exploded the oncoming Khieevi warheads. "Sheer off, we're going right into the mess," Gill cried, and Rafik hit the thrusters in a two-second blast that took the ship safely away, and their proximity sensors indicated they had missed being blown up by the skin of their collective teeth. Suddenly it was Gill in the pilot seat, though how he had relocated Rafik in the second chair, the heir did not know. But Gill's lips exposed his bared teeth in a snarl, and the intense expression on the big man's

breaking OFF."

As Gill turned back to where the mercenaries were pounding the V formation of

the Khieevi, it seemed that the three lead ships were disassembling themselves

into smaller separate units. Far too many smaller units.

They watched, horrified, as the little pinnaces, like minnows against sharks,

followed, their forward lasers punching at the shark tails ... in three cases

making direct hits. But only three instances . . . and luck had to have been on

their side because there were far too many of the smaller Khieevi ships heading directly toward Rushima.

One of Ikwaskwan's dreadnoughts engulfed a Khieevi ship in such a holocaust

that there were only a few units left to peel off the mother ship, like dry seeds

falling out of a pod. But they made no attempt to correct their downward direction.

"Dead!"

stroy

them all?"

"We'll give it a mighty big try, Acorna acushia," Gill said. "What's the state of

our weapon supply, Cal?"

"We'd do better to try launching singly, bringing down a small ship with each

missile, than any more broadsides," Cal said.. "I think ..." Acorna added her opinion, "... that we ought to go for the mother

ships. I know they're now a much smaller target, but if we kill all of them, the

Khieevi will be forced to land on Rushima, and they'll be sitting targets."

"Good thinking, Acorna," Gill said, giving her a grin over his shoulder as he

maneuvered the AcaSeckl to bracket one of the now-spindly-looking mother

ships in his launch sights.

They were so oddly shaped they didn't even appear to be dangerous, though

the ovoid upper structure was clearly armed, to judge by the laser beams and

a bad

hit and swerved out of range, while its fighter ships returned to defend it.

"That's two of the nine gone," crowed Rafik, waving his fists about.

"No, three," Gill corrected him, pointing to one that was no longer firing.

"Yes, but how many dozens of the smaller ones have gotten completely away?

" Acorna asked.

"Lets hurry a few to their deaths," Gill said, and altered course once more,

bearing down on a covey of them.

"We're down to laser fire," Cal said.

"Misbegotten son of a syphilitic camel driver," Rafik said, and swore on.

"If

you'd listened to Pal in the first place, we'd've been able to go for one of the

mother ships instead of having to go after the small fry."

"Let's fight them," Gill said, "not each other. Ah, got one."

Which he did, but the small ships seem to explode into even smaller divisions.

"How long can they keep separating?" Gill complained in exasperation.

of the pinnaces. "We better get as many survivors as we can."

The brilliantly colored Linyaari ship and the Uhura had had much the same idea

and collected the pods, which attached themselves to their rescuers' hulls with tractor beams. But that meant the loss of any high-speed maneuvering

capabilities for the rescuers.

"Let's get this lot back to the Haven," Gill said, pointing to the bulk of the Starfarer ship just visible at the edge of Rushima's primary moon. The small

one that rushed around in orbit beyond the bigger one wouldn't have hidden a

Khieevi parasite.

By the time the AcaSeckl, the Uhuru, and the Linyaari had brought the pods

safely back to the Haven, Captain Andreziana had received orders from Ikwaskwan to come out of hiding and get the last three ovoid mother ships.

The other six had been accounted for and were destroyed.

"All Khieevi are now on the planet, or about to land. We can move in now -with

art of

invective listening to another.

"But there are now so many of them down there," Acorna said.

"Thousands." Ikwaskwan grinned. "It could be expensive . . . lucky our clients

are rich."

The Haven, with them on the hangar deck, moved out from behind the moon

and, one by one, turned her big lasers on the ovoid stems that were attempting

to find refuge behind the moon from the dreadnoughts and battle cruisers

chasing them.

Amid the cheers as the last mother ship blew up, Markel said with great satisfaction and in anticipation of what was to come next-

"Well, it's up to Dr. Hoa now, isn't it?"

He became the center of everyone's attention.

"Well, isn't it?" he asked in a slightly speculative tone.

"Look," Ed Minkus said patiently for perhaps the twentieth time, "we aren't the

said. "Sure you are. That's why you was wreckin' my cabin. You all seen the damage they done, didn't you, fellers?". There was a general murmur of agreement, broken only by one dissenting voice that said he personally had seen One-One do worse than that to the bar at Grip's Crossing more than once.

One-One frowned the dissenter down. "Caught 'em in the act, din't I? And you ain't never seen me toss me own good stock of furs in the mud, have you, Quashie?"

Over the hours while Des and Ed had been held prisoner, there had been a steady trickle of other settlers who'd remained behind, coming in twos and threes in response to a message put out by One-One on some incredibly primitive homemade broadcasting device that seemed to operate on quartz

get

there, and bring their weapons.

The motley crowd that now filled the cabin inspired Ed with no very sanguine

hopes as to his and Des's future. There were too many of them, and the cabin's

tiny windows let in too little light, for him to see them all clearly, but he was

not as glad of that. The faint light from the windows showed lean, weary-looking

men and a few women, dressed in limp rags or stiff, awkwardly tanned leather. Their skin and clothes were crusted with engrained grime, their eyes

glittered with the dangerous light of people who'd been pushed too far and

isolated too long, and, collectively, they stank of old sweat and stale liquor.

And the weapons they had collected inspired him with no more confidence.

There were a few fairly up-to-date laser pulsers and blasters, but more common

threat

of an invasion by overwhelming forces. Several more appropriate terms came

to his mind, including, "nuts," "wackos," and "psychotic bastards." But he was

careful, considering his company, to keep those opinions strictly private. One

of the first arrivals had been carrying a long rope with which he bound Des and

Ed together, seated back-to-back on the floor. He'd cut off the unused length of

rope and coiled it again. Whenever the settlers discussed what to do with their

prisoners, this man's lean, grimy fingers began stroking the coil of rope, and

Ed watched it with horrified fascination.

From One-One's broadcast and subsequent conversations, Ed and Des had

learned how the land and huts they'd overflowed had come to be in such poor

deep

kimchee if they didn't untie him and Des and let them take them off-planet.

Ed kept trying to convince them of that, though with less and less hope of

doing it as the hours wore on. The changing quality of the dim light warned him

that much precious time had already passed . . . how much he didn't know;

One-One had relieved him and Des of their chronometers and other equipment

as soon as someone showed up to hold the blaster on them -while he patted

them down for weapons.

Des was unable to join in the argument for their lives, having exploded in such

bursts of fury and blasphemy when first tied up that One-One had told the man

with the rope to gag him. All Des could do now was rock back and forth and

tell

you the same thing."

One-One cackled. "Right, sonny, you could bring some more of your
thieving

buddies down on us, couldn't you! Don't waste your breath; I sent
somebody

to shut down the corn units hours ago. And there's three guys guardin'
the

ship, so don't get no ideas about that bein'your ticket home, neither!
Reckon

we c'n use it to ambush yer buddies when they do show up."

"Hours... . What time is it?" Ed demanded. "For God's sake, just tell me
how

long we've been here already?"

One-One squinted at Des's shiny chronometer, which hung awkwardly
off his

skinny wrist.

"Cain't read these little bitty numbers so good as I used to, sonny. What
you

reckon it says, Quashie?"

ingly

tortuous, ticklish path. He tasted the salt on his dry lips.

"Is that number in a little blue square at the bottom right hand of the chronometer face?"

"Was blue," Quashie said. "Now it's red."

Ed sagged against the ropes that held him more or less upright and closed his

eyes.. "I'm tired of hearing all your arguing," One-One told him. "You shut your trap

now, or we'll shut it for you like we done the other 'un."

"It's okay," Ed said tiredly. "There's no hurry now. We're all dead, we just don't

know it yet."

The chronometer had been set to display the time left before Admiral Ikwaskwan's deadline for clearing the planet. The changeover from blue to red

meant the time had elapsed and the

chronometer was now measuring the time since the deadline had passed.

Ed didn't know what Ikwaskwan expected to happen now, but he was fairly

As if to corroborate his statement, a distant blast rumbled through the sky.

Several of the Rushimese startled nervously;
two of them blocked the tiny window, trying to peer out of it.

"More of their dirty tricks," one of them said. "Thunderstorm, I reckon.

That

could of been a lightning strike on Grip's Crossing. Any more rain, and that

cliff's gonna come down on this-here cabin, One-One."

"Held up all right so far, din't it?" One-One retorted, but his eyes slid un-
easily

upward.

"Naah, that ain't lightning," the man called Quashie argued. "More like
the dam

upcreek of Grip's busting. I heerd the big one down to the reservoir go.

Sounded just like that there."

Three more booms and a series of sharp cracks canceled the argument.

The

last noise was so close to the cabin that Ed shut his eyes and tried to
contract

his body, as if that would protect him from aerial attack.

spair

before, he knew the difference now. There'd been no reasonable hope
that

these maniacs would untie him and Des and give them a chance to
reach the shuttle . . . but as long as it existed, the hope of escape had been
there, the

chance in a million that they would somehow be able to get out of this
crazy

place and back to the narrow berth on a Red Bracelet ship which now,
in

retrospect, seemed a haven of comfort and safety.

So deep was his despair, he paid no attention to the lowvoiced conver-
sation

going on between One-One, Quashie, and one or two other settlers who
seemed to be leaders of the group. Their words were almost drowned
out

anyway by the woman Wmjy's hopeless sobbing and by the blasts and
roars of

distant battle . . . not all of them all that distant, either!

Ed leaned against the cabin wall, eyes closed in despair, and ignored
his

these here invaders wanted to blow up your shuttle, them and you might not be

on the same side after all. And they's ship looks different from yours, too.

Different from anything I ever seen before, truth."

"Christ on a crutch!" somebody yelled. "They Lf aliens! Some kinder giant bugs!"

Des grunted and thumped from side to side, shaking Ed with each excited

movement. "Mmmp? Mmmb nnn mmmph!" he grunted emphatically.

"Course, you're still damned looters, and we'll probably still hang you after we

done fought off these here fellas, but if'n you'11 give your parole while the fight

lasts, well . . . reckon we c'n use ever able-bodied person we got here."

Ed couldn't swear loyalty fast enough.

"Your buddy, too?" One-One regarded Des critically.

"Mmmm-mmmp," Des told him.

"Good enough . . . you ain't got nowhere to run to, anyways. Might wanta keep

willya? "

He handed a blaster to Des and pointed out that he still had the other blaster,

and that there'd be someone watching their backs, in case they had any cute ideas. Des shook off the ropes and gag like feathers and charged for the back

end of the cabin as if he'd been doing sitting-up exercises instead of sitting

tied up in a corner for hours. Ed moved more slowly, feeling the pins and

needles of returning circulation in his extremities and the cramping sensation

of muscles protesting their long confinement.

"Pick it up, Ed me boy!" Des shouted. Somebody handed him a wicked-looking

iron pole with a row of sharp points roughly welded to its far end.

"A lot of good that does," Ed protested. "Where's our other blaster?"

One-One grinned and shook his head. 'Ain't got enough distance weapons to

waste two on one winder, me boy. Your buddy'll try an' hold 'em off. Any of

uncivilized as the worst of the settlers in the cabin.

"Luck of the Smirnoffs, Ed old buddy!" he greeted Ed.

"Luck?" Automatically, Ed took position beside Des, his iron pole at an angle

where he could jab it out the window at anything approaching. "Our ship's

been destroyed, we're trapped on this planet between crazy settlers and invading space bugs, Ikwaskwan's gonna pound the bugs and doesn't care

what he does to us in the process, and you say we're lucky?"

"If the bugs hadn't moved in," Des said cheerfully, "these maniacs would've

likely hung us. And as for the ship, there's a simple solution now, isn't there?

We'll just have to take theirs!"

"Simple." Ed almost choked.

"No alternative, buddy. Oh-oh, here comes a bug. Let's see if their armor holds

up to a ..." Des squeezed off a shot. A cloud of steam went up from the advancing alien's hard brown carapace, and one of its many legs disappeared,

many enhancements that was considered illegal and immoral in the civilized world. This particular one was supposed to allow an ordinary hand blaster to spread its stun range over half a klick, or alternatively to narrow and concentrate its power in one needle-sharp pulse that would vaporize the object it hit.

"Shit!" Des squeezed off half a dozen more shots as the alien advanced, coolly picking off the jointed legs along one side of its flat body until they were all gone. The alien toppled to one side and lay wriggling its other legs helplessly.

"Give me the pole." Des squeezed his bulk through the open window with a few rips, scratches, and curses, dropped with a thump onto the muddy ground, and charged without stopping to catch his breath. The hooked pole went into a bulbous, gleaming structure on the alien's head and sank deep within,

black

droplets that decorated his face. "We'll lure the bugs into the house, then fire

off a couple of blaster shots and bring that cliff down on 'em . . . it's not all that

stable now, didn't you notice that when we were coming down the track?"

Ed certainly had. And though he had little or no faith in Smirnoff's plan, he

couldn't think of anything better-so he begged, bullied, or persuaded the remaining settlers to crawl through the back window and follow Des along the

narrow track he had temporarily cleared.

For one dark moment he wondered exactly how Des planned to "lure" the

Khieevi into the cabin and who was going to play "bait," but One-One Otimie

solved that question once he understood the plan. From an overlooked cupboard above the food stores he produced battered musicubes and a solar-powered player.

fine; its people I wanted to get away from."

As they scrambled through the back window, the last two humans to clear the

cabin, the seductive strains of Susannah's aria, "Deh vieni, non tadar," floated

through the air. Ed only hoped the song would be as enticing to the Khieevi as

it had been meant to sound in the opera.

He was almost disgusted at how well Des's crude plan worked. The cockroachlike Khieevi approached the cabin, cautiously at first, then more

openly as no one fired on them. They made sharp crackling noises among

themselves as they drew closer, firing occasional bolts into the cabin; Ed could

almost have sworn the two in the lead were laughing and rubbing their forelegs together in anticipation of a jolly time. He remembered the vids Ikwaskwan had

copied from the Linyaari and used as training films, and felt sick all over at the

until all

but one of the advancing aliens was out of sight inside the cabin. Then he and

One-One fired blasters at the designated weak spots, dissolving a long line of

muddy earth and stone into a bubbling liquid that let the front face of the cliff

slide downward with a long, final sigh. Slabs of stone tilted slowly forward and

smashed the cabin roof flat; one of them fell half across the one Khieev who

remained outside, turning his body into a mangled mess that leaked black fluid

and curls of steam. The stone slabs were followed by a slow but inexorable tide

of wet dirt and the molten lava created by the blasters, which buried the cabin

and its occupants under a newly created hill.

"Come on," Des hissed before the wave of mud and lava had settled, "gotta

take their ship before they catch on to what just happened!"

you probably would. Give me that pole, you don't know what to do -with it."

And he plunged in among the Khieevi with a battle yell of pure, savage joy,

stabbing the pole down with unerring aim into the enemies' soft spots.

Someone thrust a cleaver into Ed's hand, and the wave of yelling settlers

carried him on until he found himself in the thick of the fight, chopping off legs

with his cleaver, dodging the energy bolts, frantically waving his free arm to

defend himself from the gouts of black acid the aliens spat . . . and then, before

he knew it, they were through and on the farside of the aliens, and Des was

shouting at them to follow him into the ship itself. Ed stepped over blobs of

black guck, already crusting over, and kicked a dying Khieev off the ladder with

one booted foot.

occupied. He was squatting on the low, narrow bench that the Khieevi must have used instead of chairs.

After a moment's uncomfortable experimentation, Ed decided that Smirnoff had found the only possible adaptation of the human anatomy to these furnishings.

Wide metal columns behind them, their outer walls curved in a concave form

that must have been designed to fit a Khieev carapace, promised support and protection during takeoff, and the straps that dangled from the columns could,

with some ingenuity, be arranged to hold a human body. Ed hoped the settlers

had made their own accommodations to the Khieev interior; Des was already

punching buttons with mad abandon in search of the one that would fire up the

ship's engines.

"You think you can fly one of these things?" he asked doubtfully.

you can

find a portable corn system among all that crud the settlers dragged on,

Ed. It

might be polite to announce we're on our way!"

Haven, Unified Federation Date334.05.26

With the Khieevi mother ships disabled and their pods pinned down on

Rushima by the orbiting ships of the Red Bracelets, there was time to discuss

Markel's suggestion of using weathermodification technology to destroy the

Khieevi rather than the expensive, and destructive, kinetic energy weapons

avored by Ikwaskwan.

"I had intended this system for peace, not war," said Ngaen Xong Hoa sadly.

"But it seems that technology of this sort must be used always for destruction-if

not by the warring parties of my homeland, then by whoever controls it."

He

gave Markel a long, steady look. "I trusted your father's honor. He died rather

scientific knowledge to kill... those who would otherwise ... exterminate us. So we would be using it in self-defense, which is not the same thing as using it for making war on the helpless... . You know what the Linyaari have told us about these invaders. If they had come in peace, we would have greeted them in peace . . . but they come to destroy us. And, yes, I will use any means at my disposal to defend my people and myself. I believe Illart would have done the same thing."

"We do not know they have come to make war," Hoa said. "Actions speak louder than words," Rafik pointed out. "Ah. But words have not spoken yet."

Hoa clasped his hands together in front of him. "Before I give consent to this further misuse of my research, I must insist that we make every effort to communicate with our alien visitors."

Fallona did! By analyzing the programs Nueva's people implemented we could deduce those things that were left out of the research notes." He paused, and all his aggression seemed to dissipate suddenly. He swallowed again. "But... I believe . . . Illart would also have said we must first attempt peaceful negotiation."

"Ridiculous!" Andreziana was on her feet. "Market, as captain of the Haven, I could order you to implement the technology now.

"But you will not," said Pal Kendoro sharply. Pal was so quiet that all were startled at this interruption and watched as he came forward to grip Andreziana's arms at the elbows, forcing her to look up at him. "Ziana, don't you know better than to give orders that Market will feel honor-bound to disobey? You and the other kids did a grand job of recapturing the Haven.

You're a bunch of infant experts at everything from astrogation to life-support

more

than I was afraid to space the murderers who killed my mother and father!"

"And you're still feeling bad about that, aren't you?" Pal said in a low, gentle

voice. "They were murderers, and you had no other option, but you see their

faces in your nightmares . . . and so to prove you made the right choice then,

you have to keep choosing the toughest path, "whether or not it's necessary."

Tears sparkled in Andreziana's eyes, and she stared up at him wordlessly.

"You don't have to do that now, 'Ziana," Pal said. "This responsibility belongs

to all of us; you don't have to carry it alone. Whatever we do, we'll all discuss it,

and we'll all share in the decision. You and the other kids did a fine job when

you were left on your own, but the point is, that you're no longer alone anymore. We're in this battle, fighting right beside you."

captain

of the Haven . . . but this can't be just the captain's decision. This decision

belongs to all of humanity ... all who are here to speak, at least . . . and to the

Linyaari, too," she said. "Shouldn't they be here? And the Red Bracelets - ". "Let's not overdo it," Johnny murmured. "I think we know how the Red Bracelets would vote. Besides, they're needed where they are ... in low geosynchronous orbit, making sure the Khieevi don't go anywhere."

"And we cannot afford to keep them there indefinitely," Gill pointed out. After more discussion, it was agreed that the Haven and the AcaSeckl would

attempt for a period of two Standard hours to establish some communication

with the Khieevi on Rushima, using the universal codes that had long been

agreed on for first contact with any sapient alien race, should one ever be

found. Therefore, mathematical formulae and physical constants were broadcast in steady sequence, using different base systems and with regular

planet-and

heading straight for us. Corns, tell Ikwaskwan not to shoot it down!"

"Trojan horse," Gill suggested, while Acorna efficiently raised Ikwaskwan's

flagship and requested the lone vessel be allowed to exit Rushima unhindered.

"He's not heading straight for anywhere," Calum exclaimed. "Look at that-yawing

all over the place . . . don't these people know how to stabilize their ships?"

"They did just fine in the battle," Gill pointed out. "Maybe this one is damaged."

His fingers twitched, indicating his complete willingness to do more damage.

"Acorna, are you open on all frequencies?"

"Of course, Calum," Acorna said. "Intruder is not transmitting."

"If they don't correct their course and identify themselves somehow in the next

sixty seconds," Calum said tensely, "rescind the hold-fire request and give

Ikwaskwan permission to destroy them. They're now, more or less, on a

"Don't fire! Don't fire!" he squawked first, and then, regaining a little control,

"All Red Bracelet ships and allies: this is Ed Minkus for the ship ... uh ... what is

it called, Des?". A rumbling growl seemed to be telling the speaker not to waste time on

nonessentials. "Call it Jurden, it smells like one!"

"Right! Uh . . . this is the ship Jurden, a prize of war captured from the Khieevi,

requesting permission to rejoin . . . and, uh, could somebody tow us in with a

tractor beam? We're having a little trouble figuring out the controls on this

thing."

"Jurden, this is the Haven," came a crisp young voice on the frequency Ed had

found. "We have a fix on you now. Can you verify this is not a Khieevi trap?"

"Dammit, we just got away from the Khieevi . . . wait a minute!" There were

so if you

think us is bugs, you just go right ahead and blow us out of the sky, you hear?

Rather that than goin' back, right, folks?"

"Jurden, prepare to be towed," Andreziana's voice responded.

The exchange was shut off as Haven's tractor beam attached itself to the

Khieevi ship. Gill and Calum leaned back, laughing weakly, while the others

exchanged puzzled glances.

"What's so funny?" Acorna finally asked.

"Smirnoff. The bastard can't be all bad," Gill said. "He must have some Celtic

ancestors somewhere."

"I fail to see that as a guarantee of respectability-look at you two giggling

idiots!" Rafik said, crisply critical.

"Jurden," Calum calmed himself long enough to explain, "is an old Scots word

for a chamber pot. So I guess we know Smirnoff's opinion of the Khieevi!"

The weather-intervention process fascinated Calum, who was watching every detail of Hoa's work. There was plenty of time for all interested observers to assemble because Hoa insisted that the Red Bracelet ships must clear out of their low orbit. "Ionospheric intervention of this magnitude can affect orbiting ships' communications and electrical systems," Hoa explained. "Haven must maintain a certain distance in order to fire laser beams, but all others should retreat as far as possible."

While the Kilumbembese ships were moving to a safe distance, Hoa studied real-time displays of Rushima's atmosphere and terrain and hummed softly to himself.

"Mmm, mmm, good unstable cloud masses here, yes, much instability in the troposphere, electrical potential building up ... a little nudge here. . . . We begin

back

the Red Bracelets may have been necessary for their safety, but it's got to look

to the Khieevi like we're retreating. They'll see if they can escape. They know

they're trapped on the surface."

Hoa's fingers played over the console pad before him, and he snapped requests to Market for confirmation of the numbers he produced.

"Hurry!" Andreziana said from her own seat. "I'm seeing hot spots, probably

ships igniting their engines. ..."

"Now," Hoa said, and the screen in front of Andreziana went wild with a display

of crackling lights.

"What was that?" she gasped.

"Series of short pulses cause electron migration, propagation, collisions, avalanche ionization," Hoa said. "Conduction path will be formed wherever

possible. Lasers would provide more focused strikes, but in absence of information about location of ships, general ionization is best bet."

the other one transmuted into a searing burst of light that left only fragments.

The third ship darted through a space just recently vacated by the Red Bracelet

fleet and escaped Rushima, but not to attack, only to flee. One of Ik-waskwan's

warships swung out of line and followed.

"How did you make that second one explode?" Calum demanded, awed.

Dr. Hoa shrugged slightly. "Impossible to predict what goes first when electrical systems are destroyed. Steering, power . . . in this one, I think fuel

controls. It is not at all an accurate action," he said with disapproval. "Is not science; science deals with predictable results. Now you will see! Markel, bring

up titanium-sapphire lasers, please."

"Aren't -we too far away for laser warfare?" Calum asked. "The beam will

spread until it's so weak ..."

"Sufficiently intense light pulses are trapped in three dimensions," Hoa replied

"was to use such tunnels to draw lightning away from structures, which needed protection. Instead ..." He twiddled with controls and adjusted the

focus of the laser with infinite precision. "Instead," he repeated, as lightning

arced through Rushima's atmosphere, "I now direct it at structures. ..."

"Which need destroying," Calum reminded him gently.

Ikwaskwan's com technician reported that the Khieevi ship had escaped;

having so little mass, it had been able to reach lightspeed long before the

heavier battleship, and they had been unable to catch it within the limits Ikwaskwan had set for his fleet's range.

"Quite right, too," Calum agreed. "They'd do themselves and us no good by

following one Khieevi ship until their fuel was exhausted. Still, I'd like to know

where they come from. ..."

"Several ships have been captured," Market reminded him, "and we have the

Acorna's

home world probably lay. That world was long since laid waste by the Khieevi,

and the Linyaari envoys could provide them with the location of the new home,

narhii-Vhiliinyar; but there still might be a use for his computational and astroplotting program, to help locate the home base of the Khieevi. That possibility cheered him immeasurably, and while Dr. Hoa pounded Rushima

with storms and floods to destroy any remaining Khieevi, he began jotting

notes for an amended version of the program.

When Dr. Hoa patently began to tire Calum and Markel both vied to take over

from him. Calum was chosen but, when Dr. Hoa saw Markel's sullen expression, he put his hand under the boy's chin and forced him to meet his

gaze.

"There will be time for you, too. Watch and be ready to take your turn. You are

onto

the bridge.

"Your ready room, my dear, your ready room," Dr. Hoa said, smiling as

he

patted her arm but quite willing to let her escort him. That accomplished,

Andreziana returned to her command chair with just the slightest of smirks at

having been more effective than Johnny Greene. And Pal moved just that

much closer to her chair, subtly informing the older man that his efforts were

redundant.

Johnny turned away, with a broad grin that Acorna and Rafik noticed:

Acorna

with considerably more sympathy and relief than Rafik.

That would certainly solve a problem for her. The -way Pal had all but challenged Thariinye disturbed her even if she did see it as only the usual

posturing of males for a desired female. The incident had also taken away from

"Join us, my sister-child," and then added as Acorna switched her direction,

(You cannot know how rewarding it is to see the Khieevi overwhelmed as they

have overwhelmed us for centuries. To know that we, we four, have been

witness to their rout.)

(I don't feel much like cheering, I'm afraid) Acorna said truthfully.

Neeva pressed her horn against Acorna's. The scene of Acorna's dream reappeared. (This is what they destroyed for you. But it is good to see that you

are more linyani than khievn in the matter of dealing death. This is indeed a

novel way of defeating one's enemy.)

(IF you can get them to land on a planet) Acorna said.

Neeva nuzzled Acorna. (You are heartsick, my sister-child, and it is because we

are not what you thought we should be. Is that not correct?)

Acorna gasped. She hadn't realized just how deeply Neeva could delve. (I mean

no offense, truly. It's just that you . . .)

lieve your

anxieties and confusions, dear 'Khornya.)

Acorna was mind-weary enough to wish surcease and entered the
Linyaari

vessel. Thariinye was not in evidence.

(You must have just passed him on the way to the Haven's bridge,)

Neeva said.

(He wishes to know more about this most unusual and spectacular
method of

dealing with the Khieevi.)

(Huh,) Khaan said 'with a nasal snort of disagreement, (he enjoys see-
ing the

ships blown up and was counting them. "That is for the Selinaaryi." "The
next

kill will be for the Juveniiryi.")

(Who?) asked Acorna, confused, though she did realize that these were
family

names.

(Ancestors and friends who were lost to the Khieevi over the centuries,)

Khaari

answered.

than

not, Acorna winced at the pain as Neeva touched places which Acorna hadn't

even known were sore.

(When we bring you home) and there was a subtle triumph in Neeva's use of

the word, (we shall introduce you to the ways whereby we dissipate tension

and fatigue. This ship was not large enough to contain the unit, which is why

we do not appear at our best to you. We, too, have suffered from the stress of

reaching your quadrant of space soon enough to give you warning.)

(We are not always as contentious as we have been these past few weeks.)

Melireenya said sorrowfully. Then her silvery eyes brightened. (What glad

tidings we bring, along with one we thought lost and gone to us.)

(Do I have many relations?) Acorna asked, though she already knew that she

had been the only youngling born to her parents.

(Chance for what?) The inferences were beyond Acorna, though she sensed them in the subtle nuances of the interchange.

(Why, to introduce you to a suitable mate, of course) Neeva said, as if that should have been obvious. (You are well old enough to need a mate. In fact, I marvel that you have been able to contain yourself.)

(She has had no one to stimulate that part of her nature yet) Melireenya said.

(Or have you experienced . . . well, unusual sensations at all?) She turned to the other two females. (It can happen, you know, for someone isolated as she has been.)

(I ... well)-Acorna bowed her head in confusion-(there have been moments . . .)

(Not for much longer, sister-child,) Neeva assured her, and continued to massage her neck.

(It will have to be for a while longer,) Acorna said regretfully.

(WHY?) all three Linyaari demanded, shocked.

cause

even Melireenya was convulsed in Linyaarish laughter.

(Wait and see, 'Khornya. Wait and see.) Then the other two made excuses of

tasks to be done and Neeva altered the rhythm of her gentle kneading, and,

before Acorna could help herself, she was dozing off.

It was dawn on the Haven before anyone came looking for her. Calum had

finally deferred to Markel and gone back to the Aca<)eck, falling asleep the

moment he lay down. He never thought that Acorna would be anywhere but in

her own quarters. So, when Gill and Rafik came looking for her, and him, to

announce the arrival of Uncle Hafiz, with his voluptuous and veil-swathed

Karina, they were startled and dismayed to find her missing.

"She is here, close by," Karina said through her veil. It wasn't a very thick

fact. And oh, they're all there. And fast asleep."

"Uncle," Rank said in an undertone, "since when have you followed the outmoded and barbarous custom of veiling your women?" Only a few years

earlier Hafiz had been shocked and dismayed to find Rafik apparently converted to the Neo-Hadithians and reverting to the strictures practiced by

those who denied the Second and Third Prophets, keeping women veiled and

refusing spirituous liquors. He had professed great relief to discover that Rank's apparent conversion to a fundamentalist sect had been only a clever

business trick-even if he had been its victim.

"Since I acquired this pearl without price, my lovely Karina," Hafiz replied in the

same discreet undertone.

"Acquired? Uncle, the last time I looked, slavery was forbidden by the laws of

all known states and federations. Even on Laboue, I do not think you can

legally own a concubine!"

charlatan?"

"Dear boy," his uncle said in a warning tone that held more than a hint of steel,

"you are speaking of your new aunt. It is a shame to all discerning men that

such a flower of beauty should have been forced to work for a living instead of

reclining upon silken cushions and being fed on marzipan and cream cakes.

Her previous lifestyle," he said grandiloquently, "is unimportant to me; the

cherished gazelle of Hafiz Harakamian need never lift a finger again."

Rafik reflected that if his uncle really intended to feed his new acquisition upon

marzipan and cream cakes, she might well be incapable of lifting a finger in a

few years. Even now, "gazelle" was hardly the word that came to mind when

describing her.

"Is she not voluptuously beautiful beyond your wildest dreams?" his uncle

"Karina, my little lily," Hafiz said to his new wife, "pray do not exhaust yourself

in using your powers to contact the Linyaari. They will awaken soon enough of their own accord, and I would not see your lovely face lined with fatigue. Sit

here and rest yourself, and I will see to it that some light refreshment is brought to restore your psychic energies."

Karina smiled up into his face with a look of such radiant love and trust that

Rank's last objections to the marriage melted like snow on Laboue, and he was

devoutly thankful that the words "gold digger" had not passed his lips. No one

looking at the pair could doubt that they were truly infatuated with one another.

Still, when he remembered his uncle's cynical strictures on the subject of

women and marriage, he could not but be amused to see Hafiz, of all people,

swept away on a tide of sugary-sweet romance.

beloved aunt. . . and if you had ever heard the Old Earth poets he used to quote

on women and marriage! He used to compare marrying to buying a horse."

And he recited four lines of Hafiz's favorite poet's from memory:

If it be pleasant to look at, <f tailed In the packed ^erai, Doe<f not the young

man try ltd temper anS pace ere he bay7 If She be pleasant to look on, what

^oe^ the young man .say7 'Lol She if pleasant to look on. Give her to me tooayl

"And if she produces a son to cut you out of your inheritance?" "Is it not written in the Book of the Third Prophet, 'Count not the light from a distant star

among your assets, for that star may have been long dead by the time its light

reaches thine eyes'? I have not been such a fool as to count on stepping into

the shoes of a healthy man with many years to live, Calum. While trading for

Uncle Hafiz I have built up quite a respectable line of credit on my own

"Well . . . the interruption to your trade . . . and, ah, paying the . . ." Rafik stammered. He had been so flabbergasted by the introduction of Karma as his

uncle's wife that he had not even noticed Admiral Ikwaskwan's arrival, and now

he had to hastily suppress the comments that had risen to his lips about rapacious mercenaries.

Hafiz gave the broad, closed-lip smile that many competitors had learned to

dread. It usually meant he had just swallowed their pet canary.

"I confess there were some minor difficulties initially," he said pleasantly.

"In

fact, Delszaki Li and I were forced to combine our businesses in order to command enough liquid credits for the initial great expenses. But -with the

advantage of House Li's trading contacts and capital added to my own superior communications system, I am happy to say that House Harakami-anLi now

commands an even greater share of the galactic market than before . . . and

also be resolved quite profitably."

"House Harakamian-Li?" Calum repeated, stunned.

"What's the matter -with that?" Gill demanded. "Sounds like a good idea to

me." Calum groaned. "Gill, you have no business sense whatever. With those

two . . . rapacious old pirates . . . working together . . . and about to reap obscene profits off their contacts with the first two space-faring alien races

we've ever encountered ... well, let's just say they make the Khieevi look like a

minor threat to civilization!"

Admiral Ikwaskwan cleared his throat. "As to the matter of profits," he reminded them, "a half share in the Khieevi captures belongs to the Red Bracelets."

"One-third," Hafiz said quickly.

Ikwaskwan hooked his thumbs in his belt and rocked back and forth slightly on

the balls of his feet. "The agreement was that all parties to the contract should

share equally in the spoils of war. Since Harakamian and Li are now one

Nadhari. "But..."

"E'kosi Tahka'yaw," Nadhari said, sounding relaxed, as if she were saying a

private mantra to the ceiling. "M'on Na'ntaw. And, of course, Skomitin.

You

haven't forgotten Skomitin, have you, Ikki?"

"Skomitin's dead," Ikwaskwan said quickly.

Nadhari gave him a sweet smile. "But I'm not . . . am I, Ikki? " Her light rocking

movement mirrored Ikwaskwan's own, but she seemed considerably more

relaxed; one hand was on the back of her head, the other in a pocket of her

dark, close-fitting coveralls. Calum remembered that Nadhari was said to keep

poison darts in those tight black braids that coiled around her head.

Ikwaskwan moistened his lips. "You seem in the best of health ... as I am. I

trust we all expect to stay that way! Onethird, then," he said more loudly, turning back to Hafiz, "as was agreed in the original contract. God forbid

I

quired

quite a lot more haggling, as neither Ikwaskwan nor Hafiz wished to allow the

other party to conduct a detailed survey of exactly what had been captured

before the spoils were divided. By the time they had agreed on how to share

out the loot, another complication had arisen. Des Smirnoff and Ed Minkus,

rested and recovered from their ordeal on Rushima, put in their own claim for

credit to the salvaged pod known as the Jurden.

Ikwaskwan listened to their claim without speaking, while his dark eyes slowly

looked over the two very junior Red Bracelets from head to foot and back

again. "What recruiting officer took these in?" he demanded eventually.

"If I

had known any of my officers thought us so desperate for warm bodies

..."

"Hey," Des interrupted, "you're looking at experienced men. Trained with

have heard all I need of these. It's not the looting I object to, you understand,"

he explained to Hafiz, "it's the incompetence. My Red Bracelets would be the

laughingstock of the galaxy were it known that I had taken in such gutter-sweepings

as these. I dare not even dismiss them." He sighed. "I cannot afford to let them loose with the claim that they were once, however briefly, officers of

my force. There is only one solution." A hand twitching toward the blaster on

his hip made it quite clear what he thought that solution was.

"Quite so," Hafiz agreed. "Clearly they must be properly trained up to the

standard of your forces. You do have something corresponding to the regular

army's basic training, do you not?"

Ikwaskwan's lips twitched as he took in the proposition. "On Kilumbemba . . .

we have, indeed. It is, of course, mostly geared to the young and exceedingly

but Des was foolish enough to push his luck. "And the credit for our capture?"

"Ahhh," Ikwaskwan breathed. His head moved like that of a serpent about to

strike. "As it was told to me, the Jurden was helplessly out of control when

Haven took her under tow. By the laws of space salvage, she is Haven's prize, no? Now, you two- to the shuttle, march! You will consider yourselves under

arrest until you can be delivered to the brig aboard one of the battle cruisers."

He lifted his wrist corn and delivered a series of short, sharp instructions in his

native tongue which presumably alerted the shuttle crew to the imminent arrival of two disgraced exofficers.

Once Smirnoff and Minkus had shambled off, Ikwaskwan turned to Nadhari.

"Nadhi. It has been, as you say, a long time. I believe some of our new armaments may be of interest to you."

"I have a duty here," Nadhari said. She sounded almost regretful.

fail to return within ... let us say two hours Standard . . . your shuttle would not be permitted to depart?"

"And you," Ikwaskwan returned, "understand that the security precautions put in place by my predecessor for safeguarding the person of the Admiral have been not only retained but improved? My staff officers would die to avenge any harm to me."

Nadhari shrugged. "With the primitive tactics you employ, Ikki, they will likely die soon enough anyway." But she put one hand on his arm and sauntered off toward the docking bay-where the shuttle rested.

"Well," breathed Calum, staring at the two retreating short, slight figures with their air of coiled menace, "seems like romance is bustin' out all over!"

Rafik glanced at the corner where Pal was holding Andreziana's hands and talking earnestly. "It does indeed."

help with the development of the mining base's third stage, but shook his head

regretfully. "I can't leave these kids to run the Haven all by themselves."

"Looks to me as if they won't be completely on their own." Rafik jerked his

head toward Pal and Andreziana.

"Still . . . it's bad enough they've lost their parents and their home. ..."

Johnny

said, incautiously loud..Markel, never far from Johnnys elbow, overheard this. "What do you mean,

we've lost our home? Haven's in perfectly good shape ... at least she will be,

once we make the repairs which we should be well able to pay for, now that Dr.

Hoa has agreed to stay on with us. We should be able to earn more than

enough to maintain the ship by selling his weather-modification services to ag

planets ... honestly," he added, "not as a protection racket!"

Johnny raised his eyebrows. "You can keep the Haven, yes. But Esperantza..."

of the Haven just to get worn-out fighting atmospheric weather and planetside

gravity? You gotta be kidding!"

"You can take a poll if you like, Johnny," Markel offered, "but I think you'll find

the rest of us feel the same way."

"And between Dr. Hoa and Pal," Rafik pointed out, "they will hardly be without

adult guidance. Trust the kids, Johnny. They know what they want, and they

can be fairly ruthless about getting it."

He withdrew to a reasonably private corner with Gill, Judit, and Calum.

"Looks

like everything is getting settled," he said glumly.

"Yeah," Gill said with equal lack of enthusiasm.

"There's really no excuse ..." Calum began.

". . . to keep Acorna here with us," Judit finished, tears sparkling in her eyes.

"She needs her own people."

"Do not grieve," Karina advised them, a lofty smile on her round face.

"She will

telling Melireenya, quite firmly. "Even if the return to Maganos does delay you .

. .us."

"Then you have decided to leave us," Gill said heavily. "Well, it's the right thing

for you, Acorna acushia, and we all wish you ..." His voice trembled with suppressed sobs, and he could not go on to save his life.. "I must go back with Neeva and Khaari, yes," Acorna said, "to be educated in the Linyaari ways, and to find . . . She blushed. "Well, to complete my education."

(Yes, you're going to have all sorts of educational experiences,) Khaari teased,

and Acorna s blush deepened.

"But after that. . ." Gill, Rafik, and Calum all waited with bated breath.

"We must maintain diplomatic contact with your race," Neeva said, "and as our

only expert in human ways, Acorna will be too valuable an envoy to be wasted

in any other position. Melireenya will be staying with you for the time being, to

aged ship

fled homeward with its traumatized crew. Their speech could not be transcribed in the letters of any human language, consisting as it did of a

series of rapid clicks whose changing rhythms carried their meaning; but the

meaning itself would have been perfectly clear to any of the iniquitous, warlike

race from whom they fled.

"We must warn our masters to have nothing more to do with this race,"

Senior

Click-Off Longlegs announced to clicks of agreement. "They are barbaric and

vicious beyond belief: when attacked, they actually fight back!"

As for whether the human race would remain equally content to have nothing

to do with the Khieevi . . . this they did not consider.

End Acorna's Quest