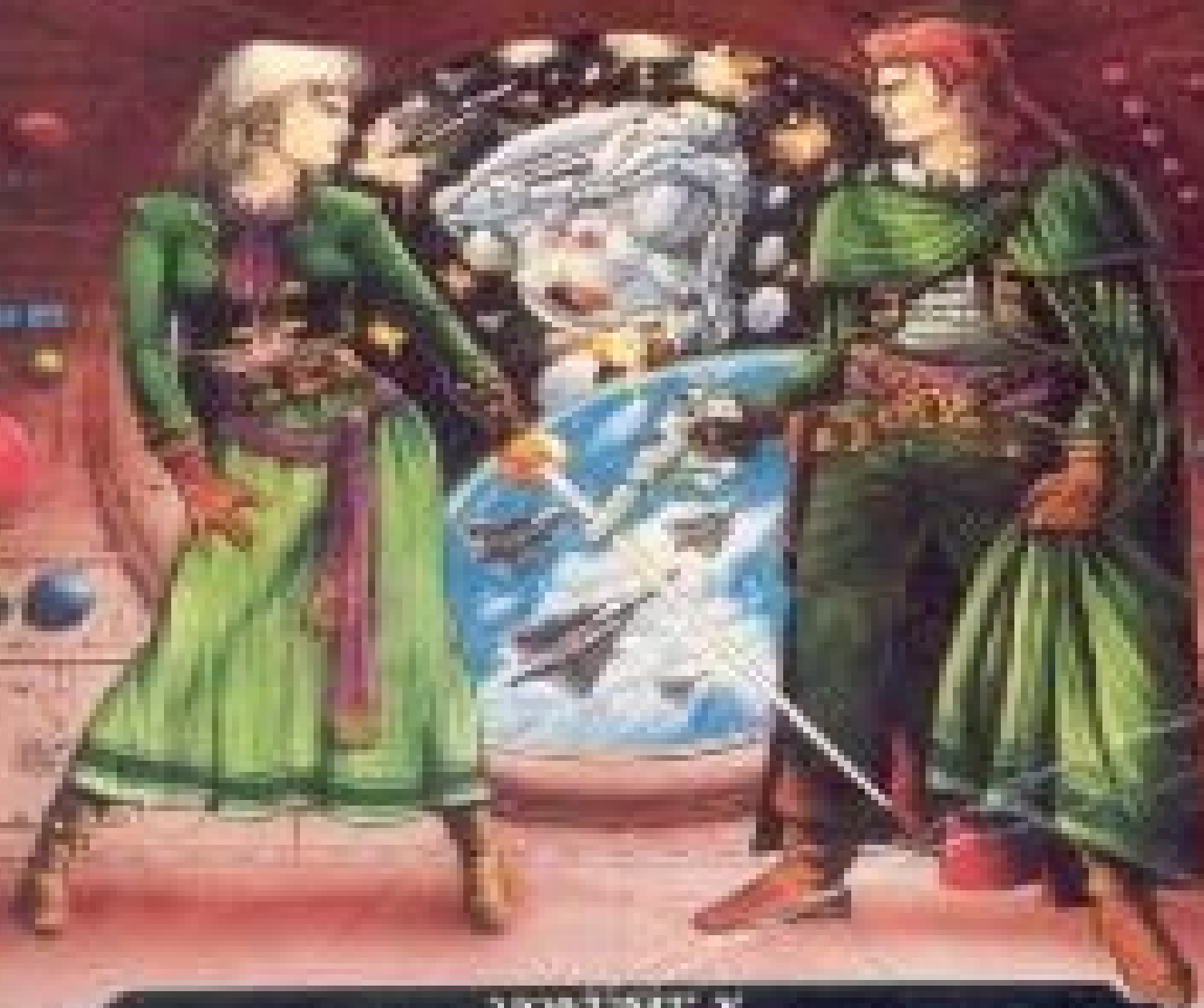


WAD CARDS

EDITED BY GEORGE R. R. MARTIN



VOLUME X

DOUBLE SOLITAIRE

WRITTEN BY MELINDA M. SNODGRASS



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DOUBLE SOLITAIRE

A Wild Cards Mosaic Novel

by Melinda M. Snodgrass

edited by George R. R. Martin

*This book is for Vic Milan, without whose help the Takisians
wouldn't be half so interesting. And for George R. R. Martin,
my editor and friend, without whose help, support, and
encouragement this book wouldn't have been.*

Chapter One

Baby was gone.

All that remained was the retinal imprint of the amber and purple lights as they had elongated, and given a final burst of colored fire as the living spaceship shifted into ghost drive. Aboard that ship were Tachyon's grandson, Blaise, the Morakh killer Durg, and Tachyon's body. *How many million miles from Earth were they by now?* wondered Tach, and then the emotions hit, beating at the confines of her skull like terrified birds slamming against a window: anger, fear, loss, and a grief so deep it manifested as a physical pain. The screens that lined the Turtle's shell gave back images of stars, gem bright against the blue black velvet of the upper atmosphere.

The silence inside the Turtle's shell was like a living presence. Tommy was looking at her. Tachyon couldn't meet his gaze, and now, as the urgency of the chase faded, Tachyon was horribly aware of the close confines within the Turtle shell. Necessity had placed her in Tommy's lap, his arms around her waist, his thighs a warm pressure against her buttocks. She slid onto the floor at his feet, wedged herself against a console as she tried to escape his male heat. Tachyon could feel her heart beating in her stomach, and each pulse brought a burst of nausea.

With a moan she bent over the fecund swell of her belly and murmured, "*No.*"

"Ah, hell, we're practically in fucking *orbit*." Tommy's head swung from screen to screen. All of them gave back the same black picture except the cameras mounted on the base of the shell. They showed the Earth. A long, long way down.

The shell gave a sickening lurch, tipped until it was edge on to the thinning atmosphere, and began to fall. Tommy let out an inarticulate yell of terror. Tachyon's own problems paled to insignificance when measured against the current problem of immediate survival.

The Turtle "flew" by telekinetic power. He pictured himself "pushing" or "pulling" against something. Until a few seconds ago he had been clutching Tachyon's living spaceship with teke fingers. Then *Baby* had made the transition to ghost drive and was now flying in regions that could only be described as the edges and cracks of reality. Tommy had nothing "real" to cling to.

Their speed was increasing with each second, becoming a headlong plummet that would end in death. *No, end far sooner than that*, Tach corrected herself.

Forcing a calm she did not feel, Tachyon said pedantically, "We are in what is commonly called in the spaceman business a catastrophic reentry. You must slow our rate of descent, Tommy, or we shall be cremated, or form a rather large crater somewhere on the Eastern Seaboard."

Tom had his hands over his face, muffling his voice. "I can't. I've got nothing to grab hold of!"

"There's a very large planet directly below us. Push against that." A tiny thread of panic set some of the words to jumping. Tach wiped sweat and froze halfway through the gesture. "Tommy, we are running out of time!"

"I can't."

"The man who outfoxed Bloat's Wall can think of something!" It was becoming difficult to speak as G forces built inside the welded steel walls of the shell.

Her child's mind quested, groped at the edges of her mother's thoughts, trying to understand. Tach blocked Illyana, not wanting the baby to read Tach's growing panic. "Goddamn you! If you kill my baby, I'll never forgive you!"

Tach glanced at the screens. Most had gone dark, burned out by the rising skin temperature. Only two threw back an image. Flames. Tach tore Turtle's hands from his face, gripped his chin, and forced his head up and around.

"Look!"

Turtle gave a moan of terror and dismay and assumed an even more fetal curl in the big upholstered chair.

Bad idea.

Tachyon pulled back her arm, her elbow brushing a metal console. It burned her skin. Plastic was beginning to melt and run, the smell catching like acid at the back of the throat. *No, they wouldn't burn up first, they'd die from asphyxiation -- plastics were highly toxic.* She swung, and her hand connected with Tommy's cheek and ear in a furious slap. He yelped and looked up.

"How do you fly? How do you do any of the things you do? Tell me!"

"I pi-picture things like b-big hands or something."

She gathered the front of his T-shirt in her hands. Sweat squeezed from the material to coat her fingers. "Then do it now. Wings. Big, beautiful wings. Like Peregrine's. Spreading out. Catching the air. Slowing our descent." Tommy's eyes closed. His plump jaw tightened with concentration. "We're gliding now." Tach groped for more metaphors. "A parachute. Gigantic."

The shell gave a jerk that sent her sprawling. Like a spear her elbow drove into a screen, shattering it and

coating her arm with blood.

"Shit, are you okay?" asked Tom.

"You did it, Tommy, you did it!" She laughed into his frightened brown eyes.

"You're bleeding."

"It's nothing."

"So what do you want to do now?"

She looked at the final remaining screen. New York formed crystal-and-steel spines on the northern horizon. Exhaustion hit, slamming into her chest like a falling sandbag.

"Take me home, Tommy. Take me home."

Manhattan. They were approaching at sunset, and the buildings thrust like stone lances at a bloody sky. Landmarks began flashing past. Soon they were over the leprous growth that was Jokertown. It was a wild flight with only a single camera; they were flying virtually blind. Tachyon stared into that single monitor, expressionless and passionless. There was no sense of homecoming, just a bone-sapping weariness. She had lost everything. Any hope of returning to her true home. Any hope of returning her lost soul to its true form.

The clinic came into view. The camera mounted on the belly of the shell gave her a fleeting glimpse of the stone lions that flanked the front steps. Then they were over the roof, and settling gently onto the tar-and-felt surface.

Turtle opened the hatch, and Tach climbed out. The August setting sun was beating down, giving the roof a gelatinous texture. Her tennis shoes stuck to the tar, making

the impossible climb up the curving side of the shell even more impossible.

Tommy stepped out of the shell, forcing a protest from Tachyon.

"Tom, no, you might be seen."

The ace didn't reply, just held her gently around the waist and boosted her up onto the back of the shell. They stared at each other for a long moment, then Tom said simply, "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Failing you."

The scene in the street soon became chaotic. Doctors and nurses poured from the doors of the clinic. Patients craned out windows. Traffic stopped. Turtle had returned to Jokertown. Rumors were flying. He'd brought word that Tachyon hadn't died at all. He'd returned to Takis, and died *there*, and now Turtle had a Takisian princess with him who was Tachyon's widow and mother to his yet-unborn child.

Bradley Finn, the clinic's only joker doctor, pranced in the street. The nervous clatter of his hooves on the sidewalk sounded like a bad flamenco troupe warming up. Troll, chief of security for the hospital, laid a shovel-sized, horny hand on the centaur's withers. The palomino skin shivered, and Finn quieted.

Tachyon, seated on the top of the shell, studied the faces of her people. Suddenly Dr. Cody Haverro strode through the doors of the clinic, and ice talons closed around Tachyon's heart. Long ago, in another lifetime, Tachyon had loved this woman. Now she felt only shame.

"THIS IS DR. TACHYON." Turtle had cranked up the volume on his loudspeaker, and the words reverberated off the brick of the buildings. "HE'S BEEN JUMPED AND HELD CAPTIVE ON THE ROX. THE FACT THAT HE KNEW HOW TO LOCATE ME SHOULD BE PROOF ENOUGH, BUT YOU ALL, NO DOUBT, HAVE PERSONAL EXPERIENCES THAT ONLY YOU AND DR. TACHYON HAVE SHARED. TEST HER, IF YOU MUST, BUT THIS IS TACHYON."

Silence, punctuated only by the normal sounds of the city. In the distance a siren wailed -- drawing closer. For the cops, any gathering in Jokertown was a potential riot. Tachyon realized she had to get the crowd dispersed and order restored before the police arrived. She swung her leg over, and slid off the shell.

Cody reached her first. Tachyon glanced briefly up, but she couldn't meet the level gaze from Cody's single dark eye. She turned her back on the older woman and walked toward Finn and Troll.

"Take me to my office. Tell me what terrible things the jumper did in my place. Then take me home."

Cody was at her elbow. "You haven't got a home. We thought you were dead. We let the apartment go." She shrugged dismissively, but Tachyon could sense the pain she was hiding.

"Softer might be better," suggested Finn softly to Cody as he joined them. His eyes kept drifting to, then jerking away from, the swell of her pregnancy, and Tachyon felt a bone-gnawing need to break something... kill something.

"Better just to get it all out," replied Cody stubbornly.

"Better for whom?" asked Tach.

Cody's one eye stared at her with the desperation of a dying animal. "I couldn't help. They held me for months. Chris thought I was dead. They stuck my kid in a foster home." Tachyon couldn't tell if Cody was looking for comfort or just babbling randomly. "Then Blaise told me he'd killed you. I believed him. I didn't mean to fail you."

In a low, flat voice Tachyon said, "I cannot handle you. Your presence. Your words. Deal with my clinic, deal with your own pain, and leave me alone."

It was said without a glance to the stricken woman. Cody stiffened, wrapped herself in her pride, and walked back into the clinic. Troll and Finn stared at Tachyon.

Troll said quietly, "She's been through some terrible times."

"And she deserved better. Yes, I know. I cannot provide it. I cannot face her... I cannot help her... any more than she helped me."

Tach suddenly turned and bolted back to Turtle. Laid her cheek against the steel plates of the shell.

"I'm frightened."

"IF YOU NEED ME, I'LL BE THERE. YOU KNOW HOW TO FIND ME," Tommy said.

Tach nodded and walked back to join her staff.

"Then Cody vanished -- missing/presumed dead, and you -- well, we thought it was you --" Troll corrected himself. "Retreated into a bottle and eventually resigned from the clinic. We limped along. Then suddenly Cody returned with word you'd died, and the fake Tach vanished. I wanted to go to Ellis Island and search --"

"Only by then it was called the Rox, and nobody could get there," Finn broke in.

"Oh, you can get there," Tachyon said softly as she remembered the lonely, frightened, dreaming boy who held sway over the joker kingdom that now occupied Ellis Island. "It's just a little like never-never land... Her voice trailed away.

"Never more than now. A fucking *castle* has appeared out there. This Bloat's issued a statement to the American government that he and all the jokers are seceding from the United States. You know what happened the last time somebody tried that? It was called the Civil War," Finn said.

"Who cares about all the political shit? I want to know what happened to the Doc." Troll pressed. "What *did* happen -- after Blaise kidnapped you, I mean?"

Tachyon sat silent until Finn said uncomfortably, "It's a little obvious, isn't it?" Troll glowered. Strain was definitely showing among the staff of the Renssaeler Clinic.

Seven months of hell passed with sickening ease through her memory. The kidnapping, Blaise, the transfer of her soul and mind into the body of a sixteen-year-old girl, the rape. Weeks of utter darkness in a basement cell. Another rape. The pregnancy. The aborted escape attempt, and yet another rape. Finally rescue. And now despair.

"Who's the father?" Finn asked.

Tachyon rose. "My charming and psychotic grandson, Blaise." As their faces registered shock and disgust, Tach smiled thinly. "Don't look so shocked. Incest is an ancient and revered tradition on Takis."

"It ain't much, but it's home," Finn said as he tossed the keys onto a table in the entryway.

"It's a penthouse," Tachyon protested.

"Yeah, well, it sounds good even if it's not true." Tach followed the young man into the living room. "I'm a joker. Daddy's a rich Hollywood producer-director, I figure I'm entitled to a few perks."

The room was spacious, and furnished almost entirely with large throw pillows. There was one sofa.

"A concession to two-legged critters," Finn said, following her gaze.

Curious now, Tach peeked into the kitchen. About what one would expect from a kitchen, but the cabinets and counters were all set much lower than the standard.

Back in the living room Tach discovered the bar. She stood and contemplated a bottle of Courvoisier with the hungry eyes of a starving refugee.

"No, boss," came Finn's voice from behind her. "Try this instead." She turned, and he proffered a glass of milk.

"No, thank you."

"Drink it." He pressed the glass into her hand.

"I hate it," Tachyon said. "When you fuss. When you force me to take care of myself. When you make me feel that this" -- an accusing finger pointing at her belly -- "is more important than I am."

"It is you."

Tach stared up at Finn. She touched her face, lightly combed her fingers through her hair. A featherlike brush

across the swollen belly. "This is *not* me. It's not, Bradley." Her voice was tight with strain.

Finn guided her to the sofa, pushed her down. "Boss, it's gotta be said -- this may be you. What I mean is the femaleness, not the pregnancy. Blaise is gone. Your body's gone. If it can't be recovered, you may have to spend the rest of your life --"

The rest of this hideous, rational, and perfectly logical speech was lost to the ringing of the doorbell. Finn trotted away to answer and so didn't notice when Tach began to shiver. The glass slipped from her numb fingers, spilling milk across her lap. Pressing both hands to her head, Tach gasped for air. Clammy sweat was breaking out at her hairline and along her upper lip, and her vision seemed to be narrowing to a tunnel with blackness to either side. Cool fingers gripped Tach's wrist and felt for the pulse point.

Her eyes snapped open, and she stared up into Cody's lovely, beloved face. Embarrassed on a host of levels, Tach looked away, but in that brief glance Tach noticed the wisps of silver among the ebony cap of Cody's hair, and that the lines about her single eye had deepened. Clearly the suffering of the past months had not been limited solely to Tachyon. There had been plenty of grief to go around.

Tachyon, when she had been a he, had desperately wanted to make love with this woman. The emotion, the desire was still there, but there was no testosterone to fuel that drive, no penis to deliver on the passion.

"*Don't!*" shrilled Tachyon. She struggled wildly to get up off the sofa, cursed with vexation when her ungainly body refused to cooperate.

"Anxiety attack," said Cody calmly. "Get my bag," she threw over her shoulder to Finn. He complied, and as she

fished out the hypodermic, she said conversationally to Tachyon, "I'm going to give you a light sedative. I don't normally approve of this for a woman as advanced in pregnancy as you are --"

"Get *away* from me! You shame me! I am humiliated beyond all measure! I cannot live like this! I *will* not!"

Cody reached up and straightened the black eye patch that covered her missing eye, sighed, and said, "Let me in, Tachyon. Stop closing me out." Cody's calm, husky, *womanly* tones set a sharp contrast to Tach's girlish soprano. She filled the hypo. "And by the way, you may not have the luxury of a choice." She slid the needle beneath the skin of Tach's upper arm and depressed the plunger.

"So I should just lie back and enjoy it?"

"You know goddamn well I'm not suggesting that. Look, I'm sorry, we're all sorry, for what happened to you. But being female is not the big tragedy you're presenting. And maybe while you've got this opportunity for an in-depth analysis of the female condition, you might want to take a few notes!"

"What are you saying? That I am insensitive to women?"

"Yes. People always got sidetracked by your flamboyant dress and the ease with which you displayed emotion. They assumed you were a wimp or a puss boy... The truth is that you were the ultimate boy's boy, and a real goddamn prick sometimes. Women have always been objects for you. Sex objects, ideals of romantic love, mother comforters, potential wives, potential brood mares. What we've never been are people."

Tach swallowed past the lump that had hardened in her throat.

"People, I'm scared. I can't live like this."

Finn's arms closed about her. "I know, baby, I know."

Since the rapes she hadn't been able to tolerate physical contact with a man. Gently, trying to avoid panic, Tach disentangled those confining arms. Stood and looked at Cody. Suddenly Cody's hand shot out, and she steadied Tachyon. The sedative and the tumultuous events of the day were catching up with her, and she was literally swaying on her feet.

"Go to bed," said Cody softly, and pushed her gently to Finn.

Finn led her to the guest room. "Do you want me to stay? I can get somebody else to do late rounds for me.

"No, take care of my clinic. And I... I want to be alone."

The snick of the door closing behind him was loud in the shadows. Tach eyed the bed. Remembered many nights of fervent swordplay with a variety of lovers. Their names were forgotten, but their bodies... Rage and loss filled her.

Bad dreams brought her awake. Blaise was still walking through her mind, the memory of his mental and physical rapes like an oozing wound. Terror had set her heart to hammering, each wild beat bringing a surge of nausea. By the time Tachyon was fully awake, she was out of the bedroom and was standing shivering in the living room.

So she could now add sleepwalking to her list of night terrors.

She went searching for relief. Finn's liquor cabinet revealed him to be something of a wine snob, but there were also bottles of brandy, fine whiskey, and vodka.

The residue of the sedative was still in her system, making her head like cotton wadding and dragging at her limbs, and she knew as she uncapped the brandy that she shouldn't be doing this. But it had been a haven for too many years, and she wanted to turn off her head.

Tach had made a substantial dent in the level of brandy in the bottle before an over-full bladder sent her staggering into the bathroom. It had a traditional toilet, but there were also an oubliette in the French fashion. A rather large hole in the floor.

How did Finn manage at the clinic? Back into a stall, lift his tail, and hope his aim was good? Tach wondered.

The bath had also been altered. It was an enormous sunken affair with heavy frosted sliding doors.

She realized she had never before considered the difficulties Bradley had to face. The realization shamed her, adding to the already deep depression that seemed to have a palpable presence.

After relieving herself she stood and stared at her thickening body. *I've become a joker. A stranger in a deformed body.* Lifting the hem of the long T-shirt, Tach ran an experimental hand across her swollen belly. She was a trained physician. It wasn't hard to locate Illyana's head.

What a burden to grow up knowing you were conceived during a violent rape. That in your veins runs the blood of a madman, a killer. How can I ever explain it to you? What will I tell you when you ask about your father? A pleasant little story maybe? He was called the Outcast, and he was a lonely prince who went away long, long ago.

Her laugh was a bitter yelp, a cry of pain. *You're an accident. Blaise became my child in a spray of blood. You were conceived in blood. You'll be born in blood. What's to*

keep you from being a monster too? To keep you from feeding on me the way he did? The way you already have.

The physician-trained part of Tachyon's mind was screaming like a siren trying to penetrate the drug-, alcohol-, and exhaustion-induced depression. Over the long, pain-filled years Tach had always managed to battle back from the weary surrender. This time she didn't care to try. Illyana's emotions wove a frantic counterpoint about Tachyon's wear bitter thoughts. It was like holding a small dying creature.

We'll die together, baby, Tach thought as she rummaged through the medicine cabinet.

Bradley was an old-fashioned boy. The mother-of-pearl grip on the straight razor glittered in the lights. With clumsy fingers Tach pulled out the blade. She cut the pad of her thumb badly, but it didn't seem to hurt. Methodically she spun the spigots, filling the tub with hot water. Settled onto the toilet to watch it fill.

Will you understand, baby? asked Tachyon as she studied first the razor, and then the tub. *I hope so, because I have to do this. I'm so tired. I cannot go on.*

It was filled. She stripped out of the T-shirt and walked down the steps into the water. The heat of the water stung her toes. Slowly she lowered herself into the water. Lifted an arm from the water, drew the blade down the length of her wrist. There was cold and pressure, and then pain. The blood was running down her wrist, warm and a little sticky. Switch hands and repeat the process. She had two good hands again. She could do surgery.

Cutting out the life, she thought dreamily as she rested her head against the edge of the tub.

Warm, so warm. The blood flowed from her wrists, mingled with the water, and was carried away in ever-widening eddies. Sunsets over oceans. Flower petals dancing away in the chop of a mountain stream. Lethargy tugged at her. Soon even the light faded.

Chapter Two

"I'm having second thoughts about your plan."

Durg looked up and met the boy's flat black stare. He hadn't lived longer than two hundred years without learning how to read through bravura, and he could see the panic huddled in the back of Blaise's eyes. He was also a Morakh; trained not only for combat, but for diplomacy and counsel. He arranged his features into an expression of warm attention.

"May I know why, lord?"

Blaise cast a nervous glance about the control room of the ship. Durg was seated on an extruded bench against one of the curving, pearlescent walls. The boy took Durg's arm and tugged the Takisian into the center of the circular room.

In a low whisper (as if it would do any good if the *Ishab'kaukab* decided to listen) Blaise said, "Sooner or later he's gonna wake up." A head jerk toward Kelly, who sprawled unconscious in the big canopied bed. "And when he does, *Baby's* going to know that's not Tachyon and head straight back to Earth."

"Your point?"

"Why don't we handle it now? Turn around, head back --"

"And go where?"

"Tahiti, Tibet... Why does it have to be Takis?"

"Anyplace you can run on Earth, your grandfather can run too. And what of Bloat? A creature that can warp and bend reality will not be discouraged by a few thousand

miles." That blow struck home. Durg saw it in the slight widening of the eyes. Blaise shuddered and allowed his fear to emerge a bit farther from the shadows. "The joker adores your grandfather. He will not rest until he sees you punished." Durg paused a suitable few seconds, then added softly, "And I thought you wished to be a prince?"

Blaise leapt on that. "Yeah, it sounded great when I was running the jumpers and ruling my piece of the Rox, but I've had a lot of time to think in the past day, and I've remembered a few little points that Granddaddy told me which you've carefully omitted."

"Such as?"

"I'm an abomination on Takis. Unplanned breeding is like the greatest sin. As soon as I set foot on the planet, I'm going to be killed."

Durg cautiously placed an arm around Blaise's shoulders. The young man tolerated the contact. *So, he wants to be a little young today, coddled a little.* Durg guided him back to a bench and pushed him down.

"You are discounting three things. One which you cannot know. Two which you have forgotten. Beneath all of our flowery oaths and honor and blood ties there is a strong streak of practicality in all Takisians. We are the ultimate pragmatists. You will be bringing a great gift to the Vayawand." He turned and pointed at the prone Tachyon body. "The heir to the House of their greatest enemy. You also possess an extraordinary power. I have been bred to resist mind control. You can control me. We shall use that. Believe me, however disgusting your pedigree, they will not waste your talent. The first hours will be critical, but if we can survive, I think you have the potential to become a great ruler."

Blaise flung his arms around the Morakh's thick waist and buried his head against Durg's massive chest. "You won't leave me alone, will you?"

"I am your blooded man. Only your rejection or my death will end my service." Durg allowed a slight smile to cross that elfin, beautiful face. "And we Morakh are not only killers of kings, we are also their advisers."

Lifting his head, Blaise said, "Uncle Claude taught me how to be a revolutionary." He sounded very young.

Durg laid a hand on the top of the boy's brush-cut red hair. "And I shall teach you to be a prince."

It still didn't seem like a spaceship. First, it had a name... *Baby* -- whoever heard of a spaceship named *Baby*? Second, it didn't look like a spaceship. The walls were curved and fluted, and glowed with a pearlescent light that made Kelly feel as if he were living inside a seashell. And the central feature of the control room was a great canopied bed. No captain's chair, no helm, no banks of blinking computers -- just a bed. Third, there was the fact that the ship talked and sang... and wept. And only Kelly could hear her. And this was the final thing he had learned from the sorrowful voice that filled his days and tormented his dreams. *Baby* was a female.

Blaise had turned back to the screen that *Baby* had obligingly telescoped open on the floor and wall.

"So that's it," said Blaise, and despite his best effort his voice was filled with wonder.

Kelly wanted to go and look, but his head was pounding. There were millions of minds ahead, and the pressure of their thoughts closed about Kelly's brain like a vise.

It had been a journey from hell. Once Kelly had regained consciousness, the ship had realized this wasn't her master. Rejecting this impostor in Tachyon's skin, she had bolted for Earth. Blaise had mind-controlled the poor, terrified creature and then begun a deadly stalk. As he hunted Kelly about the confines of the living quarters, the young man, a mad light dancing in those black eyes, had carefully explained aloud to the ship about the kidnapping and the jump and the rapes.

Then Blaise sprang upon Kelly, and he couldn't help himself -- Kelly screamed. Only to have the sound die in a desperate gurgle as Blaise had closed his hands about Kelly's throat.

"So you see, Baby, if you don't do what I want, I'll kill this body, and Grand-pere will never be able to recover it. He'll be trapped forever, and it will be your fault."

Baby was very docile after that, but she wept most of the time, and the sound of that psychic weeping was slowly driving Kelly mad.

Durg stirred, an act as startling as if an Easter Island effigy had stood. The squat, heavily muscled body had a monolithic quality, and the delicately beautiful head set atop the broad shoulders only made it worse.

"Better take control of her," grunted the Takisian. "Her instinct will be to bolt for the Ilkazam platform. Let it happen and we're all dead."

Incredulous, Blaise demanded, "It's been almost fifty years. How the fuck can she still remember?"

"She is an *Ishab'kaukab*. They do not forget."

Blaise nodded, and his eyes took on that flat, unfocused stare that meant his power was being utilized.

Baby's mournful mutterings cut off abruptly. Kelly felt Blaise's mind control, wrapping about the soul of the ship like poisonous tentacles. *Trapped and no way out.*

Kelly understood the emotion. It had filled every waking hour as she grew up in the small Oklahoma town. *Shit-kicker heaven*, was how she still thought of it. Three thousand people, one movie house, four restaurants where you could get a mess of poke, and some biscuits and red-eye gravy. But Kelly, reading her romance novels in the heat of a summer night as the bugs formed a shade for the naked light bulb, dreamed and wondered what coquilles St. Jacques tasted like.

Everybody at her high school said she was really pretty. Model pretty. Actress pretty. And home was dust, and bugs, and chores, and Mom and Dad, who didn't appreciate how different, how special, she was. There had been fights, and problems, and then one day she had stolen the egg money and bought a bus ticket to New York.

All the way to Manhattan she had comforted herself and silenced the rumblings of her empty belly by dreaming about her modeling career -- the clothes, the fame, the money. But mostly she'd dreamed of the triumphant homecoming. Momma in tears, and Daddy all hangdog, sorry now because he hadn't realized what was growing up in the old clapboard house in the Baldy Hills. And Eugene Pelz would be sorry he hadn't taken her to the senior prom even if she was only a freshman.

The reality of Manhattan was very different from her fantasies. The tall buildings cut off the meager winter sun, creating a world of shadows, slush, and city dirt. After the songs of frogs and crickets, birds and cattle, the noise of the city was a scream that assaulted the ears. Buses were disgorging passengers like steel whales belching out schools

of frantic fish. Kelly noticed there were a lot of young, blond, frightened-looking girls. And she noticed the men who closed on them like sharks. One approached her, offered her a place to stay. Charm oozed like rancid sweat from his pores. Kelly belted him in the knees with her suitcase and fled. The following days were a blur of streets, crowds, shelters, assaults, panhandling for enough to buy a hot dog from a street vendor. And the glass and chrome and stone faces of the buildings mocked her. Behind those facades was the world of the wealthy, the famous, the powerful, and that world was not going to open for a fifteen-year-old from Atoka, Oklahoma -- no matter how pretty she might be. She called home once, but her daddy refused to accept the collect call, and Kelly had stood sobbing in a pay-phone booth while no one in New York noticed.

Eventually she had met David, and he had brought her into the center of the jumper family. It had been fun back then, and David had promised that soon she would make her initiation. Blinded by love and admiration, Kelly had waited and prayed she might lose her virginity to the charismatic young man, but it had never happened. There had been limousine rides and money, but there had also been robbery and murder and terror. Then David died, and there were no more limousine rides. There was just terror. She was a second-class wannabe jumper without a protector.

Until Blaise. He was David and more: handsome, charismatic, fearless, dangerous, and possessing an ace's power. But it came from a far more exotic source. This was no wildcard infection. Blaise was an alien, or at least a quarter so, grandson of the famous and flamboyant Dr. Tachyon. Kelly wanted to be his girl, and he'd sort of encouraged her, but eight months ago she had learned her true status -- dupe, tool, weapon. Blaise had kidnapped

Tachyon and terrorized Kelly into participation in a bizarre triple jump that left Kelly in the alien's body, and him in hers.

Now that body lay twenty-three light-years away, and Tachyon was about to experience the deepest moment of woman's life as he gave birth to the child that *Kelly's* body carried.

And Kelly is slowly going crazy, thought the false man as the assembled minds of Takis beat at his brain.

Chapter Three

There was sand underfoot, black and fine. A cold wind lifted it into puffing little dust devils like smoke in the harsh dry air. The sand marched to meet a sky of gun-metal gray. No feature broke or softened the knife-cut line of the horizon. It was an utterly desolate place.

"Your life." Blaise's voice seemed to come whispering from all directions. "This is what it's become. How it's going to stay." The wind seemed to shiver with a cold, evil laughter.

Tachyon whimpered and covered her ears with her hands. "No, you're gone. You can't hurt me anymore."

"Sure I can. I'm twined around your dreams, I hide in the dark places of your soul."

"Leave me *alone*."

"No problem. You haven't got anybody now."

She had to force out the words. "I have my friends."

"Really? Is it an act of friendship to tell you that you've lost yourself forever? That you have to resign yourself? In other words, shut up, stop whining, and let us get on with our lives. We're sick of you and your problems, Tachyon."

"They are not saying that."

"They're thinking it," retorted Blaise.

"No! I would know."

"You know nothing! You're no telepath. You're a crippled excuse for a telepath."

"Finn," cried Tachyon in desperation. "He is my friend."

"He was thrilled to have you gone. It was a chance at last for him to excel and be recognized. And it's more just that a joker should run the Jokertown Clinic. Not you, an arrogant, bigoted fool who has secretly despised your damned and deformed stepchildren."

"*Don't!* Don't. Stop, please!" Tach dropped to her knees, bent at the waist until she was brought up short by the swell of pregnancy.

"Look at you. What a laughable sight. A man... trapped in a woman's body, and pregnant. Bloated, ugly. Neither you nor that child are loved. You're an embarrassment, and she'll be an even greater one once she's born. Blaise's crazy bastard." The scorn was evident in the ghostly voice.

But there was a point of light, a burning fire that struggled valiantly against the creeping cold that was gripping all her limbs. It was music, and the scent of sunlight in a girl's hair, and the touch of silk. It was life.

"Illyana," Tach murmured.

She came striding across the sand. Where her feet touched, the black shattered into rainbow colors. Her wild mane of golden red hair formed a nimbus about her face. She had her mother's mouth with that cute little porpoise smile, and Tachyon's features, all sharp angles and pointed chin.

She leaned down and took Tach by the hand. "No, PapaMom. It's not fair."

Shaklan came drifting by and gathered his granddaughter into his arms. "House Ilkazam doesn't breed cowards," he said as they whirled away to a lilting three-quarter-time song.

"*No!*" The shout brought Tachyon fully awake.

The water was a deep rose, and very cold. She gripped the edge of the tub and tried to stand. The Formica was icy cold, and slick with blood and water.

Strain shivered through the muscles. With a gasp she fell back into the embrace of the water.

Rolling heavily onto her knees, Tach began crawling for the steps of Finn's sunken bath. Her hair trailed like seaweed behind her. It was an effort to keep her mouth and nose above water. First step. Second. Her head was on the top step, the tile clammy against her cheek. Hair wrapped like tentacles about her arms and throat. She was dimly aware of the water lapping at her buttocks. Mostly she was aware of numbness.

Query/love/fear/love/query???

Not the self-composed young woman who had come to her in death's dream. Terrified child. *My* child. It was horribly uncomfortable lying on her stomach. Tach heaved herself up, crawled free of the grip of the water. She dragged down one of the towels and cinched a clumsy tourniquet about one wrist.

The doorjamb served as a crutch. Tach climbed shakily to her feet, tottered for the phone. She passed a full-length mirror on that thousand-mile journey. The red-streaked body with the distended belly was a fearsome sight. Collapse on the bed. Dial Cody's number.

It seemed to ring for a long, long time.

"This better be good." Cody's sharp tones were as welcome as a symphony to Tachyon.

"Cody. I'm hurt, badly... badly. Help me."

"Who is this?"

"Tachyon."

"On my way."

The phone gave back the flat nasal buzz of a disconnected line. Tach lay back in the bed and tried to stay conscious.

"You know, this is only the second time I've seen you in seven months, and you've managed to wreck my mood both times."

A brief smile flickered across Tach's lips. "Once by being a bastard, and once by being a Juliet."

"That remark is just as confusing as the pronouns that are applicable to you."

The curved suture needle darted like an eager fish back and forth across the gash; It was fascinating to watch the pale skin pulling closed over the moist red of the muscles and capillaries.

"You sew better than anyone I know," said Tachyon.

Cody smiled up at her. "Cut pretty well too."

"Yes." Tach sighed, and glanced up at the I.V. dripping plasma back into her blood-starved system. The local anesthetic Cody had administered made her forearms feel like blocks of wood. "Guess I cut pretty well too. I can't believe I did that."

"Everybody's got a breaking point."

Tach watched Cody wind the bandages about her arms. "People will see them and know that I tried to kill myself."

"You did."

"I don't want people to think I'm weak."

The long fingers caressed each instrument as Cody laid them in their velvet-lined case. "Is this the first time in your life you've ever tried suicide?"

"Yes."

"And in forty-odd years on Earth, you destroyed the mind of a woman you loved, were deported, slid into alcoholism, came close to getting killed -- I don't know how many times -- and now this." She gestured the length of Tach's body. "If this really is the first time you've ever attempted suicide, I'd say you're made out of twisted blue steel and dynamite. And if you need even more to pat yourself on the back about, remember -- you stopped yourself."

Tach laid a hand over her belly. "Illyana stopped me."

"Illyana," mused Cody. "Pretty name."

"Named for my maternal grandmother eight times removed," replied Tach. Cody sank back to sit cross-legged on the carpet at Tachyon's feet. Impulsively Tachyon held out her hand to the older woman. "I ask your pardon. My behavior toward you has been inexcusable."

"There was a lot of anger in you today. Was it directed toward me?" Cody's single eye was serious. Tachyon couldn't face that level gaze. She fidgeted, glanced about the room, twined a piece of her long gilt hair between her fingers.

"You are a physical reminder of all I have lost."

Now it was Cody's turn to look away. She laughed, but there was a huskiness in the sound as of unshed tears. "Damn it. I should have slept with you last year."

Tach scraped back her hair with both hands. "You humans and your taboos."

Cody stood and took a turn around the room. When she completed her agitated little circuit, she settled uneasily onto the sofa next to Tachyon.

Cody spoke first. "Do you... do you... still want me?"

"No. Apart from the fact that I'm pregnant, and my sex drive is decidedly reduced, there are those troublesome hormones. Estrogen, progesterone. You're not making any bells ring."

"But a man?" asked Cody softly.

Tach ran a hand across her mouth and chin. "The body feels the attraction."

"And the mind?"

"I am Tachyon." Her mind's eye suddenly gave her a blinding picture of a decaying old room, the smell of mildew from a rotting mattress, Blaise -- Tach closed her eyes, felt the skin between her eyes pucker with her frown.

"What?" asked Cody softly.

"No."

"I'm your friend. I maybe can't understand -- thank God -- but I can listen. And I can care."

She beat her hands together, a nervous tic. Cody reached out and folded her hands over Tachyon's.

"I'm free now. Why does it still unnerve me so?" Tach's voice was breathy with fear.

"There's a reason why there are rape crisis centers, and counseling, and support groups. This is the most violent

of all violent assaults. The most demeaning, Cody said softly.

Hair flew as Tach shook her head. "I... should be able... to... to handle... this."

"Why?"

She panted, trying to draw air into her stricken lungs. "I'm... I'm a man --"

"So that's supposed to make you tougher? Have you ever met a male rape victim? Well, I have. The emotions are the same no matter what your plumbing happens to be. You go through the same shame and rage, guilt, the enormous fear, the depression." Cody couldn't control it. Her eye slid down to the bandages that cuffed Tachyon's wrist. Cody stripped off her surgical gloves, removed the I.V., closed her case. "Do you want me to stay?"

"Yes, please."

Cody's arm around her waist was a welcome support as they walked to the bedroom. There was a brief moment of awkwardness, then they both noticed the blood staining the sheets.

"That won't do..."

"I'll get fresh linens..." they said simultaneously. It was a strangely cathartic action... making a bed together. Sheets billowed tentlike, corners were tucked. Then abruptly Cody asked, "Have you cried once since this happened?"

"Which part of it?" retorted Tach wryly.

"Take your pick."

In a low voice she said, "I wept after the first rape. Then he came a second time, and all the tears died."

"It's a release you need."

"It's an escape I used too often, I think... in my old life."

Cody tossed the down comforter onto the bed. "Don't be a tough guy."

"I'm not," said Tach shrugging out of her robe. "I'm not trying not to cry. I just can't. All the pain has jammed up somewhere, and I can't let it out."

They curled up beneath the comforter. Sleep had almost claimed Tachyon when Cody's voice pulled her back, saying softly, "It's not quite how I envisioned my first time in your bed."

Tachyon levered herself up on one elbow, leaned over, and gently kissed Cody on the cheek. "I do love you..."

They put their arms around each other, huddled close.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Go after Blaise."

Chapter Four

The monastery nestled like a bamboo-and-rice-paper pearl in a setting of verdant green hills. Gnarled pines held poses against the pale blue sky like tortured, yet graceful, Kabuki dancers. As Tachyon trudged up the road toward the front gates, spume from a small waterfall was carried to her cheek by a short-lived puff of wind. Then the sleepy August heat returned. Crickets droned dully in the trees and bushes. Tach struggled to keep her eyes open. And her sense of misuse deepened. Fortunato would agree to a meeting at precisely the time she most desperately needed her afternoon nap.

A monk was waiting at the gate. In his dark robe he had seemed just another huddled root at the foot of a gigantic pine. Tach swallowed a gasp as he suddenly unfolded from his meditative pose and stood up.

The welcoming, toothless smile metamorphosed into a frown of confusion.

"I'm here to see Fortunato," said Tach slowly. She touched her breast. "I am Tachyon."

The monk brightened at the sound of her name, but then a distressed murmur of Japanese began. The little man's ears were large and stood out from his almost completely bald head like flaring mushrooms. Like semaphores they made it very clear that she was not entering the monastery, as the old man vigorously shook his head.

"Look, I am Tachyon. I know you were probably expecting a man, but I promise, your virtues are quite safe with me." The man was still shaking his head. Tach's patience snapped like a tightly wound guitar string. "Look!

I've had a really difficult four days. I would have been here two days ago, except a moron at Tomlin wouldn't let me on the plane because my passport picture was *a little out-of-date*." She briefly covered her eyes with a hand, reliving the humiliation of the moment. "Like the wrong sex. And I'll tell you right now -- long airplane rides are hell on pregnant women." Communication was not occurring.

"And you're not understanding a word I am saying, are you? Maybe you'll understand this... if you do not let me through this gate, I'm going to..." Her voice trailed away as a plan bloomed.

Cupping her hands around her belly, she said, "Fortunato! I must see him!"

The old man's eyebrows began waggling as furiously as his ears. Panic was added to the jumble of emotions that warred for control of his face. He pointed to her stomach. Tach nodded. The old man opened the gate and indicated a pathway of carefully raked white sand. Tach started walking. And, soon reached a small bridge, which arched like a springing fawn across a tumbling white-water mountain stream. It was a startling design, however, for the bridge made a perfect ninety-degree turn in the center, then resumed its leap for the far side. Tach paused for a moment in the center of the turn, gripped the handrail, and stared down into the churning water. The water and the wind through the pines formed a harmony as delicate as a sigh. Dropping her head onto the backs of her folded hands, Tach simply listened and breathed for a long moment. This was a good place to be. But it could be delayed no longer. However lovely the setting, soothing the moment, it was not her place or her fortune to rest here. Fortunato had that luxury, she did not. Firmly she raised her head, squared her shoulders, and trying not to waddle, she walked off the bridge and into the heart of the Zen garden.

Fortunato was waiting on a stone bench set artistically before a small pagoda. The gravel of the path crunched beneath her feet, but the ace continued to read, not deigning to acknowledge her arrival. A thin thread of anger coiled like a worm in the center of her heart as Tachyon studied that long, spare face. There were more lines about the narrow, bitter mouth and the slanted oriental eyes, and his cocoa hair held a tinge of gray. The years were passing, and their passage had left a permanent record on Fortunato's face.

"Hello, Fortunato." The sound of her soft soprano brought his head up like a spooking horse. It has been a while."

They studied each other. Gray eyes locked with black. It didn't require a lot of imagination to see the line of fire arcing between them.

"Tachyon." And Fortunato's voice fairly purred with satisfaction.

"You're the first person to recognize me must be the telepathy."

"I've given all that up."

Her disbelief showed. "I'm sure."

"It's true." The ace set aside his book. "I just recognized the look in the eyes."

"Somehow, I do not think that is a compliment."

"Glad to see you haven't lost that rapierlike keenness and understanding." Tach remained silent. "Looks like you've got trouble."

"I've got trouble," acknowledged the alien.

The wind and the crickets replaced human conversation. It was capitulation, but Tach had to break the silence first.

"May I sit down? My back..." she added.

"Yeah, sure. Take a load off."

And then it became too much for the ace. The lines at either side of Fortunato's mouth deepened as he fought the grin, but it couldn't be controlled. White teeth dazzled against the dark skin. The smile became a laugh. Three sharp snorts of amusement. Pain shot from the hinge of Tachyon's jaw into her head as her teeth ground together. "I am so glad you find this a laughing matter. For me it is rather more serious," she declared in a voice gone shrill with anger.

"I think it's funny. What can I say?"

"You could show a little concern."

"Why? I didn't like you when you were the faggot from outer space. Why should I like you now that you're the brood mare from the Bronx?"

"That is an incredibly, insensitive and disgusting thing to say. I suppose that's the way you felt about Peregrine when she carried your child. You couldn't see the woman. Just the bloated, distended body. Sex is the only thing that's ever mattered to you. You haven't even seen your child, have you?" His silence answered her question.

"You're a fine one to be giving me a lecture on feminism. You weren't exactly Mr. Sensitive."

"I was never a *pimp*. And I would never have denied my child. But I don't know why I expected anything different from you. The Ideal granted you great and potent powers. But you never understood that with great power comes

great responsibility. You've abandoned anyone who's ever had a claim upon you. Your mother, your women, your child... It is not the action of a grand seigneur."

"Yeah, because I'm not one. I'm a half-black, half-Jap bastard who fought for everything I ever had, and I didn't ask for any fucking favors."

Looking into those angry black eyes, Tachyon considered rather belatedly that when one comes *seeking* favors, one ought not get on one's high horse. She plaited a fold of her loose blouse. Pride was an unpalatable morsel to swallow. "I'm sorry" said Tach stiffly. "I should not have lectured you."

"That's one you've gotten right."

They stared at each other for a long moment. The hormonal shifts within Tachyon's borrowed body were causing a fire storm of emotions. Fury wrestled with despair, but even the traumas of pregnancy could not pierce the ice dam that held her tears. Something in Tach's arid stare rattled Fortunato. Uncomfortably he asked, "Aren't you going to bawl now? Every time I saw you, you were sniveling. Now at least you're the right gender to get away with it." Tach just stared at him. After a lengthy silence the ace asked, "Why the hell did you come here? You're a reminder of all the shit I left behind."

"How nice for you. Some of us cannot run away." Illyana kicked, and Tach's hand went instinctively to her belly. Closing her eyes, she twined her thoughts about the baby's. The emotions were like colored ribbons. She was softly smiling when she again opened her eyes. "It is a rare place where the only sensation is love."

"I can think of one other," said Fortunato, very dry.

"No, sex is far more complicated. It is warfare, and obligations, and games, and tests." Tach straightened resolutely and met Fortunato's frowning gaze. "I have come to you for help."

"I don't give abortions."

It was deliberately cruel. Tach was unmoved. "My body has been stolen from me. And I believe the thief has taken it to my home world. I must go after them. And for that I need you."

The receding hairline gave the ace a lot of forehead to furrow and knot as a frown of Jovian proportions crossed his brow. "I don't get it. As far as I know, you're the only person who owns a spaceship instead of a dog."

"How do you think they got off the world?"

Something flickered deep in Fortunato's eyes. It was gone before Tach could identify the emotion that drove it. "You really are fucked."

Tach dropped her gaze. "Will you help me?"

"I still don't see what I can do."

"It has been forty-four years since Jetboy failed over Manhattan. I have seen you all, treated most of you. You are the most powerful ace ever to live. I think your powers are sufficient to cross even light-years. Send a message to my family on Takis." It was more impassioned than she wanted, but desperation was beginning to chew at the edges of her fragile control.

"I don't have any powers. I had to give them up when I entered here."

"Your powers are intact. It's written in your DNA. You can play self-deluding games, but you are a wild card. You

will die a wild card."

"You know how my power worked." Fortunato threw out his long arms, indicating the peaceful garden. "You see any way for me to awaken the Kundalini?"

The words had to crawl from a mouth gone desert dry. "Yes... use me."

"Jesus fucking Christ, you *are* desperate."

"You will never know how much," said Tach, so quietly that the ace had to lean in to hear her. His body odor was fresh, citrusy. Tach fought back vomit.

She had prayed it would not (but feared that it would) come to this. Like most aces Fortunato relied upon a psychological crutch to use his wildcard powers. Peregrine believed she could not fly without her wings. In fact they were useless -- she flew using an elaborate telekinetic power. Turtle's teke power would not work unless he was safely armored in his shell. And Fortunato could not use his awesome telepathy unless he had sex immediately before utilizing his powers. It had been an elaborate joke in Jokertown. "May I charge you up?" had become a euphemism for fucking.

Tachyon wondered if the fear was evident on her face. She toyed briefly with the notion of telling the ace that she had been raped. No, he would only think she was whining. There would be no sympathy from that quarter -- only disdain.

"Stand up." Startled, Tachyon obeyed. "Now, turn around." A long thin forefinger twirled in the air.

Tach pivoted slowly. His gaze seemed to have weight and substance. Heat licking across her face, down the

length of her bare arms. The pale golden hairs on her forearms stood up.

"Now the hair,"

"What?" Her hand flew to the French braid that contained the heavy blond mane.

"Take it down."

The bow resisted her shaking fingers. She thought he would help her, but Fortunato sat, arms folded across his chest, his long legs stretched out before him, showing through the slit in his kimono. At last it came down, and she shook it loose from the braid. It formed a cloak across shoulders and breast.

"Now the blouse."

"Why are you doing this to me?" She felt like a limp and helpless victim. Visions of Blaise flashed about the corners of her consciousness. The first flickers of a conflagration that would destroy her with terror.

"I want to see what I'd be getting. I used to audition all my girls. You're very graceful. Hand movements are nice -- a little clumsy --"

"Fear has a way of doing that," shot back Tach, anger driving back the fear.

"You're afraid," Fortunato repeated as if the concept were a new one, the emotion unknown to him.

"Yes," was the curt reply.

"Why?"

"No, I won't give you that."

"You're about to offer me all of you. Why balk at a little confidence?"

"I am using you," Tach cried. Rage threw caution to the wolves.

"Thank you. That's what I was looking for... a little honesty, a little admission that this is all about you... precious you, wonderful you... you... you."

"I humbled myself and came to you for help. And if asking is not strong enough, then by the Ideal, I'll beg!"

"So start... I'm waiting."

"Damn you! How much groveling is required before you can grant me a simple favor?"

"I've given up my powers."

"I'll give them back to you! You've fucked me often enough psychologically and metaphorically. You may as well complete the goddamn cycle!"

Echoes of her shrill diatribe shattered against the mountain's side. The crickets fell silent. Fortunato's eyes narrowed to calculating slits. He studied her. Then slowly shook his head. "No... I don't think I want to do that."

"You bastard." Her voice was shaking as hard as her hands. A button twisted off as she tried to close her blouse. "Nothing matters to you but yourself. This is not just about me... about a lifetime trapped. Blaise is going to Takis. My people are going to suffer... perhaps die because you can't be bothered to help."

"Aliens," said Fortunato, edging the word with ice.

It threw Tachyon completely off stride. She faltered, gaped. "What?"

"Aliens. I don't give a rat's ass about the sufferings of faggots from outer space. Your people brought the wild card to Earth. What was the toll on Wild Card Day? Sixty

thousand dead? Let this Blaise do his worst." Fortunato was talking to her back. A vise had closed around her chest as the guilt slammed home. Mental wails were coming from Illyana as she tried to absorb, understand, buffer against the fire storm of emotions that tore through her mother. It was almost a flashback. The peaceful garden became Central Park. *The screams of the dying and the deformed. And the smell -- smoke and feces and vomit. Wild Card Day. September 15, 1946.*

"Hey, Tachyon."

She kept walking.

"I'll give you this much -- Jube the Walrus isn't a joker. In fact, he's not even human."

That got her. Frowning, Tach turned back to face the ace. "You're mad."

"No. I'm the most powerful ace in the world, remember?"

"Even if it's true, how does that help? What in the fuck am I supposed to do with that?" Tachyon walked back to the bench, glared at the ace.

Fortunato stood and smoothed the folds of his kimono, glanced down into Tachyons bitter face, shrugged. "Hey, you're not my problem. It's not my responsibility to take care of you."

"Or anyone else." Tight and low the words had to fight their way past her lips.

"I thought you would have gotten that by now."

"Oh, yes, I got it. Now get this!"

It was an effort to keep her balance, but Tach managed, and watched with satisfaction as the toe of her

shoe impacted squarely with Fortunato's crotch. He clutched himself and dropped, groaning, to his knees. The twilight bird song was punctuated with the sounds of gags and retching. Tach watched dispassionately as vomit and spittle decorated the grass.

"There must be a thousand women who wish they could have done that," said Tach pleasantly. "I'm glad it got to be me."

As she walked back across the bridge, Tach couldn't help reflecting how soothing the sounds of a Zen garden could be.

"You went to Japan for a *day*?" The customs officer was a hirsute individual with a five o'clock shadow at ten o'clock, and brows that looked like knotted bird nests. "And you've got *no* luggage?"

"Yes ... and yes."

The line behind Tachyon was becoming restive. The Japanese might be patient about queues back home, but not in New York. They wanted to reach the fleshpots of Manhattan and find a blond cutie -- rather like the one holding up the parade. Despite Tachyon's fecund condition she had been groped five times on the flight back to the States. The fifth assailant had earned himself a black eye.

Resigning herself to the necessity of explanations, Tach began, "I went to Japan solely for a meeting. You have my passport with a letter from Senator Kennedy. It should be apparent what has happened to me."

Cody was no doubt waiting beyond customs. It made Tach crazy to be so close to home, and to be stalled by an officious --

There were suddenly two men on either side of her. Dark suits, white shirts. Every thread of their polyester screamed federal cop.

"Dr. Tachyon, if you could come with us please."

She took one last longing look at the sliding doors cycling open and closed, disgorging people into freedom. The man on her left closed a hand around her upper arm. Resistance melted under the hot breath of fear.

Chapter Five

Interrogation rooms the world over have the same look and feel and smell. Tachyon had experienced them in France, Germany, and Spain. Had spent several memorable days in New York's Tombs in the early sixties fighting off nightmares born of the d. t.'s. So, although the smiling General Zappa might describe this as a "debriefing," Tach knew better. It was rubber-hoses time again.

Only the man wielding the hose would be the civilian representative of the United States government. She glanced again at Phillip von Herzenhagen's blood-suffused face and took tighter rein on a mount called terror. The special assistant to Vice President Quayle was fat and pink like a marzipan bonbon, and he had entered the room just brimming with jocularly and bonhomie. Then he decided to interpret Tachyon's ignorance for intransigence, and his mood had shifted.

Tach's eyes roved the room, seeking inspiration from the cinder-block walls. *There had been cinder blocks in her basement cell on the Rox*, she recalled. Zappa was seated across a scarred wooden table from her. The scrape of chair legs against the concrete floor pulled her attention back to her inquisitors.

Von Herzenhagen strode across the room and yanked up the venetian blinds. Bloat's castle bulked fantastic against the sky.

"How the hell does somebody create *that*?"

Tach shrugged. "You know as much as I do. It's called wild card."

"This creature is the most dangerous threat the United States has ever faced. Power like that --"

Resting her palms on the table, she leaned in intently. "-- is paltry when compared to that of a Hitler, a Pol Pot. We're talking about a boy, a desperate boy who is doing his best to protect and care for his people. If you would stop throwing soldiers at him and try talking --"

"We don't negotiate with terrorists!"

"Since when did jokers become terrorists?" Tach shouted.

Zappa stepped in as peacemaker. "I'd call the jumps an act of terrorism."

"You're lumping two very diverse groups with competing interests into a single entity. Bloat -- Teddy -- represents the jokers, is trying to protect them, and the Ideal knows they have suffered at your hands."

"How many jokers are on that island?" von Herzenhagen demanded.

"How many times do you want to hear the same words? I don't know."

"How the hell could you not know? You were on that fucking rock for seven months!"

Tach was furious now at his tone, the hardness of the wooden chair, the whole damn situation. "And for the first five months I was locked in a basement, and the remaining two in an attic! I wasn't given a guided tour!"

"A guess," Zappa said soothingly.

"A lot -- thousands maybe."

"You're lying." Von Herzenhagen's face was inches from hers. Tach's heart gave a skip, and nausea clawed at her guts. "Ellis Island is a quarter of a mile of ship ballast."

His hand closed on her wrist, and her slender control snapped. Tach jerked hard to the left, sending herself and the chair careening to the floor.

"Holy Christ!" Zappa's voice distant and above her.

Both the men dropped to their knees next to her. The male heat washed off them in waves. She could smell the stale cigarette smoke on von Herzenhagen's breath. He gripped her shoulders, and Tach began screaming, a thin, tearing sound shattering off the brick wall.

"Don't hurt me! Ancestors, please don't hurt me!"

"Then tell us what we want to know," von Herzenhagen said.

"Jesus shit, Phil," Zappa snapped. "She's... he's scared to death."

"Tell me!"

"There are... caverns... miles and miles... of them. Please, please, don't hurt me," Tach whimpered. She had curled into a fetal position, arms folded protectively across Illyana.

With a forefinger Zappa pushed up her sleeves, lightly touched the bandages. "Phil, lay off her now, okay?"

The slamming of the door was the reply.

The accommodations were nicer than the Rox, but it was still a cell. The window gave her a view of Ellis Island, and Tachyon wondered if that was deliberate. She whiled

away the hours watching military aircraft cut the skies over New York Harbor.

The sun went down, and the castle glittered with lights. Like stars peeking through massed thunderclouds. An Ab screamed past and disturbed from their rest a flock of winged creatures; they exploded off one of the tower battlements like wind-torn smoke.

Which would win in the coming conflagration? Tach wondered. Fantasy or technology? Oh, Teddy, they are going to destroy you and your poor little fairy-tale kingdom.

She half expected a reply. For months she and the joker governor of the Rox had maintained first a dream, and then a true telepathic communication. He had loved her and wooed her and finally found the strength to help engineer her escape. Too bad the freedom had lasted only five days. A lot of people had died to secure that brief interlude.

Gathering her feeble powers, Tach actually did reach out and mind-search for the Outcast. The telepathic signal seemed to be reflected back to her. The increase in Bloat's powers had closed his mind as well as his kingdom to her. And, realistically, what could he do to aid her this time, this mammoth mountain of oozing flesh topped with the head and torso of a nineteen-year-old boy?

With a sigh Tach abandoned the view and returned to her bed. They at least kept her supplied with books, newspapers, a television. The drawback was she could count the passing days in the changing dates. She read until sleep dragged at her lids, then snapped out the light and fell headlong into what she hoped would be a night of forgetfulness.

The snick of the lock brought her bolt upright, bile clawing at the back of her throat. Moonlight glinted off the

soldier's belt buckle. This was it then. They had come. Blaise. Rape...

A shadowy form darted past the guard, carrying something. Tach screamed, shrill and desperate. Light exploded in her eyes, leaving floating red dots imprinted on the retina.

"Shit, Tachy, shut up! They'll have my nuts!" A harsh whisper. A familiar voice. Digger Downs. Sleazy reporter for a sleazy rag called *Aces*.

Tach raked back her hair with a trembling hand. Climbed up off the floor. Air trickled back into lungs, and Tach tried to stop shaking. Digger snapped another picture.

"God, this is great. Could you turn sideways?

Humiliation gnawed at Tach's guts like a frenzied animal, and she wanted to *kill* something. "So who's the father? Inquiring minds want to know." Digger grinned at her, the smile deepening as he saw her hands closing into fists. "Can't make me pour brandy over my head now, can you, Tachy? So, how's it feel?"

It surprised her, how fast she moved despite her ungainly bulk. The back of the metal chair slid easily into her hands.

"*Goddamn* you!" Three quick steps, heft, swing. "You son of a bitch!" Bring the chair down firmly on the top of the head.

"*Owww*!" Digger's camera went flying. Tach had to give the reporter points for doggedness. He went scrabbling on hands and knees across the floor for the fallen camera. Tach whacked him again, hard, across the back this time. "*Shit!*"

"You could have helped me. Instead you shame and humiliate me!" The word spiraled into a shriek as Tach flung the chair at him.

Digger recovered the camera, scrambled to his feet, and went barreling for the door with Tach running awkwardly after him. The guard was in a panic at the noise and uproar. The wad of bills peeping coyly from his shirt pocket wasn't enough to get busted for. He stiff-armed Tachyon, his palm taking her hard in the chest. The blow knocked her to the floor. She was on her back, legs open, belly thrust aggressively for the ceiling. Digger took a final picture.

"Even better than a profile," he said.

The door slammed shut.

"I am an American citizen. You cannot hold me without cause. I demand that I be released." Tach was discovering that stiff speeches delivered in soprano voices don't have much impact.

The office was a thrown-together affair. Metal desk, a very nice leather executive's chair, filing cabinets of three different colors. *Headquarters of an army on the move*, thought Tachyon.

Von Herzenhagen didn't respond. He just stubbed out his cigarette in the overflowing ashtray on his desk and swiveled his chair to face a filing cabinet. He began rooting through the files while Zappa said, "You're a necessary resource during this crisis."

"What resource? I have no powers to assist you. I have told you all that I know about the situation on the Rox. You have to let me go." Silence. "There are laws in this country, and you are breaking them."

Von Herzenhagen emitted a sound of satisfaction and swiveled back to face Tachyon and Zappa. He was holding a piece of computer printout. With a snap of the wrist he unfolded it. It was a very *long* piece of paper. Offered it to Tachyon.

The heading read, KELLY ANN JENKINS. Under it was an impressive array of charges. Accessory to armed robbery. Accessory to kidnapping. Accessory to assault and battery. Accessory to murder. It was quite a rap sheet.

Tach tossed it back onto the desk with a disdainful flick of the fingers. "So? What has this to do with me?"

"You are Kelly Ann Jenkins," von Herzenhagen said.

"Fascinating. And I thought I was here because I am Dr. Tachyon."

"Fingerprints say you're Kelly Ann Jenkins." Von Herzenhagen smiled from the teeth out. "I don't think you're in any position to make demands, Doctor. Now be a good boy, and maybe we won't put you in the county jail. Inmates are very hostile toward jumpers. You won't like your treatment there, and sometimes the guards are just a little slow responding to screams."

Tach stared down into that round, pink face and felt the walls of her prison close even tighter about her.

Chapter Six

French braiding was every bit as hard as it looked -- harder. Tachyon was trying to while away the long hours by mastering this esoteric skill, and so far was failing miserably. It made her crazy that as accomplished a surgeon and violinist as herself could not plait dead protein.

As she frowned into the mirror, a retina-searing flare of golden light suddenly filled the room, reflecting off the glass.

Explosion! Big one! The first panicked reaction was to dive for cover. Then she saw him hovering outside the barred window.

"Starshine!" Tach cried, and ran for that fantastic figure in its formfitting yellow costume, green trunks, boots, and gloves, a sunburst blazing on his massive chest.

He turned an ireful green eye upon her. "Well, I see that muckraking little excuse for a journalist was correct. But why he feels he must utilize his talents in this kind of cheap sensationalism.

From the hallway came the sounds of running feet, orders being shouted. Tach lost the thread of Starshine's diatribe.

"If this is a rescue, could you... " She made a tumbling motion with her hands. "Could you... get on with it?"

"Take cover."

Tach darted around the bed and huddled between it and the wall. She risked one glance as Starshine unleashed a flaring yellow sunbeam from his hand. Tach ducked and covered her head, and the outer wall of the building

exploded into the room. Coughing, wiping plaster dust from her face, Tach tripped and dodged fallen bricks to the hole. The snap and snarl of weapons fire had now been added to the chaos. Bullets went whining off Starshine's energy field.

The ace landed lightly in the room, dropped the field, and lifted Tachyon into his arms. Looking up into that handsome square-jawed face crowned with a nimbus of waving blond hair, Tach reflected that Starshine was, physically, at least, the perfect rescuer for a damsel in distress. Unfortunately his touch had bile rising in the back of her throat.

"Doctor, I hope the graveness of your present situation has finally brought home to you the dangers attendant with unregulated scientific research."

The door was swinging open. "How about the dangers attendant in guards with *guns*?" Tach squeaked.

Starshine sniffed, raised his energy field, and shot out the ragged hole. Tach looked ahead and saw a pair of Apache helicopters chewing their way toward an interception. Starshine put on a burst of speed that pressed Tach deeper into the man's arms, and they were past the choppers.

"Where are you taking me?"

"I would have thought you would have had enough of men making decisions for you." They dived abruptly, using the warehouses that lined the Jersey coast as a screen from both visual and radar sighting. "I'm doing you the courtesy of treating you as a fully realized woman with the capability to make decisions for yourself."

"I am *not* a woman."

Starshine looked down at her in disgust. "How typical. You have been given this chance to explore the life-affirming power of the female, and you reject it. I've done a poem on this very subject." He sucked in a breath, opened his mouth, Tach cut in.

"Before you start quoting yourself, could you please direct us to Hook Road in Bayonne? There's an abandoned junkyard there. Right on New York Bay. We'll be safe there."

"Incredible. I wonder what psychological problems this reveals, comparing your female state to garbage."

"Fly," Tach said wearily. She was even too tired to remonstrate as Starshine declaimed his latest ode.

Thomas Tudbury was an overweight man in his forties, and Tachyon and Starshine were standing in his kitchen. Thomas Tudbury was also supposedly dead. His alter ego, the Great and Powerful Turtle, lived on, and thus far his secret hiding place was known only to Tachyon and Joey Di Angelis. Which explained his present fury and consternation. Starshine had folded his arms across his chest and was eyeing Tom with Olympian disdain. Tach knew that was part of the problem. It wasn't helping Tom to have this Adonis in his face.

"Jesus, Tachy, why did you have to come *here*?"

"If you're scared, you don't have to worry. We weren't traced," Starshine said. "I saw to that."

"Hey, dumbshit --" Tom began.

Tach quickly interrupted. "Where else could I go? They'll be watching the clinic, my friends. They locked me up, Tommy. I can't take being locked up anymore!" Her voice had gone all ragged and stretched.

Tom slumped into a chair. "Christ, Tach, you just tumble from one crisis to another." He scrubbed at his face with a hand, took a pull on his beer. "Anybody want anything?"

"Do you have any Perrier?" Starshine asked.

Tom rolled an eye, grabbed Tach by the wrist, and pulled her out of the room.

Hurriedly Tach said, "He'll only be here for, oh, maybe another twenty minutes."

"If he's going to leave, couldn't he do it now?"

"He'd have to become somebody else, and I'd rather have him become the person he truly is --"

Hands on her shoulders, he halted her nervous pacing. "Are you okay?"

"Yes... no. I've got to get to Manhattan. Please, Tommy, just let Mark stay here. As soon as I'm back, we'll both go away, and you can be comfortable again."

Tommy scrubbed his face with both hands, sighed, said, "You want somebody to go with you?"

"No, alone is better."

"You're not going to the clinic, are you?"

"No. I need to break into someone's house. And for that I need Jay Ackroyd."

"The dame entered my office. She moved with an aggressive waddle that let me know right away she was trouble. I waited. How would she come on to me? The ever-popular ploy of the pregnant woman -- the flood of tears? The premature labor --"

Tachyon had a feeling that Jay Ackroyd was going to continue in this irritating vein for a good long while. So she poured his coffee in his lap. The stream of bad prose became a stream of invective. Ackroyd yanked tissue from the box on his desk and mopped at his crotch.

"Motherfucker! I just got these back from the cleaners." Jay looked up, aggrieved. "And you could have burned my willie off."

"A small loss," said Tachyon, and she carefully settled into a chair. It was apparent from the banner headline -- TACHYON'S TORMENT: WHO'S THE FATHER? -- and the photo on the cover of *Aces* magazine why Jay was so sanguine about her appearance. Also piled on the desk were five newspapers. CIVIL WAR? queried one headline. WAR IN THE BAY? asked another. Tach shivered and looked away.

"Is there some reason why you're here, or did you just feel an overwhelming need to take it out on a convenient man for the predicament you're in?"

"I wish to hire you."

"First, a question. How'd you get off Governor's Island?"

"I escaped," Tachyon replied.

"Great." Jay swiveled around in his chair and peered through the venetian blinds at the street below. "Is there an army of goons right behind you?"

"No. I was careful."

"So what's the job? Look for a runaway father?"

The only thing that kept her from going down the detective's throat was the knowledge that wisecracking was as natural to Jay Ackroyd as breathing. Even when it would

result in a lot less pain, the private investigator couldn't resist shooting his mouth. It usually ended with a fist in said mouth, but Jay persevered. He was either very brave or very stupid. Tachyon still hadn't decided which.

"I want you to teleport me into Jube's apartment."

"When he's not there?"

"Of course when he's not there," snapped Tach, exasperated. "If he was there, I would just knock on the door."

"So why don't you do that?"

"It would be rude to search a house with the owner present."

That boosted Ackroyd out of his chair. He took a nervous turn about the small office. "I've never been in Jube's apartment. I can't teleport if I haven't been there."

"Liar." It was a moment that called for succinctness. "You were busy entertaining Finn and Dutton with tales of Jube's exotic sculptures."

"Jesus, is nothing private in this crappy town?"

"No. Now will you do as I ask?"

"Look, do this much for me. At least give me a fucking reason. I like Jube."

Tachyon unconsciously massaged the peak of her belly with her palm. The bigger she got, the better it felt. It was Jay's fascinated stare that made her aware of what she was doing. Flushing, she quickly dropped both hands into her lap and gripped them tightly.

"I have reason to believe that Jube is not a joker."

Ackroyd goggled at her. "Meaning?"

"Well, if he's not a joker, and he's not a nat... you're the detective, figure it out."

"Alien?"

Tach nodded.

"That's crazy. They don't make aliens that look like that."

"How would you know?" pointed out Tach logically.

"Well, *you* should know."

"It's a big universe out there."

The detective ran a hand through his brown hair. He looked distracted.

"Will you help me, Jay?" asked Tach, for the first time allowing a little of her desperation to creep into her voice. "Jube may be my last hope."

"Oh, shit."

The stench of rotting meat was overpowering. Tach clapped a hand over her mouth, ran for the john, and vomited up the contents of her stomach. After rinsing her mouth, she plucked several tissues from a box. Holding them over her nose, she cautiously reentered the bedroom.

A bare mattress covered the floor, and a hot tub filled with icy water occupied one corner. A window air conditioner was set on high, and it had obviously been blowing for a long time. The temperature in the room was arctic.

Breathing through her mouth in quick pants, Tachyon stepped into the living room of the basement apartment. The source of the stench was pans filled with steaks, all cheerfully turning green on the top of a battered old card

table. But all this strangeness paled before the fantastic device that occupied the center of the room.

Jay had described it as a sculpture, modern art created by a demented mind. But it was actually future technology, built by an inventive alien mind. Tachyon watched in fascination as the tachyon transmitter seemed to shiver, and a flare of St. Elmo's fire ran the length of it.

She now had a pretty good idea what she was looking for.

Twenty minutes later she was still looking. Somewhere the Network *vacu* had a monitoring station. A place to spy upon this unsuspecting little world. A place to prepare the contracts that would ultimately deliver the humans into bondage.

"No," she said aloud to the interior of the closet she was inspecting. "This is my world. I will protect it." The fifty or so Hawaiian shirts were unimpressed with this impassioned little whisper.

From the front room there was a click of a well-oiled bolt snapping back. It might have been the fall of a guillotine. Tach huddled among some baggy black trousers, tried to still the frantic beating of her heart. Stomach acid raced up the back of her throat. Illyana yammered.

No, baby, thought Tach miserably, this is not a good place to be.

Maybe he wouldn't find her. Maybe he'd drop off his paper, check his phone machine, leave for a dinner with friends. But luck was not favoring the heir to the House Ilkazam. Heavy footsteps entered the room. Jube let out a belch reminiscent of a bus backfiring.

The closet door was pulled completely open. Flight was impossible. Was it too much to hope that Jube was hopelessly nearsighted?

"Jesus Christ!"

Hope withered with a tiny whine. Tach gathered dignity and outrage about herself like a queen wrapping herself in ermine. Stepped to the door. Jube had a rotting steak in one hand, and a Hawaiian shirt in the other. Tach stared at the six nipples lining the broad black chest like dainty yellow pimples. The shirt dropped to the floor, and a fat, three-fingered hand closed tight around Tach's wrist. Jube yanked her unceremoniously from the closet.

"How typically Takisian," said Jube, and it didn't sound like a compliment.

"How much more like a Network *vacu*," spat Tachyon. "I at least came openly to these people. You live in secret among them, waiting for the proper moment. How much do you stand to make on this transaction, soul seller?"

"How did you find out?" demanded Jube. Seen this close, his tusks looked threatening. "I know damn well you didn't figure it out for yourself. I've been fooling you for twenty years. And I don't think a body shift suddenly boosted your IQ."

Tach felt the flush rising from her neck to the point of her widow's peak. Insults stood poised to fly, but she only managed to get her mouth open before there was an urgent knocking on the door.

"Go away!" yelled Jube.

"Open the goddamn door," came the voice of Jay Ackroyd. "You got my client in there, and he... she... shit... hasn't paid yet."

Jube favored Tachyon with another glare, as if involving the ace had somehow deepened her sin, and waddled ponderously to the door. Jay slouched in.

"You blew the punch line, Jay," Jube grumbled. He then turned a sour eye on the detective. "And what a way to repay me for my great hospitality, sneaking her in here."

"Sorry, but she's got this crazy-assed idea that you're an alien

"I am," Jube said so quietly that Jay missed it.

He sailed on. "I should have known it was just hysterics or something."

"Are you listening to him? And by the way, I am *not* hysterical."

"You're pregnant out to here." Jay demonstrated. "Of course you're hysterical. *I'd* be hysterical What did you say?"

"I am," Jube repeated.

Jamming his hands into his pockets, Jay took an abrupt turn around himself. "Great. That's just fucking great."

Tachyon could understand the emotion, the terrible sense of betrayal. "If you'd really been a joker, it wouldn't have been so bad. But all the time you were laughing at them." Distress made her choke a little on the words.

It seemed to distress Jube almost as much. The jowls seemed to lengthen and quiver with sadness. "That's not true. On this world, in this place, I *am* a joker. I understand."

"No, you don't. You can't. However horribly they may treat you, whatever abuse -- verbal or physical -- is directed toward you, you have the ultimate comfort. *You know* you

are normal. For all I know, you're a thing of beauty on your home world. You will never understand deformity."

"And you can, little prince?" The sarcasm edged the words like acid. Jube tossed the steak back onto a plate; it landed with a wet splat. "Well, shall we get down to business?" Tach cringed. "There's only one reason for this little surreptitious social call. You want a message sent."

Tach eyed the joker -- *no, Network operative*, she corrected herself -- from beneath lowered lashes. "You would send one?"

"Of course."

Tachyon almost stepped into the pause, but the words died in her mouth as Jube added, "For a price. *Everything* has a price, Tachyon," Jube concluded in answer to her look.

"That, more than anything, convinces me you are Network."

Ackroyd stepped in. "Let's pretend for a minute that I'm just a guy. A nice, human guy who doesn't know *what the fuck you're both talking about.*"

"What are you?" Tach asked, ignoring Jay.

"Glabberan." The pronunciation made it sound like Jube had ripped loose a tonsil.

"Gesundheit," Jay said. "So how the hell did you end up here?"

"The Network brought him," said Tachyon.

"That again."

"Them," corrected Jube. His voice swelled with pride. "One hundred and thirty-seven member races working --"

"For domination and oppression. Their contracts are so unconscionable, the bargains so hard, that people are crushed beneath them," Tach said.

She spoke from knowledge. Eight thousand years ago the Takisians had staggered beneath burdensome payments. The Network had been more than happy to sell the fledgling space-farers' ships, but without the knowledge or the technology to repair them or build more. There was always a hitch in a Network contract. Then the Takisians had discovered the *Ishab'kaukab*, and bred them to serve their needs. The Network had resented this loss of a market, and a vicious war had been fought. Eventually the Network withdrew, but the Takisians had never forgotten the cost in blood and wealth. They had also never forgotten the shame of their economic servitude.

"Now, Jay, having heard the skewed Takisian view of the universe, will you give me equal time?" Jay shrugged his assent. "Yes, we're traders, yes, we drive a hard bargain because for us the highest law is the contract. But unlike them" -- a point to Tachyon -- "any race is free to join the Network, and we don't care how distasteful your personal habits might be."

Tach couldn't stand it. "They have no honor. No sense of right or wrong. They just grub for advantage. For eight thousand years they've been trying to regain their hold on Takis -- and for eight thousand years they've been failing."

"Guys... uh, people. I'm not getting paid by the hour on this one." To Tachyon he added, "I was hired to pop you in here so you could find out if Jube was an alien or not. He is, so I'll be going, and you two can trade insults all afternoon."

"Don't you care at all that your world is under siege?"

"I see one fat guy in a really tacky Hawaiian shirt. Doesn't look like the front wave of an invasion to me."

"Then you're an idiot." Tach turned her back and folded her arms, resting them on the bulge of her pregnancy.

"Bye." Jay wagged his fingers at the alien pair.

"Wait." Jay turned inquiringly back to Jube. I must have your solemn promises that you will not reveal my secret."

"I don't have to drink any blood or anything, do I?" Jay asked.

Jube frowned, puzzled. Tach bit her lip in vexation. "No," the Glabberan replied.

Jay nodded thoughtfully. "And if I don't promise?"

"I make no deal with her."

Jay and Tach measured glances. The alien acquiesced with a sharp little bob of the head.

"You got my word."

She had to force the words. "By Blood and Bone I swear."

Jay left.

Jube picked up the remote control to his television and waddled into his bedroom. Tachyon waddled after him. She watched as the Network agent entered a complex series of numbers onto the remote. As the last digit was struck, the bare brick wall at the back of the apartment seemed to dissolve. Sixty years ago it had been a coal cellar. Now it was a beachhead for a poisonous invasion force. Pushing aside her repulsion, Tachyon forced herself to concentrate. The back wall held a gigantic holocube. A horseshoe-shaped

console curved about that cube, and nestled in the center was a chair contoured for Jube's squat bulk. More machines lined the walls. Some Tachyon could identify. Most she couldn't.

Jube walked past her and settled with a grunt into his chair. He looked back inquiringly at Tachyon. Gnawing nervously at the inside of her cheek, the Takisian dithered.

Yes, her predicament was desperate, but did she have the right to endanger Takis for one hundred and twenty pounds of male flesh?

"Are we doing this?" asked Jube, shattering her thoughts and sending them skittering in all directions. Tach nodded mutely.

There was a place on the console where Tach could sit. It wasn't terribly comfortable, but Jube showed no inclination to offer his chair. The sausagelike fingers caressed the keypad. He glanced up at Tach. Like most people his eyes kept drifting to the swell of her belly. Tach steeled herself for the inevitable question. But Jube surprised her. Instead of the irritating bleat of *"How does it feel?"* the alien said wistfully, "I haven't had a child yet. May never get to now. One of the trade-offs for taking up Network service."

"Yes, I suspect there isn't a Glabberan female within twenty light-years."

Jube busied himself with the keypad before answering. "I could impregnate myself." The joker smiled at Tach's eye-widening reaction. "We Glabberan are hermaphrodites. But I had a feeling that me fetching up pregnant was going to be tough to explain in terms of the wild card. It would stretch even your credulity."

"Is that how I seem to you? Credulous?"

A form flickered to life on the holocube. The language was unfamiliar, the form was not. Tach had read enough contracts in her life to recognize one. She could feel depression crawling down her body like men on a treacherous, icy cliff.

"It's a function of your upbringing. You Takisians measure everything by your cultural imperative. You can be incredibly murderous and devious, but overall you're an endearingly forthright race. You take honor and vows and blood debts and all that baggage very seriously."

Tach indicated the holocube. "And all this time I thought a contract was sacrosanct to the Master Traders. If you're telling me it's not, I shall have to rethink these negotiations."

The big head shook ponderously from side to side. "Oh, no, you don't have to worry about that. We'll honor the letter of the law... it's just sometimes the spirit that escapes us." And Tach thought she heard an echo of regret in the joker's voice like half-heard summer thunder. "You Takisians will put yourselves through oceans of shit to fulfill a vow. Well just find a new way to interpret a clause and spare ourselves a wade in the shit."

Tachyon's names -- both the Takisian and the human nom de guerre -- appeared in the lines of alien prose as startling and incongruous as icebergs in a goldfish pond. Jube's hand dropped into his lap, and he looked up at Tach out of small pouched eyes.

"Okay, what exactly do you want?"

"More to the point -- what is this going to cost me?"

"I thought we should settle on an open contract. Payment to be made later."

Outrage made her voice a squeak. "I am not so stupid as to sign a blind contract with *you*."

Jube rubbed thoughtfully at his upper lip. "Tell you what, in memory of an old friendship -- I'll let you exclude anything you want."

Tach eyed the other alien suspiciously. "How will you show a profit?"

"I'll manage. Now what am I selling you?"

"Passage to Takis."

Again that head shake like a statue waking. "No can do. I'm not a captain. All I have at my disposal is a slightly jury-rigged tachyon transmitter."

"So you're telling me I have to haggle with you over the price of a message, and again with some rapacious ship's captain for passage?"

"Yes, that's what I'm telling you."

"You really are the most disgusting bloodsuckers."

"Deal or not, Tachyon. It's not my belly expanding with each passing day."

"Very well." She began to tick off on her fingers. "I won't give you the clinic."

"Don't want it anyway," grunted Jube as he began to type.

"My holdings on Takis are exempt."

"Okay."

"You can't have *Baby*."

"You don't have her either," pointed out the joker with irritating logic.

With as much dignity as she could muster, Tach looked down her nose and said, "I will... just as soon as you can send a message."

"Anything else?"

"My bank accounts, investments, personal possessions."

Jube shrugged dismissively. "Paltry to a Master Trader."

There was something in the joker's eyes that raised warnings like the skirt of a hurricane approaching shore. Tach almost stuttered in her haste to add, "And me. Either this body or the other. You can't have them." Jube nodded and typed in the condition. "Or any portion of them. My brain is not going to end up running a mining operation on some outer moon." Tach canted her head back and considered. The effort of trying to outguess, outthink, outmaneuver the Network was summoning a prickling headache that settled low in her forehead with all of the irritating persistence of too-long bangs.

"My knowledge, work, research on the wild card, or any related genetic research." Hastily she added, "Nor will I submit to experimentation to try to determine the source of our telepathy."

"In short we can't have a piece of body, soul, or mind."

"Correct. This body, or the real one."

Jube cocked his head, eyed her curiously. "Why so protective of this body? You're just renting, so to speak."

"I feel a certain... obligation," said Tach slowly. "I must guard her future encompassed by this body ... And there is... our child." Tach stared down at her hands.

"I just hope she's being as careful with mine."

"Anything else?"

"What?" Tach lifted dazed eyes, pulling herself almost by main force back to a limbo world of regrets and fears and might-have-beens.

"The contract," Jube prompted gently. "Is there anything else you'd like to exclude?"

Tach wearily shook her head. Jube hit a key with an aggressive little finger. From the maw of another unidentifiable contraption, a silvery paper was expelled. It was cold and slick in Tachyon's fingers like mercury made solid and rolled as cellophane. The words (in English now) were etched into its surface, starkly red against the silver.

"Very interesting color choice," she said dryly. "Do I sign in blood too?"

"Nothing so exciting," grunted Jube. "And there's nothing significant about the color. This is mycar, virtually indestructible, but a bitch to read. The red shows up better."

"Certainly gets your attention," Tach agreed as she carefully perused the document.

It contained the usual *whereofs* and *theretos*, and parties of the first part and parties of the second part. It was a party that Tachyon would rather have missed. But stripped down, the legal flesh boiled away until only the bones remained, it basically said that Jhubben of Glabber, representative of the Network, would send a message summoning a fast ship to Earth. In consideration for this service Tachyon, aka Prince Tisianne of the House Ilkazam, agreed to pay Jube an unspecified amount, or perform some service to be determined at some later, unspecified date. It made Tachyon crazy even to contemplate signing it.

So of course she signed it. What other choice did she have?

"Are you going to send the message?" asked Tach.

"Yes."

"When?"

"Just as soon as you're out of my apartment," came the patient if rude reply.

"You don't trust me?"

"No," said Jube firmly as he got a hand under elbow and assisted her off the console. "Jube the Walrus and Dr. Tachyon trusted each other. Prince Tisianne and Jhubben of the Network --"

"Are implacable enemies."

Chapter Seven

"Jube will use you as our message drop."

"Oh, goody." Jay was canted back in his chair, feet on the desk, sucking on coffee. "So added to aiding and abetting a felon, we have consorting with aliens and smuggling aliens ... The damn INS is going to love me."

Tach ignored him. "It will be at least a week before the ship arrives, but I will check with you every day just to be on the safe side."

"And where will you be staying?"

"In New Jersey. That is all you need to know."

"And how are you going to get back there?"

The detective's bland face was even more bland than usual. Tach eyed him suspiciously. "What? What have you heard? What do you know?"

"City's been sealed."

This is not a big problem," was the acerbic reply. "I assume at some time you have been to New Jersey?"

"Yeah, but the only place I remember really well is a nightclub in Jersey City."

"It will do."

Jay formed the fingers of his right hand into the shape of a gun, pointed at Tach.

The owner of the nightclub was very annoyed. He thought Tach was a runaway who had been sleeping in his club. He also thought she was drunk; actually a front-heavy Tach was trying to overcome the effects of the teleport.

Balance regained, she took a quick glance about the shadowed and silent club. It was pretty sleazy, but then this was New Jersey... and Jay.

"I'm callin' the cops!"

"Please do. I'm with the Department of Health and Public Safety. We're making an undercover sweep, and let me tell you, a night exploring *your* kitchen and bathrooms..." The owner blanched.

"We've had some help problems," the man whined.

Tach was heading for the front door. "Well, get them fixed!"

She found a pay phone a block from the club. Dialed the junkyard.

Tachyon was resting in a recliner, a pillow supporting the small of her back, feet up to relieve the swelling in her ankles. The pressure of two pairs of eyes finally penetrated her darting, whirling thoughts. She looked up, meeting Tom Tudbury's concerned look, and Mark Meadows's thoughtful gaze.

"What?" she asked.

"It's, like, really weird watching you, man. At times you've got this faraway peaceful look like you're telling the world, 'I'm pregnant, so you and your problems can just go piss off.' And other times I look in your eyes, and it's pure Tachyon."

She stared at the lanky human. His six-foot-four-inch frame was too long for the sofa, so his remarkably big feet hung over the end of the couch like moving crates that had suddenly taken a mind to wearing tennis shoes. Ragged

ends of hair just brushed the back of his collar. Once it had hung below his shoulders.

Tach sighed and let go of the past. "Ideal, I'm losing my self."

"Much of what we are is defined by our biology," Mark reminded her.

"How depressing." She sat silent for a moment, then asked, "I'm curious -- how did you know to rescue me?"

"They, like, read in Taos, New Mexico, too. I'd joined a commune --"

"There still are some?" It was the first thing Tommy had said in hours.

"Yeah, a couple. Anyway, we went into town for groceries, and I saw the headline on *Aces*. So I came."

A strange expression twisted Tommy's face, regret and guilt. *Because he didn't come for me?* Tach wondered. Aloud she said, "You shouldn't be here, Mark. It's too dangerous."

"Don't worry. I've gotten pretty good at this. I know how to buy fake ID. I can spot tails... well, most times," he amended, and the pale blue eyes blinked rapidly behind the thick lenses of his glasses. It was a brief glimpse of the man he had been.

"I miss my sweet Mark. My innocent one," said Tach softly.

"Mr. Bush's meaner and crueller attitude toward wild cards sent him away," Mark said in a feeble attempt at a joke.

It was a bizarre set of events which had turned the former flower child into a fugitive from federal justice. Mark's ex-wife had returned after years of absence and

demanded custody of the couple's retarded daughter, Sprout. Kimberly based her case on Cap'n Trips's unfitness as a parent because he was a wild card. The court agreed but didn't find the former Mrs. Meadows too tightly wrapped either. They removed Sprout to the care of New York's foster services. Mark objected strenuously to this and, enlisting the aid of his "friends," broke his child out of the juvie home. That made him a criminal. It was a mad world, Tachyon decided.

"Anyway, I'm here, Tachy, and I want to help. So tell me what you need," Mark concluded.

She laughed. "Blood and Ancestors, *where* to start. She sobered.

"Go on," Tom prodded her out of her abstracted silence.

"I haven't been home in almost fifty years, and I'm coming home at a distinct disadvantage. I don't have my powers. I have to prove who I am, reclaim my place, and *then* I can start worrying about locating Blaise and my body. And how do I force Blaise to make the switch? And what if he kills my body to stop me? What if he's *already* killed my body?"

"First answer me a question," Tom said. "Why do you believe Blaise is on Takis?"

"Because of the company he took. My ship, my body... and Durg."

A slap couldn't have hit Mark harder. His fingers scrabbled at the back of the sofa, and he came bolt upright.

"Durg. I left him standin' on the side of the road. K.C. was dead, Blaise was on our trail, and about half a thousand

cops right behind him. I didn't want Durg in trouble with the law. I was trying to protect him."

"Leaving him was the worst thing you could have done. He's Morakh. They're bred for only two purposes -- killing and loyal service. A Morakh cannot exist without a master." She sighed.

A delicate shivering was running through Mark's hands. "So I caused this."

Tach stood, crossed to him, and closed her fingers briefly around his. "No, Mark, no. Assigning blame at this late date is quite useless, and anyway, the original sin is mine. I brought Blaise into my world in a spray of bullets and blood."

"He never knew you killed his guardian," Tom said.

"Some things, maybe, are sensed by the soul."

Tom set aside his beer and, propping his elbows on his knees, regarded her over the top of steepled fingers. "Are you planning to ask for some help?"

Stiffly she said, "I would not so impose. Besides, I can handle matters myself."

"Damn stiff-necked Takisian. You'd put your head in a noose just to prove it's a pretty necklace."

"The point?" she gritted, eyeing him down the length of her upturned nose.

"From what you've told me, you're going back to a pretty Byzantine and poisonous environment. You're going to need bodyguards."

"Tommy, I could not ask it of you."

"You're not. I'm offering."

"Oh, man." Tachyon had never seen it outside of a movie screen, but Mark actually slapped his forehead. "I'm so dense. *Now* I remember you. You're the Turtle!"

"Yeah, I'm the Turtle. An embarrassed and red-faced Turtle. I should have been the one to break her out of Governor's Island."

"No, man, you're, like, a *hero*. You don't break the laws. Me" -- he shrugged -- "I'm already a fugitive from federal justice. What's another count on the rap sheet?"

Tom's face clouded at the memory of the last time he'd faced off with Mark Meadows -- or rather one of Mark's "friends." J. J. Flash, Esquire, had firmly and comprehensively kicked Turtle's armored behind. Mark remembered at precisely the same moment and sucked in air in a quick little hiccuping gasp.

"An... uh, I'm real sorry about Flash, but I had to get my kid."

"Forget it." Tommy waved him off.

Tachyon reasserted control over the conversation. "Gentlemen, I thank you for your most generous offers, but this --"

"Makes perfect sense. Me and my 'friends' would be happy to go. Give Turtle here some backup."

Tach nibbled at a forefinger, studied them from beneath her lashes. Two middle-aged men, and a more incongruous pair could not be imagined. Mutt and Jeff. And, Ideal, she loved them both so much... and could use them so much.

Slowly she said, "Aces would do more than provide me with protection. If I was to return with you two in tow, it would improve my standing immeasurably." She smiled

humorlessly. "On Takis reality is often shaped more by appearances than by objective fact."

Tom suddenly stood and took a turn about the living room. His plump cheeks had gone pink, and his brown eyes were shining.

"Another planet. Shit, I've hardly been to another *state* except New York. My whole life I've been waiting for this. When I was a kid, I'd stand at my bedroom window and watch the ships passing down the Kill. Just shadows and lights in the dark, going someplace wonderful. I wanted to be on those ships so bad."

Tach held out a hand to him. "Now you will be."

They were seated in a diner in Bayonne. Since Jube had traveled via Ackroyd's finger, it was another charming establishment worthy of Jay's low-class tastes. Jube's colorful shirt flared like an abstract painting against the tattered red plastic booth.

"It's been set. White Sands in three days' time."

Her mouth suddenly gone dry, Tach took a quick gulp of her vanilla shake. "How... how ironic," she said, and remembered her arrival forty-seven years before at those same White Sands. "The area is much more heavily guarded than it was in 1946. Are you sure this is wise?"

"This is a Network ship. Nothing can detect it."

"A slight exaggeration. You've been trying to run the Takisian sensor net, and failing -- spectacularly, I might add."

Jube brought his broad three-fingered hand down hard on the table. Glasses, salt and pepper shakers, and Tach, all jumped. "I haven't been doing squat about invading or

infiltrating, or infecting Takis. *I've* been settled on Earth studying a most admirable group of aliens who have been royally fucked over by *you*."

Shame set her to plucking nervously at the strands of hair that had broken free from her braid.

"I am sorry Jube. Old hatreds make mockery of recent friendships. We are not representatives of our respective cultures, are we?" She turned strained and desperate eyes to Jube.

Taking her hand, Jube said softly, "If it's any comfort to you, I'm not a negotiator. I'm a scientist, an anthropologist, that's all. And I do love these people... at least as much as you do."

Tach nodded. Her throat suddenly hurt too much to talk. Jube's words had reminded her of just how much she was leaving, and the responsibilities she couldn't help but fear she was evading. The sealing of the city could only mean that another attack on the Rox was imminent, and Tach wondered if this time Bloat could survive. She should stay and try to help, but the ship was arriving, and there wouldn't be another. She did calculations and decided that if the Ideal favored her, she could be restored to her body, and back on Earth in two months. Could Teddy hang on that long?

"White Sands, three days. Well, I'd best get planning." She drained her shake and slid out of the booth.

"Tachyon." She stopped and looked back. "In memory of the old joker news vendor who told bad joker jokes, take this, and don't think too harshly of me," Jube said.

He placed it on the table. A tangle of wires topped with a yellow-green crystal. Tach's eyes widened slightly.

"Thank you, Jube. It will help."

"Cool," breathed Trips as the heavy sunken door swung up to reveal the Turtle shell.

"You're sure you'll be all right?" Tach asked again nervously.

Tommy nodded. "Yeah, I got sandwiches." He hefted the wicker hamper. "Plenty to drink."

"Don't get pulled over," Mark said seriously. "I bet there's an open-bottle law for turtle shells too." He then allowed a delighted smile to crease his cheeks. Tom and Tach just stared up at the big ace, then began laughing.

"What a team," Tom said. "Your relatives haven't got a prayer, Tachy."

"They could not withstand us before," the girl replied. She stepped forward and gave the ace a quick hug. Tom started to close his arms around her, then abruptly dropped them.

"Like, go in peace, man," Trips said, flashed Tom the peace sign, then vigorously shook the smaller man's hand.

Tom entered the shell. Trips and Tach stepped back and watched the great armored shell slide silently out into the night. It dwindled quickly as it climbed. Their last sight of it was as it crossed like a small, self-propelled shadow across the face of the moon.

"Awesome," Mark sighed.

Jay and Mark were waiting for her in a corner booth. The nightclub was jumping at nine o'clock with a bad salsa band making conversation virtually impossible. It wasn't

detering the patrons, however. The rumble of three hundred voices provided a bass counterpoint to the wailing singer.

"How'd it go?" Mark asked. Under the colored strobe lights his face seemed to dissolve and reform every third second. It was sickening.

"Not so well," Tach said. The memory of Cody's tears gnawed at her. "She wanted to come with me. Impossible of course. A woman of childbearing years. Impossible." She sat down at the table and briefly buried her face in her hands. "I love that woman. And I have brought her nothing but pain." Tach threw her hair back. Turned to Jay. "So have you completed the arrangements for our journey?"

"Yeah." He pushed three tickets across the table.

Tach stared at them. Blinked and looked again. They had not changed, they were still... "*Bus tickets?*" Tachyon finally said.

Jay threw out his hands palms up. "Hey, they're watching the airports, trains don't go anywhere close to where we need to be --"

"I thought you would charter a plane or something."

"With what?" Jay asked. "You got no money. I got no money. He" -- jerk of a thumb at Mark -- "sure as hell ain't got no money."

"But a *bus*? I'm pregnant. The last time I rode a bus was from Lisbon to Amsterdam in 1953 It was awful.

Jay just shrugged. Mark laid a hand soothingly on Tach's shoulder. Withdrew it quickly as she tensed. "Doc, it'll be okay. They're a lot more comfortable flow."

"There are three tickets here." Tach eyed the detective suspiciously.

"I'm coming with you. Make sure you get there safe."

"Are you sure this isn't merely a ploy to drive up your fee?"

"Bitchy, bitchy. Watch it, you're going to give motherhood a bad name." Jay checked his watch. "We better get rolling. The bus leaves at ten."

Hours later she leaned against the window, her head pillowed on Mark's rolled-up jacket, and watched the night ratchet past. Jay was snoring loudly in his seat. Mark was as silent as a statue. Tach could sense he was awake.

He whispered to her, "Scared, baby?"

"Yes. I am no one. I live nowhere. Belong no place. I wish someone could find me again."

"Someone will. *You*."

Chapter Eight

As the doors to the office swung closed behind him, Durg again wondered if his line carried a recessive for insanity. He had been stolen from this House at age twelve. Now, one hundred and ninety-six years later, he was returning. His boot heels drew music from the harmonically sensitive floor. It seemed an entire symphony's worth of walk to the great desk.

Durg knew his attention should have been focused upon L'gura, *Raiyis* of House Vayawand. But there had been three rulers of the House since Durg's kidnapping, and of greater and more terrifying interest was the Morakh who stood behind and slightly to the left of the *Raiyis's* chair. Yes, she was standing absolutely still, but there was the poised quivering of a recently shot arrow. She was ready to fight. To kill. Her honey brown hair had been twisted up into an elaborate knot like a temple chhatri. Down, it would probably stretch to her knees. She was very beautiful.

Lighter-boned than a Morakh male, she was still massive when measured against her master. L'gura was thin to the point of emaciation, and his chalk white skin set off the green and blue of the jewels implanted in his cheeks and beneath his brows. He was placidly watching Durg's approach.

It is a mark of his confidence in his Morakh that they leave the guards outside, Durg thought. And almost too late he reacted to her slashing attack. *Too long among humans. Too long on a world where guests enter unarmed into rooms.*

Durg tucked into a tight ball, thus missing the larynx-crushing blow. The roll was supposed to take her in the shins. She was too fast. She sprang lightly over him,

delivering a vicious thrust kick to the kidneys as she passed. Ignoring the pain, Durg snapped onto his back and caught her by the ankle. Threw her hard into the far wall. He regained his feet just in time to counter her next attack. He now had his objective. He endured two punishing blows in order to close with her. He drove his heel down hard on her instep and speared her in the throat with his right elbow, while with his left hand he drew the ceremonial sword swinging in its scabbard at her side. He used her own momentum to send her stumbling past him, and he quickly ran to L'gura, knelt, and offered the sword and the back of his neck.

"Malika, enough!"

At that shouted command from her master, the woman skittered to a stop inches from Durg's unprotected back. The aching between his shoulder blades diminished to a mere itch.

L'gura stood and threw the sword back to his Morakh. "It seems he is worth enough to let him live."

"He is still a traitor and tainted," Malika replied.

"But so interesting. A renegade Morakh who returns home in a stolen Ilkazam ship with an Ilkazam noble and an abomination in tow." L'gura resumed his seat. "If your story is intriguing enough, I'll let you live long enough to complete it."

Durg omitted nothing. He told of his theft by a raiding Ilkazam party led by Prince Zabb. His years of service to House Ilkazam. The journey to Earth to evaluate the success of the Ilkazam Enhancer experiment. His secret command to locate and kill the heir to House Ilkazam, Prince Tisianne. His defeat at the hands of a woman touched by that Takisian Enhancer. His abandonment, and his years on Earth. How by

the grace of the Ideal a powerful weapon had been delivered into his hands.

"Two, in fact," Durg amended. "And I realized I had a coin valuable enough to buy my return to the House of my birth and blood."

L'gura said nothing, just stroked his upper lip thoughtfully. Malika, having ascertained she would not interrupt her master, stepped in. "Why now? Why in all these long years did you decide that now was the moment?"

"I wished to breed. I heard you were available."

L'gura laughed at his Morakh's outraged expression. "Durg at' Morakh bo..." The *Raiyis* of House Vayawand raised his brows inquiringly.

"Blaise," Durg supplied the name of his master.

"...bo Blaise, you are a most unusual Morakh. Tainted, yes, but very interesting. Now, tell me of this coin, and why it is valuable to me."

"Will it buy me back into my House?"

"If it is valuable enough."

"Is the heir to House Ilkazam worth anything to you?"

L'gura leaned back in his chair. Spoke to the ceiling. "If you actually held Tisianne." He snapped suddenly forward and pinned Durg with a look. "But you do not. You possess a body animated by the mind of a mudcrawling girlchild."

"True, but the Ilkazam won't know that."

"And what happens when the real Prince Tisianne arrives and proves us all liars?"

"He will not. The human mudcrawlers are primitive. Years ago they attained their moon, then lost their will and

nerve for space travel. They have no ships capable of crossing the void. The only ship was Prince Tisianne's, and we have removed that means of escape."

L'gura sighed. "I have no interest in gene money. I wish to defeat Ilkazam."

"As do we. We are not proposing a kidnapping, a hostage situation. My master suggests that it might be more to your benefit if Tisianne brant T'sara seems to have willingly switched his allegiance."

"It has never happened," Malika said.

Durg shifted to look at her. "Then how much more impact this betrayal will cause."

"No one will believe it," L'gura said.

"They will. They will hear my young master speak, and he has the power of words."

"Not enough to keep him alive. He is a half-breed horror."

"Again, you are correct, but surely it is enough to keep him alive a few days?"

"You're bargaining with me, Morakh. Are you sure you weren't stranded among the Network *vacu* instead of mudcrawlers?"

"The question is... are you buying?"

L'gura stared at Durg for a long, long time. Durg knew the man was regretting the genetic manipulations that had left the Morakh completely opaque to even the most powerful telepath. When you were certain of your pet's loyalty, it was not a problem. When you weren't

Durg smiled inwardly but allowed no hint of his internal pleasure to show on his face.

"Three days for your half-breed."

"That should be enough for him to prove his usefulness."

"There will be no reprieve," L'gura warned.

"As you say, Most Bred."

And Durg bowed his way out of the office.

"We have little time," Durg said softly to Blaise.

"Do it," Blaise ordered, and Kelly closed his eyes and contacted *Baby*.

And the ship swallowed the Vayawand guard left on duty until the arrival of the House shuttle. Durg spared a moment to ponder the communication that had sprung up between the ship and the bogus Tachyon and regret it, but it was serving its purpose now, and soon Kelly would be separated from the other stolen female.

"I've bought you three days, but don't trust it. Treachery is the great Takisian art form. They'll try to kill you before the deadline and take Kelly for themselves."

"So I'll jump this L'gura guy --"

"No! We save that."

"So how the fuck do I convince this guy not to croak me?" Blaise paced a few nervous steps away, and back again. "I knew we shouldn't have come here."

"You are an abortion, afterbirth, the most filthy thing they can imagine. Which means they will underestimate you. I will select the target and upon my command use your

mind control. Strike when they are unaware. Kill them quickly."

Durg had already selected the target -- Malika, the Morakh guard. Perhaps it was a quirk of Blaise's madness coupled with his freakish mind-control power, but the young man had found the key to a Morakh's mind. At their first encounter Durg had repelled the mental attack, but Blaise had come close to scratching the surface of that opaque mind. Months of practice had provided Blaise with the secret. Now all their lives depended upon whether the knack would translate from Morakh to Morakh.

The boy's shrill objection pulled Durg back. "And then they'll kill me!"

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. Are you brave enough to risk the roll of those dice?"

The young man stared down into Durg's eyes. There was fear there, and Durg remembered Blaise was only sixteen. But House Tandeh had been founded by just such a "boy." Then that wild, fearsome smile touched Blaise's lips, and Durg felt something akin to a chill pass down his spine.

"What the hell. I've always been lucky."

"The greatest danger in Vayawand lies in the fact that the revolutionary energy of the masses will be dissipated in spurts, in isolated explosions. Our task as the founders of the Committee of Action consists of unifying the masses and investing them with the greatest possible force. With that titanic power behind us we will sweep to power, not only in Vaya, but across the whole of the planet."

The Most Bred and the *Tarhiji* (Kelly had discovered that meant the mind-blind bulk of the population) servants -
- sat enthralled. Kelly stifled a yawn. One servant let out a

small hiccup of sound, an aborted cheer. He was quickly shushed, but then Sekal leapt to his feet and lifted his wineglass to Blaise.

"It is wonderful! It is... brilliant, it is... it is..."

"But what does it mean?"

It was a soft and languid voice, and it belonged to an extremely elderly, extremely precious nobleman by the name of Bat'tam. From the moment of their arrival he had been a constant visitor at their suite, but the attraction wasn't Blaise. In fact, this was the first time Bat'tam had ever addressed a word to the young man. No, Bat'tam came for Kelly -- or rather to lust after the flesh that Kelly currently inhabited. It made Kelly crazy

Blaise stared down into Bat'tam's sagging, wrinkled face. "What does it mean?" the young man repeated softly. His purple black eyes swept the dinner table, and the now-silent nobles. "It means I shall make you the rulers of Vayawand... and the conquerors of Takis." And then he began to sing in a rich baritone.

The sound drowned out Bat'tam's plaintive query of "*How?*"

"Arise, ye prisoners of Vayawand! Arise, ye wretched of Takis, for justice thunders condemnation, a better world's in birth. No more tradition's chains shall bind us, arise, ye slaves; no more in thrall! Takis shall rise on new foundations, we have been naught, we shall be all!"

The tune was stirring, the words simple. Several of the nobles, and a few of the *Tarhiji* servants, tried it out on the chorus. Durg slipped down the table refilling wineglasses. Bat'tam lifted his and then locked eyes with the Morakh.

"I hope your master can fight as well as he can talk,"
Bat'tam said.

Durg blinked slowly several times, then finally said,
"He doesn't need to. This battle's already won."

Chapter Nine

A small avalanche of white gypsum sand heralded Mark's return.

"No sign of the army." He slapped energetically at his pants legs, and sand hopped like terrified fleas from the material.

"What a relief," Jay said. "I was sure worried that a bunch of jeeps and tanks and helicopters were gonna come sneaking up on us."

Mark's face crumpled.

"POPINJAY," boomed Turtle through the speakers set into his shell. "IF YOU'RE GOING TO BE AN ASSHOLE, WHY DON'T YOU JUST CLIMB BACK IN THAT RENTAL CAR AND LEAVE?"

"Because I want to see the spaceship. And don't call me Popinjay, damn it."

"They're metal. They're not beautiful like our ships," Tach murmured, speaking almost more to herself than her companions.

Mark knelt and began rooting through the luggage. There wasn't much. While Jay had gone to rent a car Mark and Tach had bought a few changes of clothing in Alamogordo, New Mexico. Tach had also added a deck of cards and a traveling Scrabble set to her meager belongings. Mark and Tommy were so excited about this journey that Tach hadn't had the heart to tell them how stone-cold boring space travel could be.

The snap of the latches was loud in the desert darkness. Flicking on a pocket flashlight, the tall ace once

again surveyed his stash of powders.

"They haven't changed since the last time you checked -- four hours ago," Jay said.

Mark rocked back to squat on his heels. "I know. I just keep wishing I could have made more. I've got four of everybody. That's it."

"Mark, we have pharmaceuticals on my planet," Tach reminded him.

"Yeah, but it'll take time to get the proper chemical equivalents, and if things get hot, we may not have it." He shook his head and shut the case.

"Well, let's just hope the Network baggage handlers didn't train at Tomlin International," Jay said. "Otherwise your dope is history."

Mark grinned. "I think this qualifies as carryon."

Tach was listening with perhaps half an ear to the humans' conversation. Mostly she scanned the explosion of light that was the Milky Way. A star dislodged itself from its fellows and began a slow arcing fall toward Earth.

"There, Mr. Ackroyd, there's your spaceship."

Jay frowned up the line of her arm. "Uh-uh, shooting star."

"Spaceship."

The star continued its descent. Jay gnawed at his lower lip. "Okay, airplane then."

"JESUS, ACKROYD," Turtle said. "YOU SOUND LIKE A UFO DEBUNKER. IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE THERE'S GOING TO BE A SPACESHIP, WHY ARE WE ALL STANDING AROUND FREEZING OUR BUTTS IN THE DESERT?"

"I don't know about you. Me, I'm getting two hundred bucks a day."

Lifting her wrist, Tach checked the sweep hand on her watch. No, it wasn't an illusion; the pilot of the Network vessel was descending at terrifying speed. Then suddenly Turtle and Popinjay's bickering was drowned under the crash of an enormous sonic boom.

"Holy shit," Jay breathed, and they all followed his gaze. "Twenty billion dollars spent on Star Wars, and they can't even detect *that*."

A ship was slipping down a wash of moonlight. The shape was triangular, the regularity broken by a light-filled dome that topped the vessel -- a moonstone mounted in a silver setting. After the clarion announcement of its arrival, its landing was virtually soundless, but some braking force was in operation, for whirling dust devils of white gypsum sand went coiling and twining toward the ship like beckoning fingers. Gypsum flakes chattered hysterically against Turtle's metal sides, and Jay, Tach, and Mark covered their eyes and gave their backs to the stinging sandstorm.

The ship settled, three great landing pylons sinking with a crunch into the sand. It was the first sound directly attributable to the arrival of the alien vessel, and Tachyon noticed that even the desert night birds remained undisturbed. Their fitful cheeping still pierced the darkness. Suddenly a large spot sprang to blinding life and pinned the foursome like bugs on a needle of light.

"Are you *sure* Blaise is headed for Takis?" asked Jay softly.

"It seems the most likely guess," Tach answered.

"I'd hate to be climbing aboard that thing for a guess."

"THEN I GUESS ITS A GOOD THING YOU'RE NOT COMING," Turtle boomed through his speakers.

Tach was eyeballing the ship, trying to estimate its interior capacity. The answers she was coming up with weren't very encouraging. The sleek little flying pie wedge was fast, but it was *small*. Obviously only a scout ship. Turtle seemed to suddenly bulk much larger beside her.

A ramp extruded tonguelike from the side of the ship, the motion accompanied by a soft humming. It dropped with a soft thud onto the sand, and they heard the sound of boot heels rapping metallically in the night. The bird song cut off abruptly. At her side Tach heard Mark draw in a sharp breath and hold it.

They're about to see an alien, she thought. Naturally they're frightened.

The Network contact reached the base of the ramp. It was still in the shadow of the ship, so Tachyon couldn't determine the species. It stepped forward, and moonlight lit the tips of the white blond hair, seemed to etch the tipped-up gray eyes with kohl. It smiled down at her.

Darkness crashed over Tachyon like a wave.

Chapter Ten

"Shit, what the fuck's wrong now?" were the dulcet words Tachyon heard when she regained consciousness.

Mark was patting first her hands, then her cheek, then going back to her hands. Her head was propped in Jay's lap. She knew because the smell of cheap aftershave was overwhelming.

"I always have this devastating effect on women," drawled a new, yet horribly familiar voice.

The accent was light, lilting, rather like a Rumanian crossed with a Swede. Tachyon talked the same way -- when she remembered to affect the accent. Only one other race would speak English with that particular cadence. Tach opened one eye, risked another glance. No, nothing had changed. It was still a Takisian. It was still her wicked cousin Zabb.

"JUST SHUT THE FUCK UP," Turtle growled.

Zabb turned his attention to the looming bulk of the Turtle shell. It was a long three seconds as he carefully scanned the armored surface. "Don't tell me you built another one of these ugly horrors? And I gave you such a perfect opportunity for a redesign."

Five years before, a ship from House Ilkazam had rather belatedly returned to Earth to evaluate the results of its botched experiment. Of lesser priority was to determine the fate and the whereabouts of the heir to the House. Zabb had captained that ship, and he'd been searching for Tachyon in order to kill him. In that effort he was foiled by Tom Tudbury, but he had managed to jettison Tommy's shell during the fracas. Tommy obviously hadn't forgotten. He

lifted a few feet off the ground, and Tach shrilled out, "Get me up! And Turtle, calm down."

"Yes, mushroom, *sit!*" Zabb ordered, and then laughed.

With Mark's supporting hand beneath her elbow, she started to struggle to her feet, only to have a pair of finely manicured hands close about her waist, swing her up, and set her lightly on her feet.

The touch of his telepathy was glass sharp, as cold as icicles. Tachyon looked up into the beautiful, laughing face of her cousin.

My, how you've changed, purred her tormentor.

Tachyon slammed up her primitive shields, more to shut off the sound of his mental laughter than any desire to protect her mind's secrets. Zabb lifted her hand, dropped gracefully to one knee before her, and lifted his face expectantly. Angrily she snatched back her hand.

No!

Because I've been such a bad boy? Zabb asked blandly, as he climbed to his feet.

Because you dishonor me. Greet me properly.

I take reality as I find it. You can't really expect me to salute you man to man?

You know what I am.

I know who you are. What you are is rather evident for the stars to see.

He lifted her hand again and this time spoke audibly. "Tis, what a fascinating predicament you've gotten yourself into this time."

"I take it you're acquainted," Jay said, then added, "Here I was waiting for E.T., and I get another comic-opera Takisian. Swell, just great."

Arching one brow, Zabb jerked his head at the fulminating human. "Who is this... person?"

"One of my protectors." The shrillness of her voice betrayed her nerves, and Tach angrily bit at her lower lip.

"Since when?" Jay whispered, and she could have slapped him.

Zabb turned his attention to Meadows, and despite his every effort a frown sank the arrogantly upraised eyebrow.

"Peace, man." The ace made the gesture, but his tone and the set of his shoulders made a mockery of the sentiment. "Like, it's really good to see you again."

"What is this? Is the whole fucking universe the size of New Jersey?" said Jay. "Does everybody know everybody?"

"Mark got a particularly edifying view of Zabb's tail as he turned it and ran from me and my ship a few years back."

"Don't get too cocky, Tis." Zabb jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "That's *my* ship. It's only by my say-so that anyone flies on her. You need me..." His eyes dropped, and he stared insolently at the bulge of her belly. "Obviously."

Jay cut through the round of escalating pleasantries. "Could we get on with this? I have to catch a plane in El Paso at eight-forty."

Zabb pulled out a pocket computer and began entering data. "The message said you wanted passage to Takis."

"If you please," said Tachyon.

"For just you?"

"And two others." She indicated Mark and Tom with a nod of the head.

Zabb favored her with a limpid, humorous glance. "You always did inspire such loyalty... in dogs and servants."

"Probably because I can be trusted," Tach said.

"Why do you want to return home?" the Takisian asked.

"That is none of your affair."

Zabb snapped shut the computer. "All right, I'll take you."

"What's the price?"

"You remain silent about my activities during our reconnaissance of Earth."

"*Kib'r* Benaf'saj is dead, Hali is dead, your ship lost, and you are on a Network vessel. I think the family will draw their own conclusions."

"Not if you give them the true story."

"Which is?" asked Tach with growing weariness.

"About how the Swarm attacked, but I valiantly fought them off at enormous cost to ship and crew. The ship, much of her sentience destroyed in the battle, fled into deep space. Where I was discovered by the Network. And..." He shrugged. "What could I do? The bloodsucking bastards insisted I pay for my rescue."

Confused, Tach shook her head as if the action would organize her mind better. "Why, Zabb? You can never return home. What does it matter what they think of you?"

His expression clouded. "I will die under unfamiliar stars, but if I leave my ancestors at peace, I will be satisfied."

Tach made a moue, drew the end of her long braid over one shoulder, and began idly plucking off split ends while she regarded her cousin. The expression was noble, the tone sincere, pain lurked in the corners of those gray eyes -- and she didn't believe him for a minute. He read the thought and flashed her an ironic smile.

"I'll have time to convince you during the voyage." The cold gray eyes studied Turtle speculatively. "And you, little man, are you willing to crawl out of your shell?"

"WHAT?" Tom asked.

"This is a scout ship. Virtually no hold space. What we do have is taken. I'll carry the flesh, but no more."

Silence seemed to wrap the shell. It had become a darker hole in the darkness. Tach felt her stomach take a fall of several stories. After all her proud words about not requiring help, it was very comforting to *have* that help. And Tach sensed her support was wavering. She wanted to say something to Tom, find some way to starch his backbone.

"Uh... Doc, could I talk to you for a minute?" asked Trips. "Privately."

Zabb crossed his arms over his chest. Laughter seemed to be lurking about the corners of that mobile mouth, hiding in the drooping brush of his full mustache.

"What's so goddamn funny?" Jay demanded.

"You... all of you. I can read minds."

Tach smiled, a slow, teeth-baring expression. Slipped a hand into her pocket and closed her fingers gratefully

around the device that Jube had given her. Pulled it out, unfolded her fingers like a flower blossoming. Fury crashed across Zabb's face.

Tach beckoned to Trips and Jay. They stepped away a few feet. Turtle continued to squat on the sand. Mark looked questioningly back at him.

"Turtle?" the gangly ace said. The shell seemed to shiver as it flew the few feet to join them.

Tach flicked her nail beneath the edge of the jewel. The device began to hum, and St. Elmo's fire ran chuckling through the wires. Instantly a headache slammed like a vise around her temples.

"What in the hell is that thing?" asked Jay.

The crystal was pulsing, throwing a putrid green light in a three-foot circle around them. Most of the shell was outside the protective glow. Just another reminder of how useless that encasing pod of steel was proving to be. *Why did I ever think he could come with us, or that he could be any help?* Tach wondered. Then forced herself to answer Jay's question.

"A mentat barrier. Periodically the Network tries to annex Takis by dealing with the mind blind. Rather recently, as we measure time, there was a little spat that we won because Takisians can fight like cornered ferrets when we need to, and to a Master Trader a Pyrrhic victory is bad business. But we also won because we're telepaths. The Ly'bahr developed this little toy to block our powers." Tach squeezed her eyes shut and sucked in a deep breath. "They're reasonably effective because they hurt like hell, but enough sufficiently determined telepaths can punch through it."

"Can this Zabb guy?" asked Jay.

"No."

That assurance acted on Trips like a starting gun. Words poured urgently out, and he stuttered in his haste and concern.

"This is c-crazy, Doc. Five years ago this guy tried to *kill* you. His whole purpose in life is to kill you. You can't get on a ship with him for a couple of weeks and expect to arrive on Takis with your parts intact."

"However sincere or insincere the emotion, Zabb wants to be vindicated in the eyes of the *Ajayiz*. He won't kill me until I've met my part of this bargain."

"And on Takis?" Mark asked.

"He won't be on Takis. He's signed a service contract with the Network. They take their contracts very seriously. Breach one, and they will hunt you to death and beyond. Zabb will deliver us and resume his duties."

"Forgive me, Doc, but I think you're being naive."

"What other choice do I have!" Anger and desperation edged her words like razors.

"Wait for another ship."

"Don't you understand anything. I've been saying? This is the Network. *Everything* costs. Everything is extra. If I reject this transport, we'll have to renegotiate, and the price will only go up. And I suspect I have already sold my soul."

"What was the price?" asked Trips.

"Open contract, payment to be tendered later."

"Dumb," was Jay's only comment.

"What else was I supposed to do?" She clutched at her temples. *"Damn this thing. It hurts."* And she turned away and vomited the contents of her stomach across the powdery white sands.

Trips flipped off the barrier, put his arm supportively around Tach's shoulders. Jay offered a handkerchief, and she gratefully wiped her mouth.

"Okay, we gotta do it." Trips shook his head. "We've just gotta be awful careful."

Serious glances all around. Tach gave a sharp nod and started back to Zabb.

"TACHY!" Tom's voice was stressed as if it had been scored with sandpaper. "I CAN'T... ...NOT WITHOUT MY SHELL." Tears blurred the final word.

There was an ache in her throat. Tach crossed to him and pressed her cheek to the cold iron. "Tommy," she managed.

Mark joined her. He stroked the metal with gentle fingertips as if handling a hurt animal. In some ways he was. "Oh, come on, man. You want it so bad. This is it, Burroughs and Clarke, 'Doc' Smith, remember like we talked that night... *The Lensmen?*"

"I HAVE A SHELL, AND I DON'T... *CAN'T* TRAVEL WITHOUT IT."

"Terrific, another cherished illusion blown to hell... the Great and Powerful Turtle is a weenie," Jay grunted.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Tommy," Tach said quickly.

"IT'S NOT THAT I'M AFRAID," Tommy flared. "MY POWERS DON'T WORK WHEN I'M OUTSIDE MY SHELL. I CAN

MOVE PENCILS AROUND IF I CONCENTRATE REAL HARD, MAYBE A SMALL ROCK BUT HOW THE HELL IS THAT GOING TO HELP?" To Tachyon he added softly. "I'D JUST BE OF NO USE TO YOU, TACHY."

"I understand, Tommy, it's all right."

There was a long moment of silence, then Turtle blurted, "I WANTED TO GO SO BAD." The shell rose and flew a few feet away. Suddenly a tall dune flattened beneath the force of Turtle's grief.

Mark looked seriously down at Tachyon. "We've got problems. I gotta sleep sometime. There's gotta be two of us."

The thought hit both of them simultaneously. They pivoted slowly to face Jay.

"No, oh no," said the detective, holding out his hands as if to ward them off and retreating backward a few steps.

"It makes perfect sense," Mark argued.

"Bullshit it does. You're asking me to climb on board that spaceship and go to *another* planet, where you can display me like a prize trout to a bunch of his... her relatives who may all want to kill her, except that I'm supposed to stop them."

"Yes," Tach said succinctly. "That sums it up."

"You're nuts," said Jay Ackroyd equally succinctly.

"You can let him down -- lots of people have -- but the Doc's always been there for us. He's going to a dangerous place, and she's in a tough condition to deal with violence and killing. So, I'm asking you for her. Will you help?" Trips asked.

"Hell, if the crazy Takisians don't kill me, the fucking pronouns will." Jay unlimbered a hip flask and took a swig. Jay slapped the cap back onto the flask and thrust it back into his coat pocket. Sauntered over to Tachyon. "Okay, but I get time-and-a-half for other planets."

Tach couldn't find a phrase, a word, or an entire army of words crushing enough for the detective. Instead she spun on her heel and returned to Turtle. Laying her cheek against the cold metal shell, she whispered softly, "Goodbye, Tommy."

"COME BACK." Even through the distortion of the speakers she could hear his pain. Her throat ached in sympathy.

"I promise." Whirling she half ran, half staggered through the deep sand until she stood face-to-face with Zabb. "I accept your terms, Trader Captain," she said with great formality. It served to remind Zabb of his current status. The point was not lost upon the Takisian, but he merely indicated the ramp with his usual graceful courtesy.

"Then let us be off."

At the foot of the ramp there was a paranoid little quadrille as Zabb tried to get Tachyon and the humans to precede him into the ship.

Tach glowered up at him. "I think not. I want you where I can see you."

Zabb bowed. "My motivation exactly. You have a most alarmingly attractive derriere." He shrugged and chuckled at Tach's smoldering expression. "But pleasure postponed is pleasure savored."

The quick rap of boot heels, and he was consumed in the brilliant light pouring through the open hatch. Tach drew

a breath, squared her shoulders. Mark suddenly turned and waved cheerfully back at Turtle like a happy vacationer about to set sail on a cruise ship. Jay dropped his head briefly into his hand.

Then flanked by her two incongruous paladins, Tachyon entered the enemy ship.

Chapter Eleven

They say the Morakh lack all mentatic skills, but there is a humming in the brain, a shivering along all the nerves, which tells a Morakh that dying is about to start. Durg was feeling it now. He signaled Blaise. There was a widening of the pupils, no more, to indicate he understood. Durg allowed himself a brief moment to hope that Blaise was finally learning subtlety.

Their current danger existed because of Blaise's phenomenal oratorical skills. The boy had presented his plan for the domination of House Ilkazam. He had spoken as if addressing an auditorium of the *Tarhiji*, and even the psi lords had been affected. Now Blaise was a danger, and the time for betrayal had come.

L'gura was once more behind his desk. There were three other of the *Zal'hma at' Irg*, and Malika, with him. Blaise was seated, facing L'gura. Kelly was on one side, Durg on the other.

"Your groundling ways have some interest, but I think we prefer to handle our affairs in the Takisian manner," L'gura said.

Durg snapped his fingers, indicating Malika, and then petitioned the ancestors. The woman's eyes widened in terror. She suddenly ripped her blade loose and, driving it deep into her belly, ripped upward.

Blaise released her and pounced on the shocked Vayawand. Had their defenses been fully in place, he would never have captured them, but they were in total shock -- *the mudcrawler had controlled a Morakh*. Then the three nobles were down, writhing on the floor, slowly suffocating. Durg flashed across the intervening space and yanked

Malika's pistol free, tossed it to Blaise. The boy snatched it out of the air, grabbed Kelly by the arm, jerked the smaller man onto his lap, and tangled the barrel of the gun in the red curls at the Takisian's temple.

Grotesque choking sounds filled the office as the nobles' autonomic functions shut down. L'gura stared placidly at the desperate men as they flopped like hooked fish. Dark blood from Malika's gutted body was spreading across the floor. It touched the edge of the *Raiyis's* shoe. He calmly moved his foot. Durg had to admire his sangfroid.

"Is this enough *virtu* for you? A sufficient demonstration of my value? Or am I still just a miserable mudcrawler?"

Blaise thrust Kelly off his lap and gave the older man a boot to hurry his trajectory toward the floor. Kelly fetched up almost nose to nose with one of the dying. The bogus Tachyon let out a whimper and scuttled away.

L'gura steepled bone white fingers before his mouth. "Enough. They're too well-bred to waste."

"Really? They look pretty useless to me. But have it your way." Blaise released the three men from the killing grip of his mind control. During his desperate struggles one had ripped out several of the inset jewels that adorned his cheeks. Blood flowed sluggishly from the gouges.

"Welcome to my House, Blaise brant Gisele. I think you will prove to be a most excellent addition."

Durg released a breath he hadn't even been aware he'd been holding. The dice had fallen well. He was home.

"Oh Shit!"

The shout penetrated her nightmare-laced sleep and sent Tachyon rolling out of the narrow bunk and scuttling for cover. She was dragging some of her own with her -- the light, yet warm black fabric that served as sheet, blanket, and comforter. Her eyes finally focused, and in quick, snapping images like a stuttering slide show, she took in the situation.

A chunk of wall had peeled back, and the head and thorax of a Kondikki worker wove hypnotically back and forth as the clusters of tiny eyes searched for the source of all the noise. The embedded ceiling lights reflected off the creature's shiny greenish black chitinous exoskeleton.

Jay was backed against the fold-down table, and his wildcard trigger finger was coming to bear.

"Jay! *No!*" Tach screamed. And flung her blanket. It tangled about his arm and hand, there was a soft *pop*, and the blanket vanished. The Kondikki was, mercifully, still present.

"It belongs here," Tach yelled.

"Not in *my* bedroom it doesn't!" the ace shouted back.

"Look." The alien, its segmented body wiggling like a child's toy, was climbing the wall. "It's just replacing a light."

Jay followed her pointing finger and spotted the burned-out panel.

Legs suddenly gone weak, Jay dropped to the floor. "Shit." He mopped sweat with the back of his hand. Tach crawled to him and wrapped her arms briefly about his shoulders, then scooted back out of reach.

"I'm sorry I should have warned you."

"No kidding." He drew in a breath, wiped his mouth.
"Secret alien spies, UFOs, and now giant bugs. Is it too late to go home?"

"Way, way too late."

The door slid open, and Trips entered, paused and blinked at the huddling tableau on the floor. The private investigator pointed. Head craned back, hands propped on his hips, Mark grinned up at the Kondikki, its flexible mouth tendrils busily replacing the light.

"Aren't they cool? There are thousands of them, way smaller than that one, down at the end of the corridor."

Jay combed his hair with his fingers. "I didn't need to hear that. And no, I *don't* want to see 'em."

"Where did you send the blanket, Jay?" Tach asked sternly.

He looked sheepish. "When I don't really have time to figure out a destination, I usually just go for the scoreboard at Yankee Stadium."

Tach stared at him in growing fury. "You were going to pop a Kondikki worker to *Yankee Stadium*?"

"Hey, it's in the Bronx. They're used to big cockroaches up there."

"Jay, you are my ace in the hole," Tach said, accepting Mark's offer of a hand up. "You must be more cautious about so frivolously using your power."

"Frivolous! There was a giant bug in the room. And I don't know why you're sweating it -- how far away from Earth are we?"

"Several light-years, I'm not sure."

"I'm good from L. A. to New York. Light-years... I doubt it. The bug would never have made it."

"First, it's not a bug. It's a sentient creature. So the idea of your leaving it floating in space does not comfort me. Second, I think you underestimate your power. I doubt it is impeded by the normal laws of the space-time continuum." She cocked her head to the side and considered for a second. "On the other hand, I don't wish to test the theory." Tach walked to her bunk and sat down. If you are both rested enough, we must begin your instruction and training."

"In what, and for what?" asked Jay. The set of his jaw was belligerent.

"Language, customs, most important, attitudes."

Mark pushed Tachyon onto her back on the bunk. She let out a gasp, and the ace quickly retreated a couple of steps, holding out his hands placatingly. "Easy. How about a foot massage?"

"All right," was the dubious reply. Mark seated himself and pulled her feet into his lap. Slipping off her shoes, he began to rub. Tach gave a tiny groan of pleasure.

"So lecture," Jay ordered.

"Ideal, where to start?"

She chewed on her lower lip, but before she could launch in, the lights in the cabin dimmed twice, and they felt an odd prickling over their skin.

"Oh, Christ, what was that?" Jay asked, in a voice gone suddenly breathy.

Tach was as flummoxed as the detective. The phenomenon was repeated. Mark knitted his brows in a

contemplative frown. "I think it's, like, maybe the... doorbell?"

"Who the hell'd be visiting us?"

"We could, like, open the door and find out," Mark suggested.

Jay hurried to the portal, touched the keypad, and it slid open to reveal an extremely tall, lovely woman. Well, not woman exactly. She was an upright biped, and she was a mammal as evidenced by the impressive pair of breasts curving the material of her shift, but she was eyeless, and what Tach had at first taken for hair she realized were twining sensory organs. She was also the whitest creature Tach had ever seen. Her clothing was simple in the extreme -- a plain blue shift, sandals. Her only ornamentation was an elaborate leather belt both inlaid and embroidered with jewels and metal threads, supporting a gem-encrusted pouch that hung at her left side.

She smiled and said in halting English, "Wel... come to my... uh, ship. I am Nesfa."

"Pleased to meet you. Jay Ackroyd." The detective held out his hand, then shot Tach a pained and embarrassed look. Tach was not the least bit surprised when Nesfa unerringly took the ace's hand.

"Oh, groovy, are you part of the Network?" Mark asked. "Hi, I'm Mark Meadows."

"Pleased to face you... no, see you... no."

"Meet you," Mark corrected with a happy smile.

"I learn your... language only a little from my captain."

"Zabb?" Tach suggested.

"Yes." She "looked" back at Mark. "We are Network, but very... new."

"You just joined?" Jay amplified.

"Yes. We Viand search for new... places... to live. We... buy ship."

"But you don't know how to operate her?" Tach asked.

"No," Nesfa replied.

"Typical," Tach said bitterly.

"I come only to say... hello. No to bother. Ship is... as yours."

She smiled again, and it was so warm and pretty that the travelers were beginning to forget the lack of eyes. Of course they'd all had practice. Before its destruction they'd all drunk at the Crystal Palace and been served by the eyeless bartender, Sascha.

"Bye-bye," she said, and left.

"Boy, we gotta get out more," Jay gusted. "What a doll." Mark and Tach exchanged glances and burst out laughing. "What? What is it?"

"What an ambassador you'd make," Mark said.

"But only if the aliens are all women," Tach added. Jay was continuing to stare at the closed door. "Jay, you can pursue your gonads' imperative at a later time. We must resume."

"Yeah, okay."

Tach must have looked lost, because Mark prompted her. "You were gonna talk about the customs in the Houses."

"Oh yes. Just quick background. There are seven great Houses. The Ilkazam, the Vayawand, the Alaa, the Ss'ang, the Tandeh, the Jeban, and the Rodaleh. Then fifteen or so modest Houses, and finally a few tiny holdings. About thirty total, though the numbers can fluctuate due to war or treaty.

"Once you pass through the walls of my family compound -- or any compound, for that matter -- you will be living between the covers of a flamboyant novel. While it is true that we rule the mind-blind -- sometimes with a ferocity that's appalling -- we are also the primary consumers of the luxuries and services produced by the *Tarhiji*. We're their primary source of entertainment too. Perhaps that's one of the reasons we strut through life with the bombastic quality of performers in an Italian opera." Tachyon frowned and considered the human's nondescript face. "In order to succeed in Takisian society, it is essential that you possess elan. In your case, Jay, it is unfortunate that you *look* so ordinary, but your smart mouth will offset that liability."

"Gee, sorry, if I'd known, I'd have had a nose job."

Tach shot back. "It would require an entire body sculpt."

"Walked right into it," groused Jay.

"Mark carries a similar burden, he's not at all handsome, but his great height will make him unique -- assuming they don't view him as a freak and deformed."

"This is kind of disturbing. Is your entire society this shallow?" asked Mark.

It stung, and a flush blossomed in her cheeks, but there was enough truth in the accusation and enough innate honesty in Tachyon to give her pause. She sighed. "Yes, and no. Yes, because your breeding is in your face and your

form, and we do breed for beauty. No, because the Takisians can be very astute and see past mere appearances." Tach stopped, considered. "But that's an oversimplification too. You see, on Takis appearances *are* everything. A false appearance of power, of *virtu*, can make a man a king as easily as a true one."

"That's not astute, that's gullible," said Jay.

"No, cautious," Tach corrected. "The man who struts and preens may be a bombastic buffoon, or he may be every bit as dangerous and powerful as he claims. You don't attack until you're certain. That's why you must hide your powers, Jay, but at the same time flaunt them. Drop mysterious hints about the nature of those powers, leave the impression that they are awesome, terrifying, and probably mental in nature."

"Trips may be able to pull that off. He can reveal a few of his friends and even suggest that there are a lot more waiting in the wings, but that's going to do fuck-all for me. They'll have my head open in a second, and then they'll know I'm no mind-powered ace."

"Are you listening to me?" snapped Tach. "They won't risk that until they are certain of your powers, and your allies."

"So far as I can tell, our only allies are sitting in this room."

"As recent as five years ago my uncle Taj was still loyal to my line. There may be others."

Jay continued to argue. "And just how will you prove that you are who you say you are?"

"Open my mind."

"Great," said Jay bitterly. "That's really hiding the football."

"Jay, if I suddenly started telling you my life story -- as quickly as I could, and in no logical order -- how much would you actually absorb?" The ace considered that, tugging on a shaggy bit of hair that was just brushing his collar. "Memory, in both humans and Takisians, is laid down in chemical codes on various synapses with a great deal of repetition, and no particular order." She swiveled to face Mark. "Do you remember when I had to force open Rabdan's mind?" Mark shuddered. "I had to peel his mind layer by layer, laying bare the memories, and destroying his mind in the process. And this wasn't accomplished in a minute."

"It took you seven hours," said Mark. "And you were almost unconscious by the end."

"So when you read a mind, what are you getting?" asked Jay.

"First, just the surface thoughts, and it's very confused, a constant running babble. We're trained to break it out, enforce grammatical order so it's understandable. Deeper memories are harder, you have to dig a little. It's like searching through an encyclopedia for the proper reference. Let's say I'm searching your mind to determine how you cowed Digger Downs. I might have to turn over a whole series of buried memories -- stealing a dime from the little girl in first grade, striking out with your date at the senior prom --"

"Hey!" Jay exploded. Mark chuckled.

"So telepathy is not as simple as it seems. And it becomes more difficult when you're dealing with a trained mentat. They'll have alarms to warn them of interlopers,

and if they're powerful enough, traps to destroy the weak or unwary."

"Zabb twigged to you pretty fast," said Mark.

"That's because he knows me very well. There is a signature, a taste, if you will, to each mind. Each is unique."

"So old friends or close relations will believe you instantly," said Jay.

"And if by some dismal chance none of those happy few remain, I'll have to convince related strangers with a dazzling display of knowledge that no impostor could possibly possess."

"And then?" asked Jay.

"And then we find Blaise and recover my body."

"It sounds so simple," Mark said.

"It won't be," said Jay. "How the hell do we find two people when they have an entire planet to hide in?"

Trips contemplated his dealings with Blaise -- dealings that had left one woman dead and almost cost Mark his daughter. He sighed and said, "If Blaise is on Takis, I'm sure he's, like, made his presence felt."

Chapter Twelve

Back home in Oklahoma they'd had a cat. A lanky orange critter with a crooked tail -- legacy of a fight with a neighbor's Labrador -- and haunted, feral gold eyes. For six years it had slunk about the house, grabbing at food when it was set before it, but otherwise ignored and despised. That was Kelly's status in House Vayawand.

Sometimes he wondered if Takisians possessed invisibility as well as telepathy. He had certainly become transparent. A few times he'd forced the issue -- placed himself like a small stone in the midst of a rushing stream, greeted someone as they broke and eddied past. But he'd gotten this *look*, which sent him folding in on himself like the leaf of a touch-me-not, and been whirled away by the rushing currents of people. He then lowered his sights. Obviously the lords and ladies of House Vayawand thought he had cooties. Okay, he'd try servants. It made no difference. Even the *servants* were snotty.

So here he was sliding through the door of a... mess hall? family cafeteria?... ready to make another snatch-and-run food raid. He picked an empty table near the door to the kitchens. It was noisy with servants hurrying past, and smoky each time the doors swung open. It was not elegant dining. Which was why it was deserted. No self-respecting Takisian would sit in such an inferior position.

Only a very inferior bogus Takisian, thought Kelly sadly as a plate of soup was slid very carefully and very quietly under his nose.

The servants might look at him as if he were dirt, but their behavior was always excruciatingly polite. Because he had the *face* -- borrowed though it was. He might be an

impostor, but the face bestowed power and an aura of danger. Not that there was a lot of physical difference between the mind-blind majority of the planet and their telepathic overlords. They were all fair -- the darkest hair color Kelly'd seen was a sort of mink brown -- on the small side, but the *Tarhiji* tended to plumpness, whereas the carefully inbred psi lords possessed a refinement, and an almost tooth-aching beauty, which combined with their ancient eyes into a terrifying presence. And each time those eyes were turned on Kelly, he felt as if his bones had been replaced with ice.

I share so much with you, Kelly cried inwardly to the bowed head of the young man who served him. *I'm as terrified of them as you are. Talk to me!*

And once again his random ability to tap into the telepathic gift that lay dormant -- but dangerous -- in his borrowed mind stirred to life. The young man heard Kelly's thoughts and jumped like a frog on an electric wire. The pale brown eyes fluttered nervously up to meet Kelly's gaze. The servant placed his hands briefly over his ears and shook his head.

"But why?" asked Kelly aloud.

It was an effort to say the words, but the young man forced them out in a grating whisper. "You are trouble. Great trouble."

He was gone, swallowed up by the clatter and steam of the kitchen.

"No, I'm *in* trouble. Big trouble," said Kelly to the empty space left by the waiter's precipitous retreat. With a sigh he lifted his spoon and began to eat.

There was an eddy of movement at the main door. Four guards, their bodies forming a protective square, sailed

into the room. At their center, nestled like a precious jewel in a living setting, walked a lavishly overdressed Takisian. This one Kelly recognized -- Ke'elaa, head of Vayawand security. Kelly couldn't pull his gaze away from the martial parade. In that strange overworld where his uncontrollable telepathy periodically carried him, Kelly perceived Takisian thoughts as dancing rainbow colors. Now there was a swirling black storm eating at the edges of those oblivious colors. Kelly shook his head, trying to clear the weird feeling.

Then he realized: *Blaise*. Blaise was in this room. Someone had been jumped.

One of the guards hesitated, frowned, and looked back toward the soldier at the rear of the phalanx. But the reaction, the premonition of danger, came too late. The heavy pistol was out of its holster, the barrel jammed into the back of Ke'elaa's head. Cooked brains and congealing blood were suddenly flying from the hole in what had been Ke'elaa's face.

Reflexes Kelly hadn't even known he possessed kicked in, and he took a low, long dive that carried him through the shuttering lens of the kitchen door. He came to rest against the lower legs of a waiter, who tottered, skittered, danced, to no avail. Food pattered down, a vegetable rain, followed by the mind-numbing sound of shattering china. It almost drowned out the screams, curses, and the snarl of weapons fire from the dining room. Self-preservation was still the paramount drive for Kelly. Crawling from beneath the half-stunned servant, Kelly surrendered to the urge that was pure Kelly Ann Jenkins. He howled like the teenage girl he really was. That need satisfied, he clutched the stump of his right arm against his chest and bolted.

The house was seething like a disturbed anthill. To Kelly's fevered imagination, hours seemed to pass until he at last stumbled past Blaise and Durg serenely playing cards, and into the haven of his bedroom.

Pillow clutched desperately against his aching stomach, Kelly rocked backward and forward in an agony of fear and shock. Blaise sauntered in. There was a sated, well-fed feeling surrounding him. He sat on the edge of the bed and asked in a soft voice, "What's wrong?"

"You know damn well what's wrong. You killed Ke'elaa, and now everybody's killing everybody out there." His voice caught on a sob.

"It wasn't me. These Takisians kill each other all the time."

Kelly wanted to smash the hypocritical smile off his face. "I *felt* you."

Blaise pushed back the sweat-matted bangs from Kelly's forehead. "But you're not going to tell anybody, are you?"

"No."

"Then we haven't got a problem. We're no threat to anyone, simple little groundlings that we are."

The bed shifted as Blaise removed his weight. He smiled down at Kelly. Walked out. And Kelly remembered how once, briefly, he had loved him.

Chapter Thirteen

Jay felt like a curmudgeon, but after only a few days he decided just one thing could be said for space travel -- it was achingly, stultifyingly boring. At least on an airplane there was the occasional burst of turbulence, but the Milky Way was behaving with perfect gentility -- not a single asteroid field to dodge, unknown space anomaly to elude, space pirate to defeat.

Tachyon's face had been a study in disgust, amazement, and condescension when Jay had offered this opinion. "*Asteroid fields?* We're light-years from the nearest system. And do you have any comprehension of how big space really is? As for pirates... we're traveling with the closest thing to them."

"Then I guess I'll go looking for some captive princesses. Maybe they'll be more appreciative than the humorless bitch I'm stuck guarding.

"I should hope Nesfa would have better taste!" Tach shot back.

Another problem with spaceships -- you can't slam the doors when you're pissed. Jay grumbled to himself, *Dumb-ass Takisian. Couldn't she recognize sarcasm when she heard it?* and went wandering again.

Tachyon had been sticking tight to the stateroom. Scared of Zabb, wary of Nesfa and her people. As for Zabb, he'd been notable only by his absence. Trips insisted that someone be with Tachyon all the time, and since Jay wanted to spend time with the amazing Nesfa, that put most of the burden on the hippie. Jay knew he was shirking, and that only added to his lousy mood.

As planned, he ran across Nesfa. She was hurrying down a corridor carrying a potted plant. It looked like attenuated bamboo, but of a startling purple hue. "I'm prettying the lounge. Come and help."

"Sure."

This was a new room for Jay. A few low sofas, a clear table. Multicolored lights crawled randomly through the piece. Jay couldn't decide if it was the Network version of a lava lamp, or a video game. Nesfa crossed to a corner and deposited the purple bamboo. Then Jay spotted the most exciting feature yet -- a port.

"Hot damn, the observation car" Jay laughed for the sheer relief of it. A weight of claustrophobia he hadn't known he was carrying suddenly blew off his shoulders. "So how do we get a view?"

Nesfa's white brow furrowed. Her hair swept forward, scanning the wall. She then crossed and pressed a section. The black rolled away, and Jay frowned as roiling gray, like dirty cotton wool being torn by hurricane winds, showed beyond the port.

"What the hell is this? No *stars*!" Jay yelped, feeling cheated.

"Of course there are no stars," Tach snapped from the doorway. "We're not in reality as you know it." She was in one of *those* moods, her mouth drawn down, gray eyes dark with a secret pain.

Jay had never liked being lectured by Tachyon when the little shit was a man. Now the soft girl's voice made it doubly hard to take -- memories of a finger-wagging mother or sister.

"Gee, so sorry you finally decided to crawl out of your cave."

"You... fight?" Nesfa asked hesitantly. Damn, the girl was quick, picking up human emotional nuances that well.

Mark stepped hurriedly in. "But, Doc, I could see stars when we were aboard *Baby*."

"We weren't traveling at light-speed, Mark."

Why did Tachyon have that sharp tone only when she addressed him? Jay wondered. *Talking with Mark she fairly cooed.*

Tachyon continued, "That was just a little high-speed chase around the solar system."

"Which you would never have won if my 'Cat hadn't been damaged from our earlier encounter with the Swarm," said Zabb conversationally from another doorway.

Mark's hand was in his pocket. Jay was willing his to stay there. But the Takisian made no move even to enter the room, and Jay felt the hair on the back of his neck start to lie down again. There was something predatory in the way Zabb was eyeing Tachyon, and Jay began to think that maybe Meadows wasn't totally paranoid. Maybe this smiling man really did intend to kill Tachyon.

"Forgive my laxity as a host. I've had a ship to run.

Zabb said something to Nesfa in an unknown language. She responded in the same clicks and pops. He crossed to her and ran a hand softly across her belt and gently cupped the hip pouch. The familiarity made Jay want to hit him.

"I didn't want your society, Zabb, just your efforts as a carter," replied Tachyon with a fine hauteur that set oddly

on her very youthful features.

Zabb laughed. "Oh, cousin, you do that very well, but you chastise me for becoming a laborer while you have spent the past forty years ministering to filth?" He propped his shoulders against a wall and included Mark and Jay in the conversation. "On my world saints are suspect. Only the mad act without a hefty dose of self-interest. So I think my cousin is mad. Or hopelessly tainted. After all, he has become an Earth-woman." Again that laugh.

"I think we ought to get back to our room," said Mark.

Jay agreed, but another, less wise, part of himself hated to be routed by this supercilious, smiling bastard.

"An excellent idea, but leave my kinswoman. We have need of private conversation," Zabb said.

"Now, you didn't strike me as stupid," said Jay conversationally. "Arrogant, and maybe a little too inclined to lead with your chin -- most of you military types have that problem -- but not stupid. Why do you think we're along on this little party? It sure ain't for the great view or the superb accommodations."

"You're not seeing the Doc alone." It lacked the wit and panache of Jay's remarks, but it got the point across.

Zabb sighed, a heavy, studied sound of noblesse oblige oppressed by gaucherie. "How very tiresome you humans are." He turned to Tachyon. "Cousin, are you *afraid*?"

Jay squeezed his eyes shut. Praying, but doubting that Tach had the self-control to ignore that red flag.

"Afraid of you?"

Here it comes, Jay almost moaned aloud.

"Of course I am." The ace's eyes snapped open, and he stared in amazement at that queenly little figure with its rampantly out-thrust belly. "But I repose my faith in my friends and the strength of your word. My friends I'm sure about, your word... " Her voice trailed off significantly, and she gave a little shrug of the shoulders that said a book-full.

Zabb may have tossed a flag, but Tach had jabbed in a poniard. A dark flush rose in his cheeks. The Takisian spun on his heel and exited. Tach slumped suddenly.

"I shouldn't have come out. I shouldn't give him a chance at me."

"Yeah, that's what I've said all along. Come on, baby, I'll take you back," Mark said softly. "Jay?"

"I... uh, think I'll stay here and help Nesfa with the planting."

Mark's blue eyes were very knowing behind the thick lenses of his glasses. Jay flushed and wondered if his growing sexual need was apparent to everyone.

"So, here we are. Just the two of us."

Nesfa looked up from the bamboo. "Yes."

"So, are you married?"

"Excuse?"

"Married. Got a husband? Mate?" The concept didn't seem to be penetrating.

"I don't... understand."

Jay decided words were getting in the way. He bent and kissed Nesfa lightly on the lips. Her face brightened. "Ah, you wish to exchange."

"Yeah, yeah, that's it." *God, what an ambassador he'd make.*

Nesfa stood and led Jay to a sofa. This was becoming more promising by the minute. She ran her hands around his waist and frowned in perplexity.

"Where is your #@\$**&#**?"

Jay leered. "A little lower." He unzipped, and, by damn, she was a fast learner. Her hand had him out in a second, caressing and exploring his penis.

Jay began kissing her. Nesfa seemed to like that. So did he, once he got used to the strangeness of her taste, sort of pepper and lemon. Her hair was twining and coiling around his head, tickling his face. There was a new, moist weight on his arm. Jay opened his eyes and looked down. A wormlike *thing* was oozing out of the jewel-encrusted pouch, wrapping itself about his arm, climbing. Its torpedolike head was dripping gore.

Jay screamed hoarsely and threw himself backward off the couch. Nesfa was sitting like a sack of abandoned laundry. The lovely face had gone slack and empty. The worm was quivering, casting its head in small circles, searching for Jay.

It began to undulate its way back into the pouch. Jay jumped to his feet, gripped the top of the shift in both hands, and ripped. It fell away to hang like tattered seaweed over the heavy belt. There was a hole in the pouch. A hole in the shift. A hole in Nesfa. The worm thrust its head back into the woman's body. The light and animation came back into her face.

"Jay, what is wrong? You do not wish to exchange?"

Jay stared down at his now-limp penis hanging through his fly. He shuddered as he remembered another crawling parasite: Ti Malice. With shaking hands Jay stuffed himself back in his pants and ran.

Chapter Fourteen

"Am I the only person who's not bothered by this? These people are full of bloodsucking worms!"

Cap'n Trips ran one long, bony forefinger through a pile of Scrabble tiles. "And I suppose we could be described as people full of shit. Aliens are different, Jay, that's why they're aliens."

"That's sorta what Tachyon said, only she was a lot snottier."

Jay returned to a glum contemplation of his tiles. A sharp cry of terror from the Doc drew the detective away to investigate. Jay crossed back from the bunk. The tiny whimpering sounds had ceased. Settling back into his chair, Jay jerked a head toward the sleeping Tachyon. "She seems all right now."

"I think the nightmares are getting better," said Mark.

"I think you're dreaming."

"I was hoping." Mark looked back at the tiles. The selection hadn't improved. Nothing suggested itself.

"Has he got anything in that bag of tricks to help?" Jay indicated the medical bag.

"Can't... the baby."

"Oh yeah..." A pause while Jay frowned at his tiles. "How do you spell *titillate*?" Mark spelled it.

"Shit. I need another /."

Jay spelled out *tit*. Mark carefully recorded the detective's three points.

TRY hung alluringly off on the left side of the board. Mark gathered up his tiles and spelled out *tryptophan*.

"What the fuck is that?" Jay yelped.

"It's an amino acid." Mark had hit a triple-word score, and double points on the y. He now led Jay by a hundred and eighty points.

Jay collected two new tiles, leaned back, folded his arms across his chest, and eyed Mark. "What did happen out on the Rox?"

Mark shrugged. "He got jumped."

"By who? With who?"

"She hasn't told you?" Jay shook his head. "It's, like, really private to her, you know? So I probably shouldn't..."

"I'm trying to do a job here, Meadows. A little information would help." Mark remained stubbornly silent. "Look, from the performances she puts on every time she goes to sleep, I gotta figure her current condition isn't due to her catlike Takisian curiosity to experience sex from the other side."

"No." Mark mournfully admitted.

"Judging by the way she reacts every time one of us touches her, I'm figuring she got raped." Mark just kept staring, giving away nothing. Jay's next words sent the comforting little delusion of his poker face fleeing. "By Blaise, right?" Mark tried to control the reaction, but his head snapped up. Jay smiled humorlessly. "You may be kicking butt in Scrabble, but don't ever gamble with me."

"Okay, so now you know."

Jay shook his head. "It's really disgusting."

"It wasn't the Doc's fault!"

"Really? She'd probably disagree with you. So would I."

Anger has a taste, almost a physical presence. Mark could feel it battering against the back of his teeth. "Oh, why?" He wanted it to sound casual, instead emerged in sharp razorlike exhalations.

"Tachyon had me searching for Blaise a year ago because she was scared to death of the little shit. And after my investigations I could see why." The detective glanced back toward the bunk. "All and all I don't know if Tachy is such a great candidate for motherhood... shit, fatherhood... fuck it -- parenthood. He sure screwed up with Blaise."

Mark hadn't noticed when he'd picked up the Scrabble tile, but suddenly it was there, and he was twisting it through his fingers. "Blaise is *crazy*! Certifiably, clinically crazy. For years Doc tried to provide a stable and normal home environment. He tried with love to undo twelve years of sickness. And yeah, it's a bummer he failed, but at least he *tried*."

"He should have gotten some qualified help, but he's so damn arrogant ... I guess he thought he could be a kid shrink too."

"That's not fair!" Mark cried. "It's real easy for you to sit there and throw stones, but you were partly to blame." The flush appeared in Jay's cheeks so fast he might have been slapped. The tile between Mark's fingers snapped, and both men jumped. Suddenly horribly selfconscious, Mark tossed away the shards of the tile.

"How do you know about Atlanta?" Jay demanded. He was breathing hard.

Mark ducked his head. "The Doc told me. Not too bright, taking a thirteen-year-old off to play detective. Course you couldn't predict that Ti Malice creature would possess him, and then use Blaise's mind control to kill that poor joker, or that Blaise would *enjoy* it so much. Any more than Doc could predict how his spoiling would fuck with the kid. You guys were trying to *care*. It just all went funky and triggered the craziness."

Jay didn't say anything, just sat for a long moment with his head bowed. "Meadows," he said finally. "I apologize. I was royally out of line."

Mark cleared his throat selfconsciously. "Hey, I didn't mean to rant at you. He's just my closest friend... and personally, I think the Doc will make an awesome parent. She adores kids."

"He must, otherwise she wouldn't have let this one get her stretched out to here." Jay demonstrated, then shook his head. "How do you suppose she's handling it? If I suddenly got switched... had something growing inside me..."

"I don't think Takisians are as hung up about gender as we are. Kids are also, like, the wealth of the family. And there's the telepathy. If you had bonded mind to mind with your baby, could you kill her?"

"Probably not."

Mark swallowed hard, past the question that lay like a lump in the center of his throat. "Hey, man, I don't mean to be nosy, but I gotta ask it." Jay nodded assent, but warily. "Why are you along on this trio

"I need to have my head examined."

"No... seriously."

The detective sat silent, his face an unmoving, uncommunicative mask. It went on for so long that Mark was beginning to writhe with embarrassment. Finally Jay sighed, and Mark also exhaled in relief.

"I don't know," Jay said in so serious a tone that it hung oddly on his lips. "Not out of friendship, like you. Oh, don't get me wrong. I like Tachy well enough, but..." The shrug said it all. "Maybe it's a funny kind of chauvinism. For years they've been sneaking in on us, manipulating us, watching us. Now we're coming. Taking it home to them."

Jay stared down at the backs of his hands. Turned them palms up, either startled to find they moved, or searching for meaning in the creases and lines. Mark tried and failed to resolve the very ordinary man he saw with the individual living inside that skin.

"And what about you?"

Jay's question pulled him back. Mark fitted the broken tile together. Pressed hard. Laid the pad of one finger against it and pulled. It was still broken.

"I read them all... Clarke, Asimov, 'Doc' Smith. My dad flew state-of-the-art test planes. He was too old for astronaut training. I was all... wrong. No stomach for regimentation, the wrong attitude for the academy. They would have eaten me. He founded Space Command. His son couldn't pass the evaluation for the airforce academy. Maybe it broke his heart... I don't know. We don't talk much... never have."

Mark paused, remembering the last time he'd seen that erect, iron-haired figure, his hands resting on the shoulders of his granddaughter, sending his son out on the run from the government the general had sworn to defend.

No, they hadn't talked, but somehow Marcus had understood.

Softly Mark resumed. "Now I'm going. Now I finally have something I can share with him."

"So you're into this for everyone but you."

"No," Mark shook his head. "I'm looking..."

"For what?" Irritation sharpened Ackroyd's tone. It seemed Ackroyd wasn't a man with a lot of patience for soul searching.

"I don't know."

She knew she was driving them slowly mad. Even Mark was showing rebellion in the tight line of his lips, or the annoyed inhalations each time she refused to acknowledge their remarks. Unless they were couched in Takisian, of course. Then she listened and responded, but in the careful, simple phrases of a parent to a precocious five-year-old.

She joined them at the table carrying several articles of clothing. Jay sighed. "*Benaji, sala'um, wai'r'sum --*"

"No," Tach interrupted in English. "Today we move on. You've learned *Sham'al* -- loosely translated, industry speak. Now you have to get a taste of *Ilkaza* in the public mode."

"Time out." Jay gave the sign.

Before the detective could get wound up, Mark intervened. "We don't have time to learn every language spoken on Takis, Doc."

"I'm not expecting you to, but all you've learned is the lingua franca, if you will. The language of commerce, and communication to the lower classes. There is a diplomatic tongue, *Amlas*, used only between Houses. Then there is the

language of each House, private and public. You don't need the private -- you haven't wives or children to address. I doubt you'll need *Am/as* -- why should you be negotiating with the rival Houses on behalf of the House Ilkazam? But if you don't have at least a nodding acquaintance with *Ilkazal*, you'll be dismissed as mere servants or aliens."

"We are aliens," pointed out Mark.

"There are aliens and then there are aliens. I want you in the ship category. Able to speak *Sham'al* and know a bit of *Ilkazal*."

"So we can't parlay vous in English at all?" Jay asked, totally confusing the issue.

"Not at all. Like the ships, you have your own private language --"

"We're not going to have to learn ship talk too, are we?" asked Mark hastily.

She said reassuringly, "No, it's far beyond humanoid understanding. It's telepathy based on complex mathematics. When broken down and made audible, it resembles music more than anything else."

Mark's homely face became almost handsome as he smiled in delight. "Awesome, man, the music of the spheres. Maybe old Sir Thomas wasn't so far off."

Tachyon chuckled, the first laugh she'd enjoyed in weeks. The image of one of *Baby's* relatives hanging in the sky and singing softly to a British poet was irresistible.

Jay pulled her back. "So let me get this straight. As allies you've got your ships and that's it?"

"And the Network has one hundred and thirty-seven member races." Jay shook his head. "I think we're playing in the wrong league."

"You're not playing in any league at all," said Tachyon. "You're still a farm team."

"And who calls us up is still in doubt?" asked Mark.

Tach just nodded. She never did get to return to her dissertation on Takisian linguistics. The door to the cabin opened, and Zabb entered. Her reaction startled and dismayed her. The Tachyon mind cried out for her to assume a fighter's stance, prepare for attack. The body responded by placing a hand protectively over her belly. Fortunately, Mark and Jay were more practical. They shifted quickly, Mark shielding her with his body, Jay hanging by her left shoulder.

"Sit, hounds." Zabb patted soothingly at the air with his palms. "I've not come to harm my cousin, merely invite" He broke off abruptly, his mouth twisting in a crooked half smile that fifty years ago Tachyon had learned to resent and distrust. "Dear me, sweet Tisianne, what do I call you? English is such a primitive and cumbersome language. Are you a he, a she, or an it? Pronouns, I believe they're called... slippery things."

"Not half so slippery as you," said Tachyon bitterly.

Overall she'd made peace with her temporary gender change, and the sidelong looks from her friends and her enemies affected her very little. Until Zabb. Before him she knew humiliation, and the corrosive anger at her ludicrous situation became an actual pain in the center of her chest. Illyana, rightly perceiving the anger as being directed at her small baby self, shifted nervously and sent out a telepathic begging cry to her mother.

Reminded of her duty and obligation, Tachyon made a conscious effort to bury the anger, sent waves of comfort and love washing across the baby's unhappy little mind until she was rocked back into the peaceful dream state of the womb.

Wonderful, I'm turning my child into a codependent even before birth.

It raised an interesting question she had never before considered. Telepathic mothers could in fact begin imprinting, affecting their children long before their physical appearance in the world. But Tachyon's mind was male. So what behavior and thought patterns was Illyana absorbing?

"Hello, Tis? Are you with us?" Tach's head jerked back up, and she stared consideringly up at Zabb. "Will you come walking or no? And without them. I must speak with you privately."

A chorus of *nos* met his statement. Zabb's lips narrowed almost to invisibility beneath the sharp, elegant line of his mustache.

"Don't be such an idiot, Zabb. We've both spent our lives surrounded by guards. Why should it bother you? Unless you're afraid of my particular guards?"

"Burning Sky! You think *you* could present me with anything I would fear? Bring them if you think my word is not enough."

Tachyon stared at him. Heard the bravado echoing in the first sentence. Sensed the pain in the second. *What a strange relationship we have, she thought. You taught me to ride and let me take the reins of the sleigh on Crystal Night. I've eluded your assassins, felt the cut of your blade as we dueled to the death. And each time I've cheated you. You are my adored enemy.*

"Stay here," she heard herself saying. "I will walk out with my cousin."

"You've lost your fucking mind," said Jay.

"Perhaps... but I don't think I'll lose my life." She glanced back over her shoulder at the two humans. Smiled. "And if my judgment is poor, and his words dishonored, I'll trust you to kill him for me."

"I don't know about you, but I really hate that guy," Jay said conversationally as the door closed. "And I'm not going to let him waltz off with Tachy. Time for a little snoop-and-poop action."

"I'll snoop and poop with you." Meadows was busying himself with the briefcase.

"Meadows, I'm a detective. Taking you along is like taking a fucking semaphore --"

Jay didn't see which vial the gangly ace took, but suddenly there was a whirlwind, and blankets went sailing off the bunks like hysterical chickens. The little figure shrugged herself free of the cocooning blankets, and Jay felt his jaw drop.

Jet black hair fell like an ebony waterfall down her back. The black jumpsuit hugged every curve of her lovely body. The white yin/yang symbol on her chest drew the eye to her perfect breasts.

"*You're* living inside Mark Meadows? Holy shit, I'm going to be a lot nicer now."

"As we speak, our quarry eludes us," she said in a soft, pretty voice. There was a hint of censure in the words, and the remark was offered with a modest dropping of the eyes.

"Uh... yeah, right. Who the hell are you?" Jay asked plaintively, as they stepped through the door.

"Isis Moon... Moonchild."

Once in the corridor, Moonchild dimmed the lights. Shadows dripped from the walls. She stepped into one of them and promptly vanished. Jay briefly wondered how she'd feel about divorce work. He almost lost her several times, but each time a small hand reached out from the shadows, lightly touched his wrist, and led him on.

Down a left-branching corridor they heard voices: Zabb's clear tenor, and Tachyon's bell-like tones. Jay pressed himself against the wall and craned until he could peer around the doorjamb. It looked like an armory, with racks of weapons hung on the walls and several spacesuits hanging from hooks.

Tachyon was fiddling with the arm of a suit. She sighed, dropped it, and turned to face her cousin. "Are you still worrying about that damn throne? If it's any comfort to you... I don't want it." She shook her head. "And Zabb, it's over. Whether I want it or not, *you* can't have it either."

"Oh?"

"We've each made our choices. Mine was set fifty years ago when I went in pursuit of Ansata and the virus to try to prevent a holocaust. Your course was set five years ago when you betrayed your House and sold yourself to the Network. Takis may be a stop for each of us, but it can never again be home."

"You're the most self-righteous little *vacu*," Zabb returned angrily. "You pretend it was necessary for you to deal with the Network in order to protect Takis. Abortion! It was self-interest, pure and simple. Why don't you admit that

all this altruism is really just a pose to cover your pathetic grandstanding for attention?

"You couldn't hold your own in the true Takisian fashion -- no aptitude for command, and no stomach for war. Even your science -- you were a synthesizer, not an innovator. You didn't invent the Enhancer project, you could only build on the work of others.

"You destroy everything you touch, Tis. Poor damned Ansata who carried the virus to Earth. If you'd let him carry out his mission, the death and suffering among those groundlings would have been much reduced. But you got to be a ministering power, the noble lord bountiful.

"And what about your own world? You damn near destroyed the family by your noble posturings. You left *me* to face our enemies." Zabb ripped open his tunic, and revealed the left side of his body. It was a mass of puckered white scar tissue. Tach threw out a hand and backed away.

So far as Jay could tell, Zabb didn't do a damn thing, but suddenly Tachyon threw her hands over her face, let out a scream, and collapsed.

Chapter Fifteen

"I win... and guess what? You lose." Blaise's voice held that excited, joyful lilt that always left Durg itching to slap him.

The effect it had on the *Raiyis* of House Vayawand could only be guessed at, for L'gura had himself well in hand. The strain of the past weeks had written their passing on his face. Where once he had been gaunt, the face was now skull-like, but Durg had to admire the force of will that kept the prince erect and serene even as he faced his executioners.

There was no hope of escape, and L'gura knew it. Those most loyal to him had long since been jumped and then killed or discredited by Blaise. The guards observing the tableau would not embrace death on behalf of this wounded wolf.

No blame could attach to the *Raiyis* for not suspecting, understanding, or knowing how to counter Blaise's powers. The fatal error had been basing their test of wills on Blaise's oratorical skills. L'gura should have selected a Takisian forum in which the native could excel. Instead the *Raiyis* had allowed Blaise (coached carefully by Durg) to goad him into a public debate and to make the throne the prize to be won.

Demagogue, thought Durg dreamily. It was a word without equivalent in Takisian, and Blaise had used this alien power to exhort and thrill until the members of House Vayawand were roaring their support and enthusiasm. A few hot and gusting words, and they fancied themselves the rulers of Takis. The decision of the House was plain -- they

wanted Blaise to lead them to this new order. But it would be Durg who would translate words into reality.

"You're an excellent argument for the wisdom of a controlled breeding program," said L'gura conversationally.

A flush blossomed in the boy's cheeks, and Durg held his breath. The internal struggle was obvious. Reason conquered anger, and Blaise shrugged. "My dear old granddaddy used to say that one healthy outcross was worth a thousand line-bred fools. For once he was right about something."

L'gura scanned the nobles arrayed around his desk. "You are all quite determined on this?"

Elidan nodded. "The *Raiyis* sighed and leaned back. "It can be painless," Elidan said.

"No, I'd rather have it messy." The sharp gray eyes were turned to Blaise. "You should have to clean up the chair."

Durg moved, but he was too late to stop the flick of the forefinger across a seam on the arm of the chair. The wingback detonated, exploding L'gura's head. Fragments, both organic and inorganic, pattered across their faces like a disgusting warm rain. The body collapsed forward, the ruined head continuing to bleed onto the surface of the desk.

With a jerk of his head Blaise indicated to Durg. The Morakh crossed to the chair and threw aside the body. Blaise followed and, swinging out the chair, seated himself. The Vayawand nobles watched in horrified fascination as blood and brains smeared into the boy's dark red hair.

"Impressive, half-breed. But your mistake was assuming I would allow a mongrel like you to rule the House

Vayawand," Elidan said.

"I never assume anything, Elidan," Blaise replied.

Several things happened very quickly. Blaise slumped, almost losing consciousness. Elidan grabbed the crystal wine goblet on the desk and shattered it. Durg signaled the guards, whose loyalty had been carefully purchased days before, and they, together with Durg, held the other nobles at gunpoint while Elidan proceeded to cut his throat with a jagged piece of glass.

Blaise was screaming. *"No, no! He's killing me! Ancestors, save me!"*

When the windpipe was severed, Blaise again slumped, gripped the arms of the chair to still the shaking of his hands, and watched as Elidan choked and bubbled on the floor before him. A few more seconds and it was over. The shaken nobility of the House Vayawand eyed their creation, and Sekal slowly bowed to Blaise.

"Raiyis."

Blaise accepted their homage with appropriate grace. Durg was relieved -- it would have been so like the young monster to gloat. The men filed silently out of the office, and Blaise held out a hand to Durg. The Morakh assisted him to his feet.

"The hardest thing is enduring the pain... concentrating through it to time the return jump," said Blaise as he shoved a toe under Elidan's body and rolled him over. The neck wound yawned up at Durg like a ragged, toothless grin.

Blaise suddenly lifted hooded lids and gave Durg the full force of those strange dark eyes. "My dear *pet*," he said

using the Vayawand diminishing word for a Morakh. "*You* haven't given me proper obeisance yet."

It startled Durg. His entire focus had been directed toward making Blaise *Raiyis* of House Vayawand. Having succeeded, it hadn't occurred to him the boy would take it seriously. *A lack of imagination was a terrible impediment to a Svengali*, Durg thought as he felt, like the briefest lick of a whip, the touch of Blaise's coercive mind control.

Durg hurried to his knees and noted that the pleasure in his victory had gone sour.

Chapter Sixteen

"What did he *do* to you?"

Tachyon turned her head to the wall. Jay repeated the question -- louder. Moonchild was suddenly between them, sliding like a cloud between sky and sun. Using just her fingertips, she removed Jay's hand from Tachyon's arm. "That is not the way, Mr. Ackroyd. Step back please. You threaten by the mere fact of your presence."

Stung, Jay retreated. Watched as Moonchild shook back her long hair, seated herself on the bunk, and drew Tachyon into her arms. Jay waited for the usual reaction. It didn't come. Instead Tach sighed and relaxed against the slim Korean woman. Jay figured it out -- while intellectually Tachyon knew this was "Mark," the smell was of jasmine and sandalwood, the fingertips were soft, the body a place of rest and peace, not an instrument for pain. Jay suddenly regretted Tachyon's decision not to bring Cody.

"Doctor, you must speak with me," Moonchild said. "I was present at your collapse, and our captain took no physical action against you. Am I to infer from this that his assault was mental in nature?"

Tach pushed her hair back. The black and white and blond strands intermingled, and Jay thought he'd never seen a more beautiful pair of contrasting breads. One silver, one ebony. They could have been the queens on a living chess set. The romanticism of the thought embarrassed him, and he jammed his hands into the pockets of his brown slacks.

Tach shuddered. "He held up a mirror," she said so softly that Moonchild had to bend down to hear her.

"I do not understand. What does that mean?"

"There's a fairy tale among my people about a man so evil and honorless that his ancestors gathered and resolved to curse him so that each mirror he gazed into would show him his soul. Eventually it drove him mad, and his servants found his bloody body in the midst of shattered mirrors. Zabb took me on a time journey -- the past and future all woven into one, and I nearly strangled in the threads of my selfishness. And then I realized I am the man of that story."

Jay felt the anger rising again. "Zabb knows he can't touch you physically. He can't even hurt you emotionally or mentally *except that you're letting him*. We haven't got time for you to indulge in an orgy of self-pity and self-doubt. You've hauled Meadows and me across half a galaxy. You owe us. You've got to look out for us the same way we're looking out for you. And that means teaching us all these stupid languages, and not making us crazy worrying about the state of your head. We've got enough problems trying to preserve your attractive little ass and recover your original skinny little ass," Jay concluded.

"Zabb was there when my father was injured. He thrust the memory into my mind," Tach flared back at Jay. "I smelled the coppery sweet scent of his blood, the stench of flesh burned away by high-energy weapons, screams, the crack of lasers cutting the air, explosions, falling masonry." As she spoke, she assumed the thousand-mile stare that gave Jay the creeps. "Shaklan is rappelling down a tower, leading a counterassault of Ilkazam warriors against the Vayawand troops huddled behind parapets. A Morakh warrior whirls, fires from the hip. The laser peels back the side of my father's skull, revealing brain -- boiled and charred from the heat of the laser. The long fall to the roof. The screams," Tach concluded in a remote voice.

"You've got a shit load to worry about, I know that," Jay said. "But we've got to pick our worries in order of

descending magnitude, and you flippin' out about something that happened years and years ago isn't going to help."

"We are strangers and wanderers," Moonchild said. "We do not understand your culture. Therefore, diplomacy must be your arena, and for that you need your wits. You must find your center. Our task is one of steel and strength. We can handle your enemies, Doctor. We cannot handle you."

Jay had a feeling it was Moonchild's calm good sense, and the comfort of her arms, that relaxed the shivering Takisian. Tough love clearly wasn't a winning technique for dealing with Tachyon right now.

"Don't leave me," Tach whispered to the ace.

Moonchild nodded and lowered Tach gently back onto her pillow. Arms entwined, Tach's head rested on Moonchild's shoulder, and the ace's hair formed a dark blanket for them both. Feeling very much the outsider, Jay retreated to the table and let the females bond. Eventually Tachyon drifted into another of her nightmare-wracked sleeps, and Moonchild slipped away from the girl.

A few minutes later Moonchild vanished and Mark returned. He gazed down at Tachyon and shook his head. "I heard about cases like this back from the last days of the Summer of Love. Too much dope, too much tear gas, too many riots -- overload. I have a feeling that for the Doc it's just all too much. Forty-four years of too much." He sighed. "I wish she could cry. I think the release would really help."

Jay shuffled cards. "I don't know, it's kind of a relief. Tachy was always blubbering about something."

"You don't think this is worth a few tears?" Mark gestured at the sleeping girl. The thrust of the pregnancy

weighing down that delicate girlchild body. Tach let out a whimper, and Jay felt like a real schmuck.

Meadows crossed to the table and sat down. Cupped his chin in his long bony hands and seriously regarded Jay. "This is only going to get harder," Meadows said softly.

"You think I don't know that," grunted Jay.

Again the head shake. "This isn't about palace intrigues or alien warriors. The Tachyon mind wants to concentrate on the problems at hand. The Kelly body knows it's got one big problem to face. The Doc's gonna be at war with himself... er, herself."

Jay looked at him in annoyance. "Meadows, just when I think I've reached my nadir, you find something else to really kick the shit out of my mood."

"I thought you might enjoy witnessing our arrival, Princess Tisianne," said Zabb without turning around.

"Cram it up your ass, Zabb," replied Tachyon.

It almost toppled Jay, so slangy, uncouth, so *human*. He'd never imagined such words in Tachyon's mouth. It was almost as startling out of this little girl. It obviously flustered the shit out of the Takisian. Zabb swung around, and it was evident he hadn't intended to. Tachyon smirked, Zabb frowned. It was such a tiny victory in the mind war they were waging, yet Jay could see Tach savoring the moment.

It was the first time Jay had seen the bridge, and he looked about curiously. Nesfa and five of her people were manning the consoles, readouts, and panels. Jay gave the woman a sickly smile, and a little finger wave.

"This isn't an Aevre bridge," Tach said.

"No, the ship was built... exactly for the... apexs... no, hands of Captain Zabb and our leased body partners," Nesfa said.

"Leased?" Jay yelped. "You mean you don't normally look..."

"No, no. On our home world our body partners are four-legged... um, grass eaters. Only, very..." Nesfa pinched her fingers together several times. "Clumsy hands."

"The deal they struck with the Master Trader provided them with a ship, a ship handler, and bodies more suitable for exploration," Zabb said.

"And what are they exploring for?" Meadows asked.

"A planet with more useful body partners, so the Viand can build a true interstellar culture. They possess the brains. What they require is brawn." Zabb suddenly cocked his head to the side in a parody of a man having an idea. "I should have thought of it; Earth would be perfect."

Jay tensed, took one stiff-legged step forward. Tachyon laid a hand briefly on his shoulder. His brains reasserted control over his testosterone levels.

"Oh, man, then the Network are slave traders." Meadows's voice throbbed with grief.

It was sort of depressing, Jay reflected, to discover that all the aliens in the universe seemed to be assholes.

Zabb shrugged. "They're business beings. Profit is the driving force in their culture."

The Takisian touched a panel, and the cameras on the exterior hull of the ship threw the image of Takis up on the screen. If Earth was sea green and white, a beryl, this world

was an opal. Large polar ice caps, seas of shimmering aquamarine, and those clouds. A riot of color.

"That's it? Really it?" Meadows breathed.

"That's it, groundling. Magnification factor three. We're about a million kilometers out," Zabb said.

Knowing this was the real McCoy brought Jay's attention back to the screen. The clarity of the picture made it look like an astronomical rendition at a planetarium -- flat, lifeless fantasy. But there were people living beneath those iridescent clouds that banded the equator.

"How far?" Meadows asked.

"From what? Relative to what?" There was a little sneer lurking in the words. Jay wanted to clout Zabb.

"Sol," said Trips.

"Twenty-three light-years, and change." Zabb flashed a quick smile at Jay, and for the first time the human realized just how grotesquely handsome he was. *Son of a bitch*, thought Jay. "As Mr. Ackroyd would say. Interesting human phrase ... I like it."

"I know a lot of others. Like, 'kiss my ass,' and 'up yours.' Too bad you won't be staying around to let me coach you in the subtleties."

Zabb seated himself at one of the computer stations and entered a numerical code. There was a soft pressure through the soles of their feet as the ship's engines fired, braking and adjusting their course. Takis seemed to be swimming away from them like an iridescent crystal globe in the ink sea of space.

A large moon crept coyly into view like a child peeping around a doorjamb. As they passed low over its crater-

pocked surface, Jay saw low domes hugging the feet of craggy mountains. It looked as if a school of soap bubbles had broken free from a child's bath and deposited themselves on this harsh and unwelcoming surface.

Jay indicated the lunar settlement with a jerk of the chin. "Ilkazam?"

"No," said Tachyon. "Alaa."

"Who are they?" asked Mark.

"Enemies," was Zabb's laconic reply.

"Don't Takisians have any friends?"

"No," said Tach simply, and left it at that.

Jay felt a little queasy.

They passed over the edge of the curving horizon and were once again in the blackness of space. Takis was much closer now. As was a second, smaller moon -- a moonlette really -- which raced slightly behind its larger companion like a greyhound running at the flank of a charger. What seemed like hundreds of points of winking light banded the planet. Jay frowned, trying to fathom the twinkling display.

He was trying to decide if satisfying his curiosity was worth looking like a dumb shit. He'd just about decided it was when Mark took the idiot's lead. "What are those?"

Tachyon looked momentarily confused. Jay pointed, amplified. "Over there, looks like somebody lost a string of Christmas lights."

"Sunlight reflecting off platforms, satellites, weapons." The words dried up. It didn't seem as if she were trying to snub the humans, it was more as if she'd forgotten how to talk. Unblinking, she stared at the screen. Jay would have given a lot to know what was going on in that little head.

Again, it was Meadows who dared to voice what Jay was only thinking.

He held out both hands closed into fists. "Pick a feeling."

Tachyon studied the backs of Mark's hands. They were rosy with blue veins, and a few age spots were starting to show. Tach reached out and delicately tapped the left one. Jay noticed that her nails were carefully maintained in that look known as the French manicure. It was strange that he hadn't noticed before now. Strange that Tachyon would take such care with this borrowed body. Then he thought about Tachyon's personality, and suddenly it made perfect sense.

"You really are one vain little son of a bitch," murmured Jay to himself.

Mark's hand was now extended palm up. Tach lightly brushed her fingers across the soft skin. "Happy." She paused, then some internal spur set the words flowing again. "When I left all those long years ago, I thought I'd be returning in a matter of weeks. Then I thought I'd never see home again. And now..." The sentence trailed off.

Mark opened the other hand. "And this one?"

Again that featherlike brush. "Fear... because now I'm afraid I'll never see home again." The smile was crooked.

"We'll get you back, Doc."

The keying on a console brought Jay's head around in time to see Zabb place a communication headset over his gilt hair, pull the thread-thin mike to his lips. In *Sham'al* he said, "This is Network ***&\$%#@* number nine two seven five seven wanting..." (No, that couldn't be right, thought Jay. Ah, *requesting!*) "Standard **&%^ \$#'. "

There's something very frustrating about hearing a language with which you have a passing acquaintance. You want to understand, you ought to understand, ultimately you don't understand. Comprehending one word in three was driving Jay nuts. He stepped in and tapped Tachyon on the shoulder. She jumped like a scalded cat. Turned to look at him with a blank, fixed stare that seemed to communicate that she couldn't recall who he was or why he was there.

"Hello, translation please."

There was a leitmotiv of Takisian broadcasting on an open channel. Tach listened, shook her head.

"It's just standard landing protocols --"

"I want to hear it."

She shrugged. "Okay. We read you -- I can't translate the Network word. I think it's the ship's name -- you are cleared for docking at hangar bay twenty-three." Zabb warbled back. Tachyon repeated in English. "Transferring computer control to station beacon."

More singing from the station, and Tachyon gave a short gurgle of laughter, then translated, "Your accent is passable, shopkeeper, I congratulate you."

Zabb glared, and the words came in a sudden glissando. "It's better than passable, you childless, motherless ass. What a diplomat you'd make."

Jay realized that Tach had added the final remark as a sarcastic commentary on Zabb's social skills. It had the expected result -- Zabb's glare shifted to Tachyon.

"Get off my bridge," Zabb ordered, but Tachyon wasn't listening.

Her expression held all the joy of a Bernadette the first time she saw the virgin. "Listen!"

Jay listened. Meadows was listening so hard, he held his breath. Jay heard himself breathing, the subtle humming of the equipment.

"What?" he whispered. "Am I listening to?"

"Ships... singing... telling stories... Ancestors, I really *am* home." Joy rang in the words, but then she swayed like a stalk of blowing wheat. Jay got an arm around her, supported her until the faintness passed. She drew a thumb across her hairline -- so disconcerting, it was a Tachyon gesture -- nodded thanks, and scuttled out of the circle of his arm.

The ship altered course again, obedient to the invisible reins of data transmitting from the Takisian station. The station slid into view from the bottom of the screen. Jay knew *up* and *down* were relative terms in space. He knew the ship was moving, not the station -- (well, but wait, the station was also moving around the planet -- *too confusing*) -- but it still had a *Jaws*-like quality of an attack from below, a gaping maw opening to receive the little silver minnow. The image was reinforced by the organic quality of the station. No right angles here, no sharp edges or glitter of metal. Whatever this thing was, it had been grown, not welded, into place.

"That's not an overgrown ship, is it?" Trips asked.

"No, the ships are a separate sentient race, although rather substantially genetically altered by us. This is nanotech at its apex." She flashed that little porpoise smile. "We're cultivators, not mechanics."

"And every family has one of these mothers?" asked Jay.

"Yes, but not so large."

"Then this isn't Ilkazam?" Trips asked.

"No, this is the Bonded station. It was primarily built as a buffer for the Network, but we use it to do business House to House as well." Again the smile. "We don't like tourists on our turf."

Jay asked the logical question. "So what about us?"

"I've adopted Trips, which makes him family."

"And you're invited," put in Zabb. He stretched, stood, and crossed to them with that grace that always had Jay thinking nervously of the white tiger in the Central Park Zoo. "The only absolute prohibition is against any member race of the Network."

"Or any individual who has sworn service to the Network," Tach added, and from the looks she and her cousin were exchanging, Jay had a feeling that a lot more was being exchanged than mere words.

"You've really got a hard-on about these Network dudes," Jay said.

"We despise them only somewhat less than we hate the Swarm," drawled Zabb.

"And you're the only Takisian to have done business with both," Tach said, and sweet malice dripped off the edges of the consonants.

Zabb returned Tach's smile. "I'm quite a legendary fellow." And to Jay's surprise Tachyon gave a sudden yip of laughter like a fox's cry.

Trips was frowning. "So we might run into some Vayawand?"

Tach sobered. "Entirely possible."

"Isn't that, like, a problem?"

"Bonded means peace as well as money. This is the one place all the families can come together at any time and do business without threat of violence. An insurance consortium holds bond money from each family, and it would bankrupt a House if they violated the peace."

"We're violent, but pragmatic," Zabb added.

Braking jets fired, and the ship gave a lurch as it settled onto the floor of the docking bay. Tachyon stumbled, and Zabb threw out a hand to steady her. She jerked away, and he jerked back his hand before contact could be made. Jay decided it was a good thing they were saying adios to the Takisian just real soon now.

Meadows broke into his worried thoughts about the little Takisian soap opera. "Jay, we've done it. We've made it. We've reached another planet!"

"Yeah... swell."

Chapter Seventeen

At the foot of the ship's ramp Tachyon felt anxiety fall away like snow sliding off a roof. It still wasn't solid ground underfoot and open sky overhead, but at least she was off *that* ship. Away from *him*. She looked back at Zabb and inclined her head regally.

"Thank you for your services."

"The pleasure was mine."

She led the two humans toward the bay doors, then became aware of the steady rap of Zabb's boot heels on the floor behind her. She whirled. Nesfa and her people were eagerly tumbling out the lock, chattering in their own language.

"Zabb, you've done your job. You've delivered me to Takis. Now go *away*."

"It's a free station. I've a mind to buy a new hat. Besides, you aren't home yet."

"And just what does that mean?"

He shrugged. "Also, I have to keep an eye on my happy groundlings on an outing." He jerked a chin toward the giggling Viand.

Chewing down irritation, Tach resumed her stately waddle for the door. They were on the perimeter of the station -- little to see but maintenance vehicles, automated loaders, an occasional mechanic -- both genetic and mechanical. Tach realized she didn't want to hike all the way to the central hub, and she was sick of listening to Zabb and his mudcrawlers march after her. She reached a pedestrian strip and slid a hand across the wall. A schematic of the

station appeared, delicate veins of color running beneath the skin of the wall. She traced a travel path and keyed the strip to move. The strip moved slower than a walking man. Zabb waved as he passed them. The Viand observed the gesture, looked at each other, waved.

Fifteen minutes later they were in the heart of the bustle. The central hub combined the beauty and reverence of a Gothic cathedral, the manic energy of the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, and the conspicuous consumption of a stroll down Rodeo Drive. The walls arched toward a tapering point hundreds of feet overhead. The ribbed material softly glowed, throwing an iridescent light over the throngs of people strolling across the glass-like floor, entering and exiting the exotic buildings, pausing by carved fountains to exchange greetings, supping in the cafes, examining the bounty of a hundred worlds laid out in elegant, eye-tempting display.

Two of the Viand were carrying laden plates to a table. Nesfa and several of her crew were inspecting elegant handguns in the window of a nearby gunnery. True to his word, Zabb was in a hat shop arranging a long-tailed, shining cap on his fair head. He spotted Tach, swept off the hat, and gave her a bow so low and so flourishing as to make a mockery of the courtesy.

Takisians, both *Tarhiji* and *Zal'hma at' Irg*, were everywhere, and Tach viewed them with growing alarm. Almost fifty years had sent fashion careening to the opposite extreme. There was still a lot of lace and layers, but the new look among the younger breed was the speed-skater look. Tight spandex caressed every curve and angle. Eye-confusing colors swirled, dotted, or splattered the one-piece suits, and the biotech that had grown this cloth was keyed to galvanic skin responses. Colors shifted and swirled in response to the wearer's mood and whim. Hair had also

adapted to the new look. In place of long curls, peach fuzz across the nearly naked skulls, or a river of straight silk as long as it could be coaxed. Tachyon's old body was sadly out of fashion with its naturally curly love-locks. Tach's borrowed body fit right in -- or would if it hadn't been female... and pregnant.

"Nice," Jay said. "Be nicer if there were a few more babes around to model the spray-on look."

"We are getting, like, some weird looks, man," Trips whispered hoarsely.

A scent, rich and spicy, assailed Tachyon's nostrils, and she froze as the smell crossed time and triggered memory. Mark's concerns and alarms seemed unimportant, overshadowed as they were by the play of images behind her closed lids.

"You okay?" Jay asked.

"Fritter cakes," said Tach, swallowing the saliva that filled her mouth.

"Yeah, they smell great. If we had some money, we'd buy some."

Ignoring him, she continued. "I must have been ten or eleven. Jadlan and I slipped into the private kitchen and made them. The smell woke father, and we thought he would kill us. Instead he laughed and made hot *ikadah*. We talked until almost dawn." She bowed her head and lightly touched her stomach. "I never saw Jadlan again."

"Why is it you're never happy unless you're miserable?" growled Jay.

"Guys, we really are in the shitter," Trips said urgently.

Tach pulled her attention from the past and gawked at the seven Takisian men who had fanned out and were advancing on the trio. They halted just out of arm's reach, and their demeanor was decidedly hostile. One of the men stepped forward. Two long braids hung at each temple. Beads had been worked into the pale hair, each marking a significant moment in the life of this noble of the House Alaa. The rest of his hair formed a tangled cloud across his shoulders.

"*Intaye*, do you require aid?"

Tach was confused. "No."

The man peered closely at her. "Are you of House?"

For a moment the question took her aback. Of course she was of House, the greatest and most puissant house on the Crystal World. Fortunately Takisian caution overrode Takisian pride. It would not do to reveal to strangers the return of the heir to House Ilkazam. Then it finally penetrated -- these men were not concerned with her noble pedigree, or her mission. They saw a breeding female. A strange enough sight even among the shops and homes of the *Tarhiji*. Unheard of among the *Zal'hma at' Irg*. And it was obvious this little body had enough grace and beauty to make them question her station.

Tach evaluated her two paladins. Only Jay could effectively pass as a member of the majority population, that ninety-seven percent that actually engaged in industry and agriculture and supported the elegant, telepathic overclass.

Tach shrank shyly against Jay's side. "No, lord."

Their interest in her vanished like steel shutters falling behind their eyes. They transferred their attention to Mark, towering head and shoulders over the diminutive Takisians

that surrounded him. "And what, by the Ideal, are you?" drawled the Alaa nobleman.

Mark flipped them a peace sign. "Terran, human, from the planet Earth. Peace, man."

Jay leaned in to Tach and whispered, "He's gonna say it. I know he's gonna say it."

"Like, take us to your leader, man."

"He said it." Jay shook his head.

The Takisians exchanged puzzled glances, and Tach felt a smile growing like a sunburst. The Most Bred, the *Zal'hma at' Irg*, don't like jokes they don't understand. Particularly when they suspect they're the brunt of the joke. A few black looks were bestowed on the trio, and they dispersed.

"Meadows, you are one crazy fucker." Jay shook his head again. "Wish I'd thought of it first." Mark smiled shyly.

"Let's find a phone. I want to get home."

"Phone?" queried Jay.

She fluttered her hands like a person waving off flies. Jay stayed stubbornly in place. "Link stage. Okay?"

Fingers flying across the keyboard, Tach tried another combination of numbers. The stage remained stubbornly gray; then the flowing red script appeared, instructing her either to present her credit crystal, or to give a valid account number.

"Maybe they changed my access code," said Tach. She leaned back and chewed nervously on her lower lip.

All three of them were squeezed into a link booth that consisted of a keyboard and a concave desktop.

"Maybe you don't have an account any longer," suggested Jay. "It's been over forty years."

"It was *my* money."

"Yeah, well, maybe they figured you didn't need it any longer."

Mark offered tentatively, "Will they accept a collect call?"

"Would you?" shot back Jay.

"No," Mark admitted. The ace considered for a moment. "We could, like, cruise around until we spot someone from House Ilkazam."

Tach was already shaking her head. "Won't work. Juniors are always assigned to hub duty. These children probably wouldn't know me in my own form, much less as I am now. No, I need someone who will recognize my mental signature."

Jay glanced back through the doors of the booth. "Are there panhandlers on Takis?"

Tach ignored him and tried another combination of numbers. Suddenly an arm reached over her shoulder and deposited a black crystal on the keyboard. Silver and red lines crawled through the facets like sluggish lightning.

"Allow me to be of service, cousin," Zabb drawled. Coolly Tach lifted the crystal and dropped it into the cradle. "Let's hope no one's raided your assets."

Zabb smiled. "No one would dare. In my case the family *knew* I'd be back."

The screen flashed once and went black. Tach typed in the link destination. *Commandant, platform Ilkazam.*

An instant later the six-inch-tall figure of a Takisian appeared in the concave bowl. He wore the gold and white of the Ilkazam officer corps, and there was a certain facial resemblance to Zabb, and to Tachyon as he had been.

"Bazzakra brant Kazz sek Najah sek Mimjal! Blood and Line, this is the first good fortune I've had."

The hologram of the man smiled politely, but wary puzzlement hung about him. "*Intaye*, are we acquainted?"

Zabb leaned in, his hand resting lightly on Tach's shoulder. "Surely you remember me, Baz."

The reaction from Tachyon was instinctive. Teeth bared, Tach brushed Zabb's hand from her shoulder.

The reaction from Bazzakra was equally instinctive. He rejoiced at the sight of his old commander. "Zabb! We thought you dead."

"Thought Tis was dead too," smiled back her cousin. "But here he, er rather *she*, is. In another predicament as usual."

"You're serious? This girlchild is the Heir?"

"Yes."

Suspicion darkened the gray eyes as Tach frowned up at her cousin. "Why are you doing this? I should have thought you'd be delighted to destroy my chances."

"No, dear cousin, someone must return home to lead our family."

"Then you know," Bazzakra said.

"Know what?" Tach demanded.

But the officer's mind had jumped to a new consideration. Plucking at his lower lip, he frowned off into space. "I must consult Taj. If it truly is you, Tis, you haven't lost your flare for a dramatic entrance at the final hour."

Tach beat the palms of her hands on the desk. "What is happening to my home and House?"

"Not over a public link," warned Zabb. "You *have* been among the mudcrawlers too long."

A second later another figure flickered to life on the holostage. He was dressed in the more elaborate finery that the two humans associated with Tachyon at his flamboyant best. His face was heavily lined, gray streaked his temples, and one long brush of silver ran from a pronounced widow's peak back over the top of his head.

"Finally, an old geezer," Jay said. "Too bad he looks like a geriatric skunk." Mark gave the detective an urgent nudge with his elbow.

Taj studied Zabb's handsome and arrogant face, the thin lips curved in a slight, scornful smile, and ran a hand wearily over his face. "I know from long experience, Zabb brant Sabina sek Shaza sek Risala, that wherever you are, there dwells trouble. What is it this time?"

"Is this link secure?" asked the younger man.

"Yes. World Link is no doubt raving, but by the time they realize the scramble was deliberate, not technical failure, we will have concluded our business. Whatever that business might be."

"Tisianne and her two servants require a shuttle."

"Fascinating." It was a gift to be able to fill a single word with so much disdain. Zabb flushed. "Are you drunk or insane?"

It was time Tach took a hand. She dreaded it -- the *look* and then either shock or amusement. Sucking in a deep breath, she said, "No, uncle. I am Tisianne. And I need your help. Worse than I did the night I'd been out whoring in the city over the absolute prohibition by father, and he force-locked the entire compound just to catch me. You overrode and slipped me back into the palace."

The old man seemed to shrink. "Ancestors! It can't be."

Tach leaned forward intently. "It is. I can tell you more. The day your sister -- my mother -- died. I had crawled under her arm, but she was so cold --"

"*Stop!* Baz, get these... travelers down here. *Now.*"

"Yes, sir."

"And make inquiries. You understand?"

"Yes."

"So he believes you?" Mark asked.

"He doesn't know what to believe," Tachyon replied. They were waiting outside one of the docking bays. "Any good telepath could have pulled those memories from the real Tachyon's mind."

"Zabb did vouch for you."

"Given our family history, that could end up damning me more than helping me. After my father was... injured, Taj has served as regent to the House. Protecting my throne until my return. Protecting it most notably against Zabb." She sighed. Her back was aching abominably, and indigestion set her stomach to roiling. "And it won't take Baz long to discover that Zabb is captaining that Network ship."

"So we're really in a 'have you stopped beating your wife yet?' situation," Jay said.

"Not that hopeless. Once me meets me, our bona fides will be established."

"Yeah?" Jay asked aggressively. Tach simply tapped her temple. "Oh... yeah." The ace walked a tight, nervous turn. Jay jammed his hands into his pockets. "Some kind of Takisian ordure is hitting whatever passes for the fan on this planet."

"What makes you think that?"

Jay simply tapped his temple. Zabb, Nesfa, and several Viand arrived.

"I came to say farewell," said Zabb as if in answer to a question Tachyon hadn't posed.

"It can't be soon enough."

"And I to tell you... goodbye," Nesfa twinkled at Jay.

Jay's eyes widened in alarm, his Adam's apple worked convulsively, and finally a single word emerged. "Great." He took up a position safely behind Mark Meadows.

Tach returned to a contemplation of the amber lights running in complex patterns over the lintel of the air lock. A voice warned them softly in Takisian that a ship was arriving, and it was unsafe to open the inner door until docking was complete. There was a soft ringing like the chime of a glockenspiel, and the lights went blue.

The lock cycled open, and Bazzakra, flanked by five soldiers, stepped through. The guards quickly fanned out. Their weapons were still holstered, but tension vibrated in the silence. A couple of the Takisians eyed Zabb respectfully, and Tach realized that her rival had been gone

only five years. Her absence spanned over forty. Who would remember Tisianne?

Baz was staring at her, mostly at her most obvious physical feature. Feeling as awkward and ungainly as a blimp, she stepped forward and made a quick, sweeping gesture across her forehead.

"Read."

She felt the delicate probe like the brush of a feather across a fingertip. It fell away at the same moment Bazzakra took a step backward.

"Burning Sky! It *is* you."

For an instant he seemed bereft of words. Here in the presence of so many powerful telepaths, Tach was discovering that her feeble skills seemed augmented. She could catch whispers, shadows of the thoughts around her. Bazzakra's were of total confusion, a man trying to make sense out of too many horrifying factors.

Finally he shook his head and limited himself to a fervent, "The blood is well and truly flowing now."

"Take me home, Baz. We'll sort it out later."

"If it can be," Zabb offered cheerfully.

Baz's face closed down. There was regret in the blue eyes, but also contempt. He turned to Zabb. "You understand, my lord --"

"That I'm an impotent bastard without a pedigree, and I can never, ever, ever go home. Yes, I know" He crossed to Tachyon and lifted her hand. "Goodbye, Tis. I hope you have a safe delivery. Whether back into your own form, or into the exalted ranks of motherhood."

He leaned in and gave her the kiss between relatives, first on the forehead, then the lips. She was too clumsy to elude the embrace, and the contact left her shivering, her stomach reduced to a tight knot. Tach dragged the back of her hand across her mouth.

The soldiers closed ranks around Baz and the three travelers, and they moved swiftly through the lock. Tach noticed the guards never turned their backs on the Viand. She was certainly home. It was depressing.

The ship was a small, quick passenger shuttle. Bred for boring, repetitive work, it lacked the wit and sparkle of a ship like Tachyon's stolen *Baby*. But its thoughts were welcoming, and it extruded more benches to accommodate the newcomers.

They began the uncoupling procedure. Tach sagged on a bench and tried not to fall asleep. Tried to plan. Tried to shut out Illyana. Tried to stop wondering what color her child's eyes would be.

It was an alien emotion, but as the lock cycled shut, Zabb felt a fist close around his chest. He forced aside the homesickness, the sense of abandonment, and counted down the seconds. *Far enough, but not too far*. What he was about to try was utterly, totally, completely insane, but it would be a death to be sung, and whether he succeeded or failed, he would be out of the hands of the Network. He was going home.

Zabb drew in three panting breaths through his mouth, sucked in a lungful of air, and, drawing his weapon, blew out the lock. Alarms began sounding, the edges of the rift secreting material as the station fought to heal itself and stop the hemorrhage. None of this really registered with Zabb. He kicked off hard, like a runner at the start of a race.

Across the floor of the docking bay. The mad sprint was burning air, but it couldn't be helped. He needed the inertia. The outer hull lock was slowly shuttering closed.

Zabb hit the edge of the bay and jumped. The abrupt loss of gravity set his stomach rolling. He focused on the gray, rough hull of the Takisian shuttle to ease the nausea. He measured his progress toward that surface against his remaining air. The calculations were not encouraging.

Tachyon was jerked awake by the ship.

Master, an explosion has breached the integrity of the platform. Should I recouple?

No! On visual.

The ship obligingly offered them a view of the slowly retreating docking bay. Where the lock had been, there was a ragged hole. Tachyon lurched to her feet as she spotted the small figure in Network mufti diving slowly after the departing ship.

"Jesus Christ," Jay breathed. "He'll never make it."

"No," Mark said. "Inertia will carry him. If he can hold his breath long enough."

The Viand were firing now, using their newly purchased weapons. They were lousy shots. High energy beams pulsing through the bay, light claws scratching at the fabric of space. Nothing came even close to Zabb.

"Motherless mudcrawlers! Fire on my ship! On a Takisian! Return fire!" Baz ordered.

Lasers lashed from the ship, and one of the Viand went down. Its pouch convulsed wildly, and the worm

crawled free. There was an audible *thump* as Zabb hit the side of the ship.

Tach clutched Baz's arm. "Don't let him in."

She "heard" Zabb's preemptory command to the ship. Its acquiescence. Admiration for Zabb and a desire to obey Tachyon warred on Baz's face. His hesitation made the decision for him. There was no time to countermand the order to the ship. The inner door flowered open, and Zabb tottered through. Collapsed.

Baz issued a telepathic command, and the ship leapt like a startled cat. Front heavy and awkward, Tach teetered, staggered backward. The bench caught her in the back of the knees, and she sprawled.

"Remember all that blood that was going to start flowing?" she said bitterly. "Well, it certainly will now. And it's all going to be mine."

Baz ignored her. In fact they all ignored her. Mark dropped to his knees beside the prone man and rolled him onto his back. Baz moved for a first-aid kit while Jay watched with bemused fascination. It was as piping female tones had no power to penetrate, the words held no meaning.

Regaining her feet, Tach walked over and stared down at the unconscious man. Zabb's face was a brilliant red from burst capillaries. Blood flowed sluggishly from nose and ears. An array of complex emotions clawed at her -- hate, fear, love, the memory of a childhood hero worship... admiration. She was still a Takisian, and not even four decades on an alien world could blunt her acceptance of that quintessential Takisian attitude known as *virtu*. To try to succeed brilliantly and flamboyantly. To try to fail brilliantly and flamboyantly. It was all the same to a psi lord, so long

as his actions had an effect. This exploit would ring through the halls of the House Ilkazam. And all Tach had managed to do was get kidnapped and knocked up. She returned home a victim. Zabb a hero.

Baz administered an injection designed for just such mishaps -- though normally such accidents occurred because of spacesuit failure. The compound was designed to carry oxygen more efficiently through the bloodstream. Seconds later the drug kicked in. Zabb shivered and began dragging in great, gasping lungfuls of air.

A moment later his eyes snapped open. He seemed confused, disoriented. Loudly he announced, "Consider the business relationship between the Network and myself to have been terminated."

"A simple 'I quit' wouldn't do?" muttered Jay. "Little drastic, I'd say."

"How else do you renege on a lifetime contract except by running?" whispered Trips.

Baz assisted Zabb onto a bench. Tach leaned in, gathered the front of his Network uniform in both hands, and yanked him up until they were almost nose to nose.

"My sin was bringing the Network here in the first place." She enunciated each word with exaggerated care, biting off the consonants as if they were enemies to be crushed between her teeth. "But you have compounded the transgression by ensuring that they shall *never ever* leave until we deliver your lifeless body to them."

Zabb twisted his hand into her hair and pulled her even closer. "You're welcome to try, cousin."

Chapter Eighteen

Meadows kept talking. It was like listening to Carl Sagan on ludes. *Relative mass, elliptical orbits, low density, probably metal poor*, tossed and bumped like rudderless boats in the sea of technobabble pouring from the old hippie's mouth. It didn't mean jack shit to Jay. All he wanted was to look out the window (or whatever the hell it was on this low-flying ship critter) and watch the scenery flash by.

It was better than the observation cars on the old Broadway Limited of Jay's youth. He'd loved to ride the trains, especially when his dad had taken a sleeper car. Lying in the upper bunk, swaying to the rhythm of the train as it raced down the track. The monotonous clicking of the wheels on the rails. The sudden flash of lights across the black glass of the window as they whipped through some small town. Jay always wondered who lived in those towns. How their lives differed from his. Well, that curiosity had carried him a shit load farther than the old Broadway Limited Chicago to visit Grandma.

And there weren't going to be any ice-cream sundaes when they arrived, either. All he had was Mark Meadows aggressively proving that eggheads really were incredibly stupid, and Tachyon staring out the window with that blind, lost expression that made Jay crazy, and two male models who were twittering to each other like a pair of baritone pigeons on a phone line.

Turning back to Tachyon, Jay studied that delicate and very beautiful profile. Wondered if Tachyon had any plan past the obvious imperative to *get home*. Her dear old chum Baz had sure transferred his loyalty to Zabb once he saw the condition his prince was in. Maybe this Taj guy would be some help. Jay had liked the look of the older man.

"The tectonic stresses and activity must have been incredible to have pushed the plates into such vertical positions."

Jay swiveled his head and stared at Meadows. "If you mean they've got really high mountains here, yeah, you're right. They've got really high mountains here."

The pale blue eyes behind their thick lenses blinked rapidly several times. Jay felt as if he'd kicked a puppy.

"I'm just trying to understand the planetary development, and how it might have affected the culture," Meadows said.

"And I just want to admire the view. And it's a lot more fun when you have someone to share it with. For example, I'd say, *Wow, look at that mountain.* And you'd say, *Yeah, it's really high, and look at those amazing glaciers!* And I'd say, *The sun on the ice makes rainbows. Boy, that's really beautiful.*"

"I see your point." Mark cleared his throat, his prominent Adam's apple jerking like a bobbin on a fishing line. "Boy, those mountains are really lovely."

Jay sighed, returned his attention to the view. *National Geographic* would love to get a chance to do the first photo layout of Takis, combining as it did the best of the Swiss Alps and the Himalayas. Snow-tipped peaks thrust through the opalescent clouds like jagged talons reaching for the belly of the tiny ship. Then the clouds would suddenly part and reveal deep valleys verdant with vegetation. In other valleys the mountains fell away to lakes of an eye-aching blue. The great peaks drowned their feet in the still, deep waters, the reflections forming double visions of mountains and sky.

There began to be signs of civilization. Houses perched dizzily on rocky outcroppings, tile-roofed

farmhouses, cable cars connecting peaks and valleys. The ship flashed over a final peak, and they were flying across a bowl surrounded on all sides by mountains.

Mark leaned forward eagerly. "A caldera. Probably the site of an ancient volcanic erup --" He broke off guiltily and rolled an eye toward Jay. "Sorry."

Jay wasn't interested in geology. A city nestled like a starling in the circle of mountains. The predominant impression was of towers. Towers of all types and descriptions. Round towers, pointed towers, bell-like cupolas, some of them actually twisted like blown glass. And the colors. Jay couldn't tell if they'd been painted or if the stone actually came in these bewilderingly brilliant shades. There was a clear delineation where the older section ended and modern architecture began. The styles remained the same, but there was more glass in the newer buildings.

Finally there was some reaction from Tachyon. She let out a funny little hiccuping cry, but whether of grief or joy Jay couldn't tell. "The music center. It's gone." She spoke English. Jay knew it was unconscious. Knew it would drive her crazy if she knew.

Zabb had that smile that Jay had learned to distrust. It meant something really unpleasant was about to emerge from between his teeth, and it was always directed at Tachyon.

In his heavily accented English he said. "I'm afraid it was one of the casualties of the Vayawand assault."

"They attacked the city?" The concept seemed to completely shock Tachyon. Jay didn't know why. Wasn't that what war was all about?

"Unfortunately a number of House were attending a concert. Fortunately I wasn't. After your father turned

himself into a vegetating hulk, someone had to lead the defense. Fifteen families arrayed against us."

Only you could have defeated those odds," Bazzakra said in Takisian.

Ass kisser, thought Jay, and Why is asshole number two speaking English? The ace then looked at Tachyon, her eyes drowned in misery, and he understood. Zabb wanted the humans to know he was tormenting his cousin, wanted to see if they would react. Was daring them to react. As Jay watched, a spark of fury burned away grief in the girl's gray eyes. "I will not be burdened with this guilt."

'Bout time, thought Jay.

"I wasn't here. Perhaps I should have been, but my presence wasn't going to lessen the damage done to Ilkala." She indicated the city with a wave of a hand.

"The damage was foredestined when we initiated the ill-conceived experiment."

"If you'd allowed us to test the virus properly --"

"It wouldn't have made any difference!"

"That's excusatory crap!" Zabb shouted. "The meta-Takisian powers that the virus would have provided us, coupled with our psionic gifts, would have made us the undisputed rulers of Takis."

"No, she's right," said Mark softly. "On Earth we've had the wild card for almost fifty years, and guns and bombs are a match for any ace. It's like John Lennon said, man, we've just gotta give peace a chance."

"Taj and my father should have seen this attack coming," Tachyon argued. "Our culture is poised on a knife's edge of malice, rivalry, and self-interest. You threaten to

upset the balance of power that completely, and of course the other families are going to attack."

Baz broke in with an agitated burst of singsong. Pissed, Jay decided, because he couldn't understand. Tachyon and Zabb twittered back, but there were sudden odd pauses, and Jay realized it was because they had switched to House talk, which relied rather heavily on telepathy. Jay just hoped that Zabb wasn't stealing the family farm from Tach's weakly shielded human brain. Over the years Tachyon had kept stressing that there was a very strong code of etiquette governing telepathic eavesdropping, but Jay didn't trust Zabb. A month with the guy had left no doubt -- he was a total dickweed.

Tach turned back to her human companions, pressed a hand against the swell of her pregnancy as if holding back nausea. "Baz says there's a claimant to the *Raiyis'tet* who is trying to end the regency. I really did return just in time." The soft chin stiffened. "And now that I am home, it is time I dropped the groundling name and assumed my proper identity. I am Tisianne brant Ts'ara sek Halima sek Ragnar sek Omian. Prince of House Ilkazam."

"Okay, man, like, I'm with you." Mark nodded several times for emphasis, then glanced back out the window, and his breath caught with all the wonder of a four-year-old coming downstairs to find the Christmas tree up and the presents waiting. "Oh, it's so cool!"

Jay pressed his nose to the window, eager to see. During the talk they had flashed across the basin of the caldera and were now back in the mountains. The ship raced through a winding canyon, careful to remain below the level of the cliffs, and coming far too close to the rock walls for Jay's taste. Carved out of the stone were dwellings. At least Jay assumed they were dwellings -- if not, someone

had gone to a lot of trouble to cut pillars and lancet windows for an elaborate facade. They rounded a final curve, and suddenly a *house* lay revealed, coiling like a crystal-and-marble dragon's tail across a high mountain meadow. Like the first structures they'd seen, part of it was carved from the rose-colored cliff face.

Below that frowning fortress the land had been terraced to form pretty gardens filled with flowers, blossoming trees, and fountains. Despite the flowers, Jay had a feeling it was late autumn in Ilkazam. The leaves of the trees flashed winter fire and lay like colorful scattered scarves on the grass.

Bordering each garden were more buildings with no interlinking architectural style. Most of them were colorful with plenty of windows. Most extended no higher than two stories.

With one awesome exception. A single tower, which looked as if it had been built from smoky crystal, pointed warningly toward the sky, and as he stared down the length of that narrow valley, Jay decided he never wanted to experience a windstorm in the needle. The cliffs had to create a hellacious wind-tunnel effect, and that building would be swaying like a ten-dollar hooker on six-inch heels.

A wall surrounded this improbable edifice, and it seemed like a pretty archaic and wimpy way to hold back enemies in a spacefaring culture. Jay said as much, and Mark nudged him with an elbow, indicating guard posts on the cliffs. Jay looked closer and saw the blunt muzzles of weapons thrusting like alligator snouts from the cracks and fissures in the cliff wall.

"Lasers," whispered Mark. "Big ones by the look of it. Missile silos, and there's a flickering in the air over that wall -- maybe a forcefield?"

"Fairy-tale palace with great big horror-movie teeth," grunted Ackroyd. "Clad we're invited. I'd hate to crash this party."

"Burning Sky, you *are* Tisianne," Taj said, and there was no joy in the words.

The regent of the House Ilkazam dropped his head into his hands and tugged nervously at the hair over his temples. Tisianne had known his uncle a long time. For this terribly refined, terribly controlled man, this was the equivalent of hysterics.

What was it Jay had said about invited guests? thought Tisianne. *But the invitation was most grudgingly offered. The kind of invitation you issue to unexpected drop-ins and shirttail relatives. Somehow my arrival here has made a bad situation worse.*

There had been no honor guard, just a single equerry with a couple of *Tarhiji* soldiers to whisk them through back doors and forgotten hallways to the office of the *Raiyis*. The pair of guards flanking the elaborate double doors had insisted the travelers be scanned even though Tis told them repeatedly it wouldn't do any good. The three human bodies were outside the genetic mapping of Takis. Jay had taken it with ill grace, yelping loudly at the pinprick as blood was withdrawn from his wrist, and had spent the next few minutes muttering about alien poisons and precious bodily fluids. Finally the infrared trip wires, which flashed across the door at random and ever-changing heights and angles, were disconnected, and they entered.

Though opulent, the office was clearly a space designed for a busy man to work, and work efficiently. For an instant Tis wondered if her human companions were disappointed. Then she forgot all about them and their

reactions. It struck hard and deep as a blow that nothing in the room had changed since Tis had stood here before his father forty-four Earth years ago and shouted bitter defiance into that beloved face. They were the last words they had ever spoken to each other.

On one wall hung a portrait of Tis and his mother done just before her death. On the desk a shifting holograph filled with pictures of Tisianne -- riding, dancing, skating, reading. There was also a starkly simple flower arrangement. The petals and leaves reflected back the lights and stung Tisianne's eyes. As a youth Tis had excelled at the art of flower arrangement. That had been his last creation for his father. Shaklan had had the flowers freeze-dried and lacquered to preserve this final gift from a rebellious child.

And now Taj had unwittingly brought home her sin and her loss by playing patient caretaker to a mausoleum in memory of a half-dead man.

What kind of a Takisian are you, Taj brant Halima sek Ragnar sek Omian, thought Tisianne, that you have no ego?

And that was the thought which had apparently elicited the outburst from Taj. It was very embarrassing for Tisianne. She knew the mentatics training she had forcefed this borrowed body was marginal at best, but she hadn't even *known* she was being scanned.

Taj raised his head and waved them toward chairs. Zabb sprawled with elegant, mocking ease. He wore his Network uniform like a defiant shout. Trips sidled crabwise toward a heavily carved high-back chair. Once seated, he perched stiffly and uncomfortably upright as if caged. Jay was as cool and insouciant as ever. He sat down, relaxed, and waited -- it was the detective's gift. Tis selected a comfortable settee. None of these aggressively masculine

chairs seemed designed to accommodate a pregnant woman's unique physique, and she saw no reason to suffer.

The computer screen inset in the polished desktop sprang to life. Taj bent and read, and the light flowing up from below accentuated the lines of strain and turned the eye sockets into dark hollows. With a sigh he pushed back from the desk and swiveled in his chair to face Tisianne.

"Your mind is Tisianne's, the body contains not a platelet of Takisian blood. But the child you carry is not only part Takisian, but carries the genetic markers of House Ilkazam."

"It's a rather long and complicated story."

"I'm in no hurry."

Tis was. Her teeth sketched at her lower lip. "Please, I must know, is Blaise here?" Taj gave her a *look*. She subsided.

The older man turned to Zabb. "If I didn't have larger problems to deal with, I'd chastise you with a laser whip. Your little stunt sent that Network ship careening into our space, violating the boundaries established by treaty." Zabb started, surprised. "This behavior was easily discouraged, but the precedent set is unfortunate."

"But they *were* discouraged?"

"They've withdrawn to the Bonded platform." Taj smiled humorously at Zabb's expression. "Did you think they'd go meekly home? You've breached a Network contract, and we've fired shots -- the first shots fired against a Network vessel in over eight thousand years. For all I know, we may be at war again. All because of you.'",

"I have always had a *remarkable* effect on people," Zabb drawled, and Baz choked.

Taj quelled the lesser noble with one slitted glance. "Get back to Ship Home. I want extra patrols flown. Keep a watch on that Network *vacu*."

Baz nodded quickly and exited.

Taj drummed fingers on the desk, the overlong nail on his left thumb hitting with a sharp click as he studied the humans. "And what do I do with you?"

Tis moved to stand between Jay and Trips. "They don't know House Talk very well. Try *Sham'al*. And you needn't do anything with them. They are my bodyguards, and one is of my line. I adopted him."

"How... like you." Taj pushed back his hair, folded his hands as if to keep them still. "They carry the Enhancer in the pattern of their genes."

Enhancer threw them. Tis explained that it meant the virus. Trips had nothing to say to that. As usual Jay did.

"We call it the wild card," said Jay. The English term sounded strange coming at the end of a burst of Takisian.

"Wild card?" Taj looked to his nephew for amplification.

"It's a term from an Earth card game called poker. It's meant to imply randomness, something that strikes without warning."

Taj nodded, absorbed this, then, cocking an eyebrow at Tis, said, "I'm still waiting to hear how your soul came to reside in this pretty pregnant vessel, and I'm most intrigued to discover how you managed to impregnate yourself."

"The father of the child is Blaise, my grandson."

"So you're carrying your great-granddaughter?"

"Yes."

"Fascinating. An incest for which there is no name."

"It was a subtle revenge."

"This grandson of yours sounds very Takisian."

"If that's synonymous with crazy, you'd be right," Jay said. Tis and Trips winced. For the first time Taj really seemed to focus on the detective.

"For a mudcrawler you are very fearless... or foolish."

"A little of both actually. Can I ask a question?" Taj nodded assent. "You're the first old geez -- uh, older person I've seen here. How old are you?"

"Nine hundred and twenty-three."

"Jesus Christ! Does everybody live to be nine hundred?"

"Barring unforeseen... er, accidents, which is rather difficult to do," Zabb drawled. "We can live much longer."

Taj looked significantly at Tisianne. "Well, I'm waiting." Tisianne opened her mouth, closed it. Her uncle sighed. "Yes, Tis, your situation is ludicrous, but I don't see how talking about it will make it any worse. And I cannot help -- you or the House -- unless I know precisely with what I'm dealing."

Slowly at first, then with growing animation, she told the tale. The last great fight with Shaklan when Tisianne had begged his father to halt testing of the Enhancer on a small, insignificant planet filled with genetic doubles of the Takisians. His pursuit of the test ship, its destruction, and the release of the virus.

She recalled the early days when ten thousand people had died in Manhattan, when hideous and twisted jokers had wandered like living scars on the face of the city. She

spoke of the few, the lucky few who were blessed with metahuman powers -- the aces. Taj glanced with interest at the two humans. It didn't take a genius to conclude that they possessed these metahuman powers. If there was a Takisian racial flaw, it was unbridled curiosity. It was already beginning to eat at the regent.

Tis glossed over the terrible days of the McCarthy witch hunts, her deportation, the years of drunken wandering. It was then he had sired a daughter. Taj's expression grew thunderous, and she blanched a bit. Hurried on to the founding of the Jokertown Clinic to care for the victims of the wild card. The discovery that he had a grandson: a quarter-Takisian boy who had been raised by vicious revolutionaries and possessed not an ounce of pity or morality. The outcrossing of genes had somehow produced a mind-control power of terrifying dimensions. She touched on the enemies and crises she had faced -- the Swarm invasion, the Astronomer, the jumpers, Bloat -- and her great nemesis, Blaise.

"There was an ace, his wild card was to bestow this jumper power on adolescents. Blaise became a member of this gang, and to revenge himself upon me, he switched me into the body of this girlchild. He held me prisoner, and he... he... he would..."

Her voice had started to jump, and strength drained from her body. She felt her knees buckling. Zabb reached her first. Swung her up in his arms and carried her to the settee. Her vision cleared. Taj stared down at her, white-faced with shock. Obviously her emotions, the memories, had been too strong. They had forced themselves past the shields that the old man was maintaining for politeness' sake. Even Zabb, who would cavil at nothing, was shaken.

"This piece of rotting afterbirth *raped* you?" Zabb shouted. Tis shrank from his anger.

"Hey, guys, yeah, it's a lousy thing, but we're all adults here," Jay said. "It's not like it never happens --"

"Not on Takis!" Taj interrupted.

Zabb whirled on the humans. "It is an act of total depravity, a sign of insanity. It is abomination." Zabb turned back to the regent. If this creature is on Takis --"

"He is with the Vayawand," Taj said.

"Then let me lead a raid --"

"No." Tisianne sat up, and rising, she moved with what grace she could muster to the desk to seat herself in her father's chair.

The humans were oblivious to the symbolism. The lines at the corners of Taj's mouth deepened, whether a smile hidden or anger suppressed, Tisianne couldn't tell. Taj had ruled this House for over thirty years. Did he resent her usurpation? But it wasn't usurpation; it was hers by right.

Only one man could challenge that right. Implacably she met his gaze. Zabb smiled. Unconsciously he brushed at his mustache with the tip of a forefinger, his manner that of a man surveying an hors d'oeuvre tray. Taj inclined his head. Zabb did not.

"You are dismissed," Tis said to her cousin.

"He is the commandant of the House," Taj said.

"I have not made him so. And you must have been using someone else in his absence."

"Not as effectively," was the dry reply.

Zabb rested his palms on the desk and leaned in on her. "I am the best man for the job, cousin."

"For whatever job I decide to give you. Not one of your own choosing, *cousin*. And certainly not for the job you are eyeing." Anger made her breath short, and Illyana jerked in her womb. Tis pressed a hand against her stomach and longed for a handful of Roloids. "Now, go." Zabb bowed, so respectfully, so politely, so reverently that it made a mockery of the obeisance, and withdrew.

"We're going to have to use him," Taj said.

"Maybe, but Ancestors be damned if I'm going to let him *assume* anything."

"What are your orders, *Raiyis*?"

"Contact the *Raiyis* of House Vayawand. Inform him of my return, my situation, of the... crime committed against me. Demand extradition, but lead the troops yourself -- I don't trust Zabb --"

It finally penetrated that Taj had been gesturing at her, trying to stop the urgent flow of words. "What?"

"This is all very lovely, nephew, but for one tiny flaw -- Blaise *is* the *Raiyis* of House Vayawand."

Chapter Nineteen

Ballooning was definitely a rad experience. Slipping along, just another colorful cloud among all the other colorful clouds. Unlike a human outing there wasn't a lot of noise of conversation, but that was because most of the people were using *Vayet*, and fully half the conversation was telepathic. There was a *Tarhiji* orchestra performing at the stern of the amazing carved-and-painted gondola, but they kept it soft so a person could appreciate the magical *silence* of this mode of travel.

There was one constant noise that Kelly found very disturbing -- the clap of wings followed by a piteous shriek as another small bird or animal was caught and killed by the plunging birds of prey being flown by the nobles in the bow. Blaise was up there where he could really hear their cries and smell the blood. Kelly liked it just fine in the stern, thank you. And he knew the cure for discomfort -- more wine.

He signaled, and the wine washed like liquid amber into the goblet. The scent of the servant's perfume filled Kelly's nostrils. He snatched up the glass so quickly that the servant spilled a few drops on the embroidered tablecloth. Kelly grinned apology at the pretty girl and gulped down half the glass. Cold sweet fire. Whatever else could be said about the Takisians, they made bitching wine. The girl smiled back. There was a startling reaction from Kelly's borrowed body, and he half rose from his chair. The horizon wobbled, and Kelly realized he was more than a little drunk.

"The body leads, the mind must follow," said Bat'tam.

The elderly noble had drawn a chair close -- too close - - to Kelly's. The lost human blinked owlishly at him. The embedded jewels had begun to sag like collapsing houses

into the wrinkles networking Bat'tam's face, and his long silver hair reminded Kelly of cobwebs. The older man's gaze dropped, and Kelly slid a hand to his crotch to hide his rampant erection. Bat'tam stood, waved off the girl, placed a hand on Kelly's shoulder, and urged him back into his chair.

"There, there, Ilkazam, don't distress yourself."

"I'm a little confused about my role right now," Kelly slurred, and hiccuped his way into a little sob.

"What does it matter? Man or woman, you are dear to me."

"I thought you were only nice to me so you could get close to Blaise."

Bat'tam laid a hand across Kelly's mouth, stopping the angry, bitter words. "I avoid charismatic young men with fire in their eyes, and a hunger in their heart. That's how I've lived to be so old. No, Ilkazam. You are --" Bat'tam broke off abruptly, and frowned at the small, fast shuttle that was falling like one of the hunting birds on the bloated mass of the balloon.

The ship braked, and hovered beside the gondola. Everyone's attention shifted to the new arrival.

"It must be serious if they interrupt the *Raiyis* at his play," Bat'tam said.

Kelly's focus was on the flock of pretty little gray-and-lavender birds that had just been released. "Run," he said under his breath. "Fly fast." The little birds went fluttering in all directions. Several of the large raptors spread their brilliantly colored wings and shook them urgently as they sensed their prey escaping.

A man was suspended in thin air, being propelled by some unseen force from the door of the shuttle to the deck of the gondola. He hurried to the party surrounding Blaise and dropped to his knees.

"My lord," the man said.

Blaise smiled tightly down at him and rolled an eye to Durg. The Morakh stepped ponderously forward. "Der'et, one of our intelligence officers from the Bonded station."

"This better be good. You've interrupted me."

"Perhaps in private, master," Durg said softly.

"Fuck that," Blaise said in English.

"A Network ship docked today. Tisianne brant Ts'ara and Zabb brant Sabina were aboard. They were taken to Ilkazam, and there have been shots exchanged with the Network *vacu*."

Durg watched the color drain from the boy's face. "Oh no. No. How? How did he get here?"

Hesitantly the spy offered, "The Network, *Raiyis*."

Blaise turned on Durg. "Why didn't you tell me? You said we'd be safe. He couldn't get here!"

"Calm yourself."

It was an inauspicious recommendation. It lit the fuse of Blaise's fury, and he went plunging like a linebacker through the diminutive Takisians clustered about him.

Durg didn't have time to deal with Blaise's tantrums at the moment. The news of a Network encroachment into Takisian space was alarming. Glancing down at the huddled spy, Durg said, "Return at once to the station and monitor

the Network. Apprise me of any movement or messages." Durg started away, then looked back briefly. "And I suggest you not take formal leave of the *Raiyis*."

There was a sudden murmur of sound from the stern of the gondola, and a wavelike movement as the crowd reacted like an amoeba touched with a finger. With mounting concern Durg rolled through the crowd.

Saw Kelly, running like a maddened *jebali*, screaming Durg's name. The man slammed into his chest, and the extent of the disaster came into focus in sharp, hard-edged images -- a white-and-red-coated bone splinter sticking through the skin of Kelly's forearm.

Durg grabbed Kelly and shook him. The man screamed. *Broken ribs*, Durg registered.

"Where is Blaise?"

"He's going to kill him! He tried to save me! He'll kill me!" Kelly babbled.

Durg kicked into a run. Through the ranks of shocked *Zal'hma at' Irg*. "Go," the Morakh roared at the assembled nobles. They went.

Blaise was a frozen statue, but great beads of sweat were squeezing through the skin on his forehead, matting in the red sideburns, rolling down through the blood on his cheek. Bat'tam, armed with a broken, blood-drenched goblet, was slowly gnawing through his lower lip. Blood was beginning to run down his chin.

Kelly crept past Durg to Bat'tam's side. The elderly noble put an arm around Kelly's waist, held him close -- but gently, so gently. A part of Durg's mind registered this development and wondered if the boykisser was going to be a problem requiring a permanent solution.

"Release him," Durg ordered.

An alien emotion ran like a furtive animal through his guts. Then Durg tensed, and as Bat'tam's desperate mind control relaxed, the Morakh swiftly slapped Blaise across the face. "Are you mad? You rule House Vayawand. How can you fear a pregnant female?"

"I don't want there to be even a *chance* that Tachyon can recover his body. She" -- Blaise's out-thrust arm was so taut that it shivered with strain as he pointed at Kelly -- "is useless to us now. I want her dead."

"Useless?" Bat'tam's fingers tightened briefly on Kelly's waist. The man's nervousness jumped in each syllable. "My lord, in this body reposes ten thousand years of planned breeding. The finest genetic legacy the Ilkazam could create. This is a treasure not to be wasted."

"You don't give a shit about irreplaceable genetic material, you just want to fuck my granddaddy," Blaise spat. Bat'tam bowed his head. "Get out of here, faggot." Bat'tam hastened to obey.

Durg allowed the silence to stretch into an agonizingly long minute. Gave the killing frenzy time to die. "Perhaps his motives are not the most pure, but if the reasonable argument does not appeal... consider how it would complicate Tisianne's life if we raided the Ilkazam gene pool," Durg said softly.

The final flicker of insane fire faded from Blaise's dark eyes. He tugged thoughtfully at his lower lip and regarded Kelly. "What did you have in mind?"

"Marriage is a very useful institution." After a moment's hesitation Blaise began to laugh.

There was nervous shifting from the nobles all huddled in the bow of the gondola. Blaise's face darkened. "Are any of them spying on me?"

Durg shrugged. "It's possible. I'm the wrong person to ask."

"I can't trust any of them."

"You have the sworn personal loyalty of every Morakh in House Vayawand. The *Zal'hma at' Irg* need not concern you."

Blaise was shaking his head, sending sweat and blood droplets flying. "I think we ought to get the hell out of here. I've got to have support

Durg held himself in close control. Watched the careful facade of nerve and competence he had constructed and coached into this boy crumbling like an avalanche. Sought a solution. Then softly he said, "My lord, the psi lords are not the only people on Takis."

Chapter Twenty

"How the hell does a sixteen-year-old kid become a king in six weeks? A month? Whatever it's been in Takisian time?" Jay blurted.

"I was hoping you would enlighten me," Taj said.

"What does it matter?" Tis said bitterly. "Now it will require a war to dislodge him. I'll have to use Zabb, I can't trust him, and he may kill both Blaise and my body."

"Hey, man, like don't forget about *us*," Mark said with a significant lift of the eyebrows, and an obvious head jerk to Jay.

Sadness washed across the old man's face. "Over the weeks I've watched the well-bred of House Vayawand kill each other like maddened *sinde*. It culminated with L'gura's suicide. Ancestors know I hated that bloodless bastard, but he deserved to be ruined by a gentleman, preferably me." Taj smiled, but the momentary flash of humor died fast. "Not manipulated by a piece of unplanned afterbirth." Taj sighed. "Well, his death shall be avenged. Now that I know this is a mentatic phenomenon, it can be countered."

"With difficulty," Mark warned.

In painfully slow, excruciatingly bad English, Taj said, "Adversity is a state I understand. Achieving the impossible commonplace. What is merely difficult should be easily achieved."

There was a soft chime, and Tis keyed the desk. A holo of the door guard sprang to life on the desk. The man's face registered shock, and he couldn't seem to say a word.

"Yes? What is it?" Tis asked. Nothing. Irritated, Tis pushed. "You interrupt me, it must be something."

Taj stepped to her, laid a hand on her shoulder. "They don't know you, and he's never seen a woman in that chair."

Relieved at seeing Taj, the man reported that Zabb was requesting an audience.

Taj glanced at Tis. She nodded wearily. "Let him in."

Zabb entered in his usual sweeping style. "We've got trouble. Remember that claimant Baz mentioned? Well, they're attempting to ram through an elevation before any of us can react. I think we had best react."

"Curse that motherless Egyon," Taj said. "I wonder what spooked him."

"Probably me wandering about the halls," Zabb said. "And you know a palace, rumors pump like bile through the halls. The word must be out that Tisianne has returned. Either one of us has a superior claim to the Kou'nar line."

Taj summoned the guard, who wrapped themselves like a protective cloak about the Takisians and the humans and hustled them through the corridors of the sprawling House.

While they walked, Tisianne explained how her entire plan rested on her ability to command the troops of the House Ilkazam. "If I lose the *Raiyis'tet*, it's a sure bet that the new *Raiyis* won't help me recover my lost body. If he does, he costs himself the throne."

They kept nodding sagely, but Tis wondered how much they had really grasped. Ideal! She wondered how much *she* had grasped. It was all happening too quickly. There was no time for her to ease back into the life of a world she had left half a lifetime before.

She didn't know how to conspire anymore, she didn't want to. Resentment and weariness chewed at her. She wanted to react to the familiar faces she saw throughout the ranked bodies of her armed guards. She wanted to savor childhood memories brought back with painful vividness by the scent of baking pastries, or a particular tapestry. She didn't want to be thrust willy-nilly into the battle. She wanted someone to bring her her stolen body and put her back where she belonged. She wanted to be at peace for the first time in forty-four years.

Illyana sent a wave of warmth and love from the womb to her mother's mind. Tisianne's breath caught at the overwhelming sweetness of it. At three months the baby had been little more than a sensory sponge. Now at seven and a half months she was becoming an individual. *And the problem, you little demon,* Tis sent to her daughter, though she knew the ideas were too complex for the baby's developing mind to comprehend.

I love you and I want you, but I don't want to birth you. I'm frightened -- of the pain, of the entire experience ... Ancestors! I don't have time for these thoughts, I have to preserve my House, my station. I have to be warrior, not woman. No, that's not right. Cody would be quick to jump down my throat. Women can be fighters. Mother then, my mind more on life than death ... Hush, Illyana, sleep, baby, don't distract me now.

Through the doors, and into an elaborate audience chamber. Tis remembered it being much larger. Had it shrunk or had she somehow grown? A knot of people were gathered about the platform holding the chair of the *Raiyis* of Ilkazam. It seemed to have been carved from a piece of glacial ice, filigreed with snowflakes. It was in truth constructed of an almost obscene number of diamonds supported on a platinum frame. Such conspicuous

consumption on a planet so mineral poor. *We're psi lords, mentats, Most Bred, the Zal'hma at' Irg*, Tis reminded herself. It didn't do much to assuage the guilt. *Too long on Earth*, she thought.

The pretender could be recognized by his sulky, disappointed expression. He had been rushed into his festival finery, for the cloak was caught up in the waistband of his ballooning trousers. Tis noted in shock that the boy still wore a mother badge twined about his left wrist. Not yet twenty -- a baby! -- and someone had made him a target.

Tis raked the rest of the assembly, searching for the Svengali. *Egyon*, Taj had said. *Yes, that would fit*. Zabb's thought concurred with her conclusion. Tis also had to admire Taj's intelligence sources. The personal guard of the Sennari line well outnumbered the more ceremonial escort protecting the Kou'nar conspirators.

Tis ignored the boy with his spun caramel hair dressed to form two horns rising from above each ear. Instead she addressed his trainer.

"Not yet, I think, *vindi*. There are still three lives between you and your ambition."

Egyon pivoted elegantly to face her. He was dressed in fencing leathers dyed in multicolored squares, and his pale brown hair was clasped with a knife-and-sheath barrette. Obviously he had been caught unawares, but Tisianne had to grudgingly admire the speed of his response.

"Three, Tisianne brant Ts'ara sek Halima sek Ragnar? Are you counting that unplanned abortion you're carrying?" Egyon asked sweetly.

The need to do murder flickered once like a whipping snake's tail. Tis buried the urge. "Your powers must be

failing, Egyon. This is a girlchild. And you forget my father, who is not dead yet."

"As good as!" flared the pouting child.

"Quiet!" Egyon ordered.

"Yes, quiet, little one," Tisianne agreed. "I'm trying to save your life." The boy's eyes widened slightly. "Yes, consider that. Do you really feel you have the experience to lead this House?"

There was an instant of silence, then Zabb showed his teeth and said softly, "No, that's not a good idea."

Her cousin had read the boy's mind. Tisianne his body language, but she understood nonetheless.

"Zabb's *my* heir," Tis said. "You could put him in command of your troops, but will he fight the Vayawand or usurp you?" She shrugged eloquently.

"We have no proof this is Tisianne," Egyon said. "Just the unsupported word of the regent. You're all Sennari seed. You'd do anything to keep the *Raiyis'tet* from falling to the Kou'nar."

"Test her," said Zabb, and Tis took a quick, sidling step away from her cousin. He reached out and caught her above the elbow, held her still. "But not you, Egyon. This poor little human mind can't protect itself well enough, and I'm not going to have my cousin conveniently die from a brain aneurysm."

Relief suddenly removed the clog from her throat, and Tis quickly followed Zabb's lead. "I'll submit to an examination by the full *Ajayiz*. That should establish to anyone's satisfaction that I am Tisianne."

Zabb threw back his head and shouted, "And you can't tell me you old beldams aren't monitoring this little drama. So get in here, and let us do it."

"Zabb," said Taj warningly.

"They'd rather be amused than defend the House. Better to sit in the ashes and stir them with the stumps of their arms than miss one moment of emotional turmoil from their descendants." In a more moderate tone he said to Taj, "Sorry, *vindi*, but I've always thought they were manipulative old spiders."

"There's no need to convene the *Ajayiz*. It was already decided that Onyze should ascend --"

"The situation's changed, Egyon, you'll have to do better than that," Tis said.

Suddenly the House rang with a tone so high that it pained the ears and vibrated in the bones. The exterior manifestation of that call was painful enough -- for the telepaths it was almost unbearable. The Takisians staggered, and Taj, who was a powerful and subtle telepath, was driven almost to his knees. Tisianne held up better than any of them because of the feeble abilities of her borrowed human body. But she felt it, drawn like a knife across her nerve endings. Only the *Tarhiji* guards and the humans were unaffected.

Mark, kind to the last and always concerned, supported Taj, even checked the old man's pulse. The final aching harmonics died away, and the Takisians recovered. Taj pulled abruptly away from Mark, leaving the ace blinking in hurt confusion. Taj noticed. Glancing back, he said gruffly, "Your kindness was appreciated if unnecessary."

Mark brightened perceptibly, and Tis was reminded again how much he loved this fine old man. Taj truly was a

grand seigneur.

"Is that the Takisian version of a dog whistle?" asked Jay.

Zabb gave a short bark of laughter. In a manner of speaking, yes."

"It is the Council Call," Taj said, irritated by their flippancy.

Zabb's grin became even broader. "Little cousin, you are more troublesome and get a bigger reaction than a swarm of scissor wings. They're actually coming down."

Panic took a brief run around the pit of her stomach like a frightened rabbit seeking its burrow.

"You can take some credit for this," Taj said gruffly. "Pulling in the Network on us --"

"Which makes him a renegade and a traitor," Egyon said with that tight, prissy voice that lawyers use when addressing a jury. "A perfect candidate for the *Raiyis'tet*."

"Zabb is not the issue here, I am," flared Tis.

"You're bickering like the blind," Taj exploded. "We now all wait on the decision of the *Ajayiz*, which will be several hours in coming. I suggest we adjourn to wait in more comfortable surroundings." He paused and eyed the two humans: Jay dressed in his brown slacks and sports jacket, Mark in jeans, tennis shoes, and a T-shirt. He shuddered slightly. "And get something decent for these *stirpes* to wear."

"Go away, Egyon," Tis said softly. "Taj is still regent of House Ilkazam... and despite his courtesy I don't think that was a request."

Out-and-out warfare is rare in a Takisian noble house. Murder, when it occurs, is accomplished in shadowed corners, cloaked in the trappings of an accident.

This was how Blaise did it, thought Tisianne. If I possessed the jump power, I could take Egyon, manipulate the puppet body to attack, and jump back as the guards killed him.

But Egyon obeyed, and she didn't possess the jump power, so she regretfully watched as the Kou'nar filed obediently from the audience chamber. Well, since no new and arcane powers were available to her, she would have to rely upon those fundamental Takisian talents -- conspiracy and treachery.

Mark's touch on her shoulder pulled her out of her reverie. "You should rest," he said.

"No." She shook her head. "First I must find a toilet. Then I must see my father." She forced a casualness into her voice which she didn't feel.

Zabb and Taj both looked at her sharply, and Zabb took her by the elbow and walked her forward until they stood at the base of the dais looking up at the throne. He seemed uncomfortable, like a man who was picking up and inspecting words to find the ones with the least potential for pain. At last Zabb said, "You've been warned what you'll find."

"Yes."

"You can do a scan?"

"With Taj's help."

"Then you know what to do."

Zabb turned and walked away, and Tis watched him go with hatred growing in her heart.

When Zabb's hand fell like a stroke of doom on his shoulder, Mark wanted to shrug it contemptuously away. He could tell by the Doc's expression that her cousin had again delivered some emotional body blow, but rudeness didn't come easily to the gawky ace, and he secretly feared that he couldn't carry off the gesture with anything approaching aplomb. Mark had looked ridiculous too many times in his life for it to be an unfamiliar sensation, but close association with the emotion didn't make it any more welcome.

It took a quarter second for all these random, regretful, and scattered thoughts to shoot through Mark's head, and then Zabb was saying, "Come, I need you with me."

"Me?"

A flicker of a smile briefly relieved the intensity of the Takisian's expression. "As incredible as that might seem... yes. Your grasp of our language is better than the noisy man's, and in your case I am acquainted with your powers."

"My *friends*," Mark corrected softly. "And don't assume you've met them all." It was a gently couched warning, and Zabb didn't mistake it.

"You may believe me when I tell you that at this moment my cousin has nothing to fear from me,"

Zabb was walking toward the door, and Mark said to his back, "Because right now you need something from her."

The alien looked back. "Quite astute of you, groundling."

"Wait a minute." Mark knelt, snapped open the case, and removed five of the vials. Slipping them into the leather pouch at his belt, he crossed to where Tis was expostulating with Jay Ackroyd.

"Hey, man, watch this for me. Okay?" He handed the case to Jay and hurried back to join Zabb.

On this walk, with only a pair of guards as escort, and without the accompaniment of a frenzied explanation from Tachyon -- *Tisianne* -- Mark had the leisure to inspect his surroundings. Judging from the striations in the stone walls of the audience chamber, it was located in the ancient section of the house which had been carved from the rock of the cliff. Now they had entered the newer sections of the sprawling villa. The range of decorations was bewildering to the eye, and jarring to the mind. In some areas paintings and tapestries adorned the walls; in others just the polished stone; in still others there were inlaid mosaics.

"I take it that Takisians don't believe in a coherent decor."

Zabb laughed. "To understand Takis, you must first understand how territorial we are."

"Yeah, I know. All the different families and Houses..."

"Yes, but that extends in-House as well. Each breeding line stakes out a section of palace for their own, and that includes the corridors."

"So they get to decorate it as they please."

"And maintain it at their own expense. It's a way for the *Raiyis* to cut costs."

That raised a new thought for Mark. "Money. How do you get it?"

"Investments, taxes, theft." The alien laughed at Mark's expression. "No, nothing so romantic as you are thinking. When we battle, the winner doesn't cart away the treasures of a House. Our theft is of the electronic variety."

"But when you absorb a smaller House --"

"It happens very rarely. Nothing fights like a cornered Takisian, so out-and-out victories are costly. Also, if we reduced the number of Houses..." He paused, considered. "Well, it wouldn't be as interesting or challenging."

"Then you like to fight." A wealth of flower-child disapproval was ladled onto the words.

Zabb's quick pace slowed, and he cocked his head curiously at Mark. "Yes, we're a warrior culture. There's glory in warfare, very little in peace."

"That's a lot of crap. A sincere and dedicated pacifist is braver than any soldier. Look, I don't particularly like the Network -- too profit oriented, and money's never meant much to me, but, like, they've got the right idea. You don't squander your energy in war, you direct it out -- for exploration, scientific research. You've had space flight for a hell of a long time, and you've got only a few colonies and no alien allies. I think that's sad, and really wasteful."

Zabb stopped before an elaborately carved door. He laid a hand on the cut-crystal knob and quirked a smile up at Mark. "One could argue we are even now forging a unique alliance with you humans."

Mark stared seriously down at him. "No... you despise us."

There was the briefest of pauses, then Zabb nodded abruptly. "Yes."

As Mark watched the alien step through the door, he had to admit to a certain grudging admiration. A human would have expostulated, temporized, weaseled. Takisian honesty was as brutal as their politics.

Mark checked just on the threshold. "This is your room," he said.

"Very perceptive."

Mark surveyed the collection of weapons on the wall, the series of paintings featuring animals that resembled a cross between giraffes, horses, and impalas. A large stained-glass window depicted a hunt, but the riders were mounted on enormous flying creatures of a genus so alien that Mark couldn't even think of an earthly comparison.

"Nobody touched it in five years?"

Again that flashing smile. "They knew better."

"And the Doc's? Is his... her room still intact?"

"No." Zabb turned from where he was fiddling at the contents of an elaborate desk with etched crystal fronting each of the drawers. "I made sure it was assigned to others... oh, it must have been twenty or so years after my little cousin's precipitous departure."

Mark seated himself on the corner of a table and swung a leg. "Are you so shitty to the Doc because you're trying to bury the fact you really do like her?"

The Takisian had a funny expression. "Very... very perceptive. Is that why you agreed to accompany me and leave my cousin with only a single protector?"

"Yeah. And she would have stopped me if she'd thought it was wrong."

"Tis and I each have a mission to accomplish."

"And you need me if you're going to succeed."

"I could probably achieve it alone, but remembering how difficult you... er, your friends can be, I thought your involvement might simplify matters."

"What is it you want me to do?"

"Help me kill a man."

Hands up, palms out as if the words alone had the power to damage him, Mark backed off. "No, oh no, no way."

Zabb pressed in, driving Mark around the opulent room like a drover with a skittish horse. "Then she's dead."

"That can't be true. She's got guards, she's got us. Besides, there's no reason to kill this kid. The Doc is the Doc, and once her bona fides have been established, the kid will just get shunted aside." Zabb didn't answer. He just began filling a pipe from a twisted blown-glass humidor, never taking his sardonic, cold eyes off the sweating ace. "Killing that boy won't accomplish anything," Mark continued. "There'll always be a replacement waiting to..." Marks voice trailed away.

The images parading past his mind's eye were those from human mythology. Of dragons' teeth being sown into the plowed earth, and soldiers springing up like foul weeds.

"Precisely, which is why I want to remove Onyze in a way that will implicate Egyon and sow the seeds of distrust among the remaining members of that line. It's a very effective way to discourage pretension and treachery. And it will work. Oh, not for all time, but for a score of years, perhaps there will be peace."

"The peace of fear," Mark said defiantly.

"The best kind I know," was the imperturbable reply.

"Then I'm sorry for you." And he found that it was true.

Zabb hunched one shoulder. He picked up a lighter and drew on his pipe until he had it burning to his satisfaction. "Tisianne understands the harsh necessity that presently drives us. Even now she is taking an action that tears her soul. But she will act. Will you?"

"Not this way."

Zabb tried another tack, still in that same sweetly sane tone. "Have you never in your life acted to defend the helpless?"

Indignation edged the words. Mark sounded as harsh as an old crow next to Zabb's mellifluous arguments. "This is not a case of self-defense, and all the sophistry in the world isn't going to make it self-defense!"

"Perhaps I failed to express myself clearly. It is not incumbent upon either you or your 'friend' to kill Onyze. I will handle that, but I need full intelligence to succeed. I need a -- in your culture I believe it is called a 'bug' -- planted."

"It makes me an accessory to murder, and I won't do it!"

"Does your friend also share in your charming if totally unrealistic belief?"

Suddenly wary, Trips asked, "Which friend?"

"That blue fellow who can walk through walls." In a burst of regretful reminiscence he added, "By the Ideal, he nearly drove my poor *Hellcat* mad."

"Traveler." Mark turned away, wrapped his bony arms around himself as if the act could somehow comfort. The scent of the alien tobacco was sweet in his nostrils.

Zabb was continuing. His voice was low, calming, eminently reasonable. "You have chosen a philosophy for yourself. A foolish one by my lights, and one I cannot understand, but you are the one who must face the shame of your descendants, and the rage of your ancestors. But how can you make the decision for this other individual? He might be willing to help me. To help Tisianne."

With a tongue suddenly too thick for his mouth, Trips managed to mutter, "I do care... and he won't help. He'll be too afraid." He paused, considered. "Maybe he'll even believe it's wrong."

"How nice for you if he does. How fatal for Tisianne." Zabb dropped the pipe into an ashtray with a clatter. "And then there's the infant..."

Trips found words beyond him. He let out a sound that was half curse, half sob, and pulled out the small vial of blue powder. Downed it. As the transformation began to take hold, he faintly heard Zabb saying, "Don't take it so to heart. You can always ease the conscience with the comforting argument that it wasn't you. You were right, sophistry is the other great Takisian art."

"Made any more progress?" Tisianne asked, as she shut off the computer and turned to face Taj. They were in the medical labs of House Ilkazam.

Not by the flicker of an eyelash did the older Takisian indicate that he read the wealth of fury and sarcasm behind the four words. "A little. It hurt us when we lost our two best researchers."

"Ansata's death was his own choice. A simple surrender was all that was required."

"Or you could have released his ship."

Tis wasn't going to buy one instant of guilt. She buried the brief flash that tried to surface. "That was never an option. I weighed fifteen lives against the thousands on Earth. Ansata lost. And as for my absence -- I was unavoidably detained."

Jay surprised Tisianne by speaking up. Obviously he understood Takisian better than he spoke it. "If your ship hadn't been damaged, would you have stayed?"

Slowly she said, "Probably not. I was very young, and I was making a grand gesture in the best and grandest Takisian style. You were just faceless masses who were going to be so very, very grateful. Only later did I learn to love you."

"You have reason to be grateful, groundling," Taj said. "You obviously have received some great and potent power, or you would not be a companion to Tisianne."

Jay didn't have to climb down the alien's throat, Tis did it for him. "Grateful! *Grateful!* The Ideal curse you and leave you childless. Is Jay's power worth tens of thousands of lives? Is it worth the damage to *his* life, concerned as he must be over the fate of any children he may sire? Is it worth the loss of all that I am? What was conceived in this room / am now carrying to fruition."

She spun away and tried to regain control of her ragged breaths. The fury, the anguish helped propel her to a cabinet. It kept her from thinking too much about the purpose of the drug she was loading into an epispray.

"I see you haven't lost your flare for impassioned speeches. Do you still favor desperate causes?" Taj asked.

He was trying to fathom the mind of a person who would run off to save the inhabitants of an alien world. Trying to see if she regretted throwing away her birthright

and her future. Tis thrust the epispray deep into her pocket and looked her uncle straight in the eye.

"I'd do it again... in a second..."

His expression softened. "That's my Tisianne. Your father would be proud."

"Did he ever forgive me?"

"No... but he missed you to the end."

"It's time I saw him."

The infirmary was almost empty. There was one young man floating in a biogerm bubble. The bubbles hung from the ceiling by long filaments that monitored the injured body, but it did look as if the patient had been swallowed by a Portuguese man-of-war. Tis also thought of them as placenta pods. They served the same function as the womb, growing a healthy body, and the individual floating in their soothing soup often seemed to revert. Like the man before them, curled on his side, his thumb in his mouth, eyes squeezed shut, and nutrient feeds stabbing his body at a hundred different points.

"Gross," Jay said, but Tis wasn't certain whether he was reacting to the bubble or the horrendous wounds that raked the man's flesh, laying bare the various levels and colors of a Takisian body.

At the far end of the ward lay a pair of heavy plasteel doors like the entrance into a security vault. And it was a safe of sorts; it was designed to protect the most precious and powerful of the House Ilkazam as they healed. The guards took up positions at the door to the infirmary, and about the vault doors. Taj stood before the access panel, an abstract piece of applique art with multicolored silicon crystals, each of them flashing with white lights. Taj sent the

telepathic code, and order became chaos. Crystals flashed with clashing and discordant colors, and then the doors slid slowly open with a soft whine.

"Do you want me to wait outside with the hired help?" Jay asked.

Tis couldn't force words past the lump in her throat. She shook her head and entered. Jay followed.

Shaklan was also floating in a biogerm bubble, also curled into a fetal position, but there was no sense of the healing infant. This was a breathing, excreting husk. Rollers had been placed in the palms of each clawlike hand to prevent them from closing into permanent fists. The hip bones thrust like knife blades against the gray skin of the pelvis, and the bones of the rib cage fell away to a shrunken belly. Long, long hair floated like seaweed about the shriveled body.

Tisianne evaluated the vital signs being constantly monitored from the control panel. The monitors certainly supported the general consensus that the mind and soul of Shaklan brant Fleva sek Agem had fled.

"You still want the scan?" Taj asked.

"Yes."

She keyed the panel, and the nutrient bath began to drain away. An examination table rose out of the floor and gently received the desiccated body. Pulling aside the gelatinous bubble, Tis stared into the face of this half-dead thing and tried to reconcile it with the face of her father. It had the proper shape. That was all.

Taj gathered her hand in his, physical contact helping him to capture and augment her own feeble mental powers.

They went searching and found nothing. The flesh breathed, the mind was gone.

She paced, felt as if something were battering at the top of her skull. Found her hand thrust deep into her pocket clenching the epispray. She marched all the arguments through her head. The conclusion was inescapable.

She forced herself back to her father's side. Laid a hand against a hollow, stubbled cheek.

"Daddy..." She was a little embarrassed using the human word, but she had always liked it. It spoke of warmth and affection, and the Takisian High House equivalent didn't suggest intimacy, much less love. "I've come home. I'm sorry for the things I said. I... love you..." sound died as if strangled, and she walked away.

Taj followed and laid a hand on her shoulder. "Do you want me to...?"

"No!"

Tis held out her hand, and Taj laid a pair of tiny golden scissors on the palm. The hair was lank and wet as she separated out a strand and snipped it off. Carefully she wrapped this token of her father around one wrist.

Shaklan's lips held a hint of warmth, and it almost shattered her resolve. Then courage, pragmatism, love, and selfish need spurred her, and Tis pulled out the epispray. Laid it against her father's arm.

Jay's fingers closed on her wrist, and the pain forced her to drop the epispray.

"What are you doing?" The enunciation was ice careful.

Tisianne's eyes fluttered up to meet his. What she read there made it impossible for her to speak.

"Freeing him," Taj said softly as he gently freed Jay's fingers from around Tis's wrist. "From a death in life."

"You're going to put your own father to sleep?"

"I have to," Tis said so quietly that she wasn't even sure the words were audible. "He's been kept alive as a pawn. Now his presence is no longer necessary. In fact it's a hindrance."

"That's what Zabb was laying on you. Remove that last life standing between you and your goddamn throne. Jesus, I can't believe you."

His scorn hurt. It struck her skin like a lash, and she almost quailed. She went searching for anger and found a thimbleful. It would suffice in lieu of courage. "I expect neither your understanding nor your approval. I expect you to do the job I hired you for," Tis spat out.

Jay's face shut down like shutters slamming closed. Jammed his hands into his pockets and turned away. Tisianne sucked in a deep breath, held it, and depressed the key. Twenty seconds later Shaklan's chest seemed to collapse with the exhalation of his final breath.

Sweeping up her hip-length hair, Tis flung it across the body to form a golden shroud. From deep within her a shriek formed, drove upward, punching through her throat like a geyser of acid. The sound that emerged was like nothing human or Takisian. It was the cry of a wounded and dying animal.

For Shaklan, *Raiyis* of the House Ilkazam, was dead.

Chapter Twenty-One

If God is a woman, She looks like that grand old dowager seated in the center.

It was an irreverent thought, and it sent Mark back to an embarrassed contemplation of his thumbnails. Jay Ackroyd was sleeping, supported only by his tailbone and the back of his head in the uncomfortable little chair. Mark figured he'd let the detective sleep unless he started snoring.

While this might be the most critical hurdle Tisianne had yet scaled, for the humans it was stone-cold boring. The entire affair was being conducted in *Ilkaza!* in the private mode, so that an audible word exploded into the tense silence maybe only once or twice a minute.

The hall felt like a rococo courtroom. A mosaic tile floor showed some glorious scene from Ilkazam history, and a skylight faceted like a giant diamond formed most of the roof. The moonlight streaming through those facets broke into its component colors, and rainbows danced and clashed with the assembly's gaudy clothes.

The seven old crones stared down from their curving dais at Tisianne. *They should be passing an eye back and forth*, Mark thought, for their gray hair and cold expressions reminded Mark of the Greek legend of the Graeae. Mark wondered why the Doc didn't collapse beneath the weight of that hostile scrutiny, but she remained a proudly erect little figure with a rainbow snagged in her pale blond hair and dyeing the fabric of the elaborate clothing that had somehow been produced in only a few hours. Mark had a feeling there was some heavy nanotechnology at work here.

There had been a couple of uncomfortable moments dealing with the House tailor. Jay had been loud and crude in his rejection of any suggestion that he forgo the pleasure of wearing a sports coat and slacks. The tailor had retorted that it was beneath his dignity to design for a *Tarhiji*. Jay had retorted that the guy *was* a *Tarhiji*, so what was his fucking problem. And besides which he was better than any damn mincing fairy. Tachyon -- no Tisianne, damn it, he had to remember that -- had yelled at both of them. Then Taj had entered and gotten results.

Mark glanced over at Ackroyd. His outfit was nice but in no way matched the magnificence of Mark's suit. The tailor had been overwhelmed by Mark's size and designed to accentuate the length of the ace's lanky body. The colors were great, but the little hat kept dropping tassels into Mark's eyes, and the fluttering ribbons made Mark feel like a cornstalk bedecked to ward off birds.

Zabb came sliding down the row to join them. Mark flinched, and his hand shot down next to his chair to reassure himself of the presence of the blessed briefcase. Mark did another quick count. It hadn't changed since the last frenzied count an hour before -- Four Starshine, four J. J. Flash; three Moonchild, four Aquarius, three Cosmic Traveler.

Traveler had acceded to Zabb's request and had even joined in the spirit of the plot and improved on the original plan. It was a real bummer that this most cowardly of Trips's "friends" was forming a bond with this most charming of enemies. Now, with the elaborate pin delivered to Onyze's suite, Mark just had to wait for the other shoe to drop -- for Zabb to kill the kid.

Given that Zabb had tried to destroy Mark's home planet, it was sort of jarring to be working with him. But goddamn, Zabb could be charming, and he'd certainly

thrown his support behind the Doc's bid to regain his throne and his body. Like early in the evening. Zabb had arrived, taken a look at Tis's outfit, and vanished again. When he returned, he was carrying a pair of elaborate hair combs that appeared to be cut out of solid emeralds.

"They're mine," he explained. "They wouldn't have suited your coloring in your former guise. In your current one they suit you very well."

And Mark realized that with their pale, almost white blond hair, Tisianne in her borrowed body and Zabb looked very much alike. Tis was wearing the combs now, the hair caught up over each ear.

Remembering the combs set another synapse firing, and Mark began to worry again about Jay. Ever since the detective's return with the Doc, he had been sullenly silent, and the lines about his mouth were driven deeper as if he were holding back some raging anger. Trips had probed and had his nose bitten off and spit back at him. All Ackroyd would say was, *"Ask our little princess,"* in a tone so bitter that it sent Mark's stomach scurrying for cover against the back of his spine. He hadn't asked Tisianne -- she had enough to deal with, and there was a haunted look in her eyes that made the peaceful, gentle ace want to hit someone as if that could somehow transfer the pain she was feeling.

Zabb slid into the chair beside Mark, slipped an arm through his. *I guess we're buddies now,* thought Mark.

"I think we're in very good shape," Zabb whispered into Mark's ear.

Mark nodded, tried to unobtrusively pull his arm free. *Just an uptight American,* he thought. *I can't get used to all this touching, especially between men.*

"I mean, after all, they can't *deny* she's Tisianne."

"So what happens? They say she's the Doc, and then she's ruler of the House?"

"Not quite, they will wait to be advised."

"As to whether the consensus in the House is to make her *Raiyis*?"

"Yes."

"You're making this sound almost like a democracy." That laugh like a wolf's yip. "Not hardly. Basically it's a precaution to make certain the choice isn't so unpopular that we end up with a family blood feast."

"That's coming anyway," Trips said, depressed and tortured with guilt over Traveler's involvement in a planned murder.

"You're far too pessimistic." Zabb gave Mark an encouraging buffet on the shoulder. Then his attention was drawn to something telepathic that was transpiring on the dais.

The oldest of the old crones folded her hands carefully on the table before her and bowed her head as if in deep and profound thought.

Lifting her head, she began, "Distaffs and sword sides, *stirpes* and domestics." It was audible speech, and her focus was over the heads of the nobility, and on the servants clustered about the back wall. "Before we come to the matter before us, it is my sad duty to inform you of the death of the *Raiyis*."

A murmur moved like a moaning wind through the crowd, and Mark whipped his head around so hard to stare at Tisianne that he thought he'd snapped his neck. The Doc

stood perfectly still, and the blankness of her expression was the giveaway.

"My God, now he's got to live with that too," Mark murmured, in his distress losing control of his pronouns.

"Life on your planet has finally given Tis a spine. I'm impressed. I didn't think she could do it," Zabb said. His voice redolent with satisfaction, he added, "And it certainly caught Egyon on the hop. That he did not expect out of us."

The old lady was continuing. "Tell your families, and honor Shaklan with your grief. The city and House will observe three days of mourning beginning tomorrow... May his spirit draw near and guide us."

"May we do honor for him," came the litanous response from the assembly.

Briskly the old lady said, "So we dispense with the dead and resume our march to the future." The sharp old eyes were bent again on Tisianne. "It is clear you are Tisianne, however altered. Welcome home."

"Thank you," Tis said, bowing as deeply as her pregnancy would permit.

"On the issue of your elevation this council will convene at midnight and hear the decision of the swords. In the meantime, Taj, you will continue to serve as regent." The old man rose and bowed, crossed to Tisianne, tucked her arm beneath his, and led her toward the door. The meeting was obviously over.

Mark stood, relieved to have his six-foot-four-inch frame out of a chair designed for midgets, and grabbed convulsively for his briefcase.

"What the hell is a sword?" Jay asked.

"The male head of each distinct breeding line within the family," Zabb explained.

The crowd eddied about them. Little conversation knots formed and broke, servants threw open doors, accepted a pair of gloves from a passing master, and continued smiling, always smiling. Mark wondered if the *Tarhiji* were really that happy, or just terrified.

"There are women here," said Jay suddenly.

"Yes," Zabb answered,

"And not just the old broads and servants." Mark winced.

Zabb chuckled. "Yes, so?"

"So where's the harem?"

"*Rarrana* is not included in the tour... Unless you'd like to alter your plumbing in exchange for a peek?"

"No thanks, but how come these --"

"They're sterilized. We don't keep women in seclusion because they're women. We keep them there because they're breeding."

Zabb swung a chair around with his foot and straddled it. Pulled out the Takisian equivalent of a cigarette case and offered it. Both humans declined. Zabb shrugged, placed the cigarette between his lips, and a servant seemed to come boiling up from beneath a chair to light it.

"Assassination attempts are rarely directed at men. We just settle for them because they're usually all we can reach, and it's a convenient way to vent spleen. No, pregnant females are the preferred target. Kill one, and you've ruined hundreds of years of careful genetic planning."

"Gee, the girls must be really touched to know they're so important."

"We do value our women," Zabb said, stung by the sarcasm in the detective's voice.

"Yeah, as brood mares."

"Do you ever get to marry for love?" Mark asked.

"We marry for power, we breed for posterity, we love... only rarely."

"Great culture you got here," Jay grunted.

They were settled in Tisianne's old suite. Servants were still arriving with arm-loads of stored furniture, paintings, a computer, musical instruments, holostage. There was at least a lull in the politicking. Tis was slumped on the window seat, staring up at the moonlit glacier crawling like a frozen waterfall over the edge of the cliff. Taj had just entered, and she was giving him her profile.

Coldly she said, "I see you didn't see fit to preserve *my* room."

"I was extremely annoyed with you," was the unfazed reply. "And as for your father's office -- we went back a lot of years. Also, I was maintaining the illusion he was going to get well someday."

Tis drew a hand across her forehead. "I'm sorry. Irritability seems to be the domain of pregnant women. Is Skatt coming?"

"On his way."

"What approach do I take with him? Ideal," she pushed back her hair, stood, and began to pace. "I don't know any

of these swords. Half of them were children when I was here."

"There were a lot of deaths forty years ago. A lot of vacancies to fill with too-young candidates. And you're just a memory, or a figure in a tale to most of them."

"So they don't fear me."

"And you're not precisely intimidating now."

Jay looked up from where he was switching channels on the holo. "We could give her a bazooka to hold. The Madonna of the AK-47."

Tis ignored him. "Where's Zabb?"

"Delivering a thinly veiled threat to Pshara."

Tis shook her head. "I wish I could really trust him." She sighed. "But back to the problem at hand. How do I handle Skatt?"

"Offer him Revenue. He likes money, and he doesn't respond well to threats."

"That will annoy Rad'gar."

"He's one of Egyon's pack. Nothing we do will make him happy."

"And we don't want him handling the finances anyway," Tis concluded.

Mark was hanging about the edge of the conversation. At the lull he pushed to her side and took her hand.

"You should, like, take a break. We could... talk."

She didn't need to be a telepath to understand his drift. "It's too fresh to even look at, much less discuss." She pulled free and walked away.

"It won't stay bottled up forever," the ace warned.

"It's down there with all the other ghouls in the basement. They'll keep each other occupied until such time as they all break out at once, and I go stark raving mad."

"Sorry to add to your burdens, your princess-ship," Jay said. "But just in case I run into Blaise on the street, I better have someplace to send him other than Yankee Stadium. Have you got jails here? Dungeons, whatever? Or will you take deliveries here?"

Tis looked to her uncle. "Do we still have the holding cells in the labs? Where we tested the Enhancer on prisoners?"

"Yes. We still occasionally use them," Taj said.

"Take Mr. Ackroyd there. Let him see the cells."

"May I ask why?"

"No," Tis said shortly.

There was a tap on the door. They both glanced toward it.

"You can handle Skatt without my guidance?" Taj asked.

"I think I can manage."

Taj bowed and led Jay out another door of the suite.

Tis nodded to a servant, and the carved double door was opened. Arranging her features into a smile of welcome, Tis moved with what grace she could muster to greet him. Evaluated the warmth of admiration in his green eyes as he studied her physical charms. Pretty warm. She gave his fingers a slight squeeze and drew him toward a settee. She was definitely getting the hang of this body.

"This is really charming and intimate. Dinner in an airplane hangar with five or six hundred of your closest relatives."

"It's prettier than that," Mark protested.

"Okay, dinner in a baroque barn. Jesus, do they have to feed this herd at every meal? Doesn't anybody have a hot plate in their room? Wish I had a hot plate in my room."

"The Doc needs us here."

"Bullshit. Even our little princess for a day couldn't wrangle us a seat at the head table. If shit starts happening, Tachy's toast."

Mark wasn't having any part of Jay's bad mood, and that pissed the detective off even more. Placidly the gawky ace took another bite of highly spiced meat and mumbled around the mouthful, "You'll have her out of harm's way in an instant. I'm not worried."

"Glad one of us isn't."

"I think this is pretty impressive," Mark said, indicating the dining room.

"What, that they can flop food on the table three times a day? Then I'm really impressed with the Jokertown Soup Kitchen. They probably feed a thousand derelicts a day."

Mark surveyed the glittering crowd. Musicians performed softly in a recessed alcove set high in the wall. The balconies overhanging the room were filled with a gaggle of very young Takisians peering down at the diners. Nearby stood sentries, rifles cocked across their chests. Servants slipped through the hall clearing dirty plates and replacing empty entree dishes with full ones. Service was family-style Chinese. A myriad of dishes to sample, all highly

spiced, or very sweet, laid on a bed of a grainlike substance. It had a nuttier flavor than rice and a chewier consistency, and from the way Jay was frowning and pushing it around his plate, it didn't sit any better on his palate than it did on Mark's.

"I think I've figured out the food," Mark said.

Jay grunted. "Good, when you figure out where I can get a patty melt and a beer, let me know."

"This is a cold planet. People in colder climates tend to crave heavily spiced or gamy food and sweets. I'm a little surprised that the ruling class had an ideal of beauty which favors the slender. Usually plumpness is valued in harsher climates... indicates you've got wealth. Still, the ordinary folks do tend to be kinda pudgy --"

"Thank you, Professor. Will there be a quiz tomorrow?"

"I'm sorry, I'm doing it again. It's just... just so interesting."

Jay was frowning at a languid noble who had dispensed with a chair and instead reclined on a settee by the table. His eyes were closed, and a beautiful young woman hunkered next to him on the floor and carefully fed him morsels from the plate she held in her lap.

"I'm surprised at you. This society hardly embodies the values of the Summer of Love. It's violent, and these psi lords are a bunch of drones."

"The highborn aren't totally useless. The medical advances are, like, a direct result of the research done by the Houses."

"But it's done only for their own reasons."

"Well, yeah, but, like, why quibble with the result?"

Jay checked his watch. It was a reflexive and totally useless glance; it was still set for New York time. "We ought to be getting close to the witching hour. I think it's time for Tisianne to get control, muster an attack, and take Blaise and this girl. I'm ready to blow this Popsicle stand."

"I don't think the Doc has a clue about what to do once he has control of the House. If these Vayawand dudes are guarded like this place, it isn't going to be all that easy to dislodge Blaise, especially now that he's the *Raiyis*."

The annoyance seemed to sprout like a weed, taking root somewhere in the pit of Jay's stomach and blossoming in the back of his throat. "Meadows, you know what your ace power is -- it's to be boring and --"

But there was a commotion at the head table, and Meadows's face had gone a strange, sickly green white color. Jay jerked around and stood so fast his chair crashed over backward. But it wasn't Tisianne. Instead it was the pouty boy Onyze who was on his feet, hands clawing at his throat, and emitting a thin, tearing scream that was really awful to hear.

Jay had to hand it to them. Takisians were stone-cold calm in a crisis. Guards encircled their charges, there was the piercing hum of lasers being charged, or cocked, or whatever the hell one did with a coherent-light weapon. But no panic, no mass stampede for the exit. In fact the only people running seemed to be Trips and he, and they were headed *toward* the trouble instead of away from it.

"Dumb," Jay muttered as he bounded up the steps onto the dais holding the head table.

Zabb had his hands on Tisianne's shoulders, holding her in place. There was a cold, Medusa-like look on the Doctor's face, but her body arched toward the suffering

young man, yearning to go to his aid: Takisian and human conditioning at war with each other. It was Zabb's steel grip that decided the outcome.

Egyon reached his boy puppet and ripped open his elaborate vest and shirt. There was a *thing*, some kind of crystalline insect, attached to the base of Onyze's throat. Wielding a knife, Egyon flipped the creature off. It hit the table with a brittle sound, skittered a few steps, then froze, and as Jay watched, its structure began to rearrange itself until it resembled a jeweled pin in the design of the sword crest -- identical to the one nestled in the lace at Egyon's throat.

The creepy crawler might be off Onyze's throat, but it was clearly too late for the young man. Some powerful poison was at work. The death rattle was loud as Egyon lowered the Ilkazam pretender to the floor. Jay expected some kind of respect for the dead, but Egyon sprang to his feet, leaving the sightless eyes staring fixedly up at the painted mural on the ceiling. His hand was in his pocket, and Jay somehow suspected he wasn't jacking off.

"This is murder. You've broken House Peace," Egyon said.

Zabb laid dainty fingertips against his chest. "I?" He glanced around the circle of nobles. "I think a more useful question is who gave Onyze the *ankatai'li*?"

Silence like the grave. The eyes of the Kou'nar slid toward Egyon. Anger gave way to confusion gave way to belligerence.

"What?" he demanded truculently.

"My lord," said one of the nobles. "It was *you* who placed the badge on Onyze's lace."

"Impossible! I didn't see the boy until we gathered here."

A *bitshuf'di*, one of the neutered women, spoke up. "I saw you, my lord. Do you call me a liar?"

Meadows looked like a man who'd had the crap kicked out of him. Jay didn't exactly understand how Meadows's ace power worked, but he had a very strong feeling, honed by years of careful observation, that one of the gawky ace's "friends" was behind the tragic demise of young Oinky and old Eggy's current predicament.

"A rather drastic way to signal the transfer of your support to Tisianne," Zabb goaded.

And Eggyon bit, firing directly through the material of his pants pocket at Tisianne.

Only Tisianne wasn't there. A split second before the destructive thread of light could strike her, Zabb flung the girl into Jay's arms. Her balance was lousy, front heavy as she was. Jay had one foot on the dais, the other down a step. The conclusion was foregone. They went tumbling down the steps to the parqueted floor of the dining room. It suited Jay fine. Overhead he could hear the roar and snarl of weapons fire. And Jay hated guns. Any kind of gun. So he unlimbered his. Making a gun out of his finger, he pointed it at Tisianne.

She grabbed his forefinger and bent it painfully back. "No!" Her voice was a harsh whisper. "Don't reveal your power. Save it for a real emergency."

"I'd say this qualifies," Jay spat as a bullet threw chips off a marble tile.

Guards had formed a protective wedge about the detective and their princess and were blazing away. Jay

spent half a second worrying about Trips, hoping the gawky ace had the good sense to keep his head down -- he couldn't stand it. Curiosity won out over his very rational fear of guns and the people who used them. Jay abandoned Tisianne in the center of her nest of guards and went crawling back up the steps to the dais. He was half-afraid she'd follow, but apparently the sex change had endowed the alien with some brains.

Ackroyd cautiously poked his head above the level of the top step in time to see Taj snatch up a rifle from a fallen guard, blow the back of Egyon's head off, and duck back into cover beneath the table. Zabb, a few feet away, frowned in annoyance. "?***@^ ? you, I wanted to kill him."

"I didn't have time for your posturings," grunted Taj.

Jay wanted to cheer the old man. The detective didn't know Tachyon particularly well, but even on short acquaintance there had been so many times when he'd felt the same irritation with all the Takisian bullshit. Taj was a Takisian, but apparently his bullshit threshold was as low as Jay's.

"Did you arrange this?" Taj asked as he bounced up and snapped off another shot.

On the other side of the dining room a man screamed, clutched his gut, and pitched onto his face. Jay might like Taj, but he was going to be really pissed if the old guy turned out to be a crack shot. Then he comforted himself, there were so many tracers, both laser and bullet, that there was no telling who'd shot the poor dumb bastard.

"Naturally," Zabb replied, and he fired. Zabb was a crack shot. *Of course*, thought Jay.

There was no sign of Meadows.

Then, rising on a pillar of flame like a Hebrew phoenix, came an amazing figure, short, wiry, with bright red hair and a sharp, sardonic face. The skintight orange jumpsuit bordered with flames and cut down to the navel was a shout of bad taste -- except on Takis.

Jumpin' Jack Flash opened both hands with an unfolding lotus gesture, and goutts of flame washed from his palms, down the length of the head table. The effect of this apparition on the Takisians was profound. The gun and laser fire stuttered to a halt, there were a few seconds of silence, then whispers ran like playing children around the large room.

"Burning Sky," breathed Taj, and Jay thought it was an appropriate exclamation.

"Ancestors, how many are there?" Zabb said.

J. J. Flash, twiddling his feet like a faggy ballet dancer, descended to where Tisianne lay huddled in the center of her guards. The heat of his passage was like a sunburn across Jay's back. Flame dripped off his fingertips, and sparks danced in his red hair.

Hovering over Tisianne, he lifted one hand and bestowed a kiss on the soft skin on the inside of her wrist. "Hey, princess, heard there was a damsel in distress. What dragons would you like slain?"

"You could start by killing the people who are shooting at us," gritted Tach as she snatched her hand back.

"Sounds like a plan," and Flash was gone, propelled by a gout of fire that left a singe on the rose marble floor.

The appearance of this fire elemental in their midst had taken the fight out of all but the most dedicated Kou'nars. The rest of the Takisians seemed to have decided

that if Tisianne and his cadre had this kind of fire power, they would probably like to be on Tisianne's side.

A few shots were directed at the flying ace. The bullets affected him not at all, and the lick of laser fire he positively enjoyed, giggling as if it tickled. One bright Kou'nar thought to pick up a pitcher of water and fling the liquid toward the ace. It was a good idea -- badly executed. Flash encased him in a suit of fire, reducing his attacker to a cinder.

Taj glanced over at Zabb. "Are you responsible for *him*?"

Zabb hesitated, grinned. But whatever he said, it was too fast and too complicated for Jay's rudimentary Takisian. He became aware of Tisianne yelling.

"Jay, tell them to stop congratulating each other about how brilliantly the experiment succeeded and get control!"

Jay yelled back. "Come up here and tell 'em yourself."

"I can't. They won't let me."

That got his attention. Sure enough Tis was being forcibly but gently restrained by a pair of guards. She looked mad enough to bite nails, and Jay thought that if she really were a woman, he'd hate to be the man who married her.

Nobody seemed to be shooting anymore, so Jay risked a brief sortie into the erect position. "*Hey!*" he shouted in English. Zabb's head whipped around. "Her princess-ship wants you to shut the fuck up and take the fuck control of the bad guys."

The council had reconvened. There was a much larger crowd this time, partly because the rulership of their House was to be decided, but mostly because Takisians were actually a lot like humans. The ones who'd missed the

momentous dinner party were pissed and wanted to get at least a taste of the excitement. And who could tell... maybe the fire creature would appear again. Maybe there would be more bloodshed.

Jay circulated through the room while they waited for the seven old broads to show. From the snippets of conversations he could hear and understand, the citizens of the House Ilkazam were positively misty-eyed over the success of their pet virus and regretted that the experiment had not been carried to fruition. Jay had seen the same expression in the eyes of retired Vietnam generals -- *if only we'd been allowed to really fight*. For the Takisians the argument was -- *if only we'd known how successful the field test had been. We'd have used the virus. We'd rule Takis now*.

With a ninety percent fatality rate, Jay wished they *had* used the damn wild card. He wasn't feeling too terribly generous toward Takisians in general, and Ilkazam in particular right now.

His perambulations brought him back to where Tisianne and Meadows sat in hunched misery. Their hands were tightly clasped as if the support would somehow help, but they were both drowning, and they knew it. Jay didn't feel a lot of sympathy.

"He played it so well. The cadets and swords may suspect that he was behind Onyze's death, but they can't prove it. Mark" -- she reached up and pushed back a straggling tendril of dirty blond-gray hair -- "you should never have let him manipulate you so."

"They were going to kill you, Doc. You and the baby. What was I supposed to do?"

"Let Zabb do his own dirty work --"

"Or you," interrupted Jay. "You're pretty good at doing the expedient thing too."

He hadn't meant to say it, but the memory of that pitiful, shrunken creature being callously put to sleep rose up and gagged him. Folding his arms across his chest, he started to sit down.

With a sweep of a foot Mark kicked the chair out from under him. Jay landed painfully on his tailbone and found himself staring up and up at the immensely tall ace. There was a light in Meadows's mild blue eyes which Ackroyd had never seen.

"Don't be so fucking self-righteous. So you haven't killed... *yet*. Maybe you just haven't faced the time when... like, someone special is in terrible danger, and you've gotta... well, you've just gotta do... things." Meadows' voice trailed away into silence, and Jay was acutely aware that his eyes behind their distorting lenses were awash with tears.

Tisianne's voice was dead level, but anger hummed along the edges of each word. "If it will make you any happier, Mr. Ackroyd, I can assure you that I am suffering." She contemplated some internal vision, and it was not a happy one. After several moments she gave herself a shake and resumed. "You can despise me, Mr. Ackroyd, I'm not paying you for your friendship or your approval. I'm paying you -- both of you -- to protect me, and for you to succeed in that task, you must work together. So at least call truce."

"Let's see if I can boil down the flowery Takisian bullshit into plain English. So I can be bitched off at you, but I have to be nice to Meadows?"

"Yes."

"That I can handle," Jay concluded as the crowd settled, and the council resumed their chairs.

Responding to a telepathic call, Tisianne left her place in the audience and walked front and center. After a few minutes twenty-three stern-faced men joined her, Taj among them. Despite the portentous expressions it was tough to take any of it seriously. They were all so tiny, and so improbably dressed. Jay kept expecting them to burst into song like the Mayor of Munchkin Land welcoming Dorothy. *It actually wasn't a half-bad analogy*, the detective mused, *Tachyon as Dorothy*.

"Meadows is definitely the scarecrow," Jay muttered. "I'll be the tin woodsman. Too bad the cowardly lion didn't have the stones to board the ship."

Trips speared him with an elbow, and Jay realized Taj had begun speaking.

"Shaklan is dead. A direct-line heir has returned. I have served as caretaker to the honor and power of this House, but a grave crisis faces us. The time for caretakers is past. I relinquish my office to Tisianne brant Ts'ara."

"How say the swords?"

It was like high-stakes bidders at a Las Vegas blackjack tournament. A single finger would be lifted, an eyebrow raised, but no words spoken. Jay didn't know if they were just an uncommonly surly lot, or if they didn't want to be formally on record.

The old lady gave a wintry smile. "Twenty ayes and three ??*&##*." It was a word Jay didn't understand, but since it didn't sound like the various forms of negatives he knew, he assumed it meant abstentions. "An unprecedented display of unanimity for the Ilkazam," she said. "We must be in very grave trouble."

Nobody responded to her gallows humor. In fact the swords all stood staring down at their toes like unruly little

boys faced with an indignant mother. The seven old ladies leaned in toward one another. With their gray-and-white heads and the silver-and-gray dresses, the effect was like watching Stonehenge monoliths gathering for a conference. The confab didn't last long. The spokeswoman swept the crowd with imperious eyes, then bent that quelling gaze back on Tisianne.

"Tisianne brant Ts'ara, the regency being at an end, and the council having previously established your identity, we place in your hands --"

Meadows slewed around to face Jay. A huge smile split his face, and he gave the detective a thumbs-up signal. Jay forgot how pissed he was. He felt the smile coming and raised his hand --

"Excuse me." Zabb was sauntering up the central aisle.

"Oh, fuck," moaned Mark.

"This is no longer Tisianne the son of Ts'ara. This is Tisianne the daughter of Ts'ara." There was a sharp murmur throughout the watchers. "The position of *Raiyis* is barred to women. Theirs is a higher purpose. One that my cousin is manifestly fulfilling." And Zabb laid a hand tenderly on Tisianne's swollen belly.

The slap rang loud in the silent room.

Tisianne, her hand still upraised, stood quivering with unleashed fury. Zabb kept smiling. Kept his hand on her stomach.

Taj jerked forward, anger and shock making him clumsy. "You miserable abortion. Tisianne is a man."

"Have you ever seen a pregnant man?" To the council he said, "I agree, the mind is male, but the body... You've all

borne children. You know where her focus is." He slapped her belly. "Do you want her leading this House when we are on a war footing?"

"She'll recover her rightful body," Taj objected.

"And when she does, I'll be happy to allow her... er, him, to resume his station."

"You monster." Tis's voice was husky, shaking with emotion. "Without the power of this House I can never recover myself. Congratulations, Zabb, you have what you've always wanted, and you didn't even have to kill me for it."

Softly Zabb said, "Which is precisely why I arranged it this way." The nobleman faced the council. There was a manic light in the pale gray eyes. "Rule, *Kib'r*, is it a man or a woman?"

Jay could see the answer even before the old woman spoke. "Woman."

"And who is now direct heir?"

"Wait!" yelled Taj. "I am the regent --"

"You abdicated that position," snapped back Zabb.

"Rule, *Intayes*! Who now has the right to rule House Ilkazam?"

"You." No emotion crossed that lined face. It could have been a death mask.

Zabb swung Tisianne up into his arms. Jay expected the alien to start spitting and fighting. Instead she seemed stunned. Zabb started walking for the door. Mark, dragging his briefcase, went blundering in pursuit, barking his shins on chairs, tripping with agitation. Jay followed. They caught Zabb at the door. Pissed as he was at the little shit, the

blank look in Tisianne's eyes frightened Jay. He wondered if this latest blow had snapped her mind.

Zabb held up a restraining hand, palm out. "No, gentlemen. I am taking my sweet cousin to quarters more appropriate for her sex and condition. And unneutered males are not permitted."

There must have been a telepathic summons, for suddenly the two humans were caged by a ring of guards.

Trips remembered late-night and drunken conversations with Tachyon when the alien had talked of the murder of his mother. Of the plots and counterplots that swirled about the harem, and he called out desperately to Zabb's retreating back, "She'll be killed there."

Zabb paused, glanced back. "Oh, I think not. After all, she has family there too."

"Then she really hasn't got a prayer, you miserable fuck!" Jay said.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Takisians, or at least the Vayawand, don't throw flowers. Instead they throw birds, clutching flowers in their little beaks. Out of windows, and off the bridges that spanned the hundreds of canals crisscrossing the capital city Vaya, the birds dived on the Vayawand nobility and dropped their flowers like floriated bombs.

They were a flotilla -- seven sleek pleasure craft complete with banquets, awnings where one could seek refuge from either the sun or the rain, dance floors, and orchestras. Each boat was playing a different tune, so the cacophony of sound intermingled and rolled across the water. But this was a Takisian celebration, so guards were very much in evidence. Guard ships floated overhead, and more guards walked the footpaths at the sides of the canals.

Kelly hung over the gunnel and stared down at the little flowers rocking in the chop from the passing ships. He couldn't bear to look at the covered dais where Blaise was enthroned with his bride-to-be. The little *Tarhiji* girl had the stunned and joyful expression of a person witnessing a miracle, and all Kelly could think was *you poor little thing*.

"Come away, child." Bat'tam's voice pulled him from his contemplation of drowning flowers. "You're driving me to fidgets hanging about like that. What if you pitch overboard?"

Kelly turned to face Bat'tam, shrugged. "Doesn't matter, I can swim."

The elderly nobleman shuddered. He had shuddering down to a real art. There was the shudder to indicate the wine wasn't up to par. The shudder for dismay at a person's style sense -- that one Kelly still hadn't figured out. All the

clothes looked ugly and garish to him. The shudder at a note misplayed. But Bat'tam never shuddered when faced with Blaise. He never shuddered with fear. Kelly admired that. Thought the old man was crazy, but admired it.

"Come, sit. Drink some wine. Eat some food. Be happy." Kelly obeyed. "How are the ribs? The arm?"

Kelly gave an experimental twist. "Fine. You guys got bitchin' medicine."

"Bitchin'" Bat'tam seemed to be tasting the word. "Another strange groundling word."

Kelly poured himself a glass of wine. "Nobody on this boat seems very happy."

Kelly scanned the glum faces of the *Zal'hma at' Irg*. Only Blaise was upbeat, and he was positively giddy -- stealing kisses from his shy little bride, waving to the crowds that lined the streets and bridges and hung from windows. After his elevation to the *Raiyis'tet*, he'd had the skin around his eyes and under his brows inlaid with diamonds and jet. With his black leather jumpsuit and high black boots, he was a striking figure.

"Indeed, they are not. For if our manic young *Raiyis* succeeds in galvanizing the *Tarhiji*, there will be a new social order."

The remark fell into the center of the conversations occurring around them with all the elegance of a dropped turd. The voices of the nobles stuttered to a halt. Kelly noticed Durg listening.

"Shhhh!" he hissed urgently.

Bat'tam looked around, quite unperturbed. Nodded to the Morakh. Durg moved to them, and the Vayawand nobles

thought of other activities in which they could involve themselves. Soon they were isolated in the bow of the boat.

"I thought you weren't political?" Durg asked.

"I'm not."

"Confine your interest to the hostage Tisianne body. It would be much safer for you, boykisser."

"You and your handler have been at great pains to disguise from House Vayawand the actual effect of all these radical suggestions." Bat'tam paused and sipped wine. "But this recent act has violated our most basic and immutable law. What makes you think the family will allow this?"

"Fear. And greed. They want to rule Takis."

Durg lifted his head like a coon hound testing the wind. The boat was sliding into a dock. He held out a hand to Kelly. "Come, it is almost time for you to play your part."

The central star-shaped plaza of Vaya was awash with *Tarhiji*. It had taken a tremendous investment of time and men, but every building overlooking the speaker's platform had been searched and sealed by Blaise's Morakh guard. If trouble began, the populace were trapped and could be shot like... Durg paused. A human phrase seemed most applicable. "Fish in a barrel."

Blaise, the bride, and Kelly, together with a phalanx of Morakh, were on the platform. Knowing the hair-trigger nature of his charge, Durg elected to wait until after Blaise made his speech before informing the young man of the growing danger from Bat'tam. This had to be the speech of his life. Nothing should be allowed to distract him. A final glance about the plaza. Holocams were in place. The *Tarhiji*

were excited and attentive. All seemed ready. Durg returned to the dais and nodded to Blaise.

The young man uncoiled from his chair and moved to the podium. His height, the heavily muscled body, the shocking choice of color for his clothing, all combined to make him an arresting figure. Blaise lifted his arms, and the crowd, so well trained, fell silent.

"Look at me. I'm an abomination. *And I rule House Vayawand!*" He paused and allowed his eyes to scan the absolutely silent crowd. "I'm going to marry this *Tarhiji* lady and breed an abomination. *And he will rule Takis!*"

"We'll do it, my people, but it will take all of us -- *Tarhiji* and *Zal'hma at' Irg* -- working together. Together we can build a Takis where there are no masters and slaves, only Takisians, and the rest of the galaxy will look on us in wonder.

"I call you my people because I know your secret hopes, your hidden dreams. For generations you have served the psi lords, and in return they have given you peace and plenty. But it's not enough. Not anymore. It's time you shared in those powers that made them your masters, and I'm going to give them to you. From this day forward the laws regarding interbreeding are repealed. Each noble of House Vayawand shall be required to marry not only a woman of his class, but a member of the *Tarhiji*."

An avalanche of sound rolled over the speaker's podium. Blaise was right, thought Durg, *for a thousand generations they have been envious*. The cheering lasted a full five minutes. When they at last quieted, Blaise continued.

"You'll share more than the powers. You'll share the longevity of the *Zal'hma at' Irg*. They've shared with you a

fraction of the medical advances that have bestowed upon them lives many times longer than yours. You have lived three, four hundred years. Now you'll live a thousand. Beginning tomorrow members of the *Tarhiji* need only present themselves at the gates of House Vayawand, and they will receive the injection reserved, until now, to the Most Bred."

Durg felt a jolt through his gut. This had *not* been part of the prepared and rehearsed speech. The crowd began to cheer. It was certainly playing well.

"You may wonder why House Vayawand has joined with me in this great endeavor. Aren't they part of the class structure? Aren't they part of the problem?" Blaise paused for dramatic effect. "Yes, they were, but they have listened, learned, and understood that stagnation is death. We will shake this culture to its foundations and rebuild a just society, a workers' paradise.

"There will be those who will resist us. We will fight the oppressors and offer to their mind blind the same rights given to you. They will join us, and their Houses will become ours. One House in particular has been too proud and too evil to see and accept the right in what we do."

It was Kelly's cue. He continued to stare blankly off into space, and Durg wondered if he'd been right to place the man in such a permanent alcoholic haze. A thumb jabbed hard into a shoulder blade brought Kelly back to the present. He scrambled from his chair and walked forward to join Blaise.

"They too will fall," called the bogus Tisianne. "People of Takis, House Ilkazam, hear me. The old ways are dead. A new society dawns before us. I went first to my clan, my House, and offered them the chance to lead this revolution. They rejected and vilified me. Fleeing for my life, I went in

search of men of greatness, men brave enough to lead us into that new society. I have broken all custom, all tradition - I have abandoned my House and given allegiance to another. Because I found that brave man." Kelly laid a hand on Blaise's shoulder.

Durg could see the hesitation, the minute shrinking away from contact with Blaise. The *Tarhiji* would miss it. With luck most *Zal'hma at' Irg* would as well.

Blaise resumed. "Today I have issued an ultimatum to House Rodaleh. They have until tomorrow to merge with Vayawand. If they refuse, we will carry the revolution to them. Are you with me?" Blaise thrust a fist high into the air, and the assent was deafening. "Then go to the registration centers. Join the House army. Prepare for the fight. All of Takis is the prize. May the Ideal guide and bless us."

Blaise spread his arms in a final embrace to the crowd, stepped back to Durg's side. His face was flushed with excitement, his dark eyes glowing. Durg dropped a cloak over the boy's shoulders.

"Very well played, my lord, but was it wise to raise the longevity point?"

"Hey, it worked great."

"Yes, but there is no magic serum. The Most Bred live longer because they are *bred* to live longer."

"By the time the sheep figure out we've lied to them, we'll rule Takis. That should mollify them. If not, we can kill them."

Durg bowed his head in assent. "As you wish." They started down the steps of the platform. "There is another matter. Bat'tam brant Sandiqy sek Buad sek Jul grows too close to the false prince."

Kelly hesitated at the top of the stairs. Analyzed the remarkable effects of alcohol. It made you both dumb and brave because here he was standing five feet from Blaise trying to read Blaise's mind.

There were a lot of minds in the plaza of Vaya, but Kelly had gotten better at this telepathy shit. The pressure of minds no longer hurt like dagger pricks against the surface of his brain. They were just irritating, like a chorus of a thousand of cicadas in the bodark trees back home. He had to sift through them all to find Blaise even though Blaise was terrifyingly close to hand.

Kelly had discovered that visualization helped, so he pictured his grandmother bent over the scarred wooden table in the kitchen of the Oklahoma farmhouse, squeezing the trigger of a battered old flour sifter while brains popped through the narrow screen.

Once located, Blaise's mind was unmistakable. It had a buzz-saw quality. It was primal force with no grace or elegance. It just *was*. The deeper thoughts were hidden beneath opaque shields, but the surface thought was too strong to be hidden. Blaise was thinking about killing. Killing Bat'tam.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"Touch him, bitch, and I'll cut off your nipples and feed them to your baby!"

Tis hadn't remembered fainting. Actually she didn't remember much past the time when they reached the heavy doors of *Rarrana*. It was then that she panicked, fought, beating at Zabb's chest and face.

And now she was waking to a threatening voice echoing with the yowl of a backfence cat warning off interlopers. Raising a hand, she lightly touched her forehead. Felt the residual signature of Zabb. *No, not a faint, a coerced sleep*. He had subdued her the way a man would tranquilize a frightened animal. *Is that how the humans felt when I used my power on them?* she wondered.

The sound of receding footsteps, the slam of a door. More distant and less distinct sounds began to force their way to her consciousness. Babies crying, children laughing, squalling, calling to each other in play. The yap of excited hounds romping with the children. Sounds of adult activity -- the muted melody of water falling softly into fountain basins, a string quartet rehearsing, the drone of an announcer on the holo commenting on the action in a sporting competition.

There was a prickling sense that let her know that she was surrounded by people -- female people by the delicate scent of their perfumes -- and then one particular fragrance struck like a belly blow, and for one flashing, painful moment Tis was five years old again. Pillowed on his mother's breast, screaming mentally because the telepathic communication that he had shared with his mother almost since the moment of his conception had been brutally and

suddenly broken. In the background had been the same busy sounds of *Rarrana*. It had been Roxalana who had gathered him into her arms then.

It was Roxalana who gripped Tisianne's shoulders now and pulled her into a sitting position. Disoriented by the strength of the memory, Tis murmured, "You're wearing mother's scent." Tisianne opened her eyes.

Roxalana looked not very much different than Tis remembered. She had their father's tipped-up eyes; they gave her a wicked, calculating look that was undeserved. She was as direct as a knife blade, and often as painful.

But it was Pandasala who jumped in with the sharp, acerbic comment. "For only the past forty years. Outstanding that you finally noticed."

It was perfectly in character for her. It was said that life with Pandasala had prepared her husband for (or driven him into) the highly dangerous sport of agma hunting.

"Of course you have been gone," said Cillka.

"Without sparing a thought for your poor sisters," added Tri'ava.

"And we were supposed to make a baby together," Melant said.

"We took a terrible drop in prestige when our nearest male relative was a mere regent."

"Now maybe you'll understand our plight," finished Shi'tha.

And there was that rustling, the sideways glances that women exchange when they are hiding tolerant amusement at the foibles of men. Despite Tis's forced sex change, it was apparent that in the eyes of her sisters arrayed about her

that she was still a moronic male. Tis scanned the six delicate faces -- Roxalana, Melant, Tri'ava, Pandasala, Shi'tha, Cillka.

They were all varying shades of blond, from the deep burnished bronze of the eldest, Roxalana, to the new minted gold of Cillka, the baby until Tach had come along ninety years later. Tis realized that since her body switch she finally looked like one of the family, an offspring of Shaklan and Ts'ara. She was even the right sex. After seven daughters the House Ilkazam had begun to despair of the *Raiyis* ever siring a boy child. They had even suggested that Shaklan break his unnatural fascination with his primary wife and try fathering a child on some other appropriately pedigreed woman. Shaklan refused and eventually Tisianne had arrived -- male and redheaded, an oddity. Now Tis fit... On the whole she would just as soon have remained a changeling.

Other details were coming into focus. They were in the great star-shaped central courtyard of *Rarrana*. Directly in the center, beneath a domed skylight, was a bathing pool. Naked women dandled their children in the water or played silly water games. Like all pools on Takis, it was shallow. Takisians were notoriously bad swimmers. For a distance of four feet from the pool the ground was inlaid with beautiful mosaic pictures, most of which were hidden beneath bodies where more women lounged, enjoying the warmth of the heated tiles. *Tarhiji* servants slipped through carrying food, drink, towels. *La'bs* both male and female were very much in evidence, massaging the bodies of their mistresses, kissing them, feeding them, reading to them from holos floating comfortably at eye level. Nearby a couple was copulating, and Tis felt her cheeks go red. She quickly looked away and cursed Earth for turning her into a prude.

The jagged walls of the room were pierced with doors like tiny mouths. These were the least desirable quarters in *Rarrana* -- noisy, no private garden, the least defensible if an enemy should penetrate the women's quarters. Tis glanced up at the catwalk circling the bathing pool and counted seven guards.

She then looked back to her sisters. Four of them were pregnant. Five if you counted Tisianne. She chuckled humorlessly. "Well, we Sennari are a fertile lot, aren't we?"

"Burning Sky, Tis, how did you end up in such an absurd situation?" Roxalana exploded.

It wasn't really a question. It was an irritable exclamation of how troublesome their little brother was -- and Lani ought to know. It had been her task to raise him after their mother's murder.

Tis's heart seemed to be expanding, filling her chest with an emotion so strong, the small body didn't seem able to contain it. There is a closeness among telepathic people even when their shields are up. A constant leak of low-level, unimportant thoughts like the chuckling of a brook. It's very comforting, and to be without it is like placing a normal human in an isolation tank. To find herself now in the midst of telepaths who loved her and had lowered all barriers so that affection could flow through was indescribable. Tisianne held out her hands to her sisters. Murmured their names as they each came forward and gave her the kiss between close relatives.

The love fest lasted about three minutes, then Roxalana called them to order. "Shi'tha, Cillka, circulate and see who's talking to whom. Who's suddenly decided to visit their wives. Which fathers have suddenly been seized with an overwhelming desire to contact their daughters." The two women nodded and left.

"Come." Lani helped Tis to her feet.

"Where?"

"Zabb left strict instructions. You're getting the best suite in *Rarrana*."

"How... condescending of him. Should I be grateful?"

"Probably," said Pandasala. "It may save your life."

"You think they'll try to kill me?"

"You have been away a long time," Melant called back over her shoulder as they hurried down switch-backed halls. "The Kou'nar have several deaths and a blighted hope to avenge."

They reached a doorway, and Roxalana keyed the telepathic lock. It was an impressive set of rooms. Deep spider-silk carpets covered the marble floor, insulation to keep out the biting cold of Takis. In one corner there was a ten-foot-tall tiled stove-fireplace. Sofas, chairs, several tables. A card table near the stove, and a *ka'et*. Set atop the polished surface of the instrument was a *re'ba'bi*.

Tis crossed to the instruments, stroked the keys of the *ka'et*, and experimentally plucked the strings of the *re'ba'bi*. She set it carefully back down atop the *ka'et*, then slammed her hands down on the keyboard. The discord made Melant jump.

"This is my fucking instrument! He had this planned all along!" Nobody asked for a translation of the English word. A curse in any language seems to communicate.

Tri'ava turned back from her contemplation of the moonlit gardens and twitched shut the draperies over the double glass doors. "Interesting you should mention Zabb. I think he's as much of a threat as the Kou'nar."

Roxalana shook her head. "He could have had Egyon do the job for him. Why wait?"

"Lani's right. I think he's just enjoying the sight of me helpless and imprisoned," Tis said.

The bitterness couldn't be masked, the Tis realized it was not just for herself, but for her sisters as well. Had Earth affected her so much that she now questioned the basic tenets of her culture?

"This is for your protection, remember?" Pandasala said. "We women are so precious." A sneer trembled at the edges of the word.

So even Takis breeds malcontents, Tis thought.

Melant flung herself into a chair. "I think Panda regrets not being *bitshuf'di*."

There was a touch of spite in the words. Roxalana made a slashing gesture before Pandasala could respond to the goading. "Both of you go. Tis doesn't need to be agitated by your sniping."

Melant pouted. "But I wanted to discuss our baby. The genetic work-ups were so encouraging, Tis. When you do recover your body, please loan it to me for a night."

Tis tried to mask the hurt but knew she didn't succeed very well. She was a very poor telepath, and she threw off emotions like sparks off a spinning firework. "My track record with children hasn't been very good so far. Perhaps you should stick with Baiyin."

Melant paused at the door. "He's not going to be *Raiyis*."

"Right now neither am I."

Pandasala placed her hands in the middle of Melant's back and shoved. Tri'ava gave a little wave and closed the door carefully behind her. For a long moment Roxalana and Tis regarded that closed door, then cautiously returned their scrutiny to each other.

"They're angry. You're all angry with me," Tis said softly.

"You abandoned us, and now you're back, but not as an asset, an ally to help us further our goals, promote our projects, advance our children. Instead you're a burden. It isn't enough that we have to protect ourselves, our children still in tails. We have to protect you as well."

"Then don't! I have my humans, and Taj, and though my mentatic skill is all but gone, I still have my wits."

"Oh, no, Tis. We'll protect you. Even finding you in this ridiculous scrape is better than believing you were a traitor - - but you still leave us in a most untenable position. If you die, we suffer. The new *Raiyis* may decide that a living Sennari is a threat -- more than a conspiracy. I don't want to see my children die. I don't want to see my sisters die." She paused, and the severe lines around her mouth relaxed. It wasn't quite a smile. "I don't even want to see my little brother die."

"The two humans --"

"May have formidable powers, but for the moment they're useless to us. You'll need guards, but leave the selection to me. You haven't enough telepathy to weed out even the most obvious assassin."

Tis hung her head. She had been so proud of the telepathy she had forced the borrowed human body. Once home, she realized just how rudimentary and useless it was.

"So you're keeping me alive in the faint hope I might recover my body and leadership of the House. Other than that I'm useless."

"You are inhabiting the body of an inferior groundling. Carrying a half-breed abomination. You're not precisely an asset. But you are Tisianne, and..."

She whirled and left the room. But the thought lingered like the scent of her perfume. *I do care for you.*

"I want to see her."

Mark was leaning over the desk, hands braced on the polished surface. They were in the office of the *Raiyis*, and Zabb looked very much at home as he lolled in the padded chair and swung lightly from side to side.

"*Lilistizkar* is the traditional visiting day. You'll just have to wait."

"And when is this lillyshit?" asked Jay. "Sometime in the next century?"

"Only three days."

"I want to see her *now*." Mark tried to sound threatening. Ended up sounding pleading.

"Quite impossible. Only husbands have unlimited visiting rights."

"Then I'll marry her."

"Jesus," muttered Jay.

Zabb's smile deepened. Then, arranging his features into one of somber consideration, he said gravely, "I'm afraid as *Raiyis* I must refuse your offer for my cousin's hand."

"Come on, Meadows." Jay took Mark by the arm and tugged. "He's just fucking with us and enjoying the hell out of it. Don't be a toy for him. We'll just have to wait until visiting hours at the zoo. Maybe they'll even let us feed the girls, bring them some grapes, chocolate"

"You have no conception of life within *Rarrana*. It is not a prison."

"Can Tachyon leave?"

Zabb's silence provided all the answer they needed. A chime indicated an incoming call. Zabb keyed the stage. The image of his secretary appeared.

"Yes?"

"Sir, Captain Nesfa," the man said.

"Abyss take the woman!" Zabb said. "What part of *no* doesn't she understand?"

"Will you speak with her, my lord?"

"No. Thank her for her continued interest in my well-being, but tell her I must decline her invitation due to responsibilities at home." With a vicious jab Zabb killed the holo. "Now, where were we?"

"I was going to ask you if I can blow this Popsicle stand, go into town, check out the fleshpots of Takis," Jay said.

"No."

"Shit."

Jay expected Mark to react with that little wince with which the other ace met all of Jay's more outrageous remarks. But the hippie seemed to have withdrawn into some kind of fugue state, maybe an LSD flashback.

"If that is all..." Zabb began.

"Women are permitted in *Rarrana* without restriction?" Mark said.

Jay wondered if a space voyage had dropped Meadows's IQ.

"Obviously."

"Cool." Meadows knelt and snapped open his briefcase. Pulled out the black-and-silver powder. A few seconds later, and Moonchild stood before them.

"Now, I would wish to see the Doctor."

Jay was expecting Zabb to refuse, but there was a faint smile at the corners of that thin-lipped mouth. He didn't seem to mind being trumped. "By all means. Just be out before the change. I would hate to have to kill you.,'

"Yeah, we feel that way about you too," Jay said.

"He changes into a woman," Roxalana mused. "What a useful man. We might have some hope of understanding between the sexes if more of them could do that."

"Wish someone would give me the power to move in the other direction," Pandasala said.

And Tisianne made a mental note that if she ever did escape from her current predicament, she would find some way to free Pandasala from hers.

"How beautiful she is," Cillka breathed, and gently touched a strand of Moonchild's jet black hair.

Moonchild bowed. "Thank you, gracious lady, but my time is limited, and we must reach a decision concerning the Doctor's safety before I must leave."

"Why can't you stay to guard Tisianne?" Shi'tha asked.

"I exist for only an hour in human time."

"Unfortunate," Melant said.

"Yes, very. I have sought some way to free all of the individuals who make up Mark Meadows so that we might each pursue our own karma, our own futures, but so far I have been unsuccessful."

"Your offer is generous, groundling," Roxalana said.
"But I can select guards for my brother."

"Without offense, lady, I must say I would feel better if one of the guards was Mark."

"Mark is a man," Melant said with that careful patience one reserves for stupid children and animals.

"So are most of our guards," Tisianne said suddenly.
"The key is that they are neutered." She gathered Moonchild's hands in hers. "A vasectomy is easily performed. Easily reversed for my people. If you'll do it, you can stay with me."

"Zabb will not permit it. He has already refused to allow Mr. Ackroyd to leave the House. I think he fears that Mr. Ackroyd might find a way to kidnap Blaise. He will use every means to neutralize our powers."

"Go to Taj. He has sworn allegiance to Zabb, but this in no way compromises that oath. He cares for me. He will help," Tis said.

"My brother is correct," Roxalana said. "And use my son Rowan to send us word when you are coming. We'll see that your arrival causes as little comment as possible."

"Moonchild, thank you."

"We will be back soon." The ace slipped through the door, into the shadows, and vanished.

Mark had set the telepathic damper on the table in Tisianne's old quarters. Ackroyd's hand shot out and caught his wrist before he could turn it on.

"Hey, doesn't that thing, like, cause headaches, and give hemorrhoids, and cause telepaths to pick up mariachi stations on their fillings for a hundred-mile radius? In short, isn't this really going to piss off the Takisians if we fire it up, and aren't they going to come and pound us into the ground like tent pegs?"

Mark folded his lips in a tight line. Parted them just enough to say, "I'm in the mood to piss off Takisians. One Takisian in particular."

Mark then outlined Tisianne's plan. He should have predicted Ackroyd's reaction. "You are crazy! Fucking crazy!" Jay ran agitated hands through his hair and took a sharp turn around himself.

"The issue is that you can't be a fertile male --" Mark argued.

"I thought you were crazy when you offered to marry the bitch. Now you're offering to have your dick chopped off?"

"These aren't, like, primitives, man. This is a really medically sophisticated society. Hell, vasectomies are reversible on Earth. The Doc says it's a cinch to fix here."

"They have harems so you won't fuck their women."

"No. They have harems to prevent assassination and unplanned pregnancies. Sex is fine. The Doc told me they have toys -- both the men and the women -- beautiful

neutered sex partners. A snip, and we'll be no threat, we can stay with the Doc."

"What's this we, white man? I am not going to become a eunuch for Tachyon. That was not part of the deal!"

He was arrested at the door by Mark saying, If we don't keep the Doc alive, there's no return ticket."

That almost got him. Almost. "Uh-uh. No. No way. This is a nice little planet. Maybe I'll put down roots, open an office, get back into divorce work -- if Takisians get divorces. Take a wife. Raise some kids."

All the while he was talking, he was edging for the door. Hand on the knob, out the door, into the hall. Unfortunately sound carries. And you can't not listen. Can't not understand.

"I don't know why you're so upset." Mark's voice pursued him like a restless spirit. "You're dickless already, Jay."

ican't/iwon't/i'lldie/i'llkill!/novirus!

The slap took both of them by surprise. Roxalana for administering it, Tisianne for receiving it. They stood staring at each other, then Tis slowly lifted a hand to her cheek.

"All the years of my childhood you never hit me."

"I left that to Melant. She was my designated hitter." Roxalana turned away and straightened a vase that didn't need straightening. Tis couldn't help it. Outraged dignity, hurt feelings were forgotten. She laughed. "What?" demanded her sister with some truculence.

"It has a very different meaning on Earth."

Roxalana lifted the meaning and the ludicrous image from Tisianne's mind. Melant in a Yankees uniform, arranging her bat with that butt wiggle that is unique to baseball players.

"Seems like a silly game."

"It's a lovely game. If I ever get out of here, I'm going to introduce it on Takis." Tis walked to the window and looked out. "But as hopeless as things seem now, I may have to settle for a ladies' softball league."

"Is that necessarily so inferior?"

"It's not the future I envisioned for myself." Standing was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. Tis retired to a lounging sedan and arranged her bulky body. "I don't think I can survive in here. The boredom and paranoia are going to kill me."

"I seem to recall the beginning of this little squabble was an offer of employment from Segath. You have more firsthand experience with the virus than any member of the research team living or dead. Get back in the laboratory and share that experience."

"I will *not* work on the virus -- nonnegotiable, don't raise it again." Tis eyed the ceiling where guards patrolled on the hidden catwalk, watched the two women through monitors. Softly Tis continued. "For half my life I've been free from this scrutiny. I came as I pleased and went as I pleased. I asked permission of no one. Do you know how wonderful *aloneness* can be? We think we ignore them." She jerked her head toward the unseen guards. "But we don't. We're always aware of them. The worst for me was when I was sick. I didn't mind fucking, snoring, crapping, eating, farting, belching in front of them, but puking... you're at your most vulnerable and unattractive in that moment."

"Try birthing," was the unsympathetic reply.

It was a topic Tisianne wished to avoid. She turned onto her side, away from that disapproving presence.

"I can't tolerate self-pity and tantrums, Tis. You got to go on a decades-long lark while the rest of us did our duty -- and almighty irksome were those duties, let me assure you. So don't expect me to regret your lack of freedom. It was purchased at great cost by the rest of us.

Their father's death lay between them.

"And finally I'm sick of you denigrating the accomplishments of this segment of the House. Why is an action by a woman less valued in your eyes? You're bored because you don't feel the work we are doing here is worthy of your attention, much less your participation. Shi'tha's research in ghost-gate theory may enable us to fold space and so cross the galaxy in the time it currently takes us to reach Ship Home. I have a class of very promising youngsters about to exit *Rarrana* and begin their higher education. I taught them... and / taught them well. The girls I send out today will return in thirty years ready to be mothers, and teachers, and researchers, and painters, and composers.

"You're a doctor -- well, stop pouting in this room and get out and *doctor*. Or if that's not to your taste, volunteer for cradle duty. You value freedom so much -- free up some busy mother for her work. Ideal knows you could use the experience. A little primer before you birth your daughter. That's where your focus should be -- on your child. Not on politics, not on the breakdown of Takisian society. We build society here -- one child at a time. You're part of the process now."

Tisianne laid a hand on her belly. Felt the joyous leap of Illyana's mind as she greeted her parent. That parent realized with some guilt that she had been virtually ignoring the baby by blocking Illyana's questing thought tendrils.

Swinging her legs off the lounge, Tis moved to her sister, hugged Roxalana close. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid your little brother, despite his skin change, hasn't learned very much. He's still an idiotic male." Roxalana's hand was soft on her hair, stroking, pulling apart the slight tangles with her fingers. "All right, let me doctor. I have two good hands. I should be grateful for that."

All briskness again, Roxalana held her at arm's length. "Let me make amends for hitting you." Moving swiftly to the door, she called back over her shoulder. "Here is the bodyguard you've been missing."

The door opened, and Mark Meadows grinned sheepishly down at her.

Chapter Twenty-Four

There was a quality reminiscent of the little boy as Jay Ackroyd stood with his nose pressed against a floor-to-ceiling port and watched the Takisian ships go about their mysterious and shiply business. Tisianne seemed inclined to ignore the detective, but Mark gave her a nudge and jerked his head at Jay.

"You should, like, introduce Jay to your sisters."

Tisianne turned wide gray eyes on him. "Why?"

Despite the solemnity of the occasion Mark couldn't fully suppress the little smile that tugged at his mouth. "'Cause when he gets a load of your sisters, it'll, like, bum him out big time that he rejected *Rarrana*."

"I like that," said Tis, and led the little band of Sennari women over to the human.

Lurching along behind them, Mark felt like a particularly ungainly basset hound mothering a clutch of baby chicks. At first he'd been surprised that the women were allowed out of *Rarrana*, but Roxalana had pointed out it was only the children of the late lamented Shaklan. Even for the funeral of the *Raiyis*, Ilkazam wasn't going to risk most of its breeding females.

It took a light touch to the shoulder to draw the detective's attention away from the vista of stars and ships.

"Jay, I wish you to meet my sisters. Sisters, Jay Ackroyd." The six Sennari women acknowledged the detective with regal little inclinations of their golden heads.

"We had despaired of ever meeting you," said Roxalana, as always the spokeswoman for the sisters.

Jay regained control of his jaw and forced out, "Yeah, well, when Tachy's out in the wide world, I'm there to guard her."

"How very noble of you."

"I also wanted to see a Takisian funeral."

"Somewhat less noble of you."

In this time of danger it wasn't prudent to empty the House for Shaklan's funeral, but there still seemed to be a lot of people milling about Ship Home, both *Zal'hma at' Irg* and *Tarhiji*.

The Ilkazam orbital platform was not only a military installation, it was the breeding facility for the living ships. Hence the name, hence the hundreds of ships of all sizes, shapes, and ages drifting about, grazing on the stellar dust, and huddling close to the platform as if seeking to say farewell to their former *Raiyis*.

Tis and her sisters went off to prepare the body of heir father. Mark joined Jay at the port. Ships were still arriving. Through a secondary port set in the lock, He could watch the ships actually enter the docking bay. There was already a ship at rest there, a ship without lights or ornamentation. Mark could see the white wounds where the decorations had been removed. As each ship flew back out of the bay, it made a point to brush sides with the funeral ship -- for so Mark assumed it had to be. Mark suddenly flashed on a memory of Egyptian pharaohs, and he hoped the faithful steed didn't have to share the fate of its master. It seemed kind of barbaric for the Takisians, but they were such an odd mix of violence and elegance that you never knew.

The last mourners arrived, and the outer lock cycled closed. In answer to some telepathic message the crowd entered the bay and formed double ranks with those closest

in relationship to Shaklan nearest to the ship. Taj then came walking down the center carrying the body of his brother-in-law. At various points he would pause, and family members would place tokens -- mostly folded bits of foil, but occasionally very valuable pieces of jewelry -- in the folds of the corpse's clothing and whisper into its ear.

Each of the sisters had some small object. Tisianne only leaned in and kissed the cold lips. Taj stared hard at her. Tis waved him on. The old man vanished into the ship.

Pandasala leaned in. "No gift, no proof of *virtu* for our father?"

Tis's faced seemed shuttered. "Nothing I could give him would forestall the curse -- if he decides to curse me."

Taj emerged moments later, his arms empty. The corpse had been left in the ship. The mourners retreated behind the lock, and the outer door cycled open. Silently the dark ship lifted off and flew out into the blackness of space.

"Where are they going?" Jay asked.

Tis remained silent, staring out at the stars.

Roxalana's brow twitched briefly in a small frown as she regarded her brother, then she answered. "No one living knows. The ship that carried them in life carries them in death and takes them... somewhere."

"They don't, like, commit suicide by diving into a sun or something, do they?" Mark asked, eager to have that concern assuaged.

"No, no," Roxalana said. "The body is preserved by the cold and vacuum of space. We want our dead to know where their bodies rest."

"Why?" Jay asked.

Pandasala replied, "A ghost without a body to return to will take up residence in a living descendant -- or so the superstition holds."

Cillka spoke up. "A crash, fire, any accident that destroys the body is almost a worse tragedy than the death itself."

"And the little gifts?"

"All our actions are designed to either appease or find favor with the ancestors. As one of those ancestors heads out, we like to remind them of how wonderful we are. So compositions, poetry, a novel, a scientific achievement, artwork, we send something along."

"Christ, if you could find the cosmic cemetery, a grave robber would have a field day," Jay said.

"I think the ships would prevent that," was Melant's rather dry reply.

"Ships." Jay snapped his fingers. "Hey, I better not miss my bus. Catch you later."

"What an extraordinary man," Roxalana murmured.

"Is that a compliment?" Mark asked.

"Hardly." She laid the tips of her fingers on his wrist. "*Vindi*, you may escort me to my ship." As they moved away, she added very quietly, "I am very pleased that *you* are guarding my brother."

Jay had picked a crowded shuttle with more than the normal complement of *Tarhiji* aboard. It had the virtue of being away from Zabb, and none of the watchdogs the Takisian had placed on Jay wanted to ride with the hired help, so for the moment Jay was free from surveillance. It

was the first step in his plan to escape Ilkazam and head for Vayawand. Somebody had to stop farting around and snatch Blaise. Otherwise he and Meadows had become permanent residents.

The ship landed in the great courtyard in front of House Ilkazam, and most of the *Tarhiji* headed for the gates ready to return home after a long day of pampering the shitheads. So far luck was favoring him. Jay's fruitbar clothes were a little fancy for a servant, and he was a little tall to pass easily, but his coloring was pure *Tarhiji*, and nobody *really* looks at servants. Right? Or so he hoped as he ducked his head and scuttled sideways into the shelter of a number of other bodies.

Several more shuttles had landed, and Jay spotted a couple of his bird dogs looking frantically about for him. They didn't look at the gaggle of servants heading for the tram.

Slick as snot off a hog's back, he thought as they passed through the gates and the great panels slid shut behind them.

"The *calnite*, please," Tisianne said, and indicated a syringelike device. Cap'n Trips gingerly plucked the instrument from among its fellows and placed it in Tisianne's hand.

"Is this going to hurt?" asked the grubby, tear-stained six-year-old whose broken arm was the object of Tisianne's attention.

"No."

"That's what Manka said when she told me to jump... but it *did*."

The lower lip thrust pugnaciously forward, but the effect was somewhat marred by an unhappy wobble.

"Maybe now you won't do silly things just because people tell you to."

"Maybe I shouldn't do *this*."

"Maybe you would like a swat?" Tis asked severely.

There was a screen up which prevented the child from seeing how his arm had been peeled open, skin and muscle laid back to reveal the broken bone. Tisianne had already fitted the ragged ends back together. Now, bending in close, she delicately placed the tip of the syringe at the juncture and sent the genetically altered bacteria into and onto the bone. There it would follow its genetic mandate and grow bone.

"Do you guys clone? You gotta know how. Your technology's advanced enough," Mark suddenly asked.

"We can, but we don't."

"Why not?"

"When a culture is more concerned with fitting old minds in young bodies, and loses interest in young minds in young bodies, that culture is dying." She flashed Mark a quick smile. "We grow children the old-fashioned way. Also, you clone enough, and genetic read errors creep in."

"A copy of a copy of a copy."

"That's right." Tis finished sealing the soft tissue with a sterile fixative that left only a pale pink line.

Tach touched a panel, and the screen flashed once and vanished. Grunting a bit with effort, she lifted her little patient off the table and set him on his feet. The cradle mother was waiting outside the cubicle.

"As good as new," Tach said as she handed over the boy.

"I was afraid you'd say that," sighed the other woman.

The child was staring down at his arm with excitement and wonder. "Look, it isn't pink no more. My line is white. Maybe Momma won't ever know."

"There's a wonderful human phrase that applies in this situation. Say 'fat chance,'" Tis said.

Mark and Tis went strolling. *Rarrana* was huge, and Mark sensed he'd only seen a fraction of it.

"Zabb's put a big negatory on giving me a lab," Mark said.

"He's hoping you'll run out of drugs. Then you and I will both be without friends, and he can kill me with impunity."

"I'm tellin' you, man, Zabb doesn't want you dead."

"Mark, you are gullible, naive, and sweet. You think everybody has a touch of goodness in them."

"I know Blaise doesn't," Mark defended. "And I know Zabb doesn't want you dead."

They had reached an intersection of several corridors. One wall looked out of place, breaking the symmetry of the architecture. Tis suddenly stopped and stared at that wall for a long, long time. Mark reached hesitantly out and touched her hair.

"Doc?"

"This is where my mother died."

The ace's head swung back and forth like a puzzled crane's. "I thought she, like, fell down stairs or something?"

"There used to be a stairway here. Father had it destroyed... the entire wing walled off. Her suite was down there."

So much of Takisian life, particularly a Takisian woman's life, seemed centered indoors. It heightened Mark's sense of claustrophobia. And this place was really giving the ace the creeps.

"Hey," he blurted. "Let's go outside while there's still some light left."

Tis shook herself free of her reverie. "While there's still some autumn left. It will be winter soon."

They went to the private garden off Tisianne's suite, an odd diamond-shaped plot of ground that seemed to have been created more by architectural oversight than any plan. High walls in four different styles and three different colors peeped coyly through the leaves and trumpet-shaped flowers of a climbing vine. It was like a fat woman hiding her physical shortcomings behind gauzy veils and hoping the covering would distract the eye.

As usual there was a fountain making water music, but a sharp wind was warping the shape. Dark clouds were scudding across the sun like a nightmare's mane dulling the crystal fire of the crushed-quartz path that wove through the parterre flower gardens and trees. Since their last walk it had been raked back into its curving pattern, and now here they went raping the perfect symmetry with crude footprints. It made Mark a little crazy. Every day he wrecked some person's life work, and yet he never saw the phantom raker.

They came to roost on a bench beneath what Mark had dubbed the grape arbor for lack of a better phrase. It was an arbor, there was fruit growing on it, and the smell

was very alluring, but a sampling produced effects like a shot of bad Mexican water. Mark knew, he had succumbed to temptation.

Tis sighed heavily, leaned back on one hand, and rested the other high on the bulge point of her belly. Sunflower, Mark's wife lo these many years ago, had assumed just such a position when she'd been pregnant with Sprout. Maybe all pregnant women did. A universal in any culture. In any species. On any planet.

"I haven't asked before, but, like, are you handling this?"

"No, I never thought it would get this far. I was sure Kelly would have to handle, well... the messy bits."

"It's about a month away, right?"

"Yes."

"You want to talk about, like, uh, how you're feeling?"

Tis laughed, a hollow sound devoid of humor. "I'd almost rather talk about my father, and that walloping load of guilt." Mark opened his mouth, but she forestalled him with an upraised hand. "Just kidding. Fear is easier to face than guilt. And that's what I'm feeling. I'm absolutely, totally terrified. I don't want to have this baby. Somebody else has got to have this baby for me." She levered herself to her feet and paced nervously up and down in front of him. "I have been shot, beaten, poisoned, slashed, and raped. Pain is an old companion to me. But this pain terrifies me. I've seen women in hard labor..." Her voice trailed off, and she stared out at the eastern sky where the first evening stars were just beginning to show. "Maybe Jay will come ambling back with Blaise and my body in tow." She turned back to Mark. "I have that fantasy a lot. Stupid, isn't it?"

Very slowly, for the words cost him, Mark said, "I used to go to sleep at night and think that if I just hoped long enough or prayed hard enough, when I woke up in the morning, Sprout would be all right. She wouldn't be retarded. We all have crazy fantasies."

Even an imagination as fertile and creative as Jay's couldn't turn Ilkala into New York City. No self-respecting New Yorker would build office buildings in pale lavender, lime green, dusty rose... the list of offensive pastel colors went on and on. And while the Takisians built tall, they built tall *wrong*. The multistory buildings couldn't really be called skyscrapers, they were too spindly for that. Meadows, in another of his endless, fucking lectures, had explained that too. Something about how Takis had a relative mass about one-third? Two-fifths? -- some damn number or other -- of Earth norm, so the gravity was less, and buildings could look anemic.

And everybody could be a flit, thought Jay sourly as he surveyed his fellow passengers on the tram. It seemed a prosaic description for an impeccably clean means of conveyance which had no apparent means of propulsion. It hummed lightly up the deep valley to within a mile of the House Ilkazam, depositing servants, and the occasional slumming psi lord, and went humming back to the city. *If the New York subway system was a tenth this nice* -- He cut off the thought ruthlessly. He didn't want to like anything about Takis in his present mood. *The seats*. Yeah, the seats were way too small. Not comfortable at all.

Mollified by finding fault, he returned to a sour contemplation of his physical surroundings. He had no idea where to exit the tram. The rush of events hadn't left him with much time to peruse the guidebooks. What were the sights and attractions of Ilkala? Did Takisians write

guidebooks? Did Takisians take vacations? He tried to picture the Takisian equivalent of a Hawaiian shirt and failed utterly. Some things man was not meant to see.

At least there was a bizarre familiarity to the entire commuting ritual. In place of briefcases the business people possessed wafer-thin laptop computers that were attached by fine filament wires to a throat patch. Jay presumed they were all dictating information to the critters rather than typing. Seemed sort of cumbersome. Other people read (the books were shimmering projections at eye level, which adjusted for a shift in your posture) or listened to music on tiny radios disguised as ear clips. The competing musical styles formed whispers in the air. Apparently Takis had avoided the boom-box phenomenon.

Yeah, as cranky as they all are, they'd come over and beat the crap out of you for infringing on their ear space, Jay mused.

The number of young moms and young dads with babies and toddlers in slings or glider prams were about equal. Apparently child rearing was an equal-opportunity task among the *Tarhiji*. And then there were the old, all of whom were treated with the gravest courtesy.

The tram sighed to a stop, and about half the passengers rose and began to disembark. Though they were clearly in a financial and business district, Jay decided to go with the flow. He joined the mass exodus.

"Excuse me," Jay said in halting *Sham'al*. The woman turned and looked at him with an expression of polite inquiry. "What is this office that you're going into?"

"Jhaconda and *Stirpes*. We're providers of @^&*." Static again. Jay shook his head. She tried to explain. "We guarantee objects against loss or damage. People too."

She vanished into the building, and Jay accosted another worker well dressed, at least by Takisian standards. And got the same answer. Again. And again. He'd either hit the wrong street, or everyone on Takis was either a pooftah or an insurance salesman. It was really depressing. Jay was beginning to wish he'd followed the young moms and dads, or the old grandmas and grandpas shopping or wherever they were going.

Interspersed with the office buildings were shops of various kinds. Jewelry, shoes, clothes, electronic gadgets. As he strolled and gawked, certain facts pummeled their way past the resistant barriers in his mind. The streets were *very* clean. No garbage in the gutters. No graffiti marring the pastel walls. There were lots and lots of tiny parks complete with the obligatory Takisian fountain, flowers, grass, and trees. And no homeless people sleeping in them. No homeless huddled like shapeless sacks in doorways or shuffling down the sidewalks accosting passersby for money.

Maybe they kill 'em and eat 'em.

Or maybe there weren't any. It didn't jibe with the implicit and (in his brief experience) the fucking explicit cruelty of the culture, or the elitism of the psionic overclass. Then Jay reflected on his brief acquaintance with Tachyon -- the paternalistic attitude the alien held toward humans in general and jokers in particular. The whole noblesse oblige act. Probably the motive was pride -- there aren't going to be any hungry or homeless people in our cities, by damn -- but the result was good, grudging though Jay's admission of that fact might be.

They think they're so goddamn special, Jay thought resentfully, though no psi lord was in view to trigger the reaction. *And it's just a fluke of genetic mutation which*

could be a universal gift if the elegant lords and ladies would deign to mix their precious bodily fluids with some of the lower order.

No, that wasn't the problem. Metaphorically and literally speaking, the telepaths would fuck the mind blind with the greatest alacrity. They just wouldn't breed with them.

Jay wished he had someone with whom to share these thoughts and revelations, and then suddenly the emotion that had been tugging at the edges of his mind like a shy child came clearly into focus. He was lonely. He didn't have a damn soul on Takis to talk to... come to that, he didn't have a damn soul to talk to back in Manhattan. He had an inflatable sex doll that doubled as a receptionist. He knew a couple of sympathetic waitresses at the Java joint who served him patty melts and coffee and let him ramble, but he realized he knew nothing about them beyond their names. His one deep friendship with Hiram Worchester had sorta gone down the shitter when Jay helped unearth the evidence that Hiram was a murderer -- however exonerating the circumstances.

Jay's thoughts went back to Vi and Flo at the seedy Times Square coffee shop, spurred no doubt by the aromas floating through the open door of the Takisian equivalent. Jay hesitated a few more minutes. Then a pretty woman, carrying an armful of cut flowers, came whisking through a back door and began filling the empty vases on the fifteen tables.

Like most of the *Tarhiji* she was on the zaftig side, but her soft hair looked like spun caramel, and the pure oval shape of her face reminded Jay of a painting he'd seen in one of his catechism books -- the Madonna of the Cherries. It was the only picture of the Virgin he'd ever liked. Instead

of looking sappy the Virgin looked sensual, and she seemed genuinely thrilled to be kissing her baby.

The woman sensed his scrutiny, looked up, and frowned. "Are you eating? Or rustivating?"

"It's a little early for lunch," said Jay, amused at her acidity.

"Then move out of my doorway so you don't block the paying trade."

That decided it. Jay walked in and settled at a table. Nodded toward the empty vase.

"I haven't got a flower yet."

The lips parted, were folded back into a tight line. The woman searched through the bouquet until she located one rather sickly, wilted bloom and placed it in the vase. Her velvet brown eyes challenged him. Jay just laughed. She completed her preparations, returned to Jay's table, and stood, arms akimbo, staring at him.

"What?" the human asked.

"Are you eating or are you still rustivating?"

"Gimme a menu, and I'll order. I'm not a mind reader."

Sighing like a mother confronted by a backward child, she lightly touched an indentation in the lip of the table. The menu sprang to life in the air above the table. The squiggles looked like worm trails in the dust.

Jay shot her a sheepish look. "I forgot... I speak Takisian, I don't read it."

"Don't speak it very well, either."

"You always this nice to everybody who comes in?" She stared, a wall of unblinking hostility filming her eyes.

"I'm surprised you have any customers at all."

"I have the kind of customers I like."

"And I take it I'm not among the select. Well, you want to translate this for me? Got anything on there that resembles a patty melt?" he added.

She didn't. And the explanation didn't help much. Too many of the words were unfamiliar. He finally settled on something that appeared to have cheese and bread in it -- maybe it was a sandwich -- and a bowl of soup. There weren't too many ways to wreck soup -- he hoped.

It was an open-face sandwich made of something that resembled raw spinach stirred with cream cheese and nuts. It was way too yuppie for Jay's taste.

"You got anything with burnt pieces of animal flesh in it?"

"You don't want this?" she indicated the sandwich.

"No."

"Are you going to pay for both?"

"Naturally."

"Is the soup to your satisfaction?"

Jay didn't mistake the polite words for politeness. There was a sting on the edge of them.

"Yeah, the soup's great."

It was a thick, dark concoction with tiny blue beans that looked like a cross between lentils and pintos. Floating in it were dried yellow critters that gave it a sharp, citrusy taste. And it was really good. Jay wondered if he could get the recipe for Hiram. He told the woman about his friend and the restaurant, and how he'd really love this soup.

"Only problem," Jay said, "the produce delivery is going to be a bitch over twenty-three light-years."

He thought that might get some reaction out of her. How often did you meet an alien? Up until a month ago he'd met only one. In retrospect he decided one would have been enough. His revelation didn't impress her.

"What are you doing off the Bonded station? We don't permit aliens on the Crystal World."

"Would you believe I'm a close personal friend and bodyguard to the heir to House Ilkazam?"

"No."

Jay studied that pretty face, the soft, rich swell of her bosom beneath her blouse. Dispensed with the notion of trying to impress her. He'd settle for getting to know her.

"Have you got a name?"

"Several."

"Does that translate to mean you're married?"

The question seemed to strike a nerve. There was the briefest flicker of pain in those dark eyes. "No, I'm not marriageable material."

"Lot of my dates have said that about me. Hi, I'm

Jay Ackroyd." She stared at the out-thrust hand with the air of someone who couldn't identify the appendage. Oh, that's right, you Takisians don't shake hands. You all seem to move straight to the kissing. Great custom as long as I'm not meeting a man." He was babbling. He knew it. It embarrassed him. He couldn't stop. It was her, she made him nervous.

Her dark eyes had gone wary. She studied him, and Jay had the feeling that she was actually seeing him for the first time. "How did you get here?"

"That's a really long story."

She turned away. "Then I don't want to hear it."

"You're pretty fucking cool about meeting up with an alien. Aren't you gonna call the cops, or get scared?"

"I've been up to the Bonded station to look at aliens."

"You make it sound like a trip to the zoo."

"Isn't it?" It wasn't actually a smile, but a dimple did appear briefly in her left cheek.

Jay grinned in delight. She was really pretty when she stopped frowning. The door to the restaurant opened, and three men entered. The detective and the woman turned, and Jay didn't need his hostess's reaction to tell him these were cops -- it was depressing to discover "The Look" transcended light-years.

"You will come with us please."

"And if I say no?"

He felt another mind closing like a vise around him, and too late he realized that although these goons were dressed in the less opulent *Tarhiji* fashion and their hair was brown, they were psi lords.

"Okay, okay, okay!" he stuttered out just before the compulsion became overwhelming.

Two of the men took his arms and marched him to the door. Jay grabbed the jamb and managed to call back. "I have a feeling we'll be seeing each other again."

The spokesman for the trio tossed a credit jewel to the proprietress. "Bill it to the House."

Jay's last sight was of the woman deliberately crushing the crystal under a heel.

Out in the street they released him. Jay twitched his coat straight and pushed back his hair. "How the hell did you find me so fast?"

It wasn't hard. We just had to look for a ridiculous foreigner asking stupid questions."

The crackle of the foil as it was wadded into trash by Taj's fist was a very strong clue that Jay had again managed to walk straight into the middle of a cow patty.

"I do not think a friendship with this woman is the wisest course you could pursue. I foresee a dark outcome."

"You read tea leaves too? What, are you telling my fortune here?"

"I'm not concerned about you, Mr. Ackroyd. I am concerned about not reawakening an old shame in this House --"

"There is one really annoying habit that all you Takisians share. You can't cut to the chase. Just say it. Straight."

"Hastet benasari Julali attracted the attention of a young nobleman, and they began a clandestine love affair. She should have known better. He certainly did. If he desired the woman, he needed only to petition to bring her into the House as a *La'b*." Jay correctly translated that as *toy*. It pissed him off. "My young relative sired a child on her -- an act absolutely forbidden by our law and custom."

Because of her extreme youth, and the early stage of her pregnancy, her life was spared."

"What did you do to her?"

"The child was aborted. Hastet neutered."

"That's what she meant about not being a marriageable commodity."

"Our culture places a great value on children, Mr. Ackroyd."

"Yeah, I can tell." Taj either missed or chose to ignore the sarcasm. "What happened to the dickweed who knocked her up?"

"He was of the Most Bred."

"Translate... nothing. I think she got the raw end of this deal."

"She is lucky to be alive."

"I'm going to see her again."

"I would prefer you not."

"Where's the harm? She's a little low-class nothing. I'm a little low-class nothing."

Jay realized that, for whatever reason, he amused Taj. The old man suddenly smiled. "I suppose it will do no harm."

"And as long as we're gettin' along so great -- tell Zabb to call off the fuzz. Since it seems Meadows and I have become permanent citizens, I'd like to get a look at the real estate."

"I'm uncertain for whom that is a greater tragedy."

Chapter Twenty-Five

The most notable thing about the aftermath of battle is the stench. Acrid smoke catching in the back of the throat. The sickly sweet smell of blood, roasted flesh. Next is sound. The ears slowly recover from the screams and the discharge of powerful weapons. Then you hear the hopeless whimperings of the wounded and dying.

Blaise had handled his first battle well, and Durg was pleased. The first bleeding was always the most critical. Of course, his fears had been slight. The boy took an almost evil delight in inflicting pain. The question had been whether he was a coward as many bullies tended to be. He wasn't.

Only one small doubt niggled and worried at the edges of the Morakh's mind and spoiled his pleasure in the victory. The boy had not confided in Durg the most essential part of his planned assault on House Rodaleh.

The memory still made Durg's mouth go dry as he remembered how at the height of the battle Blaise had flung away his weapons and, using a throat mike and button speakers to amplify his voice, exhorted House Rodaleh's *Tarhiji* troops to join with him.

And they had!

So the dice had fallen well, but the action told Durg more plainly than a conversation that Blaise had begun to believe his own press. Invincible, invulnerable.

And mad, Durg thought as he came around the garden wall and stopped to consider the eerie sight before him. Blaise standing on the back of a downed ship, while the *Tarhiji*, ranked seven or eight deep, stood gazing in silent wonder up at him. The rising sun at his back seemed to

wash his trademark black clothing with blood, and *Fel'k*, the larger moon, threw its waning light across his face, deepening the eye sockets and heightening the jutting cheekbones and square chin. He was an imposing figure.

"Hear me, my people. We shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills, and a thousand years from now men will still say this was their finest hour."

Durg motioned to his fellow Morakh, and they shoved the ruling line of House Rodaleh forward to meet their conqueror. The *Tarhiji* fell back like snow touched with a hot blade.

Blaise jumped down from the back of the dead ship and stared down into the face of Aleh, *Raiyis* of House Rodaleh. Beads of sweat suddenly popped out on Blaise's upper lip. *So the man was prepared, and his shields were up*, thought Durg. There wasn't time for a long, drawn-out mentatic battle with the blind watching. Durg forced the *Raiyis* to his knees before Blaise.

"I have your House, Aleh brant Agat sek Vereem," Blaise said. "I don't need to offer you a second chance, but I'm a reasonable man, so I'm going to give you that chance. Will you join with House Vayawand?"

Silence. Durg jabbed Aleh with his thumb. "Answer."

"I do not speak with abominations," Aleh said, and by speaking to a Morakh he had made it clear he considered Blaise even lower.

With a regretful shake of his head, Blaise drew his sword and offered it to a nearby *Tarhiji*. He then indicated the captured nobles of House Rodaleh with a sweep of his hand. "These are yours to do with as you please. I know

what would please *me*." Blaise shoved Aleh toward the *Tarhiji* Blaise had armed.

The man lifted desperate brown eyes. Blaise nodded encouragingly. "Remember, you have nothing to fear but fear itself."

Hate replaced confusion, and the *Tarhiji* buried the blade in Aleh's chest.

Blaise laid a hand as if in blessing on the *Tarhiji*'s sweat-matted hair. "You may keep my sword. A gift of thanks from the *Raiyis* of House Vayawand."

A cheer tore the air, and then the frenzy struck all the blind, and they rolled over the remaining *Zal'hma at' Irg*. Durg wasn't sure if at the end they were using weapons at all. A cold finger traced a line down the length of the Morakh's back.

More to banish his unease than any real desire to discuss the event, Durg said, "Rodaleh was well into festival preparations. We can use their goods in place of House Vayawand's. It should save us substantial expense."

They moved from the gardens into the House. *Tarhiji* servants filled the doorways, anxious for a glimpse of the conqueror. Blaise bestowed offhanded smiles and waves on them.

"Great, but I'm still not going to this little party." Blaise stepped over a body crumpled in the center of the hall.

Durg kicked it aside. "You must, you are *Raiyis*, and it is our most holy, most important celebration."

"My grandfather's going to be there!" Raw panic edged the words.

Closing his eyes in pained reaction, Durg prayed for patience. "What can he do? Female, pregnant, and our spies report that my Lord Zabb has wrested the House from her grasp. She is helpless."

Blaise was shaking his head violently. "You don't understand how tricky he is. He'll get to me somehow. I've told you to kill him, but you won't do it! I won't be safe until he's gone!" The boy's voice was spiraling upward, and Durg was horribly aware of the listeners.

"Hush, don't show your fear!" The glimmerings of a plan began to form. "And my lord, there is a way to neutralize your grandfather. And one which I think will give you pleasure."

Chapter Twenty-Six

"Hi. You got stuck for my lunch. I know you won't take money, so try these." Jay thrust out the bouquet of flowers and smiled down at Hastet. He peered past her shoulder to the room beyond. It was an occupational hazard of detectives.

The view was heartening. She was a slob just like him. The room was a cluttered mess. A pair of shoes cocked shyly across each other as if ashamed of their position in the center of the room. Brightly colored pillows spilled off a sofa and onto the floor. There was a plate with a half-finished meal on the floor among the pillows. It was apparent that Hastet was not a furniture sitter. She sought the low ground.

The holo was on. At first he thought it was a newscast of a bunch of psi lords. Then he realized they weren't pretty enough, or delicate enough. They were half-starved *Tarhiji* actors prancing around pretending to be psi lords. Unfortunately it didn't look like a satire. Another piece of the puzzle about the relationship between ruled and ruler clicked into place.

Hastet was still eyeing the flowers. "You really are hopeless," she finally said. "You don't give flowers to one of the *bitshuf'di*. And an odd number of flowers are either for your wife or your mother. When you're courting, it's an even number. And you never bring red -- that's the color for the dead."

"You people are opaque. Is anything simple in this culture?"

"Only dying."

She was still blocking the door. "May I come in?"

"Why?"

"I want to apologize." That didn't seem to be winning any points. "I want to understand." That got her. Curiosity replaced hostility.

"What?"

Jay sucked a breath past his teeth, prepared, spoke. "Let me be up front about something -- I've been snooping. So I know a little about you." The pupils widened until the warm brown eyes seemed an implacable black. "And knowing what I know, I don't understand," he gestured toward the holo. "Why are you watching a soap opera about the trials and tribulations of a psi lord? Why don't you just rise up and kill them all?"

"They read minds. Or have you forgotten? And what are you doing off *your* leash?"

"I got a dispensation from big daddy Taj."

Probably because the news out of Vayawand just kept getting scarier, Jay reflected, and they probably figured he wasn't going to head off to Vayawand on his own. They had figured right.

With a quick flick of the wrist, Hastet threw the door fully open, pivoted, and walked back to her pillows. It was grudging, it was unspoken, it was an invitation. Jay accepted and entered.

Just as his knees were buckling to drop him onto the pillows, a critter stuck its head straight up out of the cushions and let out a hiss like a tire deflating. It looked like a cross between a ferret and a feathered snake, with teeth that wouldn't be out of place on a moray eel. Jay dived one

way while the critter dived back into the safety of the pillows.

"Please excuse Haupi. She's a little shy," Hastet said, her voice catching on a chuckle. Despite his alarm, Jay had to admit that a smile became her. The lines about her mouth and between her brows softened, and there was that dimple again. Jay was a sucker for dimples.

"You don't get many visitors," Jay correctly deduced.

"No," Hastet admitted.

"Takisians just keep getting dumber."

The presence of so many guards had Jay's wee-wee trying to run for cover. It was the first time he'd actually entered *Rarrana* since Tisianne's seclusion. It was Lillyshit day, or whatever the hell they called it, so supposedly it was okay for him to be there, but it still put him in fear for his dick.

Tisianne was arranging flowers and taking a long time about it. Jay's idea of flower arranging was a jelly jar and water. He had to admit the results so far were really pretty. Tis picked up one blossom, and the air was filled with a gentle chiming.

"Oh cool, is that the flower?" Meadows asked.

"Yes." Tis offered it to the ace.

Jay reached out and lifted a blossom from the table. Several of the guards tensed. Jay cringed back into his chair and folded his hands in his lap. There was a smile lurking at the corners of Tisianne's mouth as she tossed him a flower. Jay hid his embarrassment by studying the lilac and white blossoms. They were hard, and the stamens apparently

acted like the clappers of a bell. He noticed wounds on the stem.

"They pulled off the thorns."

"Yes," Tisianne said. "They don't do that for the men who enjoy this art. It's funny because men are really far more vulnerable than women." She selected another flower from an overflowing basket. "What news from the wide world, Jay?"

"You've heard as much as I have, and it's all shitty --"

Zabb walked through the doors of the suite, and Jay, Mark, and Tis all stiffened.

"Cousin," Zabb said, and gave Tisianne a buss on the cheek.

"Is there some reason that you are allowed to annoy me with impunity?" Tis asked in that sharp, snotty tone that always made Jay's teeth ache.

Zabb smiled sweetly down at his cousin. "I'm the *Raiyis*. All women are my daughters... potential wives. I can see you whenever I choose in whatever manner I choose."

"And I may choose to put that grandiose fiction to the test," Tis challenged.

"Let's not disturb the beldams again, shall we?" Zabb dropped with a sigh into a chair.

"Then leave me alone. Haven't you done enough to me?"

"You're lucky I didn't --"

"Kill me." Tisianne selected another bloom from the overflowing basket. Continued in that same sweetly

soothing voice. "Yes, every day as I look about me, consider my situation, I am again struck with how much I owe you."

Meadows stepped in. "Hey, man, it's like you said. You can visit us anytime. We only get to see Jay once in a while. Why don't you split and come back later?"

"I need to discuss the Crossing Festival with my cousin."

"I will not attend," Tis snapped.

"You will!"

Jay watched as Tisianne's fingers tightened convulsively at the rap of command in that cold voice, and the delicate stem snapped. She regarded the drooping flower with annoyance.

"He'll be there. The Ideal knows what he might try," Tisianne argued.

"It's Festival, you'll be safe." Zabb helped himself to a piece of fruit from the bowl on the table. "And speaking of your so-charming grandson, I want to discuss the speech he delivered."

"What about it?"

"Taj and I were wondering if this power is a side effect of this jumping power? It is having an electrifying effect on the *Tarhiji* planet-wide."

"Maybe because it's hitting home some truths?" Jay said.

Zabb ignored him. "And you heard what happened at Rodaleh. We cannot fight if we cannot trust the troops at our backs. You said Blaise possesses a powerful mind control. It is possible it can sway thousands? Work across a bounce/cast?"

Tis shook her head. "You are looking for a magic explanation. Jay is right, the truth is he has found our Achilles' heel and is exploiting it."

"If you want to hang onto your own people, you better start offering them a mentat in every pot, and a chicken in every garage," Jay said.

Zabb frowned, confused. Mark stepped in. "You know, how a politician will promise anything just to get elected."

Zabb was staring at them both as if they'd suddenly begun speaking in tongues. And then it hit Jay. On Takis nobody got elected to nothin'. The art of the stump had never been invented. There was no demagoguery on Takis because there *were no demagogues*.

That was Blaise's secret power. Not wild card, not the jumper skill, not his quarter Takisian blood. In a fit of excitement Jay explained his sudden insight. Tisianne looked sick, Mark thoughtful. Zabb was still confused.

Meadows slowly shook his head. "This is fucking awesome, Blaise is bringing down an entire planetary culture with the power of the Lie."

"Well," Jay grunted, "he better get a new speech writer. At Rodaleh we heard Roosevelt and Churchill."

Zabb shook his head like a horse afflicted with flies. "Well, here is *my* truth. We will *not* mix our blood with that of the *Tarhiji*."

"Then I guess we better start studying *Vayet*," Jay grunted.

That pissed him off, and Zabb left with only another reminder that Tisianne *would* be attending Festival, and he'd send over her mother's jewels.

Tis sighed and settled into a chair. Meadows fluttered around her nervously. "You okay? He didn't get to you, did he?"

"No, no. Right now Zabb's machinations, Blaise's political posturings, the fate of the planet, and the future of Takisiankind are very secondary to my child." She laid a hand on her stomach. "Personally I hope Zabb and Blaise beat each other to death with their respective peni."

"What is this Festival shit?" Jay asked.

"It's the holiest and most important celebration on Takis. It celebrates our passage through darkness to find and settle the Crystal World."

"But Blaise is going to be there?" Mark asked.

"Yes. Everyone will be there."

"What, every House?" Jay asked.

"Every House. Every member of every House."

"Well, shit." Jay shoved his hands into his pockets and started pacing. "This solves --" He broke off and looked to Meadows. "You got the jammer?"

"Yeah."

"Fire it up." Meadows located the Network device and did so. "So Blaise and the body will be at the hop?"

"Yes. How many times do I have to --"

"So I pop them both here --"

"No." Tis's eyes had gone dark with some undefined emotion.

"What do you mean, no?"

"First, you won't be there. You're not family."

Jay waved that aside. "So I sneak in. I've got a Ph.D. in hiding in bushes."

"The Festival is held on the South Pole."

"Oh fuck." Jay kicked a chair. "So I stow away."

"On a living, mind-reading ship?" Meadows asked logically.

There was some sort of internal struggle going on in Tisianne's soul. Jay could read it in the conflicting emotions washing across that little girl's face.

"We *can't*," she finally said. "We swear peace at Festival. No one's ever broken it. I can't do this. I can't let you do this."

"I can end this thing in about two seconds --"

"No."

"You'll have your body back --"

"No!"

"Meadows and I can go home --"

"*No!*"

"And you're not going to let me do it because it's *Christmas?*"

It cost her. Her teeth gently sketched at her lower lip, then her expression hardened. "That is correct."

Jay checked just inside the kitchen door. Both big ovens were fired up, and all the burners on the stove. Steam formed worm tracks on the window in the back door. Hastet was alternating between making sugar flowers on a

multitiered cake, and giving an occasional stir to a bubbling sauce.

A young man, his plump face red with exertion and heat, was creaming butter in a giant ceramic bowl. Haupi went hissing and rollicking across the floor. Her wings were up, but she seemed to have about as much lift as a dodo.

"Jesus, are we entertaining the army tonight?"

Hastet pushed back a hanging strand of hair and left a pink smudge on her damp forehead. "I suppose I have you to thank for this." She didn't sound real happy.

"What? What did I do?"

"The House called yesterday. I'm to prepare desserts for Festival."

"It is a great honor, *genefemme*," the young man said.

There were a mountain of flaky cookies with pink icing. Jay snatched one. The sweetness of the frosting contrasted with the almost tart flavor of the dough. He snatched two more.

"Shut up and stir," Hastet ordered. "No, better yet, go to Wan'se and buy me some more *sithi* beans. I'm almost out." The boy grabbed his coat and vanished, along with a cloud of steam, into the alley out back.

Hastet caught Jay with his hand on the cookies, smacked him with her pastry gun, and decorated his shirt with green icing.

"Thanks," Jay said. Scraping it off with a forefinger, he daubed it on her nose like war paint.

"I won't be able to have a booth at Festival now. I'll be too damn tired," Hastet complained.

"Nice of the lord and lady poobahs to let you guys party along with them. Even if you're not good enough to go to the big polar hop."

"I wouldn't want to be there. We have more fun here." She had these incredibly serious eyes, and when she turned them on him, Jay felt as if it were X-ray vision to the soul.

"Is that meant to be an invitation?" Jay asked.

She turned away and stirred sauce. "I would like it."

He took the whisk away from her and put his arms around her. She let him, and he felt as if someone had opened a bottle of champagne in the center of his chest. "I'd like it too." She glanced over at her cooking and gently freed herself from his arms. Jay perched on the marble pastry table. "So what's this party like?"

"It's outdoors with lots of food and drink and music and dancing."

"And cops and fights?" Jay suggested.

Hastet looked at him oddly. "When we Takisians fight, we fight for real. People die."

Jay remembered Hiram remarking, after a return from overseas, that the most violent cultures tended to have the most elaborate system of manners, the greatest degree of politeness; it was a way to keep the violence in check. Takisians seemed to be no exception.

"And besides, this is Festival," Hastet added.

"Yeah, I've heard too much about how peaceful everybody is at Festival."

Hastet resumed her cooking. She had an ability, rare in many women, to be perfectly comfortable with silence.

Jay ate cookies and watched as the elaborate confection took shape. And slowly a plan also began to take shape.

"How's all this stuff getting to the pole?" Jay asked.

"Servants from the House will pick it up tomorrow."

"So it goes in a day ahead of time?"

"Yes."

"Waiters, bus boys, too?"

"No, *Tarhiji* are not permitted. The *Zal'hma at' Irg* serve themselves at Festival."

"Do they use living ships?"

"Only to tow the freight barges."

"And who unloads once they reach the pole?"

"*Tarhiji* who have ridden with the foodstuffs. Why?" she asked suddenly suspicious.

"I just figured out how to crash that party."

"Not in my desserts you're not."

"Let's talk about it." And he drew her arm gently through his.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Twelve thousand years ago (or so legend had it) all the families had banded together to build Festival Hall on the edge of the polar continent. The Crossing Festival was always held on the winter solstice, the longest night of the year, to symbolize the blackness of space as the Takisians made their crossing and emerged into the sunlight of the Crystal World. It was the only time when for a brief count of hours the ruling families of Takis set aside rivalry, plots, and murder and celebrated together.

Everyone attended Festival. The old (not too many of those in a psi lord family), the infirm, the *very* young (there seemed to be about twenty million crying babies in this shuttle), and everyone in between. But no guards. The *Tarhiji* were not permitted at Festival.

"Perfect time to drop a tactical nuke," Jay had remarked to Trips as he watched the tailor fit the lanky ace for the Festival. Mark couldn't remember what he'd said. Maybe nothing. There really wasn't anything to say when Jay was on the prod.

Mark sighed and wished the detective were here now, but Jay was a mere guard, not adopted, not one of the family like Mark. *Maybe that was what had made him so crabby, and why he'd vanished for a day. Probably pissed.* If Jay was regretting missing the party, Mark would cheerfully have changed places with him. The ace didn't want to see Blaise -- too many bad memories. And speaking of memories, *how the hell is the Doc going to handle this?* wondered Mark.

She was in her usual position -- head averted from the women and children, gazing out the portal. *Or was the port*

only an illusion projected by the living ship? Trips had never quite worked that out.

This late in the pregnancy Tisianne's face had grown puffy, but overall she looked pretty good. Her maid had dressed her hair in an elaborate upswept style that made her seem older and far more regal. The dress wasn't so good. Its bizarre color combinations were shocking to human sensibilities, and the cut was designed to accentuate rather than minimize the belly. Then there was the bare neckline screaming for jewelry, but Tis had remained adamant and refused to wear her mother's jewels. Mark foresaw an unpleasant scene with Zabb.

Mark sidled over to her. Peered out the port. It was a tight fit, and their cheeks brushed. Heat rolled off her skin. Worried, he laid a hand on her forehead.

She brushed it aside. "Nerves. I've always had the power to make myself sick. Maybe someday I'll do it up really right and end up dead."

There was nothing to say to that. They returned to their contemplation of dark water, icebergs, and ice floes. What had seemed a puzzling white line on the horizon resolved itself into a wall of ice several hundred feet high. The sea battered against those crystal ramparts -- white spume and white ice. Occasionally the patient chew of the water broke free a chunk of ice the size of a train car. The roar of falling ice seemed like a cry of despair while the ocean boomed in triumph. And then the patient millennium-long dance began again.

Tis jerked her chin, and Trips saw it. *Building* seemed too mundane. *Palace* was incorrect since this structure stood empty all year long except for this one night. *Victorian absurdity*, was the best he could do. And *enormous*! It appeared to be constructed entirely of glass. Probably some

sort of high tensile plastic to be able to resist the polar storms, Mark amended, and he was damned if he knew what held it up. There were no struts in evidence, no obvious bearing walls.

The arrival time seemed to be inviolable. As the Ilkazam ships, flying in tight and elegant formation, dived toward the hail, Mark saw other brilliantly lit ships also sweeping in. There was a sense of show-off in the formations the ships assumed as they landed, and then it struck him -- this wasn't at the bidding of their masters, this was pure ship vanity.

Tis slumped back. "No *Baby*. They would be too afraid she'd bolt. Ideal, *I'd* probably bolt with her."

"You can't give up, Doc." He laid a tentative, comforting hand on her shoulder.

"I should have agreed to Jay's scheme," she said, and her expression was as bleak as the landscape.

The hours had passed in surprising comfort. Food was certainly not a problem, and Jay hadn't even had to sleep on the floor. This glass cat house came equipped with everything. It was an easy guess what the secluded little rooms containing only beds were for, but Jay didn't think his performance would be too hot. He'd be too aware of those transparent walls. Further snooping revealed game rooms with decks of cards and score pads at the ready. There were board games of indeterminate goals. Holographic video games. A nursery filled with cribs and toys for children.

A long ramp led deep into the polar ice, and to a great room carved entirely out of that same ice. There was a skating rink. And a *track*. Jay wondered what ran on it. Then he found the stalls, and he and some critter that looked like

a cross between a giraffe, an impala, and a horse scared the bejesus out of each other. As he stumbled back, the detective wondered what kind of people would pack up food for seventy thousand, their kids, and their animals, and take an evening stroll to the pole? The closest analogy he could think of was the Super Bowl.

For the Takisians, though, the big event wasn't sport, it was dance. The central focus of the great building was the ballroom. The floor was black, and twinkling in its depths were thousands of tiny lights. As he stared at them, Jay realized they seemed to form a stellar map. Spiraling out of the floor like coiling smoke were crystal pillars -- clear, amethyst, blue, topaz -- frozen jewels or flowers, Jay couldn't decide which.

On a high podium rested the orchestra's instruments. Jay walked up the stairs and softly touched the strings of a harp. The single note shivered in the air. Jay thrust his hands behind his back and, though he was not a fanciful man, felt as if he'd stumbled into a fairy tale. It was eerie. The instruments laid aside as if the orchestra had only paused for a break, the plates and cups arranged and waiting on the buffet, the food steaming softly, and there was not a soul in the place.

"Just one lost little soul," Jay said aloud.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a loud *boom*. Jay knew that sound. Something large and very fast had hit the speed of sound. The party was about to begin. He flexed his right forefinger several times like a man checking the action of his pistol and went in search of a hiding place.

"Killed them all." Gabru, *Raiyis* of House Ss'ang, sighed. He shook his harlequin head. Each contrasting strand of hair had been separated from the rest, lacquered,

and swept up, until they resembled knife blades thrusting out from the skull.

"There are only a handful of women left from the entire House," Ruek, *Raiyis* of House Alaa, said.

"A tragic loss," offered Hazzal, ruler of House Jeban. "Rodaleh had a very powerful strain of psi healers. We're going to see a lot more insanity with the loss of this gift."

"All the insanity we could ever imagine has arrived and is dancing," grunted Gabru. All the men turned to watch Blaise.

Zabb didn't offer an opinion or a comment on the topic under discussion. Instead he just watched that tall black-clad figure and calculated. Sooner or later he would face this young man in combat, and he would glean what he could of Blaise's psychology in the thirteen hours available to him.

The bounce/cast hadn't fully captured the sheer size of the half-breed. Zabb was accounted a giant among the Takisians. He was dwarfed by Blaise. It made him uncomfortable. He had a sudden vision of Tisianne naked and tiny beneath the brute force of that massive body. Stomach acid climbed up his throat.

"Every Rodaleh *Tarhiji* soldier who participated in this outrage will have to be killed," grunted Zujj, the military commander of House Alaa.

"I don't think terror is our most effective weapon right now," Zabb said softly. "We'll only play into the Abomination's hands."

"We have to do something?" Quar'ande, military commander of Ss'ang, said.

Taj arrived with Yimkin, the *Raiyis* of House Tandeh.

"Agreed," Zabb said. "So what say we repair to a more private venue and discuss what that something should be?"

Zabb dropped back and fell into step with Taj. Softly he asked, "Zaghloul?"

Taj shook his head. "Khuechen brant Chuea is eagerly spreading jam with what he perceives as the winning side."

"Mongrel," snapped the *Raiyis*.

At the door to the gaming room Taj checked and looked up at Zabb. "Is it wise to leave Tisianne alone?"

"She'll do well enough. She has her groundling Paladin."

You remember how I told you I was going to give you another one just as soon as this one is born?" Blaise rubbed her belly like a man with a Ho Tai good-luck figure. Tis searched the crowd desperately for Mark, or Taj, or, ancestors help her, even Zabb. They were not in evidence. Tisianne ran through a desperate litany of her sisters' names. They failed to appear.

Someone rescue me!

Rescue yourself! another part of her snapped back.

But she couldn't. She'd lost the knack for coherent speech.

Blaise leaned in, hands propped on the arms of the chair, pinning her in place. "Well, I'm going to. They're all flocking to me. They saw what happened to Rodaleh. They don't want to be next. I'm coming for you, Granddad, closer every day."

Fear has a taste, sharp and sour on the tongue. It's a driving pain deep in the gut. Steel fingers on the throat. The

ballroom was lit only by the double moons, and the pattern of tiny lights in the floor. Cold, corpse light that deepened the hollows in Blaise's face, giving him a gargoyle's look. The sound of the revelers and the music of the orchestra faded to distant hummings. The only sound seemed to be her own harsh breaths.

"But you haven't formally met Kelly." Blaise straightened just before she screamed. He gestured, and out of the crowd *he* came.

All night Tisianne had avoided this, playing a little game with herself. Not looking for her body. Trying not to go mad from the wanting. Now it was coming, jerking forward with a marionette's stiff gait. *Mind controlled!... Just to show me he can do it.*

Her body did not look well. Shadows beneath the lavender eyes. Skin a little too white, a little too pasty. A thin sheen of sweat on the upper lip. And a developing paunch. She wanted to beat the girl for so abusing her dwelling place. Then she correctly interpreted Kelly's expression as he gazed at her body, now eight months pregnant.

Neither one of us has done such a good job as renters, thought Tis.

"Kelly Jenkins, meet my granddad." The manic grin deepened. "Meet your baby. No, *our* baby. Don't you love these family gatherings?"

she/lovesonly/you, doesn'tknow/me/at/all.

The communication of the slaves, conducted beneath the twitching nose of the overseer. Kelly and Tis stared at each other. Their telepathy blended, coalesced; linked as one mind, they explored the mind of their child. And all the bitterness melted away.

Illyana, meet your mother, sent Tisianne.

Total confusion from the baby.

Indulgent chuckles from the parents.

"Hey, bug out, man!" Mark's sharp tones jerked Tis from her mind dance.

Tis recognized Zabb's quick step approaching from behind her. Zabb's gaze coolly raked Blaise from the top of his head to the soles of his feet and back again.

"While it is forbidden for us to kill you tonight, we're certainly not required to endure either your company or your conversation." Zabb turned back to Tisianne. "Cousin, will you walk with me?" He held out a hand and assisted her from the chair.

Blaise smiled, bowed with practiced ease, but his glittering eyes promised payback -- *real soon*. He grabbed Kelly by the elbow and dragged him away.

The trio watched Blaise move away. Tis realized she was shaking. She realized that the warm grip of Zabb's fingers around hers was comforting. She glanced up at him in confusion. He was frowning after Blaise.

"Some gentlemen and I require your expert advice." Zabb looked to Mark. "Will you trust her with me for a few minutes?"

"If the Doc says it's okay." Mark looked down at her. Tis nodded.

In two hundred and two years of living, how many Crossing Festivals had he attended? Probably one hundred and ninety-seven of them, though his earliest memories didn't begin until around age four. At that particular festival,

he and Nandi had discovered that the punch tasted truly wonderful. They had retreated to a staircase and downed glass after glass of the sweet golden beverage. Later they discovered they couldn't stand. Giggling, they had clung to one another under the disapproving eye of Nandi's sister. That was the last Festival they had spent as comrades. By the next year she was old enough to know he was a Morakh, and she had learned to despise him.

Durg moved down the refreshment table like a grazing bull. A tidbit from each tray, not bothering with a plate, to the evident disapproval of the masters manning the buffet. The emotion was a little difficult to classify, but Durg knew that he enjoyed seeing them -- the *Zal'hma at' Irg* -- providing the music, filling the glasses, cooking and serving the food. If they were going to party without their faithful servants, they had to pay the price.

"Why did you do it, man?" The sad tones of Mark Meadows shattered his reverie.

Durg took his time, selected and chewed down another sandwich before he turned to face the tall ace. And his answer when it came wasn't a direct response. "Do you realize that this room is littered with my former masters?"

"Doesn't say much for your loyalty."

"Or theirs. My switch in allegiance always seems to stem from abandonment. The Vayawand left me and a half dozen other children on a roadside when Zabb attacked. I transferred my loyalty to Lord Zabb. My lord deserted me among primitives on an alien world after my defeat by Isis Moonchild. I transferred my loyalty to Lady Moonchild. Then Moonchild abandoned me -- once again on a roadside. Synergy having been achieved, perhaps that will be my last abandonment."

The blue eyes were suspiciously moist behind the thick lenses of his glasses. "I'm sorry, man. I didn't realize. I wanted you to have a chance to be free. I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm sorry."

"That's the difference between them" -- a jerk of the head to indicate the celebrating Takisians -- "and you. They are never sorry. And their way is better. You expect nothing... you receive nothing... you are never disappointed."

Jay was not finding this as easy as he'd hoped. He hadn't fully absorbed just how many people were going to attend, and finding two people out of thousands was a daunting task. Blaise was going to be relatively easy; he'd be taller than all the Takisians present, and if he continued his pattern, he'd be dressed all in black. Jay remembered Hiram telling him how Tachyon would never wear black because that was the color for common laborers. Ergo it was a safe bet no Takisian was going to be wearing black. So now he just had to find the kid. As he surveyed the shifting crowds, Jay reflected that it was going to be like looking for a raisin in a bowl of fruit salad.

"Child, child, we should not be meeting like this." Bat'tam rolled an eye toward the bed. "It tempts me far too much."

"I didn't meet you to fuck, I met you to talk." Something of Kelly's urgency must have communicated itself, because Bat'tam lost some of his prissy, precise attitude. A quick touch opaqued the walls with a blinding kaleidoscope of rainbow colors.

"What are you doing here?" Kelly demanded.

"It's Festival. Everyone attends Festival."

"When you vanished last week, I thought you'd gotten smart and split..." Bat'tam was frowning in confusion. "You know, run away from Blaise," Kelly amplified. "He's gonna kill you."

The urbane, cynical mask dropped back into place like a presidium curtain falling. "I had rather apprehended that. That's why I'm making a protracted stay in Vayam."

"You've gotta go a lot farther than Vayam if you're going to be safe from Blaise!"

"My sweet one, *Zal'hma at' Irg* do not transfer alliance from House to House. I am Vayawand."

"Then you're dead, and that's really stupid. Go to Ilkazam. Maybe you can help them. Somebody's got to stop Blaise."

He gnawed at his lower lip. "It's never been done."

"A lot of shit is happening that's never happened before," Kelly countered. "Run goddamn it, run!"

Bat'tam caught Kelly by the shoulders. "If I do, it will leave you without a friend in House Vayawand."

"That's okay. I don't think he's going to kill me --" Kelly's mouth twisted in a rueful smile. "At least not yet. Your suggestion about my precious bodily fluids got him thinking, and he's got some big something planned."

"Bravery sits oddly on you. From where did this sudden resolve arise?"

Kelly shrugged. "You can't be scared all the time. After a while you just stop feeling anything. Besides, you're the only person who's ever been nice to me -- even if you are doing it for the boy you saw dancing sixty-five years ago,

and not really for me. I could at least pretend it was for me. I'm pretty good at pretending ... But anyway, I don't want you dead, so please go."

Bat'tam's hand closed on his sharply pointed chin, and Kelly could feel the nobleman rummaging about in his mind. The probe was withdrawn, and the old man ran his palms down the other man's smooth cheeks.

You know, girl, for the first time I've actually seen *you*."

There was nothing romantic in the kiss. Lips, a little dry and very wrinkled, pressing hard against his. Tongue forcing its way past the barrier of his teeth.

Would Tachyon have minded? Analyzing that question and trying to unsnarl his tangled emotions kept Kelly motionless.

Bat'tam paused at the door. Glanced back, grinned. "That doesn't quite make it all worth while... but it helps to ease the pain."

She checked slightly on the threshold, and Zabb smiled to himself. Had he finally succeeded in impressing her? And it *was* an impressive display. Oh, not the numbers... a mere five Houses meeting with House Ilkazam... but the power represented by those Houses.

Probably because they have the most to lose, came Tisianne's thought. *Still, it was a diplomatic coup on Zabb's part. I didn't think he had it in him.*

Zabb leaned in close to her and whispered, "Thank you." He knew the ease with which he read her mind would rattle her. It did.

Zabb added his telepathy to her feeble power so she could read the surface indigestion bubbling off the minds of the five *Raiyises* and their military commanders. Old Yimkin's was the worst, though some of his distress wasn't just worry over the Abomination. It was grief at seeing Tisianne in her current predicament.

If one could be said to have friends of a rival, *Raiyis* Yimkin would qualify. The histories of House Ilkazam and House Tandeh were strewn with a series of brief but lucrative treaties. One of Tisianne's sisters had in fact been married into Tandeh. That the marriage ended tragically was no the fault of Yimkin. At Jadlan's funeral, the bluff, sunburned seaman had carried a grieving fourteen-year-old Tisianne away and wrapped the weeping boy in a tight embrace.

"We are discussing the feasibility of an alliance," Zabb said.

"I'm delighted to see it," Tis replied. "And though I'm honored by the confidence, I wonder at my inclusion. I'm not a soldier -- wasn't then, am certainly not now."

But you know Blaise," Taj said. "His strengths and weaknesses."

"So how do we minimize the first and exploit the second, cousin?" Zabb asked.

"His strengths are rather evident -- several hundred Morakhs --"

"Our wits have gone begging," Yimkin interrupted. He shook his head, setting the bells braided into his full beard to ringing. "Here, child, take a seat." He rose and offered his.

Watching the flush blossom in her cheeks, Zabb knew how much the courtesy irritated her, but she took the proffered chair. Tisianne had always preferred comfort over principle.

Until that last wild gesture, Zabb corrected himself. He had plucked small memories of Earth from her mind, and most were either sad or terrifying. No, fifty years in the mud had taught Tis to suffer.

"The Morakhs aren't enough to ensure his safety. Burning Sky, what's the matter with the *Zal'hma at' Irg*?" Quar'ande exploded.

"The same thing that would be wrong with any of us," Taj replied. "He has empowered young cadet lines within the House. He's promised them conquest, and he's delivered."

"But he's an abomination," Gabru wailed.

"He's successful," Tisianne broke in. "For the moment that is all that matters. Oh, they comfort themselves with the argument that once Takis is theirs, they'll remove him --"

"But it won't happen," Zabb interrupted. "He commands the will and the loyalty of the *Tarhiji*."

"But how?" Yimkin asked.

Zabb smiled grimly. "I defer to my cousin. She seems to have a somewhat better grasp of this matter than I do."

Zabb had heard much of this before, and he could request amplification once they were back home, so he paid only scant attention to the briefing.

Instead he sat and watched Tisianne. The emotions darkening or sparkling in the wide gray eyes. The mobile little mouth with its absurdly short upper lip. The soft voice concisely and without elaboration detailing the personality

of her tormentor. She was careful to touch on none of the horrors she had endured. Was that pride or fear? That she was desperately afraid of her grandson there was no doubt. Tisianne in male form was a volatile little man. He spoke almost as much with his hands as with his voice. Tisianne in female form kept her hands clasped lightly in her lap, but Zabb saw the delicate trembling. Once, only once, did she execute a sharp, punctuating gesture. There was a flicker of reaction from Yimkin and Gabru.

She should have worn gloves, Zabb thought. Hide those scars. I wonder who stopped her. Or did this new, stronger Tisianne stop herself? I certainly can't ask her, and is it worth thought theft?

"If you thwart Blaise, be certain you are ready for the reaction. He will lash out at whatever is convenient, and with a barbarity that will shock even us," Tis said.

She fell silent. Zabb looked at the other men.

"Questions? Comments?" Head shakes all around. "Thank you, cousin. Can you find your way back to your *stirpes* without escort?"

"Yes." She stood and shook out her skirt. Walked to the door. Paused. Looked back at all of them. Desperation was etched in the tendons of her neck, the lines about her mouth. "Please... please, don't kill him. He is my only way home."

Zabb just pushed her gently back through the door.

After her abrupt ejection from the meeting, Tis felt very much at loose ends. She was afraid of running into Blaise. Mark seemed to have vanished. Her sisters were all celebrating with their husbands and children. No one

wanted her fear or her unhappiness near them. There was only one person who shared them both.

It took an hour, but once the contact was formed, there was never any doubt they would rendezvous. Illyana was the anchor, telepathy the chains, and Kelly and Tisianne were safe, for Blaise was brain deaf.

For years after, Tisianne would remember the conversation as a series of sound bites or MTV pulses. Kelly had done an impressive job self-teaching himself mentatics but lacked control. Tisianne offered hurried pointers...

And then they ended up back on Illyana. Delighting in her mind.

Kelly warned Tisianne of his body's numerous drug allergies. Tis countered that natural childbirth is mandatory among the telepathic class. Survival of the fittest and all that...

And then they ended up back on Illyana, wondering about her eye color.

Kelly hesitantly and rather shyly told Tisianne about Bat'tam.

I remember now. It was Crossing. He danced with me.

Guys dance with each other?

This is a guy's dance. Amusement at the groundling's shocked sensibilities. A very pretty, energetic dance called the Condala. You'll see it tonight. A cross between Russian and Middle Eastern styles. It's very intriguing. A beau who's nursed a crush for sixty-five years. Perhaps a suitor to make an honest woman of me.

I think he's heading for Ilkala.

Impossible, Tis demurred. No one abandons House.

And they ended up back on Illyana, wondering how she would cope with her bizarre parentage -- assuming any of them ended up back where they belonged.

Switching back to audible conversation, Tis warned, "I will not give her up."

"I understand. Just so I can see her now and then."

Before Tisianne would reply, Zabb screamed through her head like a five-alarm fire.

TROUBLE!

There was this swell hidden gallery running the entire circumference of the ballroom. The discovery had come quite by accident. Jay had seen clumps of psi lords cruising into this tiny cul de sac carrying candles and emerging minutes later sans candles. They sure as hell weren't leaving them in the hall, so Jay had snooped, watching as they opened a secret panel in one of the pillars.

When there was a lull in the traffic, Jay tried it, and felt like a turd being flushed. Whatever it was, it wasn't an elevator -- more like one of the old pneumatic tubes that used to grace department stores in the twenties. The dizzying ascent slowed, and he found himself suspended in midair in front of a door.

Stepping out (or did one step *off* thin air?) seemed the wisest thing to do, so he did, and found himself in the gallery. It was creepy at first. There were hundreds of little candles flickering at the foot of those crystal pillars. Only instead of lights embedded in the crystal, there were people. Jay wondered what you had to do to get buried at the pole? Fuck up big? Or score big?

It made him nervous staring at those serene faces. As if they might wake up and start screaming impostor, burglar, thief, like in *Alice in Wonderland*. Resolutely Jay turned his back on the corpses and walked to the edge of the gallery. And that's when he realized it was swell because he had a view of the entire ballroom, and... there was Blaise.

Jay carefully formed the forefinger of his right hand into a gun, and drew a bead on that powerful black-clad man.

-- And had his hand twisted to point at the floor by an inexorable grip.

"No!" said Mark Meadows.

Kelly and Tisianne exchanged concerned glances.

"I'll take you," Kelly said as he assisted the Takisian from her chair. Keeping a supporting arm lightly about her waist, he escorted her to Zabb.

We're a behavioral psychologist's wet dream, Tis mused as she considered the roles they were falling into by virtue of their respective biologies.

They were the center of attention as the crowd swept back to make way for their passage. Waiting in a cleared area in the center of the ballroom were Zabb and Taj. They were ranged on one side with Blaise and Durg on the other. Tis wondered if she and Kelly were supposed to have brought the ball for the tip-off?

"You have disrupted this Crossing Festival on an obscure point of protocol. It had better be worth it," Taj was growling as they arrived.

Blaise smiled slow and long, giving the impression of a killing beast stretching after a long sleep. "Oh, it will be." He

raised his voice. "But before we address these troublesome matters, I wish to share a bit of joy." He gestured, and Durg held out a hand. A woman emerged from the crowd.

She was beautiful in that way only creatures bred for beauty can possess. Jewels completely covered the bone beneath her brows and swept up and away toward her hairline like wings. With that weight of ice she was certainly of the highest born. Her hair had been cropped short and was just beginning to grow out, indicating she had recently rotated back from space-platform duty. Where it was red, it was so intensely dark, it would probably appear black in some lights. But it was also stippled with white streaks. The Ss'ang bred for that piebald look, so she was some kind of outcross. She was also one hell of a mentat, for as she passed, Tis read *nothing*. It was as if there were a blank space, a psychic black hole walking past.

"Prince Tisianne, stop making time with that other woman and come meet your bride," said Blaise with hearty bonhomie.

For an instant Tis was afraid that Kelly would faint. Tis gripped Kelly so tightly that she felt her nails puncture the fabric of his sleeve and hit flesh. Kelly shook it off, but his eyes were desperate.

Tis forced rubbery legs to move and placed herself inches from Blaise. "Blaise, my child, never ride a scam past its useful life. Fully half the people in this room know my psi signature. They know that's not me."

"It's enough you where it counts. Between the legs."

"I *won't*! It's *gross*!" Passion throbbed in the words. Tis winced. The teenage girl's hysterical reaction delivered in a baritone voice was embarrassing.

Blaise stepped around Tisianne. Squared off with Zabb. "It's the first step in the amalgamation of House Ilkazam into the new order."

"The only one," Zabb said softly.

"Are you fucking *crazy!*" Jay spluttered. "Look, I've got 'em all. Blaise, the body... even Tachy if we want to send her home fast too."

The detective struggled fitfully, but Meadows had succeeded in locking both his hands behind his back. "You can't. It's Festival."

"What is this crap? When did you become Takisian?"

"Jay, there's, like, two of us, and probably a hundred thousand psi lords. Do you really want to piss them off by violating their customs and traditions this way?"

Taj was shaking with anger, his hands opening and closing spasmodically. "You mudcrawler, you rotting abortion, this is Crossing. You denigrate our traditions --"

"You want tradition?" Blaise snarled. He grabbed for Tisianne, but Zabb yanked her away so Blaise's fingertips only grazed the skin of her arm.

Even that brief touch made the edges of the room, the people, vanish into a red haze. Only Blaise's face remained clear. *Leering down at her. Peering up from between her legs. The pounding. The pain deep in her body.*

"This woman is carrying *my* child. That makes her mine. And on that point I believe your customs, traditions, and protocol agree."

Ruek of Jeban stepped forward. "What custom decrees is that the child should die. It's an abomination ...just like you."

Blaise's eyes widened. "You'll be next," he promised softly. So great was Blaise's power and the touch of his madness that Ruck took an involuntary step back. The watching families didn't miss it.

Raising his voice, Blaise said, "No half-breed dies in my holdings."

"So you use your new laws when it suits you, and the old when that works best," Taj said sarcastically.

"Our *Raiyis* writes new laws and will build a new world," said Sekal, one of the Vayawand nobles who surrounded Blaise. Pride and adoration filled his words.

"In other words, I use whatever works." Blaise added and smiled engagingly. It was horrifying.

There are times in life when you know that doom is rolling toward you. Tisianne had felt it when he had waited for the decision of the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1950. She had felt it again as she had stood before the *Ajayiz*, and Zabb had banished her to *Rarrana*. She felt it now. Which is why Taj's passionate advocacy had no power to move her. He was going to fail.

Taj tried. He raised every imaginable objection, and a few that made no sense at all. When he saw he was losing the battle, he switched to delaying tactics -- agreeing that Blaise could have her, but only after a genetic match was run to establish paternity. That didn't work either.

The decision of the Families was clear, and it had nothing to do with custom and protocol, and a hell of a lot to

do with the fact that the Vayawand and their young *Raiyis* were scaring the crap out of everyone.

There never was anything so overt as a vote, but suddenly the crowd was dissipating like wind-torn smoke, and Blaise was walking toward her, his hand outstretched.

"They're going to give her to *him*," Mark choked out, and Jay realized the gangling ace was crying.

"Okay, that's it, party's over." Jay fashioned his gun.

It wasn't conscious. It wasn't even a decision. It was instinct and survival. Tisianne snatched a knife from the buffet table and flung herself at Blaise.

There was a whirlwind of motion, and Durg was between them. The knife cut through his finery and bit deep into the chest.

A gasp like a thousand winds in a thousand pines swept the hall, and several nobles from House Vayawand bore their *Raiyis* to the floor. The music stuttered to a halt. Silence. And tension as everyone waited to see if the violence would escalate.

Jay and Mark hung over the railing. Jay was cursing fluently and monotonously because he'd lost his bead on Blaise. Tisianne began backing slowly away from Durg. Blood was staining the front of the Morakh's shirt. Tis looked down at the knife in her hand as if surprised to find it there, dropped it. The sound of the blade hitting the floor was deafening in the unnatural silence.

Zabb suddenly strode forward and dealt Tisianne a powerful backhand blow across the face, knocking her to

the floor. Then a broad-shouldered Takisian with a chest-brushing beard made an intricate sign with his right hand, spit between his fingers, and deliberately turned his back on the fallen woman. By twos and threes, and then by the hundreds, the assembled lords and ladies did the same.

Zabb walked back to where Taj stood. He had been joined by Tisianne's six sisters. They weren't spitting at her yet, but it was clear they were all as shocked as the other families.

Durg moved to Tisianne and swung her up in his arms. Carried her toward the knot of men surrounding Blaise.

"Now, Jay, do it now."

With a soft *pop* Tisianne vanished.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

There were about three seconds of total silence. Then the ballroom erupted in pandemonium. Durg was staring at his now-empty arms in amazement. Zabb started toward the Morakh, was caught and pulled away by Taj.

"Come on, you motherfucker!" Jay screamed.
"Surface!" Blaise remained obdurately out of sight.

Then both Jay and Mark bowed beneath the imperative call from the *Ajayiz* of House Ilkazam. The House was shamed. They were withdrawing from Festival.

Mark shook himself free of the last lingering effects of that telepathic summons. "Look, I gotta split. I'll let it seem like *I'm* the one who popped the Doc."

"What about me?" Jay asked.

"Guess you go home with the dirty dishes."

"Gee, thanks. Do I get a little appreciation for saving the day? Shit, no."

"I'm very appreciative. And extremely impressed," came a voice from behind the two men.

The humans whirled. Mark taking a tighter grip on his briefcase. A brief examination of the man, and Mark felt himself relax. The jewels inset in his face proclaimed his House, but he was elderly, and the elaborate eye makeup, lipstick, and powder made it pretty clear he was a fairy. Also, if he'd wanted to fuck with their head, he would have done it before now.

"I am Bat'tam. Lately of House Vayawand. I am desirous of traveling to Ilkala, but travel is so fatiguing, and I

was wondering if you might be kind enough to remove me the way you removed Tisianne?"

"Why should we?" Jay asked.

"Oh, no particular reason. I was just hoping to avoid being killed by Blaise brant Gisele."

Jay rolled an eye to Mark. The ace stared at the Takisian for a long moment. "Go for it."

Tisianne leaned against the door of the cell and cursed Jay. He'd seen her suite. Did he send her there? No, he sent her to a cell. The house was deserted. The Zal'hma celebrating, the *Tarhiji* freed from their duties and celebrating.

With a groan she slid down the door and with gentle fingers explored her aching face. The eye was swollen almost shut, and one of Zabb's rings had gouged her cheek.

There was a soft *pop*, and a man appeared in the cell. Tis screamed. He yelled. They both eyed each other. He looked familiar. Tis tried to recall from where. The man knelt and offered his mind the way a hound shows throat as a gesture of good faith. *Bat'tam*, Tis read.

"Oh, Ideal, *you*."

Bat'tam didn't make the mistake of reading the emphasis as complimentary. He stood, brushed off the knees of his pants, and peered down at her. Eventually he said, "So that's what she really looks like."

"What?"

"Kelly."

"I'm going to kill Jay."

"Don't agitate yourself. I asked him to send me -- fascinating mode of travel -- legacy of the Enhancer?... Oh, yes, I'm switching allegiance."

"You're babbling. You're also insane."

"No, Kelly made an excellent point. The unthinkable becomes commonplace when the world is collapsing. Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?"

"I'm cold, may I have your coat?"

"A pleasure." He covered her. "Would you like to rest your head in my lap?"

"I think not," Tis said stiffly. Then angrily added, "Ideal, it'll be hours before we get out of here!"

"No. Ilkazam had just been ejected from Festival when I left. Shouldn't be too long."

Tisianne groaned. "Oh, Ancestors, I ruined everything."

"Well, let's just say you had a rather stunning effect on the proceedings."

Rescue hadn't been long in coming. Bat'tam had been left in the cell. Mark had rushed Tis back to *Rarrana* and into her suite, where they were now tensely awaiting the inevitable arrival of Zabb.

"Here, try this," said Mark. Supporting her head, he held the glass to her lips. She swallowed with difficulty. Suddenly Tis stretched out a hand to Mark. The ace was pleased to see it. As a man Tisianne had needed a lot of physical contact -- a need that on Earth had driven most of Tis's male friends to distraction. Now as a woman she could scarcely tolerate it.

And who could blame her? Repeated rapes and beatings. I wonder if she'll ever be right. I wonder if she'll be right even if we get her back where he belongs.

Mark assumed the good old smiling Mark Meadows face, took Tis's hand, and gave her a kiss on the forehead.

"What's that expression mean?" Trips asked.

"I am trying to imagine you kissing me... I mean *me*, me. I'm failing."

Hooking a chair with a foot, Trips settled, folded his arms on the edge of the bed, rested his chin on them. "It was a really dumb move, man."

Tis sighed, shifted, searched for a comfortable position. "I know, but at the time my good sense was being subsumed by raw panic."

"I can dig that, but Jay was ready. We weren't going to let him take you."

"That's all very well, but I didn't know Jay was there."

"Besides, Zabb had a backup plan. He was going to use one of my friends to rescue you."

Her laugh was more like a yelp of pain than humor. "Rescue me? Oh, that's rich. I'm certain his rescue would have been as assiduous as his attempts to recover my body."

"Don't be an idiot, cousin," Zabb said from the doorway. He sauntered into the room and dropped into an available chair, lounging comfortably. "Of course I'm not going to help you. You become male -- we become enemies again."

"What makes you think we're not now?"

"That still does not mean I wish to see you in the hands of that madman --"

"No, you'd like to see me dead," Tis accused.

"With every breath you accuse me, but every breath you draw is a gift from me. If I wanted you dead, you would be dead. And by the way, you can be a real bitch." Zabb held up a restraining hand. "No, don't reply, we have more important matters to discuss. Your little... performance has shattered my painstaking and carefully constructed alliance." He cocked his head reflectively. "Ilkazam versus every other House on Takis. What a delightful situation."

"I don't care. He's never touching me again."

Mark nodded in vigorous concurrence.

"I understand that. I would never let you go back to him, but Blaise's 'touching' thus far has been quite sufficient to place us in a most contradictory position."

Mark didn't understand. He looked to Tisianne for clarification, but she had the same confused expression that he suspected was on his face. Zabb stared at the mound of the woman's belly, raised one brow. Mark watched as all the color drained from Tisianne's face. The ace catapulted out of his chair and tried to grab her hand. She fended him off.

"No... oh, no."

Zabb leaned in for the attack. "Blaise has to legitimize his attack on us. This experiment in alien social engineering is one excuse -- House Ilkazam is all that stands between the *Tarhiji* and the coming of the Ideal. But that abomination you're carrying is a rallying point. I am keeping a man from his child. I am now the outlaw. It's a simple, emotional issue easily understood by the mind blind, and easily exploited by the *Zal'hma at' Irg*."

"You're going to give the baby to Blaise?" Mark asked. Disbelief sent his voice careening into a higher octave.

"Ideal, no." Zabb turned back to Tisianne. His eyes were soft, his tone wheedling. "Come, Tis, you've been doing so well. You understood the necessity of removing Shaklan. This is -"

"My father was already dead! There was no future, just continuance! My baby --"

"Is defective."

"*No!* There is nothing that puts her beyond genetic norms --"

"Except her breeding! If we have any hope of rebuilding an alliance, it will be with the most conservative Houses, people terrified of the changes Blaise is wreaking on our world, our culture. If this child lives, you are *supporting* Blaise's position. Politically she is a total liability. Do it, Tis, for the House, for the family!"

"If the survival... of Takis... depended upon... my killing... my baby... well... you're all dead!"

It wasn't sobs that broke the words. It was a horrible choking that cut deeper than tears. Tisianne drove her fists over and over into the mattress, then threw back her head until the tendons were etched in her throat and began ripping at Zabb. The foulest, cruelest epithets were hurled at him. Most hit.

No one can hurt us like family, was Mark's inane little thought as he tried to figure out how to take command of the situation.

There was no warning. Something just snapped. A lunging stride, and Zabb had Tisianne gripped by the throat

and had yanked her half out of the hospital bed. Her shrill scream of terror didn't even slow Zabb.

He shouted down into her face, "I was going to make this easy. Not now. You'll birth this monster. I'm going to stand there and watch, and then I'll take the creature bloody from between your legs and kill it then and there!"

Trips gripped Zabb's hands. Exerted pressure between the Takisian's thumb and forefinger. With a shout of anguish, Zabb released Tisianne. She slumped onto the pillows like a broken bird.

Maintaining the punishing hold, Mark began backing Zabb toward the door. "Get out of here ... Get out of here now, or I'm going to kill you. I don't even need my friends to help me do it. And there's no mind control strong enough to push through the hate."

Mark would always wonder what the Takisian saw in his face, for Zabb yanked free, whirled, and plunged through the door.

Mark's long legs went scissoring in a stork-like, awkward run back to the bed. He gathered Tis into his arms, rocking, stroking, murmuring endearments into her hair. The husky little voice when it emerged from the folds of his coat staggered him with the depth of its calm.

"Mark, find Jay. Summon Lani, and bring the psi block. We have a great deal of planning to do."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"So... one of them needs my help. Ironical."

Jay shifted uncomfortably. Stared at Hastet's uncompromising back. Tried to interpret that oh, so careful, oh, so neutral, tone. Decided it wasn't encouraging. So far this meeting wasn't going as he'd expected -- as he'd promised his fellow conspirators it would go.

"Tisianne isn't really one of them. Not anymore. Not after all the years on Earth."

Hastet bent, gathered up her pet. Only then did she turn to face Jay, and her expression was bitter. "My life's already been ruined by them. But at least I had my life. Now you're asking me to risk that too."

"Hastet, you will be safe. No one will ever know that Tisianne was here. Hey, they didn't know you slipped me into the big hop."

"That's because such an act was... was beyond comprehension. This! You must slip her from the House, you must travel into the city." Jay was making wild scissoring motions with his arms like a referee trying to call a foul. "Into my house. The Mentatic Intelligence Service could be eavesdropping. And how am I to explain this infant? Burning Sky, I couldn't birth her -- they saw to that, and the neighbors know it too."

"Okay, forget Tisianne. Forget about helping him... her. How about the baby? She sure as hell isn't *one of them*. Doesn't she deserve a chance to live? Isn't it worth a little risk to give her that chance?"

"You've been with them too long. You're starting to play mind games." Her eyes had narrowed to calculating

slits. She knew it would hurt him. He tried to ignore it. But damn it, it hurt.

Stung, he cried, "That's not fair."

"Isn't it? You are using the life of this infant, hoping I will associate its plight with that of my own dead child. That I will *make a blow for freedom*." Her mouth twisted in a humorless smile. "To quote Blaise brant Gisele. Well, it's a terrible trick, and I won't be part of it."

"Part of what?"

She'd gone prim. "Keeping a man from his child."

She started to walk away, but before she'd traveled two steps, Jay had her by the arm and had swung her back around.

"You want to hear how that *man* sired his child? First he transferred your prince's soul into a female body, and then he *raped* her. Comprene *rape*? He sexually assaulted her." Her face had gone white, the dark eyes like a pair of bruises against her chalky skin. "Over and over again. Blaise is crazy, can't you understand that? Hell, *everybody* on this planet is crazy. Zabb's going to murder a baby for political advantage. Blaise is leading a revolution to get his hands on his grandfather so he can continue to rape her and impregnate her until it kills her. He doesn't give a shit about the freedom of the *Tarhiji*, or the custody of this kid. He's just destroying everything that Tisianne loves in this bizarre vendetta. You say you won't be part of it -- okay, fine! But I'll be damned if I'll be part of this shit either." He whirled and went stomping for the door. "I'll find somebody to help us."

"How will you remove her? The House is heavily guarded." The soft question froze him faster than a shout.

"Nobody's going to see her leave, because she'll travel here instantaneously."

He broke off, frustrated by her expression. Decided it was time for a demonstration. He formed the fingers of his right hand into a gun and leveled on Haupi. With a soft *pop* the creature vanished from Hastet's arms and reappeared in Jay's arms. Where she promptly bit him on the thumb, wriggled free, and vanished like an animated feather boa beneath the cushions of the couch. Cursing, Jay flapped his hand wildly, paused, squeezed blood from the two puncture holes. It still hurt. He flapped it some more. Hastet had backed up against the wall, her hand at her throat.

"Gods and Ancestors, what are you?"

"A wild card."

"Next time warn me. I hate surprises." She hugged her elbows, pacing. "So you'll send the princess by this fascinating mode of travel?"

"That's the plan."

"And once here?"

"She has the baby. We take the baby and leave."

"To where?"

Haupi made a lightning raid from beneath the sofa and bit down on the toe of Jay's boot. "Th-the neutral space station," he stuttered as he shook her free. "We'll travel to Alaa and use the elevator -- whatever the fuck the elevator is -- but that's how Tachy says we gotta do it. Elevator to Alaa station Alaa station to Bonded station."

"Can't you do...?" She formed the forefinger of her hand into a gun in imitation of Jay.

He shook his head. "I was only on the station a short time, and I didn't pay close attention. I have to really memorize a place before I can pop someone. Otherwise they might end up... well, let's just say I don't want to take that risk."

"And once we're there, do we live on air and charity?" Hastet asked.

"Money's already been transferred." Jay held up the credit crystal.

Hastet flopped down onto the sofa, pulled a pillow into her lap, and hugged it tight. "Your little princess has thought of everything." There was so much bitterness in the words that Jay remained prudently silent. Hastet was frowning at images only she could see. With a shake of the head she returned to the present. "So all that remains to make this lovely plan a reality is my participation?"

"That's about it." Jay thrust his hands into his pockets.

"Tell me one more time why I should do this."

She was leaning urgently forward, her brown eyes shadowed with pain and an old anger that refused to fade. Jay shook his head.

"If I'm honest, I can't think of one damn reason." The silence seemed to collect in the corners of the room and hang in the shadows thrown by the lamps.

"Why are *you* doing it?" Hastet asked.

"I was hired --" He stopped himself. This had nothing to do with money, or the job he was originally contracted for. It was because... "I want to spit in the eye of the assholes who'd kill an innocent baby. And because Tisianne's lost so much in his life. If he loses this, I think..." Jay made a helpless gesture.

"Is this duty or friendship?"

Jay hesitated. When he began this strange odyssey, he hardly knew Tachyon -- Tisianne. In a lot of ways he didn't like Tisianne. Now --

"Friendship."

Hastet clasped and unclasped her hands several times. Flung aside the pillow. "All right, I will do it."

"This is final, last chance. You come now."

Zabb glanced to the holostage, where a five-inch-tall figure of Nesfa was fulminating. Then back to the intelligence reports on Vayawand troop movements. No," he said, drawing out the word into several syllables. "I think not."

"Then we... leaving!" She made it sound like a threat.

Zabb stilled a laugh. "My, how... terrible. Anything I can do to speed you on your way?"

"This is not ... hearing the last of this... matter."

Zabb cut the communication and briefly wondered if he had been too quick to reject Taj's advice that they offer some sop, make some face-saving gesture to the outraged Viand. But what did mudcrawlers understand of dignity?

Hey, you're the one who said there was probably no limit to my power.

That was theory. This is my child we're discussing!

It was a bizarre mode of communication. The closest analogy was mental seasickness. Jay had experienced telepathy -- the voice in the head. This was more like

telepathyvision. He could actually see all the parties to this confab. Some of the discomfort he attributed to the fact that several of the sisters had thrown up mock telepathic conversations to serve as screens. He couldn't really hear them, but he was aware of them like an itch he couldn't reach.

Meadows and Tisianne were in a garden. Snow was falling. With Mark in his Takisian comic-opera military togs, and Tisianne in a white fur cloak and fur hat, they looked like refugees from between the covers of *War and Peace*. Meadows looked really stupid, but to be fair, Jay had never seen the ace wear *anything* that actually suited that gangling form. Then there was Tisianne. It had been several days since Jay had seen the alien, and he was stunned at how *big* she'd gotten. He wondered if they were going to have time to pull off this little caper. There was telepathic reassurance from one of the sisters. He groped for a name, gave up. He couldn't keep them straight.

Look, I really know the emergency room of the clinic. We send the kid, Cody will know what to do.

What? Do we pin a note on her? Dear Cody, this is my baby. Be home soon, love Tach? This discussion is closed. We are not going to experiment with Illyana. We stick with the original plan.

So Hastet gets to be in danger. Great.

She'll have you, sent back Tisianne.

She should be honored by the trust, averred one of the sisters. Jay was glad Hastet wasn't around to hear that.

Jay sighed and rubbed a hand across his face.

Okay, but a question -- how do I pull off my end of the caper? It was like tasting a question mark. No words, just

the emotion. Jay explained to the puzzled sisters. *I've gotta see her to pop her.*

You are seeing her now. That imperious soul he recognized -- Roxalana. Cut to Roxalana in her sumptuous quarters. Looking out of her eyes at the image in the mirror as a *Tarhiji* servant brushed out the long golden hair.

Jay hung tenaciously onto his tumbling sense of place. *See her in all her burgeoning, fecund, fertile flesh.* The flash of irritation like a punch in the nose Jay correctly identified as Tisianne.

Cut to Tisianne. *Didn't most of your practice consist of sleazy little divorce and custody cases?* Tisianne asked, oh, so sweetly. *I should think skulking in bushes should be second nature by now.*

Back to Roxalana. *Tis, don't squabble. This is a real problem, and we must address it.*

For a long time Jay sensed brows wrinkling. For a long time they evaluated the multiplicity of means of ingress to *Rarrana*. Unfortunately it took even longer to count all the guards. Another long, dismal stretch of mental constipation. Finally one of the sisters slowly said, *He is a little attractive.*

Cut to Cillka. She was more than a little attractive. She was a testicle-warming knockout.

Bring him in, came the thought from Roxalana.

I've always been a girl who likes toys.

Their fading laughter held more than a little feminine revenge. None more so than Tisianne's. Jay wondered if it was too late to back out.

He extended the epispray to her. Tisianne just looked at it. Mark's wide eyes got wider with confusion. How to explain to him? How to say, I'm *scared*. I don't want to go through this. I have to go through this. I don't want to be alone. I don't want you with me. I want it all to be... different.

The barrel of the epispray was cold against her fingertips. Inside enough hormone to induce labor. Tisianne laid her free hand against her stomach, sought and touched the reassuring love flowing off Illyana. In the past week the baby's movements had virtually ceased. From the changes in her borrowed body, and the clinical experience of monitoring some five hundred pregnancies at the Jokertown Clinic, Tisianne knew that the baby's head had slipped down into the birth canal. So whether she did it now, or did it later, Illyana's debut could not be denied. She was coming, and only Tis's actions this day could assure her a chance at life.

I love you, baby. Don't hurt me too badly.

She depressed the keypad. Raised her eyes to meet Mark's. Wondered if she looked as terrified as he did. Ideal knew she felt it.

Chapter Thirty

"I feel like a total idiot," Jay said.

Mark paused and glanced up from where he was tying the big bows that adorned Jay's glittering boots.

"I'm sure the Doc feels a lot worse."

"I hope it's a *long* labor. I hope that little asshole..."

Jay couldn't think of anything awful enough to equal the humiliation he was about to undergo. Grimacing, he faced the mirror again.

He felt as if he were doing a Fruit of the Loom commercial, only in this version he got to be a cherry bonbon. He had been padded to help sell the idea he was one of the *Tarhiji*. Though why it was necessary, he couldn't imagine. The stupid suit alone made him look like a balloon. Layer on layer of pink and rose and cherry and orange and white. Each layer falling free with the pull of a ribbon. He trailed more streamers than a New Year's Eve party the morning after.

Meadows removed this *thing* from a box and headed toward him. Jay dodged, tottered and teetered on his high-heeled boots. His first impression had been correct, it was a hat -- like a cross between a poke bonnet and a propeller beanie. His awkward bobble had cost him. Meadows managed to plop the thing like a roosting gooney bird onto his head and tied the bow rakishly under one ear.

That was it. Jay went on strike. He dropped into a chair, folded his arms mulishly. "I'm not wearing the hat."

"With that hat on do you think anybody will look at your face?"

Why did Meadows always have to be so goddamn reasonable?

"Does Cillka always tart her toys up like this?"

"She has a reputation for enjoying opening a man like a Christmas present. Pull a string, another layer falls away."

Jay smirked. "Maybe with enough practice I could train Willy to spring through my fly like a jack-in-the-box. Bet Cillka'd like that."

Meadows flushed a dull red. Jay savored the moment. Meadows unfortunately bounced back. Reaching into a pocket, he emerged with a silver-filigreed object too big to be a ring, too small for a bracelet. The other ace twirled it lightly around one long index finger.

"Well, whip it out."

"What?"

"Don't brag if you can't produce." Mark forced it into Jay's hand and folded the detective's fingers around it. "Now put it on."

"Are you telling me that I have to thread my dick through that?"

"Yes."

"No." Curiosity got the better of him. "And *why*?"

"It means you're sterile."

"What? They're going to inspect?"

"They might."

Jay turned away, groped through the layers, pulled himself free. The ring settled snugly just behind the head of his cock. "Three hundred bucks a day is *not* enough."

With total ennui the guards at the door glanced at his penis and waved him through.

"What a swell job," Jay gritted. "Like the V.D. patrol in the army. These guys must get really sick of inspecting penises --"

"Even as sterling a representative as yours?"

"Shut up. Now if they got to check out the women --"

"They do."

Jay forced his mouth closed. "Where do they get to look?"

"The left nipple is pierced."

"Oww... Wait a minute, why are women coming into a harem?"

"Takisian boys don't leave until they're fourteen. Also," Mark gave the shorter man an ironic glance. "Takisians aren't as fucked up about sex as we are, man."

Jay tried to picture Tisianne -- male or female -- in the midst of a lesbian orgy. Found it wasn't that hard a stretch. Now that he was actually inside the forbidden zone, Jay found it wasn't all that exciting. That wasn't to say that the women weren't exciting. Whatever else might be said about the psi lords of Takis, they sure as hell bred Miss America beauty queens. Unfortunately, an awful lot of them had shapes more reminiscent of overstuffed armchairs than bathing beauties... but those faces. Maybe it was just the result of an overactive imagination, but Jay felt as if he were being damned with every look. He was glad they thought he was a eunuch. A fertile man might be in danger of his life.

"Are they ever *not* pregnant?" Jay whispered.

Meadows looked at him in surprise. "Most of the time. Otherwise they'd be up to their eyebrows in baby Ilkazams." Mark eyed him shrewdly. "You're disappointed."

"I guess I was expecting the shiver of beaded curtains, eunuchs slipping past with poisoned goblets, or on some secret mission --"

"Don't we qualify?"

Meadows had him there. The tall ace paused at a door and lightly knocked. Cillka answered. Quick assuring nods were exchanged.

"Right, then." When she smiled, she had a habit of catching her lower lip between her teeth. It gave her a vixenish, impish look. Reaching out, she tugged a ribbon. The embroidered vest released and slithered to the floor. "All in working order."

Taking Jay by the lapels, she tugged him through the door. It didn't take much urging. "You." A light finger to Meadows's chest. "Better get around to Tis."

"Is she all right?" Alarm quickened the normally hesitant voice.

"Fine... well, as good as can be expected." Mark stood in the hail like an orphaned puppy. "We're monitoring. I'll have our magician to the suite when Tis gives the word."

Meadows wandered disconsolately away. Cillka turned that smile back on Jay, pushed the door closed with a suggestive wrist flick. Jay's mouth went dry.

"Disrobe, dear one, while I get dressed," she said.

"I thought the idea was to *undress*."

Her head snapped around. "You're not neutered. I would never consider it. I am *Zal'hma at' Irg* of the House

Ilkazam. I do not mix my blood with that of inferior beings."

And suddenly she wasn't so beautiful anymore. Jay's ardor dropped like his softening penis. He dropped into a chair muttering, "'Scuse me, massa, for a minute there I almost forgot I was a nigger."

"How you doin'?"

Tis paused in her slow, careful pacing back and forth across her suite. "Not too badly." In a dry, pedantic tone she added, "Did you know the average labor lasts sixteen hours?"

"Don't be clinical, talk to me."

"And what should I tell you? It hurts? Well, it hurts. I know it is going to hurt a hell of a lot more before very much longer."

"So should we go now?" Mark was nervously wringing his hands. Tis wanted to scream at him to stop it.

"No, it has to be hard labor." She gripped her elbows, walked again. "I would not wish to impose upon the hospitality of Jay's lady for too long."

"You're really weird, man, when you get all Takisian and toplofty." Mark moved to her, placed his hand on her shoulders. "What is it you're really saying? Really feeling?"

Lightly she traced the bony arch of his beaky nose. "This woman is my subject. The first I've been permitted to see since my return. And I'm embarrassed. I come to her rolling in the straw like a birthing farm animal. Ideal take it, I'm her *prince*. How can I rule her without her respect?"

"What makes you think you're going to lose it? Jeez, Doc, there's not many men who'd do what you have to

protect their child."

"Most men don't end up in such a ludicrous position."

"Doc, if you were an ace, getting into weird scrapes is, like, definitely your superpower."

"How very disheartening. Where do I go to cash it in?"

Her breath suddenly seemed to get pinned somewhere between chest and mouth as a particularly sharp contraction rippled through her belly. There was a nervous, questioning blast of confusion from Illyana. Tis wanted to scream at the infant to *wait*. I'm not ready yet. Do we have to do this? But the body, urged by the drugs, had begun its autonomic function. Neither of them could back out now.

Tisianne forced a rictus of a smile. "Shouldn't be too long now."

Something touched his neck. Jay bellowed, flopped like a hooked fish in his armchair. Snorted awake. The fringes of the nightmare were receding like wind-torn clouds. Cillka was bending over him.

"It's time."

"Goddamn, it's about damn time."

Getting out of the chair revealed aches and cricks in muscles he didn't even know he possessed. Jay groaned, stretched, shook back a sleeve to check his watch. Two A.M. or the Takisian equivalent thereof. He knew the days were slightly shorter on Takis. It was too frustrating to figure out. Maybe it meant he was living longer to have extra --

The memory of the preceding night and day finally penetrated. Memories of bone-aching boredom. Meals had been the highlights. He thought he'd eaten eight just to

pass the time. Guiltily he recalled that Tisianne probably hadn't had such an easy, boring day and two nights.

"Poor little thing. Isn't this kind of a long time?"

"The body's small, it's the first, and... he's resisting."

She led him into the corridor. Pandasala and Tri'ava fell in behind like flanking guards. They looked tired. Cillka snatched the query from his mind. "No one is due to birth tonight. We're having to block Tisianne's pain from the women's quarter lest someone alert Zabb. It means we absorb it. It's not easy."

"Yeah, and you get to divide it six ways. How much more pleasant for Tisianne."

The doors to Tisianne's suite opened when they were a foot away. Roxalana playing door guard. Only a single lamp was lit. In the shadows Jay heard a desperate panting. He remembered rabbit hunting with an uncle one autumn. He had wounded a doe and trailed the blood into the woods. The sounds emerging from beneath the bush were very reminiscent of this.

The other three sisters abandoned him. Roxalana softly closed the door. Jay found his knees were shaking as he approached the bed. Mark had his arm around Tisianne's shoulders as if he'd just assisted the girl onto the edge of the bed.

Jay wanted to say something, but the words seemed to be jammed up somewhere in the back of his throat. Tisianne looked awful. Her face had gotten very puffy in the final weeks of the pregnancy, and with its current ashen color it looked like three-day-old dough. The pale eyes were bone dry, but rimmed by red, and the gilt hair had lost its glitter. It hung like dirty cobwebs around her shoulders. Jay did some mental arithmetic and figured that the alien had been

in labor around thirty-seven hours. Small wonder she looked like shit.

Roxalana plucked a package from a table. It had been wrapped in a glistening rainbow paper and tied with gold and silver ribbons.

"She'll need clothes. There are also several changes of diapers, and a breast pump and self-heating bottles." Jay swallowed hard. His part in this was suddenly starting to look a lot more complicated.

Mark accepted the bundle and shifted Tisianne's medical bag to his other hand. "Send me first," he instructed Jay. "I can make sure things are ready for the Doc. Give me, say, five."

"Got it. Sure hope Hastet is still waiting. She expected us last night."

Tisianne's unresponsiveness was starting to scare the detective. She just kept staring off into space, her arms clutching her belly.

"If this *Tarhiji* doesn't know her duty, she at least knows what's good for her," was Roxalana's cold reply.

Again Jay was seized with a dislike so intense it was almost physical. Then Tisianne let out this horrible grunting sound. In a lot of ways a scream would have been easier. Anxious to do anything, Jay popped Meadows.

"My," was Roxalana's terribly well-bred reaction. "What a very useful skill. I have longed for it at particularly dull parties."

"Unfortunately I can't do it to myself," Jay said as he watched the sweep hand on his wristwatch.

"What is the range?"

"I don't know" And then Jay remembered the hideous parasite Ti Malice, and *that place*, and wondered how far away nightmares lived. Decided he really didn't want to know -- he was afraid it was no farther than the floor beneath his bed. Just thinking about the place was giving him the cold sweats. *Time*. Jay teleported Tisianne.

Once she was safely away, he asked, "This is taking a lot longer than I expected. Are we likely to have any little surprise visits from Zabb?"

Roxalana shook her head. "I expect this House to be under attack within the month. That should hold his attention more than tormenting Tis."

"Why didn't we involve Taj?"

"Because he would not support our actions. He believes the child should die."

"So why are you involved? You ladies have always struck me more as the Furies than the Graces."

The smile was as calculating as the light from your average computer. "Because however flawed and inferior this child might be, she still carries my brother's blood, and mated to a properly bred Ilkazam, she could produce a valid claimant to the *Raiyis'tet*. And knowing she lives will make Zabb sleep less easy at night, and may... *may* keep us alive. I am a mother too, Mr. Ackroyd. I wish to see my children thrive. And now we must see you safely through the doors of the quarter."

Back in Cillka's room Jay donned the five layers he'd removed through that interminable night and day. As he stood, swinging his ridiculous hat by its ribbons, the woman suddenly reached up and mussed his hair, pulling a lock down onto his forehead. Her smile was pure mischief.

"If you had really spent this many hours in my bed, you would not look so tidy."

"If I'd spent thirty hours banging you, I'd need a wheelchair, and you wouldn't be awake."

She arranged his hat and tied it in place. "You humans are the most awful braggarts --"

Whatever other insults she was going to offer got lost as she got that poleaxed expression that Jay had learned meant a heavy-duty telepathic message coming in. Whatever she heard it was bad. She pressed her hands against her mouth, yanked them down, and blurted, "My husband!"

"Oh, great!" Jay grouched. "My nuts just became sweetbreads."

"He doesn't care about toys. The problem is he'll recognize you."

"And realize that *I'm not a toy!*" That aspect of the situation hadn't struck her. When it did, her reaction was all that he could hope for. Cillka panicked and went screeching about the room like a frenzied hen.

"Look, I majored in 'hide' in detective school. You got a closet? Under the bed?"

"He'll scan. Read your mental signature."

"Too bad I was sick the day we did 'invisible to telepaths.' Okay, get out in the hall, distract him. I'll --"

"He's got guards. They'll have surrounded the suite." Cillka began to cry.

"What, is a conjugal visit to a Takisian wife like sleeping with a black widow? Hubby's got to come armed for the fucking?"

"*Help!*" Cillka suddenly screamed. It didn't do a thing for Jay's already raw nerves.

"I'm trying!" Jay shouted back, then he realized that she'd simply voiced a telepathic all-points bulletin.

Roxalana, Melant, and Pandasala answered the call. Several connecting doors opened, and the three women came flying through, shedding clothes like trees losing leaves in an autumn storm. As Roxalana hauled Jay toward the bed, the other two applied themselves to physics of undressing while in motion. By the time they all tumbled onto the bed, the detective was down to a shoe, one sleeve from his breakaway outfit, and his hat.

He heard Cillka coo out a name, then the rest of the conversation went into the private mode, and he had no idea what was happening. Couldn't see what was happening either, because his face was pressed firmly between a pair of milk-heavy breasts. Jay wondered if he ought to have a Freudian childhood flashback now? Instead he decided to avail himself of what providence had offered. He dropped soft little kisses onto the soft skin, felt one nipple crinkle beneath the application of a tongue tip.

A few moments later, and the bed o' babes crawled off him. It was Pandasala he'd been kissing. He grinned at her. She slapped him. Stormed out. Jay shrugged. Roxalana held out his pants to him. Raised her eyebrows.

Chapter Thirty-One

There was a crane dismantling Jetboy's tomb. The Great and Powerful Turtle and the Harlem Hammer were taking exception to this activity and were hammering on the crane -- one from the top, one at the bottom. The racket was terrible Jay approved of the sentiment, but then the crane collapsed, and it was heading right for him!

Ackroyd woke with a snort and a cough. Sat up on the couch. Pale light was creeping in the window. Haupi was seated on the sill preening her wings. The racket was still continuing from the direction of the kitchen. It ceased, and Hastet came hurrying through. She checked when she saw that Jay was awake.

"Ice chips," she said, and tipped the glass so Jay could see. "The poor little thing is so thirsty, and she can't keep anything down."

"Still no baby?" Jay asked. He was surprised the words could force their way past the fuzz on his tongue. She shook her head. Jay checked his watch. Seven A.M. "Don't you love it when a plan turns to shit in your hands?"

Hastet continued for the bedroom. The concern was a big change from the cold courtesy with which she'd treated Tisianne for the first few hours. It had all been *your highness this*, and *your highness that*. But somewhere in this endless night, distrust and resentment had turned to sympathy. Maybe it was something all women shared. That this suffering was unique to women drew them together. *Except Tisianne wasn't a woman -- not really.*

Jay didn't want to go back into that bedroom. It was all too earthy, too primitive. Why wasn't there some high-tech way to have babies? A culture as advanced as the Takisians

ought to have artificial wombs. Unfortunately Tisianne got knocked up on Earth ...

He was stalling. Maybe it was because he just couldn't stop thinking of Tisianne as *Tachyon*, and there was something so creepy about a man giving birth. Maybe he just couldn't stand to see any creature in so much pain. Sucking in a quick breath, he pushed open the door and entered.

Not much had changed in the hour and a half he'd napped. Meadows was still hunched in a chair at the side of the bed, Tisianne's hand clasped tightly in his. His other hand rested on the mound of her stomach. Her gown had been thrown up, and Jay quickly averted his eyes from that expanse of white flesh, and the wide-open legs. Hastet had lifted the girl's head from the banked pillows and was slipping ice chips between Tis's chapped white lips. There was something so gentle, so womanly in Hastet's pose, in those strong, unmanicured hands. Jay felt an unaccustomed tightness in his chest. Thrusting aside the odd feeling, he moved a few more hesitant steps into the room.

Both Meadows and Hastet were murmuring encouragement. The ace's voice had gone hoarse from all the hours of talking. The other sounds in the room seemed too loud when matched against Tisianne's unnatural silence. Jay had been told to expect screams. He was prepared for screams. This harsh animallike panting was killing him.

Awkwardly he said, "I'm told it helps if you scream."

For the first time Tisianne focused on him. There was a flicker in those gray eyes that was pure Tachyon.

"And what... in the hell... would you know... about it?" She groaned, arched violently upward as a particularly hard contraction rocked her.

"That was good," Mark said. "Can you do it again?"

She turned shadowed eyes on him. "No... I'm so... tired."

Mark released her hand and jerked his head toward the door. Hastet hesitated, not wanting to leave the suffering girl. Mark nodded again, more imperatively this time.

Once in the living room, the hippie said softly, "We're in real trouble here. She's getting awfully weak. We don't have the facilities to perform a cesarean. And forceps... don't know how --"

"Could Tisianne talk us through it?"

"I don't think the baby's far enough into the birth canal for that anyway." Mark pushed his glasses up onto his head and scrubbed his hands across his face. They left wet streaks. "Jay, I was wondering if you could, like, pop the baby out..."

His voice trailed away under Jay's incredulous look. "I've got to see something. Baby's head, anything." He realized his arms were waving wildly, and he dropped them to his sides.

Hastet was looking from one silent man to the other. "Well, we must do something. We have come too far for either of them to die!"

"Let me think," Mark said, and walked away to stare out the window. Jay sat back down on the sofa. He frankly didn't have a single idea.

It was almost a relief to have them gone. Less of a distraction from the growing anger, frustration, and fear she was reading from her child's mind. She was trying to block

her agony from Illyana, and not doing a very good job of it. She was trying to remind herself that she loved this child, and not doing a very good job of that either.

"Oh, Ideal," she whimpered. "I can't believe this is happening to *me*."

Another contraction, and she felt as if her pelvis were splitting apart. She tried to put herself between her legs, to monitor the progress as she had on so many deliveries. The prognosis was not good. The pain washed in and swept away all her training, all hope of clinical detachment.

Hands closed around her shoulders. Tisianne's eyes snapped open. Mark was almost nose to nose with her.

"Listen to me." His voice was husky with exhaustion and unshed tears. "You know, better than any of us, what you have to do. But you're, like, in your own way, man. You're thinking, shit, I'm Tachyon, I'm a man, I'm embarrassed in front of Jay and Mark, and Hastet's my subject. Well, this is a woman thing now. This is female power, and you gotta get in touch with it and stop resisting it, or you and this baby are gonna die. Do you, like, understand me, man?"

He was right. Once spoken, it made such sense. And was no help. "I can't." Tisianne turned her head away.

He snatched it back. "Yes, you can! We've all, like, got the male and the female in us. Yin and yang. You've just gotta find it, and love it and hold it, and *use* it." He gripped her hands between both of his. "This isn't gross, this isn't ugly. This is magic, man. This is *life*. Don't blow it on pride!"

The next contraction was gathering, rippling through her body. Tis stared at Mark for a long moment, then threw herself into it as if the pain itself could batter down the walls

around her soul. Illyana fired a blast of terror as she moved out of safety and into darkness.

Tis was dimly aware of Hastet and Jay on either side of her, arms linked behind her back, supporting, encouraging. There seemed to be no break between the contractions now. Never in a long and dangerous life had she felt such pain.

"That's it! That's it! I can see her head!" Mark was crying. "One more, one more, come on!"

"Push, you bitch!" Jay yelled in her ear.

Their hands were on her belly. For one intense moment they were not four individuals, they were a single organism bonded in a telepathic union with this tiny struggling life. Tis threw back her head and screamed.

Silence.

Then a tiny outraged cry like a hiccuping kitten.

"Oh, Doc, she's beautiful."

Hastet helped her up. Tis looked between her knees. Mark held Illyana aloft, wet and bloody, the umbilical still attached.

"Oh... delightful," Ackroyd said. "My, what a lot of blood."

Mark tied off the cord and cut it. The touch of the antiseptic brought a scream of protest from her daughter. Tisianne held out her arms, and Mark laid the infant in them.

And suddenly Tis was crying. The emotional winter was over. The final vestige of Blaise's power over her had ended.

Sometime later, though not near enough later, Mark woke her. Illyana was a brilliant sea green bundle in the human's arms. There was a smell of fresh sheets, and someone -- probably Hastet -- had brushed out Tisianne's hair and dabbed perfume on her wrists. Her body seemed to be one big ache, with localized pains in her torn privates and her swollen breasts.

The reminder seemed to set off a telepathic alarm in Illyana. Tis read the hunger in her child's mind and reached for her. Pushing back the blanket, she said, "I really didn't get much of a look at her." She flashed a nervous smile at Mark. "She was just so *wet*."

The tiny little fists were waving now that the baby was free from confinement. The pink bud mouth was pursed and working. Tis lightly stroked a forefinger across the strawberry blond curls.

"She's got a lot of hair," Mark said. "Sprout had a lot of hair, but it was real dark, and it all fell out a few days after she was born. Weird."

Tis pulled aside the neck of her gown, then looked guiltily at Mark. "Should I do this?"

"Go for the whole experience, man. I would."

She laid Illyana against her breast, and the baby took hold. It hurt like the very devil for the first few sucks. Then the pain was replaced with a warm wonderment.

"What's it like?" Mark asked.

"Like... dope," Tis laughed. "Oh Ideal, Mark, I can't..." She blinked back tears. "It was worth it. It was *a//* worth it."

Hastet entered. She was dressed for travel in a hooded thermal cloak. Jay slunk in after her. He had the air of a hound dog in doll clothes, though Tisianne thought the

detective actually looked quite good in the Takisian clothing. Hastet had chosen well. She had attired both of them in the sturdy leather and wool of a rural couple. Jay stamped one booted foot, grimaced. "I feel like I ought to be in a yodeling contest."

"Hey, I think you look great, man. That embroidery is really *far out*."

"Madam." Tisianne extended her hand, palm up. Hastet moved to her side, knelt, and pressed a quick kiss onto Tisianne's wrist.

"Highness."

"If my manner seemed churlish last night, I apologize. I can never fully express my gratitude, both on my behalf and my daughter's. You shall be amply rewarded for your efforts."

Eyes downcast she said, "The honor is to serve."

From the flash of irritation which crossed Jay's face, it was clear that the human resented seeing his lady friend on her knees to Tisianne. Abruptly he said, "Well, as the last of hippies here would say, we gotta blow this scene."

"A few moments surely. She's still eating," Tis objected. Jay realized precisely what was taking place, and his eyes bugged in alarm. He quickly turned his back.

Tis stared down at that little head, the soft curve of Illyana's cheek, listened to the complacent sucking noises, and an almost frighteningly powerful emotion shook her. There was nothing she had loved as she loved this child.

Shaking back her hair, she looked desperately up at Trips. "Mark, I don't think I can do it. I can't give her up. I have to be with her now."

"Hey, that's cool, Doc. We can just split with Jay and Hastet."

"Oh, that's great," Jay exploded. "All of us squatting on that space station trying to thumb a ride home. I don't think your cousin Zabb's going to offer one after we fucked him over."

"Shut up! Just shut the fuck up!"

The attack from Mark was so unexpected that it had the desired result. Ackroyd subsided.

But the cock fight had given Tisianne time to think. If she chucked it all, fled with Illyana, she could forget about ever recovering her body.

Maybe my love for you is tainted, selfish. But I must be myself again. Can you understand and forgive me?

Illyana, replete, sighed and opened her aquamarine eyes. And sent a burst of love and acceptance to her mother. Setting her jaw, Tis thrust the baby into Hastet's arms. Dashed away tears with the backs of her hands, and throwing back her hair ordered, "Do it! Just do it before my resolve fails!"

And she was back in her bed in the women's quarters. Roxalana shot out of a chair. A soft *pop* and Mark appeared.

"Tis, are you..." Roxalana began. Then she saw her brother/sister's face. Gathering Tisianne in her arms, Roxalana rocked and soothed the distraught girl. "My dearest, dearest one. It will be all right."

"I may never see her again!"

Roxalana held Tis at arm's length. "At least she's alive."

Chapter Thirty-Two

It was a hell of a place to hold a wedding, with generations of dead Vayawand peering down from their glass condo tombs at the proceedings. They were all arranged as if for Victorian portraits -- seated in chairs against attractive backdrops, but with one outstanding difference. They were all buck naked. Kelly would almost have preferred skeletons in rotting finery. It would have been preferable to this macabre audience of the stuffed and mounted dead.

At least the living attendees got to stay dressed. Kelly really couldn't have gotten through the ceremony if he'd had to strip down. *What kind of people hold a wedding in a catacomb?* Kelly wondered. *And what kind of people have the bride and groom spend the night together before the ceremony?* He guessed it was designed to be a last chance for the prospective bridegroom to sample the wares and make sure he wasn't buying a pig in a poke. Well, he'd viewed, he hadn't sampled, and if he had his way, he was *never* going to sample.

Mon'aella sek Vanbrian sek Ana caught his thought and gave him her Lady Dracula smile. She'd already warned him that Takisians had drugs for everything. They could put starch in a wilting penis, and neither she nor Blaise would hesitate to mind-control Kelly and force him to perform. Kelly couldn't figure it. Mon'aella was L'gura's daughter, but she didn't seem to give a shit that Blaise had killed her father. When Kelly had alluded to this, Mon'aella had merely shrugged and opined as how her father had lasted longer than most *Raiyises*.

The three members of the *Ajayiz* of House Vayawand approached the happy couple. Perhaps by virtue of the

Vayawands' long stint on the top of the Takisian political heap, they weren't all old biddies. There were two old coots and a biddy. The old woman took Mon'aella's hand and led her off to the left. The two ancient men each took an arm and propelled Kelly off to the right.

He was grateful for the support. He'd drunk most of the night, and he was now enduring the purgatory of a hellacious hangover. It took a long time to circle the room because they stopped before each glass cage and presented the couple to the ancestors.

Kelly hoped they liked what they saw. Blaise had decided to dude Kelly up in the Vayawand style, and the skin of his cheeks was still raw and puffy where green and amber jewels had been inset. Personally he thought he looked like a chipmunk on the morning after.

There was a moment of silence while everyone observed the form of waiting to see if any ancestor had any strenuous objections to the marriage. Kelly wondered if it would be really bad form for *him* to object. A glance over to Blaise, an arm around each of his wives, made Kelly release that lovely fantasy. His shattered arm and ribs had just healed. He didn't need another "chastisement" from Blaise.

Kelly and Mon'aella were led to Blaise. They knelt, and he laid Kelly's left hand on the top of her bowed head. Mon'aella touched her forehead to the stone floor, signifying her submission to her husband. Kelly knew that was a laugh. Eight hours in Mon'aella's company had given him a pretty good idea of her disposition.

Blaise raised them both to their feet and kissed them. There was applause from the several hundred witnesses, and even the holocam crew. Blaise dug Kelly in the ribs with an elbow.

"Fill her belly quick, Kelly, my little man." Several bottles of wine tried to climb back up Kelly's throat. "Don't worry Kel. You need any pointers, I'll provide them. I'm told I'm very good." He winked at his wives.

Now Kelly really wanted to puke. *Yeah, you're a real champion at rape.* Several people in the crowd swiveled nervously to look at him. So strong had been the emotion, it had punched right through their shields. *Yeah, be uncomfortable, you fucking hypocrites. You're supposed to be so fucking shocked by sexual violence, but Blaise is conquering the planet for you, so you can wink at an inconvenient little rape along the way. Psychopathic rapist. Sociopathic rapist. Crazy motherfucker!*

The wedding party wove its way through the geometric maze of the catacombs. They had just reached the wide stone staircase when Kelly became aware of a nobleman easing forward like a racehorse nosing through the pack at the finish line.

The surface thoughts bubbling off the man were those of hunger, stiff legs from standing in the cold so long, a need to pee. But... Kelly kept his eyes on that elegant figure closing behind Blaise.

With a shout Kelly threw himself on the man's back. The sudden assault knocked him off his feet, and he went down. The tip of a knife scraped across the floor. Kelly wanted to vomit. It had been extruded from the man's wrist. Wriggling like a snake, the assassin shifted positions. Kelly was now beneath him. The whole scene was ratcheting past like a broken movie film. The knife sliding another inch out of the arm, the point descending. Kelly snatched desperately for the hand and caught it, then immediately felt his fingers slipping in the blood that coated the man's wrist.

He closed his eyes, and then the weight was suddenly plucked off his chest. Kelly risked a look. Durg was holding the now-limp body of the assassin. The other members of the wedding party were all bristling with drawn weapons. Sekal holstered his pistol and snapped his fingers. Durg dropped the man and kicked him toward Sekal.

"Diverous, help me examine him."

Diverous joined Sekal, and they knelt by the unconscious man. Kelly rolled over and vomited up stale wine. Mon'aella grabbed him beneath the armpits and hauled him to his feet. For the first time Kelly risked a glance at Blaise.

The young man had *that look*. Tendons in the neck stretched tight, face gone white, the pupils of the dark eyes gone wide. Entire body shaking with suppressed fury. It had sent jumpers scuttling for cover out on the Rox, for when the storm did break, people got hurt. Kelly knew, he remembered that day on the balloon. This time it wasn't turned on Kelly.

Breathing in sharp pants, Blaise forced out, "Who?"

"Alaa," Sekal answered.

"I thought you said nobody could get an assassin past your security!" This was screamed into Durg's face.

The Morakh remained impassive. Mon'aella crossed to the fallen assassin, knelt, and touched his temple.

Sekal shook his head. "They must have kidnapped Jild. There's evidence of reconstructive surgery."

"But the *mind*," Blaise pressed. "You fucking *knew* this guy. You must be in on it." Sekal blanched and staggered to his feet.

Mon'aella shook back her hair. The diamonds braided into the red-and-white locks rang like ice bells. "They stole more than Jild's appearance. He's a soul eater."

"What the fuck is that?" Blaise demanded.

"A mind control so powerful it becomes more like a mind drain. You take on the other personality -- voice timbre, gestures, memories, everything. The strain on mind and body is profound. Soul eaters don't last long."

"We will retaliate, *Raiyis*," Diverous said, overeager because he had been spared Blaise's wrath.

"You're damn right we will," Blaise said. He looked to Durg. "Alaa, they had that big moon base on *Fel'k*, right?"

"Yes."

"Nuke it."

"What?" Diverous gasped.

Blaise ignored him, stressing instead to Durg, "Destroy it."

"My lord," Sekal said. "There are many thousand people living there." Even this most loyal of loyal followers was shaken.

"I know. *But nobody fucking tries to kill me!*" Blaise suddenly screamed.

"We will retaliate, and we will not fail. Ruck of House Alaa will die," Durg said, trying to penetrate the killing rage.

"You're damn right you won't fail. You'll destroy that base!" Blaise was still shouting.

"My lord, that is not our way," Durg said, his voice low and tight.

"That's because it isn't done *your* way anymore, it's done *my* way. *Mine!* Do you understand me? Now do as you're told, or I'll have you killed too!"

Blaise whirled and stormed away up the stairs, his guards trotting to keep pace. Sekal, Diverous, and several others of the cabal who had assisted Blaise to power gathered in a tight huddle. Their anxiety penetrated Kelly's shields.

Now do you see what you've done, the bogus prince thought bitterly. *War is great, but genocide's kind of a bitch, ain't it?*

Mon'aella released a held breath in a sharp little puff. "Well, that's gratitude. Not even a thank you to you," she said, glancing over at Kelly.

Kelly chewed on bile. Shook his head. "I'm just as glad he didn't notice me." He pictured again all those pretty little bubbles on the surface of *Fel'k* exploding, collapsing in flames. Tears stung his eyes. "Oh God, what have I done?"

Chapter Thirty-Three

"Jesus Christ!" Jay Ackroyd exploded. "Doesn't it ever run down?"

Hastet shifted the screaming infant to her other shoulder and resumed patting. "She's unhappy."

"So am I... I have to listen to her."

"I'm doing the best I can!" Hastet was on the verge of tears. Haupi, sensing her mistress's distress, huddled closer to Hastet's side. The creature seemed to share Jay's sentiments on wailing babies. She kept weaving her head and mock striking at the swaddled noisy bundle.

"Well, what the fuck's wrong with her?"

"She's a telepath. She's been separated from her mother. I can hold her body, but I cannot touch her mind. She's angry and frightened."

Another drawback to this telepathy shit. Jay sighed. "Is she eating?"

"Some."

"Gimme the bottle."

Jay stood up and almost cracked his head on the low ceiling of the compartment aboard the Ilkala-to-Alaak maglev train. Groping in his case, he emerged triumphant with a hip flask. Opening the bottle was another matter. The self-heating element sparked, and burned his fingertips. Cursing, he sucked at his fingers, then resumed his struggles. The nipples top came off, and Jay poured in a splash of potent Takisian brandy.

"Here. I suppose it's more humane than hitting her over the head with a bat."

Hastet teased the nipple across the baby's mouth. Illyana screamed louder, then took a tentative suck. Another. Then the sound of contented nursing filled the compartment.

"Yep, that's Tachyon's kid."

"The prince will never forgive me."

"What the prince don't know won't hurt her... er, him." Jay peered out the window. Saw dark. "Look, now that the ground sloth has quieted down, I'm gonna cut down to the diner and get us something to eat. Okay?"

"Yes, fine." She never even looked up. Her total focus was on the baby. "Sleep, *kuket*, sleep."

Shaking his head over the power of biology, Jay slid open the compartment door and made his swaying way down the narrow corridor. Takisians tended to be gregarious people: They enjoyed conversation as much as their food, music, dancing, and fighting. So when Jay walked into an absolutely silent refreshment car, he knew some serious shit had hit the proverbial fan. The holostage was on, and a news anchor was reporting in portentous tones about casualties estimated to be at six thousand. A low moan swept through the crowd.

"What's happened?" Jay whispered to a man leaning against the wall near the door.

"Vayawand has just destroyed Alaa's moon base. There appear to be no survivors."

"Shit."

"Alaa is attempting to retaliate, but *Raiyis* Blaise had troops already massed on the border. There's heavy fighting in Alaak."

"Great, that's where we're headed."

"You maybe," the man said. "I'm getting off in Fanja."

"Hastet benasari Julali has closed her restaurant. Isn't that interesting?"

The so-casual way Taj asked the question put Tisianne on guard. Slowly she dropped the *re'ba'bi* and bow and rested them on her knees. Pandasala had done a good job creating the illusion Tis was still pregnant, but the padding dragged at her weary, aching body. The bed was beckoning, and fourteen hours after her grueling labor had ended, Tis was in no mood to be entertaining. Especially with the news coming out of Alaa. Surely Jay would have heard and made adjustments to the plan.

She forced her attention back to Taj. "Is there some reason this should interest me?"

"Your human is very interested in Hastet."

"Jay is very interested in women. Did you like that music? It's Mozart, a human composer who I think stands up well to Takisian comparisons."

"Very nice." Taj stood and wandered the room, paused to handle an exquisite antique vase. "I haven't seen Ackroyd brant Lois for several days."

Tis shrugged and reminded herself to push off awkwardly from the settee. She waddled toward the table. Taj was suddenly blocking her way.

"Spare me the performance, nephew" And gripping the neck of her gown, he yanked, ripping it away to reveal the padding.

For a long moment they matched looks, then Tis pulled the mutilated edges of her gown together. "How long have you known?"

"M.I.S. has been on her since your human first became involved."

"I could have trusted you," Tis mused.

"No. If I'd known in advance, I would have stopped you. But once you'd succeeded so brilliantly, I couldn't bear to interfere. It was a routine psi scan early yesterday morning that revealed your mental signature." Taj ended with a shrug.

Tis slowly removed the disguising padding and laid it aside on the bed. "I realize you must show diligence for Zabb," she said slowly, then looked at Taj. "But I thank you for the time you did give them."

She held back nothing during the interrogation save her sisters' involvement in the plot. She hoped her candor would keep Zabb out of her head. It hadn't worked. Zabb twisted everything from her mind. Not content with the details of the plot, he absorbed, dissected, and examined her life, dreams, goals, hopes, and fears. So now she added to an aching body an aching psyche. It was mind rape, and she flung the accusation at her tormentor as she struggled to break the psychic embrace.

The harrowing of her mind ended, and Zabb flung himself back into his chair behind the *Raiyis's* desk and glared at her. His cheeks flew two angry spots of color.

"I should kill you," he said finally. "I should have killed you seventy years ago." He sighed.

"Mark is right," Tis said. "You're not going to kill me, so why don't you stop bleating out this pointless and meaningless threat?"

Zabb didn't answer. Instead he sent out a telepathic summons for Taj. The former regent responded quickly. Entering the office, he bowed.

"My lord."

"Mobilize M.I.S. I want agents in every city with an orbital elevator. We may still be in time to catch them --"

"Burning Sky, Zabb! I can't believe you are being this stupid!" Tis said. "Blaise is mobilizing an army against us. Not a normal strike force, an *army*. There is combat in the streets and homes of our cities. Families that have refused to acknowledge Blaise and his new order have been eradicated. And now Blaise has introduced us to the wonders of modern human warfare -- he has used atomics against a civilian target. Let's hope he doesn't become bored with baiting us. Otherwise we will find ourselves forming the slag at the bottom of a radioactive crater."

"Not as long as you're alive," Taj said. "Much of this is being staged for your benefit, and it's you Blaise wants."

Tis glanced at Zabb. "There, you see? An excellent reason for not killing me. The point is, nothing like this disaster has ever occurred in our history, and you're wasting spies trying to locate one tiny baby? I hope you enjoy being the last *Raiyis* of the House Ilkazam. Your deeds may be worth a ship song. Ideal knows the *Zal'hma at' Irg* won't remember you."

"She's right," Taj said.

Zabb slumped, and for one brief instant Tis saw the fear and irresolution of a man who has grasped his dream and watched it metamorphose into catastrophe. Then the mask was back in place, and Zabb studied Tisianne as if he'd never seen her before. The silence went on and on.

"So what do we do?" Zabb finally asked. It wasn't what Tis had expected, and from Zabb's expression it probably wasn't what he'd intended to say either. Tisianne wondered how much this admission of helplessness had cost him.

She answered, "The first thing I'm doing is leaving *Rarrana* and returning to my suite --"

"You can't, you're --"

"I'm not, and I won't be. I've had the baby, so I'm no longer a breeding female, and since no one in their right mind would breed with this body, there's nothing here to protect. I cannot be kept confined."

Taj quirked an eyebrow at Zabb. "She's right again."

To her uncle Tis said, "From you I need an arms master. I must get this body back in shape."

"Going to fight with us, Tis?" Zabb asked with bitter sarcasm.

"Probably not. As you have so rightly pointed out, I have little aptitude for it. But there are things I can do. The reports from Alaak indicate a great many civilian casualties -
_"

"And how do you know that?"

"Taj." Zabb's expression promised strong words to his elder relative and statesman in the not too distant future. "At any rate, I am a doctor. I can organize emergency field hospitals in Ilkala and the other cities. I think we should

evacuate the children to the rural areas -- foster them with farm families. Run air-raid drills, designate shelters, appoint bomb wardens, and institute universal conscription."

"And hope they don't defect to Blaise at the first opportunity," Zabb grunted.

"*Tarhiji* died on *Fel'k*," Tis said. "A lot of them. They may be more reticent about wanting to fight for my grandson."

"An active aristocracy is not something the *Tarhiji* are accustomed to," Taj said.

"There are a good many things none of us are accustomed to, but they are happening. I would suggest it is time to adapt or die."

Taj glanced to Zabb. "Again... she's right."

Zabb made a note with a light stylus. "I'll assign a squad of my personal guard to assist you."

Tis's lip twisted. "Don't worry, Zabb, I won't foment revolution against you."

He looked up. "I never thought you would. I do it for your protection." Tis just smiled. Zabb wrote again. "And I'll give you that Vayawand traitor. As long as we're feeding him, he may as well be useful."

She rose, shook out her skirts, and started for the door. "Tis," Zabb called. She paused and glanced back. "If you're going to have an arms master, you had better be armed." He tossed her a blaster pistol. Tis caught it out of the air. "If Blaise ever does enter this House, there are some conditions over which death might be a decided improvement."

Hastet and Jay and a lot of other people stood on the platform and watched the back end of the train vanishing out of the main station of Fanja. Jay was getting a fucking tour of fucking Takis, and not getting to see a thing except the inside of railway stations. He wished he had a map. Where the hell *was* House Fannija?"

"So where's another elevator from here... wherever here is?" Jay asked.

"Jeban would be closest," Hastet answered.

"They're not, like, close buddies with Blaise, are they?"

"The House is rather small, and they tend to remain neutral."

"I don't think neutral is a luxury anyone can afford right now. A fucking world war's breaking out here."

"You take care of the baby. I'll exchange our tickets."

An old fear intruded once again. "You're *sure* we won't be met at the border with guards and dogs?"

"No."

"No passports, no visas?"

She was staring at him in perplexity. "If I want to move to Ban or Maz or Ss'anga, I move to Ban or Maz or Ss'anga."

"But you're Ilkazam."

"Yes. Why should they care? As long as I have a skill and some money."

"I don't understand you people at all. The whole damn planet's balkanized, but you've got no borders."

"Not for people like us. I have a letter of introduction from my banker to a banker at CreditNet in Alaak. That's all

the identification I need. I'll pay my taxes wherever I live, and basically life won't change very much."

"So aren't they going to wonder at our sudden change of plans?"

Hastet looked frustrated. "Maybe, but why don't we worry about that when we're faced with the problem?"

"I love it when you're sensible," Jay said. Hastet placed Illyana in his arms, stood on tiptoe, and gave him a quick kiss. Suddenly wars and rumors of wars became a lot less worrisome.

The scene on the platform was controlled and very noisy chaos. Babies were bawling, toddlers were screaming, children were sobbing, parents were crying. Husbands and wives took tender leave of each other as one or the other went off to the country to care for Ilkazam's most precious commodity.

Tis could see Mark moving through the crowd like a wading stork in a stand of reeds. He had a little girl riding on his bony shoulders, and he was bawling out her mother's name.

Bat'tam lightly touched her elbow and indicated the manager of Ilkala's largest grocery warehouse standing in evident confusion at the top of the station's stairs. With the hem of her dress and long coat sweeping the platform, she hurried to the manager's side.

He seemed dazed by the hubbub, and by finding himself in the presence of the heir to Ilkazam. To cover his discomfort, he made notes on his book computer. Tisianne extended her hand, rings flashing against the dark green leather of her glove. The entire outfit, from the heavily embroidered dress to the fur hat, coat, and muff, was so

overblown, but Bat'tam had insisted, and Tisianne had discovered he was right. Her subjects didn't want their princess to show the common touch. They wanted her to dress and act like a princess. Elegant condescension and noblesse oblige definitely greased the wheels of the civil-defense juggernaut she was riding.

The manager cupped his hands protectively about hers, kissed her wrist, and bowed. "Blood and line to serve and protect."

"Your service here today will protect more than just my family, but the thousands of families of Ilkala," Tis murmured in response, and handed him a credit gem embossed with the crest of House Ilkazam. "Have your people start loading immediately." The manager bowed and motioned to his employees.

Soon pallets filled with canned vegetables, cured meats, and beverages were floating past. Tisianne eyed a pallet loaded with dark amber wine and contemplated snatching a bottle. She'd paid for it. Why not? She could wander the streets of Ilkala guzzling from the bottle. That would be elegant behavior for a princess. Even better if she could wrap it in a brown paper bag. Bring back memories of Hamburg, and her favorite alley.

Bat'tam, who had been mincing behind her, suddenly stepped to her side and gestured with his carved crystal flask. Tis nodded. The base snapped off to form a shallow, flower-shaped cup. Tis felt her mouth quirk and firmly banished the desire to smile. Bat'tam raised one plucked eyebrow and handed her the cup.

"No, it would show very bad breeding for you to drink from the bottle like a sailor on leave with his cronies," he said softly.

"My breeding is of the very worst."

"Physically, yes. But your spirit is still Tisianne brant T'sara."

"I don't think that counts, since you can't mind-or soul-fuck."

Tis instantly felt contrite for her sharpness. It wasn't the Vayawand lord's fault she was in her current predicament. He had been charming, supportive, and upon occasion useful as she tried to organize the defense of her home. If she ever did return to her body, Tis supposed she would have to sleep with him by way of thank you. She suppressed a shudder. It had nothing to do with a sexual taboo against homosexuality -- Takis didn't have one -- the issue was whether she would ever be able to endure a sexual encounter again. She might find the terror of sexual assault too strong for even desire to conquer.

Zabb, surrounded by guards, came striding into the station, and there was the rising sound of excitement culminating in enthusiastic cheers. He handled it well, sweeping off his tall silver-and-white hat and waving it over his head. He then crossed to Tisianne and, picking her up in his arms, offered her to the crowd. The cheers intensified.

"They like us," he said setting her back on her feet. Tis started to drop into a deep curtsy only to have him wave off the obeisance. "Forget all that."

Eyes averted to hide the confusion into which he had thrown her, Tis said, "You should enjoy it, relish every bow, savor every curtsy. It's what you've been waiting for."

Zabb's eyes fell on Bat'tam. "If you please, *vindi*, I wish to speak with my cousin in private." Bat'tam bowed and withdrew. "Why is it," Zabb said, as he tucked her hand beneath his arm, and they began to stroll down the

platform, "that nothing is ever as good as you imagined it would be?"

"Possibly because you are perverse."

Zabb studied her critically. "You're looking better." Tis shrugged. "That style suits you." He wrapped one hanging tendril of hair around a forefinger. "Tell your maid to keep dressing it in this manner."

Tis glanced up at that lean face. "You look tired."

"I'm trying to redesign Ilkazam culture. Unfortunately I don't seem to be as adept at it as your grandson."

"Can I help?"

"You've already done so much... more than you can ever know." Zabb was staring at her with uncomfortable intensity. He slowly drew a hand across his face, smoothed his sideburns, brushed at his mustache.

Tis didn't know what possessed her, but she found herself saying, "Incidentally, I've always hated you in a mustache. It doesn't suit you."

Zabb gave a single sharp bark of laughter. "You haven't changed all that much, Tis. Only a Takisian would worry about facial hair when the barbarians are at the gate. So how's your boykisser working out?"

"Helpful and annoying. The man's half in love with me... well, with a vastly different vision of me, from very long ago. And his every look and gesture makes it clear how very much he regrets my current sex. I just hope he doesn't decide sugar water's almost as good as jam."

"I wouldn't worry. You've got bumps in all the wrong places." Zabb grinned down at her, and she found herself laughing.

"My, we're in unaccustomed charity with one another. I think I'll risk spoiling the moment and ask a favor."

"You can ask."

"It's been three days since Jay and Illyana left. I should have heard something by now. Will you please have Baz check on the station? Make certain they arrived safely?"

"Why don't you ask Taj? You obviously hold his first loyalty."

"I tried already. He won't do it. I think he's decided he's thwarted you as far as he prudently can."

"And you are obviously not impeded by any such considerations?"

"I have nothing to lose."

"The story of how you outwitted me has already grown in the telling, giving an immeasurable boost to your reputation. Why should I add to it?"

"Because it can't hurt you, and because whatever else might be said about you, you have always been a good sport. You always get even later, but you take the initial defeat quite philosophically."

Mark wandered up to them, his search for the lost child's mother apparently a success.

"You mean like how I haven't tried to murder your paladin here for thwarting my attempt to destroy the Earth."

"Something like that, yes."

"Am I, like, missing something, man?" Mark asked, his eyes blinking rapidly behind the thick lenses of his glasses.

"No, just Zabb being manic," Tis replied.

There was a soft chime from the portable hololink carried by one of Zabb's guards. He answered, listened for a moment, then coughed lightly.

"*Raiyis*, it is Lord Bazzakra."

Zabb keyed the link, and the image of Baz sprang to life on the platform. He looked agitated.

"My lord, the Network's arrived."

"Not Nesfa and her little gang of crawlers again. I just got rid of them."

"Well, they're back, and they're not alone. They've brought a Master Trader. Zabb, this ship is *enormous*, Baz blurted. "They're demanding to talk to *you*. About a little matter of breach of contract."

Chapter Thirty-four

It had been a long, hard trip. Three changes of train, and a terrifying ride (to a claustrophobe like Jay) through an endless tunnel that linked the two continents. Jay had been perplexed by the lack of air travel on Takis. They had fucking spaceships, but no planes? Then Hastet had pointed out the obvious. The Takisians had rejected metal ships about the time they threw out the Network. It took a telepath to fly a living ship. There were no *Tarhiji* telepaths, and no psi lord was going to serve the *Tarhiji*. Ergo no airlines. Jay saw a potential gold mine if he did get stuck on this lousy planet and could convince any displaced aristocrats to dirty their hands with something as commonplace as a job.

The train was slowing, swaying from side to side. Lights were now visible through the tinted window, and an occasional flash of wall.

"We're running out of milk," Hastet said as she shifted the baby to her shoulder and started patting.

"Not too much longer now. Hope her highness the ground sloth will be happy with formula." Illyana let out an absolutely obscene belch. "Guess that told me," Jay said.

No one in living memory had ever seen a Network starship. Takis still traded with the Network, but the Master Traders had learned to send small ships, unlikely to arouse the hostility or paranoia of the psi lords, and carrying only those goods that would interest the arrogant and insular Takisians.

So the *thing* filling the forward screen of Zabb's flagship was alarming in the extreme. It dwarfed even the

grandest Takisian warship as it hung next to the Bonded station and blotted out the stars. The most recognizable feature was the great bubble dome that housed the Aevre pilots. It was also the only feature of the ship which was not obscured by thousands of years of accretion. Pods and towers, strange box-shaped objects, long trailing antennae, clung like barnacles to the body of the ship.

"Ugly," Taj offered.

"I wouldn't want to fight the son of a bitch," Zabb said, rightly interpreting Taj's comment as less an artistic critique than a strategic one.

"You may have made that unavoidable. Do you realize the trouble the pair of you have caused?" Taj suddenly ejected.

"Sometimes I amaze even myself," and Zabb forced a smile he really didn't feel.

They met in a conference room provided by the Bonded station for just this kind of meeting. It was furnished with perches for the Aevre, tunnels for the Kondikki, a garden complete with a swing and other toys for the Rhindarians, and a comfortable collection of couches and tables for those who required less stimulation for their discussions. The Network representatives had taken up residence on one of the sofas.

Zabb had read the histories, which indicated that the Master Traders could appear as anything. The forms they selected were those most likely to be pleasing to the other party in a negotiation. He'd discounted it as sensationalism. He shouldn't have.

The figure flanked by Nesfa on one side and a Ly'bahr warrior on the other was H'ambizan, the Ilkazam astronomer

who legend held had discovered the living ships of Takis and tamed them to his will.

The presence of the Ly'bahr gave Zabb a nasty turn. The cyborg warriors were the most feared in the known galaxy, and Zabb couldn't help but wonder if Taj and five guards were enough to handle the Ly'bahr if it should come to a fight.

Taj caught the thought and sent back a gloomy, *We're not*, in reply.

Zabb hated to feel off balance, and he decided to rectify the situation. Fixing a smile on his lips, Zabb moved first to Nesfa and took her hand. She took it back, looking none too pleased to see him. "Nesfa, my dear, welcome back."

The Master Trader rightly read the snub for what it was and took command, saying, "Prince Zabb, I am Master Trader Bounty, owner of the trade ship *Bounty*."

Zabb raked the Master Trader from head to toe and back again. Coldly he said, "My class and kind represent the culmination of twenty thousand years of selective breeding. Whatever you are, you are not Takisian, and you are most certainly *not* H'ambizan. I resent your casual assumption of my ancestor's form, as if your show of mirrors and smoke could ever make you one of the Most Bred."

"No offense was intended, Prince. What form would you like me to assume?"

"I don't care, so long as it is not Takisian."

The Master Trader shrugged, and there was a momentary darkness as if Zabb had suddenly gone blind. When sight returned, Bounty had metamorphosed into one of Nesfa's people.

Zabb graciously inclined his head. "Welcome to Takis."

"I would be better pleased if I were here under more pleasant circumstances." Bounty leaned forward intently. "You signed a contract with me, Prince."

"Indeed? I do not recall it, sir."

"With one of my Aevre pilots acting as my agent... if you insist on precision, sir."

"I do, in everything. And I suppose under the conditions as you have described them, I did sign a contract. Unfortunately events have necessitated an alteration in the terms."

The Master Trader matched Zabb smile for smile. "Then you intend to return to Network service?"

"Let me be precise... no. I'm afraid I have terminated my affiliation with the Network."

"And I am afraid that's not possible. The sanctity of a contract is our highest law."

"It is not, however, mine."

"Then we have a very serious problem," the Master Trader mused.

"I can see where *you* might."

The Ly'bahr didn't care for that. It focused its glowing optics -- set on articulating stalks on each shoulder -- on Zabb. The light glittering off its burnished red metal shell danced almost painfully in the eye. Zabb was willing to bet the alloy was extremely reflective of laser fire.

"So you are willing to make no accommodation to settle this problem?" the Master Trader asked.

"I didn't say that --" Zabb began, only to be interrupted by Nesfa.

"Well, I'm not. I want *him*, piloting our ship, fulfilling the contract. Otherwise you're in violation of your contract with *me*," she said pointedly to Bounty.

The Master Trader sighed. "You seem to have had quite an effect upon our Nesfa."

"It's a positive gift," Zabb said, and allowed himself a slight smile.

"You won't return and fulfill the terms of your lifetime contract?" Bounty asked mournfully.

"No."

"Then I suppose there is nothing more to be said, and we may be forced to take more drastic measures."

"I would strongly urge against that," Zabb said softly. "As you yourselves aver... wars are bad for business."

"And the flouting of contracts is worse. You set a dangerous precedent, Prince Zabb."

"I'm a dangerous man." Zabb signaled to his escort, and they rose.

"Are these negotiations at an end, Prince?" Bounty asked.

"Let's just say this session is." And never turning their backs on the hulking Ly'bahr, the Takisians exited the room.

For most of his life Jay had been resigned to being average. Now he had the height advantage, and it was great. He could look over the heads of hundreds of milling,

seething, and pushing Takisians and see hundreds more milling, seething, and pushing Takisians.

Jay hitched the luggage higher under one arm, and with the other gathered Hastet and the baby a little closer. "Something's happened. Maybe we ought to get back on the train."

"We don't have tickets, and they're turning people away."

"Yeah, but money talks."

"Not loudly enough to be heard over this. Let's just get out of the station. The elevator is only a few streets away."

"Okay, stick close."

The problem was they were moving *against* the flow. Everybody wanted out of Ban. It hurt Jay to fly in the face of whatever conventional wisdom was impelling these crowds. A couple of times they got stalled, and Jay contemplated just popping bodies out of the way. But the last thing they needed was a panicked stampede. At last the stairs.

Inside the station proper, something wet struck his cheek. Jay looked up. The roof had been blown off the building. Rain was weeping down on the rubble and bodies. All the little shops were closed, a few barricaded. In one the Takisian version of hot dogs were cooking to a cinderlike consistency on the grill.

Off in the distance there was a rapid pulseline sound. It didn't resemble gunfire, but it sure sounded like some sort of weapon. Jay hesitated. He was none too eager to sally forth into a war zone. On the other hand, he didn't want to go back down into the ant farm. He decided he'd rather be shot than squashed like a grape in a wine press.

"I'm trying to decide if camping out here or looking for a hotel or hospital or something would be smarter."

Hastet looked at him, startled. "We're going to the elevator."

"Honey, I don't think this is the aftermath of a bad party. It looks like there's a war happening here, and I suspect that normal service has been interrupted."

"Not the elevators. They were built in common and owned in common. They'll do everything to keep them running." Hastet headed for a door.

"Okaaay," Jay said dubiously to Haupi, who had ;snuggled down among Jay's spare shorts and socks with only her head thrusting out the top of the case. The creature spit at him and dived for cover. Jay couldn't really find fault with the sentiment.

Outside, the street was blocked with burned-out vehicles. Jay had been concerned about locating this orbital elevator. Now he realized it wasn't a problem. A thing that stretched from the surface of the planet twenty-seven thousand miles to a synchronous orbit could not be missed.

It was formed of two circular conduits of some glass-like substance linked by bridges and gantries. The highest bridges looked like white lace strung between ice pillars. Jay assumed that some sort of capsules must make the journey up and down, though none were in evidence now. He tried to cultivate Hastet's faith in the inviolability of the elevator. Maybe the capsules were in transit. One would be pulling in any minute now. Or maybe not. A high, melodious keening sounded overhead. Jay jerked his eyes from the elevator and watched as seven of the living Takisian ships made a flyby. The sound was emanating from them, and as he listened, the detective could almost distinguish words.

"Singing the victory," Hastet said.

"Yeah, but whose?"

The passage of the ships had reminded them of their vulnerability in the square outside the station. They darted toward a street and were brought up short by the sight of an old man swaying on the steps of a stalled tram. Half his face had been burned away, and he was groping with his credit spike for the pay slot. Over and over he thrust in the spike, as if it were a lack of funds that kept the tram from moving.

More by instinct than in conscious thought, Jay started for the old man, only to be brought up short by Hastet's hand grasping his sleeve. No words were necessary. Jay fell into step with her as they headed for the elevator. It was the right decision. It still made him feel like shit.

So far they hadn't encountered any ground troops. Jay was beginning to allow himself to hope. Maybe Hastet was right. The squaddies were off blowing up some other section of the city since the elevator was off limits.

This area seemed to be the showcase of Ban. Broad boulevards led like spokes on a wheel toward the elevator. The architecture differed from that in Ilkala; it was lower, boxier, with fewer windows, and a lot of frieze work on the pediments. The buildings were also constructed of cut stone in contrasting colors, all laid to form Escheresque patterns. Jay assumed the lower floors of the buildings had contained shops, for all the windows were busted out, and in one a forlorn little necklace lay on display.

Illyana had awakened, and her piercing shrieks echoed off the stone walls. Ahead they could hear a sound like a growling, restless sea. The final hundred yards, and the street debouched into a square that was the granddaddy of all squares. It was so huge that it even managed to diminish

the effect of hundreds of uniformed people milling about the base of the elevator. With the predominant colors of the uniform being red, black, and purple, the crowd looked like an animated bruise.

The scene had a manic, festival quality. Despite the uniforms, the crowd didn't act like professional troops. In the brief second before Jay spun them back around the concealing corner, he had seen a man passing a bottle, and another firing a shot at the scarred and pitted walls of the elevator.

"Vayawand!" Hastet said.

"I didn't figure they were the Good Humor men."

Now that they were closer, the growl became words. Most of them were Takisian, but dropped like harsh clanks amid the music of the alien language was another tongue altogether.

"Continuons la greve! Le capital se meurt!" a voice was shouting shrilly.

"Nous irons jusqu' au bout!" another sang back.

"Le pouvoir aux travailleurs!"

Jay's high school French was really rusty, but it was good enough to give him the drift... and a headache. Blaise had been raised by a French communist. A man who had mounted the barricades in Paris in 1968. So the slogans marched on; Claude Bonnell to Blaise, Blaise to Takis, and Takis plunged into revolution. As they stood, backs pressed to the wall, a curious face poked around the corner. Gaped at the trio. Jay popped him. What came around the corner next was a particularly large and ugly gun barrel. Jay popped that too. Then he and Hastet ran like bunnies.

Tisianne was waiting for him when they returned from the station. As her hands closed urgently on his lapels, and she stared intently up at him, Zabb realized how very, very tiny she was.

"Gently, gently, *merrida*," he said, disentangling her fingers from the fruit salad that adorned the breast of his uniform. "You'll ruin my decorations."

"Praise Ideal that you're back."

"What is it? What's happened?" This was directed over Tis's head to Mark Meadows.

Before the human could answer, Tisianne was off again. "Never, *never* give orders not to be disturbed. Your people are all such fools they took you *literally*."

"*What?*"

"Blaise is, like, doing a Hitler thing," Meadows said. "He's simultaneously hit six Houses!"

"There's heavy fighting in Jeban, Ss'ang, and Tandeh," Tis amplified. "Lirat, Birjis, and Maz'tariq have all fallen. And come, you must see."

Zabb quirked an amused eyebrow at the tall human, but there was no answering smile from Meadows. Apparently he did not find Tisianne's little fidgets as entertaining as Zabb did.

She led him to the family laboratories, and opening the door to the cells, she yanked out a Vayawand soldier.

"Look at this," she ordered, displaying the man with the air of a person presenting a prize fish.

"He's... ah, quite... something."

"Don't you see? It means Jay is still alive and at large." She caught herself with an annoyed frown. "Of course, you don't care about that --"

"You're quite right there --"

"But at least I can begin to breathe again, and if nothing else you have a source for intelligence."

Zabb again eyed the frightened soldier. "One could have wished for a somewhat more highly placed officer."

"Gee," said Meadows. "We'll let Jay know the next time he checks in. This is a real drag, but I think you better, like, up the timetable for evacuating the kids. Blaise is going to be bringing the fight to us next."

"You're probably right," Zabb said.

"Well, *do* something!" Tis demanded.

And before he could inquire as to just what she had in mind, there was a soft *pop*, and a pulse rifle appeared in the cell and went clattering to the floor.

Chapter Thirty-Five

It was a cocktail party from hell. They were aboard an elaborately decorated ship that had obligingly given them a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view. It was like sitting on a chair balanced on a plate in the blue black stratosphere. Kelly, already queasy from the sights and smells of his first battle, was not handling this too well. His head flared pain in time to the beating of his heart.

Blaise lounged in a thronelike chair with the notables of House Vayawand fluttering about him. *Tarhiji* servants drifted about with trays of food and drink.

Why are they doing this? Why are they listening to him? Nothing's changed, thought Kelly. *They're still the cannon fodder, only now they get to die in much larger numbers. There's going to be nothing left of Takis when Blaise is finished.*

Durg entered and, crossing to Blaise, bent in low and whispered something. A smile broke across the too-full lips. Blaise stood.

"Ladies and gentlemen. Every great victory should be celebrated with fireworks. I give you" -- he gestured toward the sleek curving side of the elevator visible out the left side of the ship -- "*Raiyis* Blaise's patented fireworks!"

The circular tube of the elevator seemed to be trying to hula. Then, under the stresses of gravitational pull and orbital spin, it snapped. Capsules spilled like seeds from a pollinating dandelion. The upper section made a bid for orbital stability. The lower section continued to shatter under the force of the collapse. Each piece and the capsules flared like sparklers as they burned up in the atmosphere.

It created a lovely light display for half the inhabitants of Takis, but a deadly skyfall for the inhabitants of Ban. Because several thousand feet of this thing wasn't going to burn up. It was going to collapse like a cut sequoia, crushing everything in its path.

Kelly rose and snatched a glass from a passing servant. "Here's to *Raiyis* Blaise's patented genocide!"

Durg hit him in the mouth.

And the party was very definitely over.

Everybody had gotten very excited when the troops pulled out of the center of Ban. Terrified citizens came creeping out of hidey-holes, and most of the conversations Jay overheard seemed to focus, with desperate self-delusion, on the fact that this had clearly been an aberration. Blaise was a friend and champion of the *Tarhiji*, he would never send his soldiers against the ordinary folk of Jeban. This had to be an action by some Most Born general. *Raiyis* Blaise must have discovered his general's over-zealousness, so the withdrawal was no doubt due to Blaise...

"We can try the elevator now," Hastet said as they crept from their refuge in the basement of a burned-out building.

"Hasti, forget the goddamn elevator. Blaise did not pull his troops out as an act of kindness. He's up to --"

But what Blaise might be planning was lost as a sound of terrifying and earsplitting magnitude rolled across the city. Jay had heard metal being stressed. This was metal screaming in denial.

They stared at the elevator, gleaming like an ice column, and as they watched, it began to collapse, falling

straight down as if compressed by a great hand. Jay flung an arm around Hastet and threw them both to the ground. Illyana let out a squeak of protest as she was crushed against Hastet's chest. Then all sound ended as a sound beyond hearing assaulted the ears. The ground heaved and bucked, ripping Jay's arms loose from Hastet. Dirt pattered down on him. Then the shock wave hit, sending Jay rolling across the street like a windblown leaf.

For a long moment it seemed as if the planet itself was shocked into silence, or perhaps it was only a trick as abused ears tried to cope with the cessation of sound. Then the screams and moans and cries for help began.

"Monster. Monster. Monster," Hastet murmured monotonously as Jay limped to her and hauled her to her feet.

Miraculously she had managed to hang onto Illyana. The baby was screaming her terror. Blood trickled from Hastet's nose and matted in the hair at her temples. Jay felt the same warm flow against his skin. He wiped it away, blood smearing in the dirt on his face. On Hastet's face tears left bright runnels in the dirt and blood.

People began running toward the great square... or what had once been the square. All the buildings within a mile radius were leveled, bricks and marble strewn like shattered rose petals after a killing wind.

Other people ducked their heads and slipped away, headed for the city's edge. Jay and Hastet joined them.

They had been fencing when the whole of House Ilkazam went into a telepathic frenzy. Holostages sprang to life, and a servant brought a portable to the gymnasium.

The elevator fell.

Mark took three steps backward; then his rubbery knees gave out, and he collapsed on the gym floor. Bat'tam bowed his head and stroked the length of his sword like a man quieting a frightened dog.

Tisianne ripped off her mask and flung her sword end over end. It buried its point in the floor and remained upright, swaying slightly. Her face was slick with sweat beading in her brows, stinging the eyes. She licked her upper lip and tasted salt. It made a nasty combination with the rage and fear that roiled in her gut.

Tis started for the door, calling back over her shoulder, "They'll need food, medical supplies --"

"There's an *army* in Ban," Bat'tam interrupted. "An unfriendly one."

"I don't care!" Tis replied.

Mark lurched to his feet. "What is with you? You can't go there!"

Bat'tam looked at her shrewdly, then said, "You sent your child, the human, and his woman to an elevator. Alaak is in Vayawand hands. Now Ban."

"Two out of the three, yes, very astute," Tis said. "And given my luck, the odds are very good that --" Anxiety locked down on her vocal cords, and the words died.

They had hitched a ride with about twenty other refugees in a produce skimmer in from the country. The driver hadn't been able to unload in Ban, so Jay and Hastet were perched on top of a load of pungent Takisian vegetables. There wasn't a hell of a lot of conversation -- the Takisians all seemed stunned by events -- and for once

Illyana was mercifully silent. Probably because she had a bottle stuffed in that tiny rosebud mouth.

The countryside was pretty. Jeban lay on the equator, and while it wasn't what Jay would call tropical, they had left the winter snows of Ilkazam behind. There didn't seem to be anyplace on Takis without mountains, but these were lower and softer with more gradual slopes covered by a low, thick grass/moss combination. Critters grazed on the hillsides or ruminated beneath squat bonsailike trees.

Jay picked up one of the bulbous gray-and-red-mottled vegetables. "What are these?" he asked.

"Pful."

"Don't ever cook 'em. They smell like shit."

Illyana finished suckling, and Hastet tucked the empty bottle down in her carrying case. They had chucked all the luggage save the bottles and diapers, and Jay's tote filled with Haupi. Jay was starting to feel like a real hobo.

"That's the last bottle," Hastet said in that carefully neutral tone she assumed when she was *very* upset.

Jay shifted, trying for a more comfortable position on the spined and unforgiving *pful*. "Look, this is nuts, I'll --"

He didn't get a chance to finish. There was that high-pitched humming, and a living ship came streaking across the colorful cloud-banded sky. Necks strained back, they all stared up at the ship. It slowed, hovered.

"Vayawand," said one of their companions.

"He's looking us over for some reason," Jay said, forcing down a burgeoning panic.

The reason became very evident when one of the big ghost lances on the ship opened up and began to bisect the

skimmer. Screams, shouts, and people began tumbling off the skimmer like spilled marbles. Jay grabbed Hastet and tossed her and Illyana off the skimmer bed. The heat of the cannon singed his hair as he rolled off the skimmer.

People were milling in panic in the center of the road. "*Run!*" Jay screamed. "*Get off the road!*" There wasn't a hell of a lot of cover, but the road was lined with big flowering bushes. He gripped Hastet's arm and pulled her after him. She bucked like recalcitrant foal and stopped dead.

"*Haupi!*" she cried.

"Shit! Get under cover!" he yelled, and plunged back toward the burning skimmer.

The *pful* smelled really nasty now, and there was a new scent added to the mix -- sickeningly sweet, it caught in the throat. Jay clambered back up onto the roadway. As his head cleared the passenger window of the cab, he saw the driver slumped over the controls. His hair and clothes were still smoldering. Jay swallowed bile and scanned the back of the skimmer.

Miraculously his hand tote hadn't been fried. Jay sprinted for it just as Haupi managed to thrust open the flaps and light out for the hills. Her wings had been clipped, so her escape was made in a series of flying hops all accompanied by her shrill chittering.

"Haupi!" Jay yelled. The creature didn't even slow. The warning hum sounded again, and Jay booked for the bushes. The Vayawand ship fired a couple more shots, then became bored with baiting its unseen prey and flew on.

Showers of flower petals announced the return of the survivors. They stood in the road, staring at a man and woman who never reached that blossoming haven. He had thrown himself over her, shielding her body with his. It

hadn't done any good. The ghost lance had burned a hole through both of them.

Jay walked back to where Hastet was staring off into the hills. Tears were rolling down her cheeks, but not a sound escaped those tightly folded lips.

"Hey," Jay said gently as he squeezed Hastet's shoulders. "She was scared. She'll catch up with us."

Hastet just shook her head and, shifting Illyana higher on her shoulder, started walking.

It was an odd reversal of roles. As the days had become weeks, had become months, Taj had begun to treat his former nephew much more as a niece. So when Zabb had requested that Tisianne be present for the discussions, he wasn't particularly surprised by the look of shocked disapproval which washed across the old man's face.

"She's heir to Ilkazam after me," Zabb reminded the older man.

"What about your sons?" Taj asked.

Zabb made a nervous circuit of defense central. It was buried in a hardened bunker eighty feet below the surface. It had very much the feel of a ship bridge because much of the same nanotechnology had been used in its construction. Computers and telepaths maintained a constant link between House Ilkazam, the various M.I.S. agents in the cities, the ships, the platforms. It was a telepathic spiderweb. Unfortunately it was fraying in the typhoon blowing from Vayawand. And that reminder of the crises in which they stood brought Zabb back to the topic under discussion.

"I wouldn't trust a one of them with the House. They were bred for military prowess. That they possess; rulers they are not."

"I think the same criticism applies to you," the old man said.

For an instant the old man's audacity held him speechless; then Zabb laughed. "Don't hold back for fear of wounding me, or out of fear for yourself."

"I won't," Taj said, and then Tis entered, with her ludicrous paladin in tow.

The slowly revolving hologram of Takis told the whole sorry tale. In the southern hemisphere, and half a world away, Vayawand formed a pulsing purple mass. The other territories were delineated by their House colors. The purple washed like a stain across Rodaleh, Alaa, and Jeban. It formed a lighter wash across Zaghloul and other smaller Houses that had joined Vayawand by treaty rather than conquest. It surrounded Tandeh and Ss'ang. Far to the north Ilkazam shone like a white gold beacon, but the dark was coming, closing over them like giant wings.

The various unit commanders had joined Zabb, Taj, Baz, and Tis. The men all sprawled in chairs. Tis sat primly upright with Mark hovering over her shoulder. Baz ran a hand across his face.

"Tandeh and Ss'ang are still holding out. We've got to relieve them."

"Terrible idea," grunted Taj.

"We haven't the manpower or the firepower, and we would leave Ilkazam horribly under-defended," Zabb said. He scrubbed at his cheeks with the palms of his hands and

wondered if numbness was a function of exhaustion. When was the last time he'd slept?

"It's a very Durg kind of thing to do," Meadows said. "Get us to unzip, pull it out, then chop it off."

A young aide leaned over Zabb's shoulder. "Sir, the Master Trader --"

"Put the damn slug off! I haven't the time to deal with Network cheesemongers right now!"

"My lord." The soldier made obeisance and skated backward.

"Why has he held off so long?" one of the commanders asked. "He's tried a few missile attacks against Ilkala, the other larger cities, then nothing. What's he waiting for?"

"He still doesn't understand that no place on a planet is safe from attack from space," Taj said.

"Thank the Ideal Durg hasn't managed to educate him," Zabb grunted.

"He likes to move armies, smell blood," Meadows said.

"We've got to deal Blaise a blow that will cripple his ability to bring the armies to us," Tis said suddenly in her soft little-girl voice.

"Without risking a head-on clash with Blaise's troops. We don't have enough troops, and --" Taj began.

"We can't trust our *Tarhiji*," Baz interrupted, giving voice to all their fears.

While they talked, Zabb had been considering Tisianne's words, arranging them like a man searching for the secret to a particularly knotty puzzle. Suddenly he reached out and manipulated the holograph's controls.

Silver trajectory lines began to cut across the spinning opal that was Takis. Orbital platforms sprang to life, orbiting the main globe.

Tisianne's brows twitched together in a sharp frown. She leaned forward and studied the holo, touched the silver lines with a hesitant fingertip. Looked over at him in shock. "You're going against Vayawand Ship Home."

His fingers stuttered across the keys in excitement. More silver lines arched across the holograph. "And Zaghloul's and Rodaleh's and Alaa's --"

Tis bit her lip. "Oh, Zabb, must you? This makes us almost as bad as Blaise --"

The criticism stung. "By the Ideal, Tis, with or without balls try to be a man. This is a *war*. The purpose of war is to inflict harm." Zabb turned to Mark. "Groundling, I need the friend who dealt with that asteroid so competently."

Mark rolled an eye at Tisianne, seeking guidance. "No," she said.

"No," Mark repeated, then asked, "Why not?"

"Zabb goes to make war on the ships -- *all* of the ships of half a dozen Houses."

Mark nodded sagely. "Take out his navy, makes sense."

"They're *alive*, Mark, and those that aren't killed will have their minds burned out. Do you really want to be a part of that?"

The human looked a little sick. "Uh... no, and I can promise you Starshine wouldn't do it. No way, uh-uh."

Taj looked up from a glum contemplation of his knuckles. "He couldn't be... *persuaded*?" Emphasis on the final word.

"He'd be resisting the mind control all the way. You'd be forcing him to fight, and that would, like, really fuck the controller's concentration."

Zabb shrugged. "Well, it was worth raising."

Tis stood and stared up into his face. "You're really going to do this?"

Zabb waved a hand at the holograph. Purple seemed to be the predominant color. "Do I have any choice?"

Tis hung her head and walked for the door, paused at the threshold. "Zabb." He looked up inquiringly. "Be careful."

The irony was not lost on him. Zabb grinned at her. "Who could have predicted we'd come to this? A month ago you would have been painting a target on the back of my head."

Bat'tam was rattling the Ilkala defense center with snores of major proportions. Mark had relieved him and was monitoring the HoloNet, ready to sound the alarm if Zabb's assault force should be defeated. Tisianne knew she should be sleeping, but rest eluded her. Desperate to keep her mind from dwelling on the battle in orbit above them, she was busy embroidering Illyana's presentation gown.

"He can sure saw," Mark whispered.

Tis sighed, tossed aside the tiny silk gown, and stepped around the screen she'd set up to keep the light from the row of cots. Bat'tam was flat on his back, arms flung wide, fingertips dragging the floor. Gently Tis tugged at his shoulder until he rolled onto his side. The eruptions ceased. "Better?"

"Heaps." Mark scrubbed at his face with both palms. "Wish we'd hear something. This silence is creepy. Zabb

could have let us eavesdrop on House command radio chatter."

Tis shook her head. "Zabb loves to be mysterious."

She selected another jewel from the bowls set on her work table, stitched it into its place in the intricate abstract pattern that was her crest. Hesitated, then asked, "Do you think she'll ever wear it?"

Mark studied the filmy creation hanging like a cobweb in her hands. "You gotta keep positive, man."

"There haven't been any sudden arrivals for almost a day now, which could mean any number of things -- that Jay and Hastet are safe, or captured... or dead. And if Illyana is dead, I doubt her ancestors will accept her, poor mongrel baby that she is," Tis concluded softly.

"She's not dead. Hey, what is going to be her Takisian name? Illyana sek Kelly? Or Illyana sek Tisianne?"

"I'm her mother and also her great-grandfather... which makes *my* head hurt to contemplate it. How much worse for the child? And how do I explain it once she's reached a reasonable age?" Tis shook her head. "Will she hate us all, or turn that hate into self-loathing?"

She bent once more to her work, and Mark, with that sensitivity that was his hallmark, left her alone with her thoughts.

The sentry stepped through the door and bowed. "The *Raiyis*."

Zabb entered with his usual quick, nervous stride, but it seemed forced, and his uniform was filthy, heavily charred across one shoulder. The left sleeve had been ripped open, its blood-encrusted edges flapping like the wings of a dying bird. A field bandage was wrapped about his forearm.

Tis rose and threw aside the gown.

"Like, how did it go, man?"

"I'm tired," Zabb said, dropping into a chair. "I don't want a lot of questions right now."

Mark shuffled in confusion. "Sorry."

"Will you leave my cousin and me alone, please?" Zabb asked, but it was really an order. Mark withdrew from the room.

Tisianne moved to Zabb's side. She said softly, "That was certainly churlish." Then glancing to the arm asked, "How bad is it?"

"Not very. It could benefit from sealing."

"I'll do it."

"I hoped you might."

Tis unwrapped the bandage. As he said, the wound was not dangerous, but it was very ugly, with the lips of skin drying and curling away from the edges of the long cut.

"What did this? Or is that also an unacceptable question?"

Zabb glanced up at her from beneath his lashes. "A piece of Vayawand Ship Home. Lucky it didn't take the whole arm. I haven't time to regrow it right now."

Zabb hissed slightly as she sprayed the wound with disinfectant. "So the mission was a success?"

"Yes." He paused for a long moment, staring off into space. "You were right, Tis, it *was* hard, cruel hard. I've never felt so many of them die before."

"And what was the cost for us?"

"Ah, much better," Zabb sighed as she numbed the arm. "High. We lost fifteen ships, and a couple of hundred. Too many of them family. I'll be glad when we can start fielding some of these *Tarhiji* troops you've been drafting."

"We have to train them first. They're too valuable to waste. There's not an inexhaustible supply." Tis carefully carved away the dried skin, then pulled the lips of the wound closed and applied the sealer.

"What very steady hands you have."

Tis glanced up at him startled. His skin was warm against her palm as she supported his arm -- a touch she was all too aware of. With heightened sensitivity she drank in the smell of sweat, cordite, smoke, and antiseptic.

There is a look men assume when they suddenly "see" a woman in a sexual connotation. Tisianne had been a master of the look. Now on the receiving end, she realized it made them look stupid -- yearning cow eyes. And she had just lost her humanity, become a collection of breasts, hips, cunt. She tried to summon anger, found only confusion.

To cover her discomfort, she said with studied casualness, "A great many years of practice. It's nice to be able to do it again. When I lost my hand, I found myself reduced to very much an administrator's role. Not one I enjoy."

"When you were working on the Enhancer project, you resented the time you had to spend doctoring. You lived for research."

"I've spent half my life treating the misery caused by that research. It's made me rethink my priorities." She began repacking her case. "When I do recover my body, I'm going to have that hand regrown --"

"Tis." He had her by the shoulders. "I wouldn't count on that happening."

She jerked free. "Because you won't try!"

"No --"

She rode over him. "I'm no threat to you, Zabb, male or female. I don't want the family. I want myself. I want my child."

"I can't give it to you. It's not that I won't... I just can't!" His face was ravaged. "There has never been a coalition of such magnitude gathered against us. I don't think I can stop them." He snatched a sidearm from its holster and thrust the pistol at her. His hands were trembling. "I'd be prepared to use this. I wouldn't depend on me to protect you."

It had been Tisianne's besetting sin that she could always place herself in the other person's situation. Shaklan had thought his only son possessed a rudimentary empathy -- a rare and not well-understood mentatic power. And certainly not a very welcome one in the totally self-absorbed world of a Takisian noble House. Even a body switch hadn't damped it. It was still her curse. How much the admission had cost Zabb she would never fully understand, but she did understand his agony, and more important, his fear. Zabb had agitated, plotted, and killed in his single-minded drive to rule the House. Now he had it, and the full weight of the responsibility was crushing him.

Tis took him in her arms, one hand stroking the sweat-matted blond hair. Zabb's tears were warm against her neck. She couldn't find words. Maybe there were no words to ease his torment. She just held him and rocked him until the worst had passed.

He straightened, held her out at arm's length, stared intently into her face. The pressure of his fingers was becoming painful. Tis let out a faint, inarticulate little sound as Zabb drew her close. The entire moment had a trancelike quality. Time had distorted. *It was coming*. Ideal knew she'd done it often enough to a faceless host of women. The pit of her stomach seemed to have gone warm and liquid. Zabb bent, his mouth searching for hers...

And Tisianne jerked away. *Blaise and Zabb, rape and murder, shame and fear*. Too many terrors had come screaming up from her subconscious to allow her to accept this embrace.

"I'm a man," she whispered as she huddled in on her self.

"The body says otherwise," Zabb countered.

She flung back her hair and stared at him desperately. "I can't trust you."

"What by the Ideal does *that* mean?"

"I can't explain. I haven't the words..."

For an instant Zabb hesitated, wanting to say something, then flung himself out of the room. Mark stuck his head back around the door. Cautiously asked, "Is everything cool?"

"No. Mark, hold me."

Several of the Vayawand nobles were weeping. Despite his lack of telepathy, Durg could understand their distress. The scene at Vayawand Ship Home was shocking. The platform itself had been heavily damaged by the Ilkazam attack, and dead ships littered space around them. The worst were the still living, but mindless, ships. They flew

aimlessly, unable to communicate or eat. Their deaths were coming, but far more slowly than their more fortunate fellows.

Blaise's ship had offered a view of the devastation, but it was obviously costing the creature. Periodically long shudders swept the deck beneath their feet. Blaise himself was standing before a screen, hands clasped behind his back, his face inscrutable. Durg crossed to him.

"My lord, a census of field commanders reveals a total of ninety war craft at our disposal. Rather more troop transport.

"I can't take Ilkazam without ships," Blaise said. *"And I've got to take Ilkazam because I'VE GOT TO GET HIM!"*

Spittle struck Durg's cheek. He prudently didn't wipe it away. There was also nothing to say to this outburst. The Morakh tried a change of subject. "Tandeh and Ss'ang wish to open negotiations --"

"No. Smash them."

"Why, my lord? They were not responsible for this debacle. And willing allies are far more useful than defeated enemies."

Blaise pivoted slowly and stared unblinking down at Durg. "They have ships."

"Yes, my lord."

"Enough to conquer Ilkazam?"

"Probably not."

Blaise turned back to a contemplation of hell. "I've got to have a navy. Find me one."

Durg bowed and withdrew.

Illyana's howls had dropped to desperate and hoarse whimpers. During the long day Jay and Hastet's companions had slowly fallen away as they sought and obtained refuge with the various farm families along the road. It was an option that Jay and Hastet's paranoia made impossible to consider. So when night drew in, they selected an abandoned barn and settled for the night.

There were the remains of several summers' hay in the loft beneath the steeply peaked roof, and some of the rustlings Jay attributed not to their movements, but to the activities of the prior tenants. He just hoped they were the Takisian equivalents of mice. Not rats or spiders or something creepy.

Illyana had thrust a pudgy fist against her mouth and was sucking hopelessly. Hastet looked down at her. "Tomorrow we've got to get help. She's got to eat."

"Wouldn't do us any harm either," Jay said.

She pleated the folds of her heavy skirt for several moments, then looked up at him. Her gaze was intense. "I want to discuss something."

"Okay," Jay said cautiously.

"This morning... back on the road. I realized I reacted with greater emotion to the loss of Haupi than I did to those poor people. I don't know why. And I don't want you to hate me for it."

"Oh, sweetie you don't have to worry about that. You were in shock, and, though it may sound callous, you didn't know those people from the pope, and Haupi was your pet, your friend, and a link to everything you've given up since you've had the bad luck to get involved with me."

"Oh, Jay," she said, beginning to cry again. "She'll never survive out on her own."

"Hey, hey." Jay folded her in his arms and rocked her gently. Her tears wet his shirt.

"I'm tired, Jay, and I'm hungry... and I'm scared."

"Me too."

They sat in silence for several more minutes. Through the high loft window, Jay could see the double moons of Takis rising over the hills. So alien... and yet, as he held this woman in his arms, Jay realized he wasn't homesick or lonely anymore. And he realized he couldn't endanger her anymore. He lifted her chin with a finger, forced her to face him. "Hasti, baby, I'm going to send you and Illyana back to Ilkazam."

She shook her head violently, escaped strands of hair from her braid whipping across her face. "No, *Raiyis* Zabb will kill her."

"Okay, I'll send *you* back, and keep the kid with me."

She lifted her hand, half dropped it back into her lap. Lifted it again and explored his lips with trembling fingertips. "No... I won't leave you."

He tasted the salt of her tears on her lips. Hastet cupped his face in her hands and slowly sank back onto the hay. As her clothes fell away, Jay finally understood the words of the old wedding ceremony: *And with my body I thee worship.*

Everything up till now had just been fucking.

Chapter Thirty Six

"Dry at least, brothers," called a clear tenor voice. Jay jerked awake and placed a hand across Hastet's mouth. "Beyond that I cannot speak for the accommodations."

Hastet woke and nodded to indicate that she understood the danger in which they stood. Illyana had begun to wiggle, tiny arms and legs thrashing in the dry hay. Hastet gathered her up and placed her finger in the baby's mouth, hoping the sucking reflex would sublate the yelling reflex.

It was all wasted effort. The tenor voice sent his men fanning out through the barn. The first head popped over the edge of the loft, and Jay prepared to pop in return, but held off when he spotted the uniform -- tan and green - Jeban, not Vayawand.

"A family of refugees, my lord," the *Tarhiji* soldier called down.

"Let's have a look at them," the voice came floating up.

Jay and Hastet exchanged glances, shrugged, and moved to obey. The soldier, spotting the infant, went all Takisian gushy and quickly offered to help. Hastet let him. It was no easy matter to climb down a ladder encumbered with both skirt and a baby.

Once down, Jay found himself on the receiving end of an amused but wary scrutiny. "No proper courtesy to your lord and master?" the psi lord asked.

Like most Takisians he was a shrimp, with hair the color of amber and bright green eyes. He had a narrow, but very long, goatee, and that combined with his knowing

smile made Jay think he needed only a pair of horns to play the perfect little devil.

"Sorry, we're out-of-towners," Jay answered, slapping hay from the seat of his trousers.

The noble was sucking on a raw egg, and even so unappetizing a reminder of food set Jay's stomach to rumbling.

"You picked a poor time to come visiting," said the psi lord.

"Yeah, tell us about it."

Hastet was staring at the egg with the same famished longing that Jay sensed was in his own eyes. The Jeban nobleman pulled another from his pocket, bowed, and offered it to Hastet.

"Madam."

"Thank you." She shifted Illyana onto her hip and, cracking the egg with her thumbnail, began to suck. Jay noticed the Jeban noble frowning at Illyana's hair color. With his brown hair and Hastet's brown hair, it was evident even to a pea brain they weren't the kid's parents. It was also evident the kid wasn't *Tarhiji*. Luckily the guy didn't ask them about Illyana. Instead he asked, "Where are you out of?"

"Ilkazam," Jay answered.

"You have a strange accent even for Ilkazam."

"It's the result of a severe speech impediment," Jay replied.

The psi lord threw himself down on a pile of hay. "Well, consider yourself under the protection of what remains of House Jeban. For all I know, I might be *Raiyis*."

"Congrats. Kind of a drastic way to get promoted, isn't it?"

"Actually this whole war may be my fault."

"Surely you wrong yourself, my lord," Hastet said.

"No, no." Nimble hands fluttered urgently in the air before his face. "I was in Rodaleh negotiating a marriage when Blaise invaded. Lost that bride, so next I tried Alaa. Meanwhile Blaise was asking his advisers, 'Where is that piece of afterbirth Govan brant Shen sek Sova?' Alaa, you say? *Invade Alaa!* So I come home. Maybe I'll just marry in House. Damned if he doesn't do it again." There was laughter from Govan's men, and he smiled in answer, but there was an air of forced gaiety.

Still, Jay had to admire them. There wasn't much he admired about Takisians, but they did have an insouciance, an ability to laugh even in the face of disaster, that was rather appealing.

"I think, my lord, you might consider celibacy," Hastet said. There was more laughter.

"So what do you do now?" Jay asked.

"Hide, hope, regroup, and wait."

"Any advice on --"

Jay broke off as Govan jerked up a hand in warning. Jay experienced a sensation as if someone had spread cold jelly across the surface of his brain, and he realized Govan had shielded them against a mentatic probe.

"Did that do it?" the detective whispered.

"I don't think so," Govan replied. And with hand signals he issued quick orders. His men quickly assumed defensive

positions. Hastet, Jay, Illyana, and Govan took cover behind the sagging wood of a stall. They heard a ship landing.

Govan chewed nervously on his lower lip. Shook his head. "No good, too many to fight." He stood. "Let us see if they will be content with my surrender."

Jay grabbed the nobleman's wrist. "I don't get it. *You're* surrendering to save a bunch of *Tarhiji*?"

Govan looked down his nose. "They are my men. Selected by me. Trained by me. They have fought with me."

He walked through the wide front doors. Jay heard furtive movement behind him. The Vayawand troops were wisely encircling the building. They heard Govan's voice raised in greeting. Another few murmured words of conversation. The sharp report of a laser rifle being fired, and Govan's body was knocked back through the door.

There was a moment of shocked silence from the Jeban soldiers. Then a man a few feet to Jay's left spun and fired through the wall. There was a scream from outside, and then a barrage of laser and projectile fire ripped through the barn. Jeban soldiers twitched like men with Saint Vitus' dance, and Jay threw himself across Hastet and Illyana, trying to push them beneath the level of the dirt floor.

Five Vayawand soldiers came hurtling through the door. Two of them went down to weapons fire from the defenders. Jay popped the other three. Then ten or twelve ran in, and it got very confused. It was tough to get a clear shot so Jay was just popping Jeban and Vayawand randomly. A Jeban soldier collapsed nearby, his face a charred mess. With only the stretch of a hand Jay could seize his rifle. With it set for automatic fire, he could do more damage a lot faster than his finger.

Stubbornly he shook his head and looked away from that evil seduction. Seven, eight more soldiers vanished. The gunfire was becoming sporadic as the sheer weight of numbers bore down the Jeban defenders. Jay lined up on another soldier -- and then froze as the cold weight of a gun muzzle caressed the nape of his neck.

Rolling over on his back, Jay put his hands over his head.

"We're going to throw a *party*?" Disbelief drove Tisianne's voice into a squeak.

A trifle defensively Zabb said, "We have won a victory." He spun around in front of her and continued to skate backward, hands clasped lightly behind him. "It is traditional to celebrate."

"I don't know if I'd categorize a raid against ship homes when Blaise and his armies were occupied elsewhere a *victory*."

"You always have been hard to impress. It kept Blaise off our necks for another few weeks, my dear, maybe a few months. In our current precarious position I call that a victory."

The *Tarhiji* orchestra was tootling energetically from the glass bandstand. It was a celebration day, and all nonpregnant women had been released from *Rarrana*. Fathers, mothers, children, and lovers dived and swooped about the ice like gaudily plumed birds. Personal sleighs crisscrossed the ice like gliding flowers, each propelled by an attentive gentleman. A light snow was falling, which occasionally obscured the whirling figures, adding to the dreamlike quality of the scene.

Tis had lost her taste for the sport, and she skated off the ice to where Mark, aided (or hindered) by a giggling clot of children, was building a snowman. Reaching the bank, she spun, sat down in the snow, and started pulling off her skates. Her ever-watchful maid, Gena, came running with her furlined boots.

Mark abandoned the children and joined her and Zabb at the ice's edge. "What's up, Doc?" he asked.

Tis winced. Fortunately no Takisian was struck by the absurdity. "My cousin has a mind to celebrate. There's to be a ball, dancing and music, food and fripperies --"

Mark turned serious eyes on Zabb. "Seems kind of wrong to be dancing when so many people are dying."

"I wish to celebrate that *we're* not in the latter category," Zabb said. "It will reassure our people. It will thumb our collective nose at Blaise, and..."

"*And*," Tis prompted suspiciously. She accepted her boots from Gena and pulled them on.

"I have a reason for us being impressive right now."

"The Network," Mark supplied.

"Very astute, groundling. The Master Trader's demands are becoming more pointed and less diplomatic with each passing day. I'm going to invite him to join us.

"You are out of your mind," Tis said. "I suspected it before, but now I am convinced of it. It took a war to throw them off eight thousand years ago. Now you're inviting them back?"

"One. To a dance."

"It violates one of our most deeply held traditions."

"Sort of like Festival peace?" Zabb inquired, and Tis felt the blood rush into her cheeks. "Tis, we've broken so many traditions, laws, and rules, what's one more?"

They had taken Hastet for questioning and had left Illyana with Jay, apparently on the theory that a woman would be upset to be separated from her newborn infant and thus would talk more freely and willingly. Jay didn't know why they bothered. They were telepaths, all they had to do was open their heads with a can opener, and the little charade was over. So maybe they left the baby behind just because they were assholes, and they liked to torment people. Jay reassured himself that rape was not a practice on this strange world -- he just hoped Blaise hadn't taught them that Earth concept along with large-scale killing.

After all that struggle and effort, they were back in Ban. Illyana was screaming her hunger, and Jay could tell the noise was starting to get to his guard as well as himself. At times the ground sloth was so cute, it hurt. Other times... it was said that your baby's shit don't stink -- unfortunately this one wasn't Jay's.

Jay glanced about and wondered what the man had been like who decorated this vividly painted room. His legacy was a bloodstain on the floor now.

The door opened, and a clear young voice called out. "Jay Ackroyd, what a wonderful surprise. I should have realized when *Grand-pere* vanished at Festival that you were responsible."

Blaise walked in. Durg trailed him, silent and morose as ever, festooned with weapons like an apocalyptic Christmas tree. The breath jammed in Jay's chest, and he emitted a sound that was half squeak, half moan. For one wild moment he considered thrusting Illyana beneath his

chair. Instead he pinned a tattered grin to his face and stood.

Blaise was dressed in his trademark black, but the skintight jumpsuit had been augmented with a high-collared jacket. The heels of his high black boots had been encrusted with diamonds, and more of the jewels formed military-style bands on the sleeves and breast of his jacket. More diamonds had been plaited into the long braid that fell between his shoulders, and the diamonds and jet set into his face flashed and flickered and held the eye like the gaze of a snake. He also carried himself with an assurance far beyond his sixteen years.

Jay braced for the attack. Instead he was pulled into a crushing and exuberant embrace. "Jay, my dear, dear old friend. How are you?"

Hearing English almost made Jay forget his fear and the danger in which he stood. "Can't complain."

"What are you doing in Ban?"

His mind was racing furiously, and Jay reminded himself of the old adage. *Lie with enough of the truth to sell it.* And since Blaise wasn't a telepath, Jay just might pull it off -- assuming no real telepath was brought in to verify his story.

Jay continued. "I got involved with this lady, and she's had some problems with the Ilkazam. They tried to tell me I had to stop seeing her, and..." He shrugged.

But Blaise wasn't interested in Hastet. "Remember that awesome night in Atlanta?"

Blaise settled into a chair with the air of a man prepared to stay and reminisce. Since that counted as

probably the worst night of Jay's life, his response was perhaps a little sharper than it should have been.

"No, no, Jay," Blaise demurred. "I learned a lot that night. Grandfather, when he kept trying to psychoanalyze me, said the course of my life had been set that night. I think he was right. And I'm very, very grateful to you." He smiled winningly. "Look at this. From frightened teenager to planetary potentate. Not bad, huh?"

The transitions from flowery Takisian to exuberant adolescent had Jay grabbing for the safety bar on this mental roller-coaster ride. Blaise stood and circled Jay. His eyes were on the baby. Jay swallowed panic. Blaise plucked Illyana from Jay's arms. Her wails increased in intensity.

"What a pretty, pretty little girl." Blaise glanced inquiringly at Jay.

"She's Hastet's. Her husband knocked her up, and then got killed in a raid. That's why she's so down on the Ilkazam too," Jay babbled, and felt like an idiot.

"Really?" Jay nodded. "I don't think so." Blaise laid the screaming child over his shoulder. "We read your Hastet, so I know this is my daughter."

Jay began bringing up his finger. Then Blaise was in his head, and his hand froze at waist level.

"Read him," Blaise ordered the captain, and Jay felt as if a rake had been taken to his cortex. Two mentats cavorting in his brain didn't seem to leave enough room for Jay. His head exploded in pain. Eventually it ended, leaving only the bitter taste of defeat and betrayal. Jay apologized to the baby, and to the distant Tachyon.

"Jay, I'm very appreciative that you brought me my daughter, and you and your girlfriend must consider

yourselves my honored guests. But I'm afraid you might take it into your head to send my child away, so while it pains me to inconvenience you in any way" -- a little smile, a slight shrug, and a regretful sigh -- "I'm afraid I must."

Blaise outlined his plan to the captain. It served no purpose other than to set Jay struggling so hard that he broke into a visible sweat. Jay had a feeling that was the effect Blaise had been seeking. The pleasure of feeling a captive mind battering to no avail. Blaise tweaked, and Jay walked obediently over to the desk and spread his hands, palm down, on the stone surface. Blaise held out a hand, and Durg laid a very long, very wicked, very sharp knife in it.

Maybe Blaise really did like Jay -- he didn't saw. A hard chop, and the right index finger went hopping across the desk as if propelled by the font of blood. Jay screamed. The knife fell a second time.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

After her release from *Rarrana* Tisianne had rejected overtly female dress. No one seemed to notice except her, and the ambivalence that gripped her was both alarming and infuriating. For some reason a return to pants and boots full-time was almost as uncomfortable as those first weeks in *Rarrana* when she adapted to the confinement of skirts.

Then three days before the ball, a parade of relatives began marching through her suite, and she discovered they *had* noticed. It began with Mark and an overly casual "Are you gonna wear something pretty to the ball?" Then Taj demanded she wear something appropriate. Zabb had ordered her. Tis in a fury had informed him she wouldn't attend at all. And it all culminated with Roxalana, who had simply taken matters into her own capable hands and had a gown made.

It was a beautiful dress with layers and layers of petticoats, and a wide, sweeping skirt made from multicolored panels. The worst aspect of the gown was the neckline, which plunged deep over the breasts and left her shoulders and much of her back bare.

"Wow. You're, like, beautiful, man," Mark said as Tis frowned at her image in the full-length mirror.

"After months of looking like an overstuffed ottoman, anything would be an improvement. Gena, bring me a lace shawl." The girl obeyed, and Tis arranged it around her shoulders and tucked it into her décolletage. Gena pinned it in place with a corsage.

"Oh, don't do that," Mark objected.

"Shut up."

There was a chime at the door. A guard scanned and opened it to reveal Roxalana in the company of two of her bodyguards. She circled Tisianne critically.

"Very nice, but this will not do." She quickly unpinned the corsage and twitched away the shawl.

"What is this? Do you think the sight of my bosom is going to so move the Master Trader he will drop his demands?"

"No, I just hate to see the lines of a fine dress ruined by prudery." Lani pinned the flowers in Tis's elaborate upswept hair.

There was another chime. Taj stuck his head in. "I'm off to collect the hawker." He nodded. "Very nice, but you need jewelry."

He was gone again before Tis could formulate a really crushing reply. A sound suspiciously like a chuckle emanated from Mark's direction. "Would you like to make any comments?" Tis asked with razor-sharp sweetness.

"Uh, I think I'd wear gloves. You know, those real long ones."

The chime sounded again. "Ideal, is this Grand Central?" Tis exploded. "Maybe I should put in a revolving door?"

Zabb entered. Tis spun in a circle, affording him a good look, "Does this meet your approval, my lord?"

Zabb kissed Roxalana on the cheek. "You look lovely as always, *vindi*." She did, in her red-and-amber gown. Zabb surveyed Mark. "And you look... remarkable."

And that also was the truth. The ace wore a long swallow-tailed coat of pale blue, a knee-length waistcoat in

bright crimson, both of which accentuated his great height and thinness. The ensemble was completed with knee breeches in blue, crimson stockings, and green ankle boots.

Zabb cleared his throat and turned to face her. Tis realized he was nervous. She mentally tensed.

"Weeks ago I offered you your mother's jewels. You refused." Zabb removed a long, flat box from an inner pocket. "I hope this time you'll accept. You should be properly adorned for the ball, as befits an Ilkazam princess."

Tis had frozen at the sight of the blue-and-orange box with its embossing of moonstones in the design of flowers. A memory held her. *Tisianne standing on his mother's lap. Ts'ara heedless of the damage his muddy shoes were doing to her dress. Pressing and twisting the pretty gems with tiny child's fingers. She had told him that they were a ship's tears.* He knew better now. Ships don't cry. Tisianne wanted to.

Tis accepted the box and snapped it open. Rings, ear-tips, necklaces, bracelets. A riot of glittering, sparkling color. She lifted out a five-strand choker of pearls. Frowned.

"Wait," she said. Zabb paused, almost out the door. "There's a mistake, these weren't hers --"

Without looking back he said, "They're yours. I had them made for you. Wear them for me."

Tis sank speechless into a chair. Stared at the closed door.

Roxalana lifted the pearls from her nerveless fingers and clasped them about her throat.

"Enjoying yourself?" Zabb inquired, handing Bounty and Tis iced *silamums*.

Tis accepted the drink gratefully. The windows of the ballroom were fogged, trapped as they were between a room full of bodies, and the snow-buried gardens outside, and she was finding conversation with a Master Trader to be emotionally draining. Oh, the creature was everything charming and proper, but she couldn't control the skin creep that told her this was the enemy.

"Most assuredly," Bounty said. "I'm measuring my experiences against the memories of the last Master Trader on Takis."

"Eight thousand years," Zabb said, a pointed reminder.

"Have the Takisians changed much?" Mark asked.

"Yes and no. Technologically they're a good deal more advanced." Bounty paused and watched the intricate dance unfolding in the center of the ballroom. "Their family affiliations seem to have become far more rigid. There used to be more flux between families. Overall it's still a warrior culture overlaid with the trappings of civilization."

"Are you implying we are not civilized?" Zabb asked.

"I'm saying it's only skin-deep."

"Why?" Tis asked.

"Your highest loyalty is reserved for the vow between individuals, usually within your own clan. That's a hallmark of a primitive society."

"It's worked rather well for us," Zabb said.

"But has it?" the Master Trader mused. "You've never really managed to forge long-term and broad alliances that would enable you to undertake colonization projects, exploration." Bounty set his empty glass on the tray of a

passing *Tarhiji* waiter. "Well, I think it's time to talk business."

"You don't let up, do you?" Zabb asked. "And there is nothing to discuss. I will not return."

"I think your vaunted Takisian honor is a sham if you can violate your promise to me."

"Bluntly, you're not worthy to receive my sworn word."

Mark suddenly snapped his fingers. "I finally figured it out. What you guys remind me of. I thought Renaissance Italy, and Saudi Arabia, and a little samurai stirred in, and there are facets of all of that, but mostly you're like the Mafia."

Zabb and the Master Trader were looking confused. Tis knew her face was a study in embarrassment because Mark was absolutely right. She laughed. "Oh, Ideal, what does that make me? A Mafia princess?"

"Of Mars," Mark added, and laughed. "It'll be the next Hollywood hit."

"*Raiyis*, I don't wish to fight," Bounty said. "But --"

A sudden thought struck Tisianne. "Bounty, when my cousin was found, he was adrift in a dying ship. Life support was dying with *Hellcat*. He *had* to sign that contract. Which makes it duress, which makes it unconscionable, which makes it illegal."

"No, that's not duress. Duress is if I held a gun to his head and said I'll kill you if you don't sign. His own misfortune is not my fault."

"But you'd take advantage?" Tis asked.

"Of course, that's business."

"Oh, man, you're making corporate America look benevolent." Mark sadly shook his head. "Maybe you guys aren't so groovy."

Bounty frowned. "Where are *you* from?"

"Oh, I'm an Earthman."

"Interesting."

Zabb pulled the Master Trader back from his thoughtful contemplation of Mark. "I don't want trouble, and it's no secret I can't afford a fight with you right now. So what will it take to make you go away? Money, jewels, pharmaceuticals?"

"Your currency is worthless to me. Your jewels and drugs I can synthesize." Bounty considered. "I want another pilot."

"I can't force any of my people to serve you. I'll give you a *Tarhiji*."

Bounty shook his head. "I want a telepath."

"What about art?" Tis suggested. "That's unique."

"Personal service or real estate. That's what I prefer."

"You're doomed to disappointment," Zabb said, and tucking Tisianne's arm beneath his he drew her away. They walked in silence for several moments, then Zabb said, "Thank you, cousin, for speaking up on my behalf. I was a little surprised, but thank you."

"Sorry it didn't do any good. They really are the most awful barbarians." He was staring at her so intently that she could almost feel the pressure of his eyes on her skin. Nervously she changed the subject. "You know, other than my usurpation this room was the site of one of the most humiliating moments in my life."

"Again delivered courtesy of me."

"Naturally."

"Sixty years ago, wasn't it?" Zabb asked.

"Something like that."

"Well, let's see if I can make it up to you." Zabb bowed and vanished into the crowd. Tis leaned against a wall and watched the dancing. Eventually Mark found her.

"I've discovered the source of my sensual pleasure in the sound of these skirts." She shook hers. "It's a child's memory of his mother. All I can really remember is her perfume, and the whisper of her elaborate clothing."

"It's, like, really romantic looking. Doc... maybe I shouldn't say this, but Zabb is, like, really --"

"I know. I realized the signals I've been sending are very much damsel distressed." She looked up at the human. "Mark, I need a therapist. I'm losing my mind. I'm losing my self" His fingers tightened comfortingly around hers.

The music intruded into her reverie. A melody she recognized. Tri'ava and Pandasala swooped down on her like diving parrots, each grabbing her beneath an arm, and began tugging her toward the center of the ballroom...

"Come," Panda said.

"He's waiting," Tri'ava said.

"You'll never believe," Panda burbled.

"What he's done," they finished in chorus.

Alarmed, Tis went rushing ahead. Zabb was indeed waiting. There was an unholy light in his gray eyes as he held out a pair of crystal-heeled slippers. As the heels struck, the air was filled with a sweet chiming. Tis started

retreating, stepped on her hem, and went down in a welter of skirts.

Zabb grinned down at her. "Tis, you're looking like a clumsy oaf again."

"No!" She fended him off with both hands. "Oh, no.

"Let's see if you can get through 'Crystal Flowers' this time without making a fool out of yourself," Zabb said, removing her dancing shoes.

"You fiddled with my shoes. Wrecked the tones."

He struck the heels together again, playing an ascending scale. "I haven't this time." He slipped her foot into a shoe.

"I don't remember it." Gray eyes met gray eyes. "And I've certainly never danced it from the woman's side."

The other shoe went on, and Zabb pulled her to her feet. "Rely on me. I'll get you through it."

Pandasala on one side, and Cillka on the other, caught up her skirts so her feet would be free.

"You've been a chair warmer long enough tonight," Cillka said.

"Celebrate a little," added Pandasala.

They gave her a push toward Zabb. Even just walking to the dance floor, their heels struck music from the parquetry wood floor. Tis's chest was tight with nerves.

All Takisian dances were intricate, the footwork complicated, but 'Crystal Flowers' surpassed them all, for there was one entire line of the music missing from the orchestration -- it was to be provided by the dancers' shoes.

The base of the heel striking the floor was one note, the crystal tap on the toe another, and there were five more notes in ascending order on the high heels. It required precision to tap one heel against the other at precisely the proper level to elicit the necessary note and complete the music.

While Zabb and Tis hung to the side waiting for the music to figure back to the beginning, Tis nervously played scales, reminding herself of the placement of the notes.

"Relax, you're a good musician. This is all in the ear," Zabb said.

"And the feet," Tis said bitterly, as Zabb led her in and they were into it.

For the first few measures the music was her biggest worry. Then the pattern of the dance intruded with burning clarity. During an intricate side movement Zabb bent and brushed her wrist with his lips, Tis closed her eyes briefly. Bobbled and missed a note.

"Oh, shit!"

"It's only one note."

"It's this whole dance!" she said bitterly.

It had its origin in country peasant dances. A spring dance, the historians thought, to celebrate the return of life and the running sap. And not only in trees and flowers, but men and women as well. Its country incarnation was bawdy and sexual. The *Zal'hma at' Irg* had refined it over the generations, but it was still a wildly romantic dance. Tis had loved it as a young man. It was an excellent barometer of a women's interest.

They had progressed past the fingertips and wrist and graduated to the temple and the corner of the mouth. Zabb

smelled of spice and musk. Forcing a detached academic interest, which she really didn't feel, Tis noticed that it was much easier to steal a kiss when you're taller than the woman. Her mind pursued the trivial, hoping it would still the torrent of emotions and sensations rushing through her body.

I ought to just quit. Leave now. I ought to. Goddamn hormones!

Music and motion, and that white chiseled face. The skin on his upper lip was paler than the rest of his face. *Ideal, he shaved his mustache!* His hand closing on hers. Final figures now. Zabb brushing light kisses onto her mouth with each pass. The final kiss. This was the acid test. This was where the woman told you if she was interested or not. This was...

He captured her. It was questionable if she'd ever really meant to flee. Arms closing around her in tight embrace. A long, deep kiss to last the final measure. The music stopped. Zabb pulled back. Rivulets of sweat matted his sideburns and beaded his forehead. White blond elf locks hanging about that narrow face. And a look in those pale gray eyes.

No wonder women flee from us. The hungry pressure from those eyes. All the anguished wanting!

Tis began to back away. Zabb thrust a hand at her. Control snapped, and she fled from the dance floor, her shoes making a wild ringing as she ran. The murmur of the crowd rising like a wind storm from behind her. She had done it again. Caused another scene at a family ball.

A stitch in her side finally brought her to a gasping halt. Footsteps coming. Her heart lifted -- rescue... from

herself. Tall, but not tall enough. Blond, but the wrong blond. Dangerous not safe. Zabb not Mark.

Tis slumped against the wall. Zabb thrust his hands into the pockets of his duster-like coat and offered support to the other wall of the corridor. They eyed each other across a three-foot chasm.

"Don't you think we ought to do something about... this." She shook her head, a quick, terrified gesture. Zabb ran a frantic hand through his hair. "Ideal! You are driving me mad!"

"This is insane. You *hate* me."

"Not true. You stood between me and ambition. That impediment has now been removed."

"Impediment to what? Fucking me? You've done that very well, thank you, for a very long time."

Zabb grabbed her shoulders. "You talk too much, Tis. You have *always* talked too much!"

She watched as her terror slammed into him. His hands leapt from her shoulders as if shocked. He clutched his elbows. Retreated again to the opposite wall.

"I'm sorry. I frightened you. I'm sorry."

For a long moment they regarded one another. "How can I sleep with you? How? I'm wounded in ways you can't see, and I don't fully understand," Tis said.

"Then let me try to heal you."

That drew an incredulous laugh. "Heal me? Sex is about trust and vulnerability, and a little like dying. How can I trust *you*?"

The crooked little smile couldn't quite cover the desperation huddled in the back of his eyes. "Think of it as sublimation. I'll get this gnawing need to kill you out of my system."

Tisianne studied Zabb with growing calculation. A reluctant smile broke. "Think it will work?"

"Ancestors only know."

"Are you a good lover?"

"The best."

"All men say that," Tis said dismissively. "I even said it."

Planting a foot on the wall behind her, Tis pushed off. Stopped directly in front of him. Almost touching. She caught his chin between her fingers. Pulled his face down. Kissed him. Retreated back to her wall. No pockets. She buried her hands in the folds of her gown. Regarded him. There are many things to be said for telepaths. One is they know when to keep silent.

"All right," Tis said. "Prove it."

They had been at it for an hour. Fumblings, groping, awkward kisses from Tis, expert foreplay by Zabb. None of it worked. Each time he attempted to enter her, the terror returned. Tis lay on her back in Zabb's bed and felt tears tangling wet and hot in the hair over her temples. Zabb wiped them away.

"Tis, do you remember your first toy?"

The question startled her from her internal pain. She propped herself up on her elbows and looked at Zabb

seated cross-legged on the foot of the bed. "Yes, Roxalana selected her, and father auditioned her."

"And you had learned to play with her."

"Yes."

"How old were you?"

"Fourteen."

"And what did she teach you?"

"About a thousand positions."

"No, what's the first and most important lesson a toy teaches you?"

"That sex is a state of mind," Tis replied slowly.

"And what happened to you at Blaise's hands was not sex. It was violence." He stretched out next to her again. His skin was cold against her. He lifted her hand and laid it on his cock. "Now, you make love to me. Arouse me the way the male Tisianne liked to be aroused. I will not touch or caress you until you tell me to. You're not powerless now, Tis. In this bed, at this moment, you control me."

Hesitantly she began to explore his body. Zabb lay supine and helpless beneath her, and she liked the looming sense of power it gave her to look down at him as she knelt between his outflung legs. Under her delicate ministrations she soon had him at rampant attention. His excitement began to communicate with her borrowed body.

With a mouth gone suddenly dry she said, "Now, Zabb, now touch me."

He laid a long forefinger against his temple, then against hers. "Touch me here first, Tis."

Emotionally she retreated, though the body didn't move. Lovemaking between telepaths was a total sharing. For almost fifty years Tachyon had been forcing the joining. With Zabb it would be a merger. She opened her mind to him and found no violence there. She read his arousal and pleasure, and for an instant he had returned to her the sensation of a penis. He gently stroked her labia, nipped at her nipples, and she fed back her pleasure to him.

Terror burned away in the passion of her orgasm. It was only after she had experienced her pleasure that he allowed himself a release. And only after his cries died away did she allow herself to giggle.

"What?" Zabb muttered against her breast.

It feels... so strange. Ideal, I'm *leaking*." She wriggled from beneath him and padded to the bathroom, his sperm coating her inner thighs.

When she returned, he was under the covers. He lifted a corner, and she crawled in, curled up next to him.

"What? What do you want? You have that look again," said Zabb.

"Do it again please."

Much later she heard him ask. "So how was it?"

Tis stretched her arms back over her head and lightly traced the carving on the headboard with her fingertips. The room was redolent with the scent of cinara wood from the fire and sex. She gave Zabb a mischievous glance.

"Don't you mean how was *it*? That's what men really mean."

Zabb shoved a pillow behind his back and lit an illusion. He glared down at Tach lying next to him. "You are

the most irritating Takisian."

Tis shrugged, rolled up onto an elbow, and threw back her hair. Scanned the beside table. "When did you order *spetza*?"

Zabb reached down by the bed and with a rattle of ice pulled out a bottle of sparkling wine. "A long time ago."

"I must have been sleeping."

"An admission... I wore you out." Tis just looked at him as she accepted the glass. "What was it like" You're the only man to have made this journey."

"What about *lawmerates*?"

"It's a cheat. Surgical alteration, hormonal therapy. You are a woman."

Tis lifted a breast. "Here." Then tapped her temple. "Not here. Well, multiple orgasms are definitely an improvement over one. I discover it is much harder to let go as a woman. There is a passivity, a vulnerability that frightens me, but that may just be a result of *my* early female experiences." She paused and took a swallow of the sweet, sparkling wine.

"Sex is more significant somehow. Biology talking, I suspect. For men it's a five-minute commitment. For women, a potential fourteen years until their children leave *Rarrana*. But much of this you know. It's an advantage of telepaths."

"Much of my drive in joining is vanity. It's as if I'm looking in a mirror. Her pleasure reflects back to me how marvelous I am." The bald honesty and the insight of the admission stunned her. Tis looked at Zabb with new respect, and there was a twinge of guilt.

"You're right. I hadn't really thought about it, but you are absolutely right. I did the same thing. Ideal, what pigs we men can be." She snuggled closer to him, and he put an arm around her shoulders.

"You're going to be a very good lover. Having known what pleases you as a man, you can apply it and please your partner."

"Going to be?" Tis asked.

"Your impression was correct. You do hold back."

"Rape has a way of doing that to you," Tach said a little dryly.

"I think it's more a function of being technically a virgin."

"You have an elastic view of virginity."

Zabb was warming to the theme. Excitement growing with each word. "In fact, you're the most virginal of virgins. You have no sexual sense of self. You're learning it here, in my bed, in my arms. You've never known another man --"

"Just hundreds of women," Tis said, torn between amusement and irritation.

There was a chime. Zabb sat up, all quivering alertness, and Tis knew he had read some telepathic summons. Taj entered, and Tisianne, suddenly shy, pulled covers up to her chin.

"*Raiyis*, forgive the intrusion, but we have received a private priority message from Blaise." The formal mask slipped, and he looked at Tisianne. "I think you better hear it... now."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Zabb keyed the holostage, and Blaise appeared in the audience chamber of House Vayawand. There was an infant on his lap. At the foot of his throne sat Jay and Hastet. They had the blank, stuffed look of people enduring severe mind control.

It took several seconds for images and words to penetrate the pounding in Mark's head. Jay's mutilated hands were cuffed in his lap; the raw stumps of his fingers looked like little screaming mouths.

"You want her, Grandfather? Come and get her. You've got three days, and then she dies. I'll send her back to you in bits and pieces."

That sentence came through with appalling clarity. Mark's hand closed like a vise on Tisianne's shoulder, but whether to hold her in place or as support for himself, he couldn't say.

The images shuddered and vanished. "Do you want to hear it again?" Taj asked.

Zabb shook his head. "No... I believe we've grasped the most salient point."

Tis rose very carefully, as if any incautious movement would shatter her or break her fragile emotional control, and started for the door. Mark trailed faithfully after her.

"You are *not* going there!" Zabb exploded.

"You are quite right; I am not going there."

That shook Mark. He'd assumed this purposeful movement had a destination. "Doc, Illyana --" Trips remonstrated.

"Is lost to me! Even if I went to Blaise, he would keep me from her!"

Mark remembered Sprout being led away by the child-welfare people. Remembered the gray jail that had held his child. But he'd gotten her out, even though it cost a woman's life. Tisianne wilted slightly under the ace's angry and incredulous expression.

"And what if he kills her?" Mark said.

"It won't be the first time." Zabb shrugged. "And babies are easy, you can always make more."

Tis nodded. "Cousin, this hurts, I won't deny it. Have I permission to withdraw and rest?" Zabb waved permission, and they left the *Raiyis's* office.

Back in Tisianne's chamber, she drew out the Network damper. Tis looked up at Mark, and he saw the shadow of Medea and Cerridwen and the Medusa in her face. She took a tight grip on Mark's hand and said in a low, passion-filled voice. "We'll leave tonight. I think Traveler will be of most use."

"Pretend to be surrendering to Blaise?"

"Correct."

"This won't be easy," Mark warned.

"It's got to be tried."

Mark ran a hand across his mouth. "What a bummer. Poor Jay."

"Gimme me a second," Jay mumbled.

After the bounce/cast they had been escorted to a sumptuous suit -- and the doors had been locked behind

them. Jay availed himself of a wall, leaned his back against it, and slid to the floor. The black spots dancing before his eyes receded, but he knew they were just waiting for another chance to return. He tried to remember the last time he'd slept.

Hastet stood over him, absently patting Illyana on her swaddled bottom. The baby was crying. *So what else is new?* thought the detective. Hastet looked as if she were going to cry.

"Shit, my hands hurt so much." Jay was embarrassed at the thickness of his voice.

Quick footsteps approaching the door. Jay scrambled awkwardly to his feet. The black spots came raging back. The lock cycling. Tachyon -- *no, Kelly* -- entered.

"I'm Kelly Jenkins, these are my rooms. You may stay here with me, but I must have your word that you won't try to escape. Otherwise the doors stay locked." He turned and looked at Hastet. "Now may I see my child?"

Hastet's eyes sought Jay's. The ace shrugged. "Might as well, can't dance."

Kelly accepted the baby. He supported the tiny red gold head with his real hand, the artificial appendage under her body. The man bowed his head, and the long red hair shrouded the child. And amazingly the baby stopped crying.

"Telepathy," said Hastet at Jay's wild glance.

"It won't hold her for long," Kelly said. "I told her I was 'mother,' but she knows I'm not Tachyon." He flashed a grim smile. "You ever heard a mental raspberry?"

He had just settled down to an evening's orgy with a toy when the Vayawand traitor came calling.

"She's gone."

Zabb put aside the girl and frowned at the older man. "What are you maundering about?"

Bat'tam grabbed his arm, gave it an urgent shake. "She's taken a *l'lail*. Traveling overland. There's a storm coming." He stressed each word like a teacher speaking to a particularly dim student.

"*Damn* the girl. She gave her word. Is she trying to drive me mad? I should have killed him as a pup." The words came out in sharp staccato bursts as Zabb tried to analyze and control his tumbling emotions.

"Then why are you making love to a substitute?"

Bat'tam demanded, and pointed at the terrified *La'b*.

Zabb looked from the Vayawand nobleman back to the toy, her long hair carefully dyed white blond, her similarity of features to the female Tisianne.

"Ancestors curse you."

Mounted on a *shujukis*, snow swirling in his face, he could barely discern the wingtips of the raptor. Zabb held contact with his guard by the mindnet. The *shujukis* were mountain bred snow hunters, tracking by body heat. He searched by mentatics for that familiar, infuriating signature. It was not his gift, and he was making a botch of it. She was hiding from him and making a botch of it. The imperfect shields cut in and out like a child playing peekaboo through its fingers.

But she drew him like filings to a magnet. What did that mean? Probably nothing except that he had a passionate desire to kill her. Ideal, it was cold. Murder was a warming action.

At last the *shujukis* sensed her warmth Folding its wings, it dropped into a killer's dive. The rending beak, the claws at the wingtips... Zabb considered them all, and the murderous thoughts crumbled. The *shujukis* sensed his wavering intent, reluctantly released the bloodlust.

The *l'lails* couldn't know that. They had heard the single wing clap like warning thunder, the only warning the prey received. Tis clung like a burr to the long, arched neck of her *l'lail* as it bucked and fished. Mark Meadows was thrown. He struggled in the deep snow trying to regain his feet.

The flight of *shujukis* dropped into the snow. The beat of their massive wings shook snow from the branches of the blue needles. Grounded, they were absurd beasts, lumbering and graceless, supporting their wings on tiny clawed hands at the extreme end of each pinion.

Zabb struggled through the snow. Meadows had a vial almost to his mouth. Zabb struck it from his hands. Orange powder stained the snow like blood. The human froze, realizing that resistance in the face of so many mentats was hopeless.

Tis was still struggling with her terrified mount. Zabb gripped the *l'lail* by the ear. The animal froze. Tisianne had at least dressed for a mountain journey, with pants, high boots, parka. The pack strapped to the *l'lail's* haunches contained a glowtent. But her teeth were rattling in her head -- either from cold or fear of him. Zabb hoped it was the latter. The thought both pleased and depressed him. Contradictory emotions were beginning to feel normal. Relief to have found her. A profound desire to throttle her.

"Why are you driving me crazy? Why can't I just let you go?" Not what he'd intended to say, but a truer question was never asked.

"Please..." She folded her lips together, shook her head. Perhaps she realized it was hopeless.

Zabb turned on Meadows. "She had guards and friends precisely so she won't do this kind of idiotic stunt."

"Friends love each other. Friends help each other. I'd do it again in a second," Mark said, and the little catch in his voice somehow added to his dignity.

"What did you hope to accomplish? Vayawand is half a world away. There are a world's complement of armies between you. What the hell are you doing on */!ail* back in the middle of a blizzard?"

Tis answered. "I knew M.I.S. would be watching the stations. All we had to do was cross the Theanis, and we'd be in Maz'tariq. From there a train."

"And you didn't think Blaise would have his M.I.S. alerted? That traveling with a giant would cause no small amount of comment?"

Tisianne merely shrugged. Zabb had lost all feeling in his toes.

"Heri, take my *shujukis*, and the groundling. Princess Tisianne and I will ride back at first light on the */!ails*."

"My lord, for both of you to remain on this mountain... the House --"

"Would probably be better off if we both froze solid," Zabb replied. "You have your orders. Now go."

Zabb was grateful for one thing; unlike the noisy human, Meadows knew when further argument was pointless. After a final glance to Tisianne, and a nod from the girl, Mark cautiously threw a leg over the *shujukis*. The line of beasts waddled up onto an outcropping like a

convention of fat and geriatric hang gliders, and one by one jumped off. That brief rush of air beneath their wings was enough to get them airborne.

Zabb pulled down the glowtent and keyed it. It unfolded, sent down anchors, and began to radiate heat. Tis watched as he hobbled the *lails* and tossed the pack over his shoulder.

"I hope there's food in this. I didn't have time for dinner." He drew a hand down the tent flap, and it peeled back. Stooped to enter. She didn't follow.

"Why are you doing this?"

Zabb sighed, straightened. "I can't think of a more private place to talk than on a mountain in a blizzard."

"What could you possibly have to say that requires such privacy?"

He gestured. "Come in and find out. I, for one, am not going to stand in the snow until my testicles freeze solid."

"It's not a disadvantage I currently suffer."

"Come in out of the goddamn snow!"

He cooked for them, which was good because Tisianne was a poor kitchen chef, and a hopeless camp cook. She busied herself unrolling the bedroll, then sat nursing her knees, watching him as he stirred the sinau soup.

"Why are we up here?" she finally asked. "Sans guard, sans kith, sans House?"

Zabb tasted the soup. Hissed as it burned his tongue. Resumed stirring. "I wanted a chance to talk with you away from prying minds."

"That sounds ominous."

Zabb spooned soup into a bowl and handed it to her. She sipped it. "Mmm, that's good, thank you. Something else you do well."

"I do a number of things well --"

"Fight and plot are the only other two that leap to mind," Tis said dryly.

"You have quite a tongue on you. It could double as a ghost lance."

"Why is it that men always react so much more strongly to an insult from a woman?"

Zabb set aside his bowl and advanced on hands and knees toward her. "Perhaps because every exchange is a poor substitute for sex." He kissed her.

"Don't."

"Why not? I do this pretty well too. Are you afraid you'll start to like it?"

"You're dreaming."

His hand rubbed across the front of her shirt, and her nipples hardened. "Upset you, and you can't hide anything," he murmured, his lips against her hair.

She pushed him away. "Zabb, get a toy."

"I have a better suggestion. Marry me."

"Winter mad... I should have seen it. *What* did you say?"

"It makes perfect sense. Our two bloodlines have fought for three generations. I hold the House, you want the House. Marry me, we share it. The fighting ends."

"First, you make a basic error. I *don't* want the House. Second, I'm not even Takisian any longer. I'm a mudcrawler, a groundling, a mongrel. You're going to breed with this?"

"You've said yourself, the times they are a'changing. We'll be the first in our House to do it."

"Then marry a *Tarhiji*, but don't marry an alien. I have no pedigree. What kind of a heritage is this for our children? For the House Ilkazam? I'm barely a telepath... all of our babies would be tested, found wanting, and neutered."

"What about Blaise? He's the result of an outcross with human blood, and look at his powers. We could get lucky."

"Produce another Blaise, lovely thought."

"There's one thing in all of this you've never said," Zabb said.

"What?" Tis demanded.

"You've never said no."

"Everything I've said has been a no."

"No, everything you've said has been good reason why I shouldn't marry you. Well, I don't give a damn about any of them." He stood up abruptly, bumped his head on the top of the tent. Sat abruptly down again. "I love you."

He thrust himself into her, emotions raw against her mind. It was all true. And it terrified her. She slammed up her shields. Tis remembered Blythe and thought of Cody. Felt herself whipsawed between a man's mind and a woman's body. Went down, sucked away in confusion, a maelstrom of conflicting drives and emotions.

He/she had loved. He/she had been loved. But not by a telepath. Not body to body and mind to mind. Their souls rubbed sandpaper raw against each other. It wasn't

comfortable, but it was a closeness no human or *Tarhiji* could ever experience.

She gave way to tears. "If you loved me," she said, you would help me recover my body. You wouldn't condemn me..." Her voice failed, strangled in throat.

"No, if you are restored, I lose everything." She looked away. His need beat at her. Her confusion tore at her guts. She wavered. He read it. Gripped her shoulders, and moved in for the final blow. "Don't you see, it's right somehow. A string of seven girls. No son. No one expected it. I thought I was safe. Then you were born. As a child you charmed me, but your sex condemned you. Now you're safe. I can have you. Care for you."

"That's not love, that's possession." She threw back her hair. "Do you know the best definition of love?" Softly she quoted, "It's when that other person's happiness is essential to your own. I can't be happy with you, Zabb. Ultimately I don't think you could be happy with me. We would both know it was a cheat."

For a long moment he just looked at her, then he stood and pulled on his heavy parka. "For prudence' sake I'm taking both *I'llails*. I'll send an escort for you." He touched the tent, and it peeled back. Snow and wind rushed in. "And I very much fear my guard of honor has become a guard in truth."

Tis hung her head. "I won't try to run again."

"You said that before." Zabb hesitated, then added, "This could have gone so... differently."

He drowned her mind in sensation. Sweat-slick limbs twining around each other. The delicate dance of tongues. He fed back to her the orgasm he'd elicited only a few days

before. Then he was gone, and Tis sat in the midst of melting snow and cried.

"Have I taught you nothing?" Blaise's face had assumed that sulky boy expression that made Durg long to drive said face into the nearest wall. "Perhaps the whisperers are right. Perhaps you are mad."

The two women cavorting in the gold-and-tiled tub had sunk to the level of their chins. One was the plump little *Tarhiji* beauty, the other a stately Most Bred beauty. They were both wives. Just another custom shattered by Blaise's precipitous social engineering. Doomsayers in the House had predicted that this mongrelization of the *Zal'hma at' Irg* presaged the end of history. It now seemed a small vagary when compared to this latest whim.

"Get out!" Blaise gritted.

The women fled, leaving wet footprints on the mosaic floor. Durg watched the dimpled, rounded butt of the *Tarhiji* female. To watch the psi lady could only earn him a strong, and probably physical, reprimand from that lady's father, brothers, and uncles.

Blaise climbed out of the five-foot-long pool and flung his head, flipping water from his soaked hair across Durg's uniform. He lifted his arms, and Durg wrapped him in a bath sheet. Blaise had reasserted control over his features, and his expression was now one of neutral interest. It gave Durg a bellyache -- not precisely of fear, more of wary concern.

Still silent, the young man padded back into his bedroom. It cost him face and weakened his position, but eventually the silence drove Durg to speak.

"This has gone far beyond the little prince. Your personal vendetta against your grandfather was a pleasant

enough diversion, and in its own way began this great process, but we have grown far beyond that narrow purpose. Only Ilkazam stands between us and planetary unification beneath the Vayawand colors."

Blaise fiddled among the drawers of the bedside table. He located an Illusion and with a snap of the wrist brought it to smoldering life. He took a long drag of the drug, held it, exhaled.

"I told you to find me another navy. You haven't done it."

"Patience. So it takes another year to conquer Ilkazam."

"No," Blaise said harshly. "I want it now. And the Network's going to give it to me. They'll sell us ships, and the Kondikki to service them."

"And what have you given them?" Durg asked.

"Ilkazam."

"Which you don't possess, and if you give it to the Network, you will *never* possess! Haven't the contradictions inherent in this plan struck you?"

"I'm heir to Ilkazam, and the Network doesn't give a shit about the validity of my claim, so I can give it away. The Network will try to take possession, and then Granddaddy will really have something to worry about. The Network and Ilkazam will fight, and then we'll fight the winner."

Durg felt as if the world were tipping. He groped to collect the shattered threads of his thoughts. "If you take this action, it will shatter the alliance. Where once there were allies, you will find only enemies." The Morakh's intensity was all the greater for his so-soft tone.

"Bat'tam started bleating about that when I married a *Tarhiji*. And right after that Zaghloul joined with us. Sekal said the alliance would collapse when I allowed *Tarhiji* to kill Most Bred. Didn't happen. You all said we were fucked when I allowed the troops to hit civilian targets, and currently we control through conquest or treaty twenty-seven of the thirty-one Houses. I think you're full of shit this time too."

"The Network is different. They have been our mortal enemies for eight thousand years. It is why we developed our ships, built the stations, rejected large-scale colonizing - so we could guard ourselves against the Network. I will not allow you to do this."

Blaise reached again into the drawer, and this time when his hand emerged he was holding the .44 Python he'd brought with him from Earth. It caught Durg flatfooted, still delivering his lecture. He gaped at the weapon, tried a dodge, and felt the bullet rip into his belly.

It would have knocked a normal Takisian to the floor. Durg swayed, grunted, and, cupping his hands over the wound, watched the blood flowing sluggishly from between his fingers.

"I don't think you'll die from it, and it certainly did shut you up, didn't it?" Blaise smiled jauntily. "Now before you go and look for a doctor would you oblige me by *obeying my commands?*"

Durg made no effort to move carefully and ease the pain. It was no more than he deserved. He had betrayed his mistress and loosed a monster upon Takis. Now all that remained was to live... and die with the consequences.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

"Baz reporting, the Network has requested burnback from the station," Taj was saying as the shuntlift doors opened and deposited Mark and Tis in House Defensive Operations.

The old man had a hand pressed against his mastoid as if to shut out the din in the command post. Totally unnecessary of course, the receiver-transmitter was buried deep in the bone, but Tis could appreciate the motivation. The spherical room was a morass of shouted orders, queries, answers. Zabb raced past, his combat armor hanging about his waist, his batman in close pursuit trying to complete the task of dressing his master.

"Read that!" he said, and shoved a sheaf of foil in Tisianne's hands. "Abortion!" This directed to Taj. "Tell them to stall!" he bellowed over the noise.

Tis skimmed the sheets. She looked up at Mark, who had been reading over her shoulder. "You understand?"

"Enough. Blaise has bought ships from the Network and paid with this House. The Network is coming to take possession."

"They have raised every objection. They've run out of stalls!" Taj sang out.

"Congratulations, Tis." Zabb came raging back. "You brought them here, you --"

"And I doubt they would be quite so assiduous in their efforts to take possession if they didn't have a little unfinished business to settle with *you*. So let's not be quite so self-righteous, shall we, Zabb?" Tisianne paused, sifted the chaotic thoughts tumbling through her head. But out of

chaos sometimes comes inspiration, and it came now. "He's overstepped himself this time," she said almost to herself.

Zabb ignored her. "Taj, you command the honor against the ships going to Vayawand. I'll handle the ones headed for Ilkazam."

Tis intercepted Zabb as he darted back across DefOp. "Take me with you!"

"You're out of your mind."

"Please, it's my home, my world. Let me defend her."

"Tisianne was an exemplary pilot... better even than *you*," Taj said in unexpected support.

"*Prince* Tisianne was an extraordinary pilot because he was an extraordinary telepath. *She's* almost mind blind. I'm not turning her loose in a half-wild fighting ship." Zabb grabbed Tis's shoulders, spun her around, and shoved her back into the center of DefOp. "Stay here. Be safe."

She whirled on him. "There is no safe place. If you fail, the Network comes *here*. We will fight, and we will die. At least let me die with you."

They hadn't talked since that night on the mountain. Now the spoken and the unspoken were evident for everyone to read. "What do you think you can do?" Zabb asked.

"Talk. We're going to need help."

"And whom do you suggest calling, cousin? We haven't an ally left on Takis."

"An hour ago that was true. Now... I expect we'll find many friends in many places. We'll ship link to the *Raiyises* of Houses Ss'ang, Alaa, Tandeh, and any others who aren't held by the Vayawand by conquest."

"What's your thinking?" Taj asked.

"Blaise has just fissured his precious alliance. Now all that remains is for us to drive the wedge. It was one thing to forge an alliance against Ilkazam. It's another to invite in Takis's bitterest enemy."

"It might work," came Taj's cautious support.

"It *will* work," Mark said.

Zabb stared down at her, smiled, and said, "I love you." Tis went red. "Now come along."

"I'm coming too." Everyone stared at Trips. He wiggled uncomfortably like a puppy in a holiday crowd. "Starshine will really dig fighting uncontrolled capitalism."

In the center of the bridge of Zabb's flagship *StarRacer*, a hologram of Takis was lazily spinning. Each satellite, station, or weapons platform was carefully detailed. The Network starship was an obsidian ball. As they watched, the ball calved, producing forty tiny replicas of itself. Tisianne bent over the scanner.

"Warships, roughly analogous to our destroyer class."

Zabb, using both a telepathic ship link to his other captains, and a conventional tight-beam, laser-pulse communication system, issued his orders. Ilkazam's ships, indicated as tiny white stars, broke off by twos.

It hadn't taken much to enlist the aid of Ss'ang and Alaa, and they were coming, elegant fireflies of green and blue. The hologram now resembled a tangled skein of yarn. Tis supposed there was some sort of order to the patterns, but it eluded her, which was why Zabb had ended up military leader of House Ilkazam and she'd ended up a research scientist.

A mental nudge from the ships informed her that telepathic communication had been established with Yimkin, *Raiyis* of House Tandeh. Tisianne quickly outlined their current dilemma.

Ancestors know I sympathize, Prin... er, Tisianne, but this is no slow-moving Network scow loaded down with prophylactics and miracle cures to sell to a credulous load of groundlings. This is a Network starship built to fight. And that madman of a grandson of yours is crazy!

Yimkin had always had a gift for stating the obvious three or four times in the same sentence.

Absolutely, he's trying to give us to Network.

But if I desert him, he'll be coming after me.

The Network, Blaise, or me? Which is it to be?

God's abortions. I suppose it must be you. You breed a strong precog line in Ilkazam...

You want one?

Please.

Done.

Make sure she's pretty.

We don't breed them any other way.

Now.

Tis broke the telepathic link and studied the tactical holo. *We'll need a new color for Tandeh*, Tis thought. Zabb picked it up.

"You got them?"

"Yes."

"Did Yimkin demand the family jewels?" Zabb grunted, anxious that Tandeh had driven a hard bargain.

"Just a bride," Tis answered.

"There is no such thing as *just a bride*. Added together this will cost us dearly in land, wealth --"

"And lives," Tis interrupted.

Zabb just blinked at her. *Not a Takisian consideration*, Tis realized.

"I think it's time, Meadows," Zabb said.

Mark nodded and pulled out a vial filled with bright yellow powder. Tis laid a hand on his wrist.

"Be careful," she whispered.

"Don't worry." He patted her hand awkwardly. Downed his potion.

Starshine was a far bigger man than Mark Meadows. The extra mass had to come from somewhere. The easiest solution was to rob molecules of ambient air. A whirlwind wrapped itself about the writhing figure of the human. Light styluses, a loose glove, and any other unattached objects were sucked into the maelstrom. Tis staggered under the force of the wind, and Zabb grabbed her and hugged her against his chest. It was over in a matter of seconds.

Starshine was magnificent in his skintight yellow suit with the sunburst blazing on his massive chest, his curly blond hair tousled by his summoning. He dwarfed the Takisians. Puffing out his chest, the ace surveyed the bridge in ire. For a moment his square jaw worked as if he were trying to form words, or perhaps deciding against whom to launch them. His awful gaze fell upon Tisianne. It was inevitable. She was always the target -- of Zabb's lectures,

Jay's lectures, Traveler's lectures, Cody's lectures, Taj's lectures ...

"It's fascinating, Doctor, how I am summoned only in cases of extreme emergency -- always generated by the actions of yourself, or your rapacious relatives. If it were not for the sake of the ordinary Takisian who should be free from the yoke of unbridled Network capitalism, I would refuse to help, but --"

"You won't," Tis supplied.

It threw Starshine off his stride for an instant, but he soon recovered. "I feel it is also incumbent upon me to point out --"

Zabb set Tis in the bridge chair. "Will this go on for long, or will he eventually get around to fighting?"

This interruption hadn't fazed Starshine. He was still pontificating. "...presence of these enemies in your midst is due *entirely to your* selfish desire to abandon the female persona in which you currently reside. It would have shown far greater courage to accept life as a woman after you have so brutally and callously preyed upon the entire sex --"

Tis discovered something. She was tired of feeling guilty. She crossed to the ace, dug her long nails into a bulky forearm to hold him in place, and delivered a slap with her free hand. It left a satisfying red mark against the white, white skin. Starshine's green eyes flew open, and he let out a strange stuttering sound. As if the blow had sent words tumbling back down his throat like children falling down stairs.

"*Shut up!* And go fight!"

Tis didn't wait to see if she was obeyed. She moved back to her position. A few moments later a faint squeak

from one of the control techs brought her head around. *StarRacer* was giving them a picture of Starshine as he turned to face Takis's star and sucked in the energy. Pulling his arms close to his body, he became a yellow beam, a light spear on an intercept course with battle.

"And now, gentlemen and ladies, let us follow that audacious lead," Zabb said, and half closing his eyes, he dropped into deep rapport with his ship.

If Tisianne opened her mind, she could occasionally catch fragments of thought from the various ships and their captains and crews. But it was like listening to a symphony, a bebop combo, and a brass band tuning simultaneously. Sound signifying nothing. She watched the hologram and tried to determine if they were winning. Starshine had been added as a bright yellow star, and he was fighting to very good effect.

Zujj, military commander of Alaa, had even demanded to know what, by his ancestor's frozen balls, that critter might be. An Ilkazam crewwoman proudly reported it to be one of Ilkazam's Enhancer-augmented servants. She fell into abashed silence at Tisianne's furious look.

It was hard to blame her for chattering. For the crew it was a time to hold onto their hats and wait to be useful. So far *StarRacer* hadn't taken a substantial hit, so there was no damage to repair. No weapons to manually fire. The only real evidence they were in a fight was the subtle recoil when the ghost lances fired.

A Takisian space battle was very much the province of the captain and his or her ship. Some of the largest cruisers required a TacNet -- three or four telepaths and the ship in close link -- to run a successful combat, but such a unity of purpose wasn't very Takisian, so the tendency was to breed single-pilot ships.

A white star flickered and went out, and Tis winced. She wished *StarRacer* would show her the battle rather than this dry video-game display; then she realized why the ship didn't -- the focus of the crew might be pulled to the pictures. It was probably better that only Zabb could "see." Still, it didn't make her happy. She wanted to know that Mark was still safe.

As she watched, the Network destroyer *StarRacer* was pursuing fragmented, seeding tiny black bloblets. A hit from an Ilkazam ship? She looked eagerly to Zabb and registered his grim expression.

"They've just dropped seven Ly'bahr legionnaires," Zabb sang out, and the entire crew jumped for their helmets.

It was the worst news imaginable. The metallic warriors were capable of reconstructing their bodies into small shuttlecraft with a contingent of Kondikki workers aboard for damage control and repair. It was as if seven inorganic Starshines had just waded into the combat on the side of the Network.

Tisianne felt the lances firing in quick succession, the pressure translated through the soles of her boots, the palm of her hand as it rested on a console. Suddenly *StarRacer* shuddered, and Tis's imperfect shields buckled under an onslaught of pain. She doubled over and fought for control over her heaving stomach. It was bad policy to retch in combat armor.

The holograph gave a picture of their situation: the white star that was *StarRacer*, and in close proximity, closing by the second, a pair of black discs representing Ly'bahr warriors. The yellow star that was Starshine suddenly reversed direction, heading back on an intercept with *StarRacer* and the Ly'bahr.

The ghost lances fired again. One Ly'bahr flickered, then recovered and continued its advance. Double hits, and *StarRacer* bucked so violently that Tis and most of the remaining eighteen members of the crew were thrown to the floor.

StarRacer was in her death throes, and Tis screamed because it *hurt so much*. The floor and walls of the living ship had gone viscous and sticky. As she watched, a crewman was trapped between benches that were suddenly extruded by the ship. His blood was smeared into the secretions of the ship.

A white-hot, molten rain began dripping from the ceiling. Tis looked up and watched a beam cutting through the hull of the ship. Suddenly the artificial gravity maintained by the ship cut off, and Tis went floating. Zabb yanked her out of the way just as a section of roof peeled back. He flung her hard at a distant wait, and she managed to get twisted around so her boots struck first, caught, and held. Tis glanced back and up at the looming shadow of a Ly'bahr warrior blotting out the stars.

Takisians maintained lockers filled with archaic bladed weapons just to repel boarders. It didn't do to fire a coherent light beam or high-energy projectile weapon within the skin of your own living ship. But *StarRacer* was dying, so a veritable light show erupted from the bridge as the Takisian crew hosed down the Ly'bahr.

The creature's gleaming skin reflected back the laser fire, adding to the deadly beauty of the moment. Another crewman went down screaming. Lasers were obviously a bad idea against Ly'bahr, and Tis didn't feel very optimistic about hitting that bulbous multilimbed body with a sword. She chambered a self-propelled grenade into the adjunct barrel of her laser rifle and fired.

It hit the creature dead amidships, and exploded in a very eye-satisfying display. Tis's helmet darkened to prevent momentary blindness from the flash. The grenade didn't penetrate the Ly'bahr's armor, but it did rip five of its appendages loose from their grip on *StarRacer's* hull. Tis didn't stay around to admire her handiwork. The barrel of several weapons were coming to bear on her, and in their current position the Takisians were just so many fish in a barrel.

The remaining crew were firing the maneuvering jets on their combat armor. The Ly'bahr was picking them off in a grotesque display that reminded Tis fleetingly of bug zappers in action.

Then Starshine popped up next to the Ly'bahr. Using his augmented strength, he drove his finger deep into one of the creature's optical sensors and projected the power of a star through his tissues.

The effect was stunning. Sparks came spitting through the joints and seams of the Ly'bahr's protective case. The weapons turret, set like a head atop the body, collapsed and then detonated, and Starshine wisely put several hundred meters between himself and the Ly'bahr as the entire bulbous body exploded in an eye-searing display. Armor casing flowered outward like petals unfurling, and in among the hard bits were softer body pieces of tiny Kondikki workers.

Cheers echoed in Tisianne's mind and radio as the surviving crew abandoned the trap of the shattered bridge.

Save it! came Zabb's curt order. *There's still another one to fight.*

As if it had been summoned by Zabb's telepathy, the second Ly'bahr rose slowly over the edge of *StarRacer's*

back. A beam of light resolved itself back into Starshine. This time the Ly'bahr was prepared, and its speed was comparable to Starshine's when the ace wasn't traveling at light-speed. Starshine released a beam of directed energy at the Ly'bahr, but the warrior was already moving, and it glanced harmlessly off the gleaming red surface. Maneuvering jets firing wildly, it spun like a dervish and fired several times at Starshine. His biological forcefield sucked the energy; but on the fourth and final round it flickered a degree less brightly.

The Takisians tried to help, but both Starshine and the Ly'bahr were moving so fast, it was difficult to aim. Zabb hung about the outskirts of the fight firing quickly and methodically at any protrusion, indentation, or antenna that might conceivably be a sensor or a weapon. Tis was a good shot, but she had never been trained for free-fall combat. She didn't know how to use the recoil of her own weapon to set her up for her next shot.

One of the crew was very sensibly screaming both telepathically and audibly over the radio for *help!* Starshine and the Ly'bahr were continuing to exchange laser and energy fire. Then suddenly the Ly'bahr spun and snagged Zabb with a long, trailing arm that ended in a claw. It was seeking to grapple, but the gadfly Takisian was too fast. Not fast enough, however, to avoid the blow. One claw tip caught Zabb's armor, and there was a quick white puff of escaping air. It lasted only seconds until the suit had made repairs.

Tis made a mental inventory of the weapons aboard *StarRacer*. She dived back into the now-dark interior of the dead ship. Switching on her lights, she groped through the corridors, down to the armory. A great wave of frozen ship material had been thrown up in front of the lockers. Tis cut it

away with her laser. Opening the locker, she pulled out a contact mine and made her way back out of the ship.

Starshine and the Ly'bahr were locked in a bizarre embrace, the Ly'bahr seeking to crush and break this strange flesh-and-blood creature. Starshine had both hands on one of the creature's encircling limbs. His teeth were set in a grimace, and his face had gone beet red as he exerted every bit of wildcard-enhanced strength he possessed. The Ly'bahr's arm ripped loose from the body, and Starshine spun free. His forcefield was flickering fitfully. It was a brief escape. Another metal arm lashed out like an uncoiling whip and caught the ace by the ankle. He allowed the creature to reel him back in; then he laid a hand against the Ly'bahr's "head," and gave it a jolt of his power.

"The stomach!" Zabb screamed. "Their brains are buried deep in the internal cavities of the body!"

Tis wasn't sure if Starshine could hear. Maybe he had caught that telepathic bellow. High, and to her left, Tisianne caught a glimpse of a Takisian ship.

The cavalry, she thought. But probably too late.

Clutching the flat disc of the mine to her chest, she approached from "behind" and "below" the Ly'bahr and prayed to the ancestors that Zabb had managed to damage some of its sensors. The monster clearly wasn't in very good shape, and as much as one could tell with a cyborg, its focus appeared to be totally on the tiny figure of the ace that had dealt it such damage.

Closer, closer. The body was only three meters away. Tis cut her maneuvering jets, allowing inertia to carry her the rest of the distance. There came a flash of terror as Zabb noted her position, then a mental hiccup as he forcibly kept his shout of alarm from reaching his lips. He didn't

want to alert the Ly'bahr, undoubtedly monitoring their communications.

Tis, I'll kill you!

She frenziedly explored the disc with her fingertips, finding the incised writing on one side. Just like a claymore -- "this side toward enemy."

There was no warning. Just an overwhelming wash of pain and terror that doubled her into a ball. *Starshine!* The mental thread that had been the ace snapped and was gone. The body of the Ly'bahr was wavering as she blinked tears. Her gloved fingertips brushed that shining body. She set the shaped charge against the side. Felt it take firm hold. Tis planted a boot against the Ly'bahr and *shoved*. Kicked in with her jets, backpedaling desperately. She had set the fuse for the shortest possible time.

One of the Ly'bahr's flexible limbs touched the mine. The other, which it needed to actually remove the device, had been torn away by Starshine. There was a spectacular explosion as the mine pierced the Ly'bahr's armor and ignited the air inside the shell. The Ly'bahr went tumbling end over end, away from Tisianne, propelled by the detonation.

Zabb and the surviving crew had surrounded Starshine. He was floating limply in space. The forcefield was down, there was nothing between the ace and vacuum. Tis wanted to scream at Zabb to *do something!* but there was nothing he could do.

Then the whorled gray walls of a ship slid up beside them. A lock cycled open, and the crew of the flagship *StarRacer*, towing a dying ace, shot aboard.

As soon as the outer door had closed, Tis tore off her helmet and began administering CPR to Starshine. There

was a large hole where his left hip ought to have been. The leg was hanging by skin and ligaments. There wasn't much blood. The icy lick of the vacuum had acted as a cauterizing agent.

"Breathe, *breathe*," she murmured as she applied pressure to the unmoving chest. She was losing him. She'd seen too many people die not to know.

Denial choked her. Again she pressed her mouth over his. Something strange was happening beneath her lips. Tis drew back and watched in horror as the Starshine flesh began melting away like a high-speed film of decomposition.

She spun away and found Zabb there to catch her. Welcome arms around her, a chest against which to bury her face. Tis felt him stiffen.

"Ideal."

She looked back. The rot ended, leaving Mark Meadows sprawled on the floor of the air lock. The inner door opened, and two crewmen tumbled through carrying an emergency medical kit. The bells in their beards were ringing wildly.

Tandeh, thought Tisianne as she ripped open the kit.
Thank you, Yimkin.

You are welcome. Now send your cousin up here.
We've still got Network ships to massacre.

Zabb went. Tis crammed a pressure bandage into the wound. She saw the shine of intestine before it was veiled by material.

She began CPR again. Lift the neck, clear the throat, breathe, begin. Eventually a pulse beat in the throat as the wound began to weep sluggish blood.

An hour later it was over. Ilkazam and her newfound allies rendezvoused back on the Ilkazam Ship Home. Zabb came searching for Tisianne in the infirmary. There wasn't an empty bed or biogerm bubble.

Tis was checking the readouts on Mark's bubble. Naked and suspended in the nutrient gel, the human had the look of a grotesque Halloween skeleton.

"I thought he was dead," Zabb said.

"Dead meat won't grow," was Tisianne's laconic reply.

"We saw Starshine die."

"Starshine's not Mark."

"Then what the hell was he?"

"How should I know?"

"You're the virus expert."

That raised too many contradictory emotions even to address. Tis changed the subject. "What did this little victory cost us?"

"Sixty ships, and one hundred twenty-three crew, but we gave them such a wallop that those bugs will be busy for weeks building new ships."

"Then they'll try again?"

"I'm rather afraid so."

He held out his arms to her, and she accepted the comfort offered.

Chapter Forty

"Tis, you have a comment?"

Tisianne stirred from where she sat curled like a kitten in the corner of the sofa in the *Raiyis's* office. Truth was, her mind had been wandering. Back home on Earth it was Christmas time. What would Illyana make of a Christmas tree? Or Santa Claus? Would she ever see them, or had her mother condemned her to death? They were two days past Blaise's deadline. And Tisianne felt a flash of grief and guilt that she had placed her world above her child. But Blaise had promised pieces, and so far no pieces had arrived. Maybe the threat had been no more than a bluff.

She couldn't bear this fruitless line of thought. Tis uncoiled and stood. The men sprawled about the office looked at her with bemused curiosity and respect.

"Well, I'm not a military person. It all sounds terribly splendid how you're going to isolate Blaise, and cut the Vayawand supply lines, and assault their ground forces."

"But? I hear a very large 'but' in all of this praise," Taj said.

"We could very easily win the victory and lose the war. Those numbers -- potential casualties -- which you are so blithely throwing about translate into people."

"*Tarhiji*," Zujj, the military commander of House Alaa said contemptuously.

"Yes, but there are a *lot* more of them than there are of us. And Blaise has empowered them. We're the reactionaries coming to take away the freedoms they have gained. A man who stands to lose everything is likely to

fight like a cornered badger... *zanjabii*," she amended to a Takisian creature of like disposition.

"Well, what else can we do? We have to restore the proper order."

Yimkin was the only *Raiyis* with the balls to have actually entered the territory of House Ilkazam. He shook his head, the bells braided into his lush, full beard ringing softly.

"We can't. Whether we like it or not, Blaise has forever altered this society. Unless we kill every *Tarhiji* above the age of five, they're not going to forget."

"Without them we have no economy," grunted Quar'ande of House Ss'ang.

"Selective mind wipe?" suggested Zujj.

It just solidified Tisianne's belief that most military men were basically very stupid. She didn't even have to respond. Zabb took it for her.

"There are roughly seven hundred million people on this planet. Are you going to volunteer to head this project?" Zujj flushed at the delicate lash of sarcasm wrapping each word.

"So what do we do?" Yimkin asked.

Tis yanked the jeweled combs from her hair and raked it back nervously with one hand. Zabb winced as the careful coiffure provided by her maid was harrowed.

"Somehow we must take the moral high ground from Blaise. We must offer the same franchise to the *Tarhiji* which he is offering, but preserve those elements of our culture which are dear to the *Tarhiji* as well as to us."

"That's lovely, Tis," Zabb said. "But social engineering will have to wait until the war's over."

"You don't like to hunt, do you Jay?"

Blaise sighted down the barrel of the overly long rifle and squeezed off a shot. The beautiful little creature grazing fifty yards away jerked straight into the air as the laser struck, collapsed. Jay realized the creature had been tethered. His breakfast gave an unquiet roll.

"No, I don't like guns."

"This is a very pretty gun."

Blaise offered it to the detective. Jay glanced with disinterest at the scrimshawed bone inlaid in the butt, jewels forming the eyes of fanciful carved Takisian critters.

"Make a great walking stick." Jay pushed it away clumsily with his fingerless hands. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I thought the point of hunting was giving the animal a sporting chance."

"No, the point of hunting is killing. If you're honest, you admit it. If you're not, you talk about the thrill of the chase, and all that other horseshit. But I'm not a hypocrite. I know I like to kill things."

"I like an honest psychopath." Even as the words fled past his teeth, his brain was screaming *stupid*.

Jay cringed as he saw the barrel of the rifle swinging around to bear on him.

"Jay, Jay, Jay," Blaise tsked. "What a funny fellow you are, but a little more of that, and I'll start thinking that you prefer my grandfather over me. You don't, do you Jay? We're such friends." So soft, so sweet, so crazy.

Jay cleared his throat. "Yeah, real pals."

Blaise frowned and drew his hand up and down the barrel of the rifle like a man masturbating. "I was probably hasty when I cut off your fingers. If you had them, I could send you back to House Ilkazam, and you could pop my grandfather to me. Tachyon's made a lot of problems for me. She's the one who wrecked my alliance."

"I thought you did that all by your little self. You're the one who called in the Network."

"Jay, don't make me doubt your loyalty."

"There's not going to be much left of this planet after you and the Network get finished fighting over it."

Blaise flashed him a happy smile. "Yes, that's right. And sooner or later Granddaddy will come. The brat will draw her."

"Glad you realized the kid was useful to you."

"For the moment. I decided it would be a lot more satisfying to kill her in front of Tachyon."

Blaise nuzzled his cheek against the rifle's stock and took aim. Jay turned and walked back toward the House. Behind him the rifle fired, and another animal died.

"You Ilkazam will ultimately conquer."

Tis stopped dead, stared at Bat'tam. "What?"

The noble gestured. "Look around you. This was *Rarrana*. Now it's a military hospital. Most Houses are so rigid. They would rather die than give up their traditions. You and your cousin have turned tradition on its head. So you'll survive -- and you'll ultimately win."

Tisianne surveyed the large sun room. Wounded soldiers representing the cream of man and neutered

womanhood of nine rival Houses played with Ilkazam children, talked, and were cared for by Ilkazam women.

"Tri'ava says it's all a cunning plot for House Ilkazam to raid the gene pool of the other Houses. But she always was a jokester."

"It may come to pass. I just hope it is not necessary to breed with the blind," Bat'tam said.

"That's a more difficult prejudice to overcome -- I feel it myself, but overcome it I suspect we must. And it could be beneficial. If our entire populace were mentats instead of a tiny percentage, we would be formidable rivals to the Network. Assuming the Network gives us time."

"Tisianne, forgive me, but I am too old to become a shopkeeper. I think I will continue to be an idle ornament."

They left *Rarrana* and continued to the medical facilities. Bat'tam had to stretch to keep up with her double quicksteps.

"You have missed your human very much."

"Yes."

"Have I been no help?" Bat'tam asked.

"You've tried, but you place too much pressure on me. You want too much from me."

"I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about."

Mark had been housed in Shaklan's old room as befitted a hero of the House. Tis lowered the bubble to the table and tried not to think about the last time she'd done this. Roxalana arrived as the last of the nutrient fluid was draining from the bubble.

Tis pulled back the clear material and gently removed the breathing apparatus, wiped Mark's face dry with a soft towel. The blue eyes opened, blinked in confusion. Tis smiled and slid the glasses back on Mark's nose.

"Welcome back, Mark, I've missed you."

"We have *a//* missed you," Roxalana said as she helped him to sit up.

The ace's mouth opened, and a grating sound emerged. He stretched wider, and out fell a series of nonsense sounds. Mark stared, terrified, at Tisianne. She wasn't in much better shape. She looked wildly to Roxalana.

Tis rushed to the monitors and began a medical check. The sounds Mark made were becoming more panicky by the moment.

"No sign of brain damage. No physical cause in the vocal cords. What is wrong with him?"

Roxalana cupped Mark's face between her hands and began a mental scan. He was calmer when she released him, but there was a wealth of pain and loss in the blue eyes. Mark glanced down and realized he was naked. Blood flared in his cheeks, and Bat'tam quickly covered Mark's privates with a towel.

"It's very puzzling. It's as if he has somehow lost control of his speech centers. There's no physical damage, but he can't string sounds into coherent words."

"Starshine was a poet. A man of words," Tis said slowly. "Perhaps the trauma of the death --"

"But what died?" asked Bat'tam. "Who are these individuals?"

"I'm not certain. I have suspected that Mark's wild card allows him to make various aspects of his personality manifest, but I've had no empirical evidence,"

"Until now," Roxalana said.

Her hands played through his long hair and tickled down his chest. She had very long nails, and they were inset with tiny jewels in a matching pattern to the ones on her face.

"I am glad you are coming to me now, my lord."

Kelly sighed, stretched. He was, he realized, finally accustomed to not only the weight but the *idea* of a penis. Flaccid now, it flopped across his thigh.

"A sex drive is a terrible thing. It's much greater for men, I think, than women -- or at any rate for this man." Kelly tapped his chest. "I didn't want to sleep with you, but you made sure I did, and I couldn't stop thinking about you."

Mon'aella reached down and stroked his cock. "With which head? The girl head or the boy head?"

Kelly rolled onto his side and stared into his wife's beautiful face. "Doesn't it bother you that I'm really a woman?"

"Why? If it would gain me anything, I would sleep with you whatever your plumbing."

"You Takisians are weird."

"Practical." She sat up and threw back her red-and-white hair. She reached over to the side table and snagged a clip. "Braid it, please. And besides, mating is very enjoyable whatever the sex of the partners."

"Mon'aella, I can't." He held out the prosthetic right hand.

"I keep forgetting. We must get that regrown." She began plaiting with quick, easy movements.

"I don't think Blaise has any intention of making my life any easier."

A small smile from his bride. "Blaise may not always be *Raiyis* of House Vayawand."

Kelly glanced about, alarmed. "Jesus, watch it!"

"Blaise doesn't play the Takisian game very well. He doesn't realize that spies are power, and now that his Morakh pet is out of favor, he lacks an adviser of subtlety."

Kelly chewed on his lower lip. "Durg was always saying that Blaise had no subtlety."

"He doesn't." The woman clipped the end of the braid and, smiling, laid a hand against Kelly's cheek. "This human --"

"Jay?"

"Yes. Is he your friend?"

"He's become one."

"Then I would take him, and his *Tarhiji*, and the child on some pleasant outing. I have noticed that our revered *Raiyis* lashes out at that which is in sight."

Kelly swallowed the knot in his throat and felt it hit the pit of his stomach like a lead weight. "Is... is he likely to be lashing out anytime soon?"

"I'd say in the morning."

"Why are you warning me? Why do you care?"

"Because I am of House Vayawand, and for seven thousand years my line can be traced. This mongrel, this abortion, is destroying our unique way of life."

Before she'd dropped out of high school and run away to New York, Kelly had remembered his American history teacher saying that was how the Southerners had justified slavery. He didn't think it was politic to bring this up to Mon'aella just now when she was being so nice to him.

"But I'm not Takisian."

"I don't care about your mind, darling. It's your body that matters. The genes you carry, that you'll pass to our children. We're going to rule Vayawand. Maybe even a bit more if we're cunning."

"This is the sight and sound and smell of victory Wonderful, isn't it?" Yimkin hawked and spat.

Looking at that quivering white glob of phlegm, combining it with the acrid scent of smoke and the cloying odor of burnt flesh was almost too much for Tisianne's stomach. She tasted the morning's breakfast before she forced it back down.

"This was not our fault." The words sounded weak.

"I'm not saying it is. It is just ironic that we had to destroy Lirat's capital city to save her."

It had taken a few weeks, but they were finally on the move. Tis kept calling it D day, and there were similarities -- it was the first time the Alliance had sought to penetrate the buffer of conquered Houses that protected Vayawand. Tisianne was a little depressed that her squabbling race could seem to pull together only in the face of outside threats -- the Network, Blaise -- but at least they were

united. And maybe something good would come of all the destruction. The Alliance High Command had managed to put aside House pride, rivalries, and jealousies, and operate by consensus. They were also mobilizing to *help* other Takisians. A big change on a world in which it was every House for itself.

Unfortunately the first House to receive this "help" had been destroyed by Blaise's retreating army. As a result the liberating Alliance was feeling pretty lousy.

Zabb dragged the toe of his boot through the scorched grass. "Blaise was here. It was by his personal command that the city was razed." It was the desperate plaint of a man desperately trying to excuse himself.

"Still so sure we should not take the fight directly to Vayawand?" Tis asked in a low tone. Zabb spun on his heel and walked away.

"Ongoing disagreement?" Yimkin asked.

Bat'tam answered when it became apparent Tisianne wasn't going to. "Lady Tisianne feels we must strike at the head. *Raiyis* Zabb..." He shrugged.

"Lady Tisianne is right. There are a great many cities, and the Abyss's own armies between us and Vayawand. If Blaise is going to scorch Takis behind him, we must stop going head to head with him and try encircling."

"Convince Zabb. I can't --" She was interrupted by a cry from the ships, *Incoming enemy!*

She and Bat'tam went running for cover. A panicked madness seemed to have fallen over the conquerors of Lira. People ran in all directions. Ships leapt into the sky. And Tis wondered where by the Ideal her medical team had gone to. "Incoming enemy" proved to be two Vayawand ships. The

ships of the alliance fired warning shots, and the two newcomers hovered and drew in their ghost lances. Everyone relaxed and returned sheepishly to what they were doing.

Tis and Bat'tam exchanged glances. Languidly the elderly man said, "Relatives from home. How marvelous. Perhaps they'll have a letter for me."

Zabb, Taj, and Yimkin were already deep in conversation with the five Vayawand nobles. The bridge of Zabb's new flagship was crammed with people. Tis ruthlessly applied elbows and hips until she had forced her way to the front.

The spokesman -- *Sekal*, Bat'tam provided telepathically, *he was one of the first to swear loyalty to Blaise* -- was weeping.

Bat'tam leaned down to whisper to Tisianne, "Looks like the sparkle is most definitely off that pearl."

My wife, daughters, sisters, all gone, all dead.

Sekal broadcast his distress to the assembled officers. There was an audible reaction. A rising murmur like a wind in tall pines as the Most Bred pulled the images of death and devastation from Sekal's mind.

The story came out in sharp, painful pictures. How Blaise had returned home from House Lirat, already angry because he'd been forced to retreat, and even the destruction of the House hadn't been enough to slake his bloodlust. Then had come the discovery that his wives had been poisoned. A death feast had raged in *Rarrana*. A few children had been saved.

ILLYANA!

Sekal looked at Tis for the first time, switched to the audible mode. "Your child is safe. The groundling and his woman were warned. They were away from the House when the killing started. But the wives..." The nobleman's voice began to crack. "All the wives... my wife... killed."

Mine too? thought Tis, giddy with relief at the news that Illyana was still safe. She blushed as she realized her imperfect shields had yet again sent the thought bleeding through the assemblage.

Taj stared at her from beneath his brows. "No, you're still married."

"Oh, grand," Tis said.

"There's some evidence it was the Lady Mon'aella who poisoned Blaise's women," Sekal said.

"Maybe she will make a decent addition to House Ilkazam," Taj mused.

Zabb pulled the discussion back to reality. "So what do you want from us?" he asked. He was seated on an extruded desk, negligently swinging one booted foot.

"Return our House. Free us from this monster, this abortion," Sekal replied in a voice gone ragged with hate.

"A monster of your own choosing," Zabb said softly.

Tis stepped forward. She was out of line, she didn't care. "Years ago you attacked my House, left my father in a living death. I think you deserve Blaise."

"Cousin," Zabb said placatingly.

"Now they want our help. I say it should cost them."

"If we do you this little favor," Zabb said, "House Vayawand becomes a cadet House to Ilkazam."

They almost refused. Then they looked back out the doors of the ship at the burned devastation of what had once been a proud city. Sekal shuddered, and nodded.

Chapter Forty-One

"Once we're in --"

"But that's going to be the real trick, now isn't it?" Taj asked.

"We've got a potful of renegade Vayawand here," Zabb countered.

"That's nice, but how are *they* going to get us in?" Taj shook his head. "Security is going to be too tight for an orbital drop. And a small raiding party trying to breach the perimeter defenses..." Taj let his voice trail off significantly.

Zabb smoothed his sideburns and leaned back in his chair. "We need some kind of ruse."

Tis slid off the sofa, walked over to stand behind Zabb's chair. "Like a Trojan Horse."

He read the meaning from her mind. "Exactly. We'd need a Vayawand ship, and someone they recognize."

"Who's not a traitor," Taj grunted.

Tis raked back her hair. "Our agents report that Blaise never leaves Vayawand anymore... only Durg. He goes to report on the fighting."

"So who pretends to be the Morakh monster?" Taj inquired. "Zabb is big, I admit, but not near big enough."

"We use Cosmic Traveler," Tis said.

"Who by the Abyss's cold hell is Cosmic Traveler?" asked Taj.

"Another one of Meadows's 'friends,' a most useful fellow," Zabb said. "He just might get us in."

"And then the real problems start," the older man said.

"What choice do we have, *vindi*?" Tis asked. "You've seen what Blaise is capable of. Do you want to fight him city by city? Blaise is suffering reversals on every front. I know him. He will want to get even. Kelly, Jay --"

"Your daughter," Zabb said, and lifted an eyebrow.

"Yes," she said shortly. "They're all in danger. We've got to bypass all these endless battles and capture him." She paused and looked to Zabb. "*Will* you capture him?"

They stared at each other. Softly Zabb said, "I renew my offer."

"I repeat my refusal. And offer this as surety -- give me what I want, and I will leave. Never return. Please, Zabb, let me go home."

He touched her cheek with a forefinger. "I promise I will capture him for you."

"This is all very wonderful," Taj said. "But the groundling is sitting in a private limbo. Doesn't talk, has to be mind-controlled before he'll eat."

"We have to get him back," Tis said.

"How?"

"I don't know, but we've got to think of something."

They were all gathered about Mark's bed in the infirmary. Roxalana had been reading to him, and she turned off the book as Tis and Zabb arrived. Tis noticed the bed was surrounded with bouquets of flowers, candy, and the offerings of children -- colored pictures, favorite stuffed animals. Mark had certainly had an effect on *Rarrana* during

his time there, and people -- especially the children -- were missing him.

The children had all been fascinated with the human: his enormous height, and his friendly, playful mien. Takisian males tended to be absentee fathers until their offspring were old enough to be interesting. "Interesting" translated into six or seven when you could teach them to ride, skate, dance, ski, shoot. Otherwise any meaningful contact between children and adults was with women. But Mark had loved the little ones, and he showed infinite patience as he looked at their pictures, played their games, listened to their innocent confidences.

Roxalana looked at the briefcase Tisianne was carrying, and her brows drew together in a sharp frown. "What is that for?"

"I'm going to test a theory."

"On Mark? Oh, no, you're not. You just give him time."

"We've run out of it," Zabb said.

"Melant's making progress," Roxalana argued.

Zabb looked at the human, locked in his gray and private world. "Oh, really?"

"I think Mark is suffering not only from the shock of losing Starshine, but from guilt," Tis said. "He had a theory his 'friends' were people he possessed and in effect kidnapped from another dimension. I think if we can summon Flash, he can talk some sense into mark."

"You're insane. Do you realize the risk you are running? Mark explained to me that if anyone else tries to take these powders, they will die. How do you know the loss of Starshine hasn't left him in the same situation?"

"I don't, Lani."

"Blaise's armies are falling back everywhere. A little patience and Vayawand will fall. Why do you have to endanger Mark?"

"Because with each day that passes, and each defeat inflicted, four other lives are placed at greater and greater risk."

"And putting aside Tisianne's selfish desire to see her friends, body, and baby rescued -- each one of these victories is costing us dearly," Zabb said. "I'll sacrifice anyone if we can end this sooner rather than later."

Roxalana just looked at them for a long, long time.

Then she stood and said, "Sometimes I hate us because nothing and no one is very precious to us."

The House, *vindi*," Zabb said softly. "There is always the House."

"Demons take the House! It's made up of individuals, but we always forget that. Well, kill him if you must," and she walked to the far wall.

Tisianne removed a vial of orange powder. A flicker of alarm showed in Mark's sunken eyes.

"Mark, I wouldn't do this if I didn't believe it would work," Tis said softly.

The ace stretched out a trembling hand and lightly touched the three remaining vials of yellow powder. Roxalana came flying back across the room like a fury, snatching up the vials. She flung them against the wall. They shattered in an eruption of sparking glass shards and powder.

"My, that was dramatic," Zabb drawled. "Any particular reason for that display?"

"Not *those*. Not the yellows. I just... feel it will kill him."

Tis was shivering. She hugged herself and looked desperately at Lani. "Do you sense anything about Flash?" Her sister shook her head.

They were both hesitating. Zabb took command of the moment. Mind-controlling Mark, he forced the ace to down the orange powder.

Mark burst into flames.

In less than a second the bed was a blazing inferno. Zabb cursed and stepped backward, shielding his face from the heat. Roxalana shrieked, grabbed up a blanket, rushed forward to smother the fire. Tis caught her by the arm, stopped her. "Wait," she said.

Inside the flames Mark's body blackened, shriveled... and then, somehow, began to drink in the fire. The flames flickered, faded, and were absorbed.

When the last of them went out, J. J. Flash, Esquire, was stretched out casually in the ashes of the bedclothes, hands locked behind his head.

"I hate hospitals," Flash announced. He rose. "So you want me to kick Meadows's butt, huh? Okay, give us some time alone. Granted I can't prose and drone like the deader, but I'm pretty persuasive." He looked over at Roxalana. "Don't suppose you could stay, could you? The drip's fallen big-time for you. A little reminder of life and love?"

Tis exchanged an incredulous glance with her cousin as Roxalana held out her hand to Flash and said, "I'd be delighted."

An hour later, when Mark returned to himself, he had a very bad feeling that Flash had been terribly wicked. When it penetrated that he was lying naked in the hospital bed with Roxalana curled up next to him, he was sure of it.

He sat up abruptly. The sheet slid down. He yanked it back up. "What did he do?" he blurted, and then froze.

Roxalana serenely pushed back her hair and, propping herself on an elbow, stared down into his face. "He was very persuasive." Mark gaped at her.

His bathrobe and pajamas were a knotted mess on the floor. He snatched them up and tried to dress beneath the sheets. It didn't work too well. It really didn't work when she slid her hands under his ass and yanked the pajama bottoms back down to his ankles.

"Need some help?" He stuttered out a few noises. "Don't lose your voice again." She fished out the robe and tossed it back on the floor. "Flash is mentally... fatiguing. I like the whole of Mark Meadows much better than the individual parts. Now, take off those pajamas and tell me how remarkable I am."

Despite her exhortation, Mark told her with hands and lips rather than words. The cosmic cheering section had all bellied up to observe -- and comment -- and there was still this aching void where Starshine used to live, but it was bearable pain now.

Much, much later, as Mark gathered his clothes and began to dress, Roxalana sat up and shook back her hair.

"Thank you," she said.

"Thank *you*."

She shrugged off his gratitude. "Mark, now that you have a tongue again, do please get control of my wayward

brother. I'm afraid she's going to get himself killed."

Insomnia had become a constant companion, and even copious amounts of alcohol no longer cured it. Mon'aella had suggested pills. Kelly had sweetly inquired if she was going to repay him for saving her life by enticing him into a drug overdose. His wife's lips had curved in a small, secretive smile that sent Kelly back to the company of Jay Ackroyd.

"If Blaise doesn't kill me, she will."

"Why should she?" the ace asked logically.

"You're right, there's not enough in it for her... yet."

"And Blaise still likes pulling the wings off you."

"Problem is, I'm developing a stinger. I'm getting too powerful."

And that was the truth. It had terrified him, but on that hideous day, as children screamed and women died, Kelly had placed himself between Blaise and Mon'aella.

Blaise in a rage lost all connection to humanity. His face became a twisted mask, the eyes unfocused and staring. They had struck like rutting stags, though neither one of them moved a foot toward the other. Instead their powers had clashed, steel on steel. But Kelly was no longer the terrified teenager of a year ago. Since the night of the Crossing Festival, and Tachyon's short course in mentatics, Kelly had been studying.

It took only one setback to discourage Blaise. He wanted blood, and the gore that caked his hands and forearms wasn't enough. Denied Mon'aella, he went in search of easier prey. As he left, he threw back a garbled curse at his "grandfather." And Kelly realized some of the

virtu that had cloaked Tachyon and held Blaise in check had been bestowed on the frightened interloper in Granddaddy's body.

"My hero." That was what Mon'aella called him as she laid her hands on his shoulders.

Sickened by her hypocrisy, Kelly had replied that he should have let Blaise kill her. That would have wrecked her perfect plan. Mon'aella had only laughed, and Kelly realized that a little matter like death didn't deter Takisians. She had succeeded in her goal -- Blaise's wives, and the children they were carrying, were dead. Blaise had unleashed a murderous vengeance and alienated many of his Vayawand supporters. And Mon'aella was just that much closer to controlling House Vayawand.

"You don't like me, but you need me," had been his bride's parting shot.

The night was a nice one. *Tiana*, the smaller moon, was scraping its belly across the tops of the mountains. Soon it would set, and Kelly would be alone with his voices, his memories, his fears, and his friend. Reminded, Kelly took another pull off the bottle.

The situation was becoming really desperate. Jay was having nightmares virtually every night. Half the time he fell out of bed. That wasn't so bad. The other half of the time he wet the bed. That was pretty bad. His hands were looking really gross. There were red streaks in the palms, and Blaise wouldn't allow a doctor to examine him. Kelly had seen enough on the farm to recognize infection. He and Hastet made the ace soak his mutilated hands in hot, hot water, but the red kept creeping inexorably toward the wrist. Jay had been traumatized enough losing his fingers. How would he react to losing his hands? And who was going to do this amputation?

Kelly shivered and took another drink. No, he had to think of something. Had to find some means of escape for all of them. Otherwise they were going to die. It's very difficult to censor news when there is a planet-wide uplink. Blaise had tried, but it was still leaking through -- rumors of massive defeats and enormous casualties. And with each setback the mad light burned brighter and brighter in those dark eyes.

Baby was the only ace Kelly even remotely possessed. The ship had survived the Ilkazam assault on Vayawand Ship Home because her new master had been off trying yet again to rebreak her, bend her to his will. Occasionally Kelly could read flashes of *Baby's* thoughts, even over the thousands of miles to orbit, but the ship was so far too terrified to act.

"Doctor," Kelly said aloud to the darkness. "You better come quick because I don't know how much longer I can keep us together and alive."

Tisianne had barely gotten the words out before Mark was shaking his head and saying, "Don't look to me, man."

"And who else am I supposed to look to, pray?" It sounded angry. Probably because she was. Not the way to achieve what she wanted. "Without you, we fail." No response. "What about Jay?" she coaxed. "Illyana?"

"I won't be part of any more killing."

"This will be a raid, not a battle."

"People are still going to die."

"Some... yes, but if we stop Blaise now, ultimately a lot fewer people will die."

"This isn't the way to handle it, man. The violence just feeds on itself. We had to stop the Network, and all that accomplished was to kill Starshine."

"It also stopped the Network, and I seem to recall you volunteering," Tis said softly. "So don't keep blaming me."

"A part of *me* died!"

"How very fortunate you are. Only a part? I've lost everything!"

Mark stood and walked away from Tis, her anger, and her arguments. "Violence never solves a damn thing."

"What a brainless, spineless, *stupid* thing to say! It sure as hell broke Sprout out of the juvie home. And stopped the Swarm. And freed me from the Rox. And, as you mentioned, stopped the Network. You could at least have the guts to say what's really on your mind."

Mark whirled on her. "All right, I'm scared! I've already lost one friend. You think I'm going to risk another one?"

"All I need is Traveler, and he's such a coward he won't *let* anything happen to him."

"You can't conceive of what's happened to me."

"You're right, I can't. Any more than you can conceive of what's happened to *me*."

Mark paced, stopped by the dresser, and fiddled with the brushes, pins, combs, pots, and boxes. Stooped and stared at his hangdog features in the mirror, ran his hands down his cheeks as if trying to strip the sadness away.

"I can't understand poetry anymore. It's just a collection of words. I'll certainly never write it again."

Her mouth had a mind of its own. Before she was aware, the words were out. "That's not such a tragedy. Did you ever *read* any of Starshine's poetry?" Their eyes met in the mirror. His wide with shock, hers contrite. "Oh, Ideal, I'm sorry, that was --"

Mark was laughing. Dry, rusty sounds exploding out of his throat, his whole body jerking with the force. Tisianne stared at him in consternation.

"You're right, Jesus, you're right. It was really pretty bad."

"Oh, Mark." She moved to him, wrapped her arms around his waist, and pressed her head against his chest. "I do love you so."

"When this is over, when you're back where you belong --"

"You'll go back where you belong, Mark, I swear it."

A basement room. At each end a door. Between them a rough block wall, and in each concrete cinder block a screaming mouth. Sound dripped onto the floor, leaving her naked body cold and wet. Blaise was coming, heels drumming on the floor, turning her bones to water. A door opened. Zabb peered in, his hand resting on the knob.

"This way out," he said cheerfully.

Tisianne glanced to the other door. The footfalls were closer.

"That way pain," said a bleeding mouth with Cody's voice.

"Death," said another with Blythe's voice.

"Last chance," said Zabb.

"I can't. I need more time!" Tis cried.

Soft breathing in the darkness. She was instantly awake, laid her hand on the laser pistol resting by the bed. Recognized him by the scent. Relaxed back among pillows.

"What are you doing here?"

"Answering the call." Zabb found the edge of the bed with the back of his knees and sat down.

"I'm sorry, bad dream."

"Ancestors, Tis, can't you learn a little control? You were bellowing like an orphaned *ral*."

"I didn't realize... you could hear." She twisted the sheet between her fingers. "I didn't realize... I wanted you."

"Well, now I'm here. Do you still want me?"

Tisianne held out her arms to him.

"You're very efficient at that," she remarked as he swiftly shed clothes and joined her beneath the covers.

"Long practice."

They kissed. Several minutes later Tis fell back with a sigh. "It's hard to be sure, but taking into account the shorter Takisian day, I think tomorrow is my one-year anniversary in this body."

"Sorry, but I don't think I can arrange to have you returned by day's end tomorrow."

"I don't expect it. I was just making conversation."

"Don't, let's make love instead."

Some time later as she lay back replete, savoring the warm heaviness throughout her body, she heard snow begin to peck at the windows. Far to the south it was summer in

Vayawand. She wondered about Jay, and Hastet, and Illyana. And Kelly. Sometimes she imagined she could sense him.

Zabb lifted his mouth from an in-depth exploration of her left nipple and said, "I'm going to miss you."

She didn't pretend to misunderstand. "You could still have me."

"No, we both like girls too much."

"True."

He slid onto her. Pushed a knee insistently between her thighs, parted them. Grinned down into her face. "But I don't think you're going to forget me any too soon."

"No. And I'm going to miss you too."

Chapter Forty-Two

Air-raid sirens over House Vayawand. For an instant Kelly dithered -- run to Jay and Hastet and baby, or outside to investigate? Something drew him out.

The wall batteries had opened up and were laying down a withering fire across the night sky. There were seven ships playing quick tag with the ground-to-air fire and shooting at a lone Vayawand ship that was diving and weaving.

Kelly grabbed a running guard. "What is it?"

"Ilkazam."

That was very interesting. As Kelly watched, an Ilkazam ship blew a spine off the Vayawand ship, and the ground batteries blew it in turn to its ancestors. He tried a brief telepathic probe, but there was mentatic static filling the overmind. He knew it was a battlefield technique designed to disrupt telepathic communications, but it seemed awfully convenient in this situation.

Kelly turned and bolted back into the House.

"Ideal, Rowan," Tach said, talking to the captain of the pursuing Ilkazam ship. "You're not really supposed to shoot us down!" Tis gasped as the Vayawand ship bucked and shook under another hit.

Zabb didn't respond to her. His face was a mask of concentration as he tried to hold the captured ship on course. Cosmic Traveler/Durg sat before the holoscreen.

"Password," the defense officer was requesting.

The soul eater who had devoured the mind of the Vayawand captain supplied it. "Stalin." The deep male voice emerging from the woman's throat was horrifying.

Tis stared into the soul eater's empty eyes, shuddered, and looked away. It was a rare gift -- if such a term could be applied to a power so grotesque -- and trust Zabb to make certain his elite team contained one. Soul eaters didn't last very long. The toll on mind and body destroyed their mentatic ability in a very few years. Tisianne would refuse to train the gift if it surfaced. Which was probably a good indication of why Zabb was *Raiyis* of House Ilkazam, and she wasn't.

There was a silence that stretched for an eternity. Then the defense officer said, "Preparing to drop the field. Come in fast, Durg bo Blaise."

Traveler's powers, in addition to insubstantiality, included a remarkable impersonation ability, but it didn't include things like memories or voices. Tisianne stiffened with concern, but Traveler merely grunted; fortunately, it seemed a sufficiently Morakhian response. The ship dropped sickeningly, then abruptly leveled off, and they were down. Spies in the field had reported that the real Durg was traveling with only thirty soldiers, so the invaders had to scale back from their initial fifty.

Every one of the elite troop was a mentat. Zabb pulled them all into a TacNet, and they burned out the cortex of their captured ship. It was necessary to keep the ship from giving the alarm, but that didn't make it easier. The troops were quickly mustering, Tis slung her assault rifle and tried to ignore the itch caused by the jewels pasted on her face. It wouldn't bear close scrutiny, but hopefully they weren't going to stand still long enough or linger long enough for

anyone to notice. And they did have a real Vayawand noble with them. Bat'tam had insisted on accompanying them.

"Can this possibly work?" Tis said softly as the outer door of the ship was slowly cycling open. "A force of twenty-nine men and women and one groundling to assault an entire House."

"Probably not." Zabb grinned down at her. "But what a tale it will make."

"Would you mind terribly much if we lived to hear it? I've always thought the concept of a dead hero was something of an oxymoron."

Zabb closed a hand around her throat and pushed back her head. "Second thoughts?"

She veiled her eyes with her lashes. "A few."

"It's not too late to back out." He ran the tip of his thumb across her lips.

"Yes, it is."

"One last time for luck," he said softly as he bent for a kiss.

Tis laid the tips of her fingers across his mouth. Held him at bay. "Better, I think, that we start weaning ourselves from this sort of behavior."

It hurt him. He hid the hurt with a shrug, and a cocky, "Don't trust your resolve. I understand I have that effect on women."

The door was open. "On cousins too," Tis said softly to his back as he descended the ramp.

"Let's go."

Jay looked up at Kelly. "Is that a gun in your pocket, or are you just glad to see me?"

The man gaped, glanced down at the bulge, back to Jay. The detective set aside his *ysan*, pulled out the waistband of Kelly's trousers, and fished out the gun. He had gotten surprisingly deft with his stumps.

"Never." He shook the laser under Kelly's nose for emphasis. "Never stick a gun down the front of your pants. You'll shoot off something you'd rather not lose. Tachyon'll sure as hell be pissed if you shoot it off, and I don't know if even the Takisians can grow back a dick. Now, is there some reason you're running around like Rambo?"

"We're being rescued."

Jay glanced around. The sirens had fallen silent.
"Really?"

"Yes."

"Truly?"

"Yes!"

"How'd you get the gun?"

"Knocked out a guard."

"Oh, good."

Kelly tapped his temple. "With this."

Jay sighed. "I could say something. You know how to use a gun?"

"Vaguely."

"Well, point it vaguely in the direction vaguely away from me. So what's the plan?"

"We get out of here. Keep moving until they find us."

"Moving is going to make us harder to find."

"Harder for Blaise too."

The mention of the sociopathic young man galvanized Jay into action. "It's a wonderful plan. I'm in love with this plan." Jay moved to the door of the bedroom. "Hasti, we're blowing this scene."

She emerged with Illyana over her shoulder. "Does that mean we're leaving?"

Jay cocked a thumb over his shoulder. "Rambo here seems to think so. Says the marines have landed."

"Are they part of the Network?" Hastet asked.

"No, they're... never mind."

"It's clear," Kelly called softly from the door.

They slipped into the corridor.

The plan was simple. Taj and the bulk of the force were designated to take out the defense center and open the way for a quick rescue by ships of House Ilkazam. Zabb and Tisianne, with Traveler impersonating Durg, would go directly to the office of the *Raiyis* and seize Blaise. So far they were doing great. They were into the House proper, and no one had spared them so much as a glance. Bat'tam was leading the way to the *Raiyis's* office.

And then Durg vanished.

Mark Meadows stood blinking owlshly in the center of the corridor. *Now* they were getting looks. The four passersby in the hall went down to the combined assault of twenty-eight minds.

"Oh, bummer, man," Mark moaned. "I short-sleeved Traveler so he couldn't, like, lock me in a closet or something. Guess I got a little short." The tall ace had pulled out another vial of the blue-and-silver powder.

"No good," Zabb said. "One of them got off the alarm. Our little ruse is over."

Mark dropped the vial back into his pouch and fished out Moonchild. Downed the powder, and the Korean ace appeared.

"Lovely," Zabb said. "But does she do anything other than look attractive?" Moonchild stepped into a shadow and vanished. "Useful."

"Well, troops," Taj sang out. "To the fight. Pity, I had discovered in myself a great desire to live long enough to become an *Ajayiz'et*." He shook his head and sighed.

"House Tandeh's on an island, isn't it? I want to drown them like rats." Blaise unclasped his hands from behind his back. Turned back to face the holoscreen. "There's got to be a way to do that. Make a tidal wave." He waved a hand vaguely. "Do something."

Durg, five hundred miles out from House Vayawand, his heart and mind heavy with the knowledge of the alliance arrayed against them, forced his mind to work, his mouth to speak. "Perhaps, my lord, such wholesale destruction is not warranted."

"They betrayed me, Durg. They're going to pay for it."

"Your scorched-earth policy backlashed against us in Alaa. Besides, House Tandeh is a wealthy one. Conquest of a mud flat is not in your best interests."

"I'm rich. I don't care."

Durg took a grip on his fast-vanishing patience.
"Others will, however."

"And they don't mean shit. *I'm* all that matters. I'm the man who conquered Takis."

"A slight exaggeration." He had gone too far. Durg could see it in the whitening of Blaise's nostrils. He knew he would be returning home to pain.

Someone entered the room out of holo range. Blaise looked to his left. Durg heard a voice reporting, "My lord, intruders have penetrated the House. Troops are assaulting defense central."

Blaise whirled back to face the holoscreen. His jaw was working. "Durg, get your ass back here *now*. Kick it."

So the monster had not forgotten that Durg was essential to his security. He hadn't lost sight of that -- *yet*. Durg began to bow, only to find himself addressing an empty stage. Blaise had cut him off.

Durg issued a command to the *Zal'hma at' Irg* captain, and the ship leapt ahead. How much longer could he control his creation? Prince Tisianne and Durg's farmer master, *Raiyis* Zabb, had proved cleverer than expected, Blaise more erratic. *From the jaws of victory we snatched defeat*. An Earth expression he'd heard from a student dining in the Cosmic Pumpkin.

An edge of pain etched its way into his psyche. Memories of a man who had treated him with the most kindness Durg had ever met in his life. A woman who had defeated him, returned his life, and given him respect.

"Looks like the cavalry is riding toward Little Bighorn," Jay remarked as the throbbing howl of an alarm sounded

and armed troops double-timed through the corridors. "So what now, General?"

Kelly had been swinging his head back and forth like an agitated horse. Now he froze, his eyes going blank. "This way," he said, snapping out of it.

One good thing. Nobody paid the slightest bit of attention to them as they rushed through the House. Then it struck Jay. They were going *back* to their suite.

"Oh, gosh, this was pleasant, wasn't it, honey? Just a little late-night jog around the House."

"Don't be such a smartass." The human word dropped like a turd. Jay had been teaching Hastet English -- it was a real shame she was such a good student.

"They're meeting us there," Kelly said tersely.

Illyana woke up and began making a fanny little sound halfway between a cry and a laugh. The trio raced back through the door of the suite. Tisianne and Bat'tam were waiting.

Tis flew to Hastet. She laid the baby in Tisianne's arms. Illyana's tiny fist batted her mother firmly on the chin, and she gurgled. Kelly was in Bat'tam's arms being affectionately patted. Since hugs seemed indicated all around, Jay hugged Hastet. When he lifted his head, Kelly and Tisianne were twined in an embrace with the baby between them.

"That kid is going to be so disturbed," Jay said to Hastet. To the others. "Hate to interrupt this love fest, but did you have some idea about how you're going to get us out of here?"

They had managed to take out the main power line feeding electricity from Vaya to the House. Then the backup generators had kicked in, filling the rooms and corridors with a sickly red emergency light. Taj, Zabb, Moonchild, and the Ilkazam troops were pinned down at the intersection of three corridors. A sharp ninety-degree turn, and ten meters down the left hall, was the last remaining entrance into the basement complex and the defense center. The Vayawand troops had blown the other two stairways and the six elevators, forcing the attackers to run down a bare corridor and then descend a staircase under withering fire from the defending Morakh soldiers.

Taj fed a grenade into his launcher and sent it down the hall. It armed in time to blow a large hole out of the right wall, and destroyed a priceless tapestry. Zabb cocked an eyebrow at the older man.

"Feel better?"

"A little. They burned my Rameer seascape when they invaded Ilkazam."

Baz called from the rear of the platoon. "My ass is becoming decidedly chilly as I wait for the arrival of the enveloping troops."

"Cover it, Baz," Zabb said cheerfully.

"I haven't anything or anyone to hand, sir."

Taj looked at Zabb. "You shouldn't be wasting time with us. Better that you locate Blaise and leave us to fight. Take Blaise, and they *may* see us as liberators. Decide to stop shooting at us."

Baz sang out from the rear, "Just thought I'd mention... a blanket of withering firepower is about to descend upon us."

"The Doctor is wandering without defense. Since I will not take life, it is best that I find and guard her," Moonchild offered.

Zabb hesitated. "We're in a pretty mess," Taj nudged. "I think an orderly retreat in the midst of complete disaster is indicated."

"We must take the defense center," Zabb caviled.

"And I would be charmed to do it for you, sir," said Taj in a tone of abject humbleness. "But there are fifteen of the Morakh monsters at the bottom of those stairs. Also, the finest armor can be breached, and unlike an ace, I am not bullet proof --"

"All right, Uncle, I get the point." With more haste than grace they regrouped and went charging across one corridor, and down the left branch of another. Laser fire snapped and snarled from the stairwell, licking at their heels.

Durg led his men at a quick trot. After landing at the compound, Durg had received the reports -- the arrival of a Vayawand ship carrying him. *Ah, Cosmic Traveler*, the Morakh correctly identified -- the sudden assault on the defense center which thus far the Vayawand were repelling. Sifting through the reports of actual contact with the intruders and readings by the menspies, it seemed that Ilkazam had not come in force, and the defenders had already accounted for eleven of them.

Durg had rushed to Blaise's office prepared to guard the young man and had received the inexplicable and dangerous order to take the remaining invaders alive. The boy was seized with the notion that his grandfather *was* among the invaders. Durg thought it unlikely. Who was

present among the attackers was Durg's former master. The very boldness and audacity of the strike screamed of Zabb. Which left Durg with an interesting problem of how to effect this capture. Anything obvious like sleep gas Zabb would have already addressed.

Then Blaise had tossed his final bombshell. "*Go to Kelly's suite. Get my brat. Bring her here.*" So with one of the finest military minds on Takis roaming at large through the House, Blaise had sent Durg and a squad to the human's chambers to take custody of a three-month-old infant.

They had almost reached the door to Ackroyd's suite when a slender figure disengaged from the shadows. A hand closed down hard on Durg's chest, stopping his breath and filling him with pain.

"I always seem to be protecting the Doctor from you," said Isis Moonchild in her delicate wind-chime voice.

From the corner of his eye, Durg caught sight of a gun being raised. His hand lashed out, gripped the barrel, bore it down. The beam cut a ten-inch hole in the parqueted marble floor.

"You abandoned me," Durg said in a voice so ragged he didn't recognize it as his own.

"I never meant to." Soft and sad. "It is probably far too little, and far too late, but I am sorry." They continued to stand and regard one another for several more moments.

Behind Durg the squad shifted nervously. There was not a telepath among them, so Moonchild was safe from an attack so subtle that even Durg could not sense it. Confusion rippled through his nerves and muscles, fluttered deep in the gut. *Protect her? Kill her?*

Moonchild flexed her knees, shook back her midnight fall of hair. "If we must fight, let us get to it." And then she waited. Challenging him to bring the fight to her. Refusing to harm him except in self-defense.

The memory was so strong, it replaced reality. Shone like a waking dream across the shadowed corners of his mind and heart. The Cosmic Pumpkin Head Shop and Organic Deli. Durg wiping down tables. Sprout riding his shoulders, shrieking with delight. Mark struggling to assemble a tofu burger for the lone customer in the restaurant. But what overrode the memory was the emotion it raised. *He had been happy there.*

The barrel of the laser rifle was still gripped in his hand. Durg ripped it out of the soldier's hands, swung it up. Firing from the hip, he mowed down the troops clogging the hall behind him. Screams of pain and terror ripped the air. Those left standing put their feet to good use and fled down the corridor. Durg pursued them, sobbing and shooting. Behind him came her quick steps, like a shadow's dance. He tried to outdistance her... and memory.

"What's happening?" Jay asked.

"I don't know." Tis was peering cautiously into the hail. "There are a number of dead Vayawand soldiers out here."

"A promising sign," said Bat'tam.

"I would feel better if I knew who killed them."

"Any enemy of theirs is a friend of ours. Right?" Jay pushed the door shut again with the stumps of his fingers.

"Far too simplistic an attitude for Takis," Bat'tam said.

Hastet snapped the flap on a self-heating bottle and handed it to Tisianne, who was pacing and rocking her child.

"Personally," Hastet said, "I'm beginning to feel rather like left luggage. I hope someone comes and claims us soon."

"But it may be Blaise," Kelly said.

"We can't just keep waiting here. If we can get through a gate, we can take our chances in the open country," Tis said.

"How did you all intend to get out of here had the plan gone as planned?" Hastet asked.

"Take out the defense center. Call in our ships." Tis slipped the nipple into Illyana's tiny mouth. Despite the graveness of their situation, she couldn't help smiling. The baby's eyes snapped open. There was a very wise expression in those beautiful aquamarine eyes.

"Why can't you do that anyway?" Kelly asked.

"The defensive equipment is designed to detect genetic markers that are unique to enemy ships. They'll be destroyed on entry."

Kelly paced, nervously plaiting a small strand of red hair. "What about captured ships? What do they do to them?"

"Rebreak them and implant an artificial gene marker."

"So they read like a Vayawand ship?"

"Yes."

"So let's call *Baby*." For a stunned moment all they could do was stare. Kelly shifted selfconsciously. "I can't do it alone, but you can coach me, and when she hears you, Doctor, she'll come running."

"Can you override her retraining?" Bat'tam asked.

Tis removed the bottle to push back a hanging strand of hair. Illyana registered disapproval with a sharp yelp. "We can but try," Tis said, and shoved the bottle back into her demanding daughter's mouth.

It hurt so bad. He had looked back once, realized his leg ended in a charred and ragged stump two inches above the knee. He crawled across the blood-slick floor in search of the missing limb. Maybe if he found it, they could sew it back on. He realized he was delirious. Then he realized he was dying. He wanted to find her before the end. To see if he'd done well. Durg began dragging himself up the stairs. The smell of blood and cooked flesh lay in his throat and threatened to choke him. He laid his head down on the edge of a step. He'd rest just for a minute.

The rattle of boot heels. Durg heaved himself up with a snarl, braced on his knuckles. He stared into the barrel of a rifle.

"No!" *Her voice.*

Men ran past, thundering down the stairs.

Another voice sang out, "Defense center secured, sir." Then he added, in a little boy's voice, "They're all dead."

Hands soft and gentle on his face. Durg's arms were trembling with strain. Moonchild caught him as he collapsed. Blood from the wounds in his back smeared across her jumpsuit.

The perfume of her hair almost blotted the scent of death. "I turned... for you... I turned."

"I know. Hush, now." Tears clogged her voice.

"No one... weeps for a... Morakh." He looked up into that beautiful face. "Grant me... your forgiveness."

Moonchild nodded, bent, and softly kissed his lips.

How something as big and inflexible as a Takisian ship could wriggle with delight was a mystery to Jay, but *Baby* was managing. Light flared and coruscated across the whorls and folds of her outer skin. The lavender and amber running lights mounted on the spines of her back were bright enough to throw shadows.

"Go," Tisianne was saying. "*Baby* has her orders. She will carry all of you to the neutral station." Tisianne tenderly kissed the top of her child's head and laid Illyana in Hastet's arms. "Let her never forget I loved her."

"What about you?" Jay asked.

"I must find Blaise."

"I'm going with you," Kelly piped up.

Bat'tam cleared his throat. "I have a rather tenuous claim to the heirship of House Vayawand. This seems like a good time to present it. So carry on without me."

"Maybe you haven't noticed, but inside that masonry pile people are shooting at each other," Jay said "I don't think it's a real good time to launch a political campaign." Bat'tam just shrugged apologetically. "Why do you all want to be a bunch of heroes?" Jay concluded on a whine.

"Injured as you are, there is nothing you can do, Jay. Go!" Tis ordered.

Jay hesitated for an instant longer, then Hastet grabbed his arm and dragged him up the ramp. The lock cycled shut and the ship shot skyward.

Jay tottered onto a bench. "Aw, hell," he burst out suddenly. "They're all gonna get killed, and we'll get stuck

with the kid."

There was an air of arrogant insouciance to the wide-open door that rather appealed to Zabb. However insane he might be, Blaise possessed *virtu* to an extraordinary degree. Single-handedly he had warped the face of Takisian society. Tisianne believed forever; Zabb was hopeful such was not the case.

Then it struck Zabb: the door was an enticement, a spider's lure, and the trap set for Tisianne. *Well, he's in for a surprise*, he thought with satisfaction. Zabb had been surprised at the ease with which he deflected Tis from her pursuit of Blaise, but biology had worked to Zabb's advantage. The lure of Illyana was too great. And realistically Tis couldn't stand against Blaise. Zabb believed he could.

Nothing could quell Zabb's hatred of the man who waited beyond that threshold. Twice Zabb had held his cousin as she slept her unquiet sleep, and read in her dreams the horrors that Blaise had visited upon her. Now the monster was going to pay.

Zabb stepped through the door.

Blaise turned, and the dark purple eyes widened briefly in surprise. He lunged for the archaic Earth weapon that rested on the desk. Zabb lashed out with his mentatic power -- felt it strike, hold briefly, then slip, under the onslaught of Blaise's own mental strength. It had been enough to get Zabb across the room, his hand gripping Blaise's wrist. Killing Blaise would have been easy. Capturing him another matter. Blaise was battering not only at Zabb's body, but at his mind. The Takisian had no strength for a counterattack; every bit of his mentatic power was given over to defense.

Blaise's breath puffed hot in Zabb's face. Their minds were knotted, everything that either one had ever done or known was shared. Tisianne lay between them. Memories of love and memories of rape coiled and shattered against each other.

Blaise's lips skinned back in a grimacing smile. "Didn't I teach her great for you?" he whispered.

Rage exploded in Zabb, and for an instant his concentration broke. Blaise was in his mind. Desperately Zabb threw up a death lock and forced the abomination back out. Blaise would have to kill him to pierce these shields, and the fight on the physical plane was going to end far earlier than their mentatic duel.

Grimly, the silence punctuated only by their harsh gasps, they fought for control of the gun.

An eerie silence had settled across the House.

Kelly and Tis had tried Blaise's private quarters and found only the naked body of a murdered *La'b* sprawled in the blood-soaked bed. The long, curly red wig askew over her eyes left both of them a little queasy.

Their footsteps rang off the marble walls. Almost to the door, and they heard the boom of a gun being fired and wood splintering. A yell of pain. Tis grabbed the jamb for support and spun around the corner and through the door.

Blaise and Zabb were locked in a bizarre waltz of death, grappling between them a .44 Magnum. Blood was pouring from an ugly, ragged hole in Zabb's thigh. If the round had struck bone, it would have shattered it. That he was still on his feet was a testament either to his reflexes or to Blaise's lack of marksmanship.

Back and forth they staggered, the barrel of the gun angling first one direction, then the other. Tis was bringing up her rifle when, with a grunt of effort, Zabb bent Blaise's wrist almost backward and squeezed. With an earsplitting explosion of sound, blood and brains exploded out the back of Blaise's skull. In his forehead gaped a round black hole.

Kelly's shrill screams ripped through air still echoing with the aftermath of the gun's blast. Zabb dropped Blaise's body. Tis fell on it in a bizarre parody of grief. Gripping the corpse by the shoulders, she shook it, beating the shattered head on the floor.

"No! You can't die! You can't die! You can't die!" Kelly knelt at her side, gathered the weeping Takisian into his arms. His tears were hot against her neck. Tis stared up at Zabb with a Medusa's face. "You betrayed me," she said softly, but each word was edged with ground glass.

"I had no choice."

There was a telepathic call like a clarion bell. Council summons. All their minds were filled with an offer to negotiate with the *Ajayiz* of House Vayawand.

Chapter Forty-Three

"Well, I don't get to be *Raiyis* of House Vayawand," Bat'tam said brightly.

"Did you want to be?" Tisianne asked, with very little interest in the answer.

Illyana was a warm presence in her arms, and Tis wanted to be alone with her child to see if a baby's primal and uncomplicated love would be enough to restore her to emotional life.

It was that cold gray hour before dawn, and Tis was exhausted. Unfortunately she couldn't sleep. Her mind would not let down, wouldn't stop replaying the events of the night, analyzing, rearranging, indulging in agonizing "if onlys," and "what ifs."

Then there were the ships. Even to as feeble a telepath as Tisianne, the mentatic plane was a scene of telepathic cacophony, for the ships of the Ilkazam were singing the victory. The seniors had left the ship farm and were gathered like giant butterflies in the air above House Ilkazam. There was only one minor note in all this giddy celebration -- *Baby*, reading the misery from the minds of Kelly and Tisianne, and singing their grief.

"No, not really," Bat'tam continued. "But you must admit it was a wonderful ploy. Any other claimant was too busy fighting. By pressing a claim at such an absurd moment I gave the council a chance to free themselves of Blaise without *actually* surrendering to the Ilkazam. Of course, effectively we've become a cadet house to Ilkazam, but face was saved all around."

"It was very well done of you."

"I'm sorry about how things turned out for you --"

"Yes, me too." Tis rose and walked to the door of her suite. Bat'tam got the hint.

"After you've rested, we'll try to sort out your situation."

"I'd say you're the one with the larger problem. My mind is in one place, my body in another. Maybe a triad is the only solution."

"I think we'd shock Kelly."

The door closed behind him, and Tis sagged against the carved wood surface. Her guts were jumping, and laying Illyana gently in her crib, Tis bolted for the bathroom and vomited up her stomach's meager contents. A knock brought her head up from the toilet. She rinsed and wiped her mouth, listened while the guard answered the door. It was Mark. With a sigh she walked back into the sitting room.

"You got a minute?" the human asked.

She made a strange sound: half laugh, part moan. "All the time in the world." She laughed again. "I'm not going back to being me anytime soon."

Concerned, he cupped the back of her head in one bony hand. "Are you cool?"

"Yes, absolutely. But you, I think, are not."

Mark walked ponderously over to a sofa, slumped on the edge, his hands clasped between his knees. "Durg's dead. He turned..." Trips tapped his chest. "For me. Wonder what that does to a Morakh?"

"Well, I'm sure his psychic pain was brief. He died quickly." It came out far more acid than she'd intended.

Mark looked miserably up at her. "This whole thing is my fault. I abandoned Durg, and he hooked up with Blaise. Blaise would never have thought to come here if it hadn't been for Durg. Now Blaise is dead, and Durg is dead, and you're trapped, and --"

The pressure of her fingers digging deep into his shoulders drew a faint cry from Mark. "Don't be stupid. I'm too tired to deal with stupid. I've spent almost fifty years wallowing in guilt. Didn't accomplish a damn thing. I'm in this situation because I misread, misjudged, and mishandled Blaise. You had nothing to do with that. As for Durg... yes, you did abandon him, but not maliciously, not deliberately. If there was a sin, it was one of ignorance." She released him, combed back her hair in a desperate gesture of anger and confusion. "I don't know what I'm saying, if any of this makes any sense. I guess the point is, don't waste time on guilt. You want my forgiveness? You've got it. You don't need it, but you've got it."

Mark stood, wrapped his arms around her. "I'm sorry. You didn't need me laying my trip on you."

"I love you, Mark, but for the Ideal's sake go away."

He kissed the top of her head and went. Tis summoned Gena and took a bath. For a long time she just floated in the hot, hot water, then paddled over and allowed the maid to soap her hair, and her body. The plump fingers were just unknotting the kink in her neck when there was another hectic rapping on her door.

"Abortion!" She submerged, rinsed suds from her hair, and surfaced to shake water like a hunting dog. Gena dried her, and Tis shrugged into a nightgown and robe, and went to greet her latest caller.

It was Kelly, running in like a terrified child to bury his head in Tis's lap. She stroked the disordered curls.

"We had to secure Vayawand. They wanted me there. Acted like *I was you*." Kelly sounded desperate.

"I suppose to all intents and purposes you are." Tis rang for Gena. "Would you like a cup of *ysan*, Prince Tisianne?"

"Don't! You've got to think of something!"

"I'm afraid I'm quite out of ideas." But Kelly's touching faith in her had unblocked her mind. However much she might resent it, she was thinking again. After a long moment she said slowly, "Blaise wasn't the only jumper in the universe."

"We go home? Try to find one?" Kelly asked eagerly.

Tis smiled ruefully. "It's not much of a something."

"I think it's terrific. Let's leave *now*."

The guard was in the door to the bedroom. "Princess Mon'aella sek Vanbrian sek Ana."

"Oh, lord," moaned Kelly.

"Ancestors," Tis swore.

"Your wife," Mon'aella corrected as she swept past the guard and shut the door. She absorbed the situation: Kelly seated on the floor at Tisianne's feet, head on her knee, her hand tangled in his hair. "If you weren't both my husbands, I could find it in myself to be quite suspicious." She extended a hand to Tisianne. "We haven't met. I'm Mon'aella, your bride."

Tis rose, bowed over her hand. "Charmed." Their eyes met, and Mon'aella went strolling through Tisianne's mind.

"A little presumptuous on our first meeting, wouldn't you say?" Tis said lightly.

"I wanted to find out what kind of a man you are."

Tis swept a hand down her slim form. "A pretty poor one right now."

"Well, you are an interesting read, and I suppose I could love you for your mind, but overall I think I prefer the bogus one with some meat between his legs." Mon'aella looked at Kelly. "Come to my suite when you're finished here. We have plans to make."

For several moments after her regal exit, Tis and Kelly just regarded the floor. Then Tis sighed and said, "I think I want a divorce."

Kelly, face burning with embarrassment, mumbled, "I've slept with her."

Tisianne patted him on the back. "That's all right. Given my libido I suppose it was unavoidable."

"Can I stay here? I don't want to be with her tonight."

"Yes, yes, of course. Take the bed."

Kelly paused, in the act of shrugging out of his coat. "You're not going to bed?"

"Maybe later."

"It is later."

"Maybe tonight." Tis lifted Illyana out of her crib and started out of the room. Then looked back and forced out the words. "Have you seen Zabb?"

"Not really. He got real scarce after you all left for Ilkazam."

"I'm not surprised."

There was obviously a lot of emotional bleed from Tisianne's poorly shielded mind, because Kelly coughed slightly and asked, "Would you stay here, as me, for him?"

"No, child. I love him, but that choice has been made. Go to sleep." And Tis turned off the light and went back into the sitting room.

It was self indulgent, but Tisianne had injected herself with a lactating agent, and her breasts were again filled with milk. Sighing, she unlaced the neck of her peignoir and gown and laid Illyana's head against her chest. Laughed softly as the baby girl started sucking even before she found the nipple. There was again that jolt of pain and pleasure as the infant began to nurse.

She had almost dozed off. What yanked her awake was the sense of sharp and hostile scrutiny. Her eyes snapped open. Zabb was standing in the center of the room. The fear faded, replaced by anger.

"It is customary to be announced."

"I told your guard we could dispense with that... now that you're mine."

"You never had any intention of preserving Blaise," Tis said bitterly.

"Did I tell you I would?"

"You gave me your word."

A shrug. "You're worth more than --"

"Your honor?" Tis supplied for him. "I find that very hard to believe. You were never sentimental, cousin, and I am no longer an essential piece in your schemes. You have won the day. Find another bride may I suggest Mon'aella --"

because I am returning to Earth. There were other jumpers besides Blaise."

"No, no, and no."

Illyana finished, yawned, waved her tiny fists in the air. Zabb's eyes were on Tis's exposed breast, and it made her skin crawl. She quickly tugged the gown back into place, then placed Illyana over her shoulder and briskly burped her.

"She sounds satisfied." There was no response to that. Tis continued to pat her child, watching Zabb. He walked an aimless spiral, drawing ever closer to her. "I've always wondered." His hand shot out and twitched aside her robe. The skin of his palm was burning hot against her breast. "What it tastes like?" He squeezed down hard.

It was as if his eyes had become glass, and what she saw beyond those gray windows was crawling horror. Tisianne was trapped by the arms of the chair, and the weight of the now-sleeping infant. Reacting more by instinct, she brought up her knee and nailed Blaise in the crotch. He gagged, hunched, and she bolted for her life. Terror closed her throat, sucked air from her lips. Footsteps thudded behind her. She reached the desk, yanked open a drawer. He was almost on her. Whirled and leveled the laser on the center of his chest. He skittered to a stop. That mad, feral smile curved the stolen lips.

"You won't shoot me, *Grand-pere*. I'm your only ticket home."

"Guard!"

"He's dead."

Then it finally penetrated. Zabb was dead too. Anguish needed some outlet; it emerged as a sharp cry of grief, a

sound that resembled nothing human.

"Telepathy's a really wonderful thing. I haven't quite got the hang of this body or its powers yet, but I can control you." Tis gave a mental wail of despair as she felt his mind close over hers. Blaise was loosening his belt. Tis closed her eyes against the approaching horror. "You're terrified, Granddaddy," Blaise crooned.

"I can taste it, smell it. I'm going to *fuck* you."

"Try it, and I'll blow your brains out the side of your head."

The steel teeth released. Tis opened her eyes, felt her knees go weak with relief at the sight of Kelly with a pistol to Blaise's temple. Logic reasserted itself, and she stooped and snatched up the discarded pistol.

"Now you've got a problem, Blaise," Kelly continued. "She's got a gun... and I've got a gun. I'm a mentat, and I've just called for help, and in your case the old cliché applies -- you really haven't got a friend in the world."

Tis forced herself to take control. "You know what we want, Blaise. What do you want? If it is in my power, by blood and bone, I will give it to you."

"Get me off Takis with a whole skin, and enough wealth to be set for life."

"And you will make the jump?"

"I'll make the jump."

"You can't trust him," Kelly blurted,

"Yes, we can. He knows he is in the stronghold of his enemies. If he betrays us, he will die. And he knows my honor demands that I uphold my part of the bargain. I am a Takisian, and he knows how to turn that to his advantage."

Blaise gave an ironic little bow. It was a Zabb gesture, but Zabb was dead, and Tis could not take the time to grieve for him. The door to the suite crashed open, and Taj and Mark charged through.

Tis opened her mouth to explain, and then the world tilted, shifted, and Tach found herself looking at the Kelly body. Tis gave a cry of terror as the body collapsed, dropping Illyana. The baby began to scream. Another gut-wrenching twist, and he was back.

Chapter Forty-Four

It was like walking into a familiar house years after you've lived there. Warm with old memories and welcoming, but with strange new dents and scratches, and even some new rooms. Tis didn't take the time to explore all of them. He ran to his daughter and swept her up, feverishly examined her. Nothing but bumps and bruises. He wrapped her close, and his eyes met Kelly's over the head of the baby.

The girl's face twisted in an almost comic expression of dismay. She laid a hand on her stomach, looked at Tisianne in wonder and consternation. "It's a little boy." Suddenly she laughed. "Doctor, I'm never trusting you with my body again."

Tis lifted his shoulders ruefully.

Blaise's voice broke in harshly. "I've kept my part of the bargain, *Grand-pere*. Now keep yours."

"This creature nearly destroyed our world! Our House. He did kill Zabb. And you're going to let him go?"

Tisianne turned from the fury, scorn, and disbelief in his uncle's voice. "I gave him my word."

"*Fuck* your word!" Taj was never crude, so it carried just that much more force.

"*No*." Tisianne turned back to face the older man. "Is there anything else you wish to discuss with me?"

"Yes, I want you to formally accept the elevation to the *Raiyis'tet*."

"No -- "

"I won't hear no. You've done enough to try to avoid your duty, and you wanted it badly enough a few months ago."

"Circumstances have changed."

"Rather dramatically. And for your information I have a personal reason for refusing to shoulder your burdens and responsibilities any longer. No thanks to either you or Zabb, I've made it to old age. I intend to sit back and enjoy it."

Tis stared into that lined and beloved face. Reached out and rested a palm against Taj's cheek. "You have earned it. And I'm an ungrateful brat. I suppose I must become *Raiyis*."

Taj laid a hand on Tisianne's shoulder. "Someone's got to bind the wounds." He started for the door. "And lead the armies."

"I haven't forgotten about the Network."

"Good. I'm sure they haven't forgotten about you either."

Tis stared at the door for a long time after Taj had left. Slowly he crossed to the desk and sank into the chair. It still smelled of Zabb's fragrance, and the memory set tears to pricking at the back of his eyelids. Squaring his shoulders, Tisianne keyed the holostage and requested uplink with the starship *Bounty*.

A few seconds later, and he had the Master Trader on the stage. "Ah, Prince Tisianne."

"You keep up with current affairs, don't you?"

"It's my business," the Trader replied with a twinkle. "Ready to turn over my real estate?"

"Not in this or any other lifetime. Face it, you've bought the Brooklyn Bridge, swampland in Florida. My grandson offered what he did not possess."

"Doesn't matter. I have a contract."

"You seem to be developing a positive talent for making bad deals." That reminder of Zabb's outstanding contract brought a frown to the alien's brow.

"We're not giving up."

"And I'll reduce Takis to a burned cinder before I will cede one centimeter of my world."

"You Takisians are all mad," Bounty complained gently. Tis remained silent. Several minutes elapsed, and the Master Trader shifted uncomfortably. "I can't let you get away with this. It sets an intolerable precedent."

Tis steepled his fingers before his mouth. Considered the alien on the stage. "I'm not unreasonable. There is one contract that I believe I can fulfill without undue loss of face or diminishment of *virtu*."

"I would suggest you book passage with the Network," Tis said as Blaise locked down the lid on the time box. It was filled with gold, jewels, and exotic Takisian pharmaceuticals, a fortune by any species' standards anywhere in the galaxy. "You can certainly afford it," he added dryly.

They were in the office of the *Raiyis*.

Blaise threw himself into a chair. "I've really fucked your planet," he said in a pleasant, conversational tone.

Tis just stood, looking down at Zabb's familiar features. Pondered this creature of his loins. Said very softly, "You know, Blaise, I did love you."

"I loathe you." Blaise stretched, smiled, stood. "It's nice to know you'll never sleep a quiet night knowing I'm alive somewhere in the universe."

Tis watched thoughtfully as Blaise left.

Tisianne had insisted that Mark, Jay, and Kelly accompany him to the Network ship. Mark had of course agreed without demur. Jay had to enact an opera for him. "Jesus, that crazy fucker chopped my fingers off. I don't want to be on the same planet with him, much less in a spaceship." Tis had cut the detective off by curtly remarking that Jay still worked for him, and this was the final act of his employment. Ackroyd had grumbled that he'd liked Tisianne a lot better female.

So now they were all sitting silently in *Baby's* control room, watching the Network vessel draw closer. Blaise stood alone in the center of the room, his strongbox clutched tightly beneath one arm. Tis and Kelly were curled up in the massive canopied bed that was an extrusion of the ship herself. Jay and Mark were pressed against the ship's walls.

As if he's diseased, and he can somehow infect us all, Tis thought, then realized Blaise already had. There was not an individual in the room who would emerge unscathed from their contact with the young man.

Gazing at that lean and elegant figure, Tisianne had to remind himself that this was Blaise. *Zabb died trying to keep his word to me. Oh, ideal, how I shall miss him.*

The Network ship extruded a walkway from its lock to *Baby's*.

"Very phallic," Blaise remarked. He grinned at Tisianne and ran his tongue slowly across his lips.

Like a small animal, the terror uncoiled. Tis sucked in a deep breath and indicated the lock. Blaise walked through, then noticed they were all following.

"A send-off. How touching."

"I just want to be sure you're really gone," Mark said.

The Network had never really achieved the artificial gravity of the Takisian living ships. Walking the length of the walkway was a little like pulling loose from taffy.

The Ly'bahr were waiting. Blaise tossed the strongbox to the nearest warrior. Its arm moved in a blur of motion to snatch the box from midair.

"Let's not say goodbye, Grandfather. Let's say au revoir because I have a feeling we will meet again. Kiss for old times' sake?"

Kelly was trembling at his side. Tis just stared at Blaise impassively.

"Zabb brant --" the Lybahr began.

"No. Blaise Andrieux --"

"You have breached contract with the Network. Penalty clause one hundred and thirty-two, subsection C, is now in effect."

"What are you ranting about, tin man?" Two Ly'bahr moved up on each side. Gripped Blaise by an arm and lifted him off the ground. "What the fuck is going on!" Blaise demanded shrilly.

They carried him effortlessly down a corridor, Blaise screaming curses, questions, demands. Bounty hesitated, then asked, "You insist upon witnessing this?"

"Absolutely," Tis replied.

The Network master indicated a door. The humans were preternaturally silent as they trailed after Tisianne. Inside, a monitor filled one entire wall, giving a view of a sterile laboratory. Blaise was immobilized on a table. Fear clouded the gray eyes. He strained to lift his head.

"What are you doing to me?" he cried in terror.

"You will serve the remainder of your contract monitoring irrigation functions on Zanac," said one of the Ly'bahr. "But a humanoid body is inefficient and costly to maintain. Your brain is all that is necessary."

With a soft humming a caplike device was extruded from the end of the table and affixed to Blaise's head.

"Grandfather, help me!" Tisianne could feel the fascinated and horrified gaze of the humans between his shoulder blades. To the Ly'bahr, Blaise screamed, "I'm not Zabb! I'm not. I jumped him. I stole his body. He's dead. I'm Blaise! *Tell them!*" he shrieked hysterically at the ceiling. It was as if with Zabb's stolen telepathy he could sense his grandfather watching.

"Jesus, he'll jump!" Jay said suddenly.

"To an alien mind encased in a metal body? Impossible," Tis said quietly. "And he has to see us to reach us."

A high-pitched whine filled the air. Blaise screamed, a sound so raw that it seemed impossible for a human throat to produce it. Mark let out a small cry like a frightened kitten, and Jay retched. Kelly's arm slipped around Tis's waist, but he read the exaltation in her mind.

"I think we've seen enough," Tis said as the top of Blaise's stolen skull was carefully twisted off.

Bounty nodded and returned the strongbox. "Good doing business with you, *Raiyis*. And you'll want this." He handed over the contract signed by Blaise which had ceded Ilkazam to the Network.

Tisianne spun on his heel and led Jay, Mark, and Kelly back through the umbilical.

"Jesus Christ." Jay gulped air. "Vengeance as an art form."

"Your fee," Tis said, and handed the detective the strongbox.

They were almost back to Takis before Mark spoke. "Today, for the first time in all the years I've known you, you really felt like a Takisian to me."

"Don't be an idiot! Set her aside? On what grounds?"

Taj clutched distractedly at his hair, raging across the room and back again. Tis stared at his image in the mirror and made a face at the abject terror of the tailor fitting the coat. The paunch Kelly had grown for him made him feel heavy and ungainly, and the need for a drink ached in every muscle and fiber.

"How about that I don't love her, and she's a conniving and dangerous bitch?"

"Recall that Vayawand has agreed to cadet status. Marriages are a good way to cement such conquests," Taj countered.

Tis briefly closed his eyes. "Why do you always have to be right?"

"A virtue of old age."

"There is another matter," Tis said. "I made a bargain with Yimkin to send him a bride. I'll abide by that promise, but this is the last time we do it. We're not going to barter and sell our women like chattel any longer."

"As my lord commands."

"I understand that since the wounded soldiers have returned to their own Houses, there is a move to reestablish *Rarrana*."

"Yes, of course."

"No, I'm abolishing it. End of discussion."

The old man moved to Tisianne and laid an arm across his shoulders. "Tis, this is your experience talking."

"Absolutely."

"*Rarrana* is one of our cherished --"

"It doesn't make any damn sense. From age fourteen to forty our girls are free to join in the life of the House. Then at forty they are married, start producing babies, and lose their freedoms. Why are they more precious at forty than they were at twenty-three?"

"Because they're pregnant."

"It stays abolished."

"You are condemning our women to death!"

"Who is going to kill them? We've got bigger problems than preying on one another. The cities of Alaak, Ban, and Lira were totally destroyed. There's going to be hunger in the southern hemisphere after Blaise's scorched-earth policies. The Most Bred of House Rodaleh and Jeban have almost all been killed."

Tisianne's voice was spiraling upward. Taj suddenly gave his nephew's arm a shake. "Tis, take a woman. If not Mon'aella, someone. It will help you remember who and what you are."

"That's a person I don't want to remember." He smiled at the puzzled expression on his uncle's face and gently laid a hand on Taj's shoulder. "Don't worry, Uncle. I am only a little mad."

Jay paused at the top of the biogerm bubble and looked down at Hastet. "Hey, when I get out of the pickling vat, we've got to talk."

"About what, please?"

"Well... us."

"What about us?"

Takisians were discreet, that much could he said for them. The doctors assigned to oversee Jay's regrow moved politely away.

"You know."

"I know nothing. If you want me, you are going to have to ask for me." She whirled and was gone. Jay thought about running after, then decided he'd look stupid in his little breechclout and nose plugs.

Mark found Roxalana packing. She waved to her maids to continue and led him onto the glass porch off her suite. It was rich with the scent of flowers.

"Busy?"

"It's a useful substitute for worry."

"What have you to worry about?" Mark asked.

"There's a wonderful sense of safety in tradition and custom. Tisianne dismantles *Rarrana*. I am moving in with my husband. The poor man is quite terrified. Frankly, so am I.

"After the initial fear wears off, you'll like being free."

"I enjoyed being safe." She bowed her head, and Mark found himself on one knee by her chair, his arms around her.

"I'll never forget what you did for me."

She stroked his hair, smiled. "I'm afraid you aren't handsome enough to carry off life as a toy or an ornament. You needed your voice."

"I'll never forget you," Mark said, and his voice had a little squeak and quaver to it.

Roxalana leaned in and kissed him long and slow on the mouth.

The three humans had taken up residence together. One afternoon, as Jay was idly popping objects from one side of the room to the other -- just to assure himself that the new fingers worked -- Mark suddenly said, "We gotta get home. It's, like, time, man."

An expression of almost comical dismay crossed Ackroyd's face. "What about your plumbing?" he asked quickly. "Don't you have to get hooked up again?"

Kelly hid a smile. Mark smiled placidly at the detective. "I already did it, while you were doing your regrow."

"Oh."

"Going to have to make a decision, Jay," Kelly said.
"This is the big C -- commitment."

"And don't forget the L word," Mark said to Kelly.
"Love. Not to be confused with another four-letter word
beginning with L."

"I hope you both bloat up and die from horrible
diseases."

"You've only got two choices, Jay. You go home with
her. Or you go home without her," Mark said.

Jay took a seat at a table near the door. That way if it
went bad, he wouldn't have far to get booted. It was very
early, and he was the only customer in the restaurant.
Hastet hurried out from the kitchen and checked as she saw
him.

Jay looked up from the menu. "You don't have any
crow today, do you?"

"What's crow?"

"It's a dish you eat when you've been stupid."

"You must be a connoisseur of it."

"There, now you've done it again. I just don't know
how I can go back to Earth and never get another love pat
from the rough side of your tongue." She didn't respond.
Just folded her arms across her chest and waited. "Think you
could stand to leave this paradise of a planet?"

"I can stand quite a lot."

"How about me?"

"I could get used to that too."

"Doctor?"

"Yes, Kelly love."

Her gray eyes widened at the sight of the enameled and inlaid sleigh, the two fidgeting *l'ails*. "What are you doing?"

"Taking Illyana and myself out for a breath of air. The taste of politics is coating my tongue."

"In a sleigh?" the girl breathed.

"It's a logical way to cross snow, and far more pleasant than a snowmobile. Would you like to come?"

"Oh, God, yes."

They settled into a nest of furs. Tis handed the baby back to Kelly. "Here, you may as well get in practice." He hesitated, arranged the reins between his gloved fingers. "Unless you choose to terminate."

"He is all that's left of Zabb," Kelly said slowly.

"Which should place you under no obligation. You didn't know my cousin."

,'I know you loved him enough to be tempted to stay female."

Tis arched an eyebrow at her. "I obviously taught you too well."

She looked down at the little girl sleeping in her arms. "Doctor, do I have to go back to Earth?"

"I thought you would wish to."

"Where would I fit? What would I be? How do I go back to Atoka and tell them I spent a year being a man, and I've

lived on another planet, and I married and bedded a woman --"

"And now you're an unwed teenage mother who can read minds," Tis concluded softly.

She sighed. "Make a great sitcom. It'd be lousy in real life."

"I totally agree." Tis shook the reins, clucked to the *l'lails*, and the sleigh shot forward with a hiss of blades. "Of course you may stay. Taj will act as your protector --"

"Bat'tam's already offered." She hit him on the shoulder. "Stop chortling. He says he *still* hasn't given up on *you*."

"Oh, Ideal!"

"What is all this shit?" Jay looked over the cases and trunks that littered the docking bay at the Ilkazam ship farm.

"I had your clothes packed," Tis said.

"Oh, goody, now I've got the next seventy-five Halloweens covered."

Mark came wandering out from behind the gigantic ship. In places the rough surface blossomed into fantastic many-faceted crystals extruding like jeweled flowers from the body of the ship. Mark reached up and gently touched one long finger of crystal. It broke off with a high chiming sound, and Mark's cheeks burned red with embarrassment. Tis shifted Illyana onto a hip, hurried to his friend's side, and embraced him.

"It's a gift. Don't worry, *Sundiver* read your admiration and wanted to give you a memento."

Smiling with delight, Mark bowed awkwardly to the ship. "Thanks... uh, well, thanks."

"And while we're on the subject of mementos." Tis gestured to a servant, who offered a strongbox identical to the one that had paid off Jay.

The ace shook his head. "I don't need pay, man. Some things you do for love."

"Nonetheless, take it. For Sprout if nothing else."

Tis crossed to Jay and Hastet. He gestured again, and the servant appeared with a carrying case. Tisianne offered it to Hastet. "I had troops search for several days, but they never located Haupi. Here's a substitute, if you're willing to accept her."

Hastet opened the case, and a *wanei* stuck its head up, hissed at Jay, and retreated.

"You're not taking that assortment of feathers and teeth masquerading as a pet, are you?" Jay yelled.

"Oh course," Hastet said, and accepting the case, she crooned softly to the angry *wanei*.

"It's illegal to import animals."

"It's illegal to import aliens too," Tis said with a smile. "It is time, dear ones."

Jay and Hastet walked up the ramp and into the ship. The bickering never stopped; they also never stopped holding hands. Tis shook his head and smiled up at Mark. The humans' eyes were filling with tears.

"You always understand."

Mark blinked rapidly, coughed, looked away. "I know you're not coming. I don't understand why."

Tis had steeled himself for pain. It hadn't been enough. Mark's expression tore at his heart. "I'm tired, Mark, and confused, and I want to have my hand regrown, and I can't run out on them again --"

"But you are coming back sometime. Aren't you, man?"

"I don't know."

Mark looked down into Tis's face for a long, long time. Finally he said softly. "I don't know who you are anymore."

Tisianne walked to the viewport, looked out at the cold and distant stars. Looked back and held out his good hand to Mark. The ace gripped it hard.

"I don't know either."

Mark crossed the bay and entered the ship and never looked back. Tis loved him for it. He and Illyana retreated beyond the bay doors, watched as the great ship slid from its berth. Watched long after the final ghost signature had faded.

He looked down and met the very serious aquamarine eyes of his only child. She stretched out an arm and laid a fist against his mouth.

"Come, daughter, let's go home."

Glossary

agma -- a large, intelligent predatory animal. The challenge to the hunter is that an agma hunts back.

Ajayiz -- the ruling council of a Takisian House.

Ajayiz'et -- a member of the ruling council.

Amlas -- the diplomatic language used only between Houses for negotiations.

ankatai'li -- shape-changing insect that appears crystalline when at rest.

bitshuf'di -- a neutered psi lord, male or female.

calnite -- a bioengineered substance to speed bone reconstruction.

cinara wood - a pungent wood whose smell is reminiscent of sandalwood and honey.

Fel'k -- the larger moon of Takis.

Ideal -- the quintessential description of the Takisian psyche. It is more than mere physical or mental prowess. It is the perfection with which a Takisian comports himself in all areas of his or her life. *Virtu* -- achieving it, the quest for it -- helps to dramatize the Ideal. Success does not necessarily define whether you've achieved *virtu* or the Ideal. A spectacular failure can count more than being merely adequate.

ikadah -- a warm, sweet drink of Takis. Chocolate is the Earth equivalent.

IlkazaI -- the public language of House Ilkazam; uses telepathy and the spoken word.

Intaye -- a lady of the Most Bred.

Ishab'kaukab -- the living ships of Takis.

jebali -- a small nocturnal grazing animal.

ka'et -- a stringed instrument whereby sound is formed by striking the strings with hammers that also carry a tone. The player uses a double keyboard.

Kib'r -- a relative of past seven degrees.

kuket -- darling, sweetheart, but it is a diminutive usually applied to children.

La'b -- a sexual toy.

lawmerates -- male or female Takisians who have been surgically altered to the opposite sex.

Lilistizkar -- a visiting day in the women's quarters.

l'lail -- a riding animal.

merrida -- darling, used between lovers.

MIS -- Mentatic Intelligence Service.

pful -- Takisian vegetable.

Raiyis -- the ruler of a Takisian House.

Raiyis'tet -- the rulership of a House.

ral -- a milk-producing ruminant. Its coat produces a fine, soft wool suitable for weaving.

Rarrana -- the women's quarters, purdah.

re'ba'bi -- a stringed instrument played with a bow.

Sham'al -- the common speech of Takis. Sometimes called industry speak.

shujukis -- a large flying mountain predator that has been trained to carry riders.

silamum -- a cold effervescent fruit drink.

sinau soup -- a bean soup with a sharp citrus flavor.

sinde -- a powerful, shorttempered creature raised for its meat.

sithi beans -- a highly flavored spice used in desserts.

spetza -- a sparkling sweet wine.

stirpes -- a member of the *Tarhiji* who has been adopted by a psi lord. Degree of relationship is roughly that of a cousin, and they are not permitted to breed with the *Zal'hma at' Irg*.

Tarhtji -- the mind-blind majority population of Takis.

Tiana -- the smaller moon of Takis.

vacu -- a foul and rather disgusting creature whose name is used as an epithet.

Vayet -- the public language of House Vayawand.

vindi -- cousin. A form of polite address not indicating a literal relationship.

wanei -- a small house pet.

ysan -- a hot, bitter beverage.

Zal'hma at' Irg -- the psi lords, the Most Bred of Takis.

zanjabii -- a badgerlike creature.