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THE LOST COLONY

Volume V of the *Earthbound* Series

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1 -- Birthday

Nykkyo Kyhana stepped into the living room of the house in Queens. "Hey, Nick!" he called.

"Hey, Nick," Nicky answered, laughed and ran toward him. Nyk traded high-fives with the boy, picked him up and kissed him.

"Do you know what day today is?" Nyk asked.

"Birthday!" Nicky replied.

"Whose?"

"Mine!"

"How old are you?"

"THREE!"

"And, what do you get on your birthday?"

"PRESENTS!"

"Come on, buddy -- let's go see Grandma."

Nyk set the boy down and he climbed into a chair with a booster seat. Yasuko set a cake with three candles on the table. "Blow them out, buddy -- while I take your picture."

Yasuko cut pieces of cake. "Can you believe three, Yasuko?" Nyk asked.

She shook her head. "I cannot."

"Here, buddy," Nyk said and handed Nicky a package.

Nicky ripped off the paper and opened a case containing two child-sized chopsticks. "Nick!" Yasuko

exclaimed. "Those for him?"

"They said not for children under three. He is no longer under three. Don't you think it's time for him to start learning to use them?"

"I suppose it is. I can't recall when I learned."

"You were probably born with a pair in your hand, Yasuko. Let me take a picture..."

Nicky hopped off the chair and headed toward the living room. Yasuko spoke to him in Japanese. He turned and walked to her. She held out her hand and he dropped the chopsticks into it. She said a few more words and Nicky headed back to the living room.

"I think I'm beginning to understand some of what you're saying to him," Nyk said.

"That's impressive. Japanese is a difficult language."

"So is English."

She nodded. "I won't argue you on that. You must have a good ear for languages, Nick."

Nyk walked into the building housing his office. "Good morning, Mr Kane."

"Good morning, Jaquie. Here -- look."

"Pictures... Oh, how adorable. Three years old! He's turning into such a fine little man. Is that his grandmother?"

"Yes, indeed."

"She resembles Sukiko."

"So does Nicky. You can see her features in his face. And, he has her coloring, her black hair and her dark, dark eyes."

"How is your mother-in-law getting along?"

"Better. She still misses Suki and George, but ... better."

"That's good. I'll bet you miss her, too."

Seymour stepped through the door. "When you're done, lad," he said and headed into his private office.

Nyk followed his boss into the office. "Shut the door, lad."

"I don't know why we keep up this charade with Jaquie," Nyk said. "She KNOWS I'm not really Nick Kane, and she KNOWS Suki isn't dead but living on Floran. I know she knows. I don't know if she knows I know she knows."

“She thinks she's sheltering us. She probably is. I heard you say your mother-in-law is doing better.”

“Yes. Having me home has helped ... a lot. She still has her moments, but overall -- she's doing better.”

“Getting over it?”

“I don't expect she'll ever get over it.”

“How's the long-distance relationship working out?”

Nyk sighed. “It's evolving. I think I'm growing more distant from Suki. I still love her. She's becoming more and more important on the homeworld. When I first took her to Floran I promised her I'd call every day. Now, I'm lucky if I can speak to her once a week. I'm afraid she's found another husband.”

“Another man?” Seymor asked.

“No -- her work. I can't believe how her career there is taking off. Her courses at Sudal University are always full, and she's asked to do speaking engagements. She told me she's been asked to deliver an address at a convention of educators on Myataxya. On Myataxya, Seymor! I've never been there.”

“Neither have I. Myataxya... This must be a bunch of real big-wigs.”

“They'll put her up in one of the resorts there.”

“She should get herself an agent.”

“Do such exist on Floran?”

“Of course they do. No one could keep a speaking calendar straight by themselves.”

“I'll suggest it to her.”

“Pretty soon she'll have her own *nax'amfin* assistant.”

“She has Andra. I'm happy for her. I know she's more fulfilled there than she ever was here. But -- it's not how I expected it to be.” Nyk held his hand to his eyes. “I miss her so.”

“I'm sorry to open a wound, lad.”

“It's all right. It's the story of my life, Seymor. I'm always surrounded by women -- by people who are more important than I am.”

“You're doing important work here.”

“I know -- and raising Nicky is important. Why did you want to see me?”

“This came in last night after you went home. I'll forward it so you can read it. Executive summary is Illya Kronta wants to borrow you.”

“Borrow me? What for?”

“He needs your linguistic skills -- someone fluent in the Esperanto tongue. Something about a diplomatic initiative involving a lost colony.”

“Hmm... It's Probably the Abo -- that primitive colony on Lexal.”

“He doesn't say. He wants you in Floran City day after tomorrow for a briefing with the special envoy.”

“I'll tell Yasuko I'll be away for a few days... I wonder if I'll have time to visit Suki.”

“Play your cards right and you will,” Seymor replied. “Go show your woman her first choice in husbands was her best.”

Nyk climbed the steps to the house in Queens and opened the front door. “It's Nick,” he called to the back.

“We'll have dinner in the dining room,” Yasuko said to him from the rear of the house.

“The dining room?”

“Yes -- remember? We agreed that, when Nicky started using chopsticks, we would resume using the dining room.”

“I remember... I didn't remember it being an agreement.”

“Dinner is nearly ready.”

“Nicky!” Nyk called. Nicky ran toward him. Nyk held out his hand. “Hey, Nick!”

“Hey, Nick!” Nicky retorted and slapped Nyk's palm.

“Let's have dinner.” Nicky headed toward the kitchen. “No, buddy.” Nyk pointed. “Over there.”

Nyk approached the low table. Woven reed mats were set at three places, and pairs of chopsticks. The child-sized ones Nyk had given Nicky were set at one place. He adjusted a thin cushion and kneeled on it. “Like this,” he said.

Yasuko brought a tray with three bowls and set them on the placemats. Nyk picked up his own chopsticks. Nicky fumbled with his.

“Like this, buddy...” He looked toward his mother-in-law. “*Obaasan*, I need some help here.”

Yasuko attempted to show Nicky how to use the sticks.

“I'm going to get the camera,” Nyk said. “This is too precious.”

He returned with the camera and snapped photos of Yasuko and Nicky with the chopsticks. “I'll bet Suki would get a kick out of these,” he said.

"I'll bet she would," Yasuko replied. "Truth be known, there's no right or wrong way to use these."

Nicky put down the sticks and began picking food from the bowl with his fingers. Nyk took more photographs. "Hey -- when Suki taught me to use those things -- she never told ME that fingers are an acceptable alternative."

"Give him time. In no time he'll be using them like a native. Like you do, Nick."

"I hardly use them like a native."

"You do very well with them." Yasuko gazed into his face. "You're right, Nick. We should do things Sukiko would enjoy -- and things George would, too. Let's honor them -- day to day."

"A wonderful idea, Yasuko."

"I remember what you said about your experience losing your parents. 'Life goes on and happiness returns.' Those were your very words."

"It doesn't mean we ever forget them, Yasuko. But, it's not written anywhere that we're obligated to mourn them for the rest of our lives."

"After dinner -- we have some things to discuss."

"All right, Yasuko."

"After Nicky's in bed."

"Whatever you say."

Nyk stepped into the kitchen and began stowing bowls in cabinets. "Nicky's down. What did you want to discuss, Yasuko?"

"Nick... As the mother of the woman you married, I never thought I'd hear myself say this, but... I think ... you should consider ... bringing another woman..."

"Oh, is that it? I'm sorry, Yasuko -- I forgot to check the calendar."

"Calendar?"

"Yes -- we seem to have this discussion every six months or so. I am not interested in marrying another woman. I'm not even interested in dating another."

"But -- for Nicky's sake..."

"Nicky is doing just fine." He stepped to the calendar and began flipping over leaves.

"What are you doing?"

"Marking the calendar so we'll remember to repeat this discussion in six months." He took a pen from his pocket and annotated the calendar. "There -- Discuss woman for Nick."

Yasuko smiled. "If you really don't want to -- I won't play match-maker."

"I hope you didn't have someone in mind."

"Well... My friend Linda Tsukasa has a niece -- a very nice girl..."

"Yasuko -- there is something we do need to discuss. Something's come up at my office and I'll need to be away for a while."

"Oh... Not too long, I hope."

"Possibly three to four weeks."

"You go and do what you need to do, Nick. I have no claim on you. You haven't had too many of these assignments lately, and I've been thankful for that. I suppose once in a while comes with the territory."

"Yes -- I'm afraid it does."

2 -- Briefing

Nyk gazed out the viewport as the interstellar packet drew near the transport platform -- a village-sized space station in permanent orbit around his indigo homeworld. The packet had picked him up from the comm relay station his people had installed near Earth. By now he knew the drill by heart -- Shuttlecar ride from Earth's surface to the relay station; a diverted packet to take him to Floran and a shuttle ride to the surface. It was as routine for him as an airliner flight was to an Earth native -- and, about as pleasant.

The packet made its approach and docked with one of the tunnels with which the platform bristled. He filed through the tunnel and into the arrivals lounge. A middle-aged man wearing official insignia approached him. "Nykkyo!"

"Illya -- what are you doing here?"

"It's been a while, Nyk. I thought I should meet your flight. Come -- we can fly my private shuttle to the surface. Do you have accommodations?"

"No -- I'll find a room at the hostel."

"You will do nothing of the sort. You will stay as my guest. Come."

Nyk followed Kronta to a bullet car that carried them through the platform to the diplomatic terminal. They boarded a small shuttle. It pulled away from the platform and headed toward the surface.

Nyk felt Kronta's palm against his in a traditional Floran gesture of friendship. He spread his fingers and the two men held hands. "Nyk," Illya said, "over the years I have developed a deep respect for your abilities. In a way, it's too bad you're stationed on Earth. You could have a bright future here on the homeworld."

"Thanks, Illya. It's important work I'm doing on Earth."

"I know it is. I wish we could clone you."

The shuttle touched down and taxied to the private terminal at the Floran City shuttleport. Kronta motioned Nyk to an awaiting skimmer that carried them to a platform on the 100th floor of an apartment tower.

Nyk glanced toward Illya. "Why all the ceremony, Illya? I could've just as easily taken one of the regular shuttles and a tubecar here."

"I have a surprise for you." Kronta approached a door and pressed his wrist to a doorscan. The device read the microchip in his wrist and the door slid open. Nyk stepped into the apartment. "This is my humble abode."

Nyk looked around. "Very nice, Illya." He noticed motion from the back of the apartment and a middle-aged woman stepped into the room. His eyes met hers. "Daphne! Daphne Wallace..."

"Nick Kane ... Nykkyo Kyhana," the woman replied.

"How long have you been here?"

"About half a year." She held up her right wrist. "I have a personal ID chip... I'm now a Floran."

"How?"

"Illya and I have been corresponding since that day in Seymor's office."

"And, since your wife has been onworld, I've been pleading with her to come, too."

"Then, I was let go from my teaching job. After eighteen years on the job -- they said they wanted fresher blood. What they really wanted was cheaper, not fresher. I have no family, so I took Illya up on his offer."

"I sent one of our enforcers to fetch her," Kronta replied.

"This very nice young man escorted me here. I stepped into the shuttleport and saw Illya standing, waiting for me... and the decades melted away. I was a young American student in Paris again."

"And I was a young ExoAgent on assignment."

"It's been wonderful. We're both so happy."

“It’s a debt I owe you, Nykkyo,” Kronta added. “I only wish Daphne and I could marry.”

“We can’t,” said Daphne, “because I have no line here. I so envy you and Suki.”

“We were married in an Earth ceremony,” Nyk replied. “It has no legal standing here.”

“Speaking as a woman, Nykkyo -- it wouldn't matter to me whether it did or didn't. I remember watching you two, standing before that judge and proclaiming your love for each other. It was the most beautiful moment I had ever witnessed.”

“Then -- why not do just that? Invite friends, stand before them and proclaim your love for each other. Afterward you can have a party.”

Kronta looked at Daphne. “That is an excellent idea.”

“I’ll bring the champagne,” Nyk added. “Since you’ve been here, have you seen Suki?”

“No. We’ve talked on the vidphone but we haven’t got together. We will someday, soon. Your wife is a very busy woman. She’s the most important Earth person living on Floran.”

“Until half a year ago, she was the ONLY Earth person living here.”

“Now,” Daphne replied, “she is without a doubt the most important. Come -- we’ll dine and talk about the old days. I’ll show you to your room.”

Daphne heated packaged dinners in the apartment’s small kitchen and set them on the table. She produced a bottle and a corkscrew. Illya struggled to extract the cork; then poured rounds into polymer tumblers.

Nyk examined the label. “*Chateneuf-du-Pape*,” he said. “This was Suki’s dad’s favorite.”

“I brought a few bottles with me,” Daphne replied, “and a corkscrew.”

“It’s a good thing she remembered that,” Illya replied.

“I brought it to celebrate our reunion. Illya said we had to save the last bottle to share with you.”

“I feel honored,” Nyk replied. He lifted his glass. “Then, here’s to reunions.” He sipped the wine. “If there are Earth products you’d like -- feel free to give me a list. I’m always bringing cans of tuna for Suki. I can certainly make room for a few bottles of wine...”

“Or, perhaps a tin of *foie gras*,” Daphne suggested.

“Or some chocolates,” Illya added.

“How are you finding Floran?” Nyk asked.

“It’s beautiful -- more beautiful than my wildest imagination.”

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” Nyk replied.

“Thank goodness for beholders. Without them there would be no beauty at all.”

Nyk smiled. “Suki told me how crucial you were to forming her. She told me over and over how Miss Wallace was her favorite teacher. I can see your influence -- that last remark could've come from her own lips.”

“I love your wife, Nykkyo. She was without a doubt, in all my years teaching, my favorite. Teachers aren't supposed to form favorites, but she was mine. The day she graduated I was so happy for her -- knowing she had gotten her life on track. I was sad to see her leave, but I knew great things were in store for her.”

“You just didn't know where,” Illya added.

Nyk walked with Illya into an empty conference room at ExoService headquarters.

“Illya,” he asked, “what is this about? Where's our special envoy?”

“She'll be conferencing in from Gamma-5. I should warn you, Nyk -- she's someone we've locked horns with before.”

“Who might that be?” Nyk chuckled. “Tomyka Wells?”

“None other.”

“Impossible...” He pondered. “Tomyka has been ... rehabilitated?”

“Tomyka spent the first two years of her confinement being such a model citizen, she convinced a magistrate to cut short her sentence. She has been working with the latest Secretary of Agriculture on Gamma. The rumor is their relationship extends beyond professional.”

“Hmmp,” Nyk snorted. “I wonder what sort of man would appreciate Tomyka's ... unique charms.”

Kronta smiled. “He'd need to be a very strong one.”

“Or, a very weak one,” Nyk replied. “Latest Ag Secretary? How many have there been?”

“They've installed a revolving door on the Gamman Ag ministry. This is the fourth in three years.”

“Why the turnover?”

“We can blame THAT on the Altian-Lexalese rapprochement. Mykko Wygann has been opening large tracts of land, and the Altians have been sending unemployed ore-workers to be field hands.”

“What grows on Lexal except for inkroot?”

“They have discovered the Lexalese southern tier has a climate nearly ideal for growing winter wheat.”

Nyk nodded. “Let me guess -- The resulting wheat surplus has hit the Gammans hard.”

“On top of that, the Altians have contributed more than ore-workers. They've installed a couple of their mass drivers to put the containers into orbit...”

“...Resulting in lower production and freight costs.”

“The first Lexalese-Altian wheat came on line two seasons ago. For centuries, the Gammans have been accustomed to a monopoly on being the Hegemony's breadbasket.”

“Now, they know what competition feels like. Hence the turnover at the Ag Ministry.”

“Right, Nyk. They're scrambling to figure out how to deal with it. They've even petitioned the High Legislature for subsidies.”

“I can imagine how well that went over.”

“They called the situation a crisis impacting every colony. It fell on more or less deaf ears. Do you see what happens when you spend a year and a half cooped up in your little Earthbound hole? You get cut out of the loop.”

Nyk smiled. “It's a loop I'd just as soon remain out of. How does this lead to Tomyka's assignment as envoy?”

“This diplomatic initiative has been going on, quietly in the background for some time. Now, both parties are ready to move it up a notch. Once word circulated, Tomyka called in a few of her remaining favors among the ExoService brass and got herself appointed.”

“It seems out of her character,” Nyk replied. “I never envisioned her as a diplomat. As an enforcer, yes -- a diplomat, no.”

“She wanted it bad. We could tell she wanted it -- so bad she could taste it.”

“I still can't believe she'd make such a fuss over this sort of an assignment. What are they planning? A treaty between the Abo and the Gammans patterned after the Lexalese-Altian one?”

“The Abo? What makes you think this has anything to do with the Abo?”

“Your note to Seymour referred to a lost colony. I assumed...”

“You assumed wrong. The colony in question is Varada.”

“Varada...” Nyk rolled the word around in his mouth for a few moments. “The lost colony of Varada...”

“Misplaced would be more appropriate... It's time for Tomyka to conference in. She can fill you in with the rest.”

Nyk turned his chair to face a wall-mounted vidisplay. Kronta activated it and the image of a late-middle-aged woman appeared. “Nykkyo Kyhana,” she said. “Well, well, well... I didn't know YOU were to be our interpreter.”

“I didn't know YOU were to be the envoy,” Nyk replied.

“Please, Nykkyo -- let's not start on the wrong foot. Let's let bygones be bygones. I hold no hard feelings and neither should you. After all -- you were the victor.”

“Agreed... Tell me, Ms Wells...”

“Tomyka,” she replied. “We are on the same team.”

“Tomyka -- tell me how I can help negotiating with Varada. Tell me why we're negotiating with them at all.”

“Some background, Nykkyo... What do you recall of your school history lessons regarding Varada?”

He looked at the ceiling. “Varada -- second or third colony discovered ... Earth-like planet ... for some reason they were excluded from the Floran Hegemony.”

“Varada,” Wells replied. “Current planetary population about two billion. The planet is situated such that interstellar navigation in and out is very dangerous. More of our scouts were lost in the Varada approach than to all other colonies, combined. As a result, the High Legislature decided the colony was too dangerous and was to be abandoned. However, the settlers who were there liked the place and preferred to sever ties and become independent rather than pack up and ship out.

“The Varadans attempted, about a thousand years ago, to normalize relations. An exploratory expedition there revealed something very troubling about how their society had evolved.”

“Which was?” Nyk asked.

“They had evolved into a rigid, stratified society, comprising a leadership class at the top, and with professional, merchant and worker classes in the middle.”

“We have societies like that on Earth,” Nyk replied. “What of the lower class?”

“That is where the difficulties arose. The lowest rung on their ladder was a slave class.”

“Slavery? The Varadans practice slavery?”

“What is even worse,” Tomyka added, “is that they enslaved their own people.”

“Please explain to me why it's preferable to enslave someone else's people.”

Wells ignored his remark and continued, “As you know, the Floran Compact forbids involuntary servitude; the HL constitution forbids it and each and every colonial charter forbids it. The Varadans were told to abolish slavery as a condition for normalization. They walked away from the table.”

“And, now they're back. How did we make contact with them?”

“The Varadans have no interstellar fleet. Their technology resembles Floran's at the dawn of our Golden Age. They do have primitive tachyon transmitters, and they have been hailing us for ... for about a hundred years. About a year ago, one of our exo scouts intercepted the hail. We have been communicating, laboriously, for the past year. Each communiqué must be translated and relayed to an

exo scout, which must move close enough to transmit; then wait and relay the reply back. We feel we are ready for face-to-face communications.”

“How do I fit in?”

“Nykkyo -- You are fluent in Esperanto. We want you to interpret for us.”

“The Varadans speak Esperanto? By the time of the first colonies, the language had already evolved.”

“The Varadans speak a language that resembles Old Floran.”

“I don't speak Old Floran.”

“Old Floran is quite close to Esperanto,” Kronta interjected. “Have you ever read *Red Dawn*, *Red Dusk* in the original Old Floran?”

“Our national literary treasure... I can't get through it in modern Floran.”

“You are a natural linguist, Nykkyo,” Kronta added. “I wouldn't have recommended you if I didn't think you could handle it.”

“There must be linguists in the diplomatic corps who can translate. Use the ones that translated the initial missives.”

“They can read the language and translate it -- but they can't speak it.”

“All right -- I'll give it a try.”

“Good,” Tomyka said. “In two days time, you are to proceed to the transit platform. Go to the ExoService wing and receive instructions there. An exo scout will transport you to Varada, where you will meet with Prefect Ogan. I will follow in two or three days. It'll give you time to practice with the language.”

Nyk looked toward Kronta. “I'll want Andra with me.”

“The *ax'amfin* witch?” Wells exclaimed. “Never!”

“Why do you want her?” Kronta asked.

“Because she IS *ax'amfin*. She was taught the arts of statecraft and protocol. She's also a quick study when languages are concerned. If these are to be diplomatic meetings, I'd want her there. She can advise me based on skills she was taught.”

“I refuse to permit this,” Wells protested.

“Those are my terms,” Nyk replied. “No Andra -- no participation.”

Wells glowered through the vidisplay. “Very well. Illya, get some assurances.” The teleconference display went blank.

“I really rather you didn't bring Andra into this, Nyk.”

“Why not?”

“I don't trust *ax'amfinen* .”

“Andra has never done anything contra to the best interests of the Hegemony,” Nyk replied.

“True, but maybe because she's never had to choose between loyalty to her school and loyalty to her home.”

“Andra's not like that. She has a well-developed sense of right and wrong.”

“My previous statement stands,” Illya said. “I like Andra, and she's never crossed me, personally. But -- *anax'amfin* would never be my choice for an important mission.”

“I think she'll be useful. I certainly don't know how she could hurt.”

“What's your plan?” Kronta asked.

“I'll swing by Sudal and pick up Andra. Then we'll take the scout to Varada.”

Nyk climbed the spiral staircase to the living level of the Residence in Sudal. He looked around his childhood home. The place seemed deserted. “Hello? Suki? Andra?” A tall young woman with oat-straw white hair and pale blue eyes stepped from the back of the house. “Andra!”

“Nyk!” She ran to him. He held and kissed her. “What are you doing here?”

“I'm on a special assignment. I need you to come with me. Can you get away for a few days?”

“What assignment?”

“A diplomatic mission to the lost colony of Varada.”

“Varada?”

“No lie.”

“I ... I think I can get away...”

“Wonderful. I'd love having you along.” He scanned around the living room. “Where's Suki?”

“She's traveling. She's giving a short course on T-Delta. She left yesterday.”

“She'll tour the galaxy before I will -- and she's not even a native.”

“She'll be disappointed to learn she missed your visit. Nyk -- you must get this notion of surprise visits out of your head.”

“Right -- I need to check her calendar first.”

“If she had known you were coming, she'd have made arrangements to be with you. I know she would've.”

“I had little advance warning on this one myself.”

Andra nodded toward the kitchen. “I'll heat some meals. You can tell me all about this diplomatic mission.”

Nyk sat beside Andra at the kitchen table. He dropped his fork onto his empty dinner tray and opened a dessert roll. “I told you what I know.”

“It is fascinating. At least it doesn't sound dangerous. The lost colony of Varada. It almost sounds romantic. Think of it -- a thousand years ago the Varadans would rather walk away from the hegemony than give up involuntary servitude.”

“They must've given it up to try contact now. They knew those were the terms, and they knew they were non-negotiable. I have some background material on Varada.” He whipped his handheld vidisplay from his sash and consulted it. “The population is dispersed across the entire planet. There are four continents, two of which straddle the planet's equator and are populated. The other two are polar, ice-covered and unpopulated -- except for some native fauna.”

“Are there different nationalities on Varada?” Andra asked.

“No -- the population makes up a single Varadan nation. What is conspicuous is a formal class system, made up of a leadership class, professionals, merchants and workers. It is Varadan fashion to wear clothing that exposes the left shoulder and arm, and to wear tattooed on the left clavicle emblems of one's class. Three lozenges indicates the ruling class and three scrolls is the professional class.”

“The doctors and lawyers,” Andra remarked.

“Yes, but also the administrators, ministers and bureaucrats. Three disks identify the merchant class...”

“Three coins,” she observed.

“Three staves mark the working class. At one time there was a slave class, identified by three links of a chain.”

Andra shuddered. “To be branded a slave with an icon of the bands that bind you -- how horrible. I take it one is born into a particular class and stays there.”

“Mobility between classes is permitted, but the rules are complicated -- also, inter- class marriage is permitted, and offspring are given the choice of class to join. Varadan class hierarchy is a complex institution.”

“What else do we know of Varada?” she asked.

“Technologically, they sit between present-day Earth and Floran. They have no interstellar fleet. They do have limited, primitive hyperspace communications.” He returned his handheld to his *xarpa*. “Day after tomorrow we must ride the shuttle to the transit platform. An exo scout will take us to Varada.”

“A exo scout. I've never been on one of those.”

“Me, neither,” Nyk replied. “You know -- when I was a kid, Veska would visit and he always brought me a scale model of one of the scouts. For a while, joining the ExoService is what I wanted to do. My collection included every vessel in the fleet ... from the 100-series diplomatic couriers up to the 700-series heavy cruisers. I knew all the vital facts -- mission, size, crew complement, cargo capacity... I had them hanging on wires from the ceiling of my room. Sounds pretty nerdy, doesn't it?”

She kissed his cheek. “It sounds in perfect character with you.”

“I don't know whether to take that as a cut or a compliment.”

She kissed his cheek again. “Take it as the truth.”

“Do you realize you always kiss my cheek when you're about to tell me something you think I don't want to hear?”

“If you're the expert on the Exo fleet, tell me what sort of scout we're likely to fly.”

“Hmm... We're using the scout for two reasons. It's been centuries ... no, millennia since we had regular service to Varada. They'll need a scout to plot the course. That eliminates a 100-series. On top of that, the approach to Varada is tricky. The planet sits amidst the hyperspace equivalent of dangerous shoals. We'll need one well equipped for such exploration.”

“Are those the two reasons?”

“No. Tomyka will need to consult to the homeworld. The Communications Corps has already dragged a comm relay into position halfway between Varada and the nearest node on our comm net. They'll need another comm relay at Varada. Based on my exhaustive study of the matter, I predict they'll use a 200-series Scout. Those ships are modular, and one could be configured as a temporary, portable comm relay. They are used as such when a relay at a critical node in the net gets damaged for some reason.”

“200-series,” Andra mused. “I was hoping it would be a bigger ship.”

“It's big enough -- several times the size of a passenger packet. Actually, the 300- series Explorers are the smallest ships -- unless you're counting the 100-series couriers. I don't consider them scouts.”

Nyk lay on his childhood bed with a portable vidisplay propped on a cushion. On the screen was the image of an Asian woman. “Are you calling from Floran?” Suki asked.

“I'm calling from my bedroom at the Residence.”

“Oh... Why didn't you tell me you were coming?”

“I didn't know myself. Andra tells me you're giving a short course on Earth history.”

“Yes -- I was asked to come to T-Delta. I wish I knew you were coming.”

“How long will you be there?”

“The course is forty Deltan days, which amounts to about thirty-five standard Floran days.”

“Long enough to screw up your biological clock. Well, my mission shouldn't take more than ten or so standard days, so I'll be long gone by the time you return. How do you like it there?”

“It's different. I don't think it's as pretty a world as Floran.”

“Floran's not all that pretty.”

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, Nykkyo.”

“I was discussing that point with someone else recently. Well -- you'll find Myataxya looks beautiful to all beholders. Is that gig all set?”

“Yes it is -- later this year. I can't wait... I know! I'll give you the dates and maybe Seymor will let you join me. It can be the honeymoon we never had. You said you wanted to honeymoon on Myataxya.”

“But -- we wouldn't be able to make love day and night like a proper honeymoon. You'll need to go to your conference.”

“Those conference sessions don't last 'round the clock.”

“You're right -- it does sound like a great idea. Now I can't wait.” He chuckled. “Seymor says you should find yourself an agent.”

“Hmm... I never thought of that. Do they exist on Floran?”

“Seymor says they do.” He reached to his nightstand. “I brought some pictures -- Nicky's third.”

“Let's see...”

“I didn't bother to scan these.” He held photographs to the vidisplay camera.

“Oh... So cute! Mom's looking good.”

“She's doing better...”

“I'm happy to hear that. I lie awake nights worrying about her.”

“Now, for the grand finale... Nicky's chopstick lesson.”

“Oh, my God!” Suki began laughing. “That's so funny.”

“And, here's how it all ended -- finger food.”

“Those are too precious. Look at Mom -- she's actually smiling!”

“I'll leave these here for you -- on your nightstand. They're extra prints. I had them made for you.”

“I'd appreciate that. Thank you, Nykkyo.”

“During that chopstick incident, I almost let it slip. I was taking the picture and I said, 'Suki would enjoy these.' I'm glad I didn't say 'Suki WILL enjoy these.’”

“How did Mom take it?”

“She thought I was suggesting we do the things you and your dad would enjoy doing -- as tributes.”

Suki sniffed back a tear. “Yes. You should do that.”

“I miss you so much. I lie awake nights missing you.”

“Remember -- before the next time you visit...”

“I'll call your agent first. Maybe he can put in a good word...”

Suki giggled. “What's next for you?”

“Andra and I are going on an adventure. Don't worry -- this one is strictly routine -- nothing dangerous. I'm simply needed as an interpreter for a diplomatic mission.”

“Dangerous? It sounds downright boring to me.”

“Duty calls, I suppose.”

“Is Andra sleeping with you tonight?”

“With you gone -- of course.”

“Kiss her for me, will you?”

3 -- The ExoScout

The Sudal shuttle docked with the transit platform. The docking tunnel door opened and Nyk filed onto the platform. He took Andra's hand. “We go to baggage claim. Then, to the ExoService wing of the platform.”

He stood waiting for his bag to slide into place. “There's mine,” Andra said.

Nyk stooped to retrieve it, and then plucked his own. He took her hand and they walked to the

transit bullet that made the loop around the massive platform.

The car stopped at the Exo terminal. Nyk led Andra to another car which took them out to the Exo wing -- a satellite platform connected via a tunnel to the main one. He stepped to a reception desk. "Nykkyo Kyhana reporting for the Varada mission."

A young man in an ExoService uniform consulted his vidisplay. He pointed. "That bay over there. The transport shuttle will take you aboard on the next trip."

"Which scout?" Nyk asked.

The serviceman consulted his vidisplay again. "The 501."

"501? That's a colonial expedition transport."

"It's what it says here."

Nyk shrugged, took Andra's hand and led her toward the shuttle bay. "Something wrong?" she asked.

"Not wrong, wrong. We're riding ExoScout 501. The 500-series are colonial expedition transports." He rolled his eyes as he searched his memory. "Basic crew complement is thirteen, full crew is fifty. They are designed to carry colonists and materiel to new worlds. They have barracks to accommodate up to five hundred colonists, and a very large cargo bay for pre-fab housing and so on. I think they only built a handful of them."

"I suppose we don't need too many," Andra replied. "It's been hundreds of years since we've seeded a colony on a new world."

"I suppose... Still, it seems odd to use such a vessel on this sort of mission. They're not equipped as comm relays."

He stood at a viewport looking out into space. Parked in station-keeping was a fleet of Exo vessels. All were much larger than the passenger packets he was accustomed to flying.

He pointed. "See? That's a 200-series. Over there is a 300-series Explorer ... no, two of them..."

"Is that big, ugly one the 501?" Andra asked.

"Yes... Ugly?"

She giggled. "It looks bottom-heavy."

"It's because of the cargo hold and barracks decks," he replied. "They need the extra room to carry colonists and supplies when we seed a new world."

"And -- when is THAT next likely to happen? The dome on top looks like a wart."

"That's the observation lounge."

The pressure door to the shuttle bay slid open. A crewman approached them. "Nykkyo Kyhana?"

“Yes.”

“Come aboard -- we'll take you to the scout.”

Nyk carried the travel cases into the bay. The transport shuttle, no bigger than an Earth minivan, was parked there. He climbed aboard and Andra sat beside him. “This looks like an ExoAgency shuttlecar,” Nyk remarked.

“Yes,” the shuttle pilot replied, “your Agency shuttlecars are built on the same chassis.”

The pilot began a prelaunch sequence and tested doorseals. “I'll bet I could fly this,” he whispered to Andra.”

“Don't deny it -- you are excited to fly in an ExoScout, aren't you?”

“It appeals to the little kid in me. How I wish I could share something like this with Nicky.”

“I'll give you the tour,” the pilot said. He flew the shuttle over the scout's topsides. “Below is the observation lounge... There is the bridge ... hyperspace sensor probes ... engineering is on the lower decks. The cargo hold is one deck up... The row of viewports marks the barracks deck.”

“I know all this by heart,” Nyk whispered to Andra. “How this brings back my childhood.”

“The warp coil is located mid-ships,” the pilot continued. “This class has a single coil.”

“Unlike the 300 series Explorers,” Nyk whispered. “They have dual coils mounted on external pods.”

Andra smiled and patted the back of his hand.

The shuttle swept up underneath and headed astern. Clamshell doors swung open to reveal the shuttle bay. The transport made its approach and touched down. As the bay doors closed the pilot taxied to a parking stall and set the shuttle onto the deck.

Bay pressurization required a few moments; then the door safeties released with a snap. Nyk stepped onto the deck and gave Andra a hand. He pointed to a rectangle on the deck marked with a red outline. “That's the cargo lift,” he said. “It connects directly with the cargo hold one deck below. On a seeding mission this shuttlebay can accommodate three tender shuttles for offloading colonists and supplies.”

“Absolutely correct,” the shuttle pilot remarked.

The pressure door isolating the bay from the rest of the ship opened and Nyk encountered a man in tan shirtsleeves and trousers, the ExoService duty uniform. Epaulettes with insignia identified him as the commanding officer. “Mr Kyhana, I am Captain Hayt. Welcome aboard the 501. We're operating with a skeleton crew for this mission. You are free to pick any vacant crewmen's cabin.” He turned to Andra. “Ms Baxa.” He extended his hand. Andra grasped it and curtsied.

Hayt led them to the passenger lift. “Crew quarters are on bridge deck,” he said.

Nyk pointed to the levels on the lift panel. “Deck one is the observation deck; two is bridge and crew quarters; three is the galley, mess and sick bay; four is barracks and shuttlebay; five is the main hold and

six is engineering.”

“Have you been aboard a scout before?” the captain asked.

“In my dreams ... as a little kid. I was inside the shuttle bay on a 300, once. May I see the bridge?”

“This will be an informal flight. The bridge will be open. You are welcome on decks one through three anytime. Decks four through six are off-limits without a crew escort.”

They walked from the lift along a corridor of crew's cabins. “Any of these,” Hayt said, gesturing. “Like I said -- we're running a skeleton crew.”

Nyk pressed a door actuator and a cabin door slid open. Andra followed him inside. He surveyed the accommodations. The place had a well-worn look.

“Do you think the bunk is big enough for two?” he asked, pointing.

She shook her head. “No.”

“No?”

“No ... It means we'll have to cuddle closer.”

He set down his case. “I want to see the bridge. Come with me?”

“What else is there to do on this barge?”

He took her hand and headed down the corridor, which ended at a bulkhead. Through the open door he could see the bridge and posts for the pilot, navigator, operations officer and the captain's command. Crewmen worked vidisplays, running through checklists.

He spotted a bronze plaque mounted on the bulkhead. “ExoScout 501,” he read and ran his hand over it. “Keel laid T-Delta yards 6009.101APF... The first 500-class. This vessel is over five hundred years old. I guess it shows... She's ... seasoned.”

“She's well seasoned,” Andra remarked.

He spotted a tall young man with light skin and oat-straw white hair. He was wearing the uniform of a junior-grade officer. His eyes were of the palest blue. The young ensign glanced Nyk's way and his jaw dropped. “Janna?” he called out.

“Zane?” she replied. “No, it's Andra.”

He leapt over a low railing and approached her. “I knew it had to be one of you.” They embraced and kissed each other's foreheads.

“Do you know each other?”

“Of course we do. This is Zane. He was at Rote Academy when I was at Vebinad.”

“Vebinad is our sister school,” Zane said.

“More precisely, Rote is Vebinad's brother school,” Andra replied. “It's the only academy that trains *maleax'amfinen* .”

“I remember attending class with her and Janna,” Zane said. “We used to call the two of them the Twins.”

“So I've heard,” Nyk replied.

“How did you end up here, Zane?”

“I washed out of Rote. I failed to make the final cut, so I enlisted in the Service.”

“I'm sorry to hear that.”

“It's all right. We all know how hard it is to graduate from one of the academies. I'm the 501's communications officer. How did YOU end up here?”

“Comm... the first officer called. “COMM!””

“I'd better get back to my post. We can hash over old times after the watch is over.”

Nyk approached the captain. “When will we be getting underway?”

Hayt consulted a chronometer. “It's getting late. Probably first thing tomorrow. We're still awaiting word on our cargo.”

“Cargo?” Nyk asked.

“A communications relay. We're giving one to the Varadans.”

“We're giving away a comm relay?” Nyk asked.

“Consider it a diplomatic gift. It's an old one that's been decommissioned. For the Varadans' purposes, it'll work just fine. We'll drop it off outside their heliopause before making planetfall.”

“So that explains why we're using a 500-series scout. We needed something with some cargo capacity.”

“And, this vessel was available. Now, if you'll excuse me.”

Nyk stood with his back against the bridge's rear bulkhead. A chime sounded. “Okay, end of watch,” the first officer announced. “Put her into station-keeping.”

Captain Hayt approached Nyk. “You two are welcome to dine in my cabin.”

“If you'll excuse me,” Andra replied, “I have a prior engagement.”

Nyk watched as Andra and Zane strolled, hand-in-hand, down the corridor.

“*Ax'amfinen*,” Hayt muttered. “You can pick your friends, but not your family -- or, your crew.”

“I'm sorry?” Nyk replied.

The captain nodded toward the corridor. “If I had my choice I wouldn't have an *anax'amfin* in my crew. Best to relegate them to what they're good at -- being sex toys for colonial high officials. I'm surprised you have one with you.”

“Andra is a very good friend of mine,” Nyk replied. “As I've grown to know her, I've developed an appreciation for the roles her kind play.”

“Zane has been a good comm officer. I do wonder where *anax'amfin*'s true loyalties lie.”

“Illya Kronta says the same thing,”

“Ah ... Kronta.... How is Illya?”

“Doing well.”

“Come with me, Nykkyo -- we'll share a meal.” Hayt led him to another doorway that opened onto a spacious cabin directly behind the bridge.

“Captain's quarters,” Nyk remarked.

“First officer's is across the way. Have a seat.” Hayt pressed a panel. “It'll be just a moment. Fully crewed, this ship would have a cabin boy...”

“A cabin boy... That thought never crossed my mind.”

A chime sounded. The captain opened a panel and took a pair of meal trays from a dumbwaiter.

“This is quite a venerable ship,” Nyk remarked. “First in the 500-class.”

“This is the ship that seeded the Lexal colony.”

“How many 500s were built?”

“Two,” Hayt replied. “Three if you count the prototype. There's not much need for this class of vessel. We haven't had the opportunity to seed another colony since Lexal was founded.”

“How long do you think the crossing to Varada will take?”

“I'm estimating four standard days.”

“Four days? I've been on the packet to Lexal. They can make the trip in a single jump, and Lexal is more distant than Varada.”

“More likely, multiple jumps that feel like just one. You must understand, Nykkyo -- that is a commercial run. Those routes are well understood and well mapped. We'll be charting unknown territory on our way to Varada.”

“Varada was a routine destination at one time.”

Hayt gulped his mouthful. “Never routine. That planet has the misfortune of lying close to a nexus of some very steep hyperspace gradients. We must approach that system with great caution -- we must probe and jump ... probe and jump. Add to this the fact we're manning only one watch. We must go into station-keeping for half a day when that watch is over.”

“So, we'll be doing hyperspace mapping, too?”

“Absolutely.”

“Wouldn't a 300-class Explorer be better suited?”

“This ship is fully qualified for our mission. Don't forget our cargo. A 300 would have to tow it.”

“I keep forgetting about the relay station. Could we tow something like that?”

“I wouldn't want to attempt it.” Hayt scooped another spoonful. “Have you studied hyperspace navigation?”

“No,” Nyk replied.

The captain stood and retrieved material from his desk drawer. He returned with a polysheet, a stylus and a shirt button. “Let's say this polysheet represents space.” With the stylus he drew two circles, one at each end of the sheet. “And, let's say this is Floran and this is Varada.” He placed the button on one circle and began to push it along the sheet. “We could not make the transit in normal space -- not in our lifetimes, at least, except at relativistic velocities. Even then, time dilation would make the trip impractical.”

Hayt returned the button to one of the circles. “However, if we can use additional dimensions...” He held his hand above the sheet. “From the viewpoint of the polysheet, my hand exists in a higher-order dimension. If we know space is warped in this dimension...” He picked up the end of the sheet and the button, folded it over and released it. The page flopped open onto his desk, with the button atop the circle at the other end. “We can travel from Floran to Varada in an instant -- without moving at all.”

“In ordinary timespace, you mean.”

“Precisely.”

“I understand warp travel,” Nyk replied. “I never understood how warp navigation works.”

“Adding the time dimension complicates matters,” Hayt continued. “The goal is to arrive at Varada with negligible time displacement.” He returned the button to the starting circle. “In order to do that, we may find ourselves having to make multiple jumps.” He bent the sheet over halfway and dropped the button onto its middle; then picked up the other end, bent it over and picked up the button. “It may very well be that, in hyperspace, the best route takes us via the other side of the galaxy. We want to avoid time displacement at all costs.”

“Would you navigate via a jump with a time displacement followed by a second jump with an opposite time shift?”

“Theoretically possible, but we prefer not to do it that way. We rather to stick to hyperspace contours with a neutral time gradient.”

“Why is that?” Nyk asked.

“Time gradients are dangerous. Just because our target coordinates are empty space today is no guarantee they will be at some arbitrary time delta into the future.”

Nyk nodded in comprehension. “Or, were at some arbitrary point in the past. What differentiates the contours?” Nyk asked.

“Energy levels. Most commercial routes follow contours that are widely-spaced in the energy domain. You don't need to be too careful setting your warp coil parameters. The levels are quantized, so even if you're off by a few percent, you lock onto the desired contour. That's what makes the Varadan approach so tricky -- the contours are too close together. If you're off by a couple percent, you risk following the wrong one.”

“It could take us into uncharted space or throw us backward in time.”

“Worse yet, it could send us straight into the center of a star. Ships that were lost on the Varadan approach were never heard from again. We surmise they suffered such a fate.”

“We'll use the hyperspace contour mapping to facilitate future missions?” Nyk asked.

“Precisely. For starters, we'll relay the route to Tomyka Wells's courier. Her vessel is not equipped to perform the necessary probing. Should regular transports to Varada resume, then we'll use the hyperspace maps to create automated jump programs for passenger packets and freighters.”

“This,” said Zane, “is a tachnet uplink we'll be installing in the Varadan capital.”

“There's one of those in the attic of the house in Wisconsin,” Nyk replied. “It links with the comm relay station we have parked outside Earth's heliopause.”

“We'll do exactly the same thing at Varada,” Zane replied. “I believe on Earth the relay is located in a circumpolar region of the sky.”

“Yes -- above the planet's north pole. From Wisconsin, at least, it never falls below Earth's horizon.”

“That won't be possible on Varada,” Zane replied. “Our relay station will only be visible during part of the day. If relations with Varada develop, we can install others spaced around the equator...”

“So, one will always face the relay”

“Exactly.” He led them from the communications lab. “Now, I'll show you more of Engineering...” He led them through a hatch in a bulkhead. “The inertial sinks are in this compartment...”

“Sinks?”

“Yes -- main and auxiliary... Ahead of the sinks is life support, waste reprocessing, water and oxygen reclamation and reserve supplies of water and atmosphere.”

“How long can this vessel operate without resupplying air and water?” Nyk asked.

“With this crew, we are provisioned for one hundred standard days -- provided some event doesn't cause us to vent atmosphere ... these are containment hatches -- the entire ship is set up so we can isolate a part of the hull in the event of damage.”

“To prevent venting atmosphere,” Nyk commented.

“Yes...”

The three of them stood and gazed upon a large tank, lying on its side, with plumbing that ran from either end.

“This,” Zane said, “is our warp coil.”

“Impressive,” Nyk replied. “I wouldn't want to be standing here when it's triggered.”

“The warp jolt doesn't come from the coil -- it comes from the rupture of normal timespace. It feels no different here than in any other part of the ship.”

“Are those power conduits?” Nyk asked.

“No -- cryogenic coolant.”

“I've seen the warp coils that are in our shuttlecars. They don't require cooling.”

“This is a much bigger vessel than one of your shuttlecars,” Zane replied. “Come -- let's look in Main Engineering.”

They passed through another bulkhead and into a control room. Nyk saw the chief engineer and two mates watching status displays. A low thrum-thrum-thrum came from behind a bulkhead. “Behind there is the fusion reactor,” Zane said, pointing. “And, behind that are the hydrogen fuel tanks.” He pointed to a schematic diagram on the bulkhead. “Here are the helium vent ports.”

“We vent the fusion byproduct?” Nyk asked. “We only have single-stage reactors?”

“On a vessel as this, the additional power from two-stage reactors doesn't justify the additional weight and complexity -- better, instead, to use a larger one-stage reactor.”

Nyk perused the control panels.

“One of the tenders will be fueling us before we depart,” Zane continued. “We do that second watch.”

“I thought Captain Hayt said we were manning only a single watch.”

“Engineering is always manned,” the chief engineer replied.

“It must be a lonely watch, then,” Nyk remarked.

“Over here is the auxiliary bridge. We can run the ship from here if need be -- all the critical functions are replicated. With a skeleton crew, the second watch chief is responsible for all operations. Of course, we'll be in station-keeping -- but should anything arise, we'll have eyes on it at all times.”

“Thank you, Chief,” Nyk said.

“We'll continue our tour up two decks,” Zane said. “Directly above us is the cargo hold. It's empty and will stay that way.”

“Won't we be carrying the comm relay in there?” Nyk asked.

“It's too big. We have no way to get it below decks from the shuttlebay. It'll have to stay put there.”

“We've already seen the shuttlebay,” Nyk said, “on our way in.”

“That's right. The only other thing on deck four are the barracks, and we won't be using them on this voyage, either. We might as well go straight to deck three.”

“We have a skeleton crew on a big, empty ship,” Nyk said. “At least we won't feel claustrophobic.”

“Right,” Zane replied. “We won't be bumping into each other.”

“I imagine on a seeding mission -- this would be one busy ship,” Andra remarked.

“Yes, indeed -- we can accommodate five hundred colonists. We would need a full crew and we'd man both watches -- run the galley 'round the clock and hope our passengers behave themselves. Well, she and her sister are ready, willing and able if and when the next colony world is discovered. Missions like this one keep her limber. Come on, let's go up to the galley deck.”

Zane led them toward the lift. “Deck three is sick bay, galley, and crew and passenger mess. We have no medic aboard, so sick bay is closed -- not even stocked. We have one cook in the crew. We'll leave the mess halls shut and take our meals in our cabins....”

“Your friend Zane seems personable enough,” Nyk said to Andra.

“Yes -- he's a nice guy.”

“How much did you see of him at Vebinad?”

“Not an awful lot.” She giggled. “For a while he had a crush on Janna. It was before he realized how much the two of us resembled each other.”

“Don't tell me more... I imagine you two had quite a bit of fun at his expense.”

“Yes... He was a good sport about it. Of course, *ax'amfinen* aren't permitted love interests during academy. We are delivered to our assignees as virgins, and Destiny help anyone who isn't one.”

Nyk slipped his arm around her and she leaned against him. The lift doors opened and he looked around the observation deck.

“This is deck one -- observation lounge. We're actually standing outside the hull of the 501.”

The deck was covered by a transparent dome. Upholstered benches lined the dome, with others set in geometric patterns.

Nyk stood and looked toward the transit platform. “You get a great view from here,” he said.

“I believe that's why they call it the observation lounge,” Andra replied.

“Look -- you can see Floran City and Sudal from here... You can't appreciate the view from a packet viewport. You need to be standing in a place like this.”

Andra looked aft. “There's the fueling tender,” she said.

“It gives the second watch engineering crew something to keep their minds occupied. I understand some of the scouts can pull stray hydrogen from space and refuel in flight.”

“Not this bucket?” she asked.

“No -- not this one. Some of the newer ones... I'm just as happy we're leaving with a full tank. It wouldn't be good to run short on the other side of the galaxy.”

She embraced his arm and kissed his cheek. “You are enjoying yourself -- aren't you?”

“Immensely. I knew I was destined to be aboard one of these, one day.”

“Shall we return to our cabin?”

Nyk lay on his back, staring in the dim light at the patterns made by the metal plates forming the ceiling of their cabin. Beyond those plates lay a layer of insulating foam, more plates forming the hull of the vessel, and then -- deep itself.

Andra pulled herself against him, resting her head on his shoulder. He caressed her, and fingered her fine, white hair. She kissed his chest. “Mmm,” she said. “You have a way of making me feel loved like I've never felt before.”

“It's because I love you, Andra.”

“Mmm ... I know -- like I've never been loved before.”

“You and Suki are the two I love most in the whole universe.”

“You and Sukiko are the two I love most in the whole universe,” she replied.

“Thank you for agreeing to come with me on this boondoggle. I was surprised you agreed so easily.”

“It gives me a chance to use the skills for which I was trained,” she replied.

“You were trained for political assignments -- not diplomacy.”

“Diplomacy is one of the political arts -- don't you think?” She kissed him again. “The real reason I agreed is a selfish one.”

“Selfish?”

“Yes -- to spend time with you.”

“It's the same reason I insisted you accompany me -- to spend time with you. Even if it's in a cramped bunk in a cabin on an ExoService bucket ... or, on a strange world, breathing strange air, drinking strange water and eating strange food.”

4 -- Planetfall Varada

Nyk was startled awake by the bong-bong-bong of a chime. He looked up and saw white indicators blinking over his cabin's viewports. The flash shutters began to close.

“Andra -- Andra! Wake up.”

“Mmmmmph,” she said and rubbed her eyes.

“We're getting underway.” He folded down a jump seat and belted himself in. Andra climbed out of the bunk, folded down another and fastened her restraints.

The indicators flashed white to blue. A thud shook the ship and Nyk was thrown against his restraint. Andra's overnight bag fell from a shelf onto the deck. Then a second jolt and a third. The warp indicators went dark and the viewport shutters opened.

“Where do you think we are?” she asked.

“I don't know.” He craned his neck to look through the viewport. “We slept through the start of the watch and the captain's briefing.” He pulled on his tunic. “I'm going to take a stroll to the bridge.”

“I'll join you after my shower.”

Nyk headed down the corridor and stepped onto the bridge. On the viewpane was a rust-colored planet. “Where are we?” he asked.

“We're making planetfall on Nalos,” the first officer replied.

“What's on Nalos?”

“Nothing. It's what's in orbit around Nalos -- ExoService salvage yard. We're here to pick up a comm relay.”

“How long will we be here?”

“Well, that depends, doesn't it -- on how long it takes to find one that Zane and the chief can coax back into life.”

“We've reached the coordinates,” the pilot reported.

“Thank you, helm,” replied the first officer. He touched a control panel at his post and a rectangular object tumbling lazily in space appeared on the viewpane. “That's it -- taken out of service a hundred years ago.”

An open transport with pressure-suited crew approached the relay station. “Are they from the salvage yard?” Nyk asked.

“Yes,” the first officer replied. “They'll control its roll so our men can have a look- see.”

“It looks like dangerous work.”

“It is dangerous -- but these guys are pros.”

One of the crew stepped from the transport. He paused for a moment and then activated his thruster pack. He approached the tumbling relay, his velocity matching its rotation and grabbed onto it. From a pack on his back he withdrew an object, secured it to the relay station, let go and headed back to the transport. Another crewman repeated the performance on the other side of the relay.

“What are those?” Nyk asked.

“Inertial sinks,” the first officer replied. “They'll control the rolling.” The relay station's tumbling slowed and stopped. “Ensign,” he called into a communicator, “you're on.”

Another figure, riding a personal thruster like a motorcycle, approached the station.

“Is that Zane?” Nyk asked.

“Yes. He'll give it the once-over. The yard master tells us they have three others if this won't do.”

“And, if none of them do?”

“We'll make one do.”

Zane approached the bridge in his pressure suit and carrying his helmet in the crook of his arm.

“Status?” the captain said.

“It appears to be functional,” Zane reported, “but...”

“But what, Ensign?”

“The control cabin won't hold atmosphere. It seems the door seals are hardened from being in space for so long. Also, it's missing its gravity generator. Likely explanation -- it was scavenged years ago. We'll have to do our work in pressure suits and zero-G. It won't be easy.”

“Ensign, where in your enlistment agreement did you see the word 'easy?'”

“Nowhere, Sir. Some day, though, a Communications Corps technician will be cursing us through her teeth. We'll be able to work on it here in the bay during the crossing to Varada. We'll have gravity and atmosphere -- that'll make it easier. According to the yard master, this one was fully functional when taken out of service. I'll say this, Sir -- we couldn't find a more marginal specimen if we looked for one.”

“Put a team together to bring it on board.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Nyk stood holding hands with Andra as they stood in the observation lounge looking aftward. The scout had maneuvered so the house-sized relay station was directly aft, and had matched its velocity. The shuttle bay clamshell doors swung open.

Four open cockpit thrust tractors, manned by crewmen in pressure suits left the bay and headed toward the relay. Two before and two aft, they hooked cables onto it and began towing it toward the open bay. The gap between the scout and the comm station narrowed.

He watched two more crewmen wearing thruster packs drag cables out from the bay. These they hooked onto the relay. With the tractors hauling to the aft to keep the cables taught, they began to draw the device into the shuttle bay.

“It looks like a tight fit,” Nyk remarked. “Let's go below. When will we have another chance to see the outside of a comm relay this close up?”

He headed for the lift and exited on the shuttle bay deck. Peering through the view panel in the pressure door he could watch the crewmen winch the relay station inside. A pair of crewmen placed roller dollies under the station. He could feel scraping transmitted through the deck.

The clamshell swung shut and he could hear the bay pressurize. The pressure door slid open as the captain stepped from the lift car. Zane removed his helmet and wiped perspiration from his brow. “We brought it in, Sir,” he reported.

“So I see.”

“Chief will start fueling the fusion reactors. As long as it's in the bay, we might as well go over the exterior -- make sure the antenna couplings are all sound. I'll install comm protocol upgrades. We'll have it ship-shape before we reach Varada, Captain.”

“That's more like it, Ensign.”

Nyk approached Zane. “We're giving this away?”

“That's the plan.”

“Aren't we afraid the Varadans will learn some secrets? Like our comm ciphers?”

“This will be parked outside their heliopause. They won't be able to reach it -- their fastest shuttle would take ten years to make the transit ... one way. If you'll excuse me, I want to get out of this suit and start breathing life into this thing.”

Nyk wandered around the shuttlebay regarding the relay station. He poked his head into the docking tunnel and saw Zane sitting at a vidisplay running diagnostics. “Come on up,” Zane called to him.

He pushed a stepstool under the docking tunnel and clambered inside. “This is so much smaller than the one near Earth. Is that the crew cabin?”

“Yes,” Zane replied. “No one will want to spend any more time aboard this one than necessary -- not without atmosphere or gravity.”

“How is it coming?”

Zane put down his diagnostic panel. “I have the comm equipment upgraded. This one only has two hundred channels, but it'll do for the Varadans for years to come.” He poked some switches. “Assuming it stays running that long. Right now, we're running it on ship's power.”

“The reactors don't work?”

“So far, the chief hasn't been able to get the fusion reactors fueled -- they leak hydrogen.”

“That's not good.”

“He has one of his mates in the machine shop fabricating a new set of cryogenic couplers which should do the job.”

“Zane -- what's it like?”

“What's what like?”

“What's it like being a male *ax'amfin* ? I'm sorry if my question seems too forward.”

He smiled. “Nykkyo -- Andra has told me some of her experiences with you. I won't consider anything too forward coming from your lips. Being a male *ax'amfin* is pretty much like being a female one except for the gender thing.”

“That's a rather glib answer.”

“It's the best I can do. Actually, Nykkyo -- you and I have much more in common being men than Andra and I do being *ax'amfinen* . I think it's easier being a man. *Ax'amfin* features are more striking on a woman, don't you think?”

“I'd say so.”

“It must be difficult having your physical appearance define your whole life. That part of it is more

difficult for the women, I think.”

“Don't you ever wonder?”

“Wonder what?”

“What it would be like to fulfill an *anax'amfin* assignment?”

He smiled again. “Nykkyo -- the day they told me I failed to make the final cut was the happiest of my life. It meant I was free to fulfill my own dreams.”

“The ExoService?”

“I've wanted to do this since I was a kid. You have to realize what it's like growing up with these features. My parents worked long and hard with genetic counselors before they created an embryo with the right features for the finishing schools. They knew time was running out on my mother's biological clock.

“Finally they had all the features -- the light skin, the blue eyes, the white hair ... certain innate cognitive abilities. It all lined up with the profiles. There was one small problem called a Y chromosome. It was either implant or start over. There's always Rote Academy, they consoled each other.

“Rote accepted me -- on a provisional admission.”

“What does that mean?”

“It meant they'd pay my parents only twenty-five percent, with the rest held in trust until I successfully completed the program. Of course, Rote doesn't pay for boys what Vebinad does for girls in the first place. Here I was -- a double disappointment for my parents. I didn't want to go. When I washed out, they saw their graduation bonus vanish into thin air. I haven't spoken to them since. They accuse me of deliberately failing.”

“Did you?”

Zane smiled. “Like I said, it was the happiest day of my life.”

“Are you enjoying the Service?”

“For the most part. They recognized my talents for the comm stuff during basic training. I got my certificate, but lacked the rank. So, they fast-tracked me through officer's training and assigned me to this barge. Most comm officers are first lieutenants -- or better. Beggars can't be choosers, I suppose.”

“What do you mean?”

“It's not like I could pick my commission. It works both ways -- there's no line of crew out there waiting to man this bucket.”

“The 500s perform a critical function,” Nyk replied. “When the next colony...”

“And, when's THAT going to happen? It's been three hundred years since Lexal was seeded. In the meantime, we run a skeleton crew and make short cruises to keep our systems ship-shape...”

“...And,” Nyk added, “when the Service has something big that needs to be lugged from point A to point B...”

“Like a relay station ... right -- the Service considers us a big, deep-space tender shuttle.”

“You're making the run from Tedium to Apathy and back again, with an occasional sidetrip to Monotony.”

Zane looked up at him and chortled. “That's a good one.”

“It's a line from a movie program I was watching with my Earth mother-in-law ... about a navy vessel with a similar mission.”

“That's right -- Andra told me a bit of your situation. It sounds like your Agency assignment has been anything but boring.”

“Anything but,” Nyk replied.

“Unlike mine. We also serve who sit and wait... If you'll excuse me I have some more comm circuits to ring out.”

The warp chimes sounded and Nyk belted himself in. “Another jump,” he said. “It's been like this all watch -- jump, then reconnoiter, then jump again. No one can get anything done because as soon as you start something the chimes sound and you have to stow it and belt yourself in.”

Andra adjusted her restraints. “What precisely did you want to accomplish on this crossing?”

“Nothing... But, if I knew this is what life aboard an exo scout was really like -- it would've dampened my enthusiasm right away.”

The viewport shutters closed and the jump shook the ship. The indicators went dark and the shutters retracted. Nyk unhooked his belt and looked out the viewport. “Andra! Look!” Andra bent over and pressed her nose against the port. “It's a globular cluster! That last jump took us way outside the plane of the galaxy. We are really far from home.”

“And no doubt another jump coming.”

“I hope so -- I wouldn't want to be stranded here. But -- isn't that a sight? Those are some of the oldest stars in the galaxy. It looks close enough to touch, but it must be thousands of lightyears away.”

Another chime sounded -- the one ending the watch.

“We're going to spend the night here,” Andra said.

“Looks like. Here is as good as anywhere, I guess... Let's go up to the observation lounge.”

The lift doors opened and he climbed the spiral stairs to the lounge. “Oh, my goodness,” Andra exclaimed.

He pointed. "There's our globular cluster..."

"No, Nyk -- look down!" she said.

"You can see the galaxy -- the central bulge -- our arm of it. This view is worth it all, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes. THIS is why Florans enlist in the ExoService."

"And, here I am without a camera."

"What about your handheld?"

"I forgot." He pulled it from his sash and used the built-in camera to snap photoimages. "Oh, how I wish I could show these to Yasuko and Nicky. Maybe we should bunk here tonight. Could you imagine waking up to that view?"

"I think there's something else you'd like to do to that view."

"Yes -- if we could assure we wouldn't be interrupted -- we would."

The chime signaling the start of the watch sounded through the ship. "Are you coming to the captain's briefing?" he asked Andra. "We were asked to be there."

"No. I can tell when I'm unwelcome in that boy's club."

"They're an all right bunch."

"To another man, perhaps. I've sensed nothing but hostility from the senior officers. I don't know if it's because I'm a woman, an *ax'amfin*, or both. I suspect both. I don't like the way the captain treats Zane."

"Zane is a precocious junior officer in a senior officer's role. He's handsome, blond and bright -- I'll bet he has no problem getting dates on shore leave. Teasing such a one is part of the Service."

"It goes beyond teasing, Nyk. Remember -- I've been trained to read people. There's something deeper."

"You're sure you're not coming."

"Positive."

"I'll give you a full report, then."

Nyk adjusted his *xarpa* and headed down the corridor into the bridge. From there he stepped into the captain's cabin and took a seat at the conference table.

Captain Hayt sat at the head, along with his first officer, both chief engineers, Zane and the navigator. "We expect planetfall Varada this watch," Hayt announced. "We have some background material on our objective and our mission." He gestured toward his navigator.

“Planet Varada masses 1.2 times greater than Floran. Rotational period is ten percent shorter. Revolutionary period is fifteen percent longer. Their sun is class GIII. Solar radiation protection is recommended for crew operating on the surface.

“The axial tilt is eleven degrees. Seasonal variation is minimal. The planet has two moons that appear to be asteroid captures. There are two continents, with the bulk of the population living in a band stretching from roughly the equator to approximately forty degrees north latitude. The population becomes dramatically sparser further north. From approximately seventy degrees to the poles are polar caps. Two small, uninhabited continents lie under each cap.

“Mean surface temperature is twenty-five Celsius; near the equator the mean is thirty-five. The climate in the equatorial zones is temperate to semi-tropical. Rainfall is moderate, and severe weather is uncommon.”

“It sounds very much like Earth,” Nyk remarked. “Nicer than Earth, in fact.”

“It's no wonder the original settlers refused to abandon the planet,” Zane remarked. “It sounds more hospitable than Floran itself.”

The captain rapped the table. “On to our mission. We will have one away team, led by our Comm Chief.”

Zane stood. “I will be taking a team of myself and two midshipmen to deploy the tachyon uplink on the roof of the administration building in the capital city. Local communication trunks have been laid in and we will attempt to configure protocol converters to interconnect their planetary network to ours.”

“In addition,” the captain said, “we will be transporting the diplomatic envoys to the surface. Mr Kyhana...”

Nyk stood. “There is a single national entity on Varada. The two continents are referred to as Varada Major and Varada Minor, and each has its own continental government. The national capital city is located on the eastern coast of Varada Major.

“Our diplomatic mission is to await the arrival of Special Envoy Tomyka Wells, at which time we will begin negotiations. Our objective is to agree upon a Letter of Intent to begin discussions exploring normalization of relations.”

“A Letter of Intent to begin discussions?” Zane asked. “We spent all this time and effort -- and all we'll walk away with is a Letter of Intent?”

“That's enough Ensign,” the captain retorted. “You are out of order.”

“I'm sorry, Sir,” Zane replied.

“Let me address this,” Nyk interjected. “I agree this sounds like a ... a modest objective. There are ... complications regarding Varadan society that we must understand before we can proceed with full normalization. This mission will be a step in that direction.”

“And -- don't forget that comm relay,” the captain added. “That alone will facilitate further discussions after we have obtained that Letter of Intent. Any questions?”

He looked around the table.

“None heard. Once we have transported the envoys, and once the tachyon uplink is in place, we will continue our mission of hyperspace contour mapping in and around the Varadan system while the talks progress. Upon conclusion of the diplomatic mission -- we return home.”

Hayt looked around the table again. “This concludes our briefing,” he said. “Advise your teams accordingly. Dismissed.”

Nyk headed toward his cabin. “Well?” Andra asked.

“Planetfall Varada this watch,” Nyk replied.

“It's about time. My eagerness to be off this bucket is tempered only by the knowledge we'll need to ride her home.”

Nyk belted himself into a jumpseat mounted to the aft bulkhead of the bridge. He felt the jolt of the jump.

“Gentlemen,” the captain said. “I give you Varada.”

The crew erupted into a cheer.

“We need to subjump to orbit,” Nyk said.

“We need to offload that comm relay,” the first officer replied.

Nyk followed the crewmen to the shuttlebay. Through the pressure door he watched suited crew haul the relay station out of the bay. Then, he saw Zane astride a personal thruster heading toward the station. Zane hooked a tether from the thruster to the station; then unhooked his own safety line. He opened the docking tunnel door and stepped inside.

The station's formation and safety lights came on; then the tachyon antennas blossomed. The docking tunnel door opened, Zane emerged, hopped onto his steed and guided it back toward the shuttle bay.

The clamshells closed and the bay pressurized. Zane unhooked his helmet and walked through the door.

“Status?” asked the captain.

“Operational,” Zane replied, “though I don't know for how long. That is the biggest piece of junk I've ever worked on.”

Nyk pulled out his handheld, switched it on and saw the comm uplink indicator. His vidisplay would now operate as if he were sitting at home on Floran. He switched it off and tucked it back into his sash.

“Well,” the captain said, “This thing only needs to work long enough to get us through the first round of negotiations. Well done, Ensign.”

“Let's hope,” Zane replied, “they don't drag the talks out.”

“Now, let's get this boat into orbit. Stations everyone.”

Nyk followed the officers toward the bridge. He poked his head into the cabin. “Andra -- come to the bridge. We're about to subjump to orbit.”

She joined him, sat on a bench at the aft bulkhead and took his hand. The warp indicators flashed white to blue and the subjump jolted the ship.

The captain addressed his first officer. “Take her in.”

“Yes, Captain ... Navigator, hyperbolic approach vector, if you please.”

“Locked in.”

“Helm...”

“Engaging...”

A blue world flecked with white began to loom in the forward viewpane. Andra leaned to Nyk. “I have to admit -- despite myself I'm giddy inside. Other than Lexal, I've never been offworld. This is exciting.”

“What about that stint you did on Earth with Zander?”

“That was harrowing. THIS is exciting.”

The blue sphere grew to fill the viewpane. Nyk could begin to make out surface features -- the coastline, cities, lakes and rivers.

“Decelerating to elliptical orbit,” the pilot reported, “apogee five hundred fifty kilometres; perigee four seventy-five.”

“Place her into orbital station-keeping,” the captain said. “Warp systems to standby. Away teams -- prepare for your missions.”

5 -- Novo Hominids

The scout's shuttlecraft swept toward the Varadan capital city. Nyk looked out viewports and pointed toward the green-brown continent that spread before them. “A remarkably Earth-like colony,” he remarked to Andra.

She nodded. "The most Earth-like of them all," she replied. "What's that brown smudge over the capital city?"

Nyk peered. "Air pollution. New York City looks the same from this altitude. This society uses internal-combustion engines to power their transportation."

"We've been instructed to land on the roof of one of the administration buildings," the pilot said. "They have a landing area intended for rotary-wing aircraft there."

Their craft went into station-keeping over a helipad atop a low building situated in a green, groomed park. Nyk watched as the roof approached and felt a bounce as they touched down. The hatch opened. He stepped out and headed toward the edge of the roof and looked toward the ground.

Below him were formal gardens planted with brightly colored shrubs arranged in geometric patterns. He glimpsed motion among the greens and reds and made out a bare-chested, dark-skinned figure tending the beds.

"Nykkyo Kyhana," he heard someone call. Approaching from a stairwell was a middle-aged man in tan shirt and trousers. His shirt was cut to expose his left clavicle, on which were tattooed three scrolls. Insignia embroidered on his right sleeve identified him as an official of some sort.

"Nykkyo Kyhana, I am Prefect Ogan. Welcome ... welcome to Varada. It is my duty and my privilege to extend hospitality as we await the arrival of the envoy." Through concentration, Nyk could piece together the meanings of his words, sifting through the nuances differentiating Old*Lingwa* from Esperanto.

He attempted to apply the nuances in formulating a reply. "Good day, Prefect. Please accept our thanks. I would like to introduce my companion and assistant Andra Baxa." He gestured in her direction.

Ogan nodded a greeting and Andra made a deep curtsy. "I had heard she was accompanying you. Ms Baxa, you are a very beautiful woman. Please, this way. Our luncheon table is set."

Nyk grasped his case and followed Ogan into the stairwell and down several flights to a conference room. Set on the table were three plates, each mounded with off-white, finger-length strands. Topping the mounds were scoops of a green puree.

Nyk sat and picked up a flat implement -- a rectangular, shallow spoon with three stubby prongs on the end. His eyes met Andra's and she smiled. He scooped some strands.

"Mmm, very good," Andra said.

"No need to translate that," Ogan replied. He stabbed some strands and held them up. "Pomma -- the staple of Varada. The whole grain provides all essential nutrients. We eat it with every meal."

"Don't you tire of it?" Nyk asked.

"Never. To tire of pomma is to tire of living -- a Varadan aphorism." Nyk took another mouthful. The flavor and texture reminded him of an Earth pasta.

"Pomma IS Varada," Ogan continued. "Pomma gives us everything, from food to fiber to fuel."

“Really,” Nyk replied. “Fuel, Prefect?”

“Alcohol, distilled from pomma mash. Do Florans still grow food and fiber under domes?”

“We certainly do.”

“Varada needs not. Pomma is a native plant, well adapted to the climate here.”

“You're fortunate to have a native biosphere compatible with humans.”

“Fortunate, indeed. Our colony wouldn't have survived otherwise.” He skewered and again held up some pomma grains. “It is a very labor-intensive crop to grow.” He touched his finger to the pointed end of a grain. “Each of these is a single kernel. From this end grows a tassel. It is essential that the tassel be removed before it matures. Left on, the kernels mature to become inedible. The only way to de-tassel pomma is by hand.”

“It must be difficult work,” Nyk remarked between bites.

“Yes,” Andra added, her Varadan thickly colored by a Floran accent. “It must explain your need for slave labor.”

“Please,” Ogan protested. “The cultivation of pomma was but one reason we developed a ... a stratified society.” He moved his hand back and forth at his eye level. “Whenever you encounter strata, by necessity some reside at the top...” He slid his hand along the table top. “... and some at the bottom. The bottom stratum is as important as the top, for it supports those above it.”

Nyk picked up Andra's thread. “Nonetheless, you found it necessary to impose involuntary servitude.”

“Given the choice of the top or bottom, one naturally chooses the top. If everyone inhabited the top, the structure becomes top heavy and collapses.” He made a collapsing gesture. He looked up and into Nyk's eyes. “I take it the notion of our stratified society does not appeal to Floran sensibilities.”

“Stratification? No, we have no problem with stratification. Some of our existing colonies have societies stratified to one degree or another. We do have difficulties with involuntary membership in a given level. And, lack of opportunity for advancement -- that's a problem, too. These were the principal stumbling blocks in normalizing relations.”

“We have solved both problems,” Ogan replied. “The bottom stratum is now...” He waved his hands in a cutting motion. “...gone. Absolutely gone.”

“How did you solve this problem?” Andra asked.

“Yes, how?” Nyk added. “With automation?”

“No ... perhaps yes in a loose sense. You will see shortly...” He scooped the last of his meal. “For dessert we have pomma cake. You won't believe it's made of the same plant. The kernels are ground into flour...”

“I suppose you have pomma bread,” Nyk interrupted. He skewered his last kernels.

“Certainly.”

“I’m finished,” Andra said as she set down her utensil.

“Excellent,” Ogan replied scarcely concealing his anticipation. He stood and pressed his hand to a control.

The door opened and a young man entered. Nyk struggled to conceal his surprise.

Standing before them was a figure about as tall as Nyk. His features were pleasant bordering on handsome. He was bald -- hairless to the point of lacking eyebrows and eyelashes, and he was bare-chested and dressed only in a pair of mid-thigh length shorts and sandals. His eyes were a bright yellow-orange. Tattooed on his left clavicle, in Roman characters was LKK882821.

His most conspicuous feature was the color of his skin. He was a deep forest green.

Ogan addressed him. “Eight-two-one, please clear the table and bring dessert.” The green man nodded in acknowledgement, picked up the plates and left. The door closed. “THAT, Nykkyo and Andra, is our solution.”

“What ... who ... was that?” Andra asked.

“He is an artificial being -- developed and bred in Varadan labs to fill the lowest stratum of our society.” Ogan’s glance shifted between Nyk and Andra. “I apologize for the dramatics. He represents Varada’s finest achievement, and I felt he needed an appropriately spectacular introduction.”

“He looks human,” Nyk replied. “Aside from the green skin -- he is human.”

Ogan shook his head. “He is not. Nykkyo, I understand you are a biologist...”

“A botanist -- an exobotanist to be precise. My training is in Earth plants.”

“Indeed. Tell me as a biologist, Nykkyo -- what is the primary test of species?”

“The ability to interbreed,” Nyk replied.

“That young man cannot breed with humans. No matter how he tried, there would be no issue. Even though his DNA is based on a human pattern, it is incompatible with human genes.”

The door opened and the man entered with plates holding golden squares dripping with a dark syrup. He placed them on the table and began to leave. “Eight-two-one,” Ogan said, “please wait.” He turned to face the table.

Ogan stood. “Let me point out some features... Structurally, similar to humans. Skeletal and muscle topography are identical to ours. Our genetic designers had some fun when it came to this species. For example, even though the external features resemble yours or mine -- internally, the anatomy is flipped.” He pointed toward the man’s right ribcage. “The stomach and spleen are on the right; the liver on the left. The muscles are, gram-for-gram, one and a half times stronger than a human’s.”

“And the skin color?” Andra asked.

“Chloroplasts,” Ogan replied. “We have replaced melanin-bearing bodies with chloroplasts.”

“Chlorophyll,” Nyk added. “They produce their own nourishment from sunlight.”

“Precisely,” Ogan said. “They are solar-powered. One of them can work all day in the field without the need to break for meals. Hence the hairlessness -- hair would shade the sun. They require only a single meal every two or three days -- a special diet rich in protein and minerals. Their digestive systems are specialized and cannot process carbohydrates.”

“They have no need to,” Nyk said. “The chloroplasts create the sugars they need.”

“Again, precisely.”

“Do you mean,” Andra asked, “that he's a PLANT?”

“No,” Nyk replied. “They've adapted a plant's photosynthetic strategy and applied it to a human matrix.”

“Exactly,” Ogan added. “We've modified and enhanced it -- so that all the energy his body requires comes directly from the sun.”

“It's an amazing accomplishment, Prefect.”

“What about reproduction?” Andra asked.

“Patterned after the human model. Would you care to see?”

“Uhh ... no need for that, Prefect.”

“Thank you, Eight-two-one.” The man turned and left.

“You haven't eliminated slavery,” Andra said. “You have merely created a new race of slaves.”

“No,” Ogan replied. “They are not a new race. They are not human. They are a new species.”

“I must agree there,” Nyk said. “If two organisms cannot interbreed, then they are different species. That man...”

“Eight-two-one,” Ogan interrupted.

“Eight-two-one is not human,” Nyk said. “He is not a member of Homo Sapiens. Homo ... Homo Novus, perhaps -- or, Homo Artificialis -- but not Homo Sapiens.”

“We call them novo hominids, or novonids for short. They are created by us to serve us ... in order to free Homo Sapiens from involuntary servitude.”

“I am going to have to think about this,” Andra said.

“I thought I saw one of them tending the garden when we landed,” Nyk remarked. “At first I thought he merely had a dark tan.”

“Yes -- the majority of novonids are used in the pomma fields; but we do employ a number in the cities.”

“Do they all dress ... thus?” Andra asked.

“Of course. We clothe them only as needed for propriety -- in order not to block the sunlight.”

“How long have they ... been in existence?” Nyk asked.

“The first fertile pair reached breeding maturity around five hundred years ago,” Ogan replied, gazing at the ceiling. “We required a couple hundred years to develop a sufficient population -- through breeding and cloning -- to displace humans in the fields.”

“How many novonids are on this planet?”

Ogan again looked upward. “Around ten million.”

“Ten... million?” Andra looked toward Nyk. “What is the lifespan?”

“Very much like a human's.” Ogan's eyes shifted between Nyk and Andra. “I can see our novonid took you by surprise.”

“That is an understatement,” Andra replied.

“We had no idea,” Nyk added. “When I learned you had solved the problem of slavery I assumed some mechanical solution.”

“Our novonids are far better than machines. They are gifted with enough intelligence to learn and adapt; but they are docile and do not aspire to anything greater. Rather than a specialized machine, they are adaptable to any task. Any menial labor a human wishes no longer to perform can be done by one of them.” Ogan glanced at a clock on the wall. “You must excuse me, but I have some appointments.” He gestured them to follow.

Outside the conference room sat Eight-two-one, his hands folded in his lap. “Eight- two-one,” Ogan said, “Please turn Mr Kyhana and Ms Baxa over to my assistant.” He turned toward Nyk. “She will escort you on a tour of our city. Then, she will get you situated in your quarters at the guest house. Good day, Nykkyo and Andra. We'll meet again tomorrow and prepare for the arrival of your envoy.”

The green man stood. Nyk and Andra followed him down the corridor and into another office. A young woman stood to greet them. Tattooed on her clavicle were three staves.

“Hello,” she said. “I'm Glinni. Prefect Ogan asked me to show you our city. What would you like to see?”

“Whatever you want to show us,” Nyk replied.

“Let's walk.” She looked at their Floran tunics and sashes. “Maybe you'd like to acquire some Varadan clothing.” She called down the corridor. “Eight-two-one!” Their green escort stopped and returned to her office. “We'll need some scrip.” He nodded and left.

Eight-two-one returned, handed Glinni some cards and then returned to his post outside the door to Ogan's office. "Here," Glinni said and handed the cards to Nyk and Andra. "Some Varadan currency. Consider it a gift. You are welcome to it -- it's not enough to bankrupt us, but enough to do some shopping."

Nyk followed Glinni to the street. He inhaled. The air carried the sterno-smell of burning alcohol, with a pungent note of ozone. Cars and three- and two-wheeled cycles whizzed by, each generating its own whine like so many mosquitoes. "The vehicles here are powered by internal-combustion engines?" Nyk asked.

"By gas turbines, for the most part," Glinni replied, "fueled by alcohol."

"Surely the inertial sink had been developed on Floran before Varada was settled," Nyk replied.

"Varada lacks the exotic metals necessary to build inertial sinks."

"The same metals are used to build warp coils," he whispered to Andra. It's one reason they have no interstellar fleet."

"It's one reason the Varadans are eager for rapprochement with Floran," she whispered in reply.

"We do have iron, aluminum and titanium in abundance," Glinni continued. "We must work with what this world affords us."

"Glinni, are the vehicles all human-piloted? Do you have no centralized, automated vehicular control?"

"Why invest in such when each vehicle can have its own navigational and control system?" She tapped her temple and smiled.

Nyk heard a screech and saw a three-wheeler colliding with a truck. The drivers stood on the pavement and shouted oaths at each other. "THAT's why," Andra whispered.

The three of them headed toward the capital's downtown business district with Glinni in the lead. They passed by a novonid man pushing a broom as they approached a crosswalk. "Careful," Glinni said, "this is a streetcar lane."

Nyk heard a deep whine rise in pitch and then fall from Doppler effect as the bus- like streetcar whizzed by. On the rear was mounted a open platform on which two green-skinned passengers stood, grasping railings.

"Why are those novonids standing ... outside the bus?" he asked.

"That's where they ride," Glinni replied. "They pay no fare."

"Novonids travel for free?"

"That's right."

"As long as they don't let go of the back of the bus," Andra remarked.

"Come in here," Glinni said, holding a door. "This is our premier department store."

Nyk stepped inside. The store's street level held a row of stalls with advertising signs and lights.

"This is our food court," Glinni explained. "I come here for lunch often."

Nyk scanned the court. Varadan professionals and youths sat at tables conversing, eating and drinking. On either side stood a pair of young novonid men, clad in their shorts, ready to bus and clear tables as customers left.

"Here in the city," Nyk asked, "what percentage of menial jobs are filled by novonids?"

"More and more of them," Glinni replied. "A hundred years ago you'd never see one off the farms. Now, they're everywhere."

"Are they displacing human workers?" Andra asked.

"They're mainly used for work no one else wants. It's been liberating for people like me."

"How so?" Nyk asked.

Glinni pointed to her caste tattoo. "I'm laborer class, but I'm working in an office, in a job traditionally reserved for professional class. I'm fully qualified for the job I do. Before I could apply, I had to obtain from the labor office a certificate that there were no laborer jobs vacant and needing filling."

"Since those were filled by novonids..."

"That's right. I was free to apply up-class."

"Don't they preferentially fill professional jobs with professional-class workers?" Andra asked.

"No -- it works the other way around. I filled a professional job, so a professional-class is free to apply up-class. This notion that someone only can perform in-class work dates from before the introduction of novonids."

"You've smashed the glass ceilings," Nyk added. "And, you've exposed as fallacy the notion that there is only a finite amount of work to be done."

"Exactly." Glinni replied "There's an endless amount of work to do."

"A rising tide lifts all ships," Nyk remarked.

Glinni gestured to the lifts. "Let's go upstairs and buy a Varadan wardrobe for you."

Nyk stepped from a dressing room in a pair of slacks and a one-sleeved shirt. "I feel naked without a class mark," he said.

"Hardly anyone notices these days," Glinni replied. "Some don't bother to have it applied."

He picked up a sack of other garments and headed for the cashier. Glinni consulted a timepiece. "We must get you back to the offices. Prefect has ordered a car to take you to the guest house."

Nyk sat beside Andra as the car whined its way along the Varadan streets. “A rising tide lifts all ships indeed,” she remarked in her native tongue.

“Certainly -- it has worked for Glinni.”

“What she describes runs counter to the laws of economics -- and human nature.”

“Andra -- encountering a mid-level functionary in Floran City who's as professional, as enthusiastic and as out-going as Glinni would be a breath of fresh air. There, every office assistant or Central Admin wonk believes their job is their birth-right. Glinni was pushed into a better opportunity by that rising tide. She loves her job -- that much was obvious.”

“I agree it worked for Glinni,” she replied. “What happens when that rising green tide overflows its banks? Will the Varadans tolerate novonids filling professional slots? I don't think so. I can't imagine, after what Ogan told us, that any Varadan would accept a novonid as his boss.”

6 -- Laida

The car stopped outside a two-story building surrounded by flower beds. A novonid man knelt with hand shears, trimming the moss-like lawn around the base of a shrub.

Nyk carried his case and parcels into the building. “Mr Kyhana ... Ms Baxa -- upstairs, second door. The passcard is in the lock.”

“Quite the digs,” Nyk remarked as he looked over their lodging. “More like a guest apartment than a hostel.”

Andra shook her head. “Nykkyo -- how can you blithely talk about guest quarters? Especially after what we've seen here?”

“It's going to take me some time to assimilate all this. I didn't see any novonids being abused or mistreated. I tend to agree with Ogan. They were created to serve. They certainly are a remarkable accomplishment.”

“How do you imagine the Varadans could achieve this remarkable accomplishment, given the state of the rest of their technology?”

“As Glinni said, they work with the resources this world affords them, and the gene pool is such a resource. I dare say such genetic engineering is well within the capabilities of Floran science -- even Floran science of thousands of years ago.”

“Perhaps so,” she replied. “Our people always have resisted such genetic tinkering as unethical ... immoral. I suppose the institution of slavery desensitizes a population.”

“Andra, you of all people should realize the importance of the genetic counselors in our society. The bulk of our population -- yourself included -- are the result of genetic tinkering. The difference is in degree only.”

“The difference is how the resulting population is engaged. Whether a Floran embryo is conceived in a fallopian tube or a test tube, the resulting individual is NOT enslaved.”

“I don't believe the novonid model is based so much on slavery as ... well, as on a concept like using draught animals a couple hundred years ago on Earth.”

“I think I'd dislike the notion of draught animals just as much,” she replied.

A tone sounded at the door, then sounded again. “Come,” Nyk called. “It's unlocked.”

The door swung open. An older man entered followed by a young novonid female. Like her male counterparts, she was bald and dressed in short shorts and sandals. She wore a bandeau to cover her breasts. The tattoo on her collar bone read LLB102386.

“Hello,” the man said. “I'm Alvo -- guest house manager.” He gestured to the green girl. “This is Three-eight-six, and she is at your disposal for any of your needs.” He placed some cards on the table. “Here is some currency scrip you can use to purchase incidentals.” He glanced at the girl. “You've encountered our novonids, yes?”

“Yes,” Andra replied.

Alvo nodded. “I've been following the debates regarding the decision to approach the hegemony and petition for normalization. Many in our governing house believed novonids would ... disturb Floran sensibilities.”

“They disturb mine,” Andra said. “I don't like seeing anyone relegated to menial...”

Alvo cut her off with a gesture. “Our novonids lack free wills. You won't find one discontent, aspiring to greater things. It's not in their nature to do so. What IS in their nature is selfless obedience. And -- don't ascribe feelings to them. They don't feel as you and I do. Let me demonstrate...”

He stepped into the apartment's kitchen, rummaged through a drawer and removed a skewer. “Three-eight-six, come here.” The girl approached. “Watch... hold out your arm.” He held the skewer parallel to her arm.

Nyk winced as he watched Alvo drive the skewer several inches under the skin of her forearm until it protruded out the other side. “Not even a flinch.” He pulled it out. “Thank you, dear. Now, she can prepare your dinner -- or, you can dine out or have food brought in.” He pointed to a call button. “If you need anything day or night, any time -- Three-eight-six will be at your command.” Alvo headed out the door.

“What did you make of Alvo's demonstration?”

“I think she felt it,” Andra replied. “I saw fear and pain in her eyes.”

“I think you're right.”

“I wonder how much of what the Varadans tell us about novonids is their own self-delusion.”

“I'll get my case.” Nyk stepped down the corridor to the door and picked up his bag. His eye caught the novonid girl standing in the lavatory, running cold water on her arm. She was biting her lower lip. A thick brown fluid oozed from both wounds.

Nyk entered the lavatory. “You did feel that, didn't you?” She nodded and tears ran down her cheek. “Maybe I have something to help...” He popped open his travel case and removed a bottle from an inside compartment. “Floran healing salve -- I never leave home without it. I'm assuming your biology is similar enough to mine for this to have a chance at working... Hold out your arm. This may sting...”

He dropped the thick, clear liquid onto her wounds. She winced. “Look,” he said. The bleeding stopped and the wounds began to close. “It does work. I think you should wrap your arm -- keep that area compressed until it starts healing. Is there some bandage gauze anywhere here?”

The girl returned with a spool of lightweight cloth. “This will do,” Nyk said and wrapped her forearm. “There -- does that feel better?”

She nodded. “Yes ... thanks...”

“Oh, you CAN speak. I was beginning to think your ilk were mute.” She looked away and stifled a giggle. “You're Three-eight-six?”

“Yes...”

“I'm Nykkyo.”

“Nykkyo,” she replied.

“My friend is Andra.”

“...Andra...”

He tilted his head. “Don't you have another name? Something your friends call you?”

“Yes...”

“What is it?”

She looked at the floor. “Laida.”

“Laida ... I like that much better than Three-eight-six. Don't you?” She nodded. “Then, Laida -- come meet my friend Andra.”

Nyk sat across from Andra at the table while Laida prepared a meal. Andra nodded in her direction. “How old do you think she is?” she asked.

“Eighteen to twenty Earth years -- twenty-two to twenty-five Floran. She's a pretty girl.”

Andra nodded in agreement.

Laida set two plates before them. “Stir-fried pomma with herbs.”

“It smells very good,” Andra said.

“Is there anything else?” Laida asked.

Nyk looked at Andra and shook his head. “I don't think so, Laida.”

“Then excuse me -- I must go feed. I'll be back to clear your table.”

“Laida,” Andra said, “why don't you bring your meal in here?”

“May I?”

“Certainly,” Nyk replied.

Laida returned with a large bowl mounded with a pinkish-brown paste. She sat on the floor, cross-legged, in a corner, holding the bowl between her knees and began eating the paste with a spoon.

“No, Laida,” Andra said. “Sit here at the table with us.” She patted an empty chair.

Laida set her bowl on the table and pulled up a chair.

“What is that you're eating?” Nyk asked.

“It's our food.”

“How does it come?”

“I don't understand.”

“Where does this come from?”

“From a can.”

“May I taste?” He scooped a bit with his fingertip and licked it. “Salty... Laida, do you like this?”

“It doesn't matter if I like it or not -- I must feed.”

“When was your last meal?”

“Three days ago.” She continued to wolf down the paste.

“You don't get hungry between meals?”

“No.” Laida scraped the last of the paste from the bowl, then dropped in the spoon. She reached up,

locked her fingers behind her neck and stretched. Nyk noticed her skin bulging below her right ribcage. She pressed her hand there. "A full stomach is an agreeable sensation," she said. "Do you concur?"

"I certainly do. I enjoy that sensation three times a day -- not once every three days."

Laida rubbed her biceps. "I must get sun tomorrow -- I haven't had much today."

"Laida," Andra asked, "what happens if you don't get sun?"

"We get sick and die," she replied, "though that takes a long time. I feel sunstarved after two or three days in the shade. It's not an agreeable sensation."

"Then what?" Nyk asked.

"After a few more days, torpor sets in."

"Unconsciousness?" Nyk asked.

"No -- torpor. We don't lose consciousness, but it becomes more and more difficult to move."

"Paralysis," Nyk offered.

"More like that."

"Then what?"

"After another ten days or so, unconsciousness and then we die. That's assuming we're only sunstarved. Without water, we die quicker." She rubbed her arms again. "I feel sun-hunger now. Maybe tomorrow while you're at your meetings, Mr Alvo will let me tend the garden -- pull weeds -- and have my sun."

"How about just lying out in it?" Andra asked.

"We must keep busy. We prefer to keep busy."

Nyk stood and retrieved something from his case. "Here -- try eating this."

"What is it?"

"It's a sweet snack wafer."

She bit into the wafer. "An agreeable flavor..." She chewed and swallowed it.

"Have another."

Laida held her hand against her abdomen. "I have an odd sensation in my stomach."

"Uncomfortable?"

"No ... odd ... but the sun-hunger is fading."

“You needed sugar,” Nyk said.

“We can't digest sugar.”

“Perhaps you can't digest sucrose. There are many kinds of sugar. Laida -- the chloroplasts in your skin create glucose -- the same sugar in those wafers. Your body doesn't need to digest glucose -- simply absorb it -- which your stomach seems able to do.”

“I am feeling better. Let me clear the table.”

Andra followed Nyk into the living room and sat beside him on a sofa. “We can't be party to this,” she said. “We must inform Kronta of what's going on here.”

“Suppose the HL is fully aware of the novonids? We have given other colonies wide latitude in establishing their own cultures.

“No, Nyk. Think of what might come if novonids were introduced onto a colony that already has a high unemployment rate -- one like Altia or T-Delta.”

Laida approached them. “Do you need anything else?” she asked.

“Yes,” Nyk replied. “Some companionship.”

She paused. “I must pass your request to Mr Alvo. He would be the one to locate companions for you.”

“Your companionship, Laida. Come sit and talk with us.”

She shook her head. “I've already done more than I should...”

“Alvo said you were to satisfy our needs,” Andra said. “We need to talk with you.” Laida sat in a chair. Her yellow-orange eyes shifted between Nyk and Andra.

“Will you spend the rest of your life working here?” Nyk asked.

“No. When I'm of age, I'll return to my breeder. A novonid female is expected to bear at least ten children -- mostly males.”

“You must be close to age,” Nyk observed.

“Yes -- in a year.”

“What happens to unwanted female infants?” Andra asked. “Are they killed?”

“No. There are none -- they aren't implanted.”

Nyk looked toward Andra. “*In vitro* fertilization. Why waste a pregnancy?”

“No, not *in vitro*,” Laida replied. “They can screen the sperm.”

“Then, what happens?” Andra asked.

“Older women spend several years as wet nurses, feeding other infants.”

“And, then?”

Laida shook her head. “I don't know.”

“Would you be sent to work in the fields?” inquired Nyk.

“No. That is men's work.”

“Laida, do you enjoy the life you lead?”

“Enjoy? What do you mean?”

Andra re-phrased Nyk's question. “Do you find serving guests for Alvo to be agreeable?”

“Agreeable, yes.” She looked into Nyk's eyes. “Please... no more of this. Mr Alvo instructed me not to...”

“We don't want to get you into trouble with your boss,” Nyk replied.

“Then, I'll go. I'll return to prepare your morning meal.”

“We must be up early to meet with Prefect Ogan.”

“You are meeting with Prefect Ogan?” Laida asked.

“Yes. First thing in the morning.”

“I'll be here to prepare your meal.”

Morning light streamed into the wide window overlooking the Varadan capital. Nyk paced in the guest apartment. Andra emerged from the bathroom pulling her fingers through her wet hair. “I had a conversation with Kronta while you were in the shower,” he said. “I informed him of the situation here.”

“What did Kronta say?”

“He said the decision to proceed with normalization rests with Tomyka. She's not due here for two more days.”

“Is that it?”

“No. He gave us the go-ahead to gather more intelligence.”

“He doesn't fully trust Tomyka, either,” Andra mused.

“He trusts her,” Nyk replied, “in his own words, as far as he could hand-manuever an ExoScout. He did think one thing was odd, though... Neither of us understand why we would resurrect a discarded comm relay rather than obtain a new one from the Communications Corps.”

“This one works well enough, doesn't it?”

“Indeed -- thanks to your friend Zane.” The doorchime sounded. Nyk stepped to the door and admitted Laida. “Good morning,” he said.

“I shall prepare your food.” She headed into the kitchen.

Andra joined Nyk at the table. Laida set before them plates with biscuits smeared with the same sweet syrup Ogan had served for dessert the prior day. Then she brought mugs of a hot beverage.

“These are pomma biscuits?” Nyk asked.

“Yes,” Laida replied.

“Is this drink also made from pomma?”

“Yes -- the kernels are roasted and ground, then steeped in boiling water.”

“It's very good.” He looked up at her. “Laida -- your hands are shaking.”

“The sun-hunger has returned. Mr Alvo said I may spend the day tending the gardens.”

“If you need sun -- go get it,” Andra said. “Nyk and I can fend for ourselves.”

“You're sure?”

“Absolutely. You're dismissed, Laida.”

“Thank you. I'll see you this evening.”

Nyk sat at the conference table with Andra beside him. Prefect Ogan breezed into the room. “Envoy Wells is due tomorrow. What else needs doing to prepare?”

“We would like more information on the novonids,” Nyk said.

“Is this being requested by the envoy?”

“It is being requested by some homeworld authorities.”

Ogan paced. “Very well. Our novonid project is an open book. What can I tell you?”

“Are all novonids as docile and complacent as you have represented?”

“Hmm...” He continued to pace. “In the early years of the project, we had some strains that exhibited more aggressive behavior. Over the years we have bred that trait out of the species.”

“But the trait could surface.”

“It's possible. From time to time we do encounter individual specimens that respond poorly to

conditioning.”

“And, what do you do with those?” Ogan paced. “Prefect -- what happens to specimens resistant to conditioning.”

“If they respond poorly enough -- they are ... terminated. In a humane manner, of course.”

“Terminated?” Andra asked. “Does the same practice extend to field workers who have become too old or infirm to produce?”

“You must understand ... we have no room in our society for unproductive novonids.”

“In other words,” Andra replied, “you have brought these people into this world, you use them and then discard them.”

“They are NOT people.” Ogan paced more, his eyes rolled upward. “There is a movement among us -- the Benevolent Shelter Society... They take in worn-out workers ... care for them ... give them shelter ... until nature takes its course.”

“How many are placed in the shelters?”

“These days -- most.”

“But not all.”

“No, not all.” He stopped and faced them. “There -- I've laid it on the table. Pass this all along to your homeworld authorities. I make no apologies for our practices -- they are what they are. You will find normalization between Floran and Varada beneficial -- or not. That must be your assessment. But -- we will NOT deceive you.”

“A policy I favor,” Nyk replied. “I appreciate your candor. Were all diplomats like that.” Ogan proffered a weak smile. “Answer this, Prefect... Are the novonids sentient?”

“Sentient? What do you mean?”

“Are they aware of their own mortality? Do they fear their own deaths?”

“Hmm... That's a difficult one to answer. Their brains are patterned after the human model, and they have limited cognitive skills. No one knows for sure how they perceive the world around them. Any comparison of their thought patterns to ours would be mere conjecture.”

“Can they be taught to read?” Nyk asked.

“Can they be taught to recognize written patterns? Yes. It doesn't mean they comprehend what they read.”

“The guest house assigned us a young novonid woman to be our attendant,” Andra noted. “I was impressed with her, Prefect. She seemed sentient. Her cognitive skills seemed well enough developed to compete with the best of us. She certainly was aware of her own mortality.”

“What makes you think that?”

“She understands that, if deprived of sunlight long enough, she will die. I'll tell you, Prefect -- if I closed my eyes while conversing with her, I wouldn't have known she was one of your artificial people. She was articulate and her speech patterns belied nothing that would make me think she was other than a human peer.”

“Ms Baxa... We have five centuries of experience with these beings. We designed them for a purpose. You, on the other hand, have been on this world less than one full day, and you have had direct contact with ... how many? two? three? Please don't presume you know more of them than we do.”

“Prefect,” Andra replied coldly, “I am offering my observations as a dispassionate outsider...”

“Outsider, yes. Dispassionate? I believe there may be some concealed agenda to your line of discussion.”

“No agenda, Prefect. Events in my life have given me some appreciation for what the novonids must be...”

“Prefect,” Nyk interrupted. “Would it be possible for us to visit a pomma farm?”

“You wish to observe novonids in their natural habitat. I think I can arrange it.”

A mini-bus sped along a highway into the countryside surrounding the Varadan capital, its alcohol-fueled turbine whining. Nyk pointed. “This is all pomma?”

“Yes.”

He regarded the fields of waist-high shrubs with pack-toting novonid men strolling the rows.

“Mr Alvo at our guest house told us the novonids lack free wills,” Andra said.

“That is true,” Ogan replied.

“Is it fact or merely a legal fiction?”

“Why would you call it a fiction?”

“I would say our novonid maid has a will that certainly appears free to me.”

“Appearances can be deceiving. They lack the ability to weigh facts and make informed decisions; consequently they may not own property or enter into legal contracts. They were designed thus, Andra.”

“Prefect,” Nyk said. “Perhaps this is an indelicate question... Is there a Varadan sex industry involving novonid women?”

“Why would you ask something like that?”

“Out of curiosity. I know of it happening on other colonies. On Altia, for example, a subrace has evolved and those women find employment as prostitutes.”

“I can speak for the entire Varadan population,” Ogan replied, “perhaps with the exception of the odd pervert here or there. We find the notion of intercourse between Varadans and novonids to be repugnant ... disgusting. I personally find it abhorrent.”

“I apologize for offending you, then.”

“It's quite all right, Nykkyo. We agreed to be open... As a matter of fact, anyone caught in such an act would be severely punished.”

“Both parties?” Andra asked. “Human as well as novonid?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Tell me, Prefect,” she continued. “Is it regular Varadan practice to punish victims of crime?”

“Certainly not. The victim in such a case is the sensibility of all Varadan society.”

“No doubt. But what of a novonid victim of a sexual assault? Would you punish her?”

“Of course not. We were discussing consensual intercourse, not rape.”

“I believe, Prefect,” Andra replied, “you have contradicted yourself.”

“How so?”

“You tell us the novonids lack free will. Therefore they must lack the ability to give consent, for consent is a choice and choice derives from free will. A sexual act with a non-consenting partner is rape. Yet, you also tell us you will punish a novonid caught in such an act. Which is it, Prefect? Do they or do they not have free will? Can they give consent or not?”

Ogan glowered at her. “Let me express it more directly,” he finally said. “Novonids are like humans in that each possesses a baser self. Like us, they have emotions and primitive drives. Our conditioning trains them to suppress acting on such. Those unable to resist are dealt with.”

The vehicle slowed at a sprawling complex of low buildings. “Ah,” Ogan said. “We have arrived. Let me speak with the landlord.” He stepped from the bus.

“Ogan's a pro,” Nyk said. “Did you see how he danced his way out of your trap?”

Andra smiled. “A real pro would've seen the trap coming and avoided it. I think, perhaps unintentionally, you touched a nerve. I could see it when you broached the subject -- it struck him on an emotional level. We were trained at the academy to look for such. The best way to trap someone is with an emotional lure.” She kissed his cheek. “You performed the perfect set-up, Nyk. Another *ax'amfin* couldn't have done better.”

Ogan opened the door and gestured Nyk and Andra outside. “I feel this sun,” she said.

“Be careful,” Nyk replied. “I've had sunburn on Earth. I imagine with your fair skin you'd get burned standing too near a light bulb.”

7 -- The Pomma Farm

A young man approached them. "This is the farm's overseer," Ogan explained. "He will take you to the crops."

"Follow me."

They walked toward a field resembling many the bus had passed. Their guide pointed to a row of waist-high plants. "This is pomma," he said. "Mature plants are in continuous production." He picked a fruiting body and pointed to it. "These grains have tasseled out and the tassel must be plucked." He picked off a red, feathery structure growing from the tip of a kernel. "These grains are ready to harvest." He picked them off and handed them to Nyk. "These grains are immature and must be left. Every day, each seed head has grains requiring attention of some sort."

They approached a novonid man in late middle age. At his waist he wore a pouch into which he placed harvested kernels. Nyk watched his deft fingers de-tasseling some grains and harvesting others. Methodically he worked his way from top to bottom of the plant, then moved on to the next one. "Care to try your hand at it?" Ogan asked.

Nyk approached a pomma plant and plucked red tassels. He picked a few grains. "I would quickly tire of this work."

"Be careful not to disturb the immature kernels," Andra said.

"My fingers are getting red."

Nyk dropped a handful of kernels into the novonid worker's pouch. "That's enough," he said. "Your fieldhands are content to do this work day in and day out?"

"Certainly," Ogan replied. "They prefer to be busy as they soak up sunshine." He turned to the overseer. "Show our visitors the demonstration we discussed."

"Oh, yes..." The overseer called to one of the men. "Seven-five-three. Come over here." One of the fieldworkers turned and approached them. "Here -- put this over your head." He handed the worker a transparent polymer bag. "Secure it with this." The worker slipped an elastic band around his neck, headed back to the field and returned to his work.

"How long," Ogan asked, "would you remain upright with one of those over your head?"

"Not ... not very long," Nyk stammered.

“He can stand there all day.”

“The bag isn't even moving,” Andra said.

“It's because he isn't breathing. He has no need to.” Ogan held out his arms. “Under these conditions, his metabolism is in perfect balance. The carbon dioxide his muscles create is absorbed by the chloroplasts in his skin. Photosynthesis turns it into fuel and oxygen, which his muscles consume.”

“Should he begin to exert himself,” Nyk asked, “would he start breathing?”

“Yes, and when the sun goes down and his metabolism reverts to an aerobic mode.”

“I imagine he could produce a surplus of oxygen and begin exhaling it.”

“It does happen,” Ogan replied, “but oxygen surplus is uncomfortable for them.”

“Hence the urge to be busy in the sun.” Nyk shook his head. “Remarkable. What amazing aerobic capacity. I would hate to get into a long-distance foot race with him -- especially, during daylight.”

“You wouldn't have a chance,” the overseer said. “Seven-five-three,” he called, “you can take that thing off.”

“Let's get Andra out of the sun,” Nyk said. “Show us the workers' quarters.”

He followed Ogan and the guide toward a barracks. They passed a hopper connected to an Archimedes screw leading to the top of a silo. “When a worker's pouch is full, he comes here to empty it,” the guide said, “and to take water.”

One of the fieldworkers dumped his pouch into the hopper. He picked up a dipper, filled it from a bucket and drank. Nyk watched him head back to the fields.

They reached the barracks. “This is one of the men's lodges.”

Nyk looked in the barracks door and saw rows of mattresses on the floor. “How many work here?”

“We have two hundred fifty novonid workers -- all but twenty are men.”

“And, the women?”

“We breed our own. The infants are cared for here on the farm. Once they're weaned, they are sent for conditioning and training. Upon reaching maturity, they return here to work. If we have a surplus, we sell some. The women are also used as servants in the family and staff quarters.”

“And those who've outlived their usefulness?”

“We have had good luck placing them with the BSS.”

“The Benevolent Shelter Society,” Nyk said.

“Yes -- we support the BSS one hundred percent. On this farm, we have a no-termination policy -- the landlord spent some time as a terminator and refuses to permit it on the novonids he owns.”

“I take it not all farms have such a policy,” Andra said.

“Unfortunately not. I'll admit -- you become attached to them. The little children are adorable, and many of the adults are good company. I'd hate to have to kill one.” The overseer led them toward a long, low building. “These are the females' cabins.”

“The women have private quarters?” Andra asked.

“Yes. We reward the males with conjugal visits. It gives them something to ... strive toward.”

“Just so we understand this...” Andra replied. “A fieldworker can earn the reward of a night with one of...”

“Exactly. It's all part of our breeding strategy.”

“I imagine,” Nyk added, “that you assign pairings based on the desired issue.”

“Of course not. Breeding is a precise science. The male must wear a sheath. The ejaculate is collected, separated, preserved, catalogued and used as our needs dictate to impregnate females...”

“You mean via artificial insemination.”

“Correct. We also sell sperm to other breeders.”

“And, a male who is uncooperative?”

“He loses his conjugal privileges. It tends to be a powerful motivator for their cooperation -- in every regard.”

“I imagine so...”

“In other words,” Andra observed, “despite what we've been told about their inability to weigh facts and make informed decisions, they DO understand cooperation and reward.”

“At a basic level, yes. If there's one complaint I'd have against their designers, it's that the novonids' reproductive strategy is patterned a bit TOO closely on the human model.”

Nyk nodded and remarked, “So, these conjugal visits not only provide you with the genetic material necessary for breeding, they also satisfy a basic sexual drive -- not to mention motivating and rewarding desired behavior. It's a clever strategy.”

“Clever, indeed,” Andra whispered to Nyk in her native *Lingwa*. “No doubt it also provides endless amusement for the overseers.”

“I'm sorry -- I didn't catch that,” Ogan said.

“You don't by any chance employ spy holes or hidden cameras to observe them in the act, do you?” Nyk asked. Ogan flashed him a sideways glance, his eyes narrowed.

“Of course not,” the overseer replied. “Privacy during these conjugal visits is a fundamental dignity

they expect and receive.”

“On THIS farm, perhaps,” Andra whispered; then she spoke up. “What about the children? How are they cared for?”

“The older women -- those beyond safe childbearing years -- serve as caregivers.”

“Until the children are of age to be sent for conditioning and training, that is,” Nyk observed.

“The boys are sent for training. Our girls perform domestic chores and tend the herb garden.”

Nyk looked toward Ogan. “Thank you,” he said to the guide. He took Andra's hand and walked toward the bus. He stopped to survey the pomma field and watched the workers move from plant to plant. “Imagine,” he said, “working, sun up to sun down with no break -- and, liking it.”

Ogan gestured them inside and the vehicle began its way back into the city. “Well,” he said, “now what do you think?”

Andra stroked her forearm. “I think I got too much sun.”

“I think,” Nyk said, “you are growing the wrong crop.”

“Pomma is a pervasive plant on this world,” Ogan replied. “During our many years of isolation, our Earth crops failed -- one by one, they all failed. Pomma was originally considered famine food. As it overran our wheat and rice we learned to harvest it. Pomma is our savior, Nykkyo. There would be no Varada without it.”

Nyk nodded. “I do understand what motivated you to create the novonids. That demonstration with the plastic bag was astonishing.” He shook his head. “You could use them in a hazardous materials spill. Provided there was enough sunlight -- they could go into a toxic atmosphere without a mask and secure the area.”

“Absolutely,” Ogan replied. “Did you see any evidence of mistreatment? Those field workers are content to soak up life-sustaining sunlight and to tend our crops in return.”

“I'll concede those fieldworkers looked well cared for.”

The driver gestured for Ogan's attention and he turned to the front seat for a consultation.

Andra regarded Nyk through narrowed eyes. “I wish he weren't so smug,” she whispered to Nyk in their native tongue. “And, I wish YOU wouldn't encourage him.”

“Encourage him? What do you mean?”

“That remark about using them in a toxic atmosphere. I'm sure the Varadans can come up with plenty of ways to exploit them without helpful suggestions from you.”

Ogan turned his seat to face them again. “I'm sorry... Where were we? Oh, yes... Fieldworkers comprise the largest component of a pomma farm's capital. Only a fool would mistreat such expensive and valuable resources.”

“I’ve seen men do foolish things, Prefect.” Andra flashed him a faint smile. “That was only one farm, and I’ll wager one of the better ones.” Nyk rested his chin on his fist. “Prefect, would it be possible to have access to your media?”

“Media?”

“Yes -- your news reporting ... journalism.”

“Certainly. You must have a media screen in your guest quarters.”

“I believe we do.”

“Then, when we return to my office, I’ll create a guest access for you and show you how to retrieve our news reports. As I said, our records concerning the novonids are open books.”

Andra followed Nyk into the guest house. “That certainly was instructive, wouldn’t you say?” he asked.

“It certainly was,” she replied frostily.

“I’ll say this, though... I felt decidedly embarrassed asking that question about spyholes in the females’ quarters.”

“Why did you, then?”

“You made an accusation I felt the Varadans deserved an opportunity to address.”

“I don’t understand why you feel the need to defend them,” she replied.

“I don’t understand why you seem to think the worst of them.”

“Because ... it is an old story. Whenever one people subjugates another, sexual exploitation is the inevitable result.”

“I admire their breeding strategy. I can imagine more humiliating ways to obtain sperm.”

“Truly spoken like a man, Nykkyo. I’m imagining how humiliating it must be to be a novonid female ... being no more than a receiving vessel ... having no control over her own fertility ... much less her own sex partners.”

“Humiliation is in the eye of the humiliated, don’t you think? If this is the only way they know, how would it be humiliating to them?”

Andra’s jaw dropped. “NYKKYO! We are talking about basic human rights, here!”

“And, the novonids are not human. Besides, Floran women have relegated control over their fertility to the state, with birth licenses and all. Don’t forget about that contraceptive implant capsule in your arm. Neither society is truly free. The difference is only in degree. Their breeding strategy accomplishes one thing -- it eliminates the problem of a ... a sexually frustrated work force.” He put his hands on her shoulders. “That’s a good thing, isn’t it?” He kissed her hair.

“Don't you even think about it!”

“Come on, Andra... You and I are on the same side in this assignment.”

“Is that a fact?”

“We certainly are.” He pulled her against himself and kissed the top of her head.

She embraced him and lay her face on his shoulder. “Let's not argue. Let's agree to disagree on the topic of novonids,” she said.

“I have a better idea. Let's both agree to be open-minded on the topic.”

“Agreed.” He kissed her lips.

“I have nagging doubts -- that's all. I'll try to push them aside.”

“Good. Now, I'm going to take a look at the Varadan media achive...” He sat, staring into the media screen and tapping the keyboard. “Nothing. No matter how I specify queries for novonids, I get nothing.” Andra stood behind and looked over his shoulder. “Maybe novonids just aren't considered newsworthy here.”

“Maybe the word isn't considered polite -- at least polite in the media.”

“Like *ax'amfin* ... What euphemism would they use?”

“Try a related term,” Andra suggested.

“Related how?”

“I don't know... Have you tried Benevolent Shelter Society?”

“No, I haven't...” He manipulated the display. “Here we go... Look at this: 'BSS members cited for possession of unregistered feral fieldworker.' So fieldworker is the press euphemism...” Nyk continued to read. “This couple was discovered harboring a feral novonid ... an adolescent female...” Nyk read more. “They had their shelter privileges revoked ... paid fines...” He looked up at Andra. “The feral female...” He shook his head and bit his lip. “...was destroyed.”

“Oh no, Nyk! Proof positive the novonid picture isn't as pretty as Ogan painted.”

“Yes -- I must get this to Kronta.” He sat back and stared at the screen. “But how... I can't download these files -- their screens aren't compatible with our vidisplays.” He took his handheld from his travel case and powered it on. “I know...” He turned the device toward the media terminal and used its camera to photograph the screen. “This will have to do... Look at this.”

On the screen was a pair of older novonids -- male and female. “This appears to be an advertisement recruiting for the BSS: 'They gave their lives to growing pomma for us ... Now, which should be their future?’” He scrolled the screen and an image of a human child sitting on the man's lap appeared, juxtaposed with an image of a hypodermic syringe. “‘The choice is yours.' It goes on with a testimonial from a family who adopted a retired fieldhand. 'Our fieldworker is like a member of our family.' It also

describes how joining the BSS entitles one to purchase nutrient from the society. Touching... I'll send this to Kronta also."

"Are there other articles?"

"Certainly... BSS member arrested for attempting to organize farmworkers..." Nyk photoimaged the screen with his handheld. "This one's real interesting... It seems a smaller pomma farm was being auctioned after the death of the landlord. A BSS member bought two novonids -- male and female... He was subsequently charged with using them to produce pornographic videos."

"See? I told you so!"

"There's more... The novonid pair were confiscated by the Varadan state."

She put her hands over her ears. "Don't tell me they were terminated."

"No, they weren't..."

"I'm relieved."

"There was quite a dispute over what to do with them. The head enforcer wanted to terminate them. The BSS insisted they be given shelter. Another group wanted to sell them to the farmers... In the end the state auctioned them, and the BSS bought them. They're with a BSS family now." He continued to scroll. "I see a number of articles in that vein. It looks like a BSS mandate is to buy them when they can and then shelter them."

The doorchime sounded. "I'll get it," Andra said and headed toward the door. "Laida, come in."

Nyk stood from the terminal as Laida stepped inside. "Did you get your sun?"

"I certainly did," Laida replied.

"You look darker," Andra remarked.

"Yes -- it was a good sunning. I can't describe how good it feels ... relaxing and exhilarating at the same time." She closed her eyes and lifted her face. "Mmm... It's been a while since I've had such delicious sunshine."

Andra showed Laida her forearm. "I got sun today, too -- but I didn't find it delicious. It hurts."

"How's your arm?" Nyk asked. Laida held out her forearm. The puncture wounds had healed, but an oblong, dark bruise remained between them. "You removed the bandage."

"Yes -- it feels better. I'm healing. The mark will fade over time."

"You appear in better spirits tonight," Andra said.

"A day in the sun will do that. I'm sorry if I wasn't gracious yesternight. It must've been sun hunger. I came to see if you'd like your dinner prepared."

"Please do," Nyk said.

“What would you like me to make?”

“Whatever you think we'd enjoy,” he replied.

Laida pondered. “I know...” She brought water to boil and dumped in a quantity of pomma kernels. Nyk watched as she tested and drained the pomma, mixed it with other ingredients and dumped it into a baking pan. She slid this into the oven. “That must heat... May I get you anything while we wait? Some pomma beer perhaps? It's very good ... I've been told.”

“That would be fine, Laida.”

“I'll be right back.” She breezed out of the apartment and returned with two tumblers filled with a fizzing tan liquid.

“None for you?” Nyk asked.

“I can't drink this,” she replied. “It will make me very sick.”

“Drink something,” Nyk said. “Fill a glass. Sit and drink with us.”

“I'll drink water.” She sat at the table and sipped from her glass.

“Tell us about yourself,” Andra said.

“There's not much to tell. I was born at a breeder's. There I was trained as a hospitality servant.”

“So Alvo bought you?”

“No -- I belong to my breeder. She only leased me to the guesthouse. As a female, I'm too valuable. There's a saying: A male's worth one, a female ten. The breeders tend to retain title to their females. My mother still lives there. She no longer bears children, but she nurses them. I visit her from time to time.”

“You can do that?”

“Yes. So long as it's before curfew, we can travel the streets. Right now, I'm registered to this guest house. My travel is never questioned, for I must be fetching this or that for a guest. Let me check your dinner.” Laida looked into the oven. “Yes -- it's done.” She brought two plates and set them on the table.

“Have you tasted pomma?” Nyk asked.

“Yes -- from time to time.”

He lifted his spoon-fork utensil. “Have you tasted this?”

“No.”

“It's very good. Try some, Laida.”

“It's not food I can use.”

“It won't harm you to eat some, will it?” he asked.

“No... But, why bother to?”

“You'll do a better job servicing your guests if you know what it tastes like.” Nyk stood and took a plate from a cabinet. He placed a small scoop of the pomma casserole onto it and set it before Laida. “My mother-in-law has a saying. She says someone who doesn't enjoy coffee should never attempt making it.”

“What's coffee?” she asked.

“An Earth beverage similar to pomma brew. Besides, Laida -- you look pathetic sitting there ... doesn't she, Andra?”

“Pathetic,” Andra concurred.

Laida looked down at herself. “Pathetic? How?”

“You're sitting, sharing a table with us -- with nothing before you but a half-empty glass of water.”

Laida scooped a small amount of the casserole. “How do you like it?” Nyk asked. She shrugged and smiled. “Florans tend to treat eating as a bodily function,” he continued. “I've learned on Earth that, when shared with friends, a meal can be a pleasure.”

“I believe Varadans feel the same way,” she replied.

“Laida -- you ARE a Varadan,” Andra remarked.

“No.”

“Yes -- you live on Varada -- you are Varadan.”

“Laida,” Nyk asked, “could you take us to meet your mother?”

She shook her head. “I dare not.”

“You said you could travel there unrestricted.”

“Yes... Mr Alvo would be displeased.”

“Wouldn't he be displeased to know you refused a guest's request? Especially one you could so easily grant?”

She pondered. “I'll place a call with Ms Ramina.”

“Who?”

“She's the breeder who owns me.”

Laida left the table and used the media terminal. “Yes, Ms Ramina has agreed.”

“Then, let's go.”

“I must clear the table,” Laida replied.

“It can wait. Those plates aren't going anywhere.” He picked up the currency scrip Alvo had given him.

Nyk stood with Laida and Andra on a corner. “Where is this facility located?”

“Quadrant 2, sector 14,” Laida replied. “I usually take one of the streetcars. There's no fare for us, but we must stand.”

“Can't we buy a fare for you?”

“No. Standing room is provided for us.”

“I've seen the standing room provided for you. Laida -- we have all this scrip. Does this city have a livery service?”

“Certainly.” Laida pointed. “That's a livery call box.”

Nyk walked to mid-block and saw a kiosk. “Do I press this?”

“Yes -- that will call a livery car.”

He pressed the panel and rocked on his heels while awaiting the livery. A vehicle approached and pulled to a stop. “Address?” the driver asked.

“Quadrant 2, sector 14,” Nyk said.

The driver nodded and the door slid open. Nyk gestured Andra and Laida inside. “Wait -- I don't carry their kind,” the driver said gesturing in Laida's direction. Nyk stepped out and the cab sped off.

“I'm sorry,” Laida said. “We should take the streetcar.”

“Nonsense.” He pressed the panel again.

Another livery car approached. Nyk conferred with the driver and then gestured the women inside. “A fare's a fare, he said,” Nyk reported. The door slid shut and the cab headed into traffic.

Their route carried them away from the government complex, past office buildings and storefronts and into a residential section. The cab stopped at a corner of two streets filled with row houses having the look of once being affluent but now neglected. He helped Laida and Andra from the car.

“I gave the driver something extra,” Nyk said.

“Ms Ramina's is over there,” Laida said, pointing at a row of houses.

“Which one?” Andra asked.

“All of them. Come on.”

Nyk followed Laida into one of the houses. “Ms Ramina!” she called.

A grey-haired Varadan woman approached and threw open her arms. Laida fell into them. The woman hugged her, kissed her and caressed the back of her bald head. “My Laida...”

Ramina looked Laida over and took her forearm. She pointed to the bruise. “What happened here?”

“Nothing -- it'll be all right,” Laida replied.

Nyk looked around the vestibule. He saw a certificate recognizing Ramina as a charter member of the BSS.

“Ms Ramina -- these are the people I told you about.”

Nyk extended his hand. “Nykkyo Kyhana. This is Andra.”

“Come inside. Go call your mother, Laida.”

Nyk regarded Ramina. “I see you're a member of the BSS,” he said. “Isn't what you do contradictory to their purpose?”

“Not in the least,” she replied. “In fact I don't know any breeder -- any who care, that is -- who doesn't support the BSS.”

Laida returned with an older novonid woman in tow. She was bare-breasted and suckled an infant. “Mother -- these are Nykkyo and Andra -- they're from Floran.” The woman smiled.

“Is that a boy or girl?” Nyk asked.

“Boy,” Laida replied.

“May I hold him?”

“It's time to switch sides,” Laida prompted, took the infant from her mother and handed him to Nyk. He cradled the boy in the crook of his arm.

“You've held an infant before,” Ramina noted.

“Yes -- I have a little boy at home.” He regarded the child. “His skin is about the same color as mine. Except for the orange eyes and black lips, I’d mistake him for a human child.”

“And the baldness,” Andra added.

“I’ve seen plenty of bald Earth infants.” Nyk smiled and held his finger for the baby to track. “When does the skin change?”

“After they’re weaned,” Ramina answered.

“He’s adorable.” Nyk handed the infant to Laida’s mother, who resumed nursing him. A toddler wearing a diaper waddled into the room and hugged Laida’s leg. The boy’s white skin was covered with irregularly-shaped green blotches. “I take it this boy was weaned recently.”

“Within the past few days. His pigment is developing well.”

“Let’s go back and visit,” Laida said to her mother. “Our guests wish to chat with Ms Ramina.”

“Please sit.” Ramina gestured toward a worn settee.

“Ramina,” Nyk said, “tell us why you support the BSS.”

“The BSS provides a safety net. It’s a comfort to know if anything happened to me -- they’d be cared for. I love them, Nykkyo -- they’re my children. I joined the BSS ... I don’t know how many years ago. I adopted a retired fieldhand. Eventually I started this business because I thought someone with compassion should be raising them.”

“You own all the houses on this block?”

“Yes -- this business needs a lot of room.”

“How many males and females do you house?”

“I have twenty fertile females and five wet nurses. Right now I have a hundred children, from infants to adolescents.”

“How many males?”

“Ninety are male and ten female -- the usual ratio.”

“No -- how many adult males?”

“None. I obtain semen from some of the nearby farms. I’ll tell you, Nykkyo -- I can’t say enough good about the BSS. The society not only provides shelter but also advocacy. Just two years ago was our biggest victory -- the Termination Act.”

“Which is?” Nyk prompted.

“Now, it is illegal to terminate one without a hearing before the fieldworkers’ committee. If not for cause...”

“Cause?” Nyk interrupted.

“One that's a menace to society may be terminated on order from the committee. Abandoned or unwanted individuals must be placed in temporary shelters while the BSS attempts to place them. Violating this procedure is considered a serious crime -- akin to homicide. We do not tolerate it here and it is prosecuted vigorously. Because of the registry and the hearings, the BSS knows of each situation. We've brought the termination rate for registered ones nearly to the vanishing point.”

“What about the feral ones?” Andra asked.

Ramina sighed. “That I'm afraid is the next territory for the BSS to conquer. There was an unfortunate incident regarding a feral adolescent girl who was terminated...”

“I read about that,” Nyk interjected.

“I interviewed her. She was a nice girl who happened to be unregistered -- not wild at all. The incident sparked an uproar among BSS members. Now we have a bill in the government house to bring feral ones under the committee umbrella. I don't know how much it will help -- some of the feral ones are wild, indeed -- but it's a start.”

“Does Varada have a large feral population?” Nyk asked.

“In the cities -- no. Once in a while you hear of one surfacing.”

“Like that poor girl,” he remarked.

“No. Like I said, she was not wild -- simply unregistered. True ferals are not found often in the cities.”

“What about the rural areas?”

She shook her head. “Who knows?”

“Where do they live?”

“They're well adapted to living in the forests between the pomma farms. They can trap and kill small animals for their protein requirements. They even have learned to steep minerals from the soil.”

“Does that mean they know how to use fire?” Andra asked.

Ramina sighed. “I've heard tales of feral populations.”

“Do you mean reports ... sightings?”

“Tales ... As you know, there are vast, virgin forests to the north. I've heard stories of feral tribes living in rude villages up there ... villages of huts made of logs and soil.”

“They would need fire to survive in the north,” Nyk observed. “How much credence do you place in these stories?”

“Not much. Even if they were capable of the amazing feats described in these tall tales, the northern

climate would be inhospitable to them. They were designed for the climate here in the so-called Pomma Belt. We do know small pockets of them exist in the woodlands and hedgerows. I believe they are the extent of the feral population.

“Are they dangerous?”

“Left alone -- no. Once in a while you hear of a group of children being frightened by them. Until recently, official policy was kill-on-sight...”

“Kill on sight?” Andra asked.

“Yes, but we're working on changing that. Until this bill is debated and voted up or down, there's a moratorium on killing ferals. I'm glad for that -- I worry that an errant registered one might be mistaken for a feral...” She looked up at the certificate. “The BSS also has established programs for doctors wishing to specialize in medicine for them. They have special needs, you know. Yes, the BSS helps make sure they're cared for.”

“Wouldn't it be better if they could care for themselves?” Andra asked.

“But -- they aren't capable.”

“Laida appears fully capable,” Nyk replied.

“My Laida is special -- she's unusually bright and outgoing. Most are not.”

“Like her mother?” Andra asked.

Ramina's brow darkened. “Her mother is like that because she was over-conditioned. She was that way when I acquired her.”

“I've heard that term,” Nyk replied. “What does it mean?”

“It's a reprehensible practice. They're taken as children. Their brains are irradiated -- certain cognitive centers are destroyed -- to make them more docile. This is the reason I became a breeder. Conditioning -- a gentle term for such a vicious procedure. When I learned what it truly was I was infuriated. I wanted to show our world what could result from no conditioning.” She scooped up the toddler boy and bounced him on her knee. A tear ran down her cheek. “I refuse to let any of my children be treated so. Look at him ... would you have those eyes clouded?” She kissed the little boy. “The only conditioning my boys and girls receive is love, dignity and proper guidance.”

“And the result is Laida.”

“As I said, Laida is special. Even without conditioning, their intelligence is below that of a normal human. They were designed that way. Once in a while an exceptional one comes along. I was lucky enough to have Laida.”

“She must've inherited that intelligence from someone,” Andra said. “Imagine what her mother might've been without conditioning.”

“It makes my blood pressure rise every time I think of it,” Ramina replied.

“All your children are special,” Nyk observed.

“Demand for mine far exceeds my ability to produce them. Other breeders are taking note. We'll see the end of conditioning -- perhaps not in my lifetime, but mark my word -- the conditioners' days are numbered.”

Laida returned from the back hall. “We should be heading back,” she said. “We wouldn't want to violate curfew.”

“No, we would not,” Ramina agreed.

Nyk followed Laida onto the street. “The liveries are probably off the street by now,” she said.

“Why? This doesn't look like a bad part of town.”

“Some of the surrounding areas are quite bad, and the liveries won't come here after sundown. Come -- we'll take the streetcar home. I ride it all the time.”

Nyk stood at the corner stop and craned his neck to look down the street. Laida pointed. “Two sectors over that way is the Green Zone.”

“What's that?”

“It's a sector set aside for us.”

“For you?”

“Not for ME,” she replied. Laida rolled her eyes upward in thought. “It stems from the practices of some brokers. Placing us in urban jobs is riskier than farm work. We must compete with labor class whites. Our wages are lower, so the lease fees the brokers collect are lower. They are supposed to provide shelter for us, but shelter in the city can be expensive. Many of the brokers turn us loose to fend for ourselves. In the Green Zone, we can find shelter.”

“There are houses for you there?”

“Yes.”

“Who owns them?”

“The city does. They're old buildings, but adequate for shelter, and it costs the brokers nothing to house us. Fortunately, I have very fine quarters at the guest house, and between assignments Ms Ramina keeps a place for me here. I've never been inside the Green Zone.” The whine of a turbine grew louder. “Here's the car,” Laida said. “Put your scrip card in the farebox and don't forget to get a transfer.” The bus stopped and she headed toward the platform on the rear.

“Laida -- how do we know which stops?”

“I'll wave,” she shouted.

The door opened. He stepped in and slipped his card into the farebox slot. “Two fares,” he told the driver, who pressed a key. His card was slurped into the box and then popped back out. “Transfers?”

The driver twice poked a button on the side of the box and two colored tokens dropped into a slot.

Nyk gestured to Andra and they headed toward the back of the bus. The rear window was scratched and clouded but he could see Laida through it, holding onto an overhead rail. She made eye contact and smiled.

He glanced toward Andra. "You know -- when she smiles, she's a very pretty girl."

The bus worked its route and approached a corner. Laida rapped on the window to signal Nyk. He walked toward the front of the bus and stepped to the sidewalk at the next stop. Laida bounded to them from the rear of the coach. "We cross the street," she said. "That bus will take us to a block away from the guest house."

Nykkyo held Andra's hand as they walked from the bus stop toward the guest house. Laida followed about three paces behind. "It makes me angry," Andra whispered.

"What does?" She nodded behind them. "She knows her place," Nyk replied.

"I can't believe I heard you say that!" Andra hissed and snatched her hand from his.

"It's the truth. She knows what this society expects."

"Yes, and I remember what Ogan said: This society has no room for non-functioning novonids."

"Andra, you KNOW I'd rather she walk beside us so we could hold hands."

"What would happen then? Would she be arrested? Put down? Most likely..."

They arrived at the apartment. Nyk unlocked the door with his passcard. "Good night, Laida," he said.

"I must clear the dinner plates. They weren't going anywhere, remember?"

"I remember. Come on in."

Laida followed him into the apartment and bussed the plates from the table.

"Laida," Nyk said, "have you heard tales of ... of your kind living in tribes in the forests to the north?"

She looked over her shoulder as she wiped the dinner plates. "Do you mean feral novonids?"

"Yes -- Ramina told us of tales."

"I've heard them."

"Do you believe them?" Andra asked. "Is it possible?"

"I suppose it's possible," she replied. "There's probably strong enough sunshine. I wouldn't want to, though. It's cold up there -- it would be very uncomfortable."

“They couldn't wear coats because of blocking the sun,” Nyk remarked.

“Laida,” Andra said, “If you were given the choice between living in the forest or being hunted here -- which would you choose?”

“I would choose to do what I'm doing.”

“Suppose that weren't an option. Suppose your only choices were to flee to the cold or spend your life hiding from those intent on killing you. What would you do?”

“I don't know... I'm sorry -- I'm not equipped to answer your question. I've lived too comfortable a life, I guess.” She dried her hands and set clean plates on the table. “There -- ready for breakfast.” She looked at Nyk and at Andra. “I'm very sorry...”

“Sorry for what?” Nyk asked.

“I'm not often asked for my opinion. Tonight you asked me and I had none to give.”

“No, Laida,” Andra replied. “Your responses were lightening and interesting.”

“Lightening?” Laida asked.

“She meant enlightening,” Nyk said. “Didn't you?” Andra smiled and nodded.

Laida broke into a smile. “Really?”

“Yes,” Andra added, “as was our entire evening.”

“I'm pleased. I'll see you both in the morning.”

Nyk watched Laida head out the door. “Enlightening, of course...” he heard Andra mutter.

Nykkyo slipped into bed and coaxed Andra to snuggle against him. He closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind. Andra's legs twitched against his as she drifted toward sleep. Slowly the tension drained from his body and he began to drowse.

He was standing in a pomma field, dressed only in a pair of shorts and with a fieldworker's pouch at his side. A glance down showed the number KNK221353 on his left shoulder. The hot Varadan sun, halfway past the meridian in the afternoon sky blazed overhead.

He scanned a row of pomma plants, extending to his left and his right to the horizon. That row was replicated over and over again to the vanishing point. He grasped a seed head and began stripping kernels. An older novonid worker approached him. “Pick the tassels off first,” he said. “Pick the whole plant clean. Then, harvest the kernels. Watch...” The fieldworker cupped his hand around a seed head, closed it into a fist and opened it again. He dumped a handful of kernels into his pouch.

Nyk followed the fieldhand's lead, plucking tassels and grasping the seed heads and dropping kernels into his pouch. He stepped to the next plant and deposited the harvested kernels. He looked down -- his pouch had grown to the size of a golf bag.

The fieldworker measured the sun's distance to the horizon by holding two fingers at arm's length. He reached into a pocket, withdrew a whistle and blew it. Nyk dragged his bag of pomma to the collection station and dumped it into the hopper.

A turbine's whine approached and an open bus stopped. Other fieldworkers climbed aboard. Nyk followed them and stood as the vehicle headed from the field and toward a cluster of low buildings. It stopped near a clearing. An overseer sat at a table. Behind him was a board. Pegs held keys of different shapes and colors.

The overseer opened a large ledger-book. "Seven-two-three," he called out. The older man who had helped him harvest stepped forward. "Number one."

An assistant overseer took a key from the board and handed it to the man. He headed toward another cluster of buildings.

"Three-five-three," the overseer called out. Nyk looked around. "Three-five-three!"

One of the other workers jabbed Nyk's ribs with his elbow. He looked again at the number on his chest and realized it was he.

"Three-five-three... You're new here, but you are making the effort. You can have number two." The assistant took a key from the board and handed it to Nyk. "Over there..."

He examined the key. It was yellow and shaped like a triangle. Ahead was a cluster of small huts, and on each door was a colored shape. Nyk approached the door with a yellow triangle. He slipped the key into the lock and turned the knob.

The door swung open onto a spacious waiting-room. A row of chairs were occupied by novonid men. Ahead was a desk and beyond the desk a doorway into an inner room. Behind the desk sat Suki.

He closed his eyes, shook his head and opened them again. No -- it wasn't Suki, but a novonid version of her. Hers had the shape of Suki's face, with the pronounced epicanthic folds to her eyes.

The inner door opened and a novonid man stepped out. The woman behind the desk motioned to the next one in line. He stepped into the room and the door closed.

The door opened again. Novonid Suki gestured toward Nyk and he stepped into the room. He stood looking at a bed. Lying in it, under a sheet was Laida. He lay beside her, looked into her orange eyes and caressed her cheek with the back of his fingers. She flung back the covers.

Nyk gazed upon her naked body -- her smooth, green skin; her compact breasts and her long, slender legs. He kissed her shoulders, nuzzled her neck and smoothed both hands along her ribs and abdomen to her hips. With his thumbs he explored the shapes of her muscles.

"Hurry," she said. "The others are waiting."

"I'm not ready..."

"Yes, you are..." She stripped his shorts from him and caressed the insides of his thighs. He felt himself becoming powerfully aroused. "Here," she said, and handed him a plastic object. "Wear this. I'll show you how..."

Laida unwrapped the sheath and slipped it onto him. Her green fingers wrapped around him in a firm, warm grasp. He felt pressure building deep in his pelvis -- a surge he was powerless to stop...

Nyk gasped and opened his eyes. Andra lay beside him in the dark. He straightened the bedclothes and felt dampness against his abdomen. *Oh, no...* he thought. He stood and headed for the lavatory.

The sun's first rays fell across his eyes and waked Nyk. Andra lay beside him, her back to him. He kissed her shoulder. "Good morning," he said.

"Mmmph," she replied, yawned and hoisted herself onto her elbows. "Nyk -- you were all over me last night. Do you remember?"

"No... I'm sorry -- I was having a weird dream."

"Not to mention a wet one," she replied. "I figured that's what it was."

"Oh, Andra -- I'm so, so sorry ... and, mortified."

"It's all right, Nyk. It's not something you can control. Don't be embarrassed. I have those kinds of dreams, myself."

"You?"

"Of course. Nearly everyone does. One of the advantages of being a woman is you can have a wet dream and no one notices."

"I suppose..."

"Nyk -- I'm sorry I haven't been much of a bed partner the past few nights. I agreed to this assignment so you and I could be together. Instead, we seem to be at odds. I don't want us to be that way."

"Neither do I. Oh, Andra -- It's not you ... it's not your fault."

"I think there's something about this place."

"I think you're right about that."

"Do you remember your dream?"

"Oh... no -- not much of it."

"Was I in it?"

He pondered. "No -- I don't think you were."

"Hmm... I don't know if that's good or bad."

"For this dream -- it's a good thing." He swung his feet to the floor. "Pomma brew for you?"

“No thanks -- I don't know about you, but I'm sick and tired of pomma.”

“To tire of pomma is to tire of living,” Nyk replied with a smile.

“I'll never again complain of Floran food being monotonous. Pomma this and pomma that -- I think I have pomma kernels coming out of my ears.”

“You're not sorry you came along on this adventure, are you?”

“Nykkyo -- now that you mention it ... yes I am. I hate the food, I can't master the language...”

“Are you still fussing over 'enlightening?’”

“I do NOT fuss...”

“You're not here as a linguist -- that's MY role. You're here as a diplomatic consultant.”

“Then, why haven't you consulted me?”

“I have.”

“No you haven't. You haven't listened to a word I've said. I can't stand seeing how the novonids are mistreated here, and I'm beginning to loathe Ogan's smug face. There is no reason for us to be talking with these people. We'd be better off marking this corner of the galaxy 'Off Limits' and leaving them to their own devices.”

He hugged her and kissed her forehead. “Andra, I love you. I don't want us to argue.”

“If you saw things my way, we'd have nothing to argue.”

“Andra, your concerns HAVE been noted. If it were in my power to call off negotiations, I would've called them off. Tomyka Wells has full responsibility for the outcome of these talks.”

“Don't get me started on Tomyka Wells...”

He kissed her again. “Each of us has a role to play. Now, I'm going to take my shower...”

Nyk stepped from the shower into the living room and pulled on a pair of trousers. The doorchime sounded. He opened the door and admitted Laida. “Good morning,” he said.

“I'll fix your breakfasts.”

“No breakfast today,” Nyk replied. “We won't have time.”

“What are you doing today?” she asked.

“Our envoy arrives. We have briefing meetings and begin negotiations tomorrow.”

“Then, you'll be leaving in a few days.”

"I'd prefer to think we'll be staying for a few days," he replied and approached her. "Thank you for taking us to visit Ramina last night."

"Thank you for asking me. I don't need much of an excuse. Those people are my family. I love them, and I feel happy there. Even my mother feels happy."

"With all the love -- no doubt. Laida -- you are enriching us with your company. Andra and I both enjoy you very much."

She smiled. Nyk opened his arms and embraced her. She looked at him, her eyes brimming and stroked his shirt. "See -- it doesn't rub off."

"What?"

"The green -- it doesn't rub off." She bit her lower lip.

"Laida, is something wrong?"

She shook her head. "No one has ever hugged me -- except for Ms Ramina, of course -- no one has ever hugged me. They must fear it will rub off on them."

Nyk took her hand and held his beside hers. "Your palm and mine are almost the same color. Mine's a bit lighter..." He turned her hand over. "The green pigment is on the back of your hand -- not your palm." He caressed her hand and forearm. "My wife's hands are like that."

"Really?"

"She has yellow-brown skin, but her palms are almost as light as mine."

"Is she an artificial being, too?"

He chuckled. "No -- she's an Asian."

"Asian? What's that?"

"A variety of Earth human." He pressed his palm against hers. "I think there's much more alike between us than differs..."

"Nyk!" Andra called. "Our car is here."

"I'll clean your rooms," Laida said, "and, I'll see you tonight. Good luck with your meetings."

Nyk looked out the window. "I don't see our car," he said.

"My mistake." She looked at him. "Were you putting the moves on Laida?"

"Moves? What moves?"

"Don't feign innocence, Nyk. You know what I mean."

"I can't help it, Andra. When I'm fond of someone I express it physically."

“You remember what Ogan said about Varadan attitudes regarding the ... mingling of humans and novonids. For both your sakes, I think you should watch your step. And, I sensed you were making her uncomfortable. That's why I thought I had to break it up.”

“Here's our car coming... I sure hope I didn't. Besides, it's part of gathering intelligence for Kronta. Everything I said to her was sincere. You know I'm not capable of insincerity.”

She kissed his cheek. “Yes, Nyk -- that much I know.”

“You're keeping me honest.”

“I'm keeping you -- and Laida -- out of trouble. How would you feel if she were punished on account of your lack of self-control?”

“I'd feel badly. You're right, Andra. The social roles here are rigidly defined. I'm beginning to chafe under them.

“Are you? Really?”

He glanced out the window. “Come on. Our car is waiting.”

The car deposited Nyk and Andra at the government office building housing Prefect Ogan's office. They were escorted into a conference room. Sitting at the table was a woman in late middle-age. “Tomyka,” Nyk said.

“Nykkyo Kyhana and Andra Baxa... Again in person.”

Nyk turned to the prefect's aide. “Please inform Prefect Ogan that we need to confer privately with Ms Wells before we get started.”

“Certainly -- rap on the door when you're done.”

Nyk turned toward Tomyka. “How was your journey?”

She glared at him through narrowed eyes. “Cut to the point, Nykkyo.”

“Tomyka,” Andra interjected, “we can not enter into normalization with these people.”

“They have solved the stumbling block -- they have abolished involuntary servitude.”

“They have replaced it with something far worse. They have created a species of artificial men and women...”

“Are you referring to the novonids?” Tomyka interrupted.

“Do you know about them?”

“Certainly.”

“Aren't you concerned with the precedent admitting such a society presents to the Floran hegemony?”

Wells smiled. “Andra ... Nykkyo -- look at it this way... Why do the Varadans need novonids?”

“To tend their crops.”

“Exactly. Suppose we were to trade them some alternative staples -- wheat or rice, for example. Reducing their dependence on pomma would reduce their need for involuntary servitude.”

“And, what happens to the displaced novonids?”

“They would breed fewer of them -- the population would wither away. The change wouldn't happen overnight.”

“And what,” Andra asked, “would the Varadans give in exchange for wheat or rice? What coin do they possess?”

“That's my concern,” Nyk added. “I don't understand what they have to trade.”

Wells let out a petulant sigh. “We are in the earliest stages of negotiations on normalization. We both have much to offer each other. For us to break off these talks because of ... of our sensibilities about the novonids would be as much a disservice as if they broke them off because of the Floran institution of *ax'amfinen* .” She glanced sideways at Andra. “We were sent here to do a job. Let's get to it.”

Nyk sat beside Andra as the car headed from the administration building, its turbine making a muffled whine. “Remind me,” Nyk said, “if I'm ever foolish enough again to accept a diplomatic assignment -- not to.”

“What do you make of all this?” she asked in her native tongue.

Nyk glanced into the front seat at the driver. “I don't get it,” he replied. “I don't understand why we're even negotiating with these people.”

“I couldn't agree more.”

“I mean -- the people seem nice enough...”

“Nice? Nice people don't create a race and then enslave them.”

“The novonids are a Varadan internal issue. Conceptually, I think it's a reasonable solution.”

“Reasonable?”

“It's one I might've come up with. And, it's not something they entered into lightly. When their last wheat crop failed, they rounded up the unemployed and forced them to harvest wild pomma. It was a matter of survival. From that developed their slave class; but even that led to social instability. So, they developed the novonids. When the first novonids were put in the field, the slave class revolted...”

“... Because now THEY were being put out of work...”

“Exactly. After five hundred years... FIVE HUNDRED YEARS, Andra -- the novonids are part of the cultural landscape here. They don't bother me nearly as much as they seem to bother you.”

“Then, what does bother you?” she asked.

“Two things. I can't figure out what Floran gets in the bargain. The trade seems entirely one-way. There is nothing the Varadans can offer that's of value. Their technology is primitive and we have no need for their consumer products. Our mining colonies, such as Altia, produce minerals in abundance.”

“Including some absent here.”

“Exactly. Trade between Floran and Varada makes as much sense as trade between Floran and Earth. Varada looks like Earth plus two hundred years.”

“Maybe it's a dry run for when we can make contact with Earth -- after the Centauri mission,” Andra suggested. “They can offer us pomma.”

“No, they can't. Their pomma production is calculated to produce only what they can use plus a small tactical contingency.”

“That leaves one commodity,” she said. “a green one.”

“That's ridiculous. They wouldn't dare ... we wouldn't dare.”

“What's the other thing that bothers you?”

“Tomyka Wells. I can't figure out how she got credentials to be an envoy for these sorts of talks.”

The car stopped outside the guest house. Nyk gave the driver the two-finger Floran salute and escorted Andra inside. He unlocked the door. The apartment was empty.

“Looks like Laida cleaned the rooms,” Andra said.

“Yes -- they're spotless...” He looked out a window at the Varadan sun settling below the western horizon. “I'm surprised she isn't here fixing dinner for us.”

“Are you becoming accustomed to having a cook?” Andra asked.

“No, but I have become accustomed to having Laida here.”

He pressed the call panel. He pressed it again. A rap came at the door. Nyk opened it and saw a young novonid male. “Yes?”

“Where's Laida?”

“Who?”

“Laida -- Three-eight-six. Where is she?” He shrugged. “Have Alvo come up.”

“Right away.”

Nyk paced the apartment. Another rap came at the door and Alvo entered. "Is there a problem?"

"Alvo -- where's Laida?"

"Who?"

"Three-eight-six. Where is she?"

"Missing. She apparently wandered off during the day. I'll be speaking with her keeper about this. I don't pay for this sort of dereliction of duty."

"It wouldn't be like her to ... wander off," Nyk replied.

"How do you know what would or would not be in her nature?" Alvo replied. "Let me give you some advice, Mr Kyhana... Social fraternization with novonids is frowned upon here -- in some cases to the point of being a criminal offense. Since you are outsiders, take heed. You will do your cause well not to express too much concern for the whereabouts of Three- eight-six ... or any other novonid for that matter." He turned and left.

Nyk looked at Andra, slack-jawed. "Oh, Andra -- I hope we didn't get Laida into trouble by being friendly with her."

"I hope not, too. But -- I fear we might've."

9 -- The Green Zone

"Six days of this nonsense, Illya." Nyk spoke to Kronta through his handheld vidisplay. "Tomyka and Ogan have spent the past six days dithering back and forth on two paragraphs of the agreement. Today, I swear she insisted on reverting to phrasing we discarded two days ago. I'm mentally exhausted from it."

"This is the nature of diplomacy," Kronta replied.

"It's ridiculous -- and so agonizingly slow. I'd understand it if this were a final treaty, but it's only a letter of intent to begin the process of considering normalization. They should've been able to knock it out in half a day."

"You're doing a man's job, there Nyk. Keep up the good work."

"Thanks."

“And, I appreciate the detailed reports on the novonids. There are many in the High Legislature deeply concerned about that institution. Keep me posted.”

“I will, Illya.” The session went dark. Andra approached him. “This is agony,” he said. “And, every time I think about Laida I get a pain in my stomach.”

“I don't know about you, but I find a hard day's work doing nothing exhausting.”

“No argument there,” he replied. “What do you make of it? What does your *ax'amfin* intuition tell you?”

“I'm baffled, Nyk. I can't figure out what Tomyka's game is. Perhaps it's because she's not an experienced diplomat. Maybe it's a power thing with her.”

“Power?”

“Yes -- she's determined to show Ogan who's boss.”

“Then -- how do you read Ogan on this?”

“I think he's a frustrated as we are.” She yawned. “I'm going to bed, Nyk. Are you coming, too?”

“I'm going to do some work on this agreement, so we'll have clean copies for tomorrow's session. Then, let the dithering begin ... again.”

“Good night, then...” She headed into the bedroom.

Nyk sat at the media terminal and accessed the data store Ogan had created for the negotiations. He stared at the document, his elbows planted on the desk and his chin propped in his palms. His eye caught sight of the stack of scrip on the table.

A check of the bedroom revealed Andra asleep. Nyk picked up the scrip and headed out the door. The Varadan yellow sun had set and the streetlamps were beginning to come on. He approached the livery callbox and pressed the panel.

A cab pulled over and admitted him. “Quadrant two, sector fourteen.” The driver nodded and headed down the street.

He paid the driver, stepped out of the cab, approached the row houses and pressed the bell. He pressed it again. The door was opened by a novonid boy in early adolescence. “Is Ms Ramina in?” he asked.

The boy swung the door open and left Nyk sitting on the settee in the vestibule. He saw other pairs of orange eyes in young green faces peering from the stair railing.

Ramina in a long robe approached him. “Mr Kyhana,” she said, “what brings you here at this time of night?”

“Do you know of Laida's disappearance?”

She nodded. “Of course. Have you any news?” He shook his head. “I'm distraught over it.”

“So am I. Andra and I fear it's our fault -- that she was picked up by the authorities -- because we were being friendly with her.”

Ramina shook her head. “No, Nykkyo. Neither you nor she did anything improper.”

“You're sure?”

“Of course. Cordial friendship between our kinds is not a crime. There are some in this society who would like to see it thus, but it is not. I have my own theories about her disappearance.”

“Which are?”

“I suspect foul play.”

“To what end?”

“Are attractive young women ever abducted on your world?”

“On my homeworld -- almost never. On the world where I'm stationed for my assignment... Unfortunately, yes. You think it's something like that?”

She held her forehead, then looked up. “I fear it is. Since the registry has been in existence, the so-called green market mostly has been put out of business.”

“Green market?”

“Traffic in stolen novonids. Nowadays, a ... misplaced one would soon be spotted and returned to the rightful owner. Of course, changing registry numbers is not unheard of. There are disreputable brokers out there. I have notified the BSS...”

“In addition to everything else, the BSS maintains the registry?”

“That's correct. They'll be watching the auctions and the termination committees. I've spent the past few days contacting all the clinics specializing in novonid medicine.” She pursed her lips. “And, I've notified the morgues.”

“What about the authorities?”

“The constabulary are not excited about missing ... pets.” She spat the word.

“Knowing Laida as I do,” he said, “I would think she'd make every effort to return here, or contact you.”

Ramina nodded. “It's been the cornerstone of my philosophy to teach them as much independence as they can handle. They know how to be polite, but I also teach them how to scarp if the need arises. The need, I'm afraid, arises more and more often these days.”

“How so?”

“Over the past hundred years or so, we've seen more and more of them used in the cities.”

“No offense, Ramina, but don't you think an operation like your own contributes to the problem?”

“Who said it was a problem? There are those who welcome novonids...”

“Yes. I met a young woman in Ogan's office who believes her job was made possible by them.”

“... and those who don't. I'm a city girl, Mr Kyhana. This is my home. I wouldn't be happy out in the countryside, isolated on a farm. I do teach them ways to protect themselves.”

“In an altercation wouldn't Varadan law be one-sided?”

“You're perceptive... Yes. None of mine would ever start a fight. What I teach them is awareness, caution and escape.”

“You teach them street smarts. Thank you, Ramina. If it's any consolation Andra and I are sick about it. We'll do whatever is in our powers -- which isn't much, I'm afraid.”

“I appreciate it Mr Kyhana.”

He walked to the corner and approached the livery box. An indicator was lit. It read, “No service.”

He heard the whine of a turbine and saw a streetcar lumbering in his direction. Nyk stood at the stop. The bus came to a halt. He climbed aboard, inserted one of his scrip cards into the box and debited his fare. As the bus pulled back into traffic he worked his way to an empty bench in the back.

The bus crept its way along its route. Nyk reconstructed the stops they took when Laida accompanied them from Ramina's the other day. The bus approached a stop and slowed. Through the rear window he saw a familiar-looking young novonid woman preparing to step from the platform to the street. *Laida* !

Nyk dashed to the front of the coach, grabbing a transfer token on his way out. He saw her head to another stop across the street. A traffic light changed, leaving him stranded. He saw her bus held at another light. The light changed; it moved toward the stop and slowed.

He dashed across the street, pushed the door open as it closed and dropped the transfer token into the farebox. The bus pulled into traffic and made a turn. The roadway grew darker as they drew away from the streetlamps.

Nyk sat in the rear-most seat. He turned around and rapped on the glass to attract her attention. She turned her back to him.

He rapped again. “Laida!” he called. The bus approached a stop and she hopped off.

He sprinted to the front of the bus, but reached it too late. The driver stopped the bus at the next corner. Nyk jumped off and ran down the block. “Laida!” he shouted. He could see her ahead, clutching a fiber mesh sack.

Her walking accelerated into a sprint. Nyk ran after her but she was pulling away. She dodged into an alley. He heard a crash and a clatter.

She was lying on the pavement. The contents of her sack -- a half dozen cans -- were strewn around her.

Nyk leaned over, rested his forearms on his thighs and panted to regain his breath. "You're fast," he said. "It must be the extra strength in your muscles." He looked into her face. "I'm terribly sorry. I thought you were someone else."

"Yes -- we all look alike to white eyes."

"No. The resemblance is strong ... you are probably a couple of years younger, though." He observed she did not have a registry tattoo on her left shoulder. "You're not registered."

Her eyes darted and he could see terror in them. "Please," she pleaded, "don't turn me in."

"I won't," he replied. "I won't hurt you."

Her eyes kept shifting skyward. "The noise," she said. "It'll attract attention."

Nyk's eyes followed her sightline and he saw what she had been regarding. Atop a pylon was a searchlight and what might've been a camera. "Hide behind those barrels," she said. "I can't move -- I think my foot is broken."

He lifted and dragged her behind some barrels and debris cluttering the alley. The spotlight from the tower probed the darkness. She grabbed his collar, pulled him to the pavement and held her finger to his lips.

The spotlight continued to sweep the alley. Nyk stood. "NO!" she gasped and reached for him.

"They won't stop until they know what caused the noise..." He limped from behind the barrels, grabbed the fiber sack and began picking up cans.

The beam caught him and he looked toward the pylon. "Are you all right?" came a voice from the tower.

"I tripped and fell," Nyk replied.

"Please stand and face us..." The beam focused on him, illuminating his face and upper torso, dressed in a Varadan one-sleeved shirt. "Thank you for your cooperation."

"If you could..." Nyk pointed toward the pavement away from where the novonid girl lay. The beam followed his gesture and he picked up the remaining cans. "Thanks."

"Make sure you're off the street by curfew," came the voice. He waved an acknowledgment and headed down the street, away from the alley. The searchlight switched off.

Nyk returned to the girl's side. She looked up from the pavement. "Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you ... trust me." He crouched beside her. "Let me feel your foot," he said and palpitated her ankle. "Can you move your toes? ...I don't think it's broken -- just a nasty sprain. Are you hurt otherwise?"

"Some bruises maybe..." She pressed her hand above her breast. "You SCARED me."

"I'm sure I did and I'm very sorry." He handed her the sack of cans. "Here."

"I didn't steal them," she said. "I'm not a thief. They were being discarded."

"That thought never crossed my mind." She tried to stand but collapsed when she put her weight on her left foot. "How far are you going?" he asked. "I'll help you."

She pointed. "Over there is a gate. Through that and to the left about twenty-five metres. There's a doorway leading to a basement. In there."

"Are you ready?"

She nodded. "We must keep to the shadows."

"Okay, let's go."

He helped her stand and supported her. He could see, dimly, the gateway in the glow from a blue light above a callbox. She limped with him through the gate.

"Now, where?" Nyk whispered.

"Ahead about twenty-five metres and to the left. Do you see it?"

"Yes... Let me carry you." He crouched. "Hop onto my back..."

He hooked his arms under her knees and clasped his hands together. She held onto him around his shoulders with one hand and clutched the sack with the other. Nyk stood and worked his way toward the doorway. A door opened across the way and he ducked behind the corner of a building.

"That's all right," she said, "just one of the neighbors."

He reached the doorway, set her down and pushed the door open. Before him, a flight of cracked concrete steps led down into a dimly-lit room. "I'll carry you in my arms this time," he said and picked her up. He negotiated the stairs and stepped into the basement. The place had a dampness he found disagreeable.

"Mother! Father!" the girl called. Nyk set her down and she limped to a bench.

An older novonid couple stepped from behind an interior staircase. One of them held a makeshift lamp fabricated from a discarded can. Nyk noticed they both had registry numbers on their shoulders. They stopped short upon spotting him.

"What is he doing here?" the man asked.

"Your daughter sprained her ankle," Nyk replied. "I was helping her get home."

"Don't hurt him, Father," the girl said.

"I won't -- but he can take his chances out there."

"No, please. He helped me. He could've pressed a panic button but he didn't. He distracted the

constables and carried me home. I think he's with the BSS.”

“Are you BSS?” the mother asked.

“No -- but I'm sympathetic to them.”

“How sympathetic?” the man asked.

Nyk faced him. “I must apologize. I mistook your daughter for someone else. She was running from me when she tripped and fell. I take responsibility for her twisted ankle.”

“They were using a security cam,” the girl continued. “I don't think they saw me.”

The man regarded Nyk. “All right. You helped our daughter. We'll help you.”

“My name is Nykkyo. Please tell me yours.”

“I'm Rayla, the mother said. “My husband is Grott. My daughter's name is Lise.”

“Lise...” Nyk turned to the girl. “You do resemble another girl I'm seeking. That's why I followed you. I'm very sorry I frightened you.”

“I'll be all right...” Lise replied, “...now that I'm home, that is.”

“Do you know of a ... one named Laida?”

“We don't,” replied Grott.

“Why are you looking for her?” Rayla asked.

“She was an attendant at the guest house where I'm staying. She disappeared a few days ago.”

“Good luck finding her,” Rayla replied. “You will need it.”

“I contacted her owner -- Ms Ramina...”

“Ramina.” Grott nodded. “One of the better ones.”

“Better of a bad lot, you mean,” Rayla replied. “Guest house ... I didn't think you were a city native.”

“I'm a member of the diplomatic mission from Floran.”

“Yes,” Grott replied. “I've heard of the talks with the Florans. The rumor is you want some of us for your mines and fields.”

Nyk shook his head. “Do you mean...”

“Novonids,” said Rayla, tapping herself above her breast. “Us. It's a Varadan way of dealing with ... the problem.”

“The rumor is false,” Nyk protested. “We are in the earliest stages of discussions with Prefect Ogan's

office Believe me, there has been no mention of ... you ... from either side. I can say that with authority since I am the translator. Now, if you'll excuse me -- I must find my way back to the guest house."

Grott shook his head. "It is too close to curfew. The streetcars will have stopped running by now." The wail of a siren welled up in the distance. "There it is -- curfew. You will have to stay here tonight. One of us will help you find your way home tomorrow."

"Here?" He looked around the basement. Old bedclothes had been hung to partition the area into rooms.

Rayla took two of the cans from the sack Lise had been carrying and opened them with a hand opener. She divided the contents among three bowls. Nyk recognized it as the nutrient paste he had seen Laida eating.

"I'm sorry we have nothing to offer you," Rayla said.

"It's all right. I'm not hungry... Grott -- I see your daughter is unregistered."

The man's eyes narrowed. "I have little I can give you."

Nyk tried to reconcile her father's response to his own remark.

"He said he's sympathetic to the BSS," Rayla added. She turned to Nyk. "You won't turn her in ... will you?"

"Of course not," he replied. "I knew her likely fate if I left her there. I felt helping her home was the least I could do -- considering my responsibility for her injury."

"Do you see, Father?" Lise asked.

Grott glanced toward Rayla. She nodded. "Pull up a stool and sit with us," Grott said.

Lise and her parents sat on benches, holding the bowls of nutrient paste on their laps. Nyk found a stool and sat on it. "Grott," he said, "I was curious why Lise isn't registered."

"You're right," Grott replied. "She's of age -- she should be registered. No one wants her. She's a oneshot ... like her mother."

Nyk glanced toward Rayla, who looked at the floor. "What does that mean?"

"It's a genetic defect -- a mutation that has found its way into some of ours," Rayla replied.

"When Rayla gave birth to Lise, she was damaged."

"The womb tears," Rayla explained, "splits in two. As a result, I cannot carry another child. The word they use is oneshot. Undoubtedly Lise has the same defect."

"Rayla nearly died."

"She obviously recovered."

“A kind surgeon on the farm took it upon himself to save me. An infertile female is of no value on a pomma farm,” Rayla continued. “A male is worth one, a female ten...”

“I’ve heard that saying,” Nyk interrupted.

“... but a oneshot is worth nothing. I was sold, along with my child, to the same broker who bought Grott from another farm. He paired us.”

“So -- Grott is not Lise's father.”

“I’m not -- but I love her as if she were mine.”

“The broker leases me to a towel and uniform laundry. I might very well have washed the sheets in your guest room. Grott works as a construction laborer. It's hard work.”

“Pomma farming is hard work,” Nyk replied.

“No -- pomma farming is easy. What's easier than standing in the sun all day? As a laborer I must lift and carry. Life is good on the farms, with comfortable quarters and regular meals.” He held out his palms. “These are the quarters our owner provides. He's banking our wages for us. When we have accumulated enough for the fee, he will register Lise, and find work for her.”

“So he says,” retorted Rayla. “I think he spends our wages on pomma beer and potteen. He holds Lise over us to keep us from bolting. There's not much work to be found for the likes of us. Pushing out baby after baby is what's considered a female's work.”

“If he doesn't register her by a year from now,” Grott said, “we will take her to the BSS and have them register her. We'll be punished for sure, and we'll probably lose her, but she can't be impounded if she has one of these.” He tapped his registration tattoo.

“The BSS,” Nyk remarked. “They do much to help you.”

“No they don't,” Rayla retorted. “They're a bunch of soft-hearted do-gooders.”

“They pass laws like the Termination Act.”

“They don't like to see us hunted and killed.”

“I can't imagine YOU like to see it.”

“It's not the point.” Rayla put her hand on Grott's shoulder. “We disagree on this. I think the BSS are as anxious to stay the course as are the breeders and brokers. The Termination Act makes it easier for an old and tired-out farmworker to live out his twilight years, all right -- as a servant to some mid-level bureaucrat. Why not give him a pension and a home, and let him live out those years in leisure, instead? That's what the bureaucrats expect -- and receive from this society.”

“Rayla -- I don't know what to say...”

“I'm sorry, Nykkyo. It's not my place to be spouting such.” She collected the bowls. Nyk watched as she lit more lanterns made from tins that had held the pink paste.

“What do you burn in your lamps?” Nyk asked.

“Discarded grease from fry shops outside the Zone,” Rayla replied. “There are a few things still free in this city.”

A rap came on the door above the interior staircase. Rayla climbed the steps and cracked it open. She gestured to her husband.

“Behind here,” Grott said and Nyk crouched behind a hanging blanket.

He heard the door open and heavy footfalls. “Grott,” a man's voice said. “Are you coming to the meeting?”

“You know my feelings.”

“We need you. The others respect you.”

“I do not wish to get involved. I have a family.”

“Grott...” Nyk heard a different voice. “The word is a white's been seen in the area -- maybe a bounty hunter. Watch out for Lise.”

“Lise,” Grott called. “Did you hear that?”

“Yes, Father...”

“We'll keep her inside. Thanks for the warning.”

“You're sure you're not coming,” the first voice repeated.

“I am not. Now, be gone.”

Nyk heard the door close. He peeked from behind the blanket. Grott eyed him. “They're looking for a white. We'll hide you here tonight.”

Rayla approached him. “What did they want?”

“A meeting tonight -- they wish me to attend.”

“You won't,” Rayla replied.

“No.” He looked in Nyk's direction. “Some of the younger ones believe we should ... show the Varadans we're not a force to be trifled with. It's a fools' mission. We don't have enough numbers.”

“Some day,” Rayla added, “the numbers will be there. There are more and more unregistered. And those unregistered will have unregistered children.”

“How many live in this sector?” Nyk asked.

“Hard to say,” Grott replied. “This sector was designated to house us a hundred years ago when we were first brought from the farms into the cities. The Varadans turn a blind eye to what goes on within our

perimeter.”

“Out of sight -- out of mind,” Nyk remarked. “Tell me, Grott -- are we in the Green Zone?”

Grott nodded. “Once in a while a bounty hunter comes through...”

“Looking for unregistered?”

“Mostly looking for registereds who've bolted. They seek sanctuary here.”

“Grott is an elder,” Rayla explained. “That's why they wanted him for the meeting.”

Another rap came from the door. Again, Rayla mounted the steps and cracked it open. A number of novonid children descended the stairs. They formed a semicircle on the basement floor. Watching from behind the blanket, Nyk counted a baker's dozen of them.

Rayla passed out booklets. He watched as the children took turns reading aloud from them.

Nyk approached Grott. “I'm amazed. Rayla teaches them to read?”

“Yes,” Grott whispered.

“I was told you ... that ...”

“You were told we can't be taught to read. You were told wrong.”

“Where do the children come from? It's after curfew.”

“From other families living upstairs.”

“How did Rayla learn...”

Grott looked into Nyk's eyes. “Rayla was born on a pomma farm. Like other females, she was being groomed for breeding. The farm's owner had a single child, a little girl of the same age, who became fond of Rayla.”

“And, she taught Rayla to read.” Grott nodded. “And, Rayla has been passing it on to others. Will this help them in finding work?”

Grott shook his head. “No.”

“Why do it, then?”

“Because knowing is better than not knowing.”

“Do you know how, Grott?” He shook his head. “Why not have Rayla teach you?”

“I'm too old.”

“You're never too old to learn, Grott.”

He watched as Rayla's lesson switched to arithmetic. The class ended with her reading a story. She collected the books, hugged and kissed each child and sent them back up the stairs.

Nyk approached Rayla. "May I see one of those?" She handed him one of the little books.

He examined it. The book was hand made, the text hand lettered onto polysheet pages. These had been folded and gathered, then sewn through the sides to form a spine. Pieces of scrap cloth had been pasted on to form covers. "Rayla -- did you make these?"

"Yes..." She opened a basket and withdrew the pattern -- a tattered primary school text book. She touched it to her lips and handed it to Nyk.

He opened it and realized she had copied everything -- the text, illustrations, and page numbers -- from the original. He also realized how she had used the skills and tools available to her to fabricate her copies. He looked inside the front cover and found an inscription. *To Rayla love Kimmi* .

"Kimmi was the farmer's daughter?" Nyk asked.

"Yes. I imagine by now she has forgotten I existed."

"She gave this to you. This was hers."

"Even when I was a child these had fallen out of use."

"They don't print books any more?"

"It's all gone over to the media screens. Of course we can't afford those. This book belonged to Kimmi's grandmother. She used it to teach me."

"It's very precious, then," Nyk said.

"It's precious to me. No one else wants them. You can buy books at some of the junk shops. They sell them by the kilogram."

"Then, buy some for your students."

"We can't afford them," Grott interjected. "Our owner is banking our wages..."

"Toward Lise's registration."

"He gives us enough to buy our food. I've been using it instead for writing pads for the children. Lise was scavenging expired food when you encountered her."

"It's stale but edible," Lise added.

"We really require little to live on," Rayla continued. "I think it's important to teach our children."

"I agree," Nyk replied. "What do others think? Obviously some agree."

"The whites think it's pointless -- that we can't learn."

“So, it's not a crime?” he asked.

“A waste of time is what they think.”

Nyk dug into his pockets and retrieved the scrip cards. He handed them to Rayla. “Here. Take these. Go to the junk shops and buy books.”

“I can't accept this.”

“I insist.” He held up a card. “I have enough for my fare home. He slipped the one card back into his pocket. You take the rest. I can't imagine it better spent.”

“Thank you.”

“It's late and I'm very tired,” Nyk said. “I don't know about you, but I need sleep.”

Rayla gestured behind a sheet hanging from the ceiling. “You may bed down there.” I must make my rounds.”

He watched her climb the steps. “Rounds?”

Grott's eyes narrowed. “There are so many more men here than women -- we decided to share them. It helps keep the peace.” He looked toward Lise. “I refuse to share her. A pregnancy would kill her. I'll kill anyone who lays a hand on her ... and they know I will.”

“You love your child. I understand -- I have a little boy at home. I'll turn in -- thanks for the hospitality.”

Nyk lay on a bare mattress on the floor. He closed his eyes. His exhaustion soon overtook him.

Daylight streaming through a basement sill window roused him. “Good morning.” He heard Lise's voice.

“Good morning. How's your foot?”

“I still can't walk on it.”

He sat up and saw her sitting nude and cross-legged on the floor by the mattress. He involuntarily scanned her from head to toe, then forced his gaze between her forehead and her collarbone.

What Ogan had told him about the novonids swirled through his mind. *What lies they had been told* . Why, he wondered, had their designers so carefully crafted them in the human image? Certainly, for field work other patterns would've been more efficient -- a model with multiple arms and hands, perhaps. Or, one with appendages designed to strip pomma kernels.

They had started with a blank slate, free to create from any pattern they imagined. The ones they had used were not based in human reality, but human ideals.

Lise, like Laida, was a beautiful young woman. Rayla, and even Laida's mother had aged gracefully, retaining pretty features and lean, firm bodies. Their street clothes left little to the imagination to begin

with. The sex appeal Lise's green, naked figure exuded was not lost on Nyk. Even novonid men were more muscular, more physical ... more masculine than Floran or even Varadan natives. In spite of himself, he appreciated the beauty and sensuality of their bodies, too.

Then, he recalled Ogan's response to his question about a novonid sex industry. *Another lie ...*

And -- something else bothered him... Grott, Rayla and Lise all exhibited cognitive abilities far beyond what Ogan, Alvo and even Ramina had attributed to them. Ramina believed Laida to be exceptional. Now, Nyk didn't know if Grott and his family were also exceptional; or if Laida was merely typical. His suspicions tended toward the latter. He wondered about the so-called conditioning. And, he pondered if they were smart enough to behave in a certain way in front of their masters; and in a very different way around their families and peers. It would be behavior that certainly had its precedents. *Lies -- All the lies they had been told ...*

"Nykkyo," Lise said, her voice taut and with a trace of a quiver in her lip. "My mother and father have agreed." She swallowed hard. "I'm yours if you want."

"Why would they? Why would you?"

She swallowed again. "We are in your debt, and I'm all we have to give." Her eyes brimmed. "You could've turned me in. You could've shouted and waved your arms at that security cam, or pressed the panic button on the callbox. I'm unregistered, but of age."

"The authorities would regard you as feral."

"I'm not. I was born on a pomma farm to a registered female."

"But, try explaining that. You'd suffer a fate like that girl in the news."

"There's a bounty on such as me. You'd have received ... twenty times the value of the scrip you gave my mother. You didn't ... instead you gave her money."

"Lise -- do you agree with this decision?"

She nodded. "Yes -- I do."

"But -- you're not keen on it, are you?"

A tear beaded down her cheek. "No..."

"Grott said he forbid anyone..."

"He knows it's safe with you -- you can't make me pregnant. He wants to pay his debt. Besides, Grott says my only job will be in the brothels on the edge of the Zone, anyway. I might as well practice."

"Why would he say something so cruel?"

"Because it's the truth. He is preparing me -- for what lies ahead."

"Lise -- it need not be that way. A surgeon could tie your tubes. You need not fear pregnancy. You could live a normal life -- pair with a man. Maybe you couldn't bear a child, but I'm sure there are

orphaned children here who need someone like you.”

“What surgeon would do this?”

“One like the one who saved your mother.”

“He only did so to appease the farmer's daughter. If I could find one -- how could I afford it?”

“Wouldn't the BSS...” She shook her head. “If I had the money, I'd give it to you.”

“I think you would. What they are saying about Florans must be correct.”

“What are ... they ... saying?”

“That you are soft-hearted fools.”

“Soft-hearted? Perhaps. Fools? I think not.”

“We could've told you anything. Maybe there's nothing wrong with my womb.”

“Are you telling me you're capable of lying?”

“Anyone's capable.”

“Perhaps you can tell a lie -- I don't think you can conceal it. I think Grott and Rayla raised you with too much integrity. Your mother teaching the little ones to read -- that was no lie. I'll bet she taught you to read out of the same books.” Lise stared at the floor. “How many has Rayla taught to read? Fifty? A hundred?”

“Maybe more.”

“Let's say a hundred. I hope each of those hundred Rayla taught goes out and teaches a hundred more ... and each of those hundred, hundred does the same. No, Florans aren't fools. The fools are the ones living outside the perimeter of this zone. Lise, the pleasure of knowing that money went for a good cause is the only payment I require. I consider the debt cancelled. Go put some clothes on.”

Relief washed over her features. She stood and hobbled into another part of the basement.

Nyk arose and stepped from behind the sheet. Lise sat on a stool.

“Let me look at your ankle,” he said, kneeling. The top of her foot and her ankle were thickly swollen and discolored to a muddy brown. “You will need to keep off that for a few days.”

“It feels better than last night,” she replied.

“If you would give me directions to the bus stop -- I'll be on my way.”

She shook her head. “I'm afraid you'll get lost. The way is confusing -- and, dangerous. I dare not go out during daylight, sprained foot or not. I'm safe enough within this compound, but I'd be fair game on the streets.”

“Is there a place where I can make a call?”

She shook her head. “You must wait here until one of my parents comes home. One of them will show you the way. They both work an early shift. They’ll be home by mid- afternoon

10 -- Solicitation

“I must get some sun,” Lise said.

“Is it safe for you to be outdoors?”

“Here, yes. Here it’s not safe for YOU to be outdoors. Someone might mistake you for a bounty hunter -- a fool-hardy one, at that.”

She climbed the steps leading outside. Nyk followed her.

He looked around in the daylight and attempted to get his bearings. The doorway to the basement led into a courtyard surrounded on four sides by four and five story buildings. Whether they had been built as tenements or had been converted, he could not determine from the exteriors. The condition of the building left no doubt. They had been long neglected.

The courtyard itself was paved in concrete. It was broken and tufts of native plants pushed their way through the cracks. Over a low fence he could see into another courtyard. A group of novonid children played running and hiding games.

She pointed past the houses. “This sector... from there...” She pointed again. “To there... is ours. We have a sort of an agreement with the constables. So long as we stay inside, they won’t bother us. And, if the body of a bounty-hunter should be found outside the perimeter...”

“He was foolish enough to violate the agreement.”

“That’s right. Don’t worry, Nykkyo. No one will bother us in this courtyard.”

He followed Lise to some concrete bricks stacked to form a planter. Growing there were some knee-high shrubs. He looked at the seed heads, with feathery, colored tassels. “This looks like pomma,” he said.

“It’s not,” she replied. “It’s related to pomma. You can’t eat it, though. My mother brought seeds for these from the farm. I liked them so she gave them to me. They’re pretty, don’t you think?”

“I thought the tassels looked more elaborate than the ones I saw at the pomma farm.”

“There are three sexes to these plants -- for pomma, too. You need to mate all three in order to have fertile seeds. On pomma, the three sexes grow on the same seed head.” She knelt and pointed to one of the plants. “On this plant, there are three different blossoms... See?”

“Yes... Lise, did you know I am a botanist? Do you know what that is?” She shook her head. “It's someone who studies plants. I have never seen a plant with three genders.”

“Let me show you something else...” She led him to another planting bed. “These are ones I grew from seed. Do you see this color?” She pointed to a lavender tassel. “I made this, by fertilizing a blue flower with red and yellow ones.”

“Blue, red and yellow give lavender?”

“The three genders are male, female and X. The blue has to be on the female side to give lavender.”

“Have you studied this, Lise?”

“Yes. I keep track of the ones I cross, so I can make more. I like pretty things.”

“Lise -- you are doing science. You are figuring out the genetics of this plant.”

She shrugged. “It gives me something to do. We like to be busy in the sun.”

“So I've heard.”

Lise picked up a can and limped to a standpipe. She filled it with water and poured it onto the bases of her plants. “I'll get you more water,” Nyk said, “so you don't have to be on that foot.”

“It's all right,” she replied. “Exercising helps it feel better; otherwise it stiffens up.”

“You need sun -- I need shade. I can't stay in your world's sun very long or it'll burn me.”

“We'll go inside then.”

“But, you need sun.”

“There's always more sun.”

She limped to the doorway to her basement home.

“Let me carry you. Those steps look tricky, and with your foot...”

“Nykkyo -- it isn't the first time I've twisted an ankle... All right, carry me.”

He slipped one arm behind her knees and supported her back with the other. She put her arms around his shoulders. He looked into her orange eyes. She looked into his and smiled. Then, he carried her down the steps and set her onto a stool.

He extended his hand. “I know banishing mistrust between your people and mine is too much to expect. Do you think we can banish it between you and me?” She clasped her hand to his. “Friends?”

“Friends.”

“Lise -- do you believe in Destiny?”

“Destiny?”

“I do. I believe there's a master plan for the universe, and a purpose for everyone and everything. I believe Destiny planned that you twist your ankle, so I would help you. And -- She planned that I help you so I could meet your remarkable family.”

“Remarkable? Nykkyo -- we're no different than any family.”

“That is what's remarkable.”

Nyk paced the basement. Noon, afternoon, sunset and dusk had all passed. Lise lit one of the tin-can lamps.

His stomach growled. “You must be very hungry,” Lise said.

“No, Lise. I am beyond very hungry.”

“I'm sorry, but we have nothing.”

“I'm getting worried, Lise.”

“I've been worried...”

He heard footfalls on the concrete steps leading directly outdoors. “Lise!” Rayla's voice called. “It's Grott and me.”

Rayla stepped into the basement carrying a parcel. She handed it to Nyk. “This is for you. I imagine you're very hungry by now.”

Inside the parcel was a round of flat pomma bread and a bottled beverage. “Thanks,” he replied and tore a chunk from the bread.

“What took you so long?” Lise asked.

“We were detained by authorities,” Grott explained.

“Did you use the scrip I gave you for this?” Nyk asked.

“A little bit of it. Don't worry -- the rest will be put to good use.”

“A plainclothes constable was in line behind us,” Rayla added. “He wondered how we came by a scrip card of that denomination. They claimed to be looking for a band of street thugs, but it's really an excuse to harass law-abiding folk. They know Grott is an elder.”

Nyk finished wolfing down the flat bread and chugging the drink. “Let's go,” he said. “I'm sure my

people are frantic for me by now.”

“There was a report of a missing Floran envoy,” Rayla replied. “I saw it on a news display.”

Lise stood, avoiding putting weight on her left foot. Nyk embraced her and kissed her forehead. “Take good care of your folks, Lise. They love you and need you.”

“I know and I will. Goodbye, Nykkyo.”

He turned to Rayla and hugged her. Grott nodded toward the doorway.

Nyk climbed with him into the Varadan night. “You have plenty of time before curfew,” he said. “Best to avoid the alley where Lise came in. It's watched.”

“Watched by whom?” Nyk asked.

“By street thugs. If you turn right instead of left, you're at a brothel. Street thugs will take your scrip. And, the authorities watch the thugs. If they're lucky, they arrest both -- the thugs and the brothel's customers. I tell Lise not to use the alley, but it's shorter than the safe route.”

“With me pursuing her, she probably thought shorter was safer.”

“Probably,” Grott agreed. He gestured. “In here.”

Nyk followed him into another building. He walked along the first floor. Tiles were missing and pieces of mortar kicked underfoot. With Grott he passed open doorways and saw novonid men and women, some young and some old. He saw children, and toddlers with green blotches on white skin.

Grott led him down a set of stairs into another basement, and then into a tunnel. He pointed to a set of steps leading upward. “That will take you to the street. There's a bus stop on the corner.”

Nyk extended his hand. “Good luck with your family, Grott. You'll get Lise registered, won't you?” Nyk gave him the two-fingered Floran salute and mounted the steps. He pushed open a trap door, stood on the street and looked around. The sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach confirmed what he already knew -- he was still in a bad part of town.

The street was deserted and illuminated mainly by the city's light pollution, scattered by its air pollution and giving the sky a dull, yellow glow. He crossed over to the bus stop and realized he had no idea how often the streetcars ran on this line ... at this hour...

He paced back and forth under an inoperative streetlamp. One vehicle passed by, then another in the opposite direction. Footsteps approached from down the block. Nyk paid them no heed and waited, his hands stuffed in his pockets.

Something sharp pressed against his throat. “Give me your scrip.”

He dug into his pocket and turned over the last scrip card to a powerfully-built novonid man. “There ... that's ... that's all I have,” he stammered. He felt hands from behind him patting him down.

The beam from a pylon spotlight caught his face. Two of his assailants fled in opposite directions. The one with the knife spun him around, put his arm in a hammer-lock and held the blade again to his throat.

Then, a pop and he felt himself splattered by warm droplets. His assailant crumpled to the sidewalk.

“Halt! Put your hands up,” came a disembodied voice from the top of the pylon. Nyk held up his hands and backed away until stopped by a wall.

The whine of a turbine grew louder. The spotlight from the pylon was joined by one from the approaching vehicle. It stopped and two uniformed men stepped out.

“ID please,” one constable said.

“I ... I don't have any.”

“No ID -- take him in.”

“My name is Nykkyo Kyhana. I'm a member of the diplomatic mission from Floran.”

“You're coming with us.”

Another constable pulled Nyk's hands behind his back and secured them. They pushed him into the van. Its turbine whined up and it bumped and bounced along the broken pavement.

“My name is Nykkyo Kyhana,” he repeated to the officer guarding him. “I'm a member of the diplomatic mission from Floran. That's why I have no ID. I'm meeting with Prefect Ogan. He will vouch for me.”

“You say your name is Nykkyo Kyhana,” a plain clothed detective asked him.

“Yes.”

“You have no identification.”

He held up his right wrist. “On my world, my identification is implanted here. You lack the ability to read it.”

“That name has been on the alerts,” another officer remarked. “There have been reports all day about a missing diplomat with that name.”

“Yes,” Nyk said. “That's me. I'm sure my colleagues are frantic looking for me.”

“You should've picked a less conspicuous identity to steal,” the detective replied. “Why would a diplomat be in this part of the city, after dark?”

“He must've been rounding up greenies to take home with him,” the other officer replied, chuckling. “Go ahead, pal -- take them all.”

“No.” Nyk sighed. “I've told you... I went for a stroll. I was lost. It was after curfew and a novonid family sheltered me for the night.”

“Do you know what happens if the greenies find whites inside their perimeter? WE find the bodies the next day.”

“They must've realized I was no threat to them. I was unarmed, and I'm no match for one of their men ... I'm no match for one of their women.”

“So, they sheltered you overnight.”

“Yes -- then, tonight one of them led me through a secret tunnel. I was waiting for the bus when I was accosted.”

“Do you remember any names?”

“...No, I don't.”

“You're sure?”

“No. I don't recall any names.”

“Too bad ... it would've helped your alibi.”

A uniformed cop opened the door to the interview room and signaled the detective. “Excuse me, Sir...” He conferred with the officer. “We have been unable to match his biometrics to any in our files.”

“None?”

“No prints, no retinal scans, no DNA profile.”

“That's because I'm not from here,” Nyk replied. “I told you -- I'm from the Floran delegation.”

“Try contacting the prefect,” the detective said. “Be apologetic.”

“We're on it.”

“Why didn't you call him as soon as you brought me in?”

“Mr Kyhana -- one does not disturb a prefect on a whim.”

“Mr Kyhana,” said Ogan, “I do not appreciate being summoned at this time of night ... to this part of town. What were you doing? What were you thinking?”

“I couldn't sleep. I decided to take a stroll, instead. I realized I had gone too far and decided to take a streetcar home. I must've gotten on the wrong one.”

Ogan stopped pacing and glowered at him. “You certainly have gone too far -- and you certainly did get on the wrong one.”

“I found myself lost and it was after curfew. A novonid family sheltered me.”

“The constables have told me that story. Do you remember names?” Ogan paced more. “Mr Kyhana, if you could name names...”

“I know their names.”

“Then tell me.”

“I refuse.”

“Why?”

“Because their daughter is unregistered. I wouldn't want any harm to come to her.”

“You were staying with unregistered novonids?”

“Just the daughter was unregistered. They will register her -- when they can afford it.”

“And, you expect me to believe this story? The constables have a different theory as to what you were doing.”

“Which is?”

“They are prepared to charge you with solicitation. It's what I suspected all along.”

“Solicitation of what?” Realization dawned in his mind like the Floran sun. “Prostitution? There's no way, Prefect.”

“Solicitation is a very serious crime here, Mr Kyhana. The only way to eliminate prostitution is to eliminate the customers. Those convicted serve long stretches of prison time. I should've known there was a reason you were inquiring about a novonid sex industry...”

“No, Prefect -- that was my own curiosity.”

“...and spy holes in the females' cabins. I hope not ALL Florans show such a prurient interest in sex. Nonetheless...” Ogan began stood and faced away from Nyk. “Mr Kyhana -- the corner where you were picked up is one frequented by Green Zone prostitutes and their procurers. You were seen on a security cam handing currency over to a street thug. The one attempting to use you as a human shield was well-known in these parts as a procurer. We have the video...”

“Then, you should also have video of me being threatened by that same street thug holding a very sharp instrument. No, Prefect. I am not interested in Varadan prostitutes -- of either color.”

Ogan shook his head. “I wish I could believe you.”

“Prefect -- why would any man in his right mind want to engage in random, anonymous, impersonal sex with a novonid when he has an eager and willing partner ... who looks like Andra Baxa?”

Ogan regarded him through narrowed eyes. “I'll give you benefit of the doubt ... strictly to maintain a cordial, interplanetary relationship, mind you.” He touched the intercom. “He wasn't soliciting. He was being mugged. I'll vouch for him.”

The Prefect led Nyk to his car and gave the driver the address of the guest house. “In the future, Mr Kyhana -- please refrain from these nocturnal walkabouts.”

“Believe me, Prefect -- I have learned my lesson.”

“I should hope so.”

“I hope my absence didn't inconvenience the negotiations.”

“We called a recess. It's fortunate you surfaced today, so we can resume them tomorrow. Otherwise, I don't know what we would've told the envoy.”

“You didn't tell Tomyka I was missing?”

Ogan looked down his nose at Nyk. “Your assistant insisted we contrive a likely explanation for your absence. It wasn't an action I was comfortable doing, but I agreed ... this time.”

“There won't be another time, Prefect. I promise.”

“Nyk -- what were you doing?” Andra asked him. “Why did you take all our scrip?”

“Are YOU going to interrogate me, too?”

“Don't you think I deserve an explanation? I was so worried when you didn't return overnight. Ogan called and said you were arrested for solicitation. He told me he suspected you had contracted a case of Green Fever.”

“What is Green Fever?”

“You know what it is.”

Nyk nodded. “I think I can figure it out. Ogan accused me of it to my face. No, Andra. I was not patronizing any novonid prostitutes.”

“Then, where were you all day?” She looked at him. “What did you get all over you? Mud?”

“No -- novonid blood and brains.”

Andra's jaw dropped. “You had better tell me the whole story.”

“Last night I kept thinking of Laida. I couldn't concentrate on my work, so I hired a livery and went over to Ramina's to see if she knew anything.”

“Does she?”

He shook his head. “No. When I was done there, all the liveries in that sector had been called off the streets, so I decided to take a streetcar home -- like we did the other night. While I was on the bus I saw a girl who I thought was she. I tried to follow her. She ran from me, tripped and fell. I caught up with her...”

“And, it wasn't Laida.”

“Right. She was unregistered. We were on the perimeter of some novonid ghetto the city created for

them. They patrol this perimeter with remotely controlled cameras and guns. She had sprained her ankle and couldn't walk. I knew what her fate would be if she fell into the hands of the authorities, so I helped her to her home."

"Her home?"

"The city has turned a sector over to the novonids -- a sector of old, decaying buildings. They make their homes there, without power or running water. They do what comes naturally."

"Which is?"

A tear ran down his face. "They form families. They love and support each other. They find joy in the simplest things. By the time we reached her home, it was past curfew. Her family offered me what hospitality they could. I gave them all our scrip, save one card for car fare here.

"This morning, her parents went to find food for me. Apparently, novonids purchasing pomma bread with freshly-minted scrip is considered a suspicious activity. They spent the day being interrogated. By the time they got home, it was night again. Grott -- he's the stepfather -- led me through a labyrinth of tunnels back outside the perimeter.

"I was waiting for the bus when I got mugged by a gang of novonid street thugs. One of their pylon cameras caught it. They shot the guy who was attacking me, and they took me into custody."

"From the sound of it, you have had a busy day."

"Ogan told me you gave some excuse to Tomyka for my ... indisposal."

"Yes -- I told him to tell her you had over-imbibed in pomma beer..."

"And that I had a hangover. Andra -- couldn't you come up with a better..."

"It was a far sight better than Ogan's theory to where you were."

"I suppose it was... I convinced Ogan I had no carnal interest in novonids. The authorities released me on his voucher."

"Nykkyo -- we were so worried. How could you have done something like this?"

"It's what Seymor says -- I let my emotional involvement in Laida cloud my common sense."

"You could've told me where you were going -- left a note or something. We had no idea where to start looking. I was so worried."

"I fucked up -- plain and simple."

"Nyk -- it could've cost you your life!"

"I know -- I know..." He looked up at her. "Suki used to get mad at me like this..." Andra shook her head. "It was worth it. My attitude was in a serious need of adjustment, and I got it adjusted. The novonid issue is more complex than the Varadans want us to believe -- far more complex. I wish you could've seen it, Andra."

“No doubt there are many ways novonids are being exploited. This is just a foretaste of what's in store if novonids are the commodity Varada intends to export...”

“That's another thing. The novonids indeed believe THEY're the reason Floran wants to normalize relations with Varada. It's a rumor I've heard from several sources.” He shook his head. “All this from looking for information on Laida. I'm even more worried for her, now.”

“What did Ramina say?”

“Ramina doesn't believe she was detained because of us. Laida did nothing improper -- even that visit to her breeding place was in no way actionable.”

“Do you believe that?”

“I don't know what to believe. The reality of this society's treatment of novonids is so different from the picture Ogan painted. The whole thing makes me sick.” He paced around the apartment. “Ramina suspects foul play.”

“I think we all agree on that,” Andra replied. “Why doesn't she go to the authorities?”

“The authorities would be no help.”

“But -- what motive?”

“I don't know. My mind runs the gamut from sexual assault to a hate crime...”

“Hate crime?”

“You should hear the way the constables talk about them ... call them greenies. I believe there is a segment of this population capable of hate crimes against novonids...” He paced more. “Or, was it payback for befriending us? No doubt there are novonids who hate whites just as much.”

“Don't abuse yourself, Nyk. Does Ramina think it's our fault?”

“No...”

“These sorts of things happen -- in ANY society. You can't blame yourself.”

“... or maybe she was just saying that so I'll feel better.”

“Come on, Nyk -- come to bed. It's late and we need to be at Ogan's office first thing tomorrow.”

He undressed and climbed into bed beside her. She snuggled against him, reached across and drew herself tighter against him. He kissed her forehead. “So,” she asked, “how DID you convince Ogan you weren't soliciting?”

“It was easy. I asked him what man in his right mind would want to patronize a novonid whore when he had a willing and eager *ax'amfin* .”

She gasped. “NYK! You didn't!”

“It worked. It was more of a joke...”

“You DON'T joke about that!” She pulled from him. “Now, I'll have to sit in on those sessions, looking at Ogan's smug face -- knowing he thinks the only reason I'm here is as YOUR plaything!”

“Andra -- you're an indispensable part of this team.”

“But Ogan doesn't know that! Get out of this bed! You can sleep on the sofa for that remark.” Andra planted her foot in the small of his back and pushed him onto the floor.

“Andra! I was joking!” She pulled the covers to her chin and rolled with her back to him. “Andra... Andra, I'm sorry...”

He sighed, shook his head, walked into the living room and sat at the media terminal.

Nyk heard running water switch off and Andra stepping from the shower. She approached him from behind. “Nyk -- I'm sorry I kicked you out of bed last night.”

“You were right to. I deserved it. Andra, I'm very sorry. Please forgive me.”

She drew in a breath and exhaled it loudly. “I forgive you. I think this place is getting to us. All I want to do is go home.”

“I think I have the answer to that.”

“Did you sleep at all?”

“No -- I spent the whole night writing.” He handed her his handheld.

She began scrolling through the document. Her jaw dropped.

“It's a report addressed to Kronta, but it's intended for the Secretary of Colonial Affairs.”

“I see what it is...” Her eyes began to brim. “Oh, Nyk! Do you really feel this way?”

“With all my heart.”

“I was so worried you didn't... Oh, Nyk -- I was so afraid Ogan was right!”

“How could you be, Andra? You KNOW me. After all the two of us have been through together, how could you think...”

“The remarks you made... 'The novonids didn't bother you ... a reasonable solution ... one YOU might've come up with' ... the way you were coming on to Laida...”

“Oh, no Andra. I was willing to take Ogan's remarks at face value. Now that I've seen them with my own eyes...” Nyk watched her reaction as she read his report. “I understand, Andra -- and, I am so sorry.” He opened his arms to her, embraced her and caressed her hair. “An artificially-created person ... crafted to be recognizable on sight ... specially trained and conditioned... You know I hate the genetic

counselors and the finishing schools -- the institutions that created you. You know how happy I am you escaped that system.”

She sniffed. “I know. It's what I couldn't reconcile. How couldn't you see?”

“The fact that good can come from an institution doesn't excuse the institution itself. It must be moral, standing on its own. *Ax'amfinen* and novonids are two faces of the same evil. I don't know how I was so blind.”

“I saw,” she replied. “I saw from the first. I know how to read people, Nyk. I saw the oppression on their faces. The young man in Ogan's office, the street workers ... even Laida. You can read the same thing in every one of the faces in the finishing schools. Why couldn't you see it? It is such a short step from *anax'amfin* assignment to enslavement.”

“Why indeed... Your insight in such was the very reason I insisted you come along -- and I ignored it.”

“That night Laida took us to her home. Didn't you see it? She began to regard us as peers -- as friends -- instead of masters. Didn't you see how she blossomed?”

“I see it now. Destiny sent Laida to us to open our eyes.”

“Will you stop it with your Destiny nonsense? Maybe YOUR eyes needed opening.”

“They are uncovered, now. I put it all in this report.”

“Oh, Nyk...” She peppered his face with kisses. “Will you really send this to Kronta?”

“It is on its way to the Secretary's desk as we speak.” He took his handheld from her. “It was a productive night. I need to be kicked out of bed more often...” He poked the screen. “After I finished my missive, I worked on this...” He held up his handheld. “Floran version...” He pointed to the media screen. “Varadan version. I also passed these to Kronta in the wee hours. He got them fast-tracked to the office of the chairman of the High Legislature's Subcommittee on Colonial Security, who obtained approval from the Secretary.”

“You went over Tomyka's head.” Andra put her arms around his neck and kissed his lips. “She'll be furious.”

“I know. I can't wait. I decided it was high time to put an end to this diplomatic dithering.”

Nyk sat beside Andra at the conference table. Ogan walked in. "After our respite, are we ready to have at it again?"

"Yes," Nyk replied. "Before Envoy Wells arrives, Prefect, I would like to share with you an observation."

"Which is what?"

"Prefect -- I spent the night before last and yesterday sharing the shelter of a novonid family. For me, it was an eye-opener. Of course, I have no way of knowing if what I saw was the norm for the urban cousins of your rural fieldworkers -- but I suspect it was. Tell me, Prefect? Why not show us novonids in their natural urban environment? Have you ever visited it yourself?"

"Mr Kyhana..."

"What I observed in my stay was a loving family -- a mother, a stepfather and a daughter. Their interactions were every bit as tender and giving toward each other as any human family I've known. More so, perhaps.

"Prefect, I don't know if the statements you've made about their inferior intellectual capacity are officially-sanctioned fiction, national self-delusion or simple ignorance and prejudice. The people I met were perfectly capable of weighing facts and making decisions; and as fully aware of cause and effect as you or I. I watched the mother of this family teaching novonid children from the same ghetto household how to read and how to add and subtract. I watched as child after child stood and read aloud from a textbook; and then answered questions about what he had read.

"If novonids believe they are inferior, it is only because they have been taught they're inferior. Sooner or later, they will discover they are NOT, Prefect. They are not only stronger and more robust than you or I, but at least as smart. They require a smaller standard of living. The bulk of their nourishment comes from the sun -- and, to date, no one has figured out how to put a meter on that. I suspect their biology is designed so the chloroplasts in their skin deliver energy on demand. I haven't seen a fat one among them.

"And, Prefect, they are resourceful. That woman teaching the little ones lacked books, so she made her own out of scrap materials. When they become aware of their superiority -- watch out. The young woman who's your assistant told me she welcomed them filling the lowliest jobs. What happens when they learn they can do HER job, too -- at half the wages? In no time at all, one will be applying for YOURS, Prefect.

"You have created a monster. I don't mean the novo hominid species. I know you consider them Varada's finest achievement. They are, and they are finer than you imagine. What I mean is your own society that smugly thinks it can get away with enslaving a superior people. This is a time bomb, Prefect. The clock on it is counting down, and the day of its detonation is closer than you think."

Nyk glanced toward Andra. She smiled and made a gesture imitating applause. Ogan sat slack-jawed.

"I suppose there's no point in continuing these discussions, then," the prefect finally said.

"I don't have the authority to make that assessment. It lies with the envoy and her superiors. What I do have is the ear of an ExoService liaison, who in turn has the ear of the chairman for our subcommittee

on colonial security. This chair has the ear of the Secretary for Colonial Affairs. I have already forwarded a report outlining my experiences to this liaison.

“Prefect -- please don't take what I said in the wrong light. I meant it as friendly advice. You created these beings, and now they share this world with you. I think both species will benefit if you embrace them as partners. You are correct that I have limited experience with them. I do have direct experience living on a world that ... could also benefit from this sort of advice. I like your people, Prefect. I like the novonids. I welcome both of you as friends.”

Ogan smiled. “Very good, Nykkyo. I welcome your friendship, also.”

“One word of warning. If you believe you can deal with a novonid problem by exporting it -- you have another think coming. That is something we will not tolerate. My people are fully prepared to welcome them as peers, but NEVER as chattel. I have that from the very top, Prefect.”

“Export? Where did you arrive at such a ludicrous assumption?”

“It is the rumor circulating among the novonid community here in the capital. There are some in that ghetto who see our very presence onworld as proof the rumor is true.”

“It is nonsense. Where did you see any mention of novonids in our agreement drafts?”

“Nowhere, Prefect.”

“Sending them offworld is an idea as repugnant to me as it is to you. You have my absolute assurance nothing of the sort is being planned.”

“I'm pleased we see eye-to-eye, then Prefect.”

Ogan checked his timepiece. “I wonder where the envoy is?”

“We have all day,” Nyk replied.

A chime sounded. “That must be her, now,” Ogan said and stepped to the door.

Tomyka Wells stepped in and glowered at Nyk. “Have we recovered from our little bender?” she asked.

“Before we start,” Nyk said, offering each phrase in both the Floran and Varadan tongues, “I have taken the liberty of reconciling the Floran and Varadan versions of this document. There really was little differing in them.” He set polysheets before them -- each presented the Letter of Intent in Floran on the left and Varadan on the right. “As I said, I have the ear of a liaison on a High Legislature subcommittee. I took the liberty of forwarding this document to him. He was able to use his influence to pass it by the appropriate minister, who has given preliminary approval. So, Prefect -- unless you find something objectionable -- we consider it a done deal.”

Wells glowered at Nyk.

“If you don't mind,” Ogan said, “I'd like my own translator to have a look at it.”

“Certainly,” Nyk replied.

Ogan picked up his copy and left the room.

“Why, you little shit!” Wells exclaimed. “You went over my head. You and Kronta -- what a pair you make.”

“Tomyka -- You may be able to milk this assignment. I have a job to do -- a job on Earth.”

“Are you going to rub my nose in that, too?”

“I've wasted ten days here already. I need to get home, and so does Andra. It seemed to me we were going around in circles for nothing.”

“What do YOU know about diplomacy?”

“Enough to stay away from it in the future. Andra and I can't wait to be back on board the 501 and headed home.”

“Nykkyo, you and Andra must remain here. I have some follow-up meetings and I need an interpreter.”

“Follow-up? Follow-up to what? My assignment was to help draft a Letter of Intent. The Letter of Intent has been drafted. My work here is done. If you have follow-on meetings, Tomyka -- you are on your own.”

“The 501 broke orbit today,” Wells replied. “Your only way home IS on my courier.”

“No, it didn't,” Andra interjected. “I was speaking to Zane today. There has been no clearance requested or granted to break orbit.”

“Andra and I intend to be on that scout tomorrow, Tomyka. Once I'm back on Floran, they can map my brain for a Varadan language program. Then, you can subliminally train an army of interpreters for an army of envoys like yourself. I'm going home.”

“You will regret this, Kyhana. Mark my words. When my report...”

“Report whatever you want,” Nyk retorted. “Andra and I both have careers, and it's past time we return to our day jobs. We took this assignment as a favor to Illya. If you'd like -- I'll be happy to escalate your concerns to him for clarification.”

Wells glowered at him.

Ogan returned to the conference room. “Yes, this looks good.” Wells glowered again. “Let me present this to our affairs minister and I can have an answer this afternoon.”

Nyk sat beside Andra at a table in a private dining room. “I was proud of how you stood your ground with Tomyka today,” she whispered. “Imagine being stuck here for who-knows-how many more days and then riding home to Floran on her shuttle.”

“There was a time in my career when I would've caved in to her request. I figured -- now I'm

Assistant Agent-in-Chief for North American Operations. I don't have to take stuff from the likes of Tomyka Wells. To be safe, I bounced it off Kronta after our meeting with Ogan broke up.”

“What did Kronta say?”

“Illya agreed with me. We have what we came for. There's no reason for us to tag along with Tomyka while she attends soirees and shmoozes the locals. And, he told me he would reiterate his orders to Captain Hayt, using words of one syllable or less if necessary: The 501 is to bring us home.”

“It leaves one bit of unfinished business,” she replied.

“Laida. I still wonder if Ogan is involved with her disappearance. I'm going to try to slip in a question to him about her whereabouts. I want you to evaluate his reaction.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“I don't know -- I'll have to wing it.”

“Wing it?”

“I'll know the moment when I see it.” Wells walked in and sat. “Cheer up, Tomyka,” Nyk said. “We got what we came for. Who cares if our visit is cut short?”

“How little you know.”

Prefect Ogan stepped into the room. “A job well done -- ample cause to celebrate. This restaurant is my favorite. It specializes in some of the exotic game and seafood found on this world.”

“Exotic game and seafood?” Andra asked.

“If the notion offends you, they do serve pomma...”

“Prefect,” she interrupted him, “We were led to believe pomma is the only food...”

“Oh, no,” he replied. “We would tire of it in no time. It IS the staple, but...”

“To tire of pomma is to tire of living.' You told us that yourself.”

“Yes -- a Varadan aphorism. We also have another -- variety is the spice of life.”

“It is the only thing we've been served.”

“I was under the impression Florans were strict vegetarians. I gave orders...”

“Not ALL Florans,” Andra replied.

“I'm terribly sorry. If I had known...” A waiter wheeled in a cart carrying a pitcher. “Ah! I've ordered some pomma beer,” Ogan announced.

“We've tried it,” Nyk replied. “It's very good.”

The waiter poured glasses. "Let us drink to interplanetary friendship," Ogan said and lifted his glass. "I should warn you -- it is Varadan custom -- when a toast is offered you must drain your glass."

Nyk held up his. "To interplanetary friendship," Nyk repeated and chugged his.

"What are you doing?" Andra whispered. "We'll get drunk."

"I hope so. Drink up."

Andra forced herself to empty hers. Ogan drained his. Tomyka sat with her arms folded. Ogan signaled the waiter to refill them.

"To the Letter of Intent," Nyk said and drained his second glass.

"I feel it already," Andra whispered. "I hope you don't think you can out-drink him. He's accustomed to this stuff and we aren't."

"Try to keep your wits," Nyk replied. "One more should do. It's your turn to come up with a toast."

Andra looked upward, then lifted her glass. "To pomma!" she exclaimed.

"To pomma," Ogan replied and drained his glass.

"Your turn," Nyk said to Tomyka.

"Leave me out of this silly game."

Nyk forced himself to fight the effects of the alcohol. "Prefect," he said. "Would you do us a favor?"

"Well ... that depends."

"A novonid girl -- young woman, actually -- who served us at the guest house has gone missing."

"That's too bad."

"I understand law enforcement falls under your domain of responsibility." Nyk glanced toward Andra and saw her nodding off. He nudged her under the table. She shook her head and looked up. "If your officers should come across her, have them thank her for us -- for taking such good care of us."

"Yes? Certainly. How is she known?"

"She's known as Laida -- or , Three-eight-six."

"Three-eight-six... I'll remember that, and keep an eye out."

"Thank you, Prefect."

"What are you talking about?" Wells asked.

"I was merely asking Prefect to try to locate a friend of ours -- a Varadan friend." Nyk glanced at Andra. "Are you all right?" he asked.

She smiled. "Prefect -- is there a lavatory near by?"

"Through the door to the left."

Nyk watched her walk out the door and thought she look unsteady on her feet. "I'd better make sure she's all right." He stepped into a unisex restroom and saw the soles of her sandals from under a stall door. "Andra?"

He approached her. "Andra? Are you all right?"

She was kneeling over one of the toilets, her arms crossed across the bowl and forehead resting on her wrists. "I will be, now that I've thrown up all that beer -- plus some pomma pancakes I had for breakfast two days ago."

"Was this your first experience with alcohol?" he asked.

"And, my last... How can you handle that stuff?" She turned her face into the bowl and retched. "Nyk, I really don't need any help, here ... excuse me..." She vomited into the toilet.

He crouched and caressed her back. "I'll admit I feel a little green around the gills, myself. Suki's dad used to get me drinking *sake* and it gave me a similar sensation in my stomach."

"Mine felt like it was on fire." She sat back on her heels. "I think I'm done. I'm glad I vomited. I was on my way to being very inebriated otherwise."

He filled a polymer tumbler with water and handed it to her. "Rinse with this... I'll help you up."

"Pomma beer doesn't taste nearly as bad going down as it does coming back up... How do I look?"

"Except for the bloodshot eyes, the flushed cheeks ... and mussed hair -- you look great." He grabbed a disposable towel, ran cold water over it and wrung it out. "Here..." She held it over her eyes. "Will you be able to eat dinner?"

"If I go slowly, I think so. I don't think vomiting at a state dinner is appreciated here."

"I wonder where it IS appreciated." he replied.

She mopped her face with the towel. "How does this look?"

"Better..." He adjusted her hair for her, then embraced her and kissed her forehead. "I really appreciate your help on this assignment, Andra."

"Thanks... I'd kiss you but I don't think you'd appreciate it from someone who just threw up."

"You can owe me one. Come on." He took her hand and escorted her back to the dining room.

The 501's transport shuttle lifted off and headed toward space. "Well?" Nyk asked. "Did Ogan know?"

“Know what?”

“Last night -- about Laida?”

“You know, Nyk -- my head was swimming when you pulled your little stunt.”

“What do you think?”

“I think I shouldn't have drunk so much pomma beer.”

“What about Ogan?”

“I think the number one job requirement for a prefect on this rock is the ability to hold his liquor.”

“Does he know about Laida?”

“I don't know ... I don't think so. These politicians are so good at covering their tracks. From what I recall -- and I don't recall much -- I'd say no, he doesn't know.”

“So, there goes THAT theory.” Nyk gazed out the viewport. “I'm going to pop into the cockpit and watch the approach.”

“Suit yourself,” Andra replied.

“Come join me.”

He unfastened his restraints and worked his way to the cockpit door. “Ah, Nykkyo -- Andra,” the pilot said. “Pull down a pair of jumpseats and make yourself at home. I didn't expect to be picking you up.”

“Why not?”

“The talks were planned to run another four days. You two were to remain here and return on the courier. We were scheduled to break orbit yesterday, but we were delayed.”

“These sort of talks end when they end,” Nyk replied. “You can't predict when.” He pondered. “Break orbit yesterday? According to our arrangement, this vessel was to remain in orbit until the talks concluded.”

“We had orders from the envoy herself.”

“Tomyka Wells ordered the change in plans?”

“That's right.”

“The arrogance of that woman,” Nyk muttered to Andra. “I'll have another talk with Illya about this.”

The shuttle approached the ExoScout and went into station-keeping. “What's the hold-up?” Nyk asked the pilot.

“The bay's occupied. We have to hold until we get clearance.”

“Occupied by what?”

“A Varadan shuttle.”

Nyk watched as the clamshell doors opened and the shuttle slipped into space. Thrusters oriented it and a set of rockets fired to send it into a surface-bound trajectory.

“Those things are rocket-powered?” Nyk asked.

“No,” Andra replied. “Those aren't rockets. They get thrust by blowing pomma husks out the back.”

“I'm surprised they have a space fleet at all.”

“They have a fleet of orbital shuttles for servicing their communications and weather satellites,” the pilot explained. “They're primitive but reliable hybrids using scramjets and rockets.”

Nyk watched the Varadan shuttle re-enter and head toward the surface. The 501's transport shuttle landed and the pilot taxied to a parking stall on the side of the shuttle bay. “Give us a moment for pressurization,” the pilot said. “Okay, we're clear. Careful where you step. Those Varadan vessels use some nasty stuff in their thrusters, and some of it leaked onto the deck.”

Nyk led Andra to the lift and walked with her to their cabin. “I can't wait to be underway,” he said.

Nyk paced his cabin. “We've been stuck in orbit half a day,” he said. “I think I keep hearing shuttles land.”

“We've been here eight Floran days,” Andra replied. “It took four for us to get here and it'll take four to go home. Half a day more won't make much difference.”

“I suppose... Let's go up to the observation lounge.” He led her to the lift and rode it to the circular, domed cabin atop the scout. He stood, looked aftward and pointed. “It looks like another shuttle coming in...” He watched as the craft slid into the clamshell doors. “What could they be loading?”

Zane stepped into the lounge. “Here you are... We're about ready to get underway,” he announced. “Captain wanted me to tell you.”

“Zane -- what are those shuttles delivering?” Nyk asked.

“Samples of Varadan goods,” Zane replied.

“What goods?”

“That I don't know. All I know is they're samples.”

“I know,” Andra replied. “Whole pomma, hulled pomma, pomma flour, pomma bread, pomma beer, pomma cakes, pomma brew, pomma meal...” She counted on her fingers.

“They must have manufactured goods,” Zane observed. “It's not an agricultural society. You can tell so from orbit -- they're mechanized down there.”

“I'd say in terms of advancement, they're mid-way between Earth and Floran. I can't imagine we'd be interested in Varadan technology -- THAT exchange would be in the other direction.”

The shuttle departed. “That's the last delivery,” Zane said. “We'll be underway shortly. I must man my post.”

Nyk sat on a bench and belted himself in. “Now, it's jump after jump after jump,” he said.

Six wedge-shaped flash shields slid into place to cover the lounge dome. Warp indicator lamps flashed white, then blue and the first jump throbbed through the scout's structure.

Nyk strolled onto the bridge. He saw the captain and astral navigator conferring. “Do some more probing,” the captain instructed. He looked up. “Ah, Nykkyo.”

“Just looking for a progress report,” Nyk said.

“It's slow going,” the captain replied. “If our probing works out, we'll make one more jump this watch.”

“Then what?”

“We'll let the warp coil re-form overnight and begin again in the morning.”

Nyk headed back to his cabin. “News?” Andra asked.

“I have no idea where we are.” He picked up his handheld vidisplay. “What I do know is, we're in deep space and out of range of the comm net.” He showed her the screen. “No signal...”

“Let's have a dinner package devoid of any pomma and turn in,” she replied.

12 -- Mystery Cargo

Nyk lay in his bunk, eyes wide open. Andra lay beside, her back to him. He looked at the clock. Nadir-one, he thought, and wondered what sort of graveyard watch was kept on this bucket.

He nudged Andra. “Wake up.”

“What?”

“Something's been bothering me. Our mission was to return home with that Letter of Intent.”

“Which we are doing.”

“There was no mention during any of our talks of returning with Varadan goods -- and, no mention during any of our briefings. And, there's Tomyka trying to change the mission plans. If she had her way, we'd still be on Varada and this craft would be heading home without us.”

“That's why I'm so happy you stared her down. I spent all the time on that planet I could stand.”

“That's not it. I think something's going on in the background -- something we weren't supposed to witness. And, I think we should take a look at the cargo we're hauling. Call it more intelligence gathering.”

“What time is it?”

“Nadir-one standard -- halfway through second watch. Come on -- put some clothes on.” He opened a drawer and withdrew a handheld lamp.

The deck two corridor was empty. Nyk called the lift and looked at the control panel. “Deck five -- cargo hold,” he said. “Let's look there.”

The lift carried them to the deck directly above the warp coil and fusion reactors. “Tread softly,” he said. “Engineering is manned around the clock. Footsteps would be transmitted through this metal decking.” Andra nodded.

He swung his lamp around the hold. “Empty,” Andra said.

“That makes no sense,” he replied. He scanned the hold from stem to stern, and from port to starboard. “Just one big empty ... room. I don't know how many shuttles landed. They were offloading something.”

“What's one deck up?” she asked.

“Shuttle bay -- and settlers' barracks.”

“This ship has a skeleton crew,” she replied. “Maybe they left the cargo in the shuttle bay.”

“Maybe...”

He returned to the lift and called the car. The liftcar doors opened.

He pressed the panel for deck four. A scanpad lit up.

“Deck four is locked out,” Andra said.

“I don't dare a wristscan. The captain said decks four through six are off-limits to us. I'm sure we're not authorized and a scan could trigger an alarm.”

“Zane didn't need a wristscan when he brought us through here on that tour.”

“That's right -- this is something new...”

“...and suspicious,” she added. “What do we do? Go back down and use the freight lift?”

“That would make way too much noise.” He cancelled the call and pressed the panel for deck three. “With my scale models, I'm probably as familiar with this tub's layout as a crewman...”

The lift carried them up. He exited and led her down the corridor. “Is there another lift?” she asked.

“No. There are 'tweendecks ladderways, but I'm sure they're locked. This way...”

He led her down the corridor, past doorways labeled Sick Bay, Crew Mess and Galley. They approached a bulkhead with a door marked Passengers' Mess. He pressed the actuator and another scanpad illuminated. “It's locked, too.”

“Why would we want to go in there?” Andra asked.

“If we were on a seeding mission, we'd have five hundred settlers on board. Five hundred passengers who need to be fed. Five hundred of them going up and down from the barracks to the mess hall might tie up that one lift -- and interfere with the running of the ship.”

“There must be a passageway between the mess hall and deck four -- don't you think?”

He shook his head. “No, I don't think so. I know so. Come here...”

He led her in the opposite direction to the galley and pressed the actuator. Yet another scanpad lit up. “I'm going to take my chances with this one,” he said. “They wouldn't begrudge us a midnight snack, would they?”

He pressed his wrist against the scanpad and the door slid open. “Quietly,” he whispered. “The captain's cabin is directly overhead.” Nyk swung his lamp around the galley, illuminating stasis cabinet after stasis cabinet and banks of warmers. “They need lots of meals on a seeding mission,” he whispered. “The pantry is on the other side, under the first officer's cabin.” His beam stopped on a serving counter under an archway. The arch was closed with a tambour gate. “The mess hall is behind there.”

A chirp came from the galley door. Andra grabbed and squeezed his shoulder. Nyk doused his lamp and the two of them froze, their backs against the bulkhead and behind some stasis cabinets.

The ambient lighting came on. Footsteps entered the galley. Nyk heard someone open a cabinet, rummage around inside and close it. The footsteps crossed to the warmers. The warmer door opened, closed and the keypad beeped. The door opened again; then the footsteps grew distant. The ambient lighting switched off and the galley door slid shut.

Nyk switched on his lamp and probed around the archway. He pressed a control and the tambour retracted. The beam from his lamp searched the empty mess hall. Long tables were folded into their stowed positions against the inside of the hull.

He hopped onto the serving counter and swung his feet to the deck. Andra clambered over the barrier and stood beside him. Then, Nyk leaned over the counter and pressed the actuator again. The tambour began to close.

He swung his lamp around and stopped it on a broad, spiral staircase leading below decks. Andra followed him down. They approached another bulkhead with a closed door. Nyk reached for the actuator. "It's probably locked, too," Andra said.

"Perhaps -- if so, it's from the other side. The object would be to keep passengers OUT of the mess hall between meal calls." He pressed the actuator and the door slid open.

Andra grabbed his hand as they walked down the corridor past one barracks door after another. "Twenty barracks," he whispered, "ten on a side. Each accommodates twenty-five settlers." His lamp probed the corridor.

The passageway widened into an antechamber immediately forward of the shuttlebay. The pressure door was wide open. Nyk led Andra into the bay and began scanning it with his lamp. "Empty!" she said.

His lamp paused on the transport shuttle, parked in its stall. He flashed it onto thruster packs and the personal thruster-cycle Zane had used. Nyk trained the lamp on the deck. "Look -- calling cards from the Varadan shuttles. Their corrosive thruster fuel has eaten holes in the coating on the deck." He pointed with the beam and counted. "... five, six... If you count the spots on the deck, you can see there were at least six separate shuttle flights."

"Proof positive they were here. What were they doing?"

"We're on a fool's errand," he said. "Whatever it is, it's well hidden. We might as well go back to our cabin."

"Do we need to go back up to the mess hall?" she asked.

"Let's try the lift." He pressed the call button. "Like the mess hall, the object is to keep us off this deck. I'll bet they assume anyone who makes it here, belongs here."

"Nyk!" she whispered. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"It sounded like a moan." The liftcar arrived and the door slid open. "There it is again."

"I heard it that time." He stepped into the car, pressed the control for deck two and stepped back into the corridor.

They approached the first barracks door. Nyk touched an actuator and the door slid open. He swung his lamp around and gasped.

The two dozen cots in the cabin were occupied by semi-conscious, green-skinned men.

"My goodness!" Andra whispered.

He looked in the barracks across the corridor and found more novonids.

"So much for Ogan's absolute assurances."

"What about ours? You had it from the Secretary's office we would never do anything like this."

“Tomyka Wells!” Nyk hissed. “She must be behind this.”

“Why?”

“Kronta told me she's tied in with the Gamman Ag ministry. They've been frantic to figure out how to deal with all the new grain coming from the Altian-Lexalese detente. I wouldn't put it past them to give novonids a try. It certainly would drive down their production costs.”

Andra pressed the actuator on barracks number three. Nyk heard more moaning. He swung his lamp and its beam illuminated a familiar face. “Laida!”

“Nykkyo?” He knelt and embraced her. “You're not involved in this, are you?”

“No -- I'm appalled by it,” he said. “Are you all right?”

“I didn't think you were,” she gasped. “Sunstarved ... torpor setting in ... can't stand ... very weak. Where am I?”

“You're in the exo scout. And, the exo scout is very far from both Floran and Varada... Andra, you stay with her.”

“Where are you going?”

“Back to the galley.”

Nyk entered the barracks. Andra knelt, holding Laida's head in her lap and caressing her cheeks. “Help her sit,” Nyk said. “Laida -- drink this -- drink it down like medicine.”

“What is it?”

“Glucose syrup in water.”

Laida emptied the glass. “It burns in my stomach.”

“I imagine it does, but it should help the sun-hunger.”

“Mmm,” she moaned and folded her arms across her abdomen. “It hurts.”

“I feel the same way when I've had too much of something sweet,” Nyk said. “It'll pass as you absorb the sugar.”

Laida leaned over and retched. “I want to vomit.”

“Try to keep it down.” He held her and caressed her arms. “It won't do you any good if you throw it up.”

“Ohhh... I am feeling stronger ... the nausea is starting to pass...”

“What happened to you?” Andra asked.

“They came for me -- right after I cleaned your room...”

“After our visit to Ramina? Oh, Laida -- I'm so sorry to have gotten you into this.”

“You didn't, Nykkyo -- it wasn't anything you did. I'm responsible.”

“How?”

“I'm associated with a woman in the BSS who's advocating greater freedom for us novonids. She uses me as an example. I'll go with her to BSS meetings, lectures and the like -- give readings...”

“YOU can read?” Nyk started laughing.

“Do you, too, find the notion absurd?”

“Not at all, Laida. I know you're capable of far more than the Varadans care to admit. Ramina told us you're exceptionally bright. I doubt even she appreciates how bright you are -- how bright all of your kind are.”

“Ramina doesn't know about this... I learned from the BSS that the Florans were negotiating to bring some novonids to your world.”

“Not to MY world,” he replied. “Did you by any chance hear anyone discuss a place called Gamma-5?”

“Now that you mention it,” she mused. “Yes, I did hear that.”

“I knew it! This had nothing to do with the talks I was involved with, Laida. Believe me. It must've been going on the side.”

“I do believe you. I don't know how this BSS official learned, but the agreement was for one hundred novonid men and ten women -- the usual ratio. I learned this days before you arrived on Varada.”

“How did you contrive to be assigned as our house-keeper?”

“That was just luck. At first I thought you were part of the plot. It's the real reason I was cool to you that day. Then I learned you were meeting with Prefect Ogan and I realized you were all right.”

“Ogan is on the level?”

“Ogan has gone on the record denying any intent to trade us for Floran technology. The BSS regard him as a fool -- an idiot; but an honest one. He couldn't swindle someone if his life depended on it.”

“So someone on Gamma contracted to receive one hundred field workers from Varada.”

“And, ten fertile females. But -- you were double-crossed.”

“How so?” Nyk asked.

“Most of the novonids are feral -- rounded up from the woods and fields around the pomma farms

and sunstarved into submission. They're very wild -- some lack language skills. They'd be of no use in the fields -- dangerous even."

"And the rest?"

"Street thugs and trouble-makers from the ghetto... I think I'm feeling well enough to stand..."

"And, what was the *quid-pro-quo* ?"

"The what?"

"What did Varada receive in exchange?"

"Why -- that comm relay station -- state of the art communications." Nyk put his hand over his mouth and laughed. "What's funny?"

"Varada was cheated, too. That relay station is an old clunker. It'll be out of commission within a year."

Laida began laughing. "We swindled each other!"

"Yes -- this is a great way to launch an interplanetary friendship, isn't it?"

"I still think Varada got the better deal," Laida replied. "You see, with the termination act, they can't just put down troublesome novonids, unless they're proven a menace; and then only after a hearing. These aren't menaces, just ... more independent."

"Like yourself?"

"Yes -- but impatient, and not willing to work within the system. And with ferals going under the termination act umbrella..."

"Since they can't kill them, why not just quietly ship them offworld?" Nyk mused. "No bodies to dispose of. How did you..."

"It was Alvo."

"Alvo was brokering the deal?"

"He was in on it, to procure some of us. He must've overheard me talking with my BSS contact. He probably feared I'd tell you and you'd tell Ogan."

"I wish you had," Nyk replied.

"I was planning to -- that evening. He called me into his office and a pair of thugs abducted me and locked me in a dark room."

"Oh, Laida," Andra exclaimed, "it must've been terrifying for you."

"I tried to preserve my strength ... but, when they came for me I could barely move."

“Tomyka's dithering on the language... It WAS a stalling tactic -- to buy time to sunstarve you.”

“We have to do something to stop this,” Andra said. “The captain and some crew must be in on this.”

“Yes, but what?”

“Let's take inventory,” Laida said. “Do you have more of that sweet water?”

“I have more syrup.”

“Come on...”

Nyk toured the barracks with Andra and Laida.

“They're all feral,” Laida said of the first barracks. “We can't revive any lacking registry numbers. I hate to say this about fellow novonids, but best to leave them torpid. They'll be dangerous otherwise.”

They looked into the next barracks. “That's Mos,” she pointed to one of the men. “He's a friend -- a hothead, but I can manage him. We should revive him.”

Nyk mixed syrup with water. Laida approached the man. “Mos ... Mos, wake up.” She lifted his head.

“Laida?” he mumbled.

“Drink this -- it'll hurt in your stomach but it will cure the sun-hunger.”

Mos sipped the drink, coughed and blew some out his nose. “Try again,” Laida said. “Go slow...” She looked at Nyk. “He was sunstarved longer than me -- he's in worse shape.”

“Andra -- stay with him. Laida and I will see if there are more to revive.”

Nyk examined the barracks with her and returned to Andra. Mos was sitting, doubled over on the bunk, his arms folded across his abdomen. “How's he doing?”

“All right,” she replied.

“Laida fingered three more to revive -- two men and a woman. The rest are feral and dangerous -- or, untrustworthy. I gave her the syrup. She'll revive one tonight and the other two tomorrow.” Nyk placed his hand on Mos's back. “Mos -- how are you feeling?” He nodded. “Mos -- you must pretend to be torpid. We'll return tomorrow night to figure out our next move. Understand?”

He nodded. “Yes...”

“We had better get back to our cabin.” He gestured to Andra and they rode the lift to the cabin deck.

“This is Ala,” Laida said. Nyk looked into vacant orange eyes. “She's had conditioning.”

“I understand Ramina's abhorrence of that practice.”

“Nykkyo -- Ala's responses have been dulled, but her mind is just as sharp. My mother is the same way.”

“That makes the practice even more immoral.”

“Is the glucose syrup working?” Andra asked.

“It works for a while, then the sun-hunger returns.”

“I've given you all I dare,” Nyk replied. “The cook is going to miss it otherwise.”

“How many of them are there?” Mos asked.

“Thirteen.”

“There are seven of us,” Laida replied, “or will be once I revive the other two.”

“Are the other two as big as Mos?”

“Yes -- but it's still only seven against thirteen.”

“They're spread around the ship. During the watch there are six on the bridge, three in engineering and the cook. Engineering is the only section manned during both watches, so there are three in their bunks, too. The bridge and quarters are two decks up; engineering is two decks down.”

“What should we do?” Andra asked.

“I can only guess where this ship is headed. No doubt first stop would be Floran to drop off Andra and me. I doubt they'd unload their ... cargo at Floran. More likely next stop would be Gamma-5.”

“More likely,” said Andra, “they would stop at Gamma-5 first, maybe during second watch. We have surface shuttles big enough to carry all of you in a single trip.”

“Good point,” Nyk added. “And, that bay is large enough for one to land there. By the time we'd be out of our bunks, our cargo would be long gone.”

“Why Gamma-5?” Laida asked.

“It's the breadbasket of the hegemony, with large industrial farms.”

“Do you think they wish to introduce pomma there?”

“I sure hope not,” Andra replied.

“No,” Nyk said. “They grow wheat, but their profits have been hurt by other colonies using cheaper labor.”

“And, we think they'd try a colony of novonids there.” Andra added. “How could they get away with it?”

“It's my best guess. There are large tracts of sparsely populated land there. They could land the

transport shuttle relatively unobserved.”

“But -- the HL Secretary has stated such would not be tolerated.”

“The HL would have to find out about it, first. I'm sure the Gammans have plans for dealing with that aspect. It's an awfully big planet.”

“Nyk,” Andra said, “you're familiar with ExoService operations. What do you think this crew would do?”

“I wouldn't say I'm familiar... I must assume the captain and first officer are in on this. I'm not sure the whole crew is.”

“Can we recruit from them?”

“I wouldn't bet on it,” Nyk replied. “Their first loyalty will be to their officers. I think the captain is taking a calculated risk. He's been trying to engage us on the bridge -- to keep us from wandering the ship.”

“I'm surprised he hasn't posted guards,” Laida observed.

“He probably doesn't see the need. This level was locked out of the lift program. Andra and I found our ways here via another way. You're supposed to be torpid -- they think you need sunlight to revive.”

“That's right,” Laida agreed, “they probably don't know about the syrup.”

“Their risk would be one of us discovering you and blowing the whistle. Our course is taking us through deep space -- far from the comm net. We can't file a report until we reach Floran space. By then you'd be deposited on Gamma-5, and it becomes a colonial internal issue.”

“And, that's only worst-case,” Andra added, “from their point of view.”

“What should we do?” Laida asked.

“Yes, what?” asked Mos.

“I think our best plan would be to wait until we're within range of the Floran comm net. Then we can detain the crew. I can send a report and put out a distress signal. That makes it an ExoService affair, and we have friends there. Can you hold out 'til then?”

“I think so,” Laida replied.

“Here.” Nyk handed her a handheld vidisplay. “I swiped this from the equipment store.” He pulled his own handheld from his sash. “We can communicate thus...” He touched his screen and the one Laida held warbled. “You can't activate it without a Floran wrist chip -- but that signal can be your alert.”

She nodded. “Understood. If I hear that...”

“We'll come running,” Mos added.

“We've shown you how to operate the lift; and remember -- bridge is two levels up, and engineering

is two levels down. They can operate the ship from engineering..."

Mos nodded. "We'll send two of us down and the rest to the bridge."

"Andra and I should be getting back to our cabin. First I want to take pictures of you ... of our cargo. I want to back up my report with images." He snapped photoimages of the barracks cabins.

"Laida," he said returning to her barracks. "We'll meet again next off-watch for a status update." She nodded. "Come on, Andra..."

She accompanied him to the lift.

13 -- Mutiny

Nyk awakened to the bonging of the warp jump alert. He strapped himself into a jumpseat and awaited the jolt of the jump. "Let's take a stroll to the bridge," he said. "We'll join our captain for our morning tea."

He approached the door to the captain's cabin and pressed the chime. "Come." He walked in. "Good morning, Nykkyo ... Andra. Have a seat."

Nyk filled a cup with tea from a carafe, picked up a breakfast cake and sat at the captain's table. "How goes the plotting?" Nyk asked.

"We're working our way through it."

"Those samples we brought onboard at Varada," Andra asked. "Are any of them perishable?"

"We have them on ice," the captain replied. "They'll last to planetfall."

"Are we offloading at Floran?"

"No -- next destination." The captain eyed them. "Our current position is near the Magellanic Clouds."

"Are we that far outside the galaxy?"

"Yes -- it's the furthest out I've ever been in my career. There's a great view from the observation lounge."

"We'll check it out."

“You have to admit -- this IS a great view,” Andra said as she stood with Nyk and looked out the observation dome.

“I didn't think it was a good idea to express such interest in our cargo,” Nyk said.

“I don't think we should blithely ignore it, either. Protesting too little can be as suspicious as protesting too much.”

“I'm afraid you've aroused his suspicions. Maybe we should hang close to the bridge.”

All right,” she replied and followed him to the lift.

“You are right, Captain. It is a great view.”

“I'm pleased you enjoyed it while you could. We're about to make another jump.”

Nyk sat on a bench along the rear bulkhead and fastened his restraints. Andra sat beside him.

The jump thudded through the ship. Nyk unhooked his restraints and pulled his vidisplay from his sash. “Still no comm,” he whispered to Andra.

“I have our fix,” the navigator announced.

Nyk strolled to the navigation station and looked at a display of the plan of the galaxy. A flashing green dot identified their position.

The intra-ship comm signaled. “Bridge -- engineering. Our primary reactor went off- line.”

“Status?” the captain asked.

“Coolant,” the engineer replied. “We'll need to radiate heat before we can bring it back on line.”

“Acknowledged. Begin auto reset sequence.”

“Yes, Captain.”

The captain pressed a key for the intra-ship hail. “All crew stand down -- at ease for two segments.” He stood and headed toward his cabin.

Zane approached them. “Don't worry -- this is normal.”

“Normal?” Nyk asked.

“Normal for this ship. Our reactor is a bit under-sized.”

“Ah-ha,” Nyk replied. “She COULD benefit from a two-stage reactor.”

“When she was built, two-stagers were cantankerous and dangerous -- not like the ones they install today.”

“Why not upgrade her, then?”

“They will,” Zane said, “once the next colony planet is discovered. Until then, we put up with it. This happens whenever we need to charge the coil above eighty percent. We have some time to kill. Shall we go to the lounge?”

“I think we'll go to our cabin,” Nyk replied.

“Suit yourselves...”

Nyk headed down the corridor toward the cabin. He patted his *xarpa*. “My vidisplay -- I think I left it on the bridge...”

“We'd better go get it,” Andra replied.

He turned, headed onto the bridge and approached the navigator's post. “Looking for something?” the captain asked.

“My vidisplay.”

“I have it here.” The captain held the display in his left hand and a stun wand in his right. He turned the screen so Nyk could see the images of the barracks. “I'm afraid I'll have to hold onto this. You two are confined to your quarters.” He signaled his first officer, who approached with a stunner. “Take them to their cabin. Then, prepare to jettison our cargo.” He tossed Nyk's handheld to his officer. “Jettison this along with them.”

“Yes, Captain. Come along, you two...”

Nyk glanced toward Andra. She pulled her vidisplay from her sash and pressed the touchscreen.

“That won't do you any good,” the captain said. “We're too far from the comm net.”

Nyk heard the lift and footfalls. Three green figures darkened the doorway to the bridge.

The crew drew stunners and advanced on them. One crew member pressed a key to sound general quarters. A klaxon echoed throughout the ship.

Mos grabbed the first officer's arm, wrenched the stunner from his grip and tossed it to Nyk. He dodged a stunner thrust and connected with a yeoman, who went down. The captain charged toward Andra. He touched her abdomen with his stunner. She screeched and fell to the deck.

Mos looked at Andra and glowered at the captain. He charged the officer, who jabbed the fieldworker with his stunner. Mos kept coming. The captain jabbed again -- and again. The stunner's only effect was to enrage him more.

Mos grabbed the captain by the throat and lifted him off his feet. He pressed both thumbs into his windpipe; then dropped the limp body to the deck. Mos then tackled the astral navigator, wrenched the stunner from his hand and threw the man against a bulkhead. He slid to the deck, bleeding from his ears.

“The stunners have no effect on them!” the first officer shouted. Nyk picked up the stun wands and

tossed them to the other novonids. Mos was chasing Zane around the bridge.

“Stop, Mos!” Laida shouted. “MOS! STOP!”

“They killed the white one!” Mos shouted.

“No, Mos,” Nyk said. “She's only stunned.”

Mos stopped and stood, breathing heavily. Nyk and the others rounded up the crew at stunner-point. “Watch them, Mos. I'll find some rope.”

He returned with lengths of polymer fiber cord and began binding their wrists.

Laida knelt and held Andra. “How is she?” Nyk asked.

“Coming around, I think.”

“Andra -- are you all right?”

“No more pomma beer,” she said and held her head. “Please.”

“Take them to the barracks deck,” Nyk said. “We'll tie them up and you can guard them, Mos.” Mos nodded.

Nyk looked over the crew. “Now we have a real problem,” he said. “The captain is dead and the navigator is so badly injured I had to put him into stasis. We're who-knows-where in space, and out of range of the comm net. We have to figure out how to fly this bucket.”

“Force one of them to fly it,” Mos suggested.

“Do any of us have the knowledge to know if they're flying it where we want to go? Someone is expecting an illegal shipment of fieldworkers. If they fly us there, we're sunk.”

“It's a chance we'll have to take,” Laida said.

“No -- unless we can monitor our position, we can't risk it. I don't trust any of them.”

“I'll help you,” came a voice.

“Who said that?” Nyk replied.

“I did,” said Zane. “Andra and I are bonded. She is my Academy sister. Brothers and sisters come to each other's aid.”

“Do you trust him?” Nyk asked Andra.

She looked into Zane's pale blue eyes. “Yes -- I do.”

“Untie him,” Nyk said to Mos, using Varadan. “He'll help us fly this ship.”

“Why should we trust him?” Mos asked.

“He and Andra are bonded. Would you trust another of your own kind?”

“Not necessarily,” Mos replied.

“Our choice is to trust him or be stranded here.”

Mos complied and untied Zane.

“You'll spend the rest of your career swabbing decks,” the first officer shouted, “if not in irons!”

“Or decorated,” Nyk replied. “Mos -- if any of them move -- stun them.” Mos nodded.

Zane accompanied Nyk, Andra and Laida to the bridge. “You're a communications technician,” Nyk said. “How can you help?”

“I'm studying for my certificate in astral navigation,” he replied.

“I suppose we don't have to get home -- just far enough inside the comm net to make a distress call.”

Zane sat at the astral navigation console and brought up charts of hyperspace contours. Andra sat beside him.

Nyk regarded her. “Andra -- if the tables had been turned -- if it had been us tied up and under guard, and Zane needed help... Would you have helped him?”

Andra looked up at Nyk. She glanced at Zane and shook her head. “Please, Nyk -- let's not go there.”

“Would you have?”

Her eyes brimmed. “Please don't make me go there ... please...”

“Okay -- we won't go there.” She smiled. “I'm beginning to understand Kronta's caution, though.”

Nyk looked over Zane's shoulder. “Well?”

He brought up a plan of the galaxy and pointed. “We're here ... and Floran's here.” He pressed a key and an ellipse was highlighted on the map. “This is the range of the comm net.” He pressed another key. “Here's the galaxy in elevation... again, you see the extent of the net. We have to get from here ... to here.” He pressed more keys. “These are hyperspace contours. We must keep to those with neutral time gradients... What I must do is to plot jumps from contour to contour in a pattern that will take us within the comm net... Not an easy job.”

“Take your time,” Nyk said. “Let's get it right.”

“We have some time,” Zane replied. “The fusion reactor hasn't come back online yet.”

“It'll do that by itself?”

“It's in an automatic restart program...”

Nyk paced as Zane worked his control panels. “Okay -- I've punched in the coordinates, and set the warp coil energy level.”

“Let's charge it up,” Nyk said. “Is the reactor back on line?”

“On line... Charging -- ready for jump.”

“Belt yourselves in,” Nyk ordered and sat in a jump seat. “Activate.”

Zane pressed a control to close the flash shields. The warp indicators flashed blue. He held his hand over the trigger and pressed it.

The thud of the coil discharge reverberated through the vessel. The flash shields opened to a spinning starfield. “Control the spin,” Nyk ordered.

“That's the pilot's job,” Zane replied.

Nyk sat at the helm. He grasped the unistick and began to counter the spin.

“I didn't know you could do that,” Andra said.

“It's just like a big shuttlecar,” Nyk replied.

“Let's reconnoiter,” Zane said. “Triangulating position...” He operated the beacon locator. “We're lost. I have no idea where we are.”

“Can't you find triangulation beacons?” Nyk asked.

“No -- which means either we're so far from them to be out of range, or our time gradient wasn't neutral.”

“Don't panic,” Nyk said. “Relax and think it through.”

Zane cradled his head in his palm. He closed his eyes and took deep breaths. “Okay... I was right -- our time gradient IS off.”

“By how much?”

“Positive two thousand years.”

“Two thousand? Into the future?”

“That's right -- I must've got the coil energy level wrong ... or something.” He began to perspire. “That was Lesson One ... time gradients -- avoid them at all costs... We might've emerged from the jump in the center of a star ... or a supernova ... or in the galactic core...”

“Might-haves don't count,” Nyk replied.

“Now what do we do?” Andra asked.

“The hyperspace gradient maps don't show time deltas that large... I don't know what to do! We're hopelessly lost and I don't know what to do!”

Andra spun his seat so he faced her. She grasped his temples in her hands and looked into his eyes. “Zane... Remember your academy training. Panicking won't do you or any of us any good. Do you remember the exercise?”

Zane was hyperventilating. “No! No...”

“Of course you do,” she said. “I'll do it with you... Look into my eyes ... Take a deep breath -- one deep breath.” She drew in a breath, held it and released it through her teeth. “Relax... banish anxiety ... close your eyes ... you are master of your mind.”

Zane's breathing began to slow.

“Think clear,” Andra said. “Your mind is clear -- like a pristine pool. Make your mind like water...” Zane opened his eyes. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Then,” she said. “Let's figure out what to do. Your mind is clear and fluid. You have capacity to solve this problem. Think, Zane, of a solution.”

Zane thought more. “I know! We can backtrack.”

“Backtrack?” Nyk asked.

“Yes -- the navigation computer remembers all jumps so we can program a complement and jump back to where we started.” He looked up. “It's a failsafe for just such an incident.”

“That must've been what happened to the *Floran*,” Nyk mused. “They got an energy level wrong -- and they didn't know how to compute a complementary jump.”

“Take your time and make sure you get it right, Zane,” Andra said.

“Not a problem -- it's all automated. All I do is recall the previous jump...” He pressed a panel. “... then invert it. Ready?”

“Go for it.”

The flash shields closed again and Zane triggered the jump. He brought up the galaxy plan. “See? Here we are... Position verified by triangulation beacons. We're back where we were. So ... let's start over...”

Andra looked at the galaxy plan. “Zane... How many jumps does the computer remember?”

“All of them -- it's how we transmit courses to other vessels.”

“Then -- why don't we jump all the way back to Varada?” She pointed to the navigation display.

"I thought you wanted to be in range of the comm net," Zane replied.

"We left a comm relay there," Nyk said. "Varada IS in the net -- for the time being, at least."

"Here's the jump history," Zane said. He pointed. "Here's Varada..." With his finger he traced the jumps. "Here we are, now. It's five jumps backward." He traced the return route.

Laida approached Nyk. "Nykkyo -- you're not considering going back to Varada, are you?"

"It might be the surest way."

"Please don't return to Varada. I'm dead there. So are the others."

"The BSS will protect you."

"I'm beyond their protection, now. They'll claim I'm a menace -- and I am. I've tasted too much freedom. They'll have me put down. And Mos -- he's killed a man. They'd kill him, for sure -- the others, too."

"What about the ferals? We can turn them over to the BSS."

"The BSS can't help them, either."

"What do we do, Nyk?" Andra asked. "Take a chance on jumping forward or jump back?"

Nyk paced the bridge. "We have lives at stake..." he mused. "Technically, this is Floran soil. The Varadans can't demand we return any of the novonids ... even though they're Varadan subjects ... they'd need to extradite them and we have no extradition treaty ... on the other hand, Floran authorities might prefer to turn them over to avoid an interplanetary incident..." He looked at Zane. "Zane -- do you KNOW what went wrong?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"I was following the wrong contour -- I entered the coordinates for this one..." He pointed. "...but the energy level for this one. We want to follow this contour..." He pointed again. "It will put us within two jumps of T-Delta ... one jump to within the comm net."

"You're sure?"

"I've double-checked."

"Well," Andra asked, "what do we do?"

Nyk looked at Laida. "Please," she pleaded, "not back to Varada."

"Possession is nine-tenths of the law. We have the novonids in our possession. Let's keep it that way." He turned to Laida and spoke to her in her tongue. "No, Laida -- we're not going back." He faced Zane. "Jump forward."

“Coil charging,” Zane said. “Coordinates set ... energy level entered ... on your command, captain.”

“Do it.”

The flash shields closed and the indicators flashed. The discharge shook the ship. Nyk pressed the control to open the flash shields and grabbed the unistick to control the spin. He saw a white indicator flash on the pilot's display. “What's this?” he asked.

“Low power,” Zane replied. “We have enough reserve for one more jump.”

“We can't be out of fuel.”

“No -- but the main reactor went offline again. I know nothing of fusion reactors. I don't know how to restart it.”

“I doubt our engineer is trustworthy...” He looked at the chart.

“Here's our new location,” Zane said pointing. “If we follow this hyperspace contour, it takes us inside the comm net.”

“We have enough power for one more jump... Make it a good one, Zane.”

Zane's fingers flew across the navigation computer touch screen. He wiped perspiration from his brow. “Okay -- all set. I've tripled -- quadruple checked the figures. This jump will do it.”

“It had better do it,” Nyk replied. “Trigger it.”

The ship shuddered from the jump. The white indicator on the console flashed to red. “No more power,” Nyk said. “We couldn't have jumped back to Varada if we wanted to.” He took his handheld from his sash. “Comm net uplink -- we have signal lock.”

“I'll send a distress call,” Zane said.

“No -- Let me contact Kronta first. Then, we can make a distress call and send transponder coordinates.”

“...this is unbelievable,” Kronta said. “What is the status of ship and crew?”

“Our fusion reactor is off line, but we have adequate auxiliary power for communications and life support. We know our position and we are within the Floran comm net -- obviously, or you and I wouldn't be having this delightful conversation. Captain Hayt is dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yes -- one of the novonid men broke his neck in an altercation. It wasn't intentional. I have the body in stasis.”

Kronta rolled his eyes. “And, the rest of the crew?”

“Our astral navigator suffered a head injury and I put him into stasis, also. The rest of the crew is

confined to one of the settlers' barracks.”

“I'm dispatching a deep-space shuttle with a salvage crew. They will have explicit orders that they are under my and only my command, and they'll bring the 501 back to Floran. We'll start sorting out the mess after that.”

Nyk stepped to the bridge. “I have the communication parameters for the transponder,” he said. “Transmit it on these and only these channels. They're encoded for ExoService headquarters use only.”

Zane nodded.

“We don't need any help from Gamma-5. Keep transmitting until we get a reply.”

“Yes, sir..”

Nyk strolled back to his cabin. Andra joined him. “I think we really are in trouble now,” he said. “Seymor's right -- I do have an unfortunate tendency to let my emotions cloud my reason.” He shook his head. “We should've let the crew take this bucket wherever it was headed - - probably to drop us off at the Floran transit platform and then deliver the novonids to Gamma- 5. We could've informed the authorities there -- they'd be lying in wait for them. Instead -- I let my emotional involvement with Laida get the better of my judgment. And now, we have a dead captain ... an astral navigator in stasis and clinging to life and other crew members seriously ... inconvenienced.” He looked at Andra. “We are probably going to prison for this.”

“No, Nyk,” she replied. “By the time authorities could be notified, this ship's cargo would be off to who-knows-where. They'd expose the novonids to sunlight only to discover they're uncooperative, unmanageable and dangerous. We know our stunners have no effect on them. Our authorities only recourse would be to use lethal force to subdue them. Laida's right -- as long as they're torpid, they're safe. I shudder to think of turning them loose on Gamma-5 -- or any other planet. You have a duty first to what's right and what's moral, Nyk. Letting these ... beings loose on one of our colonies would be wrong, immoral, and dangerous.”

“What of the captain?”

“Unfortunate, but not your fault. Nyk -- If I thought you were doing something wrong -- do you think I'd stand by and watch? No, Nyk -- I was with you all the way.”

“I'll need you with me the rest of the way, then.” The intra-ship comm buzzed. “Yes,” Nyk said.

“We have an acknowledgement,” Zane said. “A deep-space shuttle is on her way.”

Nyk sat in the captain's cabin, looking across the conference table at Captain Egan, who had assumed command of the 501. Egan shook his head. “I have never heard of such a situation. I have one question. Why would you take it upon yourself to seize command of this vessel?”

“Our plan was to merely detain the crew once we reached Floran space -- to delay until a message could be sent to ExoService headquarters. Hayt learned we had discovered the novonids on board. He was preparing to jettison them into space.”

“The first officer denies that.”

“Of course he denies it. Threaten him with truth drug...”

“My Kyhana -- please don't assume you know how to do MY job.”

“I'm sorry, Captain... I believed the captain had given orders to eject the novonids into space.”

“That statement I will accept,” Egan replied. “Then what happened?”

“The captain confiscated my handheld with the photoimages I took in the barracks. We had arranged a signal with the few below decks we had revived. Andra used her handheld to send the signal. Three of the novonids charged the bridge. In the ensuing melee, Captain Hayt was killed and the navigator injured.”

“Mr Kyhana -- what were you doing getting involved with the novonids in the first place?”

“I had communications from the Secretary of Colonial Affairs himself that the Floran Hegemony would not tolerate enslaving them. This is precisely what it appeared to me was about to happen. I assumed Captain Hayt and the others were part of the plot.”

“Why would you assume that?”

“The novonids had to have been brought onboard with his full knowledge and cooperation.”

“Suppose he was simply following orders? According to the remaining crew, that is exactly what they were doing.”

“Orders from whom?” Nyk asked. “Who would have the authority to order an ExoScout to become a slave-carrier? The ExoService is under the auspices of the High Legislature -- not any individual colonial government.”

Egan pursed his lips. “Slaves... But, they're not human. They are artificial beings created for a purpose.”

“Maybe they're not human in a strict biological sense. You look at them ... talk to them -- and tell me they aren't people. They think, they love, they hate ... they are fully aware of their own mortality.” His eyes brimmed. “They feel, they bleed, they laugh, they cry... Captain -- there are those on Varada who believe the novonids are simply machines made of muscle and bone; and, they've convinced others on Gamma-5 to believe the same. Those who do are less human than any of the green-skinned beings in this ship's hold. If we permit them on Floran territory as anything but our peers, we will have lost some of our own humanity.”

Egan shook his head again. “I'll put all this in my report.”

“What will you recommend?”

“I will recommend the one named Mos be tried for homicide. If he is ... human ... in any sense, then he must be held accountable for the death of Captain Hayt. I will recommend you be held on charges of mutiny. I don't know if any of this will stick. That's not my decision. It's for others to decide -- thank goodness. You're dismissed, Mr Kyhana. And, you are confined to your cabin.”

14 -- Legal Quagmire

“You have really done it this time, Nykkyo.” Illya Kronta paced in an interview room in the detention block of ExoService headquarters in Floran City.

“Illya -- what would you have done?” Kronta continued to pace. “Illya -- what?”

“Probably the same. Not that it excuses it.”

“It makes me feel better to hear that.”

“I’ll tell you one thing, Nyk. You had better not bolt to Earth this time. You do that and our friendship is over. I will not rest until I have you back here -- in irons.”

“I have no intention of bolting. I want my name cleared. I want the real culprits identified, caught and punished -- both here AND on Varada. I want to see whoever did this to Laida and the others pay for their crimes. I want the novonids cared for. I will do whatever it takes to those ends.”

Kronta stopped pacing. “Do you mean that?”

“With all my heart.”

“Good.” He pulled an object from his sash. “Give me your left arm.” Kronta snapped a wristwatch-like device around Nyk’s left wrist and squeezed a rivet with a crimping tool. “I convinced a magistrate to order you released under electronic surveillance. You may come and go as you like, but you must remain planetbound. This device is a transponder that will permit us to locate you anywhere onworld.”

“Thank you Illya.”

“And, you must remain in Floran City.”

“Is that a constraint imposed by the magistrate?”

“It’s one imposed by me. We are providing rooms for you and the others at the hostel near Government Center. I was fully prepared to detain you, Nyk. If I thought you were even considering heading to Earth...”

“What about the novonids?”

“They are being held here at Service headquarters. The ones who participated in your little

insurrection are in detention cells -- in particular, the one referred to as Mos.”

“His name IS Mos, Illya.” Nyk shook his head. “Why is it so hard to treat them as equals.”

“They're not equals. They have different biology...”

“Their biology differs only in details. I had this same argument with Captain Egan. I didn't expect to have it with you.”

“It's a legal quagmire you've put us in. We have a cadre of solicitors scouring Floran Law for some guidance on this, Nyk.”

“Floran Law never considered such a situation. What of the others?”

“The ... unconscious ones are in the clinic, being given fluids.”

“Don't give the ones without tattooed numbers too much glucose. We won't even be able to communicate with most of them.”

“The medics have been forewarned.”

“What of Laida? May I see her?”

Kronta nodded. “Come this way.”

Nyk followed Illya to a detention cell. He saw Laida sitting on a bunk. Her eyes caught his and she stood. Nyk threw his arms around her, held her and caressed the back of her head. “How are you doing?”

“They're treating me kindly,” she replied. “I have never been this long without sun.”

“Are they giving you syrup?”

She nodded. “Yes -- it's sustaining me. The others are all right, too. I wish they'd let me see Mos. He doesn't understand.”

“We're doing what we can.” Nyk took Laida's hand and squeezed it.

“Nyk -- don't let them return me to Varada. I'm dead there.”

“You'll die here. This place can't sustain you.”

“I'd rather starve here than be put down there. Don't let them return me to Varada. Please.”

“Come on, Nyk,” Kronta said.

Laida brushed a tear from her cheek and gave him a little wave. Nyk regarded her through the window-slit on the cell door. He watched her sit on the bunk and bury her face in her hands. He turned to Kronta. “All right Illya -- human or not?”

Nyk paced in Kronta's office. "I can't recall a bigger mess," Illya said from behind his desk. "The Varadans have severed communications with us. They are accusing US of stealing THEIR novonids. US! Stealing from THEM!"

"THEY brought the novonids to the 501 in Varadan shuttles," Nyk replied. "Their primitive, alcohol-fueled, so-called spaceships dripped corrosives all over our shuttlebay."

"We believe these statements are more directed toward domestic Varadan consumers," Kronta replied.

"What can we do?"

"The 501 has been impounded and our forensics teams are going over it looking for evidence. We've taken statements from the crew."

"Why don't we interrogate them?"

"This bunch knows how to deal with truth drug. It doesn't necessarily uncover the truth -- rather, what the subject BELIEVES to be truthful."

"What about interviewing the novonids?" Nyk asked.

"We have no interpreters. Except for yourself, none of our staff can speak their language. They can read and write it, but not speak it. With the exception of the one called Laida..."

"You mean Laida, Illya -- not 'the one called Laida.' It IS her name."

"With the exception of Laida, none of the novonids can read or write."

"Let me be interpreter, then."

"Rejected. You're not an impartial party."

"Then, let Andra."

"Rejected for the same reason."

"Illya -- one reason I was asked to participate was to build a neural map for subliminal language training."

"I had almost forgotten. Shit, I had forgotten."

"Let them map my head, Illya. Let them create a Varadan language program and train ... whoever's impartial enough."

"I'll want to watch," Kronta said. "I've never seen neural mapping done."

Illya accompanied Nyk into a treatment room. "You can change into treatment garb," the attendant told him.

He looked around the room. “This looks like an interrogation setup. Is that truth drug?”

“We use truth drug as part of the procedure. Please get changed.”

Nyk returned wearing a broad loincloth. He climbed onto a therapeutic pallet. The attendant inserted an I.V. catheter into a vein in his arm.

A medic and a technician stepped into the room. “Mr Kyhana -- let me explain the procedure.”

“I understand you use truth drug,” Nyk replied.

“A light dose -- to get your mind focused on the subject at hand.” He pulled a vidisplay before him. “We will be presenting writings in Varadan. Actually, it's the letter of intent you helped draft... Ideally, someone should be conversing in Varadan to you, but we have no native Varadan speakers in the building.”

“Yes we do. We have Laida. She's being held in detention.”

“One of the green...”

“Yes -- one of them. She's smarter than I am. Bring her here.” The medic glanced toward Kronta.

“He has a point,” Kronta said and pulled his handheld from his sash.

Shortly Laida was escorted into the treatment room. Her eyes darted between Nyk, the medics and technicians and the equipment. “Don't be afraid, Laida,” Nyk said to her. “No one's going to harm you. We need your help. These men are going to use my knowledge of your language to create a pattern they can use to train others. I need you to talk to me -- that's all. Will you do that?”

She nodded. “Yes...”

“Good... have a seat.”

“Tell her,” the technician said, “once you're under the drug, she must ask you questions, and then more questions based on your answers. She must engage you in conversation even if the topic is rambling and makes no sense.” Nyk nodded and interpreted the technician's words.

“Okay -- let's get started.”

Nyk took a deep breath. He felt Laida's hand on his, turned his palm over and squeezed hers. A burning sensation began to radiate up his arm and he began to feel as if he were falling. A roaring filled his ears.

“Nykkyo...” he heard a sweet voice call his name. “Nykkyo -- it's Laida.”

“Laida,” he heard his own voice answer. “Laida my friend...”

The conversation between Laida and his own voice grew distant as the effect of the drug deepened, and became a faint echo...

Nyk opened his eyes, unsure of his surroundings. The room was spinning. He rolled his head to the

left and looked into a pair of orange eyes in a green face. To the right a pair of pale blue ones. "Laida... Andra..."

"You're all right, Nykkyo," Laida said.

"You did well," Andra added. "They said they have a good pattern. They'll start training interpreters this afternoon.

"Good. Then, they can get the novonids' side of the story."

Andra showed Nyk her left wrist. On it was a detention transponder. "I have one of these, too."

"How much longer, Illya?" Nyk paced Kronta's office.

"We're making progress. Laida and the others have been interviewed, and their testimony matches yours. We've reestablished contact with Varada -- the old way, relaying written communiques through an ExoScout."

"What about that comm relay we left in orbit?" Nyk asked.

"The Varadans don't seem to know how to make it work. We are near reaching an agreement to repatriate all but Mos and Laida."

"What of Mos and Laida?"

"We have agreed to table that discussion -- until after our legal system has disposed of their cases. This, at least, defuses the claim Floran absconded with Varadan property."

"Property ... property, indeed... They'll probably be killed, Illya -- the feral ones for sure."

"It's a Varadan internal issue -- it's not our affair."

"Tomyka Wells, Captain Hayt and others yet unknown made it our affair. And, what's Laida's and Mos's legal status here?"

"Mos killed the captain. He must answer homicide charges. Laida..."

"Laida didn't do ANYTHING, Illya."

"She is being held as a material witness."

"Illya, we can't keep them here, in confinement. In the days we've been on Floran -- you can see it in Laida. Her color is fading. She's slowly starving to death. We can't sustain them on sugar water forever."

"I know."

"Release them."

"We can't release an accused murderer."

“Then, release Laida, at least. Let her have some sunshine. She's not going anywhere. She has nowhere to go. She won't bolt.”

Kronta drummed his fingers on his desk. “All right. I'll release her into your custody. Remember -- it'll be on your head...”

“How could I forget?”

He picked up his vidisplay and poked the screen. “Come on -- we'll get her some sunshine.”

They approached Laida's cell and found it empty. “Where is she?” Nyk asked a guard.

“We found her on the floor, vomiting and convulsing. We took her to the infirmary.”

“Our doctors won't know what to do.”

“Come on, Nyk.” Kronta led Nyk to the lift and requested level four. The liftcar door opened and they approached a checkpoint. The post was vacant.

Kronta passed his hand over a proximity pad. He signaled again. And again.

“Coming, coming...” An Internal Affairs sergeant holding a meal package approached the desk.

“Do you have a green girl here?” Kronta asked.

“What?”

“Did you receive a subject from ExoService detention?”

“Who wants to know?”

“I want to know.”

“And, who are you?”

“Check my profile.”

The sergeant scooped a spoonful of his dinner. He presented a scanpad. Kronta scanned his wrist.

The sergeant scooped more of his dinner and began reviewing Kronta's profile. “Okay, let's see here... Do you know the subject's name?”

“Laida,” Nyk replied.

“Laida who?”

“Just Laida.”

“A Floran?”

“No -- an offworlder.”

“Sergeant,” Nyk said, “can't we just look in the treatment rooms?”

He squinted at Kronta, then nodded toward the corridor. “Go on.”

“I really wish we could coordinate better with Internal Affairs,” Kronta said as they headed down the corridor peeking into rooms.

“Illya -- here!”

Nyk opened the door. Laida lay on a therapeutic pallet. Her skin had faded to a sickly yellow-green. Her head was raised and her breathing appeared labored. A medical intern was attempting to scan her. He shook his head. “Her anatomy is ... flipped ... backward!”

“Yes,” Nyk said.

“Her spleen is more than double the usual size. I don't know if that's normal or not.”

“What are you doing for her?”

“I don't know what to do -- I don't know what's wrong -- I don't know where to start. We've drawn blood -- if that brown stuff in her veins is blood. Our panels are coming back all confused. It has red, white and green corpuscles!”

“Give her glucose,” Nyk said. “Glucose syrup and water. Get a feeding tube into her or something.”

An attendant attached a large syringe to the feeding tube threaded into Laida's left nostril and pressed the plunger. “I don't know why we keep doing this,” the attendant said. “She'll just vomit it up again.”

“She must be absorbing some of it. I'll watch her.”

“Keep her on her side and her face pointed down.”

Nyk sat beside her and ran his fingers along her temple. Her eyes cracked open and she began making retching sounds. He grabbed a basin and held it under her face as she vomited a clear, frothy fluid.

The attendant returned with a pouch of clear fluid. “Doctor wants to start an intravenous glucose infusion.” She hung the pouch, pushed a stool near the pallet and began examining Laida's left arm. “Let's see if we can find a good vein... This will do.” She pulled the guard off a lance.

Laida shrieked and jerked her arm away. Tears filled her eyes. “NO! NO! NO!” she blubbered.

“You must cooperate,” the attendant said. She addressed Nyk. “Please tell her to cooperate.”

“You must understand,” Nyk replied, “that on her world, they execute her kind with lethal injections. She must fear you're about to put her out of her misery.”

The attendant stepped back, her hand to her lips. “Oh, no, sweetie,” she said. “We won't hurt you.”

Nyk crouched. "Laida... They want to give you medicine in your arm. Do you understand?" He held her hand and stroked the back of it. "I won't let them hurt you. Do you trust me?" Her lip trembled and a tear ran down her face.

"I don't think she's fully coherent," he said to the attendant. He caressed her face. "Laida -- it's Nykkyo."

"Nykkyo..."

"Your friend, remember?" She smiled and nodded. "The doctors want to give you medicine in your arm. They want to help you, not hurt you. I won't let them harm you. I'll hold your hand." He looked toward the attendant. "She's left-handed."

"I'll use her right arm."

Laida bit her lip and whimpered. Nyk held her hand as the attendant pierced her skin and connected the line leading from the pouch. "Done."

Nyk caressed Laida's head and cheeks. "You're all right -- rest now."

"That struggle must've taken most of her strength."

"Probably... I'll sit with her until she calms."

Andra stepped into the room. "Any change?"

"Only for the worse. She can't keep the glucose syrup down, so they've switched to intravenous." Laida lay on her back, her eyes closed and her breathing labored. "We're not giving her what she needs. She needs sunlight."

"What she needs is that pink paste," Andra replied.

Nyk looked up. "Of course! The protein and minerals -- what has it been? Fifteen days without it?"

"Maybe twenty."

"Come on!" Nyk grabbed Andra's hand and led her to the lift and out onto the plaza at Government Center. He ran down a moving staircase and along the street to the hostel, scanned his wrist and rode a liftcar.

"Open up!" He pounded on the door to a room. It slid open. "Zane! We need your help!"

"Nykkyo... Fancy meeting YOU here. Do you know I'm in double trouble? That's right -- for being a member of the crew that smuggled those green people, AND for helping you in the mutiny."

"Did you know about the novonids?"

He shook his head. "No. As far as I can tell it was the captain, first officer and two yeomen. They had deck four locked out during those shuttle landings -- to protect the rest of the ship in the event of an accident, they said."

“The truth to this will come out. When it does, we'll all be exonerated. I wouldn't be surprised if you get a commendation.”

“I don't know about that. The ExoService doesn't hand out medals to mutineers. I don't know of a precedent for what happened.” Zane eyed him “I'm sure this isn't a social call...”

“Zane, Laida is dying. Her testimony will be crucial in resolving this for all of us. You need to help us.”

“How can I help?”

“That comm relay we dropped off near Varada -- how operational is it?”

“There's still work to be done on the ground. We installed one uplink at Ogan's office. It'll work when that hemisphere faces the relay.”

“The Varadans can't make it work.”

“That doesn't surprise me. Assuming the fusion reactors are still on line, it should function.”

“Can I use it make a call to Ogan?”

Zane looked skyward. “An inbound call would have to be connected manually.”

“What does that entail?”

“I'd need access to a vidisplay to bring up the control channel. Then, another vidisplay could connect a call.”

“Let's do it, then.”

“Use my handheld,” Andra said. She pulled it from her sash and handed it to him.

Zane poked the screen. “This could be somewhat complicated... That relay isn't registered in the comm net directory...”

“Not registered?” Nyk asked.

Zane's gaze flicked up to Nyk. “The Comm Corps doesn't know about this particular node.”

“Are you telling me that comm relay is a bootleg?”

“Not exactly... It's only accessible through dedicated ExoService portals.”

“Where would those dedicated portals lead, Zane? To Gamma-5?”

Zane shrugged. “Perhaps... I've got the relay's control channel ... I think it's the right relay...” He poked the screen again. “Okay -- I have a control panel.”

“To think someone could use a handheld to access a control panel on one of our relays,” Andra remarked. “Isn't that poor security?”

“That someone would have to know about a half-dozen passwords... And, he'd need to know what he's doing... I'm in and accessing the uplink on the surface... No response.”

“Was the relay parked over their sun's north pole?”

“South pole. The capital is south of the equator.”

“I don't know what time it is there. If it's night, the uplink could be pointing into empty space. Keep trying, Zane.”

Nyk paced around Zane's hostel room. Floran's sun set in the west and the city's lights came on. Zane poked the handheld. “I have the uplink!”

“Now what?”

“Let me acquire a local comm trunk... Okay, make your call. I'll transmit the port numbers.”

Nyk manipulated his handheld. “Can I use this as a locator code?”

“Yes -- it should connect.”

He entered the code and a blue screen appeared. “Voice-only?”

“We don't have the video format converters in place.”

The call connected. “Prefect Ogan's office,” a female voice answered.

“Glinni?”

“...yes...”

“This is Nykkyo Kyhana. I'm calling from Planet Floran. I must speak with Prefect Ogan.”

“Just a moment...”

Nyk flashed a thumb's up sign.

“Mr Kyhana...” He heard Glinni's voice again. “Prefect Ogan does not wish to speak with you.” The call disconnected.

“Their trunk dropped,” Zane reported.

“Open it again.”

“Just a moment... Okay, place your call.”

“Prefect Ogan's office.”

“Glinni -- it's Nykkyo Kyhana again.”

“Mr Kyhana...”

“Please don't hang up. This is a matter of life and death. I must speak with the prefect. Tell him I think we can help each other.”

“Just a moment...”

Nyk's palms were beginning to perspire. “Mr Kyhana -- Prefect will be with you shortly.”

“Mr Kyhana...” He heard Ogan's voice. “I must say, you have the most presumption of any young man I have met. From the very top, indeed -- to abscond with our novonids...”

“No, Prefect. You and I were both duped. This Letter-of-Intent was just a distraction.”

“I am a laughing stock here. I don't know if I'll keep my job.”

“Prefect -- we have some novonids here on Floran.”

“Yes, I know. I learned that, while Envoy Wells and I were hashing over the tenses of verbs, some other negotiations were going on behind my back.”

“I had nothing to do with it, Prefect. Please believe me. If I had known this was going on, I wouldn't have participated. I'd have notified our authorities ... put a stop to it. Can you believe that?”

“I don't know what to believe.”

“Prefect -- these novonids are dying.”

“Best to let them die. It will save us the trouble of exterminating them.”

“No, Prefect. We want to save them. I need to know what goes into the nutrient they eat.”

There was silence from the other end of the call.

“Prefect -- what constitutes the food they eat? I know it's protein and minerals. What minerals?”

“Why do you want to save them? What are you planning to do with them?”

“They can testify. They can help bring those that did this to justice. One of them knew of the plot days before we arrived.”

“Oh, that is wonderful. Days before talks began, this ... plot was uncovered ... by a novonid! One question -- why didn't this novonid tell someone?”

“She was about to tell me and then she was abducted. Please, Prefect -- we don't have much time.”

“Novonid testimony is not admissible in a Varadan court.”

“But it IS in a Floran one.”

“How could it be?”

“Because what they say will be tested against facts and cross examination. Prefect -- if they can help convict whoever is responsible on THIS end, we can cut a deal -- in exchange for a reduced sentence, those guilty can give information to help you on YOUR end. Don't you want convictions, too?” More silence. “Prefect?”

“Hold on... I'm accessing my media terminal.”

Nyk looked toward Andra. “Get something to write this down.”

“There's a pad of polysheets in the drawer,” Zane replied.

Andra brought the pad and a stylus.

“Novonid nutrient,” Ogan said. “...Protein and amino acids plus nitrates, phosphorus, calcium... potassium... a lesser amount of magnesium... other trace elements, including copper and zinc...”

“That's what goes into the nutrient?” Nyk asked.

“That's what it says here.”

“Thank you, Prefect. We will be in touch.” The call terminated. Nyk took the sheet and reviewed it. “Fertilizer!” He smacked his hand against his forehead. “Why didn't I think of it? Their chlorophyll chemistry must be based on Earth plants. What she needs is fertilizer. I used a mixture like this with plant cultures. Come on!”

15 -- Linguistic Feat

Nyk stood near Laida's pallet. An attendant brought in a syringe filled with a milky fluid. “This contains the minerals and salts you specified,” she said. “We also added soybean milk for some protein.” She fitted the syringe to the feeding tube and pressed the plunger. “Keep her on her side...”

“And, her face down.” He caressed Laida's back and shoulder blades.

“If she keeps that down, I'll bring another.”

“I hope she keeps it down.”

“So do I. It would be mighty unpleasant to throw up that mix.”

He sat, looked into her face and caressed her cheek. Her eyes were half-open and glassy, and she

breathed shallow breaths through both her nose and mouth.

“Laida... I am so sorry. You deserve better than this...”

The attendant returned. “Well?”

“She kept it down.”

She hooked the syringe to the tube and injected another dose into Laida's stomach. “Those salts should absorb fast,” she said.

“Shall we try one more dose?”

“I don't know. That much would put a human into some real trouble.”

Laida rolled her head. “Nykkyo?”

“Laida!” He helped her roll onto her back. “Laida -- we're going to get you some sun. As soon as it's daylight, we're taking you out into the sunshine.”

“Sunshine?”

“Yes!”

“I'm feeling a little better.”

“We've been giving you minerals. You haven't had minerals in a while, have you?”

“No. Not since I was taken.”

“You rest and soak them up.” He sat beside her and caressed the back of her hand and her forearm.

“Nykkyo?”

“What, Laida.”

“Please don't leave me. Your company...”

“Agreeable?”

“Very.”

Nyk pushed a wheelchair to the lift and outside onto the street. “Here, Laida -- let me get rid of this...” He grabbed the feeding tube and pulled it out of her nostril; then looked at it. He scanned around for a trash receptacle, spotted one and tossed the tube into it. “Look, Laida -- sunshine!”

She smiled and lifted her face to the Floran orange sun. “I don't understand it -- I feel nothing. It's as if I'm in the dark. The sun's shining on me, but I don't feel it.” Tears streamed down her face. “I must be dying! I can't feel the sun, Nykkyo -- I've lost my ability to use sunlight. I'm dying ... I'm dying...”

Nyk looked at her, slack jawed. "Laida -- It's not you. It's this world. Our sun is not as intense as Varada's. We have the same problem with our Earth crops. The sun's not strong enough for them. We have to grow them under domes and with artificial..." He pulled his handheld from his sash and began placing calls.

Nyk sat, resting his head against the window as the train passed Tinam on its way to Sudal. Leaning against him was Laida. He could feel her tremble. "We're almost there." He kissed the top of her head. "Almost there -- hold on."

"I feel so sick," she said. "Torpor is setting in."

The train came to a halt. Nyk supported her and headed toward the groundcar lot. "Don't pay any attention to the stares. You'll be all right. Kronta told me we could do this. Neither of us will get into any trouble..."

He helped her to sit in a groundcar and specified an address north of the city as the destination. The car began to roll onto the highway.

"It's warmer here," she said. "That feels good."

Nyk watched the familiar landmarks as the car headed north.

"Everything's purple," she said.

"That's the color of the vegetation here. You'd have to be purple to use the light of this world's sun."

Laida giggled. "Purple people... What an odd concept."

"Nearly as odd as green ones, don't you think? Or, white ones for that matter."

"I suppose so."

The car approached a wall three metres high and drove along it for several kilometres; then came to a stop. Nyk popped the cowl open. "Can you stand?"

"I don't think so."

"I'll carry you, then. I'm sorry if this isn't dignified." He scooped her up and slung her over his shoulder, holding her across the small of her back. "This is an agridome, Laida. Ten kilometres on a side. Inside are the fields where we grow our crops. Green crops, Laida... I'm taking you inside."

He scanned his wrist and a door slid open. He escorted her into the airlock that held back the air pressure holding up the agridome roof. The door slid shut behind and another before them opened. He carried her into the artificial sunlight and shifted her so he was holding her in both arms. She gasped. "I feel it!" She held out her arms and lifted her face. "I feel it! Feels SO good..."

He set her onto the agridome floor. A middle-aged man approached him. "Nykyo..."

"Dyoman," Nyk replied. "Thank you for letting us use your dome."

“Of course,” he replied. “I wanted to meet her in person.”

“Laida, this is Dyoman Hasse,” Nyk said using Old Floran. “He's in charge of the domes. He's letting you stay here as long as it takes for you to recover your strength.”

Laida looked toward him, smiling, with tears streaming down her cheeks.

“That,” Hasse said, “is a reply I'd understand in any language.”

Nyk looked skyward. Above him was the superstructure holding the giant lamps augmenting the weak Floran sun; and above that the reticulated, air pressure-supported dome roof. Through the roof he could see Floran's indigo daytime sky.

Dyoman produced a thin pad and laid it onto the dome floor near a hydroponic bed.

“Here,” Nyk said. “Just stretch out here and soak up as much as you want. I'll help you out of your tunic.”

“We like to be busy in the sun,” she said.

“You busy yourself recovering your strength,” Nyk replied. He grasped the hem of her orange confinement tunic and lifted it from her. She lay, nude, on her stomach. Nyk sat on the floor and caressed her back and shoulder blades. “Feel good?”

“Mmm... Delicious...”

“...so that's the story,” Nyk said.

Suki shook her head. “I don't know, Nykkyo, why you always must go looking for trouble.”

“I don't look for trouble. Trouble comes looking for me.”

“What is your status?”

“There's a hearing in a few days. Kronta expects we'll be exonerated, but it's by no means a done deal. If we're not -- we could be going up the proverbial river for a long time.”

“But -- you're free for now.”

“Both Andra and I are under electronic surveillance.”

“The fact they would do that means their case isn't too strong -- doesn't it?”

“Not necessarily.”

“I return from T-Delta in ten days,” Suki said.

“There's not much you can do from here or there,” Nyk replied.

“Keep me posted. This green girl -- is she another of your *amften* ?”

He shook his head. "No. Right now she's recovering her strength in an agridome."

"You want to make her an *amfta*, don't you?" Nyk looked away from the vidisplay. "I knew it."

"I'm not doing anything with her," he replied, "until our legal status is settled."

"Thank you for dinner," Nyk said.

"You're very welcome," Daphne replied. "How did the first day of the hearing go?"

"About as expected," said Illya. "We had opening arguments, statements of undisputed facts... That sort of thing."

"How does one of these work? Is it a trial?"

"It's a sort of combination of preliminary hearing, grand jury and trial," Nyk replied. "There's a referee and a five-judge panel who'll decide the case. Each sides gets a turn presenting evidence; however, each judge has a switch by his post that will illuminate a blue lamp. If he's heard enough, he can light his lamp. If all five lamps are lit, the trial stops."

"Without hearing all the evidence?"

"Why turn it into a filibuster if the outcome won't change?"

"The referee has decided two questions remain to be arbitrated," explained Kronta. "Whether or not the novonids are human, and whether or not the crew intended to break the law. The second hinges on the first. If the novonids are not human, then there was no law to break."

"The supposedly broken law," Nyk added, "is improper imprisonment and transport. Today's testimony made me very upset. I heard the opposition spouting the official party line from Varada -- how the novonids were made for a purpose, how they lack sentience, intelligence, free wills and so on."

"Our counsel is quite comfortable we can win the first round," Kronta replied. "If we do, the second one is a cinch."

"If we don't," Nyk said, "then I'm going up the river for unjustifiable mutiny."

"It seems to me proving the crew's intent would be difficult," Daphne observed.

"The prosecution seems to feel the same way," said Illya. "I have it -- off the record -- they think both rounds are toss-ups, and the likely outcome is the novonids will be classed human and we won't be able to prove intent -- hence, a draw."

"And, neither side is held accountable," Nyk replied. "What does our consul think?"

"He thinks he has found an angle that will nail them on the second round."

"But, only if we win the first round ... first."

“Why don't they,” Daphne asked, “just pump everyone full of truth drug?”

“The admissibility of truth drug testimony in a Floran court is complicated,” Kronta explained. “It's much more useful as a forensic tool. We cherish two tenets of justice that date all the way back to the *Floran Compact* -- presumption of innocence and guarantee against self-incrimination. Truth drug runs contra to both.”

“Two legacies from the United States Constitution,” she replied.

“Yes -- and from among others.”

“I'm itching for a fight,” Nyk said to Kronta as he sat at a table in the hearing room. Beside him were Andra and Zane and a withered looking older man with unkempt grey hair. To his left was the table for the prosecution; ahead was the referee's bench and to the right sat the desks for the five judges. “I couldn't sleep thinking about yesterday's testimony. Our counsel didn't challenge a word of it.”

“Counsel Morsk is one of the best, Nyk. He's passionate about our cause, and he came out of retirement to take our case. His methods may be unorthodox, but his track record is exceptional.”

“Maybe he's lost some of his edge during retirement. I can't wait to sit in the box and tell them MY experiences with novonids.”

A chime sounded and Nyk stood. The referee entered -- a middle-aged woman in a white gown. Following her were the five judges, two men and three women in embroidered tunics and sashes. They took their seats at their desks. “Please be seated,” the referee announced. “Counsel Morsk...”

The old man stood and stepped to the front of the hearing room. “Yesterday, we heard testimony to the nature of those carried aboard ExoScout 501 -- the nature of their humanity ... or lack thereof. We even entered into evidence a document -- a policy statement generously provided by the Varadan government outlining their beliefs. I'm sure the prosecution are sincere in their beliefs. However -- in the wisdom of one of the ancient Earth sages: The problem's not what we don't know -- it's what we know for sure that just isn't so...” He paused. “I would like to examine the one named Laida.”

“I object,” said the prosecution counsel, standing. “We have no precedent for examining non-humans.”

“It's the very definition of humanity we're examining,” Morsk replied. “How can we know how less ... or how more than human these beings are without questioning one of them?”

“Objection overruled,” said the referee.

A young Floran woman led Laida, wearing her novonid two-piece costume, into the examination box. Her escort returned to the back of the room and Laida held an object to her left ear.

“Morsk brought Laida here from Sudal?” Nyk whispered. “She's still recovering from being sunstarved. Her color does look better, I think.”

“We flew her in by shuttle this morning,” Kronta replied. “We'll take her back to her dome when she's finished here.”

“This young woman...”

“I object. Counsel Morsk must not prejudice the judges by employing terminology implying humanity until that question is settled.”

“Sustained,” said the referee.

“Keep your cool, Nyk,” Kronta whispered. “The prosecution will object to everything Morsk does. He's planned for it.”

“The witness before you is one of what the Varadans call a novo hominid, or novonid for short. She...”

“Objection! Counsel Morsk is using a gender-charged pronoun.”

“Human or otherwise,” Morsk replied, “the subject is female. She...”

“Objection! Counsel did it again!”

“Sustained. Counsel Morsk, you will refrain from prejudicing the panel.” Morsk nodded in acquiescence. “And, you will not be warned again.”

“As it pleases the court.” Morsk gestured toward the witness box. “The witness was one of those found on board the 501 by the defendants.” He turned to Laida. “Were you brought on board the scout of your own volition?”

Laida cocked her ear to the device she held in her left hand. “No, sir.”

“Do you understand the notion of death?”

She listened. “Yes, sir.”

“Do you fear death?”

“... yes, sir...”

“I object in the strongest terms,” the prosecutor shouted, coming to his feet. “This is a sham. What is that device?”

“It is a communicator,” Morsk replied. “Varadans do not speak Lingwafloran. We have an interpreter trained in the Varadan tongue sitting at the back of the room, translating my questions.”

“This is unacceptable,” the prosecutor retorted. “How are we to know if the questions are being translated or if the subject is being coached?”

“Yes, how?” asked the referee.

“If it would please,” Morsk replied, “we can have the interpreter come forward and perform her task aloud. I had thought the communicator would expedite the examination process.”

“I still object,” the prosecutor replied. “Since none of us speaks Varadan, how would we know if the

translation is unbiased? We have no precedent for a witness to be questioned in a private language. If this ... being ... is to be questioned, let it be in *Lingwaflozan* .”

The referee nodded. “The objection is sustained. Please dispense with the communicator.”

Morsk approached Laida and took the earpiece from her.

Nyk stood. “This is terribly unfair. You have put her to a disadvantage, not knowing our language. How would you...”

The referee pressed a control and a gong sounded. “Mr Kyhana, you are out of order. Sit and be silent.”

Nyk sat, folded his arms and glowered at the referee.

“Laida,” Morsk said. “Can you understand our tongue at all?”

She looked at him blankly. “Slowly, please,” she replied. Morsk repeated the question. “Some ... little.”

“Do you know how to read?”

“... yes...”

Morsk presented a handheld vidisplay. “Can you read this?”

Laida looked at it and shook her head. “...no...”

“Why not?”

“...not ... Varadan.”

“You can't read *Lingwa* . Can you read Varadan?”

“Yes...”

Morsk took the display and poked it. “Can you read this?” He handed it to her.

Laida's eyes brightened. “Yes... this Varadan.”

“Then, read it.”

Laida's eyes began to scan the screen.

“No -- aloud. Speak the words.”

She licked her lips, took a deep breath and began reading. Nyk sat back and let the words wash over him -- a mellifluous stream of the music of language. He could understand what she read but preferred instead to enjoy the melody of her voice.

She completed the passage and looked up. “That was beautiful, Laida,” Morsk said, picking up the

vidisplay. He turned to the judges. "Does anyone recognize that passage?" He looked around the hearing room. "That was the first four paragraphs of *Red Dawn, Red Dusk*, chapter four -- rendered in the original *OldLingwa*. How many here can read *OldLingwa*? How many have heard it spoken? How many have appreciated the beauty..."

"I object," said the prosecutor, standing. "The aesthetics of *OldLingwa* are not an issue here."

"Language is the issue," Morsk retorted. "Language and thought are joined at the hip. The pivotal question is whether the beings found on that scout are sentient, intelligent and free-willed -- whether they can think..."

"I object again! A single individual cannot speak for the hundred others. By the defense's own admission many of them lack language skills of ANY sort."

"If one, single, intelligent, sentient, free-willed, thinking being was held on board that vessel against his or her will, the crime of kidnapping WAS committed."

"Overruled," said the referee. "Counsel Morsk, please continue."

"We can't crawl inside another's skull. The only way we can evaluate the quality of another's thoughts is if the other communicates them to us. This ... witness does not have facility in our language. I felt the need to demonstrate ... it's ... facility in ... it's own."

"But -- you said this was *OldLingwa*, not *Varadan*," the referee noted.

"The two are nearly indistinguishable."

"The initial objection is overruled. You may continue, Counsel Morsk."

Morsk looked at Laida and spoke deliberately. "Do you understand what you read?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Describe it to us -- tell us what it was."

She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. "There is one ... Ponta. Ponta ... choice made..." She shook her head. "No -- Ponta choice make ... must make. Hard choice..."

"Is Ponta a man or woman?"

"I think ... woman."

"Why do you think that?"

"Ponta think ... woman... as woman..."

"Have you ever seen that passage before?"

Laida shook her head. "...no..."

"That's understandable. *Red Dawn, Red Dusk* wasn't written until after the *Varada* colony was

abandoned. Please continue describing it.”

Laida bit her lip and closed her eyes. “Ponta ... Ponta...”

“It's frustrating, isn't it?”

“What mean?”

“You know WHAT you want to say ... but you don't know HOW to say it.”

“...Yes...”

“You want to describe this passage in which Ponta agonizes over which man she will marry...”

“Objection!”

“Overruled.”

“...but you lack the vocabulary -- the words in *Lingwa* to do so.”

“...yes...”

“It makes you angry -- with yourself.”

Her eyes began to fill. “...yes...”

“Don't be. Laida, how long have you known *Lingwafloran* ?”

“I ... learn here.”

“How long have you been here?”

She rolled her eyes and counted on her fingers. “Eighteen days ... I think.”

“You've learned this much *Lingwafloran* in eighteen days?”

A tear ran down her cheek. “I try... I want ... learn more. I want talk ... you ... I ... I sick ... from ... from no sun...”

“Since you can't describe it in Floran -- please do so in Varadan.”

Laida drew in a breath, closed her eyes and began paraphrasing the passage. This time, Nyk concentrated on her words, and listened as she described a scene drummed into his and every other Floran's brains during their school years.

Nyk heard a bell ring and looked toward the panel of judges. A blue light on the center desk was lit. The other four came on in quick succession.

The referee rang her gong. “The panel has decided. We will recess while the finding is formulated.”

“This is terrible,” Nyk said as he paced. “I didn't even get a chance to give my testimony on the novonids.”

Morsk had pulled a table near a bench. He sat, his feet on the table, his knees to his chest, his fingers tented and his forehead resting on his fingertips. “Nykkyo, you will have your opportunity in the box.”

“What's taking them so long?”

“It's a precedent-setting finding,” Kronta said.

“What precedent? That the novonids are chattel? It's not fair! They used this language thing to put Laida at a disadvantage. She could barely answer a question!”

“It's falling just about how I expected it would,” Morsk said from between his fingers. “If we needed your testimony, we'd be in much deeper trouble. Nykkyo -- how long did it take you to become fluent in Varadan?”

“A few days of speaking it.”

“But,” Kronta replied, “you already knew Esperanto. Varadan, Old *Lingwa* and Esperanto are all similar.”

“How long then,” Morsk asked without looking up, “did it take you to learn Esperanto?”

“I ... I studied the written language for about three years. I learned to speak it with the Abo on Lexal. It was difficult for me at first...”

“Three years... I happen to know one of our judges is an expert on *Red Dawn, Red Dusk* .” Morsk looked up. “Laida's linguistic feat will not be lost on her.”

Nyk stopped and stared at Morsk. “That earpiece... You goaded them! You goaded them into forcing the language issue and then turned it against them.”

“If these judges do not rule that Laida, and by extension all novonids are human beings for legal purposes -- then, there is no hope for any of us.”

16 -- Dome, Sweet Dome

Nyk held Andra's hand as he climbed the spiral staircase of the Residence in Sudal. He spotted Suki, ran to her and threw his arms around her. “You're home!”

“I came in on the morning packet, and I am exhausted. I don't know how long it's been since I've had sleep ... and I don't want to know.”

“I'm well acquainted with the packet-lag phenomnon,” Nyk replied.

“How did your hearing go?”

Nyk and Andra held their left fists aloft. “The monitoring bands are gone, aren't they?”

“What was the resolution?”

“There were two issues. The first one hinged on whether or not our cargo comprised people or things. If they were things, then our mutiny would not have been justified; however, if they were people, then we were right to take whatever action was necessary to prevent an illegal activity.”

“And, the second?”

“Whether or not the crew knew they were committing an illegal activity.”

“In other words,” Suki replied, “fact and intent.”

“You're becoming familiar with Floran law,” Nyk said. “Proving the novonids are thinking beings wasn't difficult. Our counsel put Laida in the box and she performed flawlessly. Once he had that victory, he had them trapped on the second issue.”

“How so?” Suki asked.

“Zane came to the rescue,” Andra interjected. “His testimony, augmented by truth drug, focused on the secrecy of bringing them aboard, and the fact Captain Hayt ordered ejecting the 501's cargo into space.”

“In other words,” Suki replied, “the crew knew they were doing something wrong.”

“Specifically,” Nyk said, “Captain Hayt knew HE was doing something wrong. Then, Morsk invoked the duty-of-care doctrine. Since the first officer and the rest went along with the captain, it meant either they were in on it, or they violated their duty-of-care. Every Floran has a duty-of-care to the law that supercedes any chain-of-command.”

“They were damned either way.”

“Kronta told me Morsk was good. I didn't realize how good. It was so simple, but the prosecution was blind-sided by it. The panel ruled four-to-one in our favor on the second issue. As soon as the ruling was delivered, the crew began to sing like canaries...”

“What's a canary?” Andra asked.

“...They fingered the group on Gamma-5 responsible, and the group on Gamma-5 have agreed to cooperate in identifying their counterparts on Varada. This cooperation has helped sooth tender feelings on the Varadan side. That, plus returning all the novonids except for Laida and Mos.”

“Won't the novonids be executed there?” Suki asked.

“They've been turned over to the BSS. The Varadans promise they'll review each case.”

“What is a canary?” Andra repeated.

“It's an Earth bird,” Suki replied.

“Oh...”

“Laida has been offered asylum here,” Nyk continued, “based on her fear of reprisal on her homeworld.”

“And, Mos?”

“Well... Mos killed one man and severely injured another. He'll have a separate hearing. Andra, Zane and I have all been exonerated.”

Andra held up her thumb and forefinger. “They came this close to recommending Nyk and Zane receive commendations.”

“They didn't,” Nyk added, “because we were simply exercising our duty-of-care.”

“They couldn't reward you for doing something the others are being punished for not doing,” Suki observed.

“They did find it in themselves to reward Zane -- with a promotion. Not for exercising his duty-of-care, but for bringing the 501 to safety.”

“What will happen to the Gammans?” Suki asked.

“Tomyka Wells is missing. Her courier left Varadan space when news of the seizing of the 501 reached there. So far, they've found no trace of her shuttle.”

“Which means...”

“Either she's gone underground, or her shuttle is lost in hyperspace. It's a dangerous approach to Varada, and even more dangerous on departure.”

“On Gamma-5,” Andra added, “they've detained that colony's agricultural minister.”

“So, Nykkyo -- now, are you headed home?” Suki asked.

“Tomorrow. Tonight I have some unfinished business.”

“With Laida?” Suki asked. “You want to do the *amften* thing with her, don't you.”

“No ... no -- I just wanted to say good bye to her.”

“Be honest, Nykkyo -- you want to do more than that.”

“I am fond of her.”

“You're a Floran. You don't need my permission.”

“You're my wife. I'd like your approval.”

“What I've said before holds -- I admire your taste in women. If you like Laida, I'm sure I would, too.”

“I'm sure you would.”

“I'm way too tired to think about lovemaking tonight, so go do the *amften* thing with Laida. Besides -- fair's fair. I've made a few *amften*, myself.”

Nyk looked at her. “Really? Who?”

“I'm not the sort to kiss and tell. You haven't named all YOUR *amften* .”

“You know who they are.”

“All of them? Are you sure?”

“Men or women?” he asked. Suki smiled. “Suki, at least tell me if your *amften* are men or women.”

“Nykkyo,” Andra said, “I do believe I'm seeing a tinge of jealousy.”

“You know -- I think you're right,” Suki replied.

“No ... no... I'm ... just ... curious.”

Suki stepped to him, put her arms around his waist and kissed his cheek. “Both.”

“Okay,” Nyk said. “Maybe I don't want to know more. We're all Florans here, after all. This IS a cherished tradition we're talking about.”

“Nykkyo -- just go have your time with Laida. Kiss her for me, too. I'm going to bed.”

Nyk approached the agridome and walked through the airlock. He spotted Laida standing near a hydroponic bed of wheat sprouts. She was bare-foot, bare-chested and wearing a pair of white shorts.

She looked up and waved. “Nykkyo!”

“You're looking good.”

“This light agrees with me.” She held out her arms.

“You're very dark and green.”

“You must tell me, Nykkyo. Are the other croptenders artificial beings?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“Because they have brown skin, while other Florans are white.”

“It's because of the artificial sunlight,” he replied. “All Florans would look that way if exposed to it. Croptenders are the only ones who spend much time under the lamps.”

“That's right. You don't need sun to live.”

“Too much sun is bad for us. That's why croptenders wear the big hats. Even still, they get enough sunlight to give them suntan.”

She smiled. “Suntan... I get sungreen... This light is stronger even than on Varada.”

“It's not too strong for you, is it?”

“Oh no -- it feels very good. I like it. I've stored so much sunlight, I probably glow inside.”

“You can store sunlight?” Nyk asked.

“Certainly. Do you remember us talking of how a full stomach feels?”

“Agreeable, yes...”

“Being full of sunlight is an even more agreeable sensation. I feel I could go many days in the shade -- if I had to. I've never been this full of light. I love the feeling.”

He scanned her body from head to foot. “Laida -- where do you store it?”

She ran her hands along her ribcage. “Inside.”

“But, how? Certainly not as fat deposits.”

“No,” she replied. “We don't store fat -- we store sunlight.”

“Where do you feel it?”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“When you have a full stomach -- you feel it in your stomach. Where do you feel full of sunlight?”

“All over -- it feels all over good. Besides...” She pressed her hand below her right ribcage. “Your stomach might be full...” She pointed to her head. “...but your feelings are up here. There's no reason why you shouldn't feel a full stomach in your elbow or your toe, is there?”

“I suppose one reason is so you won't keep putting more into it. An overly-full stomach can be quite a disagreeable sensation.”

“I suppose...”

“Can you be overly full of sunlight?”

“No,” she replied. “Once I’m full, I’m full -- I can’t store any more. The light still feels good on my skin. I love it. This is the best light I’ve ever had, and I feel so good in it.”

“It must be very odd, being you,” he said. “To feel such a way about sunlight ... to savor it like a meal.”

“I was thinking the same about you,” she replied. “How odd it must be to feel burned by the sun.”

He watched her pluck material from the planting bed. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m culling the wheat sprouts. When I first did this, one of the other workers scolded me. I tried to explain that by culling, you give the remaining plants room to grow and they become stronger and more productive. So, they’re letting me care for this bed my way -- to see if it works. It gives me something to do. I like to be busy in the sun.” She smiled. “I’ve been drinking the hydroponic nutrient broth.” She giggled. “That surprised them, too. Now, if I can only find some protein.”

“Let’s wander over here.” He directed her toward a canteen with tables and vending machines. He scanned his wrist and purchased a package. “This is soybean cheese. See how this feels in your stomach.”

Laida opened the package and began eating. “Interesting -- agreeable.” She took another bite and pressed her hand on her abdomen. “Mmm... Do you have news?”

“Your interpreter explained the panel’s ruling on your status. Now, in the eyes of Floran law, you are human. No one in this hegemony may own, buy, sell, trade or lease you or any of your kind.”

“Yes -- here, you and I are equals.”

He shook his head. “No, Laida. I am not nor ever will be your equal. You are smarter, stronger and braver than I am. You and I are peers, and I am proud of it.”

“What of the other charges?”

“The three of us -- Zane, Andra and I -- have been exonerated. Mos goes to trial in a couple days. I’ll need to testify, but I’ll do so from Earth. I’ve been told the likely outcome is the murder will be ruled...”

“Justified?”

“...excusable. Remember, the judges ruled you -- all of you -- to be human beings in the eyes of the law. A human being has an absolute right to defend his own life and liberty. Mos will be released.”

“You can’t send him back to Varada. He killed a man. Excusable or not, they’ll consider him a menace and put him down for sure.”

“Like an Earth dog who bites a child -- even if the child provoked it. No -- he’ll be granted asylum here.”

“In a dome?”

“Yes. I hope they keep the trial short. He’s getting very weak.”

Laida looked down. "Poor Mos. He didn't mean to, Nykkyo. I know he feels badly about it. He didn't know his own strength."

"I know he didn't."

"Will Ms Ramina receive any compensation? I know she invests in each of us. She'll lose what she invested in me."

"A male is worth one and a female ten -- I recall. The question of compensation to Mos's master is one of the items on the diplomatic discussion list -- quite low on the list, but on it nonetheless. Ramina invested much more than money in you, Laida. I've been working with her on a way to make her whole for losing you."

"How?" she asked.

"I had the fortune of meeting a remarkable family living in the Green Zone. The BSS had little difficulty tracking them down. There's a daughter who reminds me very much of you. She reminds Ramina of you, too. Her name is Lise. She's an unregistered -- and she's a oneshot. Ramina is working with the BSS to register her."

"To find her work?"

"We've come up with a creative idea. Do you recall the name Fara?"

"Of course. She's one of Ms Ramina's."

"Fara is sterile. Ramina knows a surgeon who will transplant one of Lise's ovaries into Fara. Apparently it's a routine procedure on the farms for Fara's condition. He will also sterilize Lise so she need not fear a pregnancy."

"Yes -- it likely would be fatal to a oneshot. So, for the price of registration, Ms Ramina gets a fertile female."

"That, plus the doctor's fees. She will also sponsor a young woman she can love like a niece -- the sort of way she loves you. Lise will continue to live with her parents and Ramina will serve as her broker. Ramina thinks she'll have no trouble finding work. Unlike Lise's parents' broker, Ramina will let her keep her wages -- less a brokerage fee..."

"Knowing Ramina as I do, I imagine her fee adds up to her registration and medical outlays."

"I believe she's thinking along those lines. In addition, Ramina gets the comfort of knowing you are safe and cared for. In exchange, she is waiving all claims against Floran and the ExoService for granting you asylum. You didn't want to spend the next ten years of your life making baby after baby -- did you?"

Laida smiled. "No, I really didn't. It sounds like a win-win-win solution. I imagine Fara is excited about finally being able to conceive."

"Yes. Fertility will make her feel whole."

"You were able to work all this out from here?"

“Yes. We have the Floran and Varada communications interconnect working. Which reminds me... He took his handheld vidisplay from his sash, scanned his wrist and entered a code. Then he handed it to her.

Her eyes grew wide. “Ms Ramina!” She looked toward Nyk.

“Take as long as you want.”

Nyk paced around the canteen. “Yes,” he heard Laida say, “I’ve been given asylum here ... probably Mos, too. I’m fine ... Nykkyo’s been taking good care of me ... please explain it to my mother, Ms Ramina. I know you can explain so she’ll understand ... I love you, too, Ms Ramina...”

She handed the vidisplay to him. “Thank you. I miss her ... I miss them. They are my family.” Nyk opened his arms and she fell into them. He caressed her shoulders and kissed the top of her head as she sobbed. “Now, I’ll never see them again.”

“Never say never, Laida. Situations evolve. You might very well find yourself back there, some day. Everything has a purpose. You are here for a reason. Destiny hasn’t revealed it to us, yet.”

She wiped the tears from her face. “I suppose so...”

“And you can always call. Laida -- it appears you’ll be in Sudal for a while. I thought I’d show you some of the sights.”

“Do you mean, outside the dome?”

“It’s dusk -- they’ll be shutting off the lamps anyway.”

“Yes, they will be... Let me change.”

Nyk followed her to a corner near a storage shed adjacent to the hydroponic beds. Some screens had been set up. She stepped behind them. “Mr Hasse set this up for me -- so I could have some privacy.” She emerged from behind the screen wearing a Floran white, sleeveless tunic. “Some of the crop tenders donated old clothing.”

“You look great in Floran clothing, Laida.”

“I’ll bet you say that to all the women.”

He smiled. “Well -- I do think the female figure is flattered by a Floran tunic.”

“I knew it!”

“But, you look especially good -- with your dark skin against the white fabric. I’ll remember to look for a deep green *lifxarpa* for you, the next time I’m in Floran City.”

“No -- please, not green.”

“Then orange -- to match your eyes.”

He led her outside to the groundcar and opened it. She sat beside him and Nyk programmed destinations. "I'll show you Sudal University. It's where Andra and my wife work. I'll show you downtown Sudal and then we'll take a look at my childhood home."

"Sounds good."

The car pulled onto the north-south arterial highway that bisected the city. Nyk pressed his hand against hers. "This, Laida, is a Floran gesture of friendship. When I press my palm against yours, I am offering you the gift of friendship and openness. If you accept, spread your fingers."

She smiled and opened her fingers. Nyk laced his with hers.

Laida looked at their hands locked together. "This never would've happened on Varada," she said. Nyk caressed her forearm. He pointed out landmarks as the car headed south and explained the tropical storm shutters all the buildings sported.

The groundcar pulled to a stop outside the Residence. By now the ruby disk of the setting sun had dropped below the western horizon and it was deep dusk. Nyk led her inside. "Hello, Andra," Laida said.

"Laida -- you're looking healthy."

She smiled and presented the backs of her hands. "Yes, thanks to your dome."

"Is Suki around?" Nyk asked.

"She went to bed. She was exhausted from traveling."

"I can understand that," he replied.

"She wanted to meet Laida but she couldn't keep her eyes open."

"Andra, do you live here, too?" Laida asked.

"Andra is companion to my wife, as well as a friend of mine." Nyk led Laida around the house and explained how the second and third floors had no outside walls -- how they were left open to admit the breeze. Then, he led her outdoors to the bluff and they looked down at the sea.

He escorted her down the bluff and to a bowl-shaped depression lined with black sand. "This is my favorite spot. I like to lie here and look up at the sky. The night sky is Floran's most beautiful feature." He lay on the sand and she lay beside him.

"This is beautiful," she said. "I think I could get used to living here. And, you have been so sweet to me."

"I care for you very much, Laida. I understand why Ramina loves you so. Laida, there's something else... Here, on Floran we have a tradition called *amften*. It's when two people become dear friends and seal the bond by sharing the gift. That's what *amften* means -- special friends."

"The gift?"

“Love making.”

“You want to make love with me?” She sat up. “I’m flattered, Nykkyo. I really am.” She shook her head. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“It would violate a very deep and old taboo -- one from the days when my kind first emerged. Varadans find the notion abhorrent.”

“I’m a Floran, Laida. The color of your skin makes no difference to me. It’s your persona I admire. It’s no one’s fault your persona chose your body in which to live.”

She smiled. “Does that sort of talk work reliably for you?”

He returned her smile. “Most of the time. I do care for you very much. I am sincere.”

“I know you are. Nykkyo -- you might not be a Varadan... But, I am. The taboo works the other way, too. Something deep inside me finds the notion of sex between my kind and yours ... revolting.”

“Laida, you are more human than most of the people I deal with day-to-day. Take it as an insult or a compliment -- it’s the truth.”

“From you I’ll accept it as a compliment. Believe me, Nykkyo -- it’s nothing personal. Part of me would like to, but this is something I can’t get past.”

“I understand.”

“Please take me back to the dome.”

Nyk led her to the groundcar and rode in silence toward the northern outskirts of Sudal. He felt Laida’s palm against his. He spread and locked his fingers with hers. She squeezed his hand.

“Laida, I love you.”

“I know you do. With your kindness and all you’ve done for me -- I have no doubt.”

“I love you even if we can never consummate...”

“Never say never, Nykkyo. Instead, let’s say not now. Besides -- I’m a virgin. I don’t know how to. I have to read up on the practice, first.”

“Well ... why didn’t you say so? I have a strict policy. I do not go around defiling virgins. It’s a policy I never violate.”

“Never?” she asked.

“Almost never.”

The car stopped outside the dome. “Good night, Nykkyo. Thank you for everything.”

“Laida -- Tomorrow I return to Earth, and I don't know when I'll be back or see you again. Will you let me sleep with you tonight? I won't force myself on you. I'd never do that to anyone. I just want to hold you in my arms before I leave. Would that be all right?”

She broke into a smile. “Yes -- I think it would be.”

He escorted her inside and followed her to the corner where the screens were set up. He stretched out on a mattress that was lying on the dome floor. Laida lay beside him. He gazed into her orange eyes and stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers.

“The stars on this world are so bright,” she said.

“Yes... You are a beautiful young woman, Laida.”

“No. I'm not a woman.”

“The judges said so -- here, you are a woman.”

“Wouldn't I be prettier to you with long hair and light skin?”

“Your persona would be just as beautiful in any body. No, Laida -- your features are what make you, you.” She touched his head and pulled her hand back. “It's all right -- go ahead.”

Laida ran her fingers through his hair. “What strange stuff this is...”

“Would it be all right if I kissed you goodnight?” he asked.

“Okay...” He brought his lips to hers. Then, he lay on his back and coaxed her against him. He slipped his arm around her and she snuggled against him. “Mmm... This does feel good.”

“It feels even better after lovemaking...” Her eyes turned to his, she cracked a smile and shook her head. “You can't blame a guy for trying...”

“You don't appreciate how much I overcame agreeing to this. If you and I had been caught like this on Varada -- it would've been certain death for me and a heavy sentence for you.”

“Have you ever slept in someone's arms before?”

“Never. This is the first time.”

“I'm sure it won't be the last.”

“Nykkyo?”

“Yes, Laida.”

“I love you, too.”

He kissed the top of her head. “I know you do.” He lay looking up through the dome roof at the stars as she drifted to sleep.

Nyk stepped into the kitchen and poured some green tea. He set his cup next to Suki's and pulled up a stool. "*Bon'matina.*"

"*Bon'matina.*"

"Are you all rested up from your travel?"

"Mmm... I slept like a log. Are YOU *allamften* -ed up with Laida after last night?"

"No."

"No?"

"No -- she refused me."

"She refused YOU? What is the matter with the girl?"

"She has her reasons and I agree with them."

"Now, you're off to Earth?"

"Yes -- Dyppa is picking me up on the relay station and I fly from Milwaukee to LaGuardia. I don't know what I'm going to tell your mom about my absence."

Suki giggled. "Mom probably thinks you're a CIA operative or something."

Nyk trod down the jetway and into the concourse at LaGuardia. He spotted Seymor waiting outside the security checkpoint. "Welcome home, lad."

"Seymor -- I figured it out."

"Figured what out?"

"Why trouble seems so intent on seeking me out. It's not me -- it's Kronta. HE's the one with the dark cloud over his head. The problem is, it never rains on HIM -- only on his associates."

"What makes you think it's Kronta?"

"I got involved in that Lexal thing with the guns at Kronta's request. It was the same with the Tulsa virus, and now this. Kronta was responsible for my involvement with Suki in the first place -- in an indirect way, at least. Whenever Kronta is involved -- trouble is lurking around the corner. Seymor -- next time Kronta has some assignment for me -- tell him I'm indisposed. Take the assignment yourself if you don't believe me. Just make sure your insurance is paid up."

"How did the reunion with Sukiko go?" Nyk looked down and shook his head. "I figured you staged that mutiny so you'd have more time there with her."

"Don't joke about it, Seymor. She was teaching a course on T-Delta the whole time. We barely passed each other in the night." He paused. "She invited me to be with her on Myatasya, if it's all right"

with you.”

“When is that?”

“It works out to be sometime in June on the Earth calendar. It's all right, Seymor, if you need me here. I'd just be underfoot there.”

“You must go, Nyk. I can certainly spare you for that.”

“That's if I don't get a Dear John letter before then.”

“Come on, lad -- I'll drive you home.”

Nyk let himself into the front door and tread softly into the house. The sound of a television came from the living room. Yasuko was sitting in a chair, dozing. He switched off the TV. “Yasuko... Yasuko...” He nudged her.

“Oh, Nick -- you're home.”

“Yes -- I'm home. No more assignments for a little while.”

“Where DO you go on these ... assignments, Nick?” He looked at her. “What are you? Some sort of ... secret agent?”

“No, Yasuko.”

“You must be to go off where no one can get hold of you for weeks on end.”

“Okay, Yasuko. I'll tell you the truth. Yes -- I am a secret agent, but not for the CIA or the FBI. I'm from another planet, and I'm here on a covert mission. Don't worry -- our reasons for being here are benign. We mean no harm to Earth or any of its people...”

Yasuko continued to gaze at him with a stone face. “Nick -- your cover is safe with me. If you can't talk about, just tell me so and we'll drop it.”

“I can't talk about it, Yasuko.”

She nodded. “Good night, Nick.” She hoisted herself out of her chair and headed toward her bedroom.

Epilogue -- Honeymoon

Nykkyo sat in the passenger compartment of a livery car as its driver negotiated the streets of the Varadan capital. It stopped outside a one-story structure in the same sector as Ramina's breedingery. He handed the driver a scrip card. "Keep the change."

Inside the building he spotted Ramina. "Have they started?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"May I see them?"

"This way."

He followed Ramina into a treatment room. He looked around in the subdued lighting. Lying on a pair of cots were two novonid girls. Nyk approached the one with a thin, boyish figure. "You must be Fara," he said.

"You must be Nykkyo."

He gripped and squeezed her hand. "Good luck," he said, then turned to the other cot. "Lise ... I thought I'd never see you again."

"Neither did I. I'm so happy to see you, Nykkyo. What brings you here?"

"Ogan insisted I attend the installation of the Floran ambassador -- as the official interpreter. It's not as if Ambassador Morsk needs one -- he has had Varadan language training. I think Ogan wanted a drinking buddy." Lise smiled. "That was yesterday. When I heard today was the big day -- I had to come see you. Where are your folks?"

"Neither of them could get the day off. They'll be here when they can." She peeled down the drape covering her and Nyk saw the registry tattoo on her left clavicle. "Look..."

"I'm both happy and sad for you, Lise. I'm happy you no longer need to lurk in the shadows of the Green Zone, but I'm sad that mark must be the price of your safety."

"I'm happy to have it. Ms Ramina says she has an assignment for me -- babysitting a pair of Varadan children."

"I think you'll be good at it."

A medical assistant wheeled a cart of equipment into the room. "We'll get started shortly," she announced. "I'll start by putting these probes on your head and chest..."

"You don't start an intravenous drip?" Nyk asked.

"No," the attendant whispered in reply. "They're deathly afraid of needles, and I don't blame them."

Nyk took Lise's hand. "Are you afraid?"

"Yes -- a little."

“I would be, too. Good luck and good courage, Lise.” He held her hand and she grasped his in a white-knuckled grip.

Lise looked toward the assistant. “Can he stay and hold my hand?”

“Until you're under, I suppose.”

The doctor entered and switched on an overhead floodlamp. “Lise, we'll do you first. We'll make two small incisions on your abdomen, tie your tubes and harvest one of your ovaries.”

“Only one?” Lise asked.

“We'll leave the other so your hormones stay balanced.” He removed a drape covering her lower abdomen and palpitated her. He nodded toward the assistant.

She adjusted controls and placed a mask over Lise's nose and mouth. Lise tightened her grip on Nyk's hand. “Lise ... breathe deeply ... that's it ... in ... out ... in...”

Nyk watched Lise's ribcage expand and contract as she complied. Her eyes glazed, her eyelids drooped and her grasp relaxed. The attendant glanced at a brainwave monitor. “She's under. We'll call you when she's in recovery.”

He kissed Lise's forehead and headed with Ramina to the waiting room.

Nyk paced the waiting room. “So, this is a novonid clinic,” he remarked.

“This is one of the better ones. The surgeon here is board-certified.”

“There's a board of novonid medicine?” Nyk asked.

“No -- he's a certified medical doctor ... in human medicine. Anyone can hang a sign as a novonid practitioner. This doctor is head of surgery at one of the suburban hospitals. He believes they deserve better.”

“He's BSS, no doubt.”

“Of course.”

“I'm impressed with the dignity they show the patients here.”

“I wanted to tell you, Nykkyo, how grateful I am to you for caring for Laida. She calls me nearly every day and we have long conversations. I never had children of my own, and Laida is the closest I have to a real daughter. I'm sorry she's offworld, but I'm delighted she's happy.”

“She does seem very happy. Tell me, Ramina -- Laida told me they store sunlight. Is that true?”

“In a sense, they do.”

“She didn't seem to know how they do it.”

“They store activated chlorophyll. Their blood is brown because of the green corpuscles. Those carry activated chlorophyll to their spleens, which is modified to be the major photosynthetic organ. Their spleens stockpile activated chlorophyll.”

“I truly wonder what it must be like to be one of them. Laida said she has stored so much sunlight, she glows inside.”

“That sounds like Laida.” Ramina pursed her lips. “I do miss her, Nykkyo. Our media conversations are a poor substitute for holding her in my arms.”

“I’m also in a long-distance relationship. I know what you mean.”

“I also wanted to say how much I’ve enjoyed working with Lise and her family.”

“How did Grott and Rayla take it?”

“They were suspicious ... cautious at first. Once I convinced them of my good intentions, they recognized the benefits of our little arrangement. I had never been inside the Green Zone before. It was an eye-opener. We BSS have a lot of work to do there.”

“I hope the surgery goes well.”

“It should. I’ve learned these are done frequently on the pomma farms when a female has atrophied ovaries. The doctor said within a year Fara’s female features should develop and she should become fertile. Not too long ago such a one as she would’ve been put down. I couldn’t bear the thought of that, but I also despaired what to do with her. When you suggested a transplant -- I thought it was brilliant.”

“You could’ve used one of your other females as a donor.”

“All mine are either pregnant or nursing,” she replied. “This is a good solution.”

“Just make sure,” he said, “that Fara conceives only boys. Otherwise you’ll have more oneshots to deal with.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“Tell me about the assignment you found for Lise.”

“She’ll be caring for a pair of toddlers -- a boy and a girl. They live in one of the working-class suburbs. It’s a single mother who was just awarded custody, and she can’t afford care, otherwise.”

“How do you learn of these opportunities?” he asked.

“Through networking. This mom is delighted that Lise knows how to read.”

“Has she met Lise?”

“The mother has, but not the children.”

“What will the constables think of a novonid walking down the street with a pair of white children in tow?”

“I've warned Lise of some of the ... challenges in this assignment. I've also advised her how to deal with them. Don't worry about her, Nykkyo. She isn't blazing any trails -- there are other novonid caregivers. If I didn't think her capable, I wouldn't have recommended her.

“I imagine your reputation preceeds her...”

The door to the waiting room opened and the surgeon stepped in. “Everything went well. I won't say it was routine, because surgery never is. We had no unpleasant surprises and they're both recovering.” He handed a bottle of a thick, clear fluid to Nyk. “This is amazing stuff. I was able to close Fara's incision knowing there was good circulation to her new ovary. It dramatically reduced the blood loss.”

“Keep it,” Nyk replied. “There's plenty where that came from.”

“I wish I could use it on my human patients.”

“You can -- it works on humans. A Floran medic wouldn't perform surgery without it.”

“No, I can't -- it hasn't been approved by the Varadan Medical Board.”

“Can we see them?” Ramina asked.

The doctor gestured toward the treatment rooms. Nyk stepped in and saw an attendant sitting with Lise and stroking her cheek as she wept. “It's a release,” the attendant said.

“What about Fara?”

“She's still under. We had to make her slumber deeper.”

Nyk crouched and took Lise's hand. “How do you feel?” he asked.

“Not very good,” she blubbered. “I have a headache and it hurts to move ... I have an awful taste in my mouth... I had a terrible dream...”

“Do you remember your dream?”

“No. I remember it was horrible... I want sun ... I need sun...”

“You rest and heal.” He kissed her forehead.

“You can help me with the cot,” the attendant said. “Now that she's waking, we can wheel her out in back for some sun. We had to sunstarve them for a day to make sure their metabolisms were fully aerobic -- otherwise we couldn't anesthetize them. We learned THAT lesson the hard way, believe me!”

“Ready for a little ride, Lise?” he asked. “Okay, let's go...” He pushed and the attendant led down a corridor and into a garden behind the clinic. An older novonid man lay dozing on a reclining chair. Nyk removed the drapes to expose her green skin to the sunlight; then folded one and lay it across her hips. “How does this feel?”

“Mmm... better...”

“Shall I cover your breasts, too?”

“The sun feels good. If you're not offended...”

“I'm never offended by the sight of a beautiful young woman, Lise.”

“Nykkyo -- can you stay with me until my parents come?”

“I'd like to. I'd like a chance to say hello to them. I'll get a chair.”

“I'm sure they'd like to say hello to you, too. We want you to answer a question for us.”

“What question?” Nyk asked.

“Why me? Of all of us living in the Zone, why did you pick me?”

“Why NOT you?” he replied. “Have you someone else in mind?”

She smiled. “No... You ... and Ms Ramina have probably saved my life. You certainly saved me from a life of indignity.”

“Perhaps we've saved more than just you, Lise. Think about it. What assignment did you say Ramina found for you?”

“Babysitting two white children.”

“As I said, you'll be good at it.”

“I'm afraid -- I've never been near white children. I won't know how...”

“You'll find them to be exactly like ... children.”

“What if they hate me?”

“I think they're a little young for that. Little children are born lovers. They must be taught to hate -- it's not a natural behavior for them. You'll teach them a different lesson -- one that might be at odds with the one Varadan society teaches about your kind. They will learn to question -- and to evaluate based on their own experiences. It's only two children, but it's a start. You'll do fine. You're a fine young woman, Lise -- raised by two fine parents.”

She turned her face toward him and he gazed into her orange eyes. “Thanks,” she said.

“They must be proud of you.”

“They are.”

“You'll need to be brave and strong in this assignment, Lise -- but I know you're both.”

“Mmm,” she said, “the sunlight is beginning to fill me. I'm feeling better.”

He took her hand. “Why don't you relax, close your eyes, and sleep off any lingering effects of the

anesthesia? That way, you'll be in good shape when Grott and Rayla arrive.”

“Okay.”

“I'll sit here and hold your hand.”

“I'd like that.” Nyk caressed her forearm. She closed her eyes. Her breathing grew shallow and ceased.

The surgeon approached. “How's she doing?” he whispered.

“She stopped breathing,” Nyk replied. The doctor smiled and nodded. “I must keep reminding myself that, when they DON'T breathe, it's a good sign.”

Nyk climbed aboard the Floran deep-space shuttle parked on the runway of the capital airport. He gave the pilot the Floran two-finger salute. “We'll be underway shortly.”

The shuttle accelerated, lifted off and assumed a nearly vertical trajectory. Soon Nyk was looking down on the Varadan planet. “We're in a parking orbit,” the pilot reported. “Where to?”

“Myataxya,” Nyk replied.

“YES!” the pilot exclaimed. “My kind of destination...”

The flash shields covered the viewports and the warp jumps thudded through the vessel. The warp indicators winked out and the viewport shutters slid open. Nyk looked out onto the Myataxyan parent world, a golden gas giant surrounded by shimmering rings. Below was the Myataxya colony world, an Earth-like moon, looming larger as the courier executed an orbital insertion maneuver. He feasted his eyes as the courier made its reentry approach, landed and parked at the shuttleport.

He stepped to the polymer concrete runway apron. He and his pilot were greeted by bare-chested young men and women placing garlands of fragrant blossoms around their necks. Nyk headed toward the livery, pausing to examine a shrub covered with large blossoms and golf-ball sized, rainbow-striped fruits. He saw a lizard-like animal slink up to one of the fruits, adjust its coloration to match and begin feeding.

Nyk stood in line for an automated livery car. He specified his destination as the Premier Resort and awaited the computerized dispatch of a car. Inhaling deeply he savored the atmosphere -- warm, mildly humid and drenched in the aromas of blossoms and scented leaves.

His livery approached and stopped for him. He dropped in his case and watched the scenery as the car headed up a knoll and toward a sprawling complex lining a lake. Inside the main lodge he approached the front desk and pressed his wrist to a scanpad. “Mr Kyhana -- welcome to Myataxya. Dr Kyhana has already checked in -- garden room four. Place your bags on the pallet and they'll be delivered to the room.

Nyk nodded and gave the desk clerk the two-fingered Floran salute. He strolled outside, along a promenade lined with blossomed shrubs and found the room.

It was carved into the side of the hill, with a transparent, domed roof. The walls were solid rock

oozing groundwater, which cascaded down to a catch trough and into a stream cutting the room in two. He crossed a footbridge and headed toward the sounds of falling water. "Suki," he called.

"In here," he heard her voice. He turned a corner and saw her sitting in a pool filled by a ceiling-high waterfall. Steam from the pool was vented through an opening in the domed roof. "Look at this!" she exclaimed. "The pool is filled with geothermally heated mineral water. It never stops flowing and the temperature is perfect. This feels SO good. Come on in."

Nyk stripped off his tunic, tested the water with his toe and then waded into the knee-deep pool. He sat in the water and held her.

"I've been in here since I arrived," she said. "My fingers are all crinkly."

"We can't have that."

"Oh, yes we can." She snuggled against him. "Nykkyo -- I'm sorry I haven't had the time to give you the attention you deserve."

"It's all right -- really, it is. I'm delighted that you're happy and successful. It pleases me beyond happy."

"I know when one partner is successful and busy, a relationship can suffer. I saw it with Mom and Daddy."

"Suki -- if you find yourself growing to the point at which you don't need me ... or that I become a burden... You're free to go your own way."

"That sounds like you came here expecting the kiss-off."

"I was afraid ... with all your *amften* ..."

"Nykkyo -- are YOU worried about that? YOU?"

"I saw how the practice changed Senta -- how I became no longer her one-and-only but just a face in a crowd. I did fear..."

"I'm not Senta... Well -- that explains it. I thought maybe you were applying a double standard."

"I believe in the practice," he replied. "But -- I believe it must mean something ... not the way Senta does it. I'm selective ... the same way Andra is. I must truly care about someone. And, I'll never, ever ... love anyone the way I love you."

"I'm selective, too. Nykkyo, living on Floran has permitted me to explore my sexuality in a way I never could have on Earth. I think I'm better for it. I'm more comfortable with myself, and that makes me a better and more giving lover. Do you know what that means?"

"Why don't you tell me?"

"It means I can better express ... how much ... I ... love ... YOU. Nykkyo, I've been anticipating this reunion since we made our plans. As the day drew near, I found myself daydreaming that I was in your arms again. Let me show you something..."

She took his hand, cupped it over her left breast and pressed it into her flesh.

“Your heart is pounding,” he said.

“I’m this eager, Nykkyo -- to feel your touch ... to have you play my body like a musical instrument -- the way only YOU can. And you can, not because you’re a good lover -- which you are -- but, because OUR love is so profound.”

“Your *amften* taught you that?”

“And, more.”

“Then, thank them for it. I thank you for reminding me that my large and rather tender ego could stand some shrinking and toughening.”

“Nykkyo -- I’m honoring the vows I recited with you that August day on Earth. You ARE my light and my savior. Without you -- I wouldn’t have any of this. I’d be dead ... long dead. I love you so much, and I’ll never stop. You and I ARE forever.”

He kissed her hair, leaned back and held her as he gazed up at the azure Myatasyan sky. To the east the tip of the planet’s rings were rising above the horizon. He looked at his hand. “Now MY fingers are getting crinkly,” he said. “Maybe we’ve soaked long enough. We can always come back for more.”

“Mmm...”

“Besides -- you and I have a duet to perform.”

Suki snuggled under Nyk’s arm. He caressed her back and hair. “Mmm,” she said.

“Mmm?”

“Mmmmmmm... That was a performance worthy of a honeymoon.”

“No it wasn’t,” he replied, “That was just a prelude ... an overture. Just wait for the full...”

“...Theme and variations?”

“Yes...” He counted on his fingers. “We have *piano* and *forte* ... *largo* , *andante* , *allegro* and *presto* ...”

“...*con brio*...” she added.

“...and, others that haven’t been named yet.”

“I don’t know how I’ll keep my mind on my conference sessions.” She kissed his cheek and snuggled against him. “How’s Laida doing?”

“Why is it,” he asked, “when we make love, that we always end up talking about other women?”

“Would you prefer we talk of other men?”

“... Laida is fine.”

“You must take me to meet her some day.”

“Yes -- some day when you and I are onworld at the same time. I stopped to visit her on my way up here -- after dropping off a case of champagne at Kronta's. She's been given responsibility for a plot of wheat. Hers is bigger and fuller than any of the others. She told me she feels a kinship with the plants. She can feel when conditions aren't right -- when one of the lamps needs service.”

“To think of her -- living her life confined to that dome, and tending crops. It doesn't sound too much different than her lot on Varada.”

“Sometime, ask her if she thinks her lot is any different than it was on Varada. She loves it in there, Suki. She's a team leader for her plot, in charge of a half dozen croptenders. They love her. They built a little house for her inside the dome -- a house without a roof. Dyomann tells me the sky's the limit for her.”

“More precisely, the dome's the limit,” Suki replied.

“She has as good a chance at being named dome manager as anyone. She's not a prisoner in there. She can -- and, she does -- come and go as she pleases. She may not live on Floran forever. The situation on Varada may evolve to the point where she'll be welcome there.”

“I suppose that's possible.”

“More than possible -- likely. The question is, will she want to go? Kronta managed to get her registered as an honorary Floran -- ID chip and all. They won't give her a contraceptive implant because ... well, because the medics don't understand her body chemistry well enough to make one for her.”

“What will they do about that?”

“We'll get to that later... She's become fast friends with one of the judges who sat at our hearing -- one who's an expert on *Red Dawn*, *Red Dusk*. This judge has it memorized ... she knows every word of it, in Old *Lingwa*, by heart. But -- she had never heard it spoken. This judge spent several days in the dome, sitting under a shade while Laida sat under the lamps and read it to her -- the whole thing, from end-to-end. Laida tells me she'd never have that sort of acceptance on Varada.”

“It must make it easier for her.”

“She said something else.”

“What was that?”

“We were discussing the ongoing negotiations between her world and ours.”

“How are they going?” Suki asked.

“Cautiously. She said she had been thinking. She understands how fearful Florans are that Varada might start exporting novonids -- how damaging to our society it would be to have an institutionalized

underclass.”

“Yes -- I agree with her.”

“But she also said that the sort of freedom she finds here would be just as frightening to Varada should we export it. It was a very salient observation. I hadn't considered it that way. She is a remarkable girl. Hers are remarkable people. It may very well be, years into the future, that her kind will make up the bulk of the hegemony's population. I'm sure they'll dominate Varada some day.”

“You never told me why,” she said.

“Why what?”

“Why she refused to be your *amfta* .”

“We refused each other. She was bothered by the fact I'm not a novonid. She wasn't ready to engage in an inter-species relationship. It is taboo on Varada.”

“I can understand that,” Suki replied. “It would border on bestiality.”

“I disagree. That's an Earth notion. On Earth you don't have other communicative, consensual species. The whole thing centers on consent, Suki. Animals on Earth are unable to give consent -- that's what makes the practice reprehensible there. I think when two sentient, free-willed, fully competent individuals give consent, it doesn't matter whether or not they're the same race, the same religion, the same color, the same gender, or from the same planet ... or the same species.”

“Or, mother and son?” she asked. Nyk stopped short. “Now do you see how deeply these taboos run? You refused a relationship with me until you were convinced we weren't really related.”

“I was being sensitive to YOUR cultural sensibilities, *korlyta* ... You're right, Suki. I should've been more sensitive to Laida's.”

“That was her reason. What was yours?”

“She was a virgin, and I don't defile virgins.”

“Mmm...” She snuggled to him. “I'm happy to hear that.” She kissed him. “You said WAS.”

“Laida is pregnant.”

“Really?”

“Yes -- she is sunning for two. After Mos was acquitted of intentional homicide for breaking Captain Hayt's neck, he was given asylum here. Neither Laida nor Mos believe they can safely return to Varada. And, the only place they can live on Floran is inside one of the agridomes. Laida insisted Mos live in the same dome as she because ... well, because Mos isn't as educated as she is, nor does he have her social skills. They had been acquainted on Varada, and here their friendship has blossomed. She is teaching him to read, and together they're learning *Lingwa* .”

“It sounds sweet.”

“It is sweet. Mos truly cares for her. He's a bit clumsy and inarticulate, but he is sincere -- and a damned good cromptender. When she told me she was a virgin, she also said she didn't know how and needed to read up on the subject.” Nyk chuckled. “When I noticed she was pregnant, I told her she must've done her reading. She gave me a shy look and said no -- that she and Mos figuring it out by themselves was part of the fun.”

“Nykkyo -- I want another baby.”

“You want another baby? You didn't want the first one.”

“I know I didn't. Babies will do that to you. I desperately want to have another baby. I know I can't. I know Andra can't, and neither can Senta. Florans are so ... so non-fecund, it's a wonder we don't have negative population growth.”

“We have population stability -- right where we want it.”

“If Laida is the only one of your friends who's pregnant -- well, maybe that's as close as I can come.”

“Novonid infants are adorable.”

“Please introduce me to her. I'm the only one of your circle of friends who HAS had a baby. Maybe I can give her some advice.”

“Maybe you can. We'll make a point of it.”