

Child of the Mist

Kae Cheatham



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Prologue

No more running away, the young woman thought as she jogged through the dense forest. Her quiet pace was matched by a young ocsoni with silky black hair springing several centimeters over its dense fur. *This time I'm running to something. My destiny, perhaps.*

Leaves of saplings cloaked her while she negotiated the path around house-sized trunks of mature trees; large leaves blocked light from the late afternoon sky, keeping the forest cool. She didn't carry much: a small pot for water, a solbey plate to cook on, a warming net for cold nights, an extra pair of leggings and boots. For weapons: a sheathed knife—the blade as long as her forearm—and a whiprod she had taken off the guard she killed when she escaped one-hundred-and-thirty days ago. Running. Hiding. Stopping long enough to have that awful baby, and then...

Continual anger churned through her. *No more running. I've ruined their plans, and now I'll attend the business I was born to.* This her continual thought without a concept for success.

"We must be close to the wall," she quietly said to her furry companion. "I don't know what I'll do with you when I go inside, but..." She pushed back a tendril of poorly-cut hair. When her sable locks became more than a finger's length, she hacked them off and muttered, "For you, mother." The childish look this gave her totally belied her intense nature.

Her pup companion slowed, neck hairs up and nose testing the wind. She stopped, also sniffing the breeze. Nothing. Fear skittered along her slender limbs. *Faucrin Rudeg's henchmen could be waiting in ambush.* She fingered the hilt of her knife while studying her surroundings. In the dense foliage and shoulder-high mushrooms sprouting between trees, the only sign was of a bush fox recently passed.

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“They can’t possibly know where I am,” she murmured to the pup as she stroked its head. She was certain the Xirophans wouldn’t relinquish her to her government. Many tribes had hidden her from the Rudegs. The last tribe had given her a map—told her about the way in.

The ocsoni, still tense, whined and strained to dash forward as she tied the pup’s shoulder harness to a thick sapling. She removed her pack and secured it out of his reach. “Stay, Ton,” she ordered. With whiprod fastened to her purple jerkin, she stealthily climbed fifty meters into the dense canopy and leapt from one tree to the next, barely ruffling the huge leaves. She was proud of this skill the Xirophans taught her during her last refuge. When she smelled a wood fire; her well-trained muscles brought her to a standstill. *Aliens. Who else would build an actual fire. Relief engulfed her. At least they aren’t involved in Ceitwan politics!*

She heard a single male voice, but couldn’t make out words; the whines and pants she heard reminded her of her own Ton. A hearty laugh surprised her. She waited for a slight breeze then grasped a vine and noiselessly slid to the ground. From behind ferns and flowering bushes, she peered into a clearing.

An ocsoni pup yapped and darted in her direction then swerved back to the man who sat cross-legged by a small fire. He wore fabric pants and jacket—ragged and patched—heavy boots with hard heels; his only visible weapon was a holstered pistol. Beside him was another pup. He fed it scraps of food. She keened her senses to detect more aliens and quickly decided he was truly alone.

How did he come by these pups? As I? Killing the mother to hide in the den and then taking pity on the young?

She studied him again: tan skinned, bearded face, his dark hair was in a single plait down his back. She had never before seen an alien colonist. Her mother told her they were human—just like Ceitwans. Her mother told her—

Turaal!

She repressed her grief and concentrated again on the man, realizing his obvious wit to tackle this southern forest alone; his disheveled appearance and lack of provisions proved his trek had been a struggle. The camp held only a tattered warming net, a cook basin, and a sack that looked nearly empty.

I see myself in you.

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The energetic pup whirled and growled in her direction. From behind her, Ton bayed. She closed her eyes, worried the young creature would give her away. When she looked again to the camp, her heart slammed in her chest. The man was gone. She felt his approach from her left and leapt to another position while pulling her whiprod. A sting on her wrist caused her hand to open, spilling the weapon to the ground. The growling pup charged and grabbed her jerkin, tugging, keeping her off balance as the man approached.

I could kill him in an instant. One leap and a cranial blow with my heel. She watched him step closer, intrigued by her own immobility.

He called the osoni to him with a quick whistle. His dark eyes scanned her as he spoke. "You far from abadress."

The sounds were awkward Ceitwan, but his knowledge of her language surprised her. When he pocketed the small weapon that had disarmed her, she sprang forward to reclaim her whiprod, but he swept it up while restraining the gangly pup with his other hand.

"You...you not hurt?" he asked, indicating her wrist.

She shook her head, amazed by her hesitancy to attack him.

"Good," he said.

She read no hostility in him. *But what is this alien doing down here?*

In the distance, Ton mournfully howled. The man returned to his camp and began packing his few belongings.

"You don't have to go," she quickly said. *I need to find out why he's here!* But a deeper emotion also burgeoned. This was the first time in nearly forty days she had been around any sentient being, and it had been more than sixty days since speaking to a human.

"You Ceitwan scout. I be greeted before." He continued breaking camp.

"Wait!" She ignored the distrust that ebbed from him. "You're a colonist, I know. But..." She pointed to the pup. "I have one too. A bit older."

He belted on his side arm, continually checking the surrounding darkness. She didn't have to read him to know their situations were similar: Master Regent Faucrin Rudeg wanted her dead, and Chief Provost Cerlam Rudeg had ordered the annihilation of all aliens. "We have the same enemies." Her declaration made him frown. "Let me get my things. Wait here!"

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She groped in the underbrush, temporarily blinded from the fire-light. Evening mist caressed her as it began its slow filter from the high cliffs. This close to the hykris, it would become rain to drench the treetops, slide along the trunks and soak the ground. Gebbi began hooting their evening song. Soon she endured Ton's joyful licks while quickly wrapping his leash around her wrist. After hoisting her bag, she rushed back to the small camp.

It was empty.

No! Did I imagine him? That man...The alien.

Dying coals in the fire pit burned small bright holes in the darkness. Ton's inquisitive sniffing also assured her she hadn't hallucinated the meeting. "Why is he down here?" she demanded of the night. "Part of an alien exploration? If they discover the values of the hykris..." She shook her head and collapsed at the edge of the clearing, certain the man was not a threat—merely lost. Tears rolled down her cheeks and she finally admitted an inner truth. *I'm tired of being alone!*

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PART I - The Awakening

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1

32 years later.

Interstellar Consortium building in Bracshtir

Voices murmured from speakers in the media alcoves of the broad hallway. From high windows, a cascade of muted sunlight bathed the beige carpeting and glinted off ornate sconces. The sconce lights appeared as small fires snaking yellow-orange licks against the tree leaves of the virtual mural that extended two full stories. A dour-looking factor lurked in shadows beside one of many colonnades that edged the hallway. He buried the longing sparked in him by the forest scene. *Home.* Beneath this longing, his mind roamed various thoughts, all tinged with latent anger. Events of the past ten days had revived a rage that had nearly destroyed him.

But I am greater than that. My training is stronger than the hate.

Across the corridor, double doors marked entrance to a restricted suite where government officials enjoyed plush lounges, an open food buffet, entertainment and news screens. At any given time, over a hundred people utilized the lavish area, relaxing or making deals; lobbying, planning strategies or complaining about a new tariff. In an appropriate guise, the factor had several times mingled with the bevy of extravagantly-dressed men and women. Today the officials would be gathered before the news screens. Today a clash had occurred on Frenkrit after workers refused to go to their jobs. Regulators from the energy and synthetics cartels tried to force people to work. The strikers turned hostile—retaliated.

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The factor maintained a casual pose as he stretched his senses across the hall and beyond the thick doors of the official suite. He sifted through the various worries and nervous banter, searching for a specific realm of thought. Not easy to do when the man he was seeking dissembled to be another. He wandered, ethereal cloud of consciousness. There. He found him. Sir Gorgi Nashcro, top-level economist.

—*TC with problem; come at once*,— he silently projected to the man. Only a bur of response from Nashcro, but in the hallway a yellow light began blinking.

Damn. A psi-scanner. With the luck I've been having, it's probably the only one in the whole building.

He walked casually along the hallway, hoping not to attract attention.

“Hey! Hey, there! Stop!” Aides and food-service workers glanced around. “No factors allowed up here!” came gruff call. “Stop now!”

The factor quickened his pace toward the bank of lifts. He heard the guards pounding along to catch him. He flicked his forged card through the slot, entered the lift. “Bypass lift number five at your service,” spoke the chamber’s automated female-type voice.

“Sunlight,” he muttered as he tabbed the lift to action. He hadn’t chosen well. This chamber would take him directly to the thirty-sixth floor—no choice. The guards would know that—would have already called that floor’s security to be waiting. Innocuous music floated around him as the chamber sped upward; a quick soft glow marked each passing floor. Another five seconds and he’d be there. Not enough time for more than one guard to get in place, he decided. The lift walls were lined with buffed metal that reflected the interior—no place to hide. *But maybe another way.* He flung himself to the floor on his back, legs toward the side wall. Appearing as an overweight, aging factor would aid this ruse.

“Thirty-sixth floor,” the lift voice intoned. The rapid deceleration rode in his stomach for a brief moment. “Have a nice day.” The chime rang and the doors parted with a quiet hum.

He wheezed, raising his arm feebly. “My heart,” he whimpered. “Help me.” A guard sidled in—tall and thick across the shoulders and chest—a projectile gun in his hand. *Perfect.* “Please...” He gasped as the guard locked the doors open. *Now or never.* He feigned an attempt to rise. “My hea—” and slumped back. The guard stepped forward...

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He had the brawny guard immobilized, disarmed and on the floor in two seconds. A quick stab with his fingers to the neck rendered the amazed man unconscious. He closed the doors, but set the chamber to idle.

“Bypass lift number five at your service,” spoke the chamber’s automated voice while he quickly swapped his factor’s disguise for the guard’s security clothing. The trousers were a bit short, but the shirt and vest fit well. He slowed his pulse and tabbed the doors to action. “Have a nice day.” The chime rang; the doors parted with a quiet hum.

“The factor’s had a heart attack!” he told a guard who was just arriving at the lift. Blue and white alarm lights flashed in the hallway. “Call a medic! I’m going after his partner.” He sprinted away and down an adjacent corridor.

* * * *

In the officials’ suite, gray-haired Gorgi Nashcro slowly ate food from the buffet plate he carried. The room chilled his hands. Room temperatures were kept low because of the many layers of clothing everyone wore to show their status. Nashcro wore a moderate array: tan gaiters, brown breeches, black waistcoat over his shirt, economist’s multi-collared jacket, and a decorative cape over it all. His brown tam displayed the ornate Klaipacher religious motif. He brushed crumbs from the pleats of his dark green shirt, and set the empty plate aside. Before he left the room, he spent a few moments grumbling with a newly-arrived colleague about the Frenkrit situation.

Too soon, he thought as he trudged the corridor to the lifts. *Someone is again tampering with the plans.* He assumed the early rebellion had prompted Trenner’s rash contact. Slope shouldered, he passed other silent, heavily dressed people and a trio of agitated security guards. Once on the fourteenth floor, no one was around, yet he maintained his pretense of weariness.

At the door with his name on it, he pressed his key on the nameplate and hoped his colleague hadn’t been forced out of the building. Once in the anteroom, he tabbed on a light. No windows here. Furniture consisted of a sculpted black divan, a matching chair and a small antique table. Three of the dark gray walls were bare, while the fourth accommodated the standard government-issue marquees. Urban scenes from prosperous areas of the two industrial planets floated across their black-framed screens with boring predictability, while rural tableaus from the colonies scrolled along. He closed the door and reverently touched the Srotag colony

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picture of towering trees. As he walked to the table he suddenly realized he wasn't alone. He tried not to show his alarm. The person was who he expected, but he didn't realize how great the young man's skills had become. Without showing his irritation he called, "We're clear."

Trenner Curembac stepped into the main room as Gorgi Nashcro tossed aside the tam and shrugged out of his cape and jacket. Nashcro gave him a quick glance. "I thought you were in factors' garb."

"Change of plans...Many changes, actually," Trenner said.

"What's happened?"

"That sot Magritho Rishtug has a new assignment." Trenner's quiet words were filled with tension. "She and her assistant are leaving on the afternoon spaceliner for New Brounnen."

"By the stars!"

"Faucrin has passage on the same spaceliner—even with berth for his cruiser," Trenner continued, "and you know how he has it outfitted."

Nashcro's features creased with sudden tension. "He must be working on his own. I can't imagine him combining efforts with Ebbra Rudeg. They've never gotten along."

"She doesn't get along with anyone," Trenner growled.

"I suspect the sudden worker revolt is part of the plan. Diversion, just as we were going to use it, but the insurrection has started six days too early."

Trenner's heart pounded, and deep within skulked that dark beast of anger. He slammed his fist on the tabletop.

"Control, Trenner. Control."

"By the stone, that's what we need to regain. Control...They've cut us off at every turn!" He avoided the older man's reproving gaze. Delays in the last year had greatly hampered Trenner's plans. Politics caused most of the impediments as he was forced to massage egos and defer to older regents and scholars—all of whom considered themselves his allies—even Nashcro. Meanwhile the adversaries continued unrestrained.

He tossed his secretary onto the desk. "I need passage on that spaceliner and it's booked solid because of this Frenkrit mess."

Nashcro nodded and sat at his desk. Trenner paced and watched the man tap in numbers and codes. Nashcro had established excellent diplomatic privileges and was an expert hacker. Gorgi Nashcro (true

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name, Genn Calloy) excelled at many things; he was Trenner's primary mentor.

Nashcro's fingers moved swiftly. "Several of our people have tickets...starting our evacuation...I've swapped you for one of them."

"I have to keep a close eye on her."

Nashcro sat back and returned Trenner's tablet. "To be sure. Once she's off planet, no telling where she'll end up."

"She'll end up at home, of course, as Ebbra's political pawn, or a way for Faucrin to reestablish his family on the planet. Both of them need her there." He paced two strides, then said, "Implement the next phase for her return to awareness. Nothing too overt. The more she develops on her own, the better."

He noticed a slight tightening at Nashcro's mouth before the man nodded. "You're right. No sense in holding back. I'll set loose the information I intercepted five days ago." Nashcro made a few keyboard notations and turned to Trenner. "How are you getting out of here? That guard's uniform won't fool them for long."

"Plumbing conduits...I used them to get here from the thirty-sixth floor. They should be safe a while longer." Trenner started for a wall panel that would let him into the dank narrow space between walls. Hard to negotiate, but less obvious. On his trip to this office he had heard guards searching ventilation shafts right beside his route.

"Mark yourself well," the older man warned. "Nothing rash, even if you confront Faucrin."

"You know my priorities, Genn. Nothing will deter me."

2

"I had four tickets and five clients," said the slender man across the table. "So I sent four of them in and took the prettiest one out to dinner." He chuckled and tried to look sexy.

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Juilan Pranss avoided his smug expression. Magritho Rishtug laughed at the comment. A coy laugh, Juilan thought. I will act amused, help you build your self-importance—that was Magritho’s style. Juilan had worked for Magritho only a month; a temporary position—at least it had been. Now they were on a long assignment to the planet New Brounnen. Juilan clenched her hands. She hadn’t even visited the home planet’s three large moons, yet last evening she had left her home of twenty-eight years—given up her body to the destinies of space.

I could have said no. I should have looked harder for another translator’s job. The Work Board had no full-time linguistics position when she called two weeks ago.

She fondly remembered her year with social welfare where she wrote abstracts in five different languages from a remote and quiet carrel. That had been the best. Downsizing had ended her employment.

Magritho ordered her fourth drink. The man drank fruit juice. Juilan sipped water and felt disconnected, remembering Magritho’s call yesterday. Just yesterday!

“I have a high-paying assignment. We leave for New Brounnen today,” Magritho had declared over the vidphone. Juilan had arrived home only moments earlier.

“New Brounnen! That means space travel!”

“Right-o. And once we’re there, the business deal will be a bonanza.” Magritho gulped something from a tumbler. “Credits, Juilan,” the woman continued. “It’s all about credits. I’m in a bind and this will help. You need them too, what with estate taxes and death petitions and so on.”

Juilan’s father, Valhoqurin Pranss, had died from a sudden illness six days before, and she still couldn’t rid his last words from her mind: “Juilan, I tried...There’s so much more.”

What more? He’s gone. I’m alone.

A sudden thought pulled her to the present; she looked at the man dining with them, and imagined his hope that Magritho would know where he could obtain extra import tokens for his furniture stores. So clear! As if she really knew his thoughts. She swallowed hard, thinking, *Space travel. It must be.* Since yesterday afternoon, other moments like this had struck her. *I knew I should have refused this job.*

The bemused merchant related sales expectations for his furniture business. “Do you know where I might get extra import tokens?” he asked Magritho.

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Juilan bit her bottom lip, her pulse quickening. “Fem Rishtug,” she said to the pudgy, rouged woman. “I think I’ll return to our cabin.” Juilan lurched up and pulled into her broad-collared jacket.

“What? But, Juilan—You *will* be in our cabin?” Magritho said. “If—if I need you?”

“Yes, Fem.” Nerves jittery, she straightened the print skirt she wore over blue slacks and turned away before more could be said.

She moved through the dining room, into the hallway, then frowned at the labyrinth before her. The spaceliner’s circular structure, with maze-like veins of connecting corridors, constantly challenged her sense of direction. She wandered along with shuffling steps, still not used to the low gravity in most of the ship. The passenger dining areas were kept to planet-side standard—for familiar comfort, she presumed, so passengers would spend more time there...spend more credits.

Juilan brushed her fingers across the security belt she wore under her jacket, feeling the slight outline of her credit file. Her fingers tingled as though electrified. After buying an online news subscription and a history update about their destination, her credit receipt was flagged with “Check Personals.” Alarmed, she had tabbed into the private file, finding she was two hundred thousand t avvies richer than she had been last night. After fumbling her unit back into her belt, Juilan had followed Magritho to the dining room, astounded by such an outrageous mistake. Even double pay for space travel would only result in a two hundred credit boost, and wouldn’t be paid until they reached New Brounnen. Two-hundred-thousand t avvies equaled five-hundred thousand credits—enough to buy a small estate or her own short-range space plane! If it were true, she wished she had known last week; she’d have quit Magritho and never boarded this ship. If it weren’t true, she could be in big trouble.

She turned onto another concourse. *Get back to my room. Call the accounting services to straighten this out.* A few children jumped and bounded along, enjoying the light-weighted possibilities. Their giddiness depressed her, and she was lost. Should she stop someone...ask directions? She swallowed a slight panic and eased to the next intersection. A wall map allowed her to find the location of the quick tubes, just a short walk away. She had already learned “quick” was a misnomer. The conveyance slithered along one level, then jounced upward to the next,

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slithered more, with frequent stops for people getting on or off. The cabin Julian shared with Magritho (the ship too crowded for separate accommodations) was on the fifth level; the restaurant had been on the first.

By the time the tube reached the fifth level, her head ached and she gripped the handrail, feeling edgy. Her discomposure wasn't aided by stepping from the tube into a gathering of people that blocked most of the hallway. Juilan became wedged in, watching a bald man in purple satin acrobat's clothes. With subtle wrist flicks, he twirled a long rope of brightly colored feathers, making a large flowing loop. Lights seemed to dance along it, and he began jumping in and out of the horizontal loop he had created. His audience applauded and oohed in amazement as he moved the loop to a vertical position and leaped through it.

"How do you know this?" a woman asked.

The performer pivoted around, dazzling everyone with the loop. Facing Juilan, he made the loop small. "I was taught by my mother," he said, his calm voice belying his energetic performance. He reeled the loop large again and leaped through so he stood right beside Juilan. "And what is mother-taught, you don't forget," he said. He leaped away and high stepped back and forth through the vertical whirl of colors.

More people came to look. Children jumped and clapped with delight. Juilan felt their emotions in her head—enthusiasm, wonderment. Myriad thoughts seemed to pile on her, and she shoved through the audience to her cabin's corridor. Pranss, Pranss, Pranss, the entertainer seemed to say. He didn't say anything, she decided as she fumbled with the lock. She glanced back when applause sounded. The acrobat performed magic tricks with two black handkerchiefs—no sign of the colorful rope.

In the small cabin, Juilan kicked off her boots, tossed aside the skirt and jacket, and dragged her shirttail from her pants. She checked her belongings, apprehensive that someone might have entered the cabin while she was out. Everything was as she left it, including the unique instrument in its dark cloth case under her bunk. She pulled it out to inspect it again. She had found it at her father's just yesterday. Juilan played several instruments, including gitterns and lyres. Her father perhaps had planned to surprise her for her birthday next month. And this one was so different: the long neck tapered down to a deep oval sound chamber, all from one piece of wood; the strings were set

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on a high fret with the keys near the center of the neck. No decorations or hallmark on the strange blue wood. Real wood! She had never seen anything like it. Tucked under the seven strings had been a square of parchment with the handwritten words “Keeping me part of you.” Even now, tears heated her eyes; the words were the same as in a song she had written last year—the song she had sung at her father’s funeral four days ago.

She stroked the strings. Last evening, tuning the instrument had been easier than she suspected. She worked a few chords; the mellow sound vibrated rich tones. *Papa, why did you leave me?* Melancholia washed through her with each chord. She sniffed back tears and returned the instrument to its case, unwilling to succumb to the grief.

She stowed the harp under her bunk and pulled her secretary from her purse, intending to check about the funds in her account. But when she accessed the ship’s interface, a bright white message appeared; the written words were also spoken to her: “Because of the Frenkrite uprising, all communication to any planet or satellite is restricted to regulators and military personnel.”

She closed her eyes and took long breaths. It seemed she could do nothing until they reached New Brounnen.

“I hope I don’t get charged with fraud before I can clear this up.”

After twice pacing the small cabin, she shimmied out of her slacks and vented frustration by flinging them onto her bunk. They seemed to bounce and then fluttered downward as she flopped beside them. She lay back on the narrow bed and closed her eyes, certain it was all just a bureaucratic mistake.

* * * *

A persistent dream veiled Juilan’s sleep with discontent. Darkness consumed details of a village where people ran and wooden buildings burned. Orange flames licked the corner of her thoughts while the whine of weapons caused her to shift and frown. She smelled smoke.

A voice: “How can you sleep! Get up. Hurry!”

That was real, not her dream, and Juilan snapped opened her eyes, alert.

Magritho dashed around the small cabin. “It’s the damn Frens,” the woman announced as she gathered her belongings. “We’re being attacked!”

“Attacked!” Juilan lurched up, her pulse thumping. “Attacked,”

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she muttered, reaching for her slacks. “Why would Frenkritis attack a spaceliner? I thought the danger was for grain ships.” *This isn’t real. This isn’t happening.*

“Hostages, I’ll bet, and I’m determined not to get caught.”

Juilan gritted her teeth as she stuffed the coral fabric of her shirt-tail into her trousers and fastened on her security belt. Her hands shook, and after three attempts to tie the skirt around her waist she tossed it aside.

Magritho whipped by, her chunky arms clutching two satchels and her office pack. “Grab all you can carry and follow me. I’ve found us a way off this crate.”

“A way off? Leave the ship?” Black void filled Juilan’s mind—the view from the ship’s observation lounge spinning endlessly. She pulled on her dark blue jacket, stuffed her feet into her boots and tossed her hairbrush into the wheeled valise. *My first space voyage, and this happens.* The ship jolted, lurching her sideways as she started to the door. The floor quivered and an ominous thumping seemed loud.

“At least this ship has armaments,” Magritho said. “Hurry up!” They rushed into the hall.

“Oh! My harp.” Juilan dashed back into the cabin, her movements causing her to bounce along. She ducked to avoid hitting her head on the overhead storage rail. Grasping the edge of the bed, she pushed herself down and pulled the instrument from under the bunk. She hugged it to her. Back in the hall, she used the low-g to catch Magritho.

“Here we are on the brink of certain misery, and you’re worried about an instrument,” Magritho muttered when Juilan caught up to her.

Juilan pinched her lips together and gripped the case—the instrument—her only connection to her father (“Keeping me part of you”).

Magritho shoved through groups and rushed along, Juilan in her wake. Narrow hallways; flashing blue and white lights from the ceiling; speakers droned evacuation orders. Too many people screaming, pushing in on her from all sides. Fear—rancid smell. Headache. Magritho bypassed slides leading to evacuation pods and continued along crowded corridors and down tunnel-like stairwells. Juilan jerked the valise along, and several levels later they entered a cavernous rotunda where ships queued at the exit beds. People raced to vessels and argued over who would depart on which ship. Some of the vehicles were cruisers

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while others were cargo lorries where crew flung aside merchandise to make room for passengers. Hot metallic smell.

“There’s an IC cruiser,” Juilan said, starting toward the huge vehicle. *Magritho’s diplomatic privileges will surely give us passage.*

“Rishtug! Over here!” came a call.

Juilan turned and squinted at a tall man who waved them on; his auburn hair gleamed in the bright lights of the bay. How ironic, she thought. She had seen him when they boarded the spaceliner—had especially noticed his good looks and he hadn’t disguised his interest in her. She had briefly wondered if they might meet during the voyage. And here he was. She hurried to catch Magritho.

“Who is he?” Juilan asked as a cargo truck slowed their progress. Tan-skinned and square-jawed, he wore snug-fitting green trousers and a plain brown shirt.

“Joddrie Ferstan, a New Brounnen businessman. He’s agreed to get us the hell out of here. I’ve already checked him out. It’s all right.”

Juilan drew her study from the man to the ship. The sleek silver-green craft had an oblate hull, smooth lines and molded power units. “Looks like a wind ship for interlunar runs. How far are we likely to get in that?” Juilan asked.

“At least to a research platform,” Magritho declared.

Juilan easily accepted Magritho’s appraisal. Her own thoughts were jumbled with fear built by the surrounding scrabble of activity.

“What took so long?” the man asked when they reached him.

“She was sleeping! Can you believe it?” Magritho glared at Juilan.

The pilot turned hazel eyes on her, then rushed past them to stop a man who dashed toward the loading ramp of the ship.

“Can’t we take another?” Juilan asked as their benefactor kicked the interloper. The man reeled back. Blood dripped from his injured nose.

“No.” The pilot’s voice was calm, even though he grappled with another panicked traveler.

Juilan’s senses tingled as if rubbed raw with an astringent. The spaceliner trembled, and a sudden explosion convinced her to clamber up the plank behind Magritho. They passed ballast and hydrogen conduits, hunched through the engineering chutes—the active ship’s motors throbbing—climbed a sloped ladder. Industrial metal curved away and Juilan entered the passenger compartment where walls, floor and ceiling, were all in a crimson insulsteel and plush with black trim;

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the seats were expensive memfoam. The din from the launch bay was muted; calm replaced the discordant pressure she had previously felt.

One of the four seats was occupied by a fellow who nodded to her, appearing unruffled by the near hysteria outside. His wavy hair was fashioned in the shoulder-length rainbow shag most popular with children; iridescent dyes shimmered faint colors against his skin. Tan jacket, brown shirt; Juilan's fear threatened to topple her when she noticed the neuristor-impulse pistol holstered low along the right leg of his tight-fitting pants. One shot from an NI and nerve fibers were destroyed, muscle tissue obliterated. This fellow caressed the black curved handle as if it were a pet.

Magritho, what have you gotten us into.

Magritho stowed her bags in an overhead compartment. Juilan pushed her valise into another one as the pilot strode by. "Settle in! Fasten up!" he ordered as he slid into the cockpit.

Juilan held onto her harp and sank into the seat across the aisle from Magritho, sucking in her breath against the feel of warm memfoam. It oozed to the shape of her thighs and back; a fullness of it developed behind her calves, and within seconds her body felt as if it were floating—all muscles unneeded to support her. She could see into the cramped cockpit with its banks of monitors and readouts. Slim fingers of a woman moved deftly over controls; she was dressed identically to the other two, her brown hair cut short; she wore an NI holstered on her hip.

They're mercenaries! Juilan's stomach knotted. *If they're for hire, they could be kidnapping Magritho.* She wondered what payment they received: credits, land titles, drugs?

"What can we do?" Magritho asked in a voice husky with fear.

"If you've a god, you might say some prayers," the pilot quipped.

Through the cockpit window, Juilan watched greenish smoke billow across the departure area. Another concussion shook the spaceliner. Magritho muttered a quick prayer as the small ship shimmied down the launch bed, through a diaphragm and toward its exit. Juilan sucked in her alarm; the gigantic sphincter outlet was closed. The pilot's hands touched some buttons. The door began to uncoil and the ship shot through a seemingly impossible opening. "Stars afire!" Magritho exclaimed.

Juilan gripped the memfoam as acceleration pressed her into the protective seat. Adrenaline kept her pulse rapid. The large bulwark of

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another ship loomed. Before Juilan could blink, they veered upward. Something whooshed from below her and shook their ship. Brightness flooded around the window. Then they were cruising in black space. Motors purred from the bowels of the ship.

“They aren’t coming after us, are they?” Magritho asked.

The pilot, Joddrie Ferstan, checked scans and instrumentation. “No pursuit,” he finally said.

Magritho sighed, fanning herself with her hand.

“How—how long before we can go back?” Juilan stuttered. No one responded. “Regulators must be on their way,” Juilan persisted. “Can’t we just float around out here and then go back to the ship?” She shifted; the seat adjusted.

Ferstan laughed and looked at her. “The Regulators are all off patrolling the trade lanes. Besides, I doubt there’ll be much of a ship to go back to.”

“You’re joking. It won’t be that...ba...” She clutched the neck of her harp and stared at the pilot, wanting reassurance. Her stomach rolled and threatened revolt. She swallowed, swallowed, swallowed and regained control.

Keep talking; don’t dwell on this. This isn’t happening. “You don’t seem too distressed,” she managed.

He shrugged. “I got off everything I needed.”

“There’s a research platform close by. Right?” Magritho declared.

“Or even a penal facility,” Juilan put in. “Regulators would be there and could call for a rescue ship.” Juilan’s hope waned. If these people were mercenaries, they probably wouldn’t want to deal with penal-colony Regulators.

“There’s a research station,” Magritho said emphatically.

“Right. A research station.” The pilot smirked, then called to the other man. “Go below and set the transfer rods.” He turned to the woman. “You have our headings confirmed?”

“Locked and ready to go.”

“To where?” Magritho asked.

“Srotag.”

“You must be joking!” Juilan blurted out. In this second attempt to colonize Srotag, very little news was available from the remote planet. The first attempt to colonize, thirty years ago, had lasted only three years. Unlike New Brounnen, Srotag possessed sentient natives, and the Interstellar Consortium (IC) never developed effective diplomatic

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relations. Juilan hadn't heard anything about diplomacy in the seven months since the IC had returned there.

"We can't go there!" Magritho barked, eyes wide. "People are expecting—"

"Yes, a lot of people are expecting a lot of things." The pilot concentrated on a bank of dials.

"You can't do this!" Magritho pulled out of her seat and started toward the cockpit. "I never agreed to be hauled—"

"This is my ship!" Ferstan turned on Magritho. The intensity of his voice stilled the woman. "I set its course. Do you understand?"

Magritho sat down hard, her face pale.

The discord blistered Juilan's fear-streaked thoughts. She clutched her harp while her mind became a dancing, loose thing. Pain bloomed across her abdomen and around her back; she wanted to shrink away and become invisible. When Magritho pulled a flask from her bag, uncapped it, and took a long drink, Juilan wished she could drink or take a drug to remove her from this. She closed her eyes and tucked her chin to her chest, hoping she wouldn't get sick. She felt the pilot's gaze on her, sensed him watching her. She shivered and looked up at him. He smiled.

3

Sleep. Just what she needed. Sleep would save her from the peaks and valleys of fright and dismay. She would sleep and sleep and sleep, and when she awoke everything would be fine.

But sleep suffered its own peaks and valleys. She occasionally heard murmured conversation from the others, or she would open her eyes and stare through the cockpit window at the ever-constant starfield that made it seem as though they were suspended in some galactic vacuum rather than making their way toward the fourth planet from

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the sun. At those times panic loomed, and she would close her eyes to take solace in sleep. The chair curled around her lower body, cushioned her head, molded to her back as she cradled the harp in her lap. Dreams predominated: She was at the university, or standing in an IC mitigation hall translating political rhetoric. Sometimes she was running—dashing through a shadowed place. When she stopped to get her breath, her father would be there—a dark silhouette in front of an opaque curtain (*Papa?*)—voices beyond...Vibrant. Familiar.

“I have to go. It’s my duty!” a woman says.

“Don’t go!” echoes a man’s voice.

This dream produced fright, although it wasn’t frightful.

“Just leave him alone!” came an alto voice. Juilan turned with discomfort. Not a dream.

“...to tow along a damn Glory addict,” a man growled. “Look at his neck. Fresh marks. I told you I wouldn’t tolerate—”

“I’ll take care of him,” was the woman’s insistence.

Sleep, I have to sleep, was Juilan’s thought. And sleep brought dreams.

I have to get away...

“Don’t go!” wails a voice.

She fought to pull herself alert. Time had passed. In the cockpit, the navigator, Gabrett, slept. Magritho snored, looked peaceful. Juilan recalled an argument. She glanced to the seat behind Magritho. The man, Tansi, seemed to be just awakening. Red marks the size of thumbprints marked his neck and his left wrist. *A Glory addict. And the pilot doesn’t like him.* She had read reports that one in every fourteen of urban adults were users, but the Planetary Health Council’s repeated attempt to regulate the drug always hit a dead end.

Juilan rubbed at her face and wondered how long it had been since she heard the argument. How long had it been since she’d first fallen asleep? *I am so tired. Must be a drug...something in the food.*

“Just a gentle soporific,” the pilot said to her.

The pilot. Joddrie Ferstan. She gave him a timorous look.

“We’re all taking it, to eliminate CF—confinement fatigue,” he continued.

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Juilan had no recall of asking a question, although she had thought it, and it upset her that this man seemed to know her thoughts. *I have to be strong.* She chanted those words in the back of her mind. *What if we have all been unconscious and the ship is off course.* Adrenaline rose and she felt lightheaded—her fingers tingled. *We're marooned in some uncharted space, stranded—out of fuel...*

"Don't worry. Gabrett was awake when I took my snoozes," Ferstan said. He handed her a cool drink. "But we're almost there."

Juilan licked her dry lips. Her mouth felt like a dust storm had blown through it. "Almost there?" She squinted up at him.

"Srotag, Juilan." The pilot scrutinized her. "Have you had pleasant dreams?" he asked with a smile.

"Dreams?" She recalled running, running, running, and a strange persistent scent like the mingling of wood smoke and flowers. Some of the dreams seemed fresh. She wondered if unconscious people dreamed. She sipped the liquid. Refreshing. Her tension ebbed as the pilot went back to the cockpit.

After finishing the drink, she stood, surprised her feet and legs still worked after her prolonged sleep. In the john, she relieved herself then studied her reflection in the small mirror. Face creased with sleep lines; residue clumped at the corners of her eyes. At least a week must have gone by and she remembered none of it. How would she feel if she hadn't slept? What was it the pilot had said? A soporific to prevent confinement fatigue. The confinement she felt wasn't from the small ship; it came from the people. She washed her face, enjoying the privacy, but she couldn't stay in here forever.

Back in the cabin: "What the hell is that, anyway?" came the pilot's angry voice from where he stood next to Magritho's seat. He grabbed the woman's flask, took a sniff. "Phase shift!" Juilan wanted to retreat back into the small convenience room.

"I have to. It was necessary," Magritho whined, reaching for the flask. She noticed Juilan at the john door and hunched into her seat.

"I just hope you have detox to go along with it," Joddrie said, recapping the flask. He tossed it to Magritho. "All I need...another addict." He strode to the front of the ship.

Juilan stepped slowly back to her seat, alarm buzzing through her. *Magritho taking phase shift?* The mind-altering substance to prevent psi reads was only prescribed for top-tier officials; only given

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with strict knowledge of when it was being taken. Magritho's access to the drug implied she had a higher position in government than diplomatic courier.

Juilan sagged into her seat, feeling nauseous. *They've kidnapped Magritho! Why did I take this job?*

Ferstan laughed about something and the navigator looked around at Juilan. Juilan angled her back to the aisle. Despair threatened to overwhelm her. Propped beside her was the harp. She put her hand on it, wanting to feel strength from her father's bequeathal.

This whole situation is like a new language or an industrial code, her mind reprimanded as she opened the soft case and took out the instrument. *Confounding at first, but there's always a solution.* She held the harp close for a moment. *This ship will land and then we can get help.* She stroked her thumb along the wood grain, keeping positive thoughts in the forefront. Slowly, her panic subsided as she plucked random chords. She concentrated on adjusting the strings' tensions and sensed something—soft, caressing—from the pilot; she could feel his attention like warm sunlight on a chill autumn day. Glancing around, she saw him in the pilot's seat, one foot propped on the arm of the navigator's chair, the other tapping on the floor.

"So tell me about yourself," he suddenly said. "You're from homeworld?"

"Yes." She didn't want to show these mercenaries her fear. She made her voice strong. "I was born and raised there."

"Really! So you've finally decided to be adventurous—go off planet."

Juilan rubbed at her forehead, her own arguments encouraging this horrid trip, nagged at her: Go off planet, seek new experiences to help relieve the melancholy from her father's death. *And I need the credits.* Tears welled in her eyes.

"My first trip, and this!" She tried to laugh, but the sound came out as a gasp. She blinked back her distress.

Tansi spoke up, childlike excitement to his tone. "I was on my way to work with a reclaim crew at the asteroid belt and got marooned on a space station for three New Brounnen months! But I met Gabrett there, so it wasn't all bad."

"Depends on your point of view," Ferstan muttered.

Juilan strummed a chord and let the vibrations of the strings

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shimmy against her fingertips. The situation was bad enough without these strangers tossing barbs.

“So. Play us a tune, Juilan,” Joddrie said.

Yes. Maybe a song could divert her from the various woes of her circumstance. Resolutely, she plucked out the melody for an upbeat children’s song. Soon the cabin was filled with cheerful voices—Gabrett’s a wavery soprano over Joddrie’s baritone and Tansi’s tenor. Magritho slouched and glared.

“You play very well,” Joddrie said. “Where did you get the harp?”

Juilan rubbed the blue wood of the curved sound box. “It was a gift.” She could nearly see her father’s dark eyes, hear his pleasant laughter.

She began a soft minor-keyed ballad that lent itself well to this instrument.

“Farewell, my love, I know you are leaving;

“Go-ing from all we’ve ever known.

“All I can give as we part

“Is my soul.”

Her clear voice filled the cabin with the mournful song, and she was transported back to when she last sang it at her father’s funeral.

“Although we’ve barely kissed our greeting,

“Some-how I knew you would go.

“But you will live

“Bound to my life

“And dreams.

“The sun streaked walls of memories

“Our futures won’t reveal.

“Warm words of fate have given us

“Love we’ll forever feel.

“Farewell, my love, and always remember

“Ours is a bond eternal and true.

“I’ll always give

“All my soul and heart.

“Keeping me part of you.”

The motors hummed over the last bitter chord from her harp. Juilan closed her eyes against hot tears.

“That was beautiful,” Gabrett whispered.

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Juilan swallowed. Again she felt the pilot's glance. When she looked at him, he turned away.

* * * *

"Srotag dead ahead," Gabrett announced not long after they finished their rations.

Juilan bit her lip and tried not show her giddy relief. Solid land, and help for her and Magritho's predicament. She would soon be able to get away from these people—especially the pilot. Since putting away her harp, she had been too conscious of him, as if he were staring at her even when he was busy in the cockpit or stowing remnants of their rations in the disposal.

"Kill the auxiliary," the pilot ordered Gabrett.

"Done."

"I'll swap out the system," Tansi said, getting up.

"I'll do it," Ferstan growled, barging along the aisle. "It needs to be properly stowed."

"If I had planned to visit this godforsaken place," Magritho grumbled, "I would have waited 'til they had a decent population."

"What's wrong?" Gabrett asked. "You don't believe the IC publicity slogan? This is the gem of the galaxy!"

The pilot returned, tossing a pair of heavy gloves and tools into a compartment behind his seat. Juilan looked through the small portal and concentrated on the rosy cloud-like atmosphere around the planet. With no sense of movement, Juilan watched the puffy orb grow larger. Anticipation fluttered in her chest. The memfoam flowed up around her as the ship entered the occluded atmosphere. The support did nothing for Juilan's stomach spasms, nor for the sudden temperature increase; several long moments passed before the life-support system adjusted. Her fingers numbed and the jostling was like riding in a cart on a bumpy road. She closed her eyes, but her mind seemed aw whirl, traveling as fast as the ship, spiraling downward, hot with friction of some undefined conflict. She gritted her teeth and forced open her eyes. Itchy drops of sweat beaded her brow.

Ferstan leveled their flight kilometers above the surface. With the ship's speed reduced, Juilan sat forward, her focus drawn to a vast rock formation. By the lack of definition, she knew this anomaly was far away, yet it dominated the view, towering to the upper atmosphere and spreading beyond her vision; darkness obscured what was be-

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neath. The pilot veered away from it and soon they were on the sun-side of the planet. The horizon showed only a hazy green from the trees. Trillions of trees. Their respiration hung like a gray veil over the land. An occasional glimpse of green from cleared cropland along the cliff edges showed through the fog. Then, stunningly, a huge pit of gray water spread beneath them, the liquid surface appearing inaccessible within sheer lavender walls.

“Huh. Dewta’s Sea,” Magritho grunted. “The only decent body of water on the damn planet. I can’t see how the place stays so green...But, I’m sure this stupid trip will have its rewards,” Magritho ventured. “Right, Ferstan?”

“Just thank your gods you weren’t caught by the rebels. They’re under orders to waste all IC officials,” he replied.

Juilan glanced at Magritho, feeling a bond. They were both caught in this and unsure of what was happening. Magritho, eyes closed, held her arms tightly over her chest. Juilan thought she might be crying.

Ferstan circled the ship lower and Gabrett exclaimed, “Swollen scobi! Look at all the hansi nets!”

Below them, strung with bright blue connectors, clusters of sky nets floated and swayed in the mist, filament twine attaching them to the trees.

“Let’s see how many we can take out on the way down,” Ferstan said. He veered to the left and caromed the ship between the air buoys. He chuckled as two nets broke free and drifted upward. Seven pink avifauna flapped free, blue blood dotting their chests.

“We’re attracting too much attention,” Gabrett hissed. An angry voice yelled from the communication speakers.

Ferstan grinned while he guided the craft over the vast sea. Soon he steered it onto one of two long landing strips of the spaceport. As the ship slowed, the outside blur took form. Juilan gaped at enormous trees. The heavily-barked trunks dwarfed the clustered buildings of the fort to doll-size proportions. The branches arched like bridges and radiated out from the trunks so far above ground level, Juilan could barely make out the shape of the extraordinary leaves. They grew along thick stems, rising straight up from the branches, and formed a canopy of dark green.

Magritho sat forward and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. “It’s like we’re in a land of some scabby giants,” she said.

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The brakes slowed them to a crawl. A tug pulled the ship into a secluded area. A gate closed behind them and they could see nothing but high wooden walls. Juilan's heart pounded.

"What the hell's going on?" Magritho demanded.

"Quarantine," Gabrett said. "We're an unscheduled landing." The ship rolled to a stop.

They waited. Foam slid over the small portal. Juilan tried not to be impatient. *I'm back on the ground; everything will be fine.* Soon, the pilot opened the ship to three colonials in full protective gear. Two of them carried off the baggage, including Juilan's harp. The garb of the remaining person had a medical symbol on the shoulder. The woman peered out of her faceplate and spoke Basic as she insisted on throat cultures and ordered them to the john to produce urine samples. The colonial collected personal data from their ID tags while she waited.

"You're clean," the plump woman finally announced after studying her comboard for the results of the tests. She shrugged back her protective hood and grinned. "Welcome to Fort Droshtir. Sorry about this, but we can't afford any epidemics, you know. And there's a little orientation we give to all new arrivals."

She settled herself at the back of the cabin. "This was the last planet of the galaxy to be investigated by Eareye." She slurred the Exploration Research Institute acronym into a moniker. "And after no intelligent life on the others, Srotag was quite a surprise." The woman crossed her arms over her chest. "There are the Xirophans—rational hominids who live in tribal groups in the forests. Most of the planet is still unexplored and bristling with Xirophans. We trade with some of the nearby tribes and you'll see them around the fort. Just remember, their little ones are *not* cute animals you can pick up and cuddle. Xirophans are pretty damn human, except for the way they look; they're fierce about their young ones and territory. Real gut eaters in a battle.

"Then we got the Ceitwans," the medtech went on. "Homo sapiens like us, but pretty remote. Immigration calls them humanoids and bioengines are still trying to convince them to have medical tests run. Only a few have come to the fort, and none have agreed to our research. Afraid of the technology, I imagine. It's rumored they live back in the forests with the Pha—Xirophans."

Gabrett gave a perturbed sigh. Tansi leaned forward, his arms

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resting on his legs, face hidden. A giggle escaped him; Juilan assumed he was in some Glory-induced hallucination.

“Now!” The woman straightened, scowling. “The important part. Metafrangiolites. Scobi is the local term; easier to say, too.” She grinned.

A man entered the cabin with a large box under his arm and stood behind the medtech. “These little parasites are the worst killers we’ve got.” The woman produced a holo chart showing bright blue slug-type creatures. “They’re about the size of your fingernail and need moisture to live. So they’ll cling to your arms, feet, especially like armpits and crotches.”

“My god,” Magritho moaned.

“The towns all spray a repellent on the streets and trees, but it’s not enough. When scobi can’t stay moist, they deteriorate into a mass of spores called sayzen. These become airborne—over a hundred per cubic centimeter. If you breathe them, they’ll get in your lungs and sinuses. The moisture there regenerates each sayzen into a scobi—the process will suffocate you—kill you—slowly, painfully.”

Juilan shook her head: *So much for the gem of the galaxy.*

The man handed out metal canisters as long as Juilan’s hand with a hose, hood and breathing mask attached. He gave a demonstration of how to put it on. Juilan followed his lead, putting the wide strap over her shoulder and tucking the canister under her arm. The hose went around her neck so the mask dangled over her right shoulder. Juilan examined the clear visor and leather ear patches—fingered the narrow head strap.

“What the hell is this?” Magritho asked, trying to get harnessed to the canister.

“Just an air supply,” the medtech responded. “But it may save your life. It’s not often talked about, but thirty-three years ago Eareye lost most of the first two exploration teams sent to Srotag before the bioengines figured out what was killing everyone. Only sent down two hundred, three hundred people at a time for exploration, and only a third of those survived. Anyway, on this planet sunlight and low humidity are hazardous to your health.” She chuckled a bit. “So you need to avoid midday and dry areas unless you’re properly masked; always wear footgear and always carry your canister; bathe at least once a day using special soap.”

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The man passed out hand-sized bars of it. Magritho sniffed the paper-wrapped cube and wrinkled her nose. Juilan noticed a tangy odor and she was overwhelmed by an image of a silvery ocean, and something roaring. She squeezed her fingertips against her forehead and focused on the ship.

“We have to wear this damn air thing all the time?” Magritho was asking.

“Oh, no,” the medtech said. “Humidity’s high at night and early in the day. No sayzen. There’ll be warning sirens when the humidity gets too low....All right!” the woman stated enthusiastically. “We’ll get you disembarked. Just walk over to Ft. Drofshtir. Oh, Pilot Ferstan, you have to see the bursar. Something about some sky nets. The rest of you can freshen up—relax a bit. You have a homeworld hour or so before your boat leaves for Stoljet.”

“What?” Magritho shrieked.

The colonial nodded. “Your gear will go through possessions check and be stowed on the boat. You’ll register for employment licenses in Stoljet.”

“Employment licenses! I’m a courier for the Council!” Magritho exclaimed. “I just want to file an absentee report and wait for the next transport.”

“We’re expected at an assignment on New Brounnen,” Juilan added.

“Well, you’ll be here for a while,” said the medtech. “And everyone in the colonies is required to work. Stoljet is the only town with jobs.”

“How long is a while?” Juilan asked, dismay settling on her like a shroud.

“The last New Brounnen freighter left six days ago, and by sundown we’ll be out of homeworld and New Brounnen navigational segments for nearly five New Brounnen months.”

Juilan drew a shocked breath. “Surely the IC sends reconnaissance ships!”

“Srotag’s got a funny orbit, you know. And the new year is coming up—bad meteorite storms. Regulators would come only in some dire emergency, and might take twelve to twenty days, depending on where they are.”

Magritho swore bitterly, her hand on her forehead, then she whirled on Ferstan. “You knew this! You—”

“Hush,” the man snapped.

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“But we have to file absentee forms!” Juilan persisted.

“It’s better to file when you have a permanent address, otherwise things will get all messed up in cross-references,” the colonial said. “Do it all in Stoljet.”

Juilan gritted her teeth and wished she could clutch her harp as a buffer against the wave of anxiety forming in her middle; it spread up and out, like oil on ice, becoming a treacherous emotional surface.

“Don’t worry so much,” Ferstan said softly.

Juilan flinched away when he reached to give a consoling rub to her shoulder; the lack of contact kept her from turning to him for support when she couldn’t trust him. Or could she? She wasn’t sure of anything.

“One last warning,” the colonial said. “Never go into the forest or even the edges around the fort without a guide!”

4

From the detainment area, a moving walkway took them to Ft. Drofshtir, a quarter-mile away. Mist beaded on Juilan’s clothes and skin. The fresh air was rejuvenating after hermetic days first in the spaceliner and then aboard Ferstan’s small ship. The immense trees threw shadows even to this open area. Soon Juilan made out a high wooden wall flanking the gate where guards slouched along the palisades. Rods outlined the rest of the town, with force-field warnings before them.

“Stars afire! They let the buggers camp right outside the walls,” Magritho exclaimed.

A group of Xirophans hunkered near a lean-to: bipeds, of medium human height, the sleek fur that covered their bodies matched the skin on their feline faces. By the loincloths they wore, Juilan assumed these to be males.

“Never seen a phanny before, huh?” Tansi asked her when they stepped off the walkway.

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“Xirophans,” she said, disliking derogatory terms, but she flushed because she had been caught staring.

“Whatever. Curious things.”

One of the Xirophans stood up; his pelt and skin were a different shade from the others—expressive tan eyes. A collar with a decorative medallion was tied at his neck. “Hey, fem,” he called in Basic, walking toward Juilan. He held out a brightly colored rope and twirled it. The five joints on each of his fingers, made his hand appear like pincers. His small ears pricked forward. “You know this? Yes?” He was right up to her now. The tangy odor about him reminded her of the soap they had been given. She stared at the rope. He whirled a horizontal loop as the acrobat had done on the spaceliner. “You try?”

“Get out of here,” Tansi grouched, pushing the Xirophan aside. “They try to peddle anything,” he muttered.

“That rope—” Juilan started.

“Kesari feathers,” the pilot said. “Kids make ropes like that all the time. You’ll see more of them when we go to the docks.”

Juilan rubbed her fingers together almost feeling the smooth, soft feathers in her hand. She glanced back to where the Xirophan still turned the rope as he talked to the medtech.

Within the fort, tree trunks had been gouged and trenched for streets to go through. Some trunks were so large, a third of them had been cut for housing, and still the massive plants lived. Other trees shaded the town with a continuous interweave of voluminous leaves; streetlights burned. Juilan quickly spotted the government house, five stories high with the IC symbol emblazoned in bright blue on all four sides of the flag tower. Surrounded by a wide plaza, branches of the incredible trees draped over it. Juilan pulled her jacket more closely around her while remembering the errors in her bank credits. She had to straighten things out—demonstrate that she was actively trying to clear her record. Maybe she would be detained; which could be good—get her away from these mercenaries—although she couldn’t imagine what incarceration would be like in this primitive place.

Gabrett headed them toward a row of restaurants and shops. “I’m really thirsty,” she said. “And we have time before the boat leaves.”

“Oh, now I see,” Magritho said, suddenly brightening. “There’s a FASCO here.”

“When did that happen?” Gabrett muttered, looking at a squat

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building set a ways down the plaza; its burgundy and white emblem looked new.

FASCO pharmaceutical company was one of the largest corporations in the food cartel, but Juilan couldn't imagine their business on Srotag.

"I'm going to FASCO. I want to get this over with" Magritho said.

"You stay with Gabrett," Ferstan ordered. He glanced around, looking worried.

"No! There must be someone from Shenn's operation up there," Magritho gestured toward the FASCO building.

"Can't you ever be quiet?" Ferstan said.

Magritho continued. "I'm due, you know. I'm due!"

"Shut up!" he barked, shoving her toward Gabrett.

Juilan backed away from the argument. "I have to go to Cartel House," she said, wondering if Ferstan would stop her departure. "I won't be long...Business to take care of." Her face grew hot with surprise at her forthright manner.

"I'm going there, too," pilot Ferstan said. He fell into step beside her. "To see the bursar."

Juilan frowned, not wanting his company.

Humans crowded the streets and shops, most wearing the under-arm canisters as Juilan had been given. In groups of four or more, Xirophans moved in and out of the trading centers. The females wore short britches and capes hanging to their waist. Small ones were often naked; they leaped and played with feather loops or large marbles. Juilan realized they did look cuddly, just as the medtech had warned. Some of them scrambled up the streetlight poles and glided off, by means of the thin membrane stretching from the tips of their last fingers down their backs to their hips.

"Watch your step, there." Ferstan grabbed her at the waist and lifted her from the ground.

After seeing the pile of purple dung he had saved her from, she glanced around, realizing Xirophans weren't the only non-human animals in the fort. Chunky four-legged creatures were tied to hitching posts or harnessed to carts. Their scaly skin showed various shades of tan, green and yellow.

Juilan gave a little laugh and eased out of Ferstan's hold. "What are those things?"

"Bax. They're native to the planet."

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“I’ve seen cartoons and heard jokes about how primitive Srotag is, but this!” She shook her head.

“What did you expect, Juilan? Cities of stone with artificial atmospheres? Tapestries and intricate brocades?” His hazel eyes bore into her.

“Well, no.” She hadn’t expected anything. She never intended to be here.

She quickened her strides toward the prefab government building. It looked as if it had been setting there longer than a few months, the gray metal streaked with blotchy blue paint. Inside, the struts held industrial panels to section off four hallways that merged in the rotunda, which was crowded right to the door.

“This could take forever,” Ferstan grumbled as they wedged inside.

The skylights were useless because of the dense cloak of tree leaves, and the murky lights from wall columns did little to relieve the bleak aspect of the place. Warm room, bad circ system—Juilan wrinkled her nose to the mustiness and various body odors. An ache began in the back of her head.

“I’ll meet you at the boat,” the pilot said as he headed toward the hallway with a wall placard for the airways commission.

Juilan settled into the nearest queue, more than glad to be rid of him. She considered the feasibility of not showing up at the dock. She could find some employment here, or just lose herself in the bustle until the next homeworld ship arrived.

Someone shoved through the throng. A woman in a tailored suit with an educator’s cape was jostled against her. “Is it always this crowded?” Juilan asked, her headache growing worse.

“Census call,” the woman said, straightening. “Last one before the new year.”

“What?” Juilan asked.

The woman gave her a quick perusal. “New to this ground, huh? Well, we don’t have months here. No moons. But permits and assignments have to be updated every thirty days.”

“We have to make sure the Ceitwans aren’t sneaking into our system,” another person said behind his hand. “Can’t tell the native humans from our own.”

“When have you ever seen a Ceitwan?” a man declared, turning sideways to speak to them. “They’re staying away from us.”

“The Twan don’t have nothin’ to do with it,” said a bald man in

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the next line. Freckles dotted his scalp and he reeked of sweat. His voice had a squeaky sound, as if not much used.

“Twan?” Juilan asked.

“What the Ceitwans call themselves,” the woman explained.

The bald man continued. “The cartels just gotta make sure we ain’t sneaking off on our own and not paying all the tariffs and hunting fees.” Glory scars dotted his arms.

“It’s a shame they don’t regulate the drugs,” the woman snapped.

“Hell. How can you regulate it when the planet’s filled up with the stuff?” The man rubbed his fingers together, grinning and showing a fine set of white teeth. “Magic rust.”

Several people scowled, and Juilan was glad that not everyone considered Glory an asset.

“We aren’t all as lowlife as trappers,” the woman murmured to her. “Which cartel are you with?”

“I’m not connected yet. I’m a lingu—”

“You aren’t employed?” The person in front stepped from her as if she were diseased.

“No use in trying for a Ft. Drofshtir permit,” the woman said, shaking her head. “No jobs here.”

Juilan wouldn’t argue her case with these people, but she planned to search for a job board as soon as possible. News droned from the overheads. She shuffled forward with the line, watching and waiting for information about the Frenkrit revolt; about survivors of a destroyed spaceliner, about missing IC courier (or whatever her position), Magritho Rishtug.

“The Frenkrit situation escalated to a new level yesterday as armed colonists confronted the Ag Cartel Regulators,” spoke the reporter. “Several people were injured and the battling continued through the night.”

Juilan frowned at the screen. This was the same report she had seen the afternoon she boarded the spaceliner.

“It appears the hostilities are the beginning of serious civil disturbances on Frenkrit, as more workers join the fray. Rumors tell of pirate ships disrupting the trade routes, and Regulators have been sent to patrol the shipping lanes between New Brounnen and Frenkrit...”

“Move on, fem. Before someone cuts in the line.” Someone prodded her back.

“The news—” Juilan started as she moved forward.

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“I was sure it would happen sooner or later. The IC doesn’t have any respect for trade workers or colonists. The outcome of this will really affect any negotiations we do here.”

“But how long does it take for you to get your news?”

“Three-day delay. It’s hard to keep satellites in orbit here. Information comes by photochrom relays.”

“I think they censor what we get, too,” a man put in.

Juilan imagined that was true, so a two or three day delay in news seemed reasonable. What didn’t seem reasonable was her travel here in so short a time. Maybe a new transit portal had been set up for this planet. Or perhaps the woman didn’t have her facts right.

After several long moments Juilan spoke with the main clerk and was directed to a credit counselor. She made her way through the crowd, buoyed with anticipation of getting at least one of her problems solved. A very tall man motioned her to sit at his information cubicle not far from the buzz of the lobby. “It’s about my personal account,” Juilan said as she fumbled with her security belt. “There’s been a mix up in deposits. I’ve been credited with someone else’s funds.”

He folded himself into his chair and activated the security net. Juilan’s tension decrease dramatically when they were segregated from the other people. She swiped her personal stick through the slot on her side of the table and tapped in her ID. The man perused the information on the table screen. “What seems to be the problem?” he asked.

“I’m not certain. I just know there are considerably more credits in my account than there should be.”

“Oh, my!” the man said as he read. “I’m sorry for the loss of your father, fem.” He shook his head. “But this all seems to be in order; a simple transfer of your father’s insurance and investment credits.”

“But I received his insurance from the Education Counsel three days after his death. This new deposit is a mistake.”

“Well, no. If you didn’t file for the benefits, they were delayed until the information about your father’s demise filtered through the system. Then the system had to reverse—find you. Then the transfer.”

“But where did the money come from?”

“A government insurance policy, and it appears your father wisely invested his PD benefits into good stocks.”

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“PD benefits!” Juilan said. “How ridiculous. Presumed Dead is a starfarer’s term. Papa hated space travel.”

“Well, he was surely off planet for a while...when he worked for Eareye.”

“My father never worked for the E R I. He was an ethnographer with a traveling university.”

“It says Eareye. Humm...that code after his name....Let me check...Yes. He was part of the first Srotag expedition.”

“This planet?” Juilan laughed her disbelief. “Even more proof of error.”

“We should have information here...Just a moment.”

Juilan pulled nervously on the cuff of her jacket while the man called up files. Information sprang to the table screen.

“Yes. Valhoqurin Pranss. Eareye ethnographer, ninth tier,” the man read. A picture of her father, keen-featured and young, accompanied the information. “Pretty important person. Ninth tier and above were lead explorers.”

Juilan’s hands went cold as she stared at her father’s image. She pulled her gaze to the information on the table screen. The information was in the IC shorthand, tappin. Juilan struggled to decipher it.

“It says here, Pranss arrived on planet in home-year twenty-two eighty-nine,” the man read.

“He married my mother in eighty-nine,” Juilan insisted, trying to follow along. “They were in Tebba.”

“Nothing here about a spouse.” The man went on. “Reported missing in the field three homeworld-months later; declared P D. Returned to the colonies on day forty-three of twenty-two ninety-two.”

“Ninety-two!”

“He was one of fifty-two survivors of the Rashtir Massacre. The final straw, you know,” he added, looking up at her. “Eareye recalled all colonial operations after that.” He shook his head and read on. “Day fifty-eight, he left planet with adopted daughter, Juilan—”

“What?” Juilan leaned forward and frowned at the screen.

“Little girl named Juilan,” the man went on. “Here’s your ID, same as now, and—”

“That’s not right.” She studied the tappin line he indicated, making out the information. “No!” She bolted up from the chair.

The man stood, too. “Oh, dear. You didn’t know?” He touched his

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hand to his mouth in dismay and reached for his comm. “I’ll call a psych. Why don’t people tell their children about adoption?”

“No.” She stopped his call. “No. It’s just more proof of the mistake.” She swallowed her shock.

“No mistake, fem. These records are guaranteed accurate.”

“Where can I request information from the central files?”

“Why, right here; but it is extremely expensive and will take nearly three homeworld-weeks—twenty-five of our days. The priorities, you see. Personal work is first to be bumped, last to get serviced. And then there’s this Frenkrit situation just started...”

“But you can do it?” Juilan rubbed her forehead.

“Certainly. But I must say, we have better records regarding the old Srotag expedition than they do back home. The Progressive Center fought to reopen colonization for more than twenty years, and brought along all its hoarded data when we re-colonized. What I have here is most accurate. Now please, let me call a psych.”

“No. Thank you.”

“Well, where are you staying? How can I get in touch with you if some other information surfaces?”

He needs to keep tabs on me—send a psych around. The colonial offices hated mental breakdowns or suicides. It made their operations suspect.

Juilan drew herself tall. “Thank you very much for your trouble.” She stepped out of the protective field of his cubicle. She managed steady steps through the crowd to the front doors, but once outside, she stopped and leaned against the balustrade, gulping in deep breaths. Fear chased through her—insecurity of history gone wrong, her personal background becoming askew. She stared onto the busy plaza, not really seeing it. Tears stung her eyes. It’s a mistake, she insisted to herself.

“Juilan, there’s so much more.” Her father’s words slur, his body afflicted with a consuming paralysis; tears trickle from his eyes.

So much more? She wondered if he had been referring to something other than his own waning life.

“You finished in there?”

Tansi’s voice made her jerk around. He grinned. Perhaps he was waiting for Joddrie Ferstan, she thought. *Perhaps...*

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“Where are the others?” she asked, balling her hands to fists to keep them from shaking.

“Gabrett has your boss at a restaurant. We’ll meet them there.”

Juilan eyed him, thought about going back inside and reporting the danger she and Magritho were in. But what, after all, had Joddrie Ferstan done?

“You ready?” Tansi asked.

Juilan nodded and moved stiffly down the stairs.

* * * *

The raised docks were fifty meters above the water, anchored in the cliff wall by angled pylons and struts. Six sea lifts hung from suspensions cables. Covered pavilions stretched from the trees to the loading platforms, and were diffused with a cool mist. Juilan still felt the heat of sunlight just beyond. Gabrett led Magritho and Juilan to their boat; Magritho’s eyes were red, her expression sullen. Joddrie Ferstan stayed close behind Juilan; Tansi brought up the rear.

As they and fifteen other passengers boarded a double-decker ferry, Juilan couldn’t take her eyes from the stout, multicolored birds. They flapped about the boat whimpering, or so it sounded, as they begged for food. Their finger-length wing feathers were bright orange, electric blue, red, pink, yellow—like the ropes—and when the breeze caught the feathers, little lights seemed to dance through them.

The feathers are all over the dock and she runs to pick them up, laughing as she stuffs them in the sack she carries.

He laughs, too, his big hands reaching to help her little ones...

Juilan glanced around, looking for the scene she had just imagined. Nothing matched it. No children in sight; no one collecting kesari feathers. She worried the inside of her lower lip between her teeth, searching out a reason for such a clear thought.

Motors produced an aircushion. The boat, released from the suspenders, dropped to a meter above the water and started out. Magritho fussed about sayzen, although it was obvious none would occur over the water. Juilan didn’t even see any of the slugs along the railing. Wind whipped her hair as the large hover transport skimmed them south. The captain invited planet newcomers to bridge, and Ferstan ushered Juilan ahead of him.

“Dewta’s Sea extends some eighteen-hundred kilometers all the

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way to near the south pole,” the captain explained in Basic. “Nearly two thousand kilometers across. The phanny name—the phanny name—is Sayorsca. Irrigation piping is finished along twenty percent of the coast.

“Up ahead is Stomul,” the captain pointed off to the left. “One of the restored communities from the first colonial period.”

By record, my father was part of the first exploration, Juilan thought, and before he left here, he adopted me. (“Juilan, there’s so much more,” her had father grieved.) *No! The records are wrong.* She returned her attention to the captain.

“You can’t see it from here, but they’re erecting a mill.” He looked at Magritho, obviously having learned her diplomatic status. “If we had better routers, I’m sure we could supply half of all the resin homeworld needs.”

“How long has that FASCO been here?” Ferstan asked.

“FASCO? Oh, they zoomed in here about fifteen days ago. Dropped the prefab building and offloaded a big staff of execs and workers.” The captain chuckled. Joddrie’s face went stony and dark. “Best way to get colonists here, is to send them with jobs. Everyone in the colonies has to work, you know.”

The captain studied the readouts on his helm and quickly moved the sea craft to several meters above the surface. “It’s zupho mating season. Very active sort,” he said. He veered the craft to the right just as two large saurians broke the water surface.

“Stars afire!” Magritho gasped.

Juilan’s heart pumped rapidly, stunned to see such huge beasts. Roaring, the creatures tried to force each other down with their long scaly necks. One swung its tail higher than the boat and brought it down, curling huge waves across the water.

“Eareye tells us they’re quite calm, except for this time of year,” the captain said.

“Do they ever go ashore?” Juilan asked. Gabrett’s strange look scraped Juilan’s nerves and made her wish she hadn’t asked.

“No, thank the spirits. They’re strictly aquatic. But it’s oil from them protects us from the sayzen. Phannies call the oil *sgian*. We don’t know much else about the big beasts, however. Could use a more sophisticated scientific staff from Eareye, if you ask me.” Another hint to Magritho who was taking a long swig from her flask.

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“How much for a zupho skin?” Tansi asked, looking back at the grappling beasts.

“Price is set by the colonial office. We don’t get near market value, of course. The good freelance work is collecting the oil. Eareye hasn’t been able to synthesize it yet, and we need a lot.”

“How much for oil?” Tansi asked.

“One to three hundred credits a drum. One of those old boys would net nearly eight drums of oil.”

Tansi whistled appreciatively.

“I guess that’s one way to get rid of you,” Ferstan’s laugh was brittle. “Send you off with a harpoon and stunner.”

Not a joke, Juilan could tell; Gabrett drew an angry breath. Magritho sighed from boredom.

Juilan looked back to the fighting saurians and moved farther along the railing into the sunlight. She preferred the feel of the water spray on her face to the sporadic discontent of her companions. Her own discontent was almost too much to bear.

Tears suddenly cruised along her cheeks while thoughts of her father filled her mind. The idea of being adopted slapped at her, but didn’t really hurt. It was a mistake. She remembered her mother, after all. A lab tech from the eighteenth Ulq island where her father had been born. She could picture her and Val together, laughing, talking. Her mother was younger than Val by several years, had dark hair... Juilan felt certain she wasn’t adopted, just as she could feel the tears on her face. She swiped her cheeks with the back of her hand.

5

By eventide, they had circuited six-hundred kilometers of shoreline and put in at eight fortified towns, arriving at Stoljet last. Juilan missed much of it; she had taken a long sleep without dreams in a deck chair,

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rocked by the easy motion of the boat, lulled by the shushing of displaced water. At Stoljet, the waning sunlight did not reach into the pit of the ocean. Pier lights shone down to them, but to Juilan, everything seemed obscure. She paced along the railing while the boat bobbed on the water.

When they were finally raised to land to disembark, Pilot Ferstan collected their baggage, Tansi assisting. Juilan quickly claimed her harp. Gabrett seemed preoccupied with looking up into the trees; Magritho stayed on the dock near the boat captain. Perhaps arranging her quick departure from this place, Juilan thought. Around her feet, kesari feathers eddied as people walked by. She stooped and collected some into her hands—soft—their colors bright in the lights near the pier.

“Hey. Hey, Fem,” came a quiet call.

Juilan looked up.

Near the trunk of a towering tree stood a group of Xirophans. One raised his leathery hand and waved. Juilan tensed. She was certain this was the male who had spoken to her outside of Ft. Drofshtir. His eyes were tan. A medallion was on his neckband.

“It’s not really new; but take care,” he said.

“What?” She stood up, the feathers cascading around her feet.

He turned back to his friends, completely ignoring her. She wanted to call him over and ask what he meant—why he had spoken to her at all—but didn’t have the courage, not wanting any more complications to her already messy situation. Perhaps Xirophan males were attracted to human women. She shuddered.

“We have everything,” Ferstan announced, coming to her.

Juilan felt reassured by his presence, then resented the feeling.

Three Xirophans, loaded down with their baggage, started off toward the village’s one broad street. Darkness from the overhang of leaves was offset by lights suspended from tree limbs. As the procession trudged through town, Juilan glanced around for the Xirophan who had spoken to her and was glad not to see him.

Sensor rods marked the town perimeter and the central plaza had a small government building, already closed for the night. Several shops and work stalls were carved from huge tree trunks. A large gate marked the only road going into the forest. Looking down it was like peering into a cave. Juilan’s discontent increased. She was stranded. *My father was stranded. On Srotag. On Srotag—maybe.* She tried to think

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positively. This didn't have to be a disaster. She could get an employment transfer, study the native languages, write papers to add to her professional credibility.

They passed bungalows constructed from hewn wood and metal siding; through windows glowed lamp light and the blue-white of vid screens. Their walk ended at the last house on the street edged by the dark presence of forest. Inside the squat building, the Xirophan porters distributed the luggage in the four bedrooms; there was also a common room with dispensary, and a small library with an aged workstation. Gabrett and Tansi shared the room beside where Juilan's case has been left. Magritho and the pilot each had their own rooms; Juilan was grateful she wasn't sharing.

The porters bowed often and kept their eyes averted as they backed to the front door. Ferstan, a look of disdain on his face, gave them each a coin before they left.

Magritho, quiet since they left the boat, suddenly burst out. "I can't believe we had to get to this crummy little town on a boat!"

"Either that or take ten days riding bax," Gabrett said.

"Why the hell isn't there any flight service on this damned planet?" Magritho gave the pilot a scathing look. "So *now* what? *She* wouldn't let me go to FASCO." She pointed an accusing finger at Gabrett. "So where do we go from here?"

"You want to go someplace, Rishtug?" The man glared at her.

"I don't want to be here, that's for damn certain!" She stalked away from the window and dug into her bag for the flask.

"Why don't you get a good night's rest," Gabrett suggested. "It'll look different in daylight."

"What little of it there is," Magritho growled. "No moons. Twenty-two hour days! Damn." She marched off to her room.

Her door had barely slammed closed when Joddrie swore, "Sunlight! I hate that woman."

Juilan frowned at his vehemence, and the distrust she had for these people increased. Thoughts of retiring to her room were suddenly claustrophobic, and she excused herself to the front verandah, clutching her harp for solace. A streetlight sent an amber glow into the yard. Tansi followed her out and sat on the rail of the porch. Juilan hoped he didn't come out to inflict himself with Glory, although a deeper thought knew he was there to keep an eye on her.

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Few people were about; a sweet bloom scented the quiet night. Juilan sat on the top step. Taking the harp from its fabric case, she concentrated on tuning it while wondering how she might get away from these mercenaries. She also wondered how she could survive for eight homeworld-months on this planet. (“Juilan, there’s so much more.”) She flinched from the sudden anger she felt. Anger, she realized, with her father who had left unanswered questions, controversy—left her alone.

The air became chilly. Dampness filtered down. She stopped strumming the instrument, surprised by the moisture on this reportedly dry planet. After backing under the shelter of the porch roof, she held her hand out to feel the heavy mist.

“Neat, huh?” Tansi said from his perch.

“I thought the planet didn’t get rain,” Juilan said.

“This is from the *hykris*. All the storms happen up there. Really wild ones. And everything south of the equator feels the mist.”

She recalled the tremendous formation they had skirted when they first entered the planet’s atmosphere, certain it had been *the hykris*.

From town, a bell clanged quick and insistent. Juilan watched uniformed people stalk along the street. They checked every shadow, even looked into trash containers. When they saw Xirophans, they chased them toward the main gate. Then the bell ceased. The mist grew heavier and a rhythmic low, bleating began from a group of pale, porcine creatures. The smooth-skinned, eyeless animals walked in small circles, snout flaps lifted to the mist, creating an eerie scene as they danced in the dampness. After several moments, they began grooming each other.

Juilan sensed Joddrie Ferstan. It was an unreasonable non-feeling—as if his presence displaced air, or more precisely, pushed it into her. The house door opened. She looked up as Tansi went inside and Ferstan came out. He wore an air vest now, over a dark red shirt of metallic texture. An array of throwing weapons glittered from the studded belt he had strapped over tight-fitting leather britches. His NI was holstered low along his right leg.

“Enjoying the mist?” His voice caused warmth to flood her.

She calmed her breathing and dismissed the yearning his tone had produced. *I’m tired; fatigue can do odd things*. Yet she sensed his

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gaze, almost a caress on her cheek and along her neck. She turned away, and her thoughts chased down the pros and cons: He was good looking (she knew nothing about him!); he had saved her from an embattled spaceliner (he wore those weapons like favored adornments); he was looking out for her best interests (something else was driving him to these actions). Perturbed, she asked, "What are those animals over there?"

"I don't think I'll tell you until you stop thinking of me as the enemy." He smirked at her astonishment. "I'm Joddrie. Remember?" He looked into the yard. "And those are gebbi. A food source for the colonials. They make good—pets." He exuded his usual edge of restlessness. "I'm sorry about my harshness toward Rishtug," he said. "She complains too much."

The apology rang false and Juilan picked at the harp strings.

"So! How do you feel about Srotag?" He gave a quick smile.

What to say? She felt she was living in make-believe. Official records implied she had been born here, but she couldn't connect with that; couldn't turn her father into merely a benefactor with no blood connection. Joddrie continued to watch her. She swallowed her uncertainties.

"It seems so unnecessary to chase off the Xirophans." She gestured toward town. "They appear peaceful enough."

"*These* do. Living off handouts. They won't make waves."

"There are others who will?"

"Yes. Fighters. Like those in the Rashtir Massacre."

"Rashtir Massacre?" she repeated, shaken by hearing those words.

"Are you familiar with the history?" Joddrie asked.

Juilan rubbed the neck of the harp, uncomfortable. If she could believe the records, her father was a survivor of that massacre.

"Stoljet is about a half-kilometer from the old town site," he went on. "They didn't keep the name, of course. Too many bad memories."

"Yes. That makes sense." Juilan's heart pounded so hard it seemed her blouse would shake. Abruptly, she stood up. "No moons," she commented, brushing off her slacks. At the porch rail, she peered straight up at the small patch of sky she could see through the tree leaves. "Not many stars either."

"Up north the stars are brilliant. The next galaxy seems like it's at your fingertips." Joddrie came beside her and slipped his arm around her shoulder.

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Juilan trembled from his closeness, liking his woody scent.

Joddrie's embrace tightened and his fingers played in her hair. When she looked at him he said, "Come to my room tonight. We could talk all about history. Who knows what you might learn."

A flush crept along her neck and she struggled against temptation. "Pilot Ferstan, I—I hope you don't expect a sexual favor as my payment to you," she stammered. "Did Magritho promise you...this...for our rescue?" Rancor tinged her tone.

"No, no, no. I take payment in material gain. I'm sure you've guessed that by now. And..." He touched her cheek, drew his fingers along her neck, rested them on her pulse. "I'm quite drawn to you."

Juilan eased toward the door. "You're rushing things, aren't you?" Juilan could feel—could hear—her pulse throbbing along her neck where he had touched.

"You're right, of course," he said. "We have time."

Juilan pretended not to hear him. Inside, Gabrett looked up from where she sat with Tansi at the table. The woman's eyes seemed to search Juilan's face and Juilan hurried to her room, anxious to be away from the scrutiny. Once inside, she leaned on the closed door, clutching the harp while she fought frustration. Her frayed emotions sent her conflicting signals. "No one to trust," she muttered. *I'm alone.*

6

T renner released the wet vine he'd swung on and stood on a limb as broad as a lane more than one-hundred meters above the ground. He relished the damp, sweet scents of night. Twenty years he had lived off planet, and his infrequent visits home had been tense. His last trip had been four Clantrin-months ago. Clantrin. He could call it that now—the Ceitwan name for the planet that spawned the Interstellar Consortium, cartels and alien invaders of his homeworld. Clantrin—named

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for the Ceitwan astronomer who discovered the planet, just as the aliens (Clantritors) called this planet Srotag, for their exalted scientist. For Trenner, *this* world was home, and in the last few years, he had developed a collaboration with some influential Ceitwans and even more Xirophans. He hoped his colleagues wouldn't doubt his plans now that Faucrin Rudeg had interfered.

Things were possibly turning in his favor. Advance warning about the attack on the spaceliner three days ago had been the start, allowing him and a few of Genn Calloy's people to escape in an argosy, then be picked up by one of their own scout ships—a well-outfitted stealth cruiser with a Pind transfer system. The captain had easily tracked Faucrin's ship, also using Pind technology, and shadowed it to planetary orbit. When Trenner received word that the party was going to Stoljet, he had used a solo-pod for lower atmosphere entry and a floater to settle in a secreted forest port. A rough way to travel; he had already healed an assortment of bruises. Because of all the hit-and-run activities, he hadn't heard from Calloy. He hoped the man would be able to get here as planned. With a breakdown in his initial plans, Trenner wanted as many allies at home as possible.

The steady night mist glistened on the leaves while Trenner kened his senses through the darkness. He moved like a dancer along the limb, swaying his head, twisting his torso so as not to disturb the foliage. He hoped to learn what Faucrin was up to. The trunk of the everlast loomed before him, broader than a transport bay. Trenner checked his coordinates and took another living path. Soon he heard a hiss and click. The sounds blended neatly with the insects and dripping moisture from the leaves, but he knew the signal and moved toward the sound.

"You come with good silence," spoke a voice in Xirophan. "Deflectors are in place."

Trenner relaxed. "Ikasas, your trip was smooth, I trust?" Ikasas was his special on-planet contact, and today's events had forced the Xirophan to more than nine-hundred kilometers by Speed—a travel mode Xis didn't favor.

"We have survived," Ikasas stated. He took off the medallion neckband he wore and gave it to Trenner. "This way."

"And the Rudeg party?" Trenner murmured as he locked the medallion in his belt pouch.

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“All are in the shelter.”

Light improved as they reached the edge of the forest where the town’s streetlights glowed. Trenner stooped beside Ikasas who squatted at the edge of the branch that extended across half of the Stoljet street. Trenner’s attention went to the structure farthest from town where lights glowed from several windows.

“The last building,” Ikasas said, not realizing Trenner already knew. “They are five. The eldest Rudeg, three fem and one man who is Glory struck. The eldest names himself Joddrie Ferstan, not Faucrin Rudeg.”

“He’s smart to maintain his alias, Ikasas. You know how the Rudeg name is received here. His family stole a lot from us.” *A whole lot.* He rubbed the thick scar tissue that scrolled from near his ear, along his jaw line to right below his lip. When he realized what he was doing, he moved away his hand. Animosity filled him. Whenever he believed his anger had subsided, something triggered the rage. But he couldn’t vent his anger—not yet—revenge wasn’t the focus of this intrigue. And Faucrin certainly wouldn’t be the one he’d start with.

To his right, Trenner could see the entire village of Stoljet with the two guard posts and the six uniformed street watchers. They never looked up, and it amazed Trenner that the aliens didn’t understand how the everlasts were used. Natural highways, with meeting and sleeping places, the trees had always served to protect and shelter Xirophans and Twan: vantage points to prepare hunts; tactical positions during times of war, moist regions where sayzen infestation was minimal even on the hottest summer day.

“No one joins them. Couldn’t set snoops; don’t know if he makes communications,” Ikasas continued.

“He would have found snoops anyway. It might have tipped our hand,” Trenner said as he studied the house. He wished the bedroom windows faced the forest and not the sea. He sensed her in the back room closest to town and wanted to extend his thoughts and feelings to include her. But he didn’t.

Ikasas handed him a tablet. “The record.”

Trenner took the unit. “Thank you.” He would look at it later, knowing nothing significant occurred or Ikasas would have mentioned it. Right now his priority was to learn what Faucrin had planned. “How many others sleep in trees this night?”

“Three hunting parties, a caravan bunch come to find work, and

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along the heights—east of north, back seven kilometers—two bunches I didn't question. Maybe ten, twelve bodies each."

"Coming this way?"

"Not sure. Already stopped for night."

Trenner nodded.

Ikasas produced a folded leaf packet. "I ate already. Here...your share."

"Thanks." Trenner took out the hard bread and a slab of meat. He delighted in the roasted zuntin that he hadn't tasted for so long. He enjoyed the tough nut-flour bread and the tang of valley honey mixed with it—honey from a northern region of the planet where Ikasas grew up—Trenner, too, until he was seven. In Xirophan tradition, he ate without conversation, concentrating on the textures and tastes he took in, letting them refresh his memories and knowledge of home. Each mouthful could be your last, so savor, was the Xirophan adage.

At Trenner's last swallow, Ikasas offered a leather flask. Trenner took only a mouthful of water and let it trickle down his throat. Several moments later, and working hard to keep his voice calm, he asked, "Any sign of Mylo?"

Ikasas issued a quick openmouthed hiss as if ridding himself of a bad taste. "No," he finally responded. "Perhaps this Rudeg," he poked his elbow toward the bungalow, "works on his own."

"I hope so," Trenner said. "You approached her as I requested?"

"She is special," Ikasas whispered.

"You sensed something? Her response? Her reaction to the environs?"

Ikasas edged closer to Trenner. "You told me," he said.

"Is it only my telling that makes you feel this?" Trenner wanted a more specific response and wished he had the skill to touch Xirophan thoughts.

Ikasas pressed the backs of his long-fingered hands to his cheeks, eyes closed. Then he sighed and backed away. He tore off sections of the huge leaf that wafted near his shoulder and offered a piece to Trenner, who took it. "Please, now. Tell how we can help more," the Xirophan said.

With the moist leaf, Trenner wiped his mouth and hands. His disappointment didn't show when he responded. "These bunches north-east of here. We must know who they are—what they're up to. That area is too dense for good hunting. Then we need to mark Faucrin's movements. I'm certain he'll try to reach his ally, Zuéb Baiynaar. That trip will take them near the Xixisni abadress. A good place for them to rest."

Child of the Mist

“Chief Xisxisni favors this Rudeg,” Ikasas agreed. “The village sells weapons to him.”

Trenner nodded, knowing Joddrie Ferstan’ had exchanged weaponry for strategies to combat the current Clantrin invasion. That fact made the man less of an enemy. “I would appreciate it if you would shadow their movements, and if they go there, present yourself to her again—watch that she is safe.”

“You will approach her then? We will take her to safety?”

Trenner gritted his teeth, worried about how to proceed. There was so much she didn’t know—so much that could be traumatic if presented the wrong way. How would she respond, after living offworld since her toddler years? At least her father had sympathized with Twans and Xirophans alike, and recognized colonization as a detriment to the planet. Trenner wondered what Joddrie had told her. “Not then. We’d be too far from allies.”

“We must fight to keep her from Rudegs—even from this one,” Ikasas persisted.

“I have a corps who will help. I’ll meet them and keep in contact with you. Change transmission on an eight three two, daily interval...No Speed connections out there, so in an emergency we will use Bakko. You’re skilled with osconi, true?”

“Not my preferred occupation.”

“I know.” Xirophans believed some osconi to be reincarnated Xirophan souls. “But your continued involvement would be beneficial.”

“We will be there.”

That eased some of Trenner’s concerns. Strategies were always bolstered by Xi involvement.

“The bed is arranged.” Ikasas said as he pointed an elbow toward a stout tangle of limbs, already padded with leaves and moss.

“First, I have communications to attend,” Trenner said. “Make your space and I’ll fit in.”

Ikasas went to the bed and began a murmured thanks to the Xirophan supreme deity for the day just concluded. Trenner maintained a respectful silence. Once he was certain Ikasas was settled, he flicked on the tablet Ikasas had given him and watched the procession from the dock to the house. He studied the other people on the street and looked for any overly curious manner. When the guide and porters left, one looked back at the house then scanned the forest. Trenner

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slowed the motion and studied the picture for any sign or signal...Nothing.

Then Juilan came onto the porch with a harp.

Where did she get that? Perhaps it was in the house. He knew her strong musical interests. He tried to discern her mood and health by what he saw. She seemed calm, strumming the instrument; no tension in her shoulders nor the way she sat. Except for a brief moment in the spaceliner corridor, he hadn't seen her since the day after her father's funeral. Then the stress and repressed grief had etched strain into her features as if produced by a sculpting wand.

Tansi was also on the porch until right after the mist started and Rudeg/Ferstan came out of the house. Trenner winced. Ferstan stood close to her and talked. Something upset her, he could tell by her posture. Ferstan moved closer. She didn't resist.

Of course not, Trenner thought with exasperation. The man was currently her hero who had rescued her from a beleaguered spaceliner.

They went inside. The visual showed an empty porch. He pored over the screen: nothing extra to be seen, no one skulking in the shadows. He tried not to think about what now transpired in the house. *Can't do anything about that.* He resigned himself to ignorance and drew a transceiver from his waist belt. After composing his thoughts, his fingers stroked a coded message to the rest of his small corps, but his attention never left the dark bungalow. He wished the peacefulness of the evening was a sign of things to come, but he knew, if anything, it represented the exact opposite.

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