



1 -- A New Assignment

Nykkyo Kyhana lay on his back, relaxed in the sweet exhaustion that comes after. He surveyed the room, illuminated by the nightstand lamp turned low. It was the bedroom in the apartment above the house in Queens. The window was open and mild, late-April night air wafted in, now and then carrying with it a trace of diesel fumes. He could hear the noise of the City -- that of traffic, the muffled sound of a television down the block ... the occasional siren.

Suki lay under his left arm, clutching him. He stroked her bicep and contemplated her yellow-brown skin. Nyk pressed his lips to the top of her head and inhaled the scent of her hair. She snuggled against him. “Mmm,” she said.

“Mmm?”

She drew in a deep breath. “Mmmmmm... My whole body is perfectly relaxed. If I close my eyes, I'll be asleep. Mmm...”

“I hope you can keep those beautiful eyes open for a little while. I love gazing into them.”

“I'm trying.”

“Are you happy?”

“Uh-unh.”

“No?”

“Uh-UNH.” She kissed his cheek. “I’m deliriously happy. Oh, Nykkyo -- when I’m in your arms -- I truly have no cares.”

“Wouldn’t you like to have this for the rest of your life?”

“Who wouldn’t?”

“Then marry me.”

“Is that the only way I can have it?”

“...no... of course not.”

“Nykkyo, I swore an oath I’d never marry again.”

“And, I’ve sworn oaths I’ve broken.” He kissed the top of her head. “To think all this started with a simple question about *miso* soup.”

“It was the first thing you asked me.”

“No -- the first thing I asked you was if you were Japanese.”

“I told you I was an American.”

“Then I said you had beautiful eyes.”

“And then I ran away -- like a scared rabbit.”

“Was I really so frightening?” he asked.

“Terrifying.” She ran her hand along his arm.

“What did I do to frighten you?”

She smiled. “What you said about my eyes ... I guess you didn’t realize it’s a notorious pickup line.”

“Pickup?”

“Yes -- I thought you were going to hit on me.”

“Oh, no, Suki. I wouldn’t do that.”

“I know -- but I didn’t know it then.” She pulled herself against him and let out a contented sigh. “*Bon’noka*, Nykkyo.” She closed her eyes.

Nyk felt her legs twitch as she drifted toward sleep. He brushed aside some of her hair and gazed at her face. Her breathing became deep and regular. A tear formed and ran down his cheek.

Morning light waked Nyk. Suki still lay clutching him. He kissed her cheek and she cracked open her eyes. “*Bon'matina*,” he said.

“*Bon'matina*.”

“Suki, what did I do to make you think I'd hurt you?”

“What?”

“What did I do or say to make you believe I'd strike you? I'd never harm you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Last night -- you said when we first met, you feared I'd hit you.”

“Oh... I said I thought you might be trying to hit on me.” She giggled. “Have you been worrying about that?” She kissed his cheek. “It's an expression. I thought you were trying to ... you know, to pick me up.”

His mouth made an O. “I understand. You thought maybe I was paying you a hollow compliment, in the hope you might lower your guard and perhaps consent to sexual activity.”

“Yeah ... that's the ... sort of thing I thought might happen.”

“Forgive me. I have much to learn of Earth mating practices -- it's not a topic covered in my training.”

“Nykkyo -- on your world, how would two people approach each other?”

“Well, if two people were attracted to each other, one might ask the other if they cared to make love.”

“Just like that?”

“Oh, yes. We're quite direct about such things. You always know where you stand with another Floran, and we know no means no. The odds are the answer would be yes.” Suki shook her head. “We have different notions of love and fidelity than here on Earth. But, I'm not like that. Perhaps it's one reason I feel more comfortable here than on my homeworld. I'm quite a bit more reserved than a typical Floran. I must know someone and care for them before I can engage in intimacy.”

“How would you get to know someone?”

“Do you mean, how would I attempt to make someone my friend?” He thought, then said, “I might start by paying a compliment.”

“Like telling a girl she has pretty eyes?”

He smiled. "Yes -- but only if she really did."

Suki sat up and swung her feet to the floor. "If you'll excuse me, I have to vomit." She walked briskly toward the bathroom.

Nyk stood by the bathroom door. Suki emerged with her hand on her stomach. "I'll be so glad when I'm over this part of it. Mom says when she was carrying me she had terrible morning sickness."

"Are you coming downstairs?"

"Once the nausea subsides. Go ahead -- don't wait for me." She headed back toward the bathroom.

Nyk pulled on a pair of twill pants and a polo shirt and descended the stairs. He walked into the kitchen and sat at the table. Yasuko poured a cup of coffee and set it before him.

"Good morning, Nick," she said. "How are the lovebirds this morning?"

"Suki said she'll be down once her morning sickness subsides."

"I had an awful time with her -- it seemed to take forever before it went away."

"Yasuko, have you begun to accept Suki's pregnancy?"

She smiled and shook her head. "As you said -- Sukiko is an adult and free to make her own decisions. I'm still terribly worried, though."

"About what?"

"I think she'd be better off rearing a child she wanted and planned for."

"She wants this one."

"She says she does, but I wonder if any woman can care for a child conceived in a rape as she would one planned for and conceived in love."

"It's not the child's fault who the father is."

"I suppose you're right about that, Nick. We know nothing about the kid who raped her. I still think she'd be better off... But, what I think is immaterial. I do think you and she could make some beautiful children."

"It can't happen, Yasuko -- I'm sterile."

"You're sure?"

"Without doubt -- if there were one thing about my life I could change it would be that. I long to be able to father Suki's child."

"That's a shame... So this child is it, then." She rolled her eyes. "If this one ends up the sort of youth she was... You two will have your work cut out for you."

“Suki turned out all right.”

“Not without giving us fits. I'll be honest Nick -- there were many years in which we despaired having anything like what we now have with her. They say a grandchild is a parent's reward for not strangling her teen. Believe me, Sukiko gave me ample grounds. I am adjusting to the notion of being a grandmother. I think I might enjoy it.”

“I can't wait to meet him.”

“How can you know it's a him?”

“We assume it's a boy.”

“George and I were positive Sukiko would be a boy. We even had a boy's name ready. Then, she came along...”

“And disappointed you?”

“No, not disappointed. Surprised, perhaps.” Yasuko closed her eyes. “George always wanted a son. I do believe he's happy with the notion of a son-in-law.”

“She hasn't said yes, yet.”

“I see how you two interact. That girl's nuts if she refuses you, Nick.”

“We have plenty of time.”

Suki stepped into the kitchen and sat beside Nyk. She folded her arms across her abdomen and lay her head on the table.

“Still sick?” her mother asked.

“When will it go away?” Suki moaned. Her mother set a bowl of rice before her. “You must want to turn my dry heaves into wet ones.”

“Morning sickness or not, you still need nourishment.” Yasuko set a cup on the table. “Ginger tea -- to settle your stomach.” Suki sipped the tea and unenthusiastically picked up a clump of rice with a pair of chopsticks. “What are your plans today?” Yasuko asked.

“I asked Suki to help me purchase a wardrobe,” Nyk replied. “Monday, I start my new job and it requires business attire.”

“Maybe I'll tag along. George needs a few new shirts.”

Nyk surveyed the pile of clothing he had purchased. He picked up a necktie. “This is an essential part of business attire?”

“I'm afraid so,” Suki replied. “Daddy hates wearing them. Think of it as the Earth equivalent to a Floran *xarpa* -- it serves no purpose other than decoration.”

“The *xarpa* has utility. Floran tunics have no pockets -- without it we have no place to carry small articles. Not that we have much to carry -- everything we need is right here.” He held up his right arm.

“Your wrist chip.”

“A wrist scan unlocks doors, activates transportation -- pays for groceries. I still have difficulty with the notion of currency -- although I do understand the principal of the debit card.”

“Nykkyo, I want to compliment you on your street smarts today. You did the right thing -- ignoring those skinheads who were taunting us.”

“I recall from my training the best way to deal with verbal hostility is to ignore it. I'm not sure what it was we did to provoke them.”

“They didn't like seeing a white man holding hands with an Asian woman -- especially a pregnant one. I've had to deal with such all my life. If Mom and I had been Black, it would've been even worse.”

“I'll never understand why everyone on this world can't revel in the marvelous diversity. I cherish your Asian heritage, Suki.”

“I know you do. Nykkyo, you're the most color-blind person I've ever met. Many on this planet share your view. Unfortunately, many don't. You may have to develop a thick skin.”

“It's my heritage, too.”

“I know -- but they didn't. It can work both ways. There are undoubtedly plenty of Asians who'd be just as unhappy to see us together -- maybe more so.”

“More so?”

“It's a vestige of an Earth tribal mentality -- and, sexual politics. You see -- women were regarded as chattel. A white man would see you as a conqueror and me as your trophy.”

“And, an Asian man might see me as a marauder, despoiling the tribe's asset. I understand. Given that context, I'm pleased with the level of acceptance your parents have shown me. How would they feel if they knew I was a Floran?”

She smiled. “Nykkyo -- my folks are delighted by the fact you're a man. It wouldn't matter if you were purple with pink polka-dots. Come, Mom has dinner ready.”

Nyk walked into the kitchen carrying a necktie. Suki's father sat reading the Wall Street Journal. “George, could you show me again how to tie this?”

George set down his paper and walked Nyk through the steps to tie a half-Windsor knot. “Your first day on the job?”

“First day in my new role,” Nyk replied.

“Well, good luck.” George folded his newspaper and tucked it into his briefcase. “Good day, all.” He headed out the door.

Suki descended the stairs. “How are you this morning,” her mother asked.

“I’ll survive.”

“Don’t you want some breakfast?”

“I’ll get something from the union. Oh, Mom?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Don’t hold dinner -- I have my first session tonight.” She headed toward the front door and slipped on a pair of canvas shoes.

Nyk followed her. “See you later, Yasuko,” he called as he went out the door.

Holding hands, he and Suki walked to the bus stop. “We can ride together as far as Grand Central,” Suki told him. “From there I’ll transfer to a downtown train to NYU. You’ll need to get off at Time Square and take a number three train to Canal Street.”

“I think I can manage.”

“What time will you be done?”

“Five, I think.”

“I’ll wait for you on the outbound platform at Grand Central. My appointment is in Midtown and we can walk from there.” The city bus drew to the stop. Nyk inserted his fare card into the box and then took a seat. Suki sat beside him and held his hand as the bus pulled into traffic, bound for the subway station.

Nyk climbed the steps from the Canal Street platform and walked ten blocks to a dingy office building in the Tribeca section of Manhattan. He trudged up the stairs to the second floor and opened a door marked FloranCo. A middle-aged woman sitting behind a desk greeted him. “Good morning, Mr Kane.”

“Good morning, Jaquie. You’ll be seeing a fair amount of me.”

“So Mr Seymour has told me.” She picked up the phone, punched a button and announced Nyk’s arrival. He regarded Jaquie -- he thought she was a beautiful woman, with her dark brown skin and black hair, neatly done in cornrows.

The door to Seymour’s office opened. “Good to have you on board, lad. Come on in.” Nyk sat across from Seymour’s desk. “Do you have any questions?”

“Only about a thousand. What exactly will my responsibilities be?”

“As I told you, this is a training post. If you do well, you’ll be prime candidate to take over my

job -- when I retire that is. For starters, we'll place you in charge of our western operations. It includes your old haunts in Wisconsin -- though we'll keep that facility shut 'til we can get someone to man it. I'll want you in charge of our plant breeding operation, too. It's in Des Moines and run by Earth people. We're careful to keep our prices non-competitive, but we manage to make a modest profit -- enough to keep it credible."

Nyk nodded, recalling his training on the Earth economy.

"I'll start by introducing you around the office." Seymour stood and headed toward the door.

"I know Jaquie is an Earth person. How many other Florans work in this office?"

"Assume everyone's a native, lad -- unless you know for sure otherwise."

Nyk sat at his desk and plugged in his laptop computer. He began reviewing the files of the Floran Agents now reporting to him.

He opened the file for Grynnya Quinn. He recognized her surname from his translation of Koichi Kyhana's journal. Bryan Quinn was Chief Engineer aboard the *Floran*. After the warp jump accident, it had been Quinn who rigged the starship's engines for near-relativistic velocities permitting the colonists to reach the planet they named after their vessel.

Nyk pondered for a moment the temporal paradox. Here he was, on late-twentieth-century Earth. The *Floran* expedition was two hundred years in Earth's future; but it was also five thousand years in his past. And, here he was -- loving and living with an ancestor to the man who founded his world -- the man whose name, if not consanguinity, he shared. Reporting to him was a woman who also shared the name of a founding father.

He perused the file. Grynnya was another Earthbound Floran. She was their medical liaison, so to speak, and as such was responsible for the health of the Florans who walked the surface of their world of origin. Using the Earth name of Nellie Hogarth, she was a registered nurse and worked in a hospital in Kansas City.

Seymour stuck his head into the office. Nyk looked up. "I've been looking over the file of one Grynnya Quinn," he said.

"Ahh, Grynnya. Watch your step with her."

"What do you mean?"

"... you'll find out. Say, lad, care for some lunch at Bronfmann's? They make a mean pastrami sandwich."

Nyk closed his file, locked his laptop and followed Seymour out the door.

Nykkyo sat in the waiting room flipping through a six-month old edition of Readers' Digest. He heard the door to an inner office open. A middle-aged woman escorted Suki from the office. "I'll see you next week." Suki nodded.

Nyk stood and approached her. "Are you all right?" Suki nodded again, took his hand and walked with him. He pressed the call button for the elevator. The doors slid open. He stepped in and pressed the button for the lobby. "Are you hungry?" She shrugged her shoulders.

He led Suki down the street. He pointed to a Chock-Full-of-Nuts shop. "Would you like to get a sandwich in there?" She nodded.

Nyk took a bite from his cheese sandwich. "Was it a difficult session?" Suki nodded again. "Care to talk about it?" She shook her head. "I think it would help to talk."

"She said she thinks I was molested as a child."

He looked into her face. "When you were in the hospital on Floran -- Dr Krulla thought so, too. Do you remember any..."

She shook her head. "Maybe I've suppressed it. She suggested we try hypnosis. I don't know about that ... sometimes when they go looking for something -- they find it -- whether it's really there or not."

Nyk gulped his mouthful. "Be careful."

Suki nodded. "I need to get comfortable with her before taking that step." She took a bite from her tuna salad sandwich. Nyk reached across the table and took her hand. "Thank you for coming with me. I wouldn't have had the courage to go in there alone."

He dumped their refuse into the trash bin and headed out the door, holding her hand. She walked with him toward Grand Central, her eyes fixed on the pavement. Nyk moved closer to her and slipped his arm around her waist. She looked up, smiled and leaned against him. "As soon as you put your arm around me -- the pain went away."

They reached Grand Central and stood, holding hands on the outbound platform. Nyk craned his neck to look down the line for the train. He could see the headlamps reflected on the rails and tunnel walls.

The train pulled to a stop. Nyk climbed aboard, took a seat and Suki sat beside him. "Do you want to tell me more?" Nyk asked.

"Not now. I just want you to hold me."

Nyk settled into his seat, his arm around her. She leaned against him. The train left the station and Nyk began counting the stops until it arrived at their destination in Queens.

Nyk lay in bed, his hands locked behind his head. Suki emerged from the bathroom in her short robe, her long, black hair clipped into a ponytail. She slipped off the robe, ran her hands along her abdomen and then slid into bed.

He put his arm around her and she cuddled to him. "It was a rough evening for you. Are you still thinking about it?"

She nodded. "Nykkyo, I'm scared. There's much about me you don't know -- much of which

I'm ashamed. I'm afraid you'll learn something and decide I'm not worth bothering with."

"It's not likely. As to your past -- I wouldn't change any of it. Those were the events that formed you, and without them -- you wouldn't be ... you. It's you I love."

"You're so sweet." She kissed his cheek.

"Feeling better?"

"A bit. There's something about tonight's session I want to share. Do you remember that Indian dinner when we told each other our sad, sad stories?"

"Yes. I remember you told me how you entered into an arranged marriage with a man you did not love -- how he abused you and beat you. You told me you fled from him and lived with an old friend from your university days."

"I'm afraid it wasn't quite like that."

"That's not how it happened?"

"Well -- yes. I left out an important detail, though."

"Which was..."

"It was my own behavior that brought it all about. You see, Nykkyo -- I never stopped loving Alice. Even after I had married, I kept seeing her. One night my husband left on a business trip. I had planned a tryst with Alice -- I invited her over. It turned out my husband's flight was cancelled and he rescheduled for the morning. He came home and found us. He said the worst things about Alice and me -- so I slapped him. He retaliated. I threw the first blow in that fight."

"None of it justifies him beating you." Nyk pondered, stroking her arm. "I suppose I understand why you wouldn't want to tell me that. We hardly knew each other..."

"Nykkyo -- we still hardly know each other."

"We had just met, and you wanted to explain what you were doing by yourself in Wisconsin."

"There's more to it... I had lived with Alice during grad school, and I knew how dominating she was. I knew what I was in for, but I went to her, anyway. One reason I finally fled to Wisconsin was to be away from her. Now, I'm back in New York, and I'm afraid..."

"Alice has no hold over you."

"She did once -- when I lived with her, she made me do the most humiliating things."

"Like what?"

"I'd rather not go into it. I had such a need for her -- for her acceptance -- I submitted. My therapist asked me if I craved being dominated. I hadn't thought of it that way. Maybe it's true."

"I don't understand. Are you asking me to dominate you? It's not in my nature..."

“No, Nykkyo.” She wiped tears from her face. “You've shown me the light of pure love. I fear what lurks in the shadows. Alice works as a curatorial assistant at the Museum of Natural History. I'm sure in my job at NYU our paths will cross some day. I'm afraid of what might happen.”

“I understand your anxiety. Suki, on my world we've learned the best way is the direct way. I think you should tell Alice how you now feel for her.”

“My therapist said the same thing.” She kissed his cheek. “I don't need counseling when you're by my side.”

“Your situation is similar to mine with Senta. Even though I've filed for divorce, I very much wish to remain friends with her. I've told her so.”

“How did she react?”

He smiled. “Well -- Senta is a woman accustomed to having things go her way. It'll take a while for her to assimilate our new relationship. Florans are humans, after all -- and humans have faults.”

“I'm afraid Alice will have difficulty assimilating, too.”

“I trust you, Suki. You'll do the right thing.”

“That's the problem -- I don't trust me.”

Nyk sat at the kitchen table. He could hear the shower running in the apartment above. Yasuko topped off his coffee cup and sat across from him. “How did it go last night?”

“I don't know. It's not easy for her.”

“Just getting her to go and to cooperate is an enormous step. She wouldn't have without you, Nick. Her father and I are grateful.”

He sipped his coffee. “Yasuko, was Suki molested as a child?” Her mother gaped at him. “I'm sorry, Yasuko, but it came up last night. Suki claims she can't remember.”

Yasuko shook her head. “I suppose dirty linen has to be aired sometime. I wasn't expecting it so soon.” She looked into Nyk's eyes. “I don't know for sure. I never had proof.”

“Her therapist wants to hypnotize her.”

Yasuko bit her lip. “I don't agree with that sort of probing. It's too easy to ... to...”

“To contaminate her memory?”

“Exactly.”

“Who would've done it? Her father?”

“Lord, no -- it wasn't George.”

“Who, then?”

“George's father seemed to have an unhealthy interest in her. He was a very peculiar man, Nick.”

“Suki told me some about him -- how he dressed in traditional Japanese clothing.”

“He did have a strange fascination with the old country. That foolish crest hanging on the wall is a product of his fancy. When George and I first married, we lived in the very apartment you and Sukiko now use. George's father lived downstairs. I ended up his *de-facto* housekeeper. He enjoyed having a real Japanese in the house -- I had to wear the *kimono* -- put my hair up in the traditional way. He even had me attempt to teach him Japanese. I'm no *sensee* -- I have no idea how to train someone in the language. I think he wanted me, physically -- though if he did, he never acted on those desires.”

“You think he may have with Suki?”

“I have my suspicions. She was a beautiful little girl.”

“That's not surprising -- she's a beautiful young woman.”

“I stopped using him as a baby-sitter and tried to make sure someone was in the room with him when Sukiko was there.” She shook her head. “It's not possible to watch someone twenty-four hours a day; seven days a week -- month after month, year after year...”

“You never pursued it?”

She shook her head. “No... You must understand my situation -- our situation. We depended on George's father for a roof over our heads. George was just starting out, and my own immigration status was unresolved. I was terrified I would be sent back to Japan and George and Sukiko would be left homeless. It wasn't until after her grandfather died that my status was sorted out. I've since become a citizen.” She stood and turned from him. “You'll learn soon enough. When you become a parent -- you do your best and hope it's good enough.”

Nyk stood and embraced her. “I'm sure you did your very best, Yasuko.”

“You are such a fine young man, Nick. My daughter is very fortunate...”

“Am I interrupting something?” Nyk heard Suki's voice. Yasuko pulled from him and adjusted her hair.

“Your mother and I were having a talk.”

“How are you feeling this morning?” her mother asked.

“Not too bad. Come on, Nick -- we'll be late.”

“Aren't you having breakfast?”

“No time, Mom -- I'll grab a bagel or something at the union.”

Nyk picked up his case and headed toward the front door.

“Sukiko -- wait.” Yasuko embraced her daughter and looked into her eyes. “I love you and I did the best I could for you.”

“Yeah, Mom -- I know.”

“Forgive me if it wasn't enough.” Yasuko's eyes filled and she headed back into the kitchen.

Suki looked back toward her mother; then, proceeded down the front steps. “I wonder what brought that on.”

“I think I know. I asked your mom whether or not you had been molested as a child.”

Suki stopped in her tracks. “Just like that -- flat out?”

“On my world, directness is...”

“I'm afraid in Mom's culture, directness isn't cherished as it is on Floran. What did she say?”

“She said she thinks you were ... but she has no proof.”

“Who? Who does she suspect?”

“Your grandfather.”

“Not my father?”

“No -- your mom seemed quite certain it wasn't him.”

Suki closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. She smiled. “Oh! I'm so relieved!”

“Relieved?”

“I'm doubly -- triply relieved.”

“How so?”

“For starters -- I had thought my difficulties were my own fault. Now I know for sure some of them, at least, aren't.”

“You can't be faulted for actions beyond your control.”

“Exactly.” She grabbed his hand and headed down the street toward the bus stop. “Secondly, it was someone who's no longer around to threaten me. My grandfather was a truly creepy man, Nykkyo. I don't remember much about him -- maybe I've blocked it out -- but I do remember I dreaded being with him.

“Finally -- it wasn't my dad. I knew my therapist would sooner or later come round to my relationship with Daddy. When she mentioned hypnosis I was so afraid she'd put two and two together and...”

“And come up with five?”

“Worse yet -- come up with four. If it had been Daddy -- how could I continue to live in that house?” She patted her stomach. “How could I hope to bring him up there? It would've torn our little family unit apart -- dysfunctional as it is.”

“Don't underrate what you have. I'm not sure there's any such thing as a functional family -- anywhere in the galaxy.”

She lifted her face to the sun and inhaled. “Oh, Nykkyo -- smell the spring air -- the leaves are on the trees...”

“All I smell is fumes.”

She skipped along the sidewalk. “It's like a burden's been lifted from me.” She grabbed his hand and embraced his arm.

“I don't think I've ever seen you like this -- maybe once -- that New Year's Eve.”

“And, look what happened then.” She stroked her wrist. “All right -- I'll tone it down ... I guess I was never meant to be happy.”

Nyk sat at his desk reviewing field reports. An incoming vidphone call signaled him. He pressed keys on his laptop computer to answer the call. An image of a middle-aged man appeared. He wore insignia indicating he was an ExoService official. “Nykkyo -- I'm Illya Kronta. We worked together on the Zander Baxa incident.”

“I remember -- you helped interrogate Andra.”

Kronta nodded. “Good to speak with you again. How are you enjoying your new assignment?”

“Very much, so far.”

“Nykkyo, I know you had some sort of ... attraction to Andra.”

“She and I are good friends.”

“When was the last time you spoke with her?”

“Right before making transit -- why?”

“Nyk -- this may be difficult. I'm coming to you for your help. Andra has disappeared. I hoped you might know where she is.”

“Disappeared?”

“Central Admin has performed a locator code trace. We tracked her to the shuttleport in Floran City.”

“And, from there?”

“The trail ends at there. We have no record of her boarding a vessel, or leaving the shuttleport.”

“I'm baffled, Illya -- she never confided any plans in me. Did you ask my wife? The two of them were living together.”

“Your wife has been less than cooperative, and there's little we can do to encourage her cooperation.”

“Senta is not an ExoService person.”

“As she rather forcefully reminded me,” Kronta replied.

“Why are you looking for Andra? I thought she was exonerated.”

Kronta shook his head. “We had insufficient evidence to pursue her -- with the operative word being had. The more we delve into Zander's activities, the more likely it appears Andra was a participant. We have asked Internal Affairs to detain her...”

“Arrest her?”

“Detain her -- for questioning. Nyk, if you should locate her -- you'll let us know, won't you?”

“Of course, Illya.” The vidphone session went dark. Nyk drummed his fingers on the desk, then typed commands to initiate another vidphone call.

A woman appeared in the window, one with a high, broad forehead and bushy red hair. She glowered at Nyk.

“Senta, where's Andra?”

“Wouldn't you like to know...”

He sighed. “Tell me, Senta -- I know you know.” She shrugged her shoulders. “The Service overseers have traced her to the Floran City shuttleport.”

“Have they, now?”

“From there, the trail goes cold. I think you know where she went.”

“Have you been recruited to be one of their flunkies?”

“No -- I...”

“You know, Nykkyo -- you have some nerve. You call me after all this time and the first words out of your mouth are, 'Where is Andra?' Not, 'I'm sorry for taking this assignment' or 'I want us to work this out.' No -- it's 'Where's Andra?’”

“Senta, I'm doing what I must do.”

“You think you can get away with this. You can't -- you think you're safe on Earth. Some day

you'll have to return to Floran and then we'll see who has the last laugh.”

“What do you think you could do?”

“I'll bring charges.”

“On what grounds?”

“Abandonment.”

“It won't work, Senta. You're the one with the important job. You lost a liability when I left -- not an asset. It doesn't make sense to sue to recover a liability.”

“Loss of companionship, then.”

Nyk laughed. “Senta, you've never been at a loss for companionship. You and I slept together only one night out of five.”

“You and your provincial upbringing... My social life has always bothered you.”

“There's an Earth saying, Senta -- you make your own bed and you must lie in it. It certainly applies to you.”

Senta stared at him, her mouth open. “Mark my words -- you won't get away with this.”

“Senta -- let's look at the reality of the situation. You and I were never right for each other. We never loved each other. I had no idea what true love felt like until I met Suki.”

“How dare you!”

“It's the truth, Senta. But, it's more than that. This is something I must do -- I interfered with Suki's destiny. I must replace the man who was to be in her life.”

“That temporal interference nonsense.”

“You really think it's nonsense? Do you want to take the risk to find out? Do you want to be the one initiating a temporal disaster?”

“Nykkyo...”

“There's more. Right before I made transit here, I learned who my real father is.”

“I know.”

“I had a talk with your stepdad. He told me there were two women he loved -- my mother and yours, Senta. Did you ever do a DNA sequencing analysis to see if Veska might be your...”

“It's impossible!”

“It's not impossible.”

“What did he tell you?”

“Only what I told you. Senta, if you press this, I'll bring the whole Veska thing out into the open. At that point, we're not just talking divorce...”

“You wouldn't dare! You'd ruin both our reputations!”

“My reputation on that world is of no consequence on Earth.”

Tears began spilling out of Senta's eyes. Her lower lip trembled. “Mark my words, Nykkyo -- you will regret this.”

“We'll see -- now, tell me where Andra is.” Senta glowered at him. “Senta -- tell me!”

“Why don't you call her up and ask her yourself?” The vidphone window went dark.

2 -- Dyppa

Nyk disembarked the train at Grand Central. He pushed his way through the throng and spotted Suki standing against the wall.

He embraced her. “How was your day?”

“Quick -- our train!”

Holding Suki's hand, Nyk pushed back through the mass of humanity and onto the train. The car was full so he stood and held onto the overhead rail. Suki stood with her arms around him and smiled broadly. “I like strap-hanging this way. You pushed our way onto the train like a native.”

“I'm accustomed to crowds. There are some good-sized ones in Floran City. You look like you have big news.”

“I do. You'll never guess who I ran into today.”

“Who?”

“Vlad Donatovich.”

“You're right -- I couldn't possibly have guessed. Who's he?”

“He's my old thesis advisor from grad school. Now, he's a curator at the Museum of Natural

History. He still has ties with NYU, and this summer he's conducting a mini-dig in Turkey. He's asked me to join him."

"You're not thinking of doing that, are you?"

"Why not? It's only for three weeks. I called my obstetrician and she said it was okay."

"Three weeks!"

"I thought you'd be happy for me."

"I'm not happy with the notion of you being so far away."

"Nykkyo, I know you'll need to make trips in your job and they'll be a lot further than Turkey. I spent six months in Syria with Vlad when I was in grad school. I'm sure I'll survive. It's probably my last chance to use my training before the baby comes. It'll look good on my resume, I'll be networking, and..."

"Have a great time in Turkey, *korlyta*."

"You're letting me go?"

"Suki, you're an adult and adults have free wills. I hold no authority over you. If this is what you want to do, then you have my blessing." She squeezed him. "Now, tell me all about this dig."

"Nick -- maybe you can reach this for me." Yasuko handed him a lacquer tray and he placed it into a high cabinet. "Before I forget -- a man from the phone company was here to install ... I don't remember what it was."

"A broad-band data circuit?" Nyk asked.

"Yes -- that's it. I opened the apartment and showed him where you wanted it. He left the paperwork on the table."

"Thanks, Yasuko."

Suki hung the dishtowel to dry. "What's that for?"

"So I can connect the laptop computer to our office's data network." Suki gave a knowing nod. "Maybe we can try it out when we go upstairs."

Yasuko began wiping the counter tops. "I'm all right here -- you two can run along and play."

Nyk led Suki up the stairs to the apartment. "You didn't mention Turkey at dinner tonight."

"It's not a done deal," she replied. "No sense upsetting them until I know it's a sure thing."

Nyk flipped open his laptop computer, jacked it into the broadband circuit and powered it up. "I'm going to see if this connection is fast enough for a full-video vidphone session," he said.

Suki stepped into the bedroom. “Who are you going to call?”

“I was going to try Andra.”

She emerged in her short robe and gave him a frosty look. “Andra? You mean your Floran girlfriend?”

“Suki -- we've gone over it. Andra is a dear friend. She knows you're my true love and she sent me to you with her blessing.”

“If you say so.”

“Believe me -- you have no reason to be jealous of Andra.”

“How can I not be jealous of a woman who's made love with you more times than I have?”

“For starters -- you don't know if she has.”

“All right -- how many times?”

“I'm not the sort that kisses and tells. Suki -- Andra wants to meet you -- she wants desperately to be your friend, too. Andra means a lot to me. It would please me if you'd try liking her, too. If I get through -- will you speak with her?”

“I don't know...” Suki headed into the bathroom.

His computer running, Nyk entered the commands to initiate a vidphone call. He selected Andra's locator code.

Custom software on his laptop computer routed his call through the newly-installed broadband circuit, via Earth's Internet to one of the clandestine ExoAgency comm uplinks concealed on Earth. There, it was sent to the Floran TachNet relay station moored above Earth's sun's north pole, outside the heliopause -- and from there to the Floran communications network.

A blue window opened and flashed. An image formed -- one of a young woman with pale blue eyes and shoulder-length oat-straw white hair. “Nykkyo!”

“Andra!”

Andra smiled. “Good to see you from Earth, Nykkyo.”

Nyk tried to make out the objects in the background. “Where are you?”

“I'm at the palace on Lexal.”

“Lexal?”

“Yes -- you know my roommate at Vebinad Academy married the chancellor of Lexal. She's known here as Princess Janna.” Nyk nodded. “She heard about the incident with Zander and called me. It turned out she was on Floran with her husband for a meeting of the High Legislature. She invited me to visit Lexal and brought me here on the Lexalese chancellor's shuttle.”

“Andra -- I was led to believe your locator code had been deactivated.”

“Oh, no -- here in the palace, all the vidphones are screened -- to eliminate nuisance calls.” Nyk nodded in comprehension. “I put Senta's code on my access list -- and, of course, yours.” She turned from him. “Nykkyo -- here's someone I want you to meet. Janna!” She waved to someone in the distance.

Andra was joined by another woman with pale blue eyes and oat-straw white hair. She was wearing a gown and a jacket studded with tiny gems. Around her waist was a heavy, jewel-encrusted metallic belt with a large, jet-black cabochon in the buckle. Her hair was up, in a twist, and atop her head was an iridescent tiara.

“Janna, this is my good friend Nykkyo Kyhana. Nyk -- Princess Janna Wygann of Lexal.”

“Pleased to meet you, your highness,” Nyk replied.

“Call me Janna.”

Nyk regarded the two women. They resembled each other enough to be mistaken for identical twins. Janna was a bit taller and a bit lighter, Nyk thought -- but Andra was a bit prettier.

“I am delighted to make your acquaintance,” Janna continued. “Andra told me how you helped when Zander came to abduct her.”

“She exaggerates.”

“I think not.” She regarded Nyk through the circuit. “She told me you risked your life to save hers.”

“It was a collaborative effort -- she and I defeated Zander together.”

She glanced toward Andra. “What did I tell you?” Andra asked.

Janna smiled. “He's modest...” She nodded and turned back to the vidisplay. “Nykkyo, have you ever visited our colony?”

“Except for Earth, I've never been offworld.”

“Should you find yourself headed here, please call me.” Janna touched the vidisplay and a code appeared on Nyk's screen. “Here is my locator code.”

“I'm honored you'd share it with me.”

“I'd be honored to host you here at the palace. Send me your code and I'll place it on our access list.”

“I have his code, here,” Andra interjected.

“Good, then. Andra and I are Vebinad Academy sisters. A friend of hers is a friend of mine, and I'd like to meet you in person and thank you for helping my sister. Please make sure you do -- I'd be

disappointed otherwise. Now, if you'll excuse me -- duty calls. Good day, Nykkyo.” Janna whispered into Andra's ear and left the room.

Nyk saved Janna's code in his directory. Andra returned to the vidphone. “I was worried,” Nyk said. “Illya Kronta from the Oversight Committee has been looking for you. He said you had disappeared.”

She rolled her eyes. “I got so tired of answering ExoAgency questions -- the same ones, over and over again. I needed to get away and when Janna invited me -- I leapt at the chance.”

“Do you want me to keep your whereabouts secret?”

She shook her head. “I don't see a reason for that. Tell them I'll answer any and all questions after I return from Lexal. I must be back on Floran before the next term at Sudal University starts.”

Nyk caught motion out of the corner of his eye. Suki was standing behind him, out of the digital camera's field-of-view. “THAT's Andra?” she whispered. Nyk nodded. She let out a soft whistle.

“Is that Sukiko?” Andra asked. “Sukiko -- Sukiko -- Andra is!”

Nyk grabbed Suki's forearm. She pulled away -- then relented and drew up a chair beside Nyk.

“*Saluti Andra,*” she said.

Andra smiled. “Ah -- Nykkyo you our tongue learn ... teach. *Bone* . Good. You beautiful. She beautiful, Nyk.”

“Andra,” Suki replied, “you're the most gorgeous woman I've ever seen.”

Andra smiled. “Sukiko ... umm ... Nykkyo and me *amften* are. You know *amften* ?”

She looked sideways at Nyk. “Lovers, yes.”

“No -- not same on Earth -- different.” She pointed to herself. “Me he love. He me love...” She held up her thumb and forefinger. “...little.” She pointed at the camera. “You he love big...” She held her hands apart. “... much. I you lovers be *ard* ... want. I ... umm ... Nyk, *konfidenka, es-ka* ?”

“Secret,” Nyk replied.

“*Ji-ji*. I him secret tell so you lovers be. I ... you me ... *amfen* ... friends be ... want.”

“What is she trying to say?” Suki asked.

“She wants you and me to be lovers.”

“I got that much... What secret?”

“Andra knew you and I weren't really related -- that you're not my two-hundred-times-plus-great-grandmother and therefore our relationship isn't incestuous. Senta discovered it and was keeping it from me, but Andra knew and she told me. She did so you and I needn't remain celibate.”

Suki gaped at him. "You mean..."

"Andra told me and then sent me to you to consummate our love."

"Oh, Andra -- thank you ... *denke*."

"She wants you as her friend."

"Yes -- *ji* -- *ni* ... *niva amfen es*," Suki replied.

Andra broke into a broad smile. "*Bone* -- *xa mi plak*... me please."

"Andra, how did you learn English like that?" Nyk asked.

"*Ka*?"

"*Kil Anglixa kom xa lernt-zi*?"

"Zander me teach. You Sukiko *Lingwa* teach -- he me *Anglixa* teach. Now, must go. Good you meet, Sukiko. See you, Nykkyo." The vidphone session terminated.

Nyk powered off the laptop and closed the case. "Let me get something straight," Suki said. You and Andra were lovers."

"No -- she and I ARE *amften* -- dear friends."

"You slept together -- you made love."

"I sleep only with dear friends or lovers."

"But -- she loves you, Nykkyo -- I can tell she loves you."

"Yes, I know. I feel a bit sorry for her."

"She knew a secret. She knew if you knew you would come to me. Yet -- she told you, anyway. Why? Why would she do that? Why would she send you into my arms?"

"Because she loves me. You must understand the Floran approach to love, *korlyta*. True love is generous. Andra knew my happiness depended on you and I being reunited."

"Could I do that? If I knew a secret that would send you into the arms of another -- could I tell you? Would I? I don't think so. Could you do that for me? Could you tell me something you knew would send me into the arms of another?"

"I could, and I would in an instant -- if I were convinced your happiness depended upon it."

"You really could do that for me?"

"I do love you enough to give you up. I wouldn't be happy about it. I would hope, though, that you would leave room in your heart for a little love for me -- as I have a little love for her."

“Oh, Nykkyo!” Her eyes filled.

“On my world, friends and lovers are one and the same. Our language doesn't have a word for friend -- we use the word for lover. The fact Andra and I are *amften* in no way diminishes the love you and I have -- rather, it strengthens it.”

“How?”

“Because Andra wants you as her *amfta* , too. You won't find a more loyal friend.”

“I do like her. I'm willing to give this a try.”

He smiled. “That pleases me -- very much.”

“Was she really genetically engineered to look like that?”

“Yes -- she's an *ax'amfin* . Don't use that word in front of her -- it's not considered polite. Parents blessed with the right genes will work for years with genetic counsellors to conceive a child with the desired traits. Then, they're taken from their families at puberty and put into special finishing schools where they're taught carriage, protocol and statecraft. Most end up as consorts to colonial or high government officials. Sometimes they're awarded to ordinary citizens in recognition of some accomplishment.”

Suki's eyes widened. “Awarding a ... a human being in recognition of some accomplishment? Nykkyo, I can't fathom your society endorsing such an institution.”

“It's one I loathe. It's like slavery, although an *ax'amfin* isn't a slave -- she's a free citizen with rights. They do have a great sense of duty. These girls do as they're told.”

“Are any *ax'amfin* men?”

“The finishing schools are not co-ed. I believe one exists to train men, but the demand is for the feminine variety. Even our women seem to prefer female *ax'amfin* companions.”

“Is she an albino? She's very light.”

“She's as close to an albino as is found among my people. It's a rare trait, and a desireable one. Don't be fooled by her looks, Suki. The finishing schools pick not only the prettiest girls but the smartest ones, too. When it comes to brains versus beauty -- Andra has both.”

Nyk lay in Suki's bed with his fingers locked behind his head. She emerged from the bathroom in her short robe, brushing her hair. “What a day,” she said. “The excitement of the dig and meeting Andra. I never asked you how your day went.”

“There's much more to Seymor's operation than I imagined. My head is still spinning. I wonder how long it'll take me to assimilate it all. I do have my first assignment.”

“Which is?”

“Seymor and I are traveling to Oklahoma to sanitize the house Zander Baxa used.”

“Sanitize?”

“Remove any Floran technology and return it to the homeworld.”

“You're going to Floran?”

“No -- from Oklahoma I fly to Wisconsin to return the shuttlecar to the relay station. Since I've been bumped upstairs and am now attached to the home office, I can't use it and Seymor doesn't want it sitting unattended. So, the shuttle and any of Zander's paraphernalia go to the relay station.”

“How will you get home?”

“Our Kansas City operative is scheduled to return from a vacation on Gamma-5. I'll hitch a ride to Earth with her and fly home.”

“How far away is the relay station?”

“Just outside Earth's heliopause -- about five billion miles.”

“See? Just like I said earlier. How can you object to me going to Turkey when you're going there?” Suki set down her brush, clipped her hair into a ponytail and slipped off her robe. She stood sideways to Nyk and ran her hands along her stomach. “Do I look any bigger?”

“I can't see a difference day-to-day.”

She slid into bed with him. He put his arm around her and she snuggled to him. “Mmm, this feels so good. *Bon'noka*, Nykkyo.”

Nyk walked with Seymor to the rental car lot and looked for the assigned stall. Seymor inserted the key into the door of a late-model Chrysler. Nyk slid into the passenger seat.

“You should consider learning to drive,” Seymor said. “If you can pilot a shuttlecar, you can drive one of these.”

“Navigating the streets of New York City seems impossible.”

“If you can master driving in New York, you can drive anywhere.” Seymor turned onto the highway. He handed a roadmap to Nyk. “Here -- you navigate. It's about an hour's drive from Tulsa.”

Nyk looked at the map and out the car window. The countryside grew empty as they headed from Tulsa. He could see rusted oil wells. Some were still in operation.

“What desolate country,” Seymor remarked.

“Floran's desolate. This is fascinating. I can see why Zander would pick this place to live. He could engage in just about any activity and no one would notice.”

The overcast began to thicken and raindrops splattered onto the windshield. Seymor activated the wipers. The smell of wet pavement seeped into the car.

Nyk regarded the roadmap. "We turn right in White Eagle," he said.

"Coombs Road Extension is the address," Seymor replied. "See if you can find it on the map."

"I see Coombs Road but no Coombs Road Extension." He showed the map to his boss.

Seymor turned onto a county trunk and located Coombs Road. He followed the narrow road until it terminated at another county trunk. "I think we're lost."

"Let's ask directions at that country store we passed in town."

Seymor turned the car around and headed in the direction they had come. He pulled up to a small country store.

Behind the counter was a large man in his mid thirties. He had a beard and long hair pulled into a ponytail. Seymor purchased a pack of chewing gum and paid with a five-dollar bill. "Excuse me, but could you direct us to Coombs Road Extension?"

The shop attendant eyed him. "Coombs Road Extension?"

"We're looking for Alexander Baxter's place."

The man's eyes narrowed. "You cops?"

"I'm his boss," Seymor replied. "Do you know him?"

"Yeah -- Alex comes around now and then. Haven't seen him in a few weeks. If you find him, remind him he has my spotting scope."

"Spotting scope?" Nyk asked.

"About a year ago I met him at the shooting range. He was getting in some target practice. I ran into him quite a few times there. He said he was a collector and we traded tips about guns and loads -- sights and so on."

"Did he spend much time there?" Nyk asked.

"For a while -- every weekend. I remember once he had a woman with him."

"A woman?"

"I'll never forget her -- tall, blond -- a real looker. She never spoke to me, but I heard her speaking with him -- in some foreign language. Sounded like Dutch or maybe Swedish -- she could've been a Swede, I guess, being so fair."

"What was she doing at the range?"

"She was practicing, too -- a real dead-eye. I watched her shoot a 49-3X at twenty-five yards, offhand -- with a 9mm I think it was. I couldn't believe it -- Pow! Pow-pow-pow-pow -- five shots, just like that -- four of 'em in the bulls-eye, and three dead center."

“Had you seen this woman before or since?” Nyk asked.

“Nope -- just the one time. A couple weeks later, I was back at the range and Alex had a high-power rifle to zero. I offered to let him use my spotting scope -- to save having to hike out to the target and back. Big mistake -- never saw it again.”

“You haven't run across him since then?” Seymour asked.

The man shook his head. “I went by his place a few times but it was always deserted. It was a good scope, too.”

“We'll try to get your scope for you. Now, if you could provide us with directions... We found Coombs Road but not Coombs Road Extension.”

“That's no wonder.” Nyk placed the roadmap on the counter. The man pointed to a pond. “The extension's on the other side of that pond.” He pointed the route. “It's not on the map, but it's right here...”

Seymour pulled shut the car door and drove out of town. “I trusted Zander. I still can't believe he did what he did.”

“I trusted him, too,” Nyk replied. “He was my closest childhood friend -- my only childhood friend.”

“On top of everything, I cannot believe he'd take the risk to bring Andra here -- and parade her around in public.”

“Do you think he was talking about Andra?” Nyk asked.

Seymour regarded him through narrowed eyes. “It couldn't have been anyone else.”

“She never mentioned being on Earth.”

“I dare say there's much about that *ax'amfin* you don't know. Do you still cling to the belief she's an innocent bystander in Zander's activities?”

“I trust Andra,” Nyk replied. “I have no choice but to trust her. Zander was using drugs to control her. Someone in the control of another can't be held responsible for their actions.”

“Do you think he drugged her into becoming an expert marksman?”

“That guy must've been exaggerating.”

“Start adding things up, Nyk -- we know Zander was running guns to factions on one of the colonies. It stands to reason he'd want to know how to use them. If Andra was involved and he was training her...”

“I refuse to believe she was a willing participant. I spent time with her, Seymour. I know her better than anyone.”

“*Ax'amfinenare* witches, Nyk -- social chameleons. They can assume any personality the situation requires. You can't trust 'em any farther than you could hand maneuver an ExoScout. You have to be dispassionate, lad, in order to do this job. You can't let your emotions get the better of your judgment.”

Nyk pointed. “Look -- Coombs Road Extension.”

Seymor turned onto the road. After a mile the pavement turned to gravel. The car bounced along the rough surface and came to a halt outside a run-down house trailer.

“This is Zander's place?” Nyk asked.

“Yep...” Seymor approached the door, reached into a pocket and produced a key. He slipped the key into the lock and swung the door open.

Nyk stepped inside and was greeted by a foul odor. “What a mess!”

Seymor began looking through closets. “We'll scour the place for anything of homeworld origin,” he said.

Something under a table caught Nyk's eye. He stooped and retrieved a spent injector cartridge. “Look here -- Zander had homeworld recreational chemicals. It's a Class-A euphoriant.”

Seymor examined the cartridge. “Sloppy -- damned sloppy... That infraction alone would've kept him planetbound for the rest of his life.” He opened a cabinet and retrieved a polymer box. “This must be his stash.”

Nyk examined an assortment of injector cartridges. “Those green ones look like what he was using to control Andra -- his drug mixture. And, the red ones probably contain nerve toxin -- the same stuff Andra used to kill him.”

“Well, the boys at the pharma labs will be eager to get a look at this. Put all this into that carton and we'll keep looking... Ah, a vidisplay -- that has to go...” He dropped the gadget into the box.

Nyk picked up more spent euphoriant cartridges, dropped them into the carton and headed into the trailer's kitchen. He stopped short. “Seymor -- come here!” He pointed to the trailer's stove. On a burner was an open can of lentil soup sitting in a saucepan half-filled with water. Steam wafted from the pan. Nyk switched off the burner. “Someone's been here.”

“Or, someone IS here,” Seymor hissed.

Nyk could feel his pulse pounding in his neck. He headed toward the bedrooms in the rear of the trailer. One door was closed. With a tug he pulled it open.

Inside was a girl he estimated to be perhaps fourteen Earth years old. She was dressed in a mid-thigh-length cotton sleepshirt. Her hair was medium blond and her eyes brilliant blue. Nyk recognized her immediately as a Floran. His gaze fell on her hand, which held what looked like an injector.

Her eyes flashed around the room. Seymor took a step toward her. Nyk grabbed his arm and held him back. “That's a red cartridge,” he said, “deadly.”

The girl pointed the injector needle toward her thigh but couldn't find the courage to drive it into her flesh. Her eyes met Nyk's. He could see them filling with tears and her heart pounding through the fabric of her nightshirt.

She grasped the injector in her fist, lifted her arm and brought it down toward her thigh. Again she stopped short. She raised her hand again and clenched shut her eyes.

“*Z'dev m'obe!*” Nyk shouted. For an instant her eyes locked on his. “Hand me that.” He held his palm toward her.

Slowly she stretched her arm to him and dropped the gadget into his hand. He turned and gave it to Seymor; then, opened his arms to her. “Come, you poor, precious girl,” he said soothingly in his native tongue, employing diminutive endings to sweeten his words.

The girl fell against him, sobbing and trembling. He held her and stroked her hair until she began to calm herself.

“What did you say to her?” Seymor asked in English.

“*Z'dev m'obe.*”

“Obey me.”

“Andra told me it was Zander's trigger word to activate his will-controlling drug. I thought perhaps he was using this poor girl to perfect his mind control. He must've planted a subliminal command for her to use the toxin if she were discovered.” Seymor shook his head. “Looks like I was right... Now, do you still cling to the notion that Zander couldn't have exerted such control on Andra? You could see her conflict -- her will to survive fighting the power of Zander's command.” He continued to pet the girl's hair as she wept against him.

Seymor picked up the vidisplay he had found in the cabinet, switched it on and pressed it against her right wrist. The device's scanpad chirped as it read the ID chip in her metacarpal bone. “Her ID comes back as Dyppa Hawryt -- a native of the Altia colony.”

“Dyppa?” Nyk asked. “Is that your name?” She nodded. “It's a pretty name... Mine is Nykkyo...” He looked toward Seymor and addressed him in English, “Now we have a real dilemma. We can't pack HER into a box and ship her to Wisconsin.”

“We'll have to put her on the plane with you.”

“She'll need some sort of ID,” Nyk replied. “How do we manage that?”

“You'll have to improvise...” Seymor looked at the material in the carton. “Ah -- what have we here?” Seymor handed Nyk a small booklet. “This should do the trick. Looks like Zander anticipated that problem.”

“A phony passport...” He looked at the photo of Dyppa. “Meghan Coneeley, citizen of the Republic of Eire...”

“One of Zander's assignments was engineering Earth identities for Floran Agents,” Seymor

replied. "That little document would be child's play."

Dyppa trembled against Nyk. "Where is Zander?" she asked. "He'll be angry -- he'll punish me..." She wept more.

"Zander can't hurt you." Nyk looked toward Seymor. "I'll tend to her while you sanitize the place. We don't have much time if I'm to make that evening flight to Milwaukee."

Seymor nodded and began a methodical search of the trailer. Nyk coaxed Dyppa to a sofa. She leaned against him as he held her. "I'm finding a lot of spent euphoriant cartridges," Seymor remarked.

"Do you use drugs?" Nyk asked. Dyppa nodded. "How old are you?"

"Eighteen standard Floran years," she replied.

"The list keeps growing," Nyk called to Seymor. "Zander supplied drugs to a minor."

Seymor took an object from a closet. "This must be that guy's scope. We'll drop it off on our way to Tulsa." He closed up the carton and carried it from the trailer.

"Come on, Dyppa," Nyk said. "Put some clothes on -- we're going for a ride."

"Where are you taking me?"

"Home."

"Home?"

"Don't you want to go home?"

"I don't have a home."

"We'll find somebody to care for you. You can't stay here. Wouldn't you rather be with your own people?"

Nyk stood in line to purchase a ticket for Dyppa. "Remember," he whispered. "Your name is Meghan Coneeley."

Dyppa nodded.

"ID please," the ticket agent said. He presented his state ID card and prompted Dyppa to turn over the passport.

"Republic of Eire," the agent said. "Don't see too many of those..." She looked at Dyppa. "Are you checking any bags?"

Dyppa looked blankly at the agent.

"She doesn't speak English," Nyk said. "She only speaks ... Gaelic. If you'd like, I'll translate."

“Please.”

Nyk looked at Dyppa and spoke in his native tongue, “Shake your head and say no.”

Dyppa glanced at him with a faint smile. She shook her head. “No.”

“Has anyone unbeknownst to you asked you to carry anything on board?”

“Once again, say no,” Nyk prompted.

“No.” Dyppa shook her head.

“I have you in row twelve, seats A and B. Is that all right?”

“Nod and say yes.”

She nodded. “*Ji--* yes.” The ticket agent handed her the tickets. “Thank you very much,” Dyppa said with a thick accent and curtsied.

He sat with her in the departure lounge. “So far, so good.”

The gate agent opened the flight for boarding. Nyk escorted Dyppa aboard and took the aisle seat. Outside dusk was fast turning to night. He assisted her in fastening her seat belt.

The plane pushed back and taxied toward the runway. Dyppa looked around the cabin as Nyk listened to the flight attendant's emergency instructions.

The plane paused; then, the pilots opened the throttles. The craft hurtled down the runway and lifted off. Dyppa grasped Nyk's forearm in a white-knuckled grip. He looked at the panic in her eyes. “Relax -- it's no worse than a shuttle flight.”

“I don't fly well.”

“Are you going to be sick?”

“I hope not.”

Dyppa began to relax as the plane reached cruising altitude. The flight attendant brought drinks and Nyk gave Dyppa a cup of ice water.

The plane began its initial descent. Dyppa grabbed Nyk's arm every time the motion changed and at the sounds of flaps being deployed. She looked out the window in fear and fascination as the city lights below grew closer and closer. Then she threw her arms around him and buried her face as the aircraft touched down. Nyk could feel her trembling.

She relaxed her grasp on him once the plane came to a halt and the door opened. “Are you all right?” he asked.

“I will be.”

“I have some bad news. This flight landed in Chicago. We must repeat that ordeal with the flight

to Milwaukee.

Nyk paid the driver and helped Dyppa from the cab. He unlocked the door to the house in Wisconsin. "I've never been so happy to see the inside of this house." He escorted her inside. "I have fond memories of this place. I spent my initial ExoAgency tour here -- what there was of it, at least. It's here I fell in love."

"In love?" Dyppa asked.

"Yes -- with Earth and with Suki." He showed her the spare bedroom. "You can sleep here tonight. Tomorrow, Seymour's package should arrive and we head for home. Are you hungry?"

"Very."

"I still have my university staff card. Let's go over to the union and get something to eat."

He escorted her down the street and into the university union where he purchased two bowls of vegetarian chili. He watched her wolf down the meal. "How long were you on Earth?"

"I don't really know -- Zander kept me inside the whole time. One day blends into another. This world is such a strange and fearsome place."

"Earth is a beautiful planet," Nyk replied. "Zander supplied you with euphorants?"

"Yes. He had other drugs, too."

"Some in green cartridges?"

She nodded. "I can barely remember being under its influence."

"Did you ever meet Andra?"

She shook her head. "Who's Andra?"

"Zander's wife. His widow, now."

"Zander ... dead?" Shock and relief spread across her face.

"I told you he couldn't hurt you."

"No, I never met Andra."

"Did you ever meet a tall, blond woman -- an *ax'amfin*?"

She shook her head again. "No."

"You'd remember her if you had."

Dyppa dropped her spoon into her empty bowl. She pressed her hand against her stomach. "That feels good."

“Do you want more?”

“I’m fine.”

Nyk picked up the empty bowls. “Let’s go back -- I don’t know about you, but I’m exhausted.”

He opened the door to the house and heard the phone ringing. He picked it up. “Nykkyo,” he heard Seymor’s voice, in English. “I have some information on young Dyppa.”

“Go ahead.”

“I knew the name Hawryt rang a bell. Zander stole the identity of one Frax Hawryt.”

“I remember. We surmise Zander killed Frax for his identity chip.”

“Dyppa is that man’s daughter. It seems Frax left Dyppa’s mother when she was a toddler and enlisted in the ExoService. Her mother’s a registered psycho-addict -- probably didn’t give the girl much of a home life. Dyppa herself has a rap sheet -- mainly drug infractions -- use by minor -- truancy -- that sort of thing.”

“Judging from the number of spent injectors we found, the addictive tendencies must run in her family.”

“There’s more,” Seymor continued. “She ended up in a child prostitution ring on Altia.” Nyk groaned and held his forehead. “She was caught and agreed to help in a sting operation to nail the ringleader. Then, she was remanded to her mother and ordered to attend a re-education center.”

“You mean reform school.”

“She seemed to do well there. When her mother was diagnosed a psychological addictive and ordered into rehab, Dyppa went into a group home/halfway house. Then, sometime in the past year, her father paid a visit.”

“Her father would’ve been long dead.”

“Exactly -- who looks at faces? Zander scanned his way in to take her on a one-day leave. She never returned.”

“So, Dyppa’s AWOL from the group home -- and Zander’s been feeding her habit. It must be how he insinuated his control over her -- how he got her to try is hypnotic mixture.”

“I’ve been in contact with Internal Affairs. Her mom’s been clean for the past year and wants her back.”

“How will they address her skipping out with Zander?”

“It won’t be held against her so long as she cooperates and completes her re-education. Of course, she’ll need treatment.”

“More than just rehab,” Nyk replied. “No telling what Zander planted in her subconscious.”

“Agreed. An Internal Affairs officer will meet her on the relay station and take her into custody.”

“-- Along with our carton of goodies. Then I ride home with Grynnya and this Zander affair is behind us once and for all. Thanks, Seymor. This helps.” Nyk hung up the phone.

He mounted the stairs to the spare room and rapped on the door. “Come,” Dyppa said. Nyk opened the door. She was lying in bed with the covers pulled up to her armpits.

Nyk sat on the bed. “Dyppa, I want you to try to trust people who want to help you.”

“I don't understand...”

“I think Zander might have planted ideas in your head -- ideas you don't know you have. Like today -- you didn't want to kill yourself, did you?”

“What are you talking about? I never tried to kill myself.”

“The injector -- the red cartridge...”

“I don't know anything about a red cartridge.”

Nyk looked into her eyes. “You really don't -- do you?” She shook her head. “If you find yourself in a situation where your instinct is telling you one thing -- and some ... some voice in your mind tells you something else -- go with your instinct. Will you try to do that?”

“I'll try. I think I trust you, Nykkyo.”

“By the way, Dyppa -- I was proud of how you handled yourself at the airport today. It took courage and poise. You sized up what you had to do and executed flawlessly.”

She smiled. “Thanks.”

“I'm going to call Suki and then turn in. I'll see you in the morning.” He kissed her forehead and switched out the lights.

Nyk lay on his bed, his fingers laced behind his head. “Andra and I were much closer to the abyss than I imagined,” he said to himself. He closed his eyes and tried to relax.

His sleep was shattered by a shriek. He ran to the spare room and rapped on the door. “Dyppa -- are you all right? Dyppa?”

He heard another scream and opened the door. Dyppa was standing on the bed, pointing toward the floor. “No! It's coming! Don't let it... Don't let it... Don't let it get me!”

Nyk switched on the light. “Dyppa -- you're having a bad dream.” Panting, she looked at him. “Come, lie down.” He coaxed her into the bed and tucked the covers around her. “What was your dream?”

“I don't know -- I can't describe it. It was as if a pool of ... of evil seeped under the door and crept toward me. I knew I'd die if it touched me.” She took his hand and pressed it to her chest. “Feel

my heart..."

"I have no doubt it scared you -- but it was just a dream. Have you had bad dreams before?"

"Now and then. Nykkyo, do you have any drugs?"

"No -- none in the house."

"Oh... I'll be all right, I guess."

Nyk kissed her forehead. "Try to get some rest." He switched off the light and headed for his own room.

He was almost asleep when he heard a knock on his door. "Yes?" he said as he switched on the light.

The door opened and Dyppa entered. "May I sleep with you?"

Nyk averted his gaze. "Dyppa, go put on a shirt."

"I want to sleep with you. I'm afraid of being alone."

"Put on a shirt, and then if you need me to hold you, I will."

She returned wearing the blouse she had worn earlier. Nyk turned back the covers and patted the mattress. She lay beside him and he held her.

"Nykkyo -- who's Suki?"

"A woman -- a native of this world."

"I deduced so much. Tell me about her."

"How much do you know of the founding of our homeworld?"

"Some."

"Suki is destined to have a great-great-great-grandson with the name of Koichi Kyhana. He will be the astral navigator aboard the Centauri mission. After the warp jump accident, it will be Koichi who will discover the planet we know as Floran. Suki is right now pregnant with Koichi's forebear. She and I are lovers."

Dyppa lay quietly, contemplating. "Nykkyo, you shouldn't have contact with her. Suppose you do something..."

"I'm afraid I did do something -- I made her my friend before I realized who she was. Then, it was too late. It's called temporal interference, and all ExoAgents are trained to avoid it. I diverted her from her intended destiny, and now I must replace the Earth man who was to be in her life -- to keep her timeline in balance. Destiny has a way of punishing temporal offenders, Dyppa."

"Suki is your punishment?"

“Oh, no -- she's my joy. I love her with all my heart and would no matter what. Her child is my punishment -- I have promised to love and care for him as if he were my own.” A tear ran down his cheek. “I must never reveal my true nature to him. I can never introduce him to my homeworld friends or family, or let him know the glorious achievement of his descendants. Imagine what it would be like to experience interstellar travel for the first time through the eyes of a child. Those are gifts I am prohibited from giving him, and I have little else.”

“No, Nykkyo. You'll give him a gift I never received.”

He kissed her forehead. “I'm going to turn the light off. Try to go to sleep.” Nyk closed his eyes and tried to relax.

“Nykkyo?”

“What?”

“Is she pretty?”

“Suki? Yes -- very. She has the most beautiful eyes. I was smitten the moment I gazed into them.”

“Do you think I'm pretty?”

“You're young, Dyppa -- all youth is beautiful. Yes, you're a pretty girl.”

“Do you like me?”

“I feel sorry for you. You're a smart girl who's been misused.”

“But, do you like me?”

“Yes, Dyppa -- I care for you -- I like you.”

“I like you, too.” She slipped her arm around him. “Nykkyo, do you like me enough to make love?”

“Dyppa -- you're too young.”

“I'm not inexperienced -- I'm not a virgin. You probably know that already. I like sex and I like you.”

“I obey two rules, and making love with you would violate both of them. First, I don't make intimate with strangers. And, secondly -- never with minors. You're two Floran years from the age of consent.”

“A year and a half.”

“If it were a single day it would be one too many.”

“If I were older, would you?”

“Let's not speculate on such -- might-have-beens don't count.”

“Then, let's make a date in a year and a half.”

He kissed her forehead. “We'll see.”

“Good night, Nykkyo.” Her body relaxed and she began to breathe deeply and regularly.

Nyk drew in a deep breath and released it slowly. He closed his eyes. *What a day*, he thought.

Daylight waked him. Dyppa was asleep, her back to him. He stood, dressed and went into the kitchen to see what food was edible. He reflected on the collection of pots and pans. Suki had left them when she moved back to her home in New York.

He found some waffles in the freezer and dropped a couple into the toaster. Dyppa walked into the kitchen and sat at the table.

“Good morning,” he said and placed a waffle before her. He noticed her hands were trembling. “Are you all right?”

She nodded and began eating. “Nykkyo, do we have any drugs?”

“I told you -- none in the house.”

“I need a euphoriant. What about the ones from Zander's?”

“I don't have them.”

“Did that other man take them?”

“Yes -- they must go to the homeworld. You'll have to do without.”

“I need one.”

Nyk paced around the house. Dyppa sat on the sofa. Her hands were shaking. She folded her arms across her abdomen. “Ohhh...” she moaned.

“What's wrong?”

“Cramps... I need a euphoriant...”

“Dyppa, I wouldn't give you one if I had it -- and I don't have it.”

“Ohhh...” She rocked back and forth on the sofa, clutching her stomach. “I need to lie down...” Dyppa headed up the stairs and stumbled, doubled over. Nyk helped her to the spare room. She lay on the bed, writhing. “Please ... I don't want to die...”

“You won't die from lack of euphoriant.”

“Yes I will ... ohhh, the pain...” She began to cry. “Help me!”

“Try to hold on until we can get you to the packet tonight,” he said.

Nyk heard pounding at the front door. He bolted down the stairs and opened the door. “FedEx for Nick Kane.”

Nyk signed for the package and carried it into the house. He set it down, cut open the tape sealing it, rummaged through the contents and withdrew a cartridge and an injector. Turning it over in his fingers he examined it. It was a class-A euphoriant. When injected into a thigh or shoulder muscle it would impart a sense of moderate intoxication lasting an hour or so. He shook his head and replaced it into the box.

He grabbed his laptop computer and jacked it into the network port at the house. Some keystrokes brought up a vidphone window and he entered a locator code. The call initiator flashed and then went dark.

Nyk composed a telemessage and sent it. He paced around the room and then mounted the stairs to check on Dyppa. She was curled into a fetal position, trembling and moaning.

An incoming vidphone call signaled him and he rushed down the stairs to answer it. He saw his friend Aahhn.

“Sorry I missed your call, Nykkyo -- I was in surgery.”

“Aahhn, have you ever heard of physical addiction to Floran recreational drugs?”

“Psychological addiction is a well-known phenomenon,” Aahhn replied. “Which drug?”

“Euphoriant.”

Aahhn nodded. “We see it most often with euphoriants. The patient becomes dependant upon the effects of the drug, not the substance itself. I'll be honest -- we don't deal with this problem very well. Our response is to deny them access -- which drives them to use dangerous substitutes like alcohol. We should be treating the underlying problem.”

“No, Aahhn -- I mean real, physical addiction -- cold sweats, trembling, abdominal cramps...”

“Recreational drugs are specifically formulated to be non-addictive.”

“I have a girl here exhibiting those very symptoms.”

“Bring her in.”

“I can't -- we're on Earth. We're scheduled to meet a packet tonight, but she claims she'll die before then.”

“Do you have any euphoriant?”

“Some class-A injectible.”

“Give her some, then.”

“She's a minor, Aahhn.”

“If a dose of that stuff will stabilize her until she can get transport, then administer it. If she's already addicted, one more dose won't hurt her.”

“It goes against my instinct, Aahhn -- but I'll do it.” The vidphone session went dark.

Nyk took the cartridge from the box and loaded it into the injector. He climbed the stairs and entered Dyppa's room. “I have some euphoriant. It goes against my better judgment, but my doctor friend says you can have it.”

Dyppa sat up, her lips white and her face pale and damp with perspiration. He placed the injector into her trembling hand.

He watched as she turned her left hand palm-up, clenched it into a fist and punctured a prominent vein inside her elbow. “Wait, Dyppa -- it's not supposed to be used that way!” He lunged toward her, then heard the injector discharge with a snap.

Dyppa lay on her back, breathing heavily. Her hands relaxed and he saw the agony drain from her face. Her eyes rolled upward, she arched her back and drew in a deep breath. “Ohh.... ahh...” she let out gasping moans, then caught her breath. Her eyelids drooped and her lips formed a faint smile. “Ohh... floating... floating...”

Nyk watched her as her eyelids drifted shut. Dyppa's hand went limp, fell off the side of the bed, and the injector dropped to the floor. He stooped to pick it up. Her head rolled to the side, her lips parted and she began to snore.

He straightened her arms and legs, covered her with a blanket and kissed her forehead. “You poor, poor girl -- what did Zander do to you?”

Back in the living room, Nyk ejected the spent cartridge and tossed the injector into the carton. He examined the cartridge, then threw it into the box. “Zander, what did you do to her?”

Nyk poured some cereal into a bowl and tasted it. It was stale, but edible. Dyppa walked into the kitchen. “How are you feeling, now?”

“Fine.” She sat at the kitchen table. He looked into her face -- her color was good and her eyes clear and alert. “Perfectly normal.”

“We make transit tonight at midnight. Are you up to it?”

“Sure -- why wouldn't I be?”

Nyk eyed her. “How long can you go between doses of that stuff?”

“A couple of days or so.”

“And, you really believe you'll die without it?”

“Zander withheld it for three days once. I couldn't stand -- I couldn't sit -- I couldn't eat, and the pain was excruciating.”

“Dyppa -- it doesn't make sense. Those drugs aren't addictive. It all must be in your head.”

“Were the shakes all in my head? The sweats, the pain -- all in my head?” Tears ran down her face.

“Your head controls your body.”

“Believe me, Nykkyo -- I don't like using it. I did once, but not since Zander...”

“Zander!”

“I'd give anything to be free of it -- you don't believe me, do you?”

“I think I do. Well, I hope once they get you to Floran -- or, to wherever -- they can help you. Come with me -- you can help me get the shuttlecar ready.”

Dyppa followed him to the detached garage. Nyk unlocked the door and slid it open. He removed and folded a canvas cover.

“We travel to Floran in this?” she asked.

“No -- we travel to the relay station in this. We meet the packet there.”

“I'm not riding in that.”

“You don't have a choice, Dyppa.” He looked at the sky. “It's almost late enough. Let's close up the house and get going.”

3 -- Grynnya

Nyk backed the shuttle from the garage and stepped out to close and lock the door. He went into the house to shut off lights and lock up. Dyppa accompanied him to the shuttle and he helped her into the passenger seat. He set the carton onto her lap.

“Make sure you fasten your restraint,” he advised. Then, he buckled his belts, grasped the unistick and backed the craft onto the street.

It was one in the morning and the highway was deserted. A light fog had settled around the small city on the outskirts of Milwaukee. He piloted the craft down the highways to a quiet country road and pulled onto the shoulder.

Nyk ran the prelaunch sequence and tested the doorseals. The safety catches engaged with a snap. He programmed an orbital insertion maneuver into the nav computer. The main panel lit up in a blue “go” condition.

“Here we go,” he said and pressed the launch activator. The shuttle nosed upward and shot into the sky. Dyppa placed her hand over her eyes.

Shortly they were in orbit. Nyk set the subjump parameters and awaited navigation results. The windscreen and windows darkened and the panel glowed white.

“Hold on, we're going to jump,” he said and pressed the warp trigger. The coil discharged with a bang, jolting the vessel. Dyppa shrieked.

Transparency returned to the windows. Nyk tuned the autopilot to the relay station transponders. Soon the house-sized structure loomed in the forward view panel. The space door swung open and Nyk piloted the shuttle into a landing bay. The spacedoor closed and he initiated bay pressurization. The safety catches released.

He helped Dyppa from the car. She was white and trembling. “Sit -- put your head between your knees. Are you all right?”

“I -- I've never flown in such a small craft.”

“How did Zander get you to Earth?”

“I can't remember...”

“You relax while I prepare the decontamination chamber.”

Dyppa had changed into a Floran tunic and *lifxarpa*. Nyk paced around the relay station main workroom. “The packet should be along any moment.”

“I'm scared, Nykkyo. What's to become of me?”

“You'll get some treatment and then go to your mom. If you need any help -- if you need someone to ... to testify as to what Zander did to you...” Nyk grabbed a polycard and wrote on it. “Here is my locator code -- and Seymour's.” She slipped it into the fold of her *lifxarpa*.

A dull thud reverberated through the station. From the feel, Nyk surmised it was a smaller vessel than a passenger packet. He looked out the viewport and saw a deep-space shuttle at the far end of the docking tunnel. The craft bore the insignia of Internal Affairs. The tunnel door opened and a pair of officers emerged. Both were armed with stunners.

“Dyppa Hawryt?” one said.

“That's me.”

The officer approached her with a handheld vidisplay. "Wristscan, please." The device chirped as she pressed her wrist against the scanpad. The officer examined the display and turned it toward her. "I have a warrant for your arrest for violating the terms of your probation. Please stand still..." He fastened a white band around her neck.

"What's that?" Nyk asked.

"A stun collar," the officer replied.

"That's unnecessary -- she'll cooperate. Won't you, Dyppa -- you'll cooperate, won't you?"

She nodded.

"It's standard procedure," the officer said.

"But, it's unnecessary..."

"It's all right," Dyppa said.

Nyk approached and embraced her. "Take care of yourself."

"I will."

"You have my locator code. Call me and let me know how you're doing."

"I'll do that, too." Nyk kissed her forehead. She stroked the back of his head and kissed his lips. "See you in a year and a half."

"Come on," one officer said. Dyppa gave Nyk a little wave and headed for the docking tunnel.

The other officer drew his stunner and prodded her with its tip. "Move along..."

"Wait," Nyk called. The officer with the stunner stopped and turned toward him. "You'll want this, too," Nyk said and handed over the carton.

The docking tunnel door closed. "Good luck, Dyppa," Nyk said and stood by the viewport to watch the shuttle draw away and vanish into a warp jump.

Nyk checked the vidisplay for the time. It would be a while before the outbound packet was due to arrive. He walked to the control room, sat and leaned back with his fingers locked behind his head. Vidisplays flashed status reports on relayed tachnet and gravnet communications traffic.

Another thud jolted the station. Nyk glanced out the viewport and saw the docked packet, resembling a wingless Earth wide-bodied jetliner.

The tunnel door opened and a woman emerged. Nyk figured she was at least fifty Floran years old -- about forty Earth years. She was in a Floran tunic and bright red *lifxarpa*. She had long, dark blond hair that was turning grey. He recalled the photo attached to her personal file and realized it was at least a decade out of date.

Nyk made eye contact -- hers were a beautiful shade of turquoise, an unusual color for a Floran.

"Hello," she greeted him in English. "I'm Q. You must be NK."

"We can dispense with the coded monikers," Nyk replied. "I think someone in the Agency has been reading too many Earth spy novels. Shall we go with our Earth names?"

"Oh, God, no. You can't imagine how disappointed I was to learn I had to go through life known as Nellie Hogarth."

"Then I'll call you Grynnya and you can call me Nykkyo -- or, Nyk."

"Fair enough, Nyk."

She headed toward the wardroom to change into Earth clothing. Nyk paced around the workroom. He looked at his watch.

Grynnya emerged from the wardroom naked and holding a green sundress in one hand and a denim skirt and knit top in the other. "What's the weather like down there, kiddo? Which outfit would you go with?" Nyk gaped at her. She held her arms out. "Not bad for an old babe, huh?"

Nyk averted his gaze and could feel his face reddening. "It's not too warm," he stammered. "I'd go with the skirt and top."

Grynnya returned to the wardroom. "I think we've lost the darkness," Nyk called to her.

"That's the trouble with making transits this time of year -- not enough night." She emerged tucking her top into the waistband of her skirt.

"Are you hungry?" Nyk asked. "I can check and see what meal packages we have on hand."

"Oh, no you don't. I've eaten nothing but homeworld shit for two weeks." She opened her personal effects locker and removed a stasis canister. Inside was a frozen lasagna. She withdrew a gallon jug of red wine, opened the lasagna and slipped it into a warmer. "There's enough here for two. Care to join me?"

Nyk sat across from her in the station's galley. She poured herself a tall tumblerful of wine. "Some for you?"

"No, thanks. I prefer not to consume alcohol. I'm concerned about it's deleterious effects."

"In moderation, wine's no worse for you than any of the homeworld recreational chemicals."

Nyk took a bite of lasagna. "So, you're the new assistant chief," she said.

"Yes, and I'm still feeling my way around."

"I heard about you and Baxa's wife -- and about Baxa himself. I'll tell you, Nyk -- I wasn't really too surprised to learn of Zander's involvement. He always appeared just a bit too smug. What did surprise me was to learn of Andra's exoneration. I would've expected an *ax'amfin* witch to be up to her armpits in that sort of intrigue."

"I would've said the same thing," Nyk replied. "Once I had the opportunity to know Andra, I realized she's quite a sweet girl."

"I've never even been close to an *ax'amfin*. Are they really as beautiful as they say?"

"I think in Andra's case, her genetically-engineered good looks worked to her detriment."

"That's a comfort to those of us without genetically-engineered good looks."

"Don't underrate yourself, Grynnya -- you're quite an attractive woman."

She smiled. "Thanks. You should've seen me when I was your age -- I was a knockout."

Nyk took another bite of lasagna. "Grynnya, I know you're from the Quinn line. I'm a Kyhana -- in name, at least. That's two old-line names who've ended up as Earthbound Agents."

"Do you know Dalrina Davis?" Grynnya asked.

"No -- I don't recognize that name."

"She's Agent-in chief for European Operations."

"Wow -- three descendants of the original *Floran* crew who're career Agents. I wonder if it's coincidence, or if something about Earth draws us here. Yours is a fairly common name. Have you run into any Earth Quinns?"

"All the time," replied Grynnya. "I always wonder if I'm speaking to an ancestor. How about you? Kyhana isn't nearly as common a name."

Nyk looked at her sheepishly. "I'm living with one Sukiko Kyhana."

"Oh, really... Well, Agency attitudes about such must be softening."

"There are some ... special circumstances surrounding Suki."

"Indeed. I believe some ... special circumstances ... must surround all Kyhanas." She sipped her wine. "I'm sorry -- it's just Agency rules against mingling with the native population have always been a sore point with me. This can be a lonely assignment, especially for us Earthbound Agents. After all, we're trained professionals and we can be trusted to form relationships that won't put our mission into jeopardy."

"As your colleague, I agree with you. As your superior, I'm afraid I must adhere to policy."

Grynnya blushed. "Forgive me -- for a moment, I forgot I now report to you."

"It's quite all right. You may always speak freely with me."

She drained her glass. "I take it, then, your adherence to policy extends so far as it doesn't inconvenience your own situation." She smiled and batted her turquoise eyes. "You did say I could speak freely."

“I did and touché. As a matter of fact, Seymor and I are hoping my relationship with Sukiko can form a model for relaxing the very rules under which you chafe so.”

“If that's the case, then more power to you!”

“Grynnya, I think I might want to try some of that wine after all.”

She poured a glass for him. Nyk scooped some more lasagna. He felt Grynnya's toe brush against his ankle.

“You know,” she said, “since we lost the darkness we'll have some time to kill and there's not much to do on this station. Maybe we should take the opportunity to get to know each other better.”

Nyk looked at her for a long moment. “I think in light of our professional relationship, I'd prefer to feel more comfortable in that role before taking it to another level. Believe me, it's not that I don't find you -- or your offer -- quite attractive.”

“I see... Well, it certainly doesn't take one long to develop Earth attitudes on the relationship between a subordinate and her superior. I imagine you're also being sensitive to your Earth woman's sensibilities. She probably doesn't appreciate the Floran approach to such.” She poured herself some more wine. “I'm terribly sorry -- I seem to be having difficulty keeping my foot out of my mouth.”

Nyk sipped his wine. Grynnya kept her gaze on her dinner. “Don't you feel more at home on Earth than on the homeworld?” Nyk asked. “I know I do.”

She looked up. “Of course I do. I feel especially at home in Kansas City. The people there are direct and hard-working.”

Grynnya piloted her shuttlecar toward a ranch house. “I live far enough in the country to use my own backyard as a landing pad,” she said. The car touched down and she drove it to the overhead door of the attached garage. She reached under her seat and produced a palm-sized device and pressed a button. The overhead door opened and she eased the shuttle inside, next to a 1982 Plymouth station wagon.

Nyk helped her conceal the shuttle under a canvas cover and followed her into the house. “It's one AM,” she said. “I don't know about you, but my body clock is totally confused.”

“It feels like one AM to me.”

The phone rang. Grynnya picked it up. “Hello ... Leo ... No, Leo, I didn't promise you anything ... Have you been calling? I just got in ... My flight was late, okay?” She listened for a while.

“No, Leo ... I'll be spending tomorrow sleeping off jet lag. I'm sorry for the misunderstanding, but I don't know how you got the idea we had a ... Leo, I've been away for two weeks. Another night or two shouldn't make that much difference ... I'll make it up to you, I promise. How about Thursday at eight? The black one? Fine. Now, run along and take a cold shower like a good boy. See you Thursday.”

She hung up the phone and batted her eyes. “You could send me up for overhearing that

conversation.”

“I won't. I believe an Agent's personal life is their own business -- provided they don't put our mission at risk.”

“You're a good man, Nykkyo. Better than the first son-of-a-bitch I worked for.”

“Tell me about Leo.”

“He's a lab technician at the hospital -- divorced with the nicest, most polite thirteen- year-old son he sees on weekends.”

“How long have you been seeing him?”

“About a year. Leo's not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but he's sweet and a damned good lay.” She looked at him. “Tell me, Nykkyo -- your Earth woman... Does she know?”

He nodded. “She's been on the homeworld, and I'm teaching her our language. Now, you could have me sent up for hearing that.”

“Then, fair's fair. Those must be the special circumstances you referred to.”

“I'm living with her and her parents.”

“Do they know?”

“No.”

“And, do you think you two can keep it secret?”

“If Seymour can keep our mission from the Earth people working in his office, I think Suki and I can keep it from her parents. As far as they know, I'm nothing more alien than a young man who cares for their daughter.”

“You're very lucky -- I envy you. I can never get too close to anyone. It's been the story of my career -- as soon as they start to get curious, I must cut them loose.” She smiled at Nyk. “It's okay -- it comes with the territory.”

“It'll be harder with Suki's child. I must not permit my temporal interference to infect him. It must stop with Suki. He can never know my true nature. How I wish...” He brushed away a tear. “It can never be -- this is what comes with my territory -- my punishment for my temporal misconduct.” He pressed his hand to his eyes. “Now I'm maudlin ... it must be the late hour.”

She put her arm around his shoulders. “I can see you're going to be a different kind of boss. I think I'm going to like you.”

“Grynnya, if you'll direct me to your guest room, I'll turn in. I have a nine AM flight to New York tomorrow.”

“Over there.” She pointed to a door. “The bed's not very comfy. The one in the master bedroom is much nicer.”

“I'll use the guest room.”

“Suit yourself. Can't blame a gal for trying. *Bon'noka* , Nykkyo.”

Nyk paid the cabby, trudged up the steps to the front door and unlocked it. He walked in, treading softly. The place was dark. He had reached the stairs to the apartment when a light flashed on. “Oh, it's you,” George said. “Yasuko said she heard a noise. You must've caught the red-eye.”

“The flight was delayed,” Nyk whispered. “First the weather, then mechanical problems. Sorry to disturb you.”

George nodded and headed back into his bedroom. Nyk mounted the stairs and unlocked the apartment door. The bedroom door was closed. He opened it and peered in. In the dim light he perceived Suki. Alongside her was another woman with dark blond hair.

Nyk closed the bedroom door, stretched out on the sofa in the living room and pulled a crocheted afghan over him. He closed his eyes.

His light sleep was disturbed by the sound of the alarm clock in the bedroom. He heard voices. The door opened and the blond woman emerged, wearing Nyk's robe. His eyes met hers and she stopped short.

“Good morning,” he said. “I'm Nick Kane. You must be Alice. I'm pleased to meet you.”

Alice backed from him and dodged into the bedroom. Suki rushed out. “Oh, my God! Oh, Nyk... Nick! It's not what it looks like!”

“It's all right. I'd like to meet your friend.”

Alice stepped from the bedroom, dressed and adjusting her hair. “I'd better be leaving.”

“Don't go on my account,” Nyk replied. “I'd enjoy the opportunity to get to know one of Suki's friends.”

Alice eyed him. “Right... Suki, I'll call.”

She headed for the door and Suki followed her down the stairs. He heard the front door. Suki returned and dropped to her knees, sobbing. “Honestly, Nykkyo -- it's not what it looks like.”

“I see you took my advice to speak with Alice.”

“Yes, I had her come over for dinner. We talked -- it got late and she didn't feel comfortable going home after midnight, so I suggested she sleep over. I wasn't expecting you...” She brushed tears from her face. “We didn't do anything, Nykkyo. Please believe me.”

“I believe you. It wouldn't bother me if you did. I'm a Floran, remember?”

“All we did was share the bed. That sofa is so uncomfortable...”

“Yes, I agree with you on that account.”

“Oh, God, Nykkyo... I'm so sorry.”

“It's okay -- really.”

“You're sure you're not angry?”

“Not in the least. Come downstairs with me and I'll make some coffee.”

“I have to take a shower. I'll be down in a bit. You're sure you're not angry? Positive?”

He smiled. “Not angry. I'm happy to be home, happy to be with you, and happy to see you patching things up with your friend.”

Nyk headed down the stairs to the main kitchen and began brewing coffee. He made some toast and found some strawberry jam. Yasuko stepped in and stared at him. He procured another cup and saucer and poured coffee for Suki's mother.

Yasuko shook her head. “Was that woman here?” Nyk nodded. “I thought so. I don't think George knows, and I'd hope to keep it that way.” She rolled her eyes. “I feel sorry for you, Nick. I didn't care for it when Sukiko brought her home for dinner last night.”

“It's all right, Yasuko. Alice is an old friend who helped Suki through some tough times.”

She shook her head. “No, Nick. That woman is trouble. She did far more harm than good.”

Nyk sat and took a bite from his toast. He could hear the sound of the shower in the apartment.

“I don't know what is wrong with that girl,” Yasuko continued. “You'd think she'd have some sense of what she's got.”

“She said they didn't do anything except share the bed.”

“Do you believe it?”

“I don't care one way or another. What two consenting adults do while they're alone together is no one else's business. Yasuko, if Suki wants to spend time with her friends, who am I to stand in her way?” He sipped his coffee.

“This I cannot comprehend, Nick. How can you take it so lightly? How would you have felt if you had come home and found another man in your bed?”

He swallowed his mouthful. “I think it would depend on who it was. Right now, I have no difficulty with Alice.” Yasuko rolled her eyes and shook her head.

Suki stepped into the kitchen in her short robe, her hair wet. Yasuko glowered at her. “No lectures, Mom. My stomach hurts and I'm not in the mood.” She sat beside Nyk and took his hand. “I thought about it in the shower -- I'm going to tell Alice I can't see her any more.”

“You don't have to do that on my account.”

“I'm doing it for me.”

“You still must have feelings for her.”

“That's exactly the problem. Alice is from my dark times. I want to move on.”

“But, she's still a friend.”

“I've made up my mind.” She kissed his cheek and glanced at her mother, standing by the kitchen sink with her back turned. Suki stuck out her tongue. “I'm going upstairs to get dressed.”

Yasuko watched her daughter leave the kitchen. “Well -- maybe there's hope, after all.”

Seymor poked his head into Nyk's office. “How'd it go?”

“I thought a packet was coming for Dyppa. Internal affairs sent a deep-space shuttle, instead. They led her away like some criminal. They will try to help her, won't they?”

Seymor shook his head. “I don't like it when I see my Agents become emotionally involved.”

“I feel sorry for her. It wasn't her fault.”

“I have filed a report with Internal Affairs -- and, I've spoken with Dyppa's caseworker. They're more interested in her from a clinical viewpoint.”

“Clinical?”

“They want to know how Zander turned a psychological addiction into a physical one. Young Dyppa is a *cause celebre*. She'll get good treatment.”

“I'm relieved.” Nyk locked his fingers behind his head and leaned back. “I wish you had warned me about Grynnya.”

“I thought I had.”

“She came on to me, Seymor.”

Seymor chuckled. “It's a sort of rite of passage. I think Grynnya's bedded every Floran to come through here.”

“Well, she didn't with me.”

“Not yet, lad. Not yet.”

“And, she's not going to...”

Nyk walked ten blocks to the Canal Street subway station. He rode a number three train to Time Square, where he transferred to one on the outbound number seven. He got off at Grand Central,

proceeded to his waiting-spot and watched the trains for Suki. He didn't see her.

He waited 'til 5:30, then rode alone to Queens.

He walked into the house. "It's Nick, Yasuko," he called to the rear of the house.

Suki's mother emerged from the kitchen. "Where's Sukiko?"

"I don't know. She didn't show up at our meeting-place."

"Someone from NYU called this afternoon, looking for her. I'm worried, Nick."

The door opened and Suki walked in. Nyk held her, pressed his lips to the top of her head and inhaled.

"Come, dinner's ready," Yasuko said.

Nyk knelt beside Suki at the dining table. "Where were you this afternoon?" he asked. "I left voicemail for you."

"I was at the museum," she replied. "I hadn't realized it was so late and I wasn't near a phone."

"You should have a cell phone," Yasuko suggested. "Then, you could've called Nick and he wouldn't have had to waste his time waiting for you."

"I don't think I waited more than fifteen minutes," Nyk replied.

"George, why don't you and Sukiko look at cell phones this weekend?"

George looked up and squinted. "I'm already paying for two cell phones."

"One of those you use in your work."

"I still have to pay for it. If she wants a cell phone, she can buy one herself. She has an income."

"It's not worth it for the amount of use I'd give it," Suki said. "I'm saving my money for doctor's bills and for the baby."

"I think it's a matter of safety," Yasuko continued. "I know I'd feel better if she had a cell phone in her bag. That way, if she got into trouble..."

"Mom -- I've gone twenty-seven years without a cell phone and survived."

"In this day and age..."

"For chrissake," George interrupted, "cut her loose, will you? She's not a teenager any more. She can make up her own damned mind about what to have or not have in her bag."

Yasuko looked down at her bowl.

"What were you doing at the museum?" Nyk asked.

“I had a meeting with Vlad.”

“Oh, in regards to your Turkey trip.”

“What Turkey trip?” her mother asked.

Suki rolled her eyes. “This summer -- I've been asked to help with a mini-dig in Turkey.”

“You can't be serious about going -- not in your condition.”

“Mom, pregnancy isn't a disease. My doctor gave me the okay.”

George glanced toward Nyk. “You're permitting this?”

“I'm in no position to forbid it. I hold no authority over her.”

“Which is it, Daddy? Am I an adult who can make up my own mind or not?”

“What sort of dig is this?” George asked.

“They're building a hotel, and there's evidence of an old village on the site. We only have three weeks to get in there and see what we can find. Since it's not that important, archeologically, Vlad has arranged to bring some students from NYU and Pace. I'll mostly be supervising them.”

“What about your position at NYU?”

“I've agreed to write a paper, so I'll still be on the NYU payroll. And, the museum will pay my travel costs.”

“I'll never understand why you prefer that sort of work to a nice safe and sane office job.”

“When do you leave?” her mother asked.

“The first of June.”

“That's only a few weeks away!”

“I'll be fine,” Suki protested. “I'll be with Vlad. He speaks the language. I spent six months with him in Syria. I'm sure I'll survive Turkey.”

Nyk sat at the kitchen table. Suki stood beside her mother at the sink drying the dishes handed her. “I don't understand why your father would object to getting a cell phone for you,” she said.

“It's a matter of principal with him,” Suki replied.

“Should I offer to pay rent?” Nyk asked, “room and board?”

“Oh, no, Nick -- George would be offended. It costs nothing to have you two living in that apartment. We can't rent it out since there's no separate entrance. Four can live nearly as cheaply as two.

We're delighted to have you here.”

“Daddy makes no sense,” Suki said. “He objects to the cost of a cell phone yet he'd turn down room and board. I never can predict what'll set him off. I hate having to walk on eggs whenever I'm around him.”

“How much does a cell phone cost?” Nyk asked.

“Thirty or forty dollars a month,” Yasuko replied.

Nyk pondered. “I can afford that. I'll buy a cell phone. I like the idea of you having one.”

Nyk lay in bed with his hands locked behind his head. Suki slipped out of her robe, turned sideways to him and ran her hands down her stomach. “I'm really showing, now.” She slid into bed and snuggled against him.

He kissed her forehead. “Care for some lovemaking?” he asked.

“I can't tonight,” she replied. “Not after this morning.”

“It's forgotten.”

“I haven't forgotten.” She squeezed him. “It'll take me some time to get over it. Tell me about your trip.”

Nyk rolled his eyes. “It was unbelievable. Seymor and I found Zander's place -- a hovel of a dilapidated house trailer. Inside we found a Floran girl he had smuggled here.”

“A girl? How old?”

“About nineteen Floran -- fourteen or fifteen Earth years. We surmise he was using her to perfect the mind-control he used on Andra. The poor thing -- alone in the middle of nowhere on a strange planet, not knowing the language. He got her addicted to something -- probably part of his plan to subjugate her.”

“What did you do with her?”

“I took her to Wisconsin, and turned her over to Floran authorities on the relay station. Seymor says they'll try to rehabilitate her, and I hope they can. She's a sweet kid. She had the worst time at the house -- a terrible nightmare and withdrawal. She claimed some ... pool of evil was stalking her.”

“I've had night terrors like that,” Suki replied. “Especially in a strange place -- I wake up in the wrong part of my sleep cycle and hear a funny noise or see unfamiliar lights. They can be quite vivid -- and quite frightening.”

“She was afraid to go back to sleep, so I had her get into bed with me and I held her until she calmed down.”

“You slept with her?”

“Yes -- I held her to calm her.”

“That's all you did? She's not another *amften*, is she?”

“Of course not. All I did was hold her.”

“That was plenty!” Suki pulled away from him. “Now, I see how it is -- sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, isn't it. You were so quick to forgive me this morning ... because you had done the very same thing.”

“She needed drugs and I didn't have any. She was terrified. You said you've been afraid in the dark.”

“Never so badly I needed a warm body.”

“I did what any Floran would've done.”

“No doubt -- all your free love -- free sex...”

“Suki -- Florans frequently share beds. We hate sleeping alone. Even casual acquaintances extend offers to sleep together -- and it's not necessarily sexual. Besides, I told her why we couldn't do anything.”

“Which was?”

“Because she was underage and we didn't know each other well enough. She accepted it and had a quiet night.”

“And, I suppose the fact you're already taken never came up?”

“A Floran wouldn't accept that as a reason.”

“It must've been real nice for you -- cuddling up to a pretty, blond and blue-eyed Floran girl -- a far sight better than what you have here -- fat, disgusting, pregnant... Was she naked? Was she?”

“Suki, get a grip on yourself. I have no feelings for Dyppa other than to help a frightened and misused girl get safely home, and in a way that didn't jeopardize our mission.” He reached for her.

She jerked away. “Don't touch me!” Tears streamed down her face. “You shouldn't have had her in bed with you. Now, I'm sorry I agreed to break up with Alice.”

“If I recall it was you insisting on doing that,” he replied.

She glowered at him, then grabbed her pillow. “You hate sleeping alone? Good -- I hope you have a miserable night!” she shouted and headed into the living room. Nyk laced his fingers behind his head and sighed. He could hear her sobbing.

He arose and walked to the living room. She was kneeling on the sofa with her arms draped across its back. He sat beside her. “Suki, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do anything to upset you. It won't happen again.” He stroked her hair. “I promise. I don't ever want to hurt you. Can you forgive me?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.” She looked up at him. “I’m the one who’s sorry -- for my foolish, irrational, jealous behavior. You’re right -- you did nothing wrong -- you did what I would’ve done. I’m so ashamed of myself -- I don’t know what got into me. Can you forgive me?”

“I’ve already forgiven you.” He stroked her back and she leaned against him. “Shall we kiss and make up?” He kissed her lips. “Now, come back to bed.”

She lay beside him. “I can’t believe you still want me after my shameful behavior.”

“It’s forgotten,” he said and kissed her lips. “Totally forgotten.” He lay beside her and stroked her cheek.

She brushed aside tears. “How can you forgive me so easily? How can you forget?”

“If you forgive but don’t forget -- you haven’t really forgiven, have you?” He kissed away her tears -- then kissed her eyelids. “Suki, I know how much abuse you’ve overcome -- how much you’re still dealing with.” He kissed her lips. “You are a challenge -- but, nothing truly worth having comes easily. Now, let’s get some sleep. I didn’t get much last night.”

Suki caressed his hair. She slipped her hands behind his head, drew his face to hers and kissed him. He felt her breath on his face. Again she kissed him and he felt her tongue against his. He felt her hand caress his arm. She took his hand, kissed it and guided it to her breast.

“Are you sure?” Nyk asked. “I thought you said you couldn’t.”

“I need it.”

Their kisses and caresses grew into vigorous foreplay. Suki urged him onto his back and lay atop him. He locked his legs with hers, and he could feel the muscles in her abdomen heave with her breathing.

She cradled his head in her hands and pressed her lips to his. Nyk caressed her shoulder blades, her skin moist with perspiration. She arched her back, gasped and panted. He clutched her around the small of her back, squeezed her against his body and closed his eyes. “Oh, Suki!” he grunted, released her and attempted to catch his breath. He stroked her cheek and gazed into her eyes. “Suki -- that ... that was phenomenal. I love you so much.” He felt warm drops on his face. “Now, what’s wrong?”

She collapsed onto him, weeping. “Oh, Nykkyo -- I can’t believe you want me!”

“Of course I want you.” He spoke tenderly. “We wouldn’t have been able to do what we just did if I didn’t love you and want you.”

“I know -- that’s why I needed it. Oh, Nykkyo -- I’m such a mess. Please help me.”

He held her atop him, petting her hair and caressing her back. “It’s all right -- I love you, and I’ll never stop loving you.”

Her sobbing subsided and he felt her body relax. Her legs and arms twitched. Soon her lips

parted and she was breathing regularly through her nose and mouth. She began to feel heavy on him, so he rolled to one side and slid from under her. She stirred for a moment and relaxed. He held her, closed his eyes and willed himself to sleep.

4 -- The Stray

Nyk sat at the kitchen table. Suki's mother placed a bowl of oatmeal before him. "Is Sukiko joining us for breakfast?"

"She said she'll be down."

Yasuko sat across from him and picked up her coffee cup. "George and I are at a loss to understand how you could consent to this Turkey thing."

Nyk shrugged. "It's something she needs to do, and she'll do it whether or not I consent. She might as well go with my blessing."

"That girl has no consideration for the feelings of others." She sipped her coffee. "I'll be worried sick while she's away in that ... awful, dangerous country."

"Mom, it isn't dangerous." Nyk heard Suki descending the stairs. "Turkey is a civilized country and one of our allies." She walked into the kitchen, opened a cabinet and withdrew a box of soda crackers.

"There are many who'd challenge both those assertions." Yasuko glanced at her plate. "Another saltines-and-ginger-ale breakfast? How are you going to deal with that over there?"

"I'm feeling better. By the time of the trip I should be over the morning-sickness phase."

"What if you get over there and have ... complications?"

"They have doctors there..." Her mother rolled her eyes. "Mother! Why must you be so risk-adverse? Look at Nick -- he's not worried."

"I wouldn't go that far," Nyk replied.

"Then, why can't you see this is something I must do to advance my career? Nick at least sees that."

"I might have carried you in my belly for only nine months, but you've been in my heart for twenty-seven years. Once you push that baby out and begin nurturing it -- then, you'll understand. I hope

that child grows up and gives you the same kind of worry you've given us." Yasuko stood behind Suki and put her hand on her shoulder. "I didn't mean that..."

"Congratulations, Mom -- you have top score in this round of 'You Can't Win.'" She chugged the remains of her ginger ale. "If you'll excuse me, I'll go get dressed."

Nyk watched her mount the stairs to the apartment. "I'm sorry, but I didn't understand her last remark."

"I'm afraid I put my foot in it. Sukiko knows she wasn't the easiest adolescent. I should never wish what she put us through on anyone." Yasuko looked up toward the apartment. "Nick, please tell me you'd rather she didn't go."

"I'd rather she didn't go."

"Now, tell her you'd rather she didn't go."

"I did. She's going anyway."

"Just like I said -- no consideration for the feelings of others."

"Yasuko, like it or not this is something she must do." Nyk drained his coffee mug and set it in the sink. "I'll go pack my briefcase. We'll see you for dinner." He headed toward the apartment.

Nyk held Suki's hand as they walked toward the bus stop. "It pains me to see you argue with your mother," he said.

"That was no argument -- just a healthy discussion. I'm happy I can have healthy discussions with her."

"She loves you. I can feel how much she loves you."

"I know she does. I love her, too." They reached the bus stop. "It wasn't too many years ago I wouldn't have been able to say that. Yes -- I'm happy with how my relationship with my mother has improved over the years. I wish it was like that with Daddy. Here's our bus."

Nyk's intercom buzzed. "Yes, Jaquie?"

"A Yasuko Kyhana on two, Mr Kane."

"Thanks... Hello, Yasuko?"

"Nick, I didn't want to say anything in front of Sukiko, but I thought last night I heard harsh words between you two -- and crying. I hope everything is all right."

"Yes, Yasuko -- everything's fine. We had a misunderstanding, but everything's patched up."

"She seemed so argumentative at breakfast."

"She told me your exchange was nothing but a healthy discussion."

“It felt like an argument to me. Are you sure everything's okay?”

“I'm sure. We talked and kissed and made up.”

“I'm relieved. After all these years, I'm accustomed to our arguments. I'd hate to see anything jeopardize what you two have together, though.”

Nyk hung up the phone. An incoming vidphone call signaled him. He glanced up to be sure the door to his office was closed, and then answered the call. He saw Illya Kronta. “Good day, Illya.”

“I received your telemesssage. So, Andra is on Lexal. That explains the ID code trace -- those colonial shuttles have diplomatic immunity.”

“It also explains why you can't reach her on the vidphone -- her calls are being screened at the palace.”

“Nyk -- that young woman is in considerable trouble. The evidence she was involved in Zander's plot keeps mounting. Some now believe it extends even to the Ricin plot.”

“That's impossible -- she didn't even know Zander until afterward.”

“Since you're our only pipeline to her, I was hoping you'd try to convince her to turn State's Evidence. It's the best way to minimize her possible exposure in this.”

“She's innocent, Illya.”

“Running away to Lexal isn't a very good way to demonstrate innocence.”

“I thought we were a free people, Illya. She had an opportunity to visit an old friend.”

“Do you mean her highness, Princess Janna of Lexal? The same *ax'amfin* witch who placed a crown on her own head? Doesn't this sound suspicious to you?”

“Suspicious? How?”

“First we have the fact of Andra's marriage to Zander.”

“She was chosen by Zander as part of his plot to destabilize Lexal -- chosen because she happens to be a dead ringer for Janna. He intended to use an illegal hypnotic to turn her into his zombie.”

“Zombie?”

“An Earth word -- his unwitting puppet.”

“I've heard that rather fantastic theory.”

“It's not fantastic, Illya. We used some of Zander's hypnotic when you questioned her in Sudal. You saw how it worked. Under its influence she'd do anything Zander instructed her to do. Andra was nothing more than an unwilling pawn.”

“Nyk, it wasn't my intent to debate you. I'm concerned you have some emotional involvement, here.”

“I do. Illya, I spent time with Andra and became fast friends with her. I don't believe her capable of the sort of intrigue you imply.”

Kronta planted his elbow on his desk and held his forehead. “What about the Rud Vadima link?”

“What about it?”

“Vadima is Wygann's assistant adjutant and he's known to have associated with Zander. It gives us a direct link between Wygann and the smugglers.”

“Vadima WAS his assistant, Illya -- according to Wygann's own statement, Vadima left his regime two plus years ago.”

Kronta drummed his fingers on the desk. “Nyk we are receiving reports that Wygann is arming Lexal.”

“Aren't the colonies permitted to develop defensive capabilities?”

“Yes -- it would be legal if and only if the technology were of Lexalese origin. The charter specifically prohibits importing weapons technology, and smuggling of Earth technology would be regarded as an even more serious violation.”

“What do you want me to do?” Nyk asked.

“I'd like you to use your influence with Andra to arrange an interview.”

“She's been interviewed -- *ad nauseum* .”

“But, not since we've pulled together the supporting evidence.”

“Andra said she'll answer all questions -- after she returns from Lexal.”

“By then, it may be too late.”

Nyk sighed. “I'll speak to her.” The vidphone session went dark.

He started a vidphone call, entering Andra's code. The initiator flashed and went black.

Nyk cancelled the call, and started another. Veska's image appeared on his screen. “Veska -- Dad...”

“Nykkyo -- son.”

“Dad, what do you know of the Lexal colony?”

“Lexal ... fifteen hundred lightyears distant ... founded on a twin planetary system orbiting a blue sun ... sister world Lexal Prime is uninhabitable ... our youngest, most distant, and with a population of 130 million, our second-smallest colony after Myataxya ... they've only had communications for the past

ten years. Before that I had to schedule regular couriers.”

“What of Mykko Wygann?”

“Wygann was elected chancellor about five years ago. In no time, he had declared himself chancellor-for-life.”

“How does one declare oneself chancellor-for life?”

“I guess by saying, 'I am chancellor-for-life.' He has the support of the Lexalese Senate, which marches in lock-step with him -- with one exception, and that's Zygon Vellod.”

“Who's he?”

“The former chancellor. Wygann ousted him in the last general election -- right before declaring himself chancellor-for-life. Vellod didn't accept defeat gracefully and has been a thorn in Wygann's side ever since. He has a small but vocal band of followers. They make up Wygann's opposition, so to speak.

“In all fairness, Wygann is extremely popular. He's built Lexal into a strong, self-sufficient economy. There's a three-year waiting list to emigrate there -- assuming you can get on the list in the first place. Wygann screens all applicants. There's been talk of autonomy -- even independence. About two years ago, he expelled all Internal Affairs agents and replaced them with his own security force.”

“All of them?”

“Yes -- Anyone from Central Admin is *persona-non-grata* on Lexal.”

“He can do that and get away with it?”

“Wygann apparently can.”

“What of his wife?”

“Princess Janna -- an *ax'amfin* witch ... fond of imperial trappings. She's the real power behind the throne, so I've heard. I've even heard she's the one who convinced Wygann to cancel elections and declare himself chancellor-for-life. They have a son about three years old -- Mykko, Junior. They call him Mykkoin. She can't be any older than Andra.”

“Andra's twenty-eight Floran years.”

“Exactly -- how did Wygann get a birth license issued to someone under thirty? I guess when you're chancellor-for-life, you get your own way.”

“Veska, how do you know so much?”

“A great many come through this transit platform. I can speak only to a fraction of a fraction of them, but that's still a big number.”

The vidphone session went dark. Nyk drummed his fingers against the desk; then scanned through his directory of locator codes. He opened another vidphone window on his laptop. Soon he saw the image of a blond woman in a long gown and heavy belt. She had answered the call from a room lined

with embroidered white draperies and iridescent chandeliers. An ornate canopy bed was in the background. Nyk could see the Lexalese colonial insignia carved into the footboard, and light glittered off beaded curtains.

His eye was caught by an elaborate tattoo on her right deltoid. It appeared identical to the design in the footboard, but with another emblem worked into the center. This he surmised was the Wygann family moniker. The pattern was rendered in a bright purple instead of the black ordinarily used for marriage crests.

“Nykkyo -- a surprise hearing from you so soon.”

“Princess -- please forgive the intrusion. I hope it's not an imposition...”

“Call me Janna, Nyk. It's no imposition. I'm always happy to hear from one of my friends -- and peers.”

“Peer?”

“A friend of Andra is a friend of mine, and I regard all my friends as peers. Call whenever you wish to talk.”

Nyk smiled. “I've been trying to contact Andra about some homeworld issues. It appears my friendship with her has put me into the position of a go-between. It's not one with which I'm comfortable.”

“Andra and I have just come from the armory and are changing for dinner. She may be on her way to the dining room as we speak.”

“Armory?”

“Yes -- She was teaching me to shoot. Andra is an amazing young woman.”

“You don't need to tell me that. Teaching you to shoot what -- a firearm?”

“Yes -- Mykko thought it wise I should know how to defend myself. Our arms- master planned to train me, but Andra offered and I accepted. We enjoyed ourselves. She's quite good.”

“It's ... come to my attention Andra learned during a stint on Earth.”

“She's told me a bit about her stay there -- how nearly everyone she saw carried weapons. She's concerned for your safety, Nykkyo -- we both hope you know how to defend yourself.”

“I assure you that's not the case in the corner of Earth where I'm stationed. Would you mind showing me your firearm?”

“I don't see why not...” She opened a drawer and removed a bulky device with a handle set at the center. She held it to the vidphone camera and turned it so Nyk could see it from different angles. “Here is the thumb-trigger. Here's the fuel cell.”

She pointed to a compartment in the handle. “Here's the pellet magazine.” She opened the compartment and tapped out a metallic sphere. “This is a round -- a 12 millimetre sphere of depleted

uranium, clad with a steel shell.” She replaced the round and closed the compartment. From another drawer she withdrew a metal cylinder. “This is the safety key. The gun won't operate unless it's in place.” She returned the key to the cabinet. “With Mykkoin around, I keep the gun and the key separated.” He watched her return the pistol to the drawer.

“How many on your world carry arms?” Nyk asked.

“Only our security forces or other authorized officials. I guess I qualify as an authorized official.”

Nyk pondered a moment. “Janna, what can you tell me of Rud Vadima?”

“Vadima was Mykko's assistant adjutant. He was a loyal supporter and a good friend -- destined for grand things in our administration. Then, about two and a half Floran years ago, he disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

“Vanished -- without a trace. We have no idea what happened to him.”

Nyk caught some motion in the corner of the vidphone screen. Startled, Janna turned toward it with her hand over the black gem in her belt. The door opened and a little, blond boy ran in, followed by a teenaged girl. Janna spoke to them and they left.

“Was that your son?” Nyk asked.

“Yes -- that was Mykko Junior.”

“He's adorable.”

“Nykkyo, I'll tell Andra you called. Now, dinner is served.” The vidphone session terminated.

Nyk sat and stared at the screen. He opened another window to access the Floran central database and began looking at photoimages of Janna and Chancellor Wiggann.

Seymor poked his head through the door. “Lunch at Bronfmanns?” he asked.

“Sure.”

“What're you up to?”

“Oh, I'm looking for images of Mykko Wiggann and his wife -- state functions, charity events and so on. Look here...” He gestured Seymor behind the desk. “This photo dates from about the time we broke Zander's smuggling ring.”

“So?”

He pointed to the screen. “Look at her belt. She's not wearing it in any photos taken before this one. In all the subsequent ones she's never without it.”

“What does that mean?”

“There's more. I spoke to Kronta yesterday. The oversight committee believes Zander was providing Earth arms to the Lexalese administration. There are guns on the colony, no doubt -- but I believe what Wygann has are home-grown technology and legal under the charter.”

“Then, why would Zander ship Earth arms to Lexal?”

“That is the big question, isn't it? Well -- I'm working a hunch. If I can find a bit more evidence, I'll fill Kronta in on my hypothesis.”

“Nyk, Illya has an entire team working the weapons issue. It's not that I want to discourage your ... creative thinking, but this simply doesn't fall within our domain of responsibility.”

“I suppose you're right.”

“However, there is a backlog of field reports that DO fall under our domain.”

“I'll get right on them.”

“After lunch. Come along, lad.” Nyk followed Seymor out the door.

Nyk opened the front door and walked in. “It's Nick,” he called out.

Yasuko appeared from the rear of the house. “No Sukiko again?”

“I received a call from someone at NYU this afternoon, asking if I knew where she was. I told them she was probably at the museum again. Then I called and spoke with Dr Donatovich. He told me Suki had not been visiting him.”

“I'm worried, Nick. Where do you think she might be?”

“Now I wish she had that cell phone. Your guess is as good as mine. I'm operating under the no-news-is-good-news principal.”

“We'd better not hold dinner waiting for her -- George is in a poor enough mood as it is. The market was down and one of his underwriting deals fell through.”

Nyk knelt at the low table. George eyed him. “Is Sukiko working late?”

“We don't know where she is.”

“So, she's back to her old habits, is she?”

“What do you mean?”

“When she was in high school,” Yasuko explained, “Sukiko would ... stray off from time to time. Once she was gone for two whole days. It turned out she was with some older kids who were supplying her with drugs and alcohol.”

“Drugs? Alcohol? In exchange for what?”

Yasuko pursed her lips. "Don't go there," George admonished.

"Sukiko had a problem with them," Yasuko continued. "She doesn't know that we know, but one can't hide such from one's parents. She seemed to straighten out in college. I hope she hasn't had a relapse."

"I don't think so," Nyk replied.

"It would be bad for the baby. Invariably she'd return in tears. We'd have a confrontation -- ground her or come up with some sort of penance. She'd behave for a while..."

"Then," George added, "the pattern would repeat. I certainly hope she isn't planning on continuing this behavior after the baby comes. She shouldn't be out ... frolicking..."

"We don't know where she is," Yasuko interrupted.

"You know damned well where she is and what she's doing. For God's sake -- she has a man in her life and a child on the way. She ought to know better than to run off with another of her lesbian friends."

"We don't know that for sure," Nyk replied.

"I don't care where she is -- she belongs right here." George brought his finger onto the table with enough force to rattle the dinnerware. He shook his head. "I'm too old and she's too big for me to take her over my knee." He glanced toward Nyk. "Perhaps she'd benefit from that sort of treatment from you."

"Oh, no. I'd never strike her."

"What do you intend to do?" Yasuko asked.

"I intend to hear what she has to say and then decide what action, if any, is appropriate. It is possible she has a legitimate explanation."

George snorted. "Anything's possible. But, a leopard cannot change its spots."

Nyk sat on the sofa in the apartment. Yasuko paced around the room. Nyk looked at his watch. "You might as well go to bed, Yasuko. I'll wait up for her."

"I won't sleep."

"If she does come home, we'll probably need some time alone. If not -- then you and I can take turns mounting a vigil. I'll call as soon as I know something."

Yasuko gripped his shoulder, nodded and brushed a tear from her cheek. She headed down the stairs.

Nyk looked again at his watch. He sighed, leaned back and shut his eyes.

The events of his short relationship with her ran through his mind. His one comfort was his belief

that the unborn child she carried was destined to give rise to the man who discovered his world. That meant as long as he existed -- saw sights and thought thoughts -- Suki and her child were safe.

He was startled by the sound of the front door and footfalls on the stairs. Suki breezed in. "Oh, Nykkyo -- do you have any money?"

"Some. Why?"

"There's a taxi waiting out front. I didn't have any cash and the driver won't take plastic. He's holding my purse as collateral."

"I'll take care of it."

Nyk dashed down the stairs and returned with Suki's bag. He found her kneeling on the sofa. "Here's your bag."

"Thanks. I'm relieved I didn't have to ask my father for the money."

"What happened?" She kept her face turned from him. He sat beside her and caressed her back. "Are you all right?" She began sobbing. "Please tell me what happened. We've been worried sick." He touched her chin and turned her head to face him. On her left cheek were three bloody gouges. "Who... how..."

"Oh, Nykkyo," she blubbered. "I feel like such a fool. You've every right to be furious with me."

"I want you to tell me everything from the beginning. But first, let's deal with those scratches."

He led her to the bedroom and had her lie on her right side. Then he took a cardboard carton from the closet and removed a polymer case. "Healing salve," he said as he opened a bottle from the case, "this may smart for a moment."

Suki winced as he applied the thick liquid to her face. "You lie still -- I'll get some cotton." He headed out of the bedroom and paused to pick up the telephone. He punched in the number and could hear it ring downstairs. "Yasuko -- she's home and safe. I'll fill you in tomorrow morning... about five minutes ago ... see you in the morning."

Nyk sat on the bed and daubed her cheek with a cotton ball. "Now, from the beginning."

"Oh, Nykkyo -- I haven't been honest with you. I've been seeing Alice since -- well, since shortly after moving back to New York."

"When do you see her?"

"It started out innocently enough. I needed to check some facts for a paper I was editing and I ran across her at the museum. We talked -- she apologized for how she had treated me. She told me she was in another relationship. We started having lunch together a couple days a week.

"After the rape she sent me flowers at work. A few weeks ago we met for lunch. She told me she had broken up with her latest lover. She seemed distraught. I told her she needed a good cry. I know how good it feels to cry on your shoulder, Nykkyo -- so, I offered her mine.

“We found a rarely-used room -- there are plenty of such hiding-places in a building the size of the museum. I held her and she cried. Then, she kissed me. Oh, Nykkyo -- I have no self-control.”

“What happened next?”

“The kissing led to some petting and the petting led to -- well, you can imagine. That storage room became our trysting-place. Since then, Alice and I have been meeting two or three times a week to... well, you can imagine that, too. Are you becoming angry?”

“Disappointed, perhaps. Then what?”

“Then, we were almost discovered. I can't believe the risk we were taking. We decided it was too dangerous to keep meeting in the museum, so we agreed to meet in her apartment in SoHo.

“I knew things were spiraling out of control. When I had my first counseling session we talked mostly about Alice. I realized I needed to do something -- but I was so conflicted. I tried to tell you that night, but it came out all garbled and sanitized.

“I invited her home for dinner -- I thought bringing it out in the open would be a catalyst to break it off. I was expecting you to be home, but your flight was cancelled.

“After dinner we came up here to talk. I had every intention of telling her, but instead we ended up making love all evening. Yes, Nykkyo -- I lied about that, too. When you discovered us -- I was terrified, but you took it so calmly.” He handed her a tissue and she dabbed her eyes. “You must be getting angry, now.”

“What good would anger serve? Go on.”

“I vowed to break it off. Yesterday I went to Alice's apartment to tell her, but instead we ended up...” Suki resumed crying. “There's something terribly wrong with me! I spent the whole afternoon with her. That night, I thought you'd be suspicious when I didn't want to make love.”

“I did think it was a bit odd...”

“I knew you probably wanted it, being away for a few days, but I was exhausted and couldn't. You told me about Dyppa and I exploded -- then I really hit bottom. It dawned on me how you were innocently trying to help someone, while I was cheating behind your back.” She held up her thumb and forefinger. “I felt this small.”

“Then, we made love.”

“Today I met Alice determined to break it off. I told her. I told her I have a wonderful man in my life and a baby on the way, and that I wasn't going to see her any more.”

“How did she react?”

“At first she was understanding -- she wished me luck. Then, she suggested we make love one last time. I refused -- I told her it was over. She became furious. She said she wasn't letting me out of the apartment until I made love with her. It got later and later. I tried to reason with her -- I pleaded with her. Finally I picked up the phone and started to call 911.”

Nyk daubed her face with the cotton. "There -- go look in the mirror."

She went into the bathroom. "That's amazing. I was sure I had been disfigured. I can barely see them."

"There'll be no trace tomorrow, guaranteed."

"Does that stuff work on bruises, too?"

"No -- the skin must be broken... Did Alice give you bruises?"

"Not where they'll show. I started to dial 911 but she grabbed the phone from me, ripped it out of the wall and started hitting me with it. We had a knock-down, drag-out fight. I screamed. The neighbors started pounding on the door. 'Before I let you go, I'm putting my mark on you,' she said and gouged my face. I had no idea her nails were so sharp.

"By now one of the neighbors had called the police. Alice opened the door and this cop was standing there. He must've been trying to figure out if it was some domestic disturbance or what. He saw my face. I told him I didn't want to press charges."

"Why not?"

"Oh, Nykkyo -- by then I just wanted to come home. The cop used his radio to call a cab."

"That's it?"

"That's it -- that's everything. I'm so sorry, Nykkyo. I feel so embarrassed and so foolish for getting sucked into something like this. I deserve what I get -- go ahead and give me my scolding."

Nyk lay on the bed and held her, stroking her back as she whimpered and sniffled. "Suki, I'm not going to scold you. We do have some things to discuss. I told you I hold our relationship to Earth standards. But, you don't appear to be doing the same."

"You're right," she sobbed. "I'm so sorry -- I didn't intend to be unfaithful, Nykkyo -- please believe me."

"I'm not angry for what you did with Alice."

"You're not?"

"No. You were acting in a Floran way. Wanting to patch things up with an ex-lover is a good thing, and a Floran thing. I desperately want to be on friendly terms with Senta. Expressing fondness by sharing the gift is a good thing, and a Floran thing, too."

"So you don't mind..."

"Not at all. I am hurt by your actions, though -- because you weren't honest with me -- because you felt you had to ... skulk around behind my back and lie to me and your mom about your whereabouts. Our relationship must be founded on trust. I'll never lie to you."

"Oh, Nykkyo..."

He brushed away a tear. "You hurt me, Suki -- by lying to me."

"Oh, God -- the last thing I wanted to do was hurt you. I'm so sorry ... I really am, Nykkyo."

"What hurt more is that you couldn't trust me -- that you felt the need to lie. Suki, you need keep nothing from me. If you had told me you wanted to spend time with Alice..."

"You probably would've told me to enjoy myself. Oh, God, Nykkyo ... oh, God..."

"If you decide you want to spend time with someone else -- or, even live with them -- there's nothing I can do to stop you. I hold no authority over you. All I can do is to demonstrate my love for you and to hope you don't find a better offer. I would expect you to be honest with me about it."

"Oh, God..." Her body shook from her sobbing. "This is worse than a scolding. I deserve that -- not this. What did I do to deserve you? Can you forgive me?"

"I don't think you were trying to injure me -- in fact I believe you were trying to spare me. You probably thought what I didn't know wouldn't hurt me and you could put this Alice incident behind you and no one would be the wiser. Your actions make sense, from an Earth values framework. Things just didn't work out for you." He kissed the top of her head.

"No, Nykkyo ... What I did was wrong under any values framework. It'll never happen again, I promise. Please forgive me... please..."

"I can and I do." Nyk stroked her back. "It's behind us now, *korlyta*. Let's consider it a learning experience."

"A learning experience?"

"Why don't we get ready for bed?"

He lay with his fingers locked behind his head. Suki entered, brushing her hair. She clipped it into a ponytail, slipped off her robe and joined him.

"Are you feeling better, now?" he asked.

"No. Nykkyo, I can't believe how you're taking this. When I walked in, I figured you'd be angry. I expected you'd yell at me. I thought maybe you'd leave me. I was even a little afraid you might hit me, although I know you're too gentle for that. I never in my life expected you to react by loving me. If the tables had been turned -- if it had been you, dragging your ass home after some affair, I ... I don't know what I'd do -- but I know for a fact I wouldn't have responded as you did. I can't believe you can just put this behind us. I can't believe we can go on as if nothing happened."

"We won't -- something did happen." He showed her his right palm. Across it was a line -- the scar he received from stopping her suicide. "It's like this -- sometimes our actions leave a scar. But -- we heal, and we go forward. We're strengthened by adversity." He stroked her arm. "Suki, there's nothing you can say or do that'll change how I love you. Remember that."

"Nothing? Not even this?"

“Not even this. I'm a Floran, after all. Florans have discarded the possessive aspect of love and lovemaking. We think it's all right to love more than one -- more than all right -- a good thing. Tell me -- do you think your feelings for Alice somehow diminished how you felt for me?”

Suki lay, contemplating. “Of course not,” she finally replied.

“I have much the same situation with Senta. Even though she and I are dissolving our marriage, I still care for her. I long to have her as a friend. Do you understand?”

“It's not easy for me.”

“If I can retain her as my friend -- we may find ourselves making love. It's what friends do on my world. True love isn't selfish -- it's generous. The human heart has an infinite capacity for love. Accepting that notion is liberating. We judge love and commitment by how generous we are. Our society isn't materialistic, so we give each other trust and freedom.”

“And, forgiveness.”

“When forgiveness is warranted.” He kissed her forehead. “Jealousy is considered in very poor taste on my world.” He kissed her again. “It's our way. Well -- it's our ideal, at least. We're human, after all -- and humans have faults -- but we try.”

“I'm trying, too...”

“Remember this, Suki -- I'm here for you. I've joined myself to you. I'm your best friend and your strongest ally. You need never fear being open with me. Will you remember that?” She nodded. “Good.” He continued to gaze into her eyes. With his finger he traced her cheek, down her neck and shoulder and along her arm. He took her hand and placed it on his chest. “Then, let's do what friends and lovers do.”

“I don't think I can tonight,” she said. “Do you need it?”

“Yes, I ... you ... we need it.” He slipped his hand behind her head and drew her lips to his.

“Is this how Florans make up?”

“It's how the ones who are serious about their love do.”

She ran her fingers across his skin. Tears formed in her eyes. “I can't... I can't enjoy myself feeling all this guilt.”

“I feel hurt. We must go beyond -- to prove our love is stronger than the hurt and the guilt. Don't you think so?”

“I'd like to believe it is.”

“Then, *korlyta*, the time has come for you to learn the Floran way.” He caressed her cheek with the backs of his fingers. “Look into my eyes... deep into my eyes.” He gazed into hers. “Empty your mind of thoughts -- push the guilt aside. Fill your mind instead with your partner. It's giving and trust, Suki. Give one hundred percent of yourself toward pleasing me and trust me to do the same toward you -- the result will be better for both of us. Do you understand?”

She nodded.

“Good. Now -- touch me like this...”

Nyk descended the stairs and stepped into the kitchen. Yasuko intercepted him. “How's our little stray this morning?”

“She's fine.”

“Did she say where she was?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“She was with Alice.”

“I suspected as much. I'm so sorry. I told you that woman is trouble.”

“She's over it.”

“Is she? What about you, Nick? Are you over it?”

“Yes -- her intentions were good.”

“So she says.”

“It was her execution that was flawed -- I'm convinced of it. We had a talk last night.”

“I heard you two ... talking.” She rolled her eyes. “It seems the nights I think you two are happiest I hear crying, and when you're the most troubled I hear ... what sounds like a pair of newlyweds.”

“When's your birthday, Yasuko? I think I'll buy you a pair of earplugs.”

“I don't know how you can be so tolerant. I half expected to see you heading out the door with your bags packed -- and I wouldn't have blamed you one iota.”

“Yasuko, in my mind the incident is behind us. You would please me if you'd put it behind us, too.”

Suki entered the kitchen in a denim jumper, her hair wet. She approached her mother and embraced her. “Mom -- I'm so sorry for worrying you.”

Yasuko hugged her daughter and glanced toward Nyk. “I accept your apology. I'm just happy you're safe. Would you like some breakfast?”

“I'll get some at the university. I have a backlog of work to catch up on.”

Nyk gulped the last of his coffee and headed out the door with her.

He sat with her on the subway. She leaned against him. “Nykkyo -- about last night... Are you getting over the hurt?”

“Yes -- are you getting over the guilt?” She nodded. “Then -- not another word.”

The train entered the tunnel under the East River.

“Nykkyo -- there's a saying that love conquers all. Before last night -- I was too cynical to believe it.”

Suki stood as the train approached Grand Central. “I'll see you right here tonight,” he said.

“You can depend on it.”

5 -- Domains of Responsibility

Nyk embraced Suki at the international departure lounge at JFK. “This is almost as bad as when you moved to New York,” he said. “It's hard to let you go.”

“It's only for three weeks.”

“Are you nervous?”

“A bit,” she replied. “But, I'm also looking forward to it. This is my real profession. I enjoyed teaching, but my true love is digging in the dirt.”

“You'll be careful.”

“Of course I will. I'm a New York girl, remember?” She kissed him. Nyk heard an announcement the flight to Turkey was ready for boarding. Suki whispered in his ear, “*Nykkyo, mi z'am. Mi va'terne z'am.*”

He whispered to her, “*Mi mikont. Mi anke z'am.* Have a good trip, *korlyta* .” She turned and headed for the security checkpoint.

Nykkyo descended the stairs from the apartment and walked into the kitchen, “Can I help, Yasuko?”

“Thank you, Nick, but I think everything's under control here.”

Nyk walked into the living room and surveyed it. He recalled he had first walked into the house a few short months ago as a stranger. Now, this was his home, and it felt more like home to him than did the Residence in Sudal.

He spotted Suki's father sitting at the go board studying patterns of black and white stones. “George, do you fancy a game?”

George cleared the board of stones. “I offer you black.”

“I'll take white,” Nyk replied. George smacked the first stone onto the gridded board and Nyk responded with his own. They began to build black and white patterns in an attempt to claim territory, rapidly trading moves.

“You do play well,” George said. “Playing against you has sharpened my game. I should take you with me to the Queens Go Club.”

Their game slowed as it progressed. Nyk was absorbed in the patterns of black and white. He became aware George was regarding him. He looked up and into George's eyes. “I'm happy we can have a few moments to talk, Nick. You're normally so occupied with Sukiko. Yasuko and I are pleased you've entered our lives. It's amazing to me one person could make such a difference.”

“I want nothing more than to be here for Suki when she needs me.”

“You must've been heaven-sent. You certainly have turned her life around.”

“I didn't do it. It was Suki's choice -- her accomplishment.”

“There were times during her teen years I was convinced she'd end up in jail -- or dead. I'm sorry. I shouldn't say such to you.”

“I know some of Suki's difficulties.”

George looked at the board. “I do love her, Nick. I know she doesn't always believe that.”

“I know you do. I can feel it.”

“For God's sake -- she's my daughter -- my own flesh and blood. How could I not love her?” He placed a stone. “I don't understand why we can't get along -- why I must feel like I'm walking on eggs whenever she's around?”

“May I be frank, George?”

“Certainly, Nick -- you're part of the family, now.”

“It seems to me each of you has carefully built a wall between you, and now you're both sitting on your respective sides, sulking and wishing the wall weren't there.”

George looked up at him. “That's a fairly perceptive observation.”

“There is great good in her. From the moment I met her I knew she had a very good *sena* .” He winced as he realized what he had said.

“A good what?”

“Spirit, inner being... Soul if you would.”

“I never heard it expressed that way... Is that a word from her practice of meditating?”

“Suki's been teaching me to meditate. I've found it very useful, a good way to groom mental discipline -- and a good tool for contemplating the universe.”

“It seems so much mumbo-jumbo to me.”

“You should try it.”

“I've been curious, but I've never had the opportunity to ask. What is the significance of the tattoo on your right arm?”

Nyk lifted the sleeve of his polo shirt and looked at the mark, a dime-sized emblem of a black triangle inside a pentagon. It was Senta's crest, signifying the Tibran line. “I had this done when I married. My wife wears a similar mark.”

“That symbolism has outlived your marriage to her. Once your divorce is final, would you consider having it removed?”

“No. Our marriage was an important event in both our lives. It helped me survive a difficult time, right after my parents were killed.”

Nyk placed a stone and bore off two of George's black ones.

“An excellent move, Nick.” George placed another stone and looked up at Nyk. “Do you work out or engage in sports?”

“No. I've never been particularly physical.”

“You look fit. I'd say it looks like you have some strength in those arms.”

“I've had the benefit of good nutrition. I also do a fair amount of walking -- my office isn't very convenient to the subway.” He resumed contemplating the gridded board.

“May I ask you a personal question?” George asked.

“Certainly.”

“How did you punch through with her?”

“Punch through? Punch through what?”

“Her homosexuality. I've wanted for years to do something like what you've done. How did you do it?”

“I didn't. Suki and I don't love each other as man and woman -- we love each other as soul mates. It's our personas that are in love.”

“Your *senas* ? Is that the word you used?”

Nyk smiled. “Yes. We just happen to live in our own respective bodies.”

“You certainly behave like a normal couple.”

“We've discovered how to use our bodies to express the love our personas have for each other.”

“I love my daughter, Nick. But this is one aspect of her personality I struggle with. For her sake, and for the sake of the baby, I've tried to get past it. I had been hoping her relationship with you might have changed her.”

“She has changed. It took her until fairly recently not to feel crushing guilt over her own nature -- that she's not the embodiment of something evil.”

“Her nature? You believe this behavior is part of her nature, like the color of her hair?”

“I don't desire to change her, George -- she'd no longer be Suki. I accept this as part of her makeup.”

“I disagree with you on that account. I believe we each have a choice, and we can choose to be strong and do the right thing, or we can choose to indulge our whims. I choose not to embezzle funds from my firm, although on a whim, I might be tempted to do so.”

Nyk placed a stone on a vacant corner of the board. George retaliated with a one on an adjacent point. He glanced up and saw George was still eyeing him. “What about you, Nick?”

“What about me?”

“Are you gay?”

“Exactly what is gay?”

“You know full well what gay means.”

“I'm me,” Nyk replied. “I'm myself who's in love with the person who lives inside your daughter's body.”

“You didn't answer my question.”

Nyk looked into his eyes. “George, I can appreciate the beauty and the sexuality of a man's body as well as a woman's. Does that make me gay?”

“It ... it depends on ... on what you practice, I suppose.”

“I'm not the sort to kiss and tell. So long as it's consensual, and so long as nobody's being hurt, I don't think what two adults do while they're by themselves is anyone else's business.”

“With that attitude, you two certainly are meant for each other.”

Nyk placed another stone. “Do you think I'm gay?” he asked George.

“I feared you might be. Not that it makes a big difference. You've demonstrated a care for her beyond what anyone else has ever offered.”

“What made you think I might be gay?”

“There's a... I don't know how to express it. There's a softness to you I haven't experienced before -- you're not like any man I've known. You have some physical characteristics, a ... smoothness... Sukiko's been attracted to some mannish women, I thought perhaps she responds to an effeminate... That a gay woman might be attracted to a gay... I'm sorry, Nick. You're so good for her, and here I am, looking a gift horse in the mouth.”

“It's all right -- please don't feel you've insulted my manhood, George. I'm comfortable with who I am. I know I'm a freak of nature.”

“How so?”

“I'm a victim of a congenital disorder known as atypical female syndrome. Genetically, I'm a woman, but physically, I'm a man. It may explain some of those characteristics.”

“I've never heard of it.”

“It's quite rare. It's the reason I'm sterile. That's the one thing about myself I'd change if I could. I long to know I could father her child ... I do have a man's features, George. I am male, and everything works as it should, except my seed can't make a woman pregnant.” Nyk placed another stone on the board. “What about you, George? Are you gay?”

Nyk could see darkness spread across George's brow. “No! I've never had such an experience.” George glared at him. “I have always done what's right. I've never permitted myself to be tempted from the correct path. This pertains to every aspect of my life -- my career, my marriage and my family.”

“I'm sorry, George. I had no intention of upsetting you.”

George eyed him for a long moment. “You're forgiven, Nick.” He placed another stone. “Turnabout's fair play, I suppose.”

Nyk detected an increase in the aggressiveness of George's strategy. He looked at the clock, “It's getting late. Shall we tally?”

“Fine, Nick.” They scored the board and agreed George had a slight lead. “Thanks for a challenging game.”

“My pleasure,” Nyk replied and extended his hand. George hesitated, then grasped it. Nyk looked into his eyes. “I love Suki. I love all of you. I never had much of a relationship with my own father, and both my parents have been dead for nearly eight years. Yasuko and you are my mom and dad, now.” He opened his arms.

George patted his back, "Yes, Nick, we're happy to have you as a member of our family. Good night."

Nyk sat at the kitchen table sipping a cup of coffee. "Well, how do you like being a bachelor again?" Suki's mother asked.

"I don't like it very well. Suki's been gone two days and I can't wait 'til she's back." Yasuko pulled a chair next to his and patted his hand. "Use the next few weeks to catch up on your sleep, Yasuko. The bedroom above yours should be quiet."

"The sound of your lovemaking is music to my ears, Nick. I know she's here, I know she's safe, and I know she's happy. It's become a lullaby for me. I'll admit I was skeptical when I first learned she had invited you to move in. You've been so good for her -- I've never seen her so happy. I do wish she hadn't gone to Turkey, though. I worry for her... as you know."

"She'll be fine. She's not made of glass. Suki has a strong respect for the cultures of others. I'm sure the Turks will love her -- and Vlad speaks some of the language. It's out of our control, anyway. This is something she needed to do. I imagine there'll be more trips to the Middle East in the upcoming years. Maybe we'll all have the chance to accompany her. Wouldn't that be fascinating?"

"Fascinating, assuming we survive it."

Yasuko refilled his cup. "Thanks," he said. "Yasuko, is George gay?"

She looked up at him, "Why would you ask such a question?"

"You can be frank with me. This is between us. I won't breathe a word to anyone, not even Suki."

"Why would you ask?" she demanded.

"Last night while we were playing go, George asked if I were gay, so I asked him if he was."

"You didn't!"

"Yes, and his reaction was stronger than I anticipated -- it frightened me a bit. I started thinking perhaps George's obsession with Suki's lesbianism might be because..."

"Because it reflects something in his own personality? Something that makes him uncomfortable?" Yasuko sat, looked into Nyk's eyes and shook her head. "You are treading on dangerous ground, Nick. I recommend you drop it."

"Whether he is or isn't has no bearing on how I feel toward him. It could explain his distress with Suki's nature, though."

"George has been a good and faithful husband."

"I don't want him to fear being open with me. I know I'm different -- that I'm not like other men on this planet."

“We're all unique, Nick. It's what makes this world such an interesting place.”

“I couldn't have said it better myself.”

“Please -- don't pursue this. George probably regrets bringing the subject up in the first place.”

“Consider the topic closed. I love him, Yasuko. I love all of you -- and I'm happier than I've been in years, feeling part of a family again.” He rinsed his cup and placed it in the kitchen sink. “Well, I'm off to my grind. I'll see you later.” He headed for the door.

“Wait, Nick.” He turned toward her. “I wanted to say... George and I love you, too. You really are a son to us. If anything should happen to Sukiko, I hope...”

Nyk held her and stroked a tear off her face, “I'll never let any of you out of my life.” He kissed her forehead. “I'll see you for dinner.”

Nyk flipped open his laptop computer and powered it up. In his email was a message from Illya Kronta, requesting a call. He opened a vidphone window and entered Kronta's locator code.

“Nykkyo, we're still waiting to hold that interview with Andra.”

“She's still on Lexal.”

“We could do it via vidphone.”

“I haven't spoken to her. Illya, when you have three parties each on different worlds with different day lengths, it can be hard to mesh.”

“Nyk -- I get the distinct impression you're less than eager to help us arrange an interview.”

“I've been told this Lexal affair falls outside my domain of responsibility.”

“That sounds like Seymor. Listen, Nyk -- perhaps I can appeal to your sense of duty as a Floran citizen. I feel I should fill you in on what we now know. The arms shipments Zander engineered no doubt went to Lexal, but the trail ends there. We have more on Rud Vadima -- he was known to have traveled to Earth with Zander for paramilitary training. This gives us links between all the players.”

“Who are?”

“Zander, Andra, Vadima, Janna and Wygann. We know of at least one meeting between Vadima and Zander that Andra attended.”

“That's not surprising -- Zander kept her on a short tether. He even smuggled her to Earth.”

“Is that so? That ties her even tighter into it.”

“I think not, Illya. Think about what it must've been like for her -- stuck on an alien world, not knowing the language or customs. She was an unwitting pawn.”

“Don't underestimate *ax'amfin* witches, Nyk. They're trained just for such intrigue. If she were on Earth for weapons and tactics training...”

“Illya, I know and trust Andra. She tells me she knew nothing of Zander's doings and I believe her.”

“I'd really like to get a dose of truth drug into her to know for sure.”

“You've developed this theory and you're attempting to make the facts fit,” Nyk replied. “Take the Vadima link -- according to Wygann's own statement, Vadima left his administration over two years ago and his whereabouts are unknown.”

“We have no way to verify Wygann's assertion. For that matter, we can't corroborate anything he says. He claims his colony is open, yet he refuses to permit High Legislature officials to inspect his labs.”

“That's at least partly understandable, given the mutual distrust between Wygann and the current HL.”

“He also claims no weapons have been shipped to Lexal, yet we know the shipments went there, and we know weapons do exist on the colony.”

“I spoke to Princess Janna the other day.”

“YOU spoke to Janna? She hasn't answered any of our inquiries.”

“She gave me her locator code -- as a friend of Andra.”

“You have Janna's personal locator code? Could you share it with me?”

“I'm sorry Illya -- I was given it in confidence. It is the personal code of the wife of a colonial chancellor. Besides, it wouldn't do you any good -- unless you're on her access list.”

“Of course -- you're right.”

“Illya -- if the HL would meet Janna or Wygann half-way, I'm sure they'd reciprocate. I found Janna to be open and pleasant.”

“I'm afraid too many bridges have been burned -- and I'd expect nothing less from another *ax'amfin* witch. What did she say to you?”

“She showed me the gun she was issued. I'm no expert in firearms, but it looked nothing like any Earth pistol I've ever seen. She was given it for defensive purposes -- the same reason she wears a personal shield.”

“Janna wears a shield?”

“I believe so -- I don't know for sure.”

“What makes you think she does?”

“Look at photoimages of her. Ever since we broke up Zander's operation she's been wearing a heavy belt. I think it conceals a shield generator. When I was speaking with her she was startled and reached for it.”

“A shield... I wonder where that technology came from.”

“It's stronger evidence their arms program is defensive in nature.”

“On the contrary -- what would be more offensive than a shielded and invulnerable attack force? Nyk -- I appreciate your loyalty to your ... friend. You don't have the benefit of the information I have.”

“Perhaps lack of information is itself a benefit.”

“All right -- what is your theory regarding the whereabouts of those Earth arms?”

“I believe Lexal was a trans-shipment point. The planetary population is only a hundred million or so.”

“One-fifty,” Illya interjected.

“Nonetheless, there must be vast tracts of empty land there. An ExoScout could park outside the heliopause and send shuttlecars down to the surface. Once there, the arms shipments could be broken down, dispersed and quietly taken to a more densely populated colony -- like Altia.”

“Your theory works equally well for the smuggling of weapons into Wygann's hands.” Kronta drummed his fingers against his desk. “Nyk, I'm going to confide in you information of the utmost sensitivity. Please set your comm cipher to strongest security.”

Kronta's image broke up. Nyk entered his pass code and the image reformed.

“Nyk, have you ever heard of the Defense Research Labs.”

“Yes -- formed to preserve Earth weapons technology so we'd be prepared in the event our ExoScouts encountered hostile alien life forms.”

“The labs have done more than preserve Earth technology.”

“What do you mean? Are you talking about nuclear weapons?”

“I've heard credible reports of energy beam technology. You didn't hear me say that.”

Nyk sat slack-jawed. “I can't imagine our people armed with beam weapons.”

“After the Ricin Plot, the HL authorized mobilizing this technology and the formation of an inter-colonial strike force.”

“Are we talking colony-against-colony?”

“No -- the force can only be deployed under HL authority. The intent is to take preemptive action against a colony deemed a threat to the peace of the Floran Hegemony.”

“You think Lexal poses such a threat?”

“Some in the HL believe so.”

“Illya, I know Mykko Wygann has made enemies in the HL. That in itself doesn't make him a threat.”

“Nyk, I am the ExoService liaison to the High Legislature committee overseeing the strike force. The committee sees a window of opportunity to move against Lexal if it is warranted.”

“Window of opportunity?”

“Yes, Nyk -- Wygann's delegation has been recalled to Lexal for consultation after he failed to sway a resolution on colonial security. The HL is in a difficult position. On the one hand, let's assume the Lexalese are arming offensively. Wygann could overrun several colonies before the HL could react.”

“Hence the push for a preemptive strike...”

“To take out their offensive machinery before it can be brought to bear.”

“What if Lexal has no offensive capacity? How will the HL react to an assault on an innocent colony?”

“Frankly, it could bring down the government. Nyk, I'd like you to travel to Lexal, look around and see if you can find any evidence of Wygann using Earth weapons technology.”

“Me?”

“Yes, Nyk. You're in a unique position. Through your friendship with Andra, you have an entre into the Lexalese palace.”

“Which is it, Illya? Do you want to bring charges against her or use her as a double agent? Or, both?”

“Our window of opportunity won't remain open for long. If Wygann launches his own strike while we sit on our hands, then the consequences will be just as dire. I can't order you to do this, Nyk.”

“I'm sorry, Illya but I must refuse. I'm a botanist -- I have no training in undercover operations. I have a huge backlog of work to do here. There must be someone who'd be a better choice.”

“You have Earth experience. Our planetbound agents wouldn't recognize an Earth firearm if they tripped over one. And, you have a contact inside the Lexalese palace. We need this intelligence, Nyk. Lives are at stake.”

Nyk pondered for a moment. “If there is to be a strike, I'd hate to think of Andra stuck there in the middle of it.”

“There you go, Nyk. Go to Lexal and bring Andra home for her safety.”

“So you can file charges? Interrogate her?”

“Bring credible evidence of her lack of involvement and that won't happen.”

“All right, Illya. I'll do it -- a trip to Lexal and back. And, I'll see if I can witness any Lexalese security forces carrying weapons of Earth design or manufacture. In return, if I don't -- you agree to stop pursuing Andra.”

“Do you agree to be open-minded about her possible participation?”

Nyk sighed. “Yes, Illya. I'm a Floran first. If I find evidence of Andra's involvement, I'll be the first to testify.”

“Good. Then we have a deal.” The vidphone session terminated.

“But, I won't find it,” Nyk muttered. He poked his head into Seymor's office. “Well, it appears this Lexal weapons business has suddenly been thrust into our domain of responsibility.”

“What do you mean?”

“Kronta just asked me to travel to Lexal to fetch Andra home. While there, I'm to do some intelligence gathering.”

“If Kronta is asking you to do this, I can't tell you not to.”

“Kronta seems convinced Andra is in the middle of some plot.”

“Do you think so?”

“I don't know what to think. Andra swears she isn't -- but...”

“But what?” Seymor asked.

“But ... I don't know. Everyone calls the *ax'amfinen* witches. Maybe I am too trusting -- maybe I shouldn't take what a woman says at face value. Maybe you're right when you say I become too emotionally involved... How do you deal with it when someone you trust looks you in the eye and tells you a lie? Now, I'm being asked to do the same.”

“What do you mean?” Seymor asked.

“I'm to go to Lexal under the pretense of bringing Andra home for her safety -- yet I know full well a contingent of Internal Affairs officers will be waiting for her. I feel like a traitor.”

“Lad -- if it turns out she's a traitor -- then you'll feel good. If not -- she'll be exonerated, and you'll feel good about that.”

“I'll feel awful either way. She asked me to trust her, and she says she trusts me.”

“When do you make transit?”

“It's out and back -- no more than a couple of days. I'll call Veska to arrange a packet diversion. Can you do without me for two or three days?”

“We'll have to.”

“Any ideas on how to get to the relay station?”

“Why don't you give Grynnya a call? She's never busy.”

6 -- Janna

Nykkyo sat at Grynnya's kitchen table. “Thanks for doing this,” he said.

“Don't worry about it. Dinner's almost ready. I hope you like salisbury steak. Would you like another Coke?”

“No thanks.”

She stood behind him and fingered his hair. “Have you thought any more about my offer? Remember, you owe me a night.”

“Grynnya, I have a happy relationship with Suki.”

“Yes, your Earth woman. Some day she'll come to appreciate the Floran approach. When she does -- I have dibs!” She pulled a gallon jug of red wine from her refrigerator. “I had to cancel a date tonight -- with Leo. Oh, well -- duty calls, I suppose.” She opened a cabinet. “For you?”

“Why not?”

She withdrew a pair of glasses and poured a one for Nyk. “I'll make mine a short one, since I'm flying.” She filled hers half-way. “Leo's set some sort of a record with me -- most of them don't last this long. There have been a couple Earth men I was sorry to lose.”

“What about another Earthbound Floran?”

“Precious few of those come by. There's you and Seymor.” She sipped her wine. “Leo's happy to keep things on a strictly physical level and that suits me fine. You're lucky -- having a partner you can trust. You told me your woman has seen the homeworld.”

“She attempted suicide. When I found her she had no pulse.”

“It sounds to me like a successful suicide.”

“I took her to Floran to be reanimated.”

“A gutsy move -- I admire your courage.”

“I had no choice. My friendship with her triggered a chain of events leading to her suicide. I'm guilty of temporal interference. You are looking at a temporal offender. I've framed my own destiny -- I must replace the man who was to be in her life.”

“You're not going to be maudlin again, are you?” Nyk smiled and shook his head. Grynnya looked into the oven. “I think dinner's ready. We'll make transit as soon as it's dark.”

The inbound packet approached the transit platform and docked. Nyk stepped out and headed for his connection to the Myatasya and Lexal outbound packet. He passed Veska's office and poked his head in. “Veska -- Dad...”

“My son and friend,” Veska said.

“I'm on a tight connection. I thought I'd say hi.”

Veska stood, embraced him and kissed his forehead. “Maybe now's not the time to trouble you with Senta.”

“Why? What's Senta doing?”

“She's been speaking with a solicitor, looking for ways to make your separation more difficult.”

“It's rather cut and dried, isn't it? I left her -- I've taken permanent residence in a place out of her reach. I was her dependant, so I'm not injuring her financially. She has so many lovers she can't claim loss of companionship.”

“It's the principal with her,” Veska replied. “I'm trying to make her see reason. The truth about you and me hasn't helped my relationship with her.”

“There's nothing she can do to alter the outcome.”

“No, but she can make the process unpleasant -- and that's what she's attempting to do.”

“What is it with women? Do they exist solely to make men miserable?”

Veska smiled. “But -- it's such a delightful misery, isn't it? Well, have a nice trip to Lexal.”

“See you in a couple of days.” Nyk headed toward the departure lounge for the outbound packet.

The packet pulled into a parking orbit around Lexal and waited for the shuttle to dock. Nyk watched the proceedings through the viewport. The packet airlock opened and Nyk boarded the shuttle to the colony's only shuttleport, located in the capital. Soon he was standing on the planet's surface. He looked around. The capital city was located in the rugged highlands. Snow could be seen on some of the taller peaks. Nyk could feel a stiff breeze and he felt uncomfortable in his lightweight Floran clothing. The wind blew through the trees, rustling leaves ranging from green to brown. He heard a clang, looked up

and saw a Lexalese flag -- white and yellow with the colonial emblem in purple -- flapping and banging against its pole.

He walked to the groundcar lot and selected a car, opened it and climbed in. He pressed his wrist against the scanpad and requested the palace as destination. The groundcar headed from the shuttleport and onto a narrow roadway. Nyk watched the scenery whiz by as the car wound its way up switchbacks leading to the hilltop palace, dodging into lay-bys to permit oncoming traffic to pass.

He saw the palace ahead. From the road, all he could see was the outer wall, built of a brown-grey stone. Watchtowers stood at each corner and he could see guards with long arms of some sort stationed atop the wall.

The groundcar came to a halt in a visitor's lot a prudent distance from the palace. Nyk walked to a guardhouse and noticed the firearm at the sentry's side. It looked like the one Janna had shown him.

"I'm Nykkyo Kyhana. I have an appointment with the Princess."

The guard presented him with a scanpad and Nyk pressed his wrist to it. "Are you here on business or pleasure?" the guard asked after reviewing Nyk's profile.

"Business."

The guard scowled. "ExoAgent..." He squinted at Nyk. "Homeworld officials are unwelcome here."

"It's personal business."

The guard motioned him to a low platform. Nyk stood on it.

"Hold your arms out." The guard manipulated controls on a display. "You may step down," the guard said and then spoke to someone via vidphone. "An escort will be along shortly."

Nyk paced outside the guard station, shivering with his arms folded. A short, chunky young woman approached him.

"Are you Nykkyo?" she asked.

"Yes, I am."

"I'm Daya, Princess Janna's assistant. Welcome to Lexal. By the looks of things, we'll have to locate some warmer clothing for you. Come with me -- we'll see what we can find. Then I'll take you to Janna." Daya led Nyk to a transport car for the ride into the palace.

"There's a wardroom over here," she said. "this is a fairly common problem with visitors from Floran."

Nyk dressed in trousers and a long-sleeved shirt. "These fashions are similar to those found on Earth," he said.

"That's right -- you're an ExoAgent. How do you find Lexal?"

“Your planet is quite Earth-like. This is my first visit to any of the colonies.”

“Follow me and I'll take you to Janna. She's expecting you.”

Daya scanned herself into a lift to the chancellor's living quarters.

Nyk walked into a drawing room and saw Janna sitting at a desk. She was wearing the floor-length gown and the heavy belt. Nyk eyed the elaborate buckle with its jet-black cabochon.

“Thank you, Daya.” Janna dismissed her assistant with a hand gesture. Daya snapped her head, turned and left.

“Hello, Nykkyo -- I was surprised to hear from you.”

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with me, Princess.”

“Please -- it's Janna.” She turned to face him. “You caught me between engagements. Andra is a very special friend of mine, and I'm always happy to spend a few moments with one of hers. What brings you to Lexal?”

“I've come to fetch Andra home. She's required on the homeworld.”

Janna regarded him through narrowed eyes, “That sounds like an excuse -- not a reason. Andra's a big girl who hardly needs a chaperone. No -- there must be something else.”

Nyk paused and pondered. “I'll be frank, Janna. I was sent here on an espionage mission, but I feel openness and honesty are the best policies. I'm afraid I'm in a bit over my head -- I'm not trained as an undercover agent. I'm the envoy of one Illya Kronta, an ExoService overseer who's been named liaison to a High Legislature committee investigating rumors about some goings-on here. I'm to report what I find to Kronta, and he will report to the committee.”

“I appreciate your frankness, Nykkyo.” She shook her head. “The measures to which the HL stoops... What are these rumors?”

“The ExoService has proof of Earth weaponry being smuggled here. The prevailing opinion is that your husband's regime is arming offensively with illegal arms, with the intent of destabilizing neighboring colonies.”

“I've heard reports of the same rumor. It's too fantastic to be believed.”

“Kronta believes Andra is part of the plot. He wishes to interview her.”

“Andra?” She shook her head. “Ludicrous.”

“We know she was on Earth with Zander about the time the arms shipments were arranged. We also know she received weapons training there. She's proficient enough with a firearm to train you. Andra was present when certain individuals met with Zander on Floran. She may have been with him on Altia as well.”

“Do you believe any of this?” Janna asked.

“I don't know what to believe. Kronta's evidence is compelling.”

“Kronta couldn't be more wrong. The rumors are nonsense. Did he explain to you what possible gain we could expect from destabilizing the region?”

“Extending your sphere of influence. To put it baldly -- sheer power.”

“Take my word, Nykkyo -- governing this sphere is quite enough. We have no interest in projecting our control onto Altia or T-Delta. I find the notion abhorrent.”

Nyk stood, regarding Janna. He looked into her pale blue eyes. “I think I believe you.”

She proffered a faint smile. “Thank you for giving me benefit of the doubt.”

“It's not that, Janna. Andra told me how much alike you and she are. Now that I've met you in person -- I can see how remarkable the resemblance is.”

“Yes -- she and I met when we were about fifteen. Andra joined the academy and needed a room. I needed a roommate. All the students at Vebinad looked alike -- Andra and I especially so. We've been close ever since. Our classmates called us the Twins. I was truly delighted to renew our friendship. Despite appearances, this role can be a lonely one. I enjoy Andra's company -- she takes my mind off the pressures of state.”

“Janna, did you and Andra ever find yourselves crying over the same hurt and tasting each other's tears, and thus becoming bonded fast -- friends-for-life?”

“The ritual of shared pain from Vebinad Academy. A silly ritual, really -- schoolgirl stuff. Yes, Andra and I are so bonded.”

“Andra takes that ritual seriously.”

“The ritual is silly -- we take the bonding seriously.”

“Janna, I think it's in both our interests to be friends and to trust each other.”

She smiled. “This is refreshing. You intrigue me, Nykkyo. I was about to summon my security and have you removed from this palace... Why should you and I trust each other?”

“Andra and I spent a few days together, around the time her husband was killed. She told me of how she suffered, how he mistreated her, of how her hopes were dashed, and yet she survived, was strengthened, and remains a beautiful and cheerful young woman. I found my eyes burning as she described Zander's tortures of her, of how she submitted to him in an effort to avoid his punishments, of how he used illegal drugs to force his will upon her. I cried for her, with her, and we tasted each other's tears. Andra and I are friends- for-life.”

“The deeper the hurt, the stronger the bond. Did, by any chance, this occur after you two had made love?”

“Yes, it did.”

“That doubles the bond.” Janna stood, walked to a window and looked out at the highlands in

the near distance.

“So -- you and I are bonded through Andra. Friends-for-life trust each other with their lives. I must trust her and I find myself compelled to trust you, too. She trusts me, and I hope so would you.”

“An interesting approach. I'm beginning to appreciate what Andra sees in you, Nykkyo.”

“Janna, the investigators have learned of a link between your husband and Andra's.”

“That's impossible.”

“Andra and I found ourselves allied against Zander. As you know, Academy students are taught how to suppress knowledge of their companions' political activities.”

“Of course...”

“Andra agreed to interrogation under the influence of a hypnotic. She was shown a series of photoimages and she identified those who had met with Zander at their Floran City apartment. Among the photoimages was one of Rud Vadima.”

Janna spun around and looked at Nyk. “That's why you wanted to know about Vadima!”

“Janna, it appears to me you're living a charmed life. Look at your surroundings. Your planet's population is devoted to you. It seems to me you're a very lucky woman.”

“Luckier in my assignment than some, I suppose.”

“You're certainly luckier than Andra. She told me of her dreams. She dreamt of a glorious life on an exotic world. The assignment she was given was a far cry from this. And, yet she adhered to what she was taught -- the Vebinad Academy motto -- *Unu Deva Feti* .”

“To do one's duty.”

“Andra did hers. Janna, I look into Andra's eyes and I can only begin to imagine what she's seen and felt. Yet -- there's no anger in her eyes. Might you be bitter if your dreams were dashed, and your life ruined? She'll never live up to her potential, now. No one would accept Zander Baxa's widow as a consort -- even though she's as beautiful, intelligent and capable as you or any Vebinad graduate. She accepts this as her duty without complaint.”

Janna turned her back to him. He walked around her and looked into her eyes again. “Think about it. She entered Vebinad Academy as did you, a bright and pretty girl full of hopes. Her dream was to live in a palace on a colony planet, to look out on snow-covered highlands or a tropical paradise -- to see moons in the sky or a double sun. Where did she go instead? To Zander's cramped apartment in the older part of Floran City. Our society had a social contract with her and it was abrogated.”

“She fulfilled her destiny,” Janna replied. “As do we all.”

“Andra was so unhappy with Zander, at the end she was ready to die before going back to him. When I found her, she had concealed an injector filled with nerve toxin. She told me she'd use it on herself willingly and eagerly before returning to him.”

“I had no idea!”

“I watched Zander die of that same toxin -- it wasn't a pleasant sight. Andra was fully prepared to jab that needle into her own flesh. Think of how this poor girl suffered, and for the only reason she was born with certain physical traits. I know you love Andra.” Janna pressed her knuckle to her lips. “I love her, too. We came very close to losing her.” Nyk stroked a tear from his face and touched his finger to her lips. “That poor, poor girl. Let the tears flow for her, Janna.”

Her eyes filled and a tear ran down her face. Nyk touched it and transferred it to his lips. “Now, you and I have cried over the same hurt and tasted each other's tears. We're bonded fast, friends for life. We have no choice but to trust each other.”

Janna stared at Nyk and attempted to speak. Slowly she regained her composure. “Nykkyo, you are as good a man as Andra described -- perhaps better. Yes -- lets be friends and trust each other. How can we help each other?”

“We'll tell each other what we know, and figure out the rest from there. I'll go first. We know Zander was using Floran diamonds to purchase Earth weapons, and Vadima was arranging shipment. We know the weapons came to Lexal. Illya Kronta has been given the assignment to deliver to a High Legislature committee a finding on whether or not those arms are in the hands of your husband's forces.”

Janna sat and pondered.

“The committee in question,” Nyk continued, “was formed to recommend to the HL whether or not to declare Lexal a rogue colony, and whether or not to launch a police action against your regime, the first such action in our people's history. That is what I know. Now, it's your turn.”

Janna sat, staring at the floor. “Would the High Legislature really launch a strike against us? I know Mykko's policies have made him unpopular with other colonial leaders, and his successes are the envy of many. Originally, our world was founded as an agricultural and resort colony. Mykko's vision was for something more.” She looked up at Nyk, “Thank you for sharing that with me. As I told you, Rud Vadima dropped from sight two and a half Floran years ago.”

“His disappearance would coincide with Zander's stay on Earth.”

“Well, Vadima certainly was not acting as Mykko's agent. Mykko wouldn't have anything to do with Zander or any other Baxa.”

“Kronta is convinced the weapons shipments came here. If they weren't for your forces, the only other explanations would be for someone else on Lexal, or that Lexal was a transshipment point.”

“That's a question I can't answer.”

“Then tell me about your weapons program.”

“Our firearms technology was invented here. It is based on material pre-dating PlanetFall, but that's all in the public domain. When Mykko authorized the creation of our defense lab, he insisted we follow both the spirit and the letter of our colonial charter.”

“Then, none of your technology came from the Defense Research Labs?”

“No --none from the DRL or from any other off-colony source. I can take you to meet our arms-master and permit you to inspect our armory, and to see our research and development facilities. That may convince you our arms program is completely native to this planet.”

“I need no convincing. If you tell me that's the case, I believe it. We are friends-for-life.”

Janna smiled at him. “Thank you, Nyk.”

“But, Kronta is neither your nor my friend-for-life. He may need convincing. And he may need evidence strong enough to convince the committee.”

“Come with me -- I'll introduce you to our arms master.”

Daya entered carrying a portable vidisplay. “Princess, I have your afternoon schedule.”

“Daya, please clear my schedule for the rest of the day. Transmit my regrets, but this is infinitely more important.”

“Yes, Princess.” Daya snapped her head and left the chamber.

Nyk returned with Janna to her chambers carrying a datacel. “Photoimages, mechanical drawings, R&D documents. This should be enough to convince Kronta your weapons development is indeed original and within the colonial charter. I'll transmit this to him immediately.”

“Very good, Nyk. Now, were you serious about taking Andra home with you?”

“I have been instructed to bring Andra home with me -- for her safety.”

“I assure you, Nykkyo, that she's safe and welcome here. If she wishes to return to Floran with you, that's her affair. I'd be sorry to see her go. At any rate, the next outbound packet will be tomorrow, so you must accept my hospitality for at least one night.” Janna passed her hand over a proximity pad. Daya reappeared. “Daya, please show Nykkyo to his guestroom. Give him the one adjacent to Andra's.” Daya snapped a bow and led Nykkyo down a corridor.

He sat at the vidisplay in his guestroom, inserted the datacel containing his high- security comm cipher, and placed a call to Kronta. “I've seen no evidence of any offworld arms technology in the hands of Wygann's forces,” Nyk reported. “Also, I've seen no evidence of beam weapons -- only firearms of Lexalese design and manufacture.”

“Do you have any idea where the material might have gone?”

“None so far. I do have documentation supporting Janna's claim their program is defensive and self-contained. Wygann has operated within his legal rights. I might not agree with what he has done, but I believe he was within his rights to do it. When Wygann started his defense program, he insisted his researchers avoid even the appearance of employing prohibited technology. For example, he forbid his researchers from using self-oxidized explosives to propel projectiles.”

“What does that mean?”

“He forbid them using gunpowder, Illya -- since gunpowder is an Earth technology. You won't

find it on Lexal. I also have an inventory of all the guns produced by Wygann's armory and where they're deployed -- hardly enough to equip an invasion force. It's all in this documentation. I'll transmit it to you but only under the condition that it remain confidential and that it is to be destroyed after your committee has had a chance to review it."

"So agreed."

Nyk inserted the datacel and began transmitting the documentation.

"I'll review this. I'm planning on recommending the committee to leave Wygann alone. Do you see, Nyk? Your access to the palace paid off."

"And Andra?"

"This appears to let her off the hook."

"You'll stick to our bargain?"

"Yes, Nyk -- barring any new developments, we'll cease investigating Andra. What are your plans?"

"We've missed today's outbound packet. We have two seats reserved on tomorrow's flight, so I'm spending the night as Janna's guest."

"Lucky you. I'm beginning to think your protestations about this mission were specious."

"Good night, Illya." The vidphone display went dark.

Nyk pressed the doorchime on Andra's door. "Come in," she said. He walked in. "Nyk! What are you doing here?" He put his hands on her waist and looked deeply into her eyes. "What's the matter? Nykkyo, what's wrong?"

He held her and she rested her head on his shoulder. "Kronta is wrong," he said as he stroked her hair.

"Wrong about what?"

"About you -- about Lexal. I was sent here to bring you home -- under the pretense of guarding your safety. There are rumors of trouble brewing here. But -- the real reason was to turn you over to Internal Affairs for an interview."

"Do they still question my role?"

"The authorities aren't interested in the truth -- they want a collar -- finding someone they can charge and make it stick."

"If that's what it takes to clear my name, I'll go -- I'll submit to truth drug. I have nothing to fear." She stroked a tear from his face. "My friend-for-life." She kissed his cheek.

"I couldn't betray you."

“The rumors are right about trouble brewing. Security is much tighter than when I first arrived. Everyone's on edge, and Janna won't let me leave the palace. I don't like it.”

“Well, we're set for transport on tomorrow's early outbound packet. How do you like the lifestyle of a princess?”

“Give me that house in Sudal. That's a palace that's more than big enough for me.”

Nyk heard the doorchime. “Come.”

The door opened and he saw Daya. “Please follow me for dinner.”

Nyk motioned for Andra to precede him and they went into the chancellor's private dining room. Daya motioned them to sit at a large, round table. Janna entered with her husband.

Mykko Wygann was a compact, well-groomed man with a presence reminding Nyk of Suki's father. Nyk thought he looked to be about sixty-five Floran years -- old enough to be Janna's father.

“Please, don't stand,” Wygann said. “Nykkyo, Janna has told me of your conversation. Thank you for your help. Believe me, making this palace an armed stronghold was never our intention -- it's for the safety of my staff and family. We're hoping to be able to relax a bit, once we've neutralized Zygon Vellod's faction.”

“Chancellor,” Nyk said, “would you explain why Vellod is so antagonistic toward your administration?”

“Please, call me Mykko. We're all friends here, are we not? Zygon Vellod was a long- standing chancellor here. He was, in fact, my mentor. We came to disagree over the direction of this colony. Vellod saw Lexal as an agrarian economy -- combined with tourism. I, on the other hand, believed we had the opportunity for a complete, self-contained economy that included industry. We finally decided to take the issue to the people, after year-long educational campaigns from both sides. The people chose my approach. Shortly after that, we held a general election, and I was elected chancellor.

“Vellod never accepted his defeat, either in the plebiscite or in the election. He believed that some dirty tricks -- some vote fraud -- had been committed. He has taken his case to the arbitration panels, and to the High Legislature, to be rebuffed at every turn. It's driven him a bit mad, I'm afraid. He does have a small, zealous band of followers. We are convinced that Vellod is more bluster than action, but we must remain cautious.”

“Everyone seems so much more... on-edge today,” Andra said. Is there a real threat, or only a perceived one?”

“There have been rumors that Vellod is planning some sort of move, but we've heard those rumors for years.”

“We suspect Zander Baxa was smuggling firearms of Earth origin onto this planet,” Nyk said. “It's clear to me these weapons would do your administration more harm than good -- but I can rationalize plenty of reasons why Vellod would desire them.”

“We have heard rumors that Vellod was arming his faction. The fall of Baxa's ring was the first

indication the weapons might be of Earth origin. We regard those arms as a real, but small threat.”

“Small?” Nyk asked.

“Because of the logistical problems of transferring enough materiel from Earth to pose a large one.”

“We've evidence Baxa was planning some sort of coup. It seemed too grand a plan for a single individual.”

“We think Baxa had been promised a position of authority within a Vellod regime,” Wygann replied. “Vellod believes he can overturn the will of the people, who will realize their mistaken allegiance and become loyal to him. He's wrong, of course.”

“It's ironic that Vellod would enlist the services of Zander Baxa. Zander's father, Gunder, was a colonial security chief who was a member of the junta that ruled Lexal for a short while about thirty-five years ago. Those were five years of a reign of terror, I can assure you... Vellod and I were allies in an effort to remove the junta and return the colony to a democratic rule. Gunder Baxa eventually chose exile over imprisonment... Gunder was mad, and perhaps Zander shared some of that madness. Perhaps he was eager to visit revenge upon the Lexalese people.”

“Maybe Zander had visions of occupying this palace with his own princess by his side,” Janna said, glancing toward Andra.

“I knew Gunder Baxa as a mid-level Food Service manager working in Sudal,” Nyk added. “He perished in the same shuttle crash that claimed my parents. I had no idea of his past. I imagine someone accustomed to higher levels power who finds himself in a lowly desk job might have some bitterness.”

Daya directed wait staff in setting plates before each at the table. Another servant placed portions of a reddish-brown cutlet on the plates, along with deep purple root vegetables and a scoop of rice.

Janna regarded the meal, motioned to Daya and whispered into her ear.

Daya looked down and blushed a deep red. “I'll tend to it right away. I should have known better with homeworld guests.” She motioned to one of the servants who began removing Nyk's plate.

“No, please, this is fine,” Andra said. “Nykkyo and I have both spent time on Earth and have no qualms about consuming flesh. Isn't that right?”

“...absolutely,” Nyk replied.

Daya gestured to the servants and they stood with their backs against the dining room wall. Nyk looked down at his plate. “What is this ... dish?”

“It's *lagexeva*, a lake-dwelling creature,” Janna replied. “I'm terribly sorry if you're put off by it. It's one of Mykko's favorites. Chef knows better when we've scheduled visitors from the homeworld.”

Nyk cut a slice of the meat and popped it into his mouth. It had a strong flavor, with a sweet, aromatic, camphorous note filling his sinuses and making them tingle. “It's very ... good.” He looked at Andra. She ate a piece and nodded in agreement.

“You two are too kind,” Janna said. “*Lagexevais* decidedly an acquired taste. Mix it with the inkroot and rice -- that tones down the flavor.”

“I actually like this,” Nyk replied. “I’ve become fond of Earth Japanese food -- not that this resembles it. But that experience has taught me how to appreciate the unfamiliar.” He cut another slice and pushed pieces of inkroot onto his fork. “Chancellor -- Mykko -- forgive me if this sounds like an unfriendly question, but isn’t it a contradiction for you to espouse democratic ideals and yet declare yourself chancellor-for-life?”

“Since we’re all friends here, I won’t regard any question as unfriendly. Nykkyo, you perhaps attribute more power to my role than is really there. The position of chancellor is more a figurehead than anything else. I view my role not as a ruler but as a facilitator. The real governing power is in the colonial senate, which remains duly elected every three years. I have pledged that, if ever an impasse between my policies and the will of the people -- as represented by the colonial senate -- is reached, I will happily tender my resignation. I’ve given my word, Nyk -- and I’m a man of my word.”

Nyk looked up and saw Janna gazing intently at her husband.

Nyk stood with Andra in an ante-room adjacent to the dining hall. “Don’t tell me you enjoyed that,” she whispered. “I required all my willpower to suppress vomiting. I can still taste it. That ... whatever-it-was has a flavor that stays with you.”

“It wasn’t so bad. Suki’s mom has served me some very strange-tasting stuff.”

“What do you think of Mykko?”

“Politicians! They’re the same everywhere in the galaxy -- and did you see how Janna dotes on his every word?”

Daya approached them. “I apologize again for the entree. I can barely stand *lagexeva* myself, and I’ve delivered Chef a stern reprimand. We have a musical group from the local intermediate school here for a performance. Please follow me.”

Nyk followed Daya and Andra into a viewing box overlooking an auditorium. Mykko and Janna were seated. Janna leaned against her husband and they held hands. Nyk motioned Andra to take a seat beside Janna. Daya stood at the rear of the box. Below them the first three rows of seats were filled.

A line of children appeared on stage. Nyk estimated their ages were between twelve and fifteen Floran years. They were dressed in uniforms of yellow and white. Nyk leaned back and pressed his palm against Andra’s. She laced fingers with his and leaned against him as the children presented a program of acapella songs.

“Those children were adorable,” Andra said as Nyk, Janna and she walked in the palace courtyard. A crescent hung in the western sky, illuminating the courtyard with orange moonlight. A flock of flying creatures darkened the moon momentarily.

“Thank you,” replied Janna. “We contribute to their school, and this was their way of thanking us.”

“What a brilliant moon,” Nyk said, “-- easily five times the size of Earth's. It must be as bright as midday when it's full.”

“That's Lexal Prime -- our sister world. It's an inhospitable place, with a crushing atmosphere and surface temperatures exceeding five hundred Celsius.”

“It's like Venus,” Nyk remarked. “Isn't it odd two planets could share the same orbit and yield such different environments?”

“It's the thick atmosphere that's to blame.” A searchlight from a watchtower swept onto them. The light paused for a moment, illuminating them -- then moved on. The three sat on a garden bench at the center of the courtyard near a fountain.

Nyk scanned the outer wall and regarded the sentries with their long arms. “Do you always have so many guards?”

“They're on special alert tonight. It's a precaution. Vellod has delivered another of his threats. Mykko and I don't take them too seriously, but our guard commander would rather play it safe.”

One of the flying creatures landed to slake at the fountain. The creature looked like a lizard, but with two pairs of wings and a single pair of limbs. It folded its wings and stood on the edge of the fountain, then bent over to drink. Janna pointed to the creature. “That's a *flulaxera*,” she whispered. “This species feeds on the *mizhagen*. They're very shy -- it's unusual to see one this close. They feed at night and sleep by day. It's quite a sight to watch them fly; the hind wings provide lift and maneuvering, the front wings supply power.”

The animal turned and looked at them. Nyk could see its face in the moonlight. “Do they have four eyes?” he asked.

“No,” Janna replied. “The lower structures are light-emitting organs, complete with focusing lenses.”

“A creature with headlamps!”

“On a moonless night one may see them, flitting above the lake, searching for their prey with those headlamps.” The animal spread its wings and leapt into the air.

“Janna, are you happy?” Nyk asked. She looked at him, her mouth open, for a long moment. “Are you leading the kind of life you anticipated when you enrolled at Vebinad Academy?”

“Happiness has nothing to do with it,” she replied. “I'm doing my duty.”

“*Unu Deva Feti*,” Nyk interjected.

Janna nodded. “*Unu Deva Feti*. No one enrolls at Vebinad, or any other finishing school for that matter, in order to seek happiness. I'm a figure to the people of this colony, I'm their princess. I didn't ask for that honor. They bestowed it upon me. To answer your question directly, I'm very happy to be the wife of Mykko Wygann. He's a good man, a good leader, and a loving husband. And I delight in Mykkoin. I do wish my duties left me more time to enjoy my family.”

"I'm surprised you have the time to spend with us," Nyk replied.

"I'm more than happy to make time for Andra and her friends. I do appreciate your help, Nykkyo. Friends and their assistance often arrive at surprising times. We should retire indoors as the air is becoming damp, and the dampness will bring the *mizhagen* -- the little biting pests. You must be tired, Nykkyo -- the time change is always wearing on one."

They walked toward and into the palace. Daya, carrying a portable vidisplay, ran up to Janna. "Princess, for you. Chancellor thought you should see this."

Janna took the display and read it, then handed it back to Daya. "Our security forces have detained Rud Vadima. He was found attending a meeting of Zygon Vellod's forces. Our intelligence chief is supervising his interrogation right now. The result may explain where those Earth weapons have gone. I'll order a summary and we'll review it in the morning."

7 -- The Double

Nyk slipped from his clothes, turned down the bedcovers and slid in. He switched off the room lights, laced his fingers behind his head and closed his eyes. Light from the searchlight seeped around the blinds on his window. He heard klaxons in the distance and the muffled sounds of troops speaking on communications devices.

The doorchime sounded. "Yes?"

"May I come in?" He recognized Andra's voice.

Nyk switched on the room lights. "Certainly."

The door slid open and she walked in. "May I sleep with you?"

"Certainly." He turned back the covers. Andra slipped from her robe and slid in beside him.

He put his arm around her. She kissed his cheek. "This feels good, Nykkyo. I miss you holding me." Nyk stroked her fine, light hair. "Would you be cross with me if I told you I wasn't in the mood?"

"I'm not in the mood, either. It does feel good to hold you. It reminds me of our days together in Sudal. I cherish those days."

"So do I." She reached a slender arm across him and pulled herself tighter against him.

"This world is so Earth-like," he said. "It's cold here. I'm glad there are covers on the bed. I'd be

uncomfortable, otherwise.”

“It's all beginning to make sense to me,” Andra said.

“What makes sense?”

“What Zander was up to -- the whole weapons plot -- it's beginning to make sense. Zander was helping Zygon Vellod's plan to seize the colony. Vellod has constructed an image for himself as a disgruntled crackpot, with a small but vocal following. I think he's more dangerous -- much more dangerous. He must be getting help from the outside.”

“We know Zander arranged for some operatives to have paramilitary training on Earth. Vadima was among those ... You're right -- our people are so unprepared for combat. Wygann might have guns and his guards might know how to shoot, but I'm sure they have no idea what to expect in an assault. I have no idea what to expect. I'd rather not experience it.”

“Nykkyo, I'm frightened. I know Janna's frightened, too. She's trying not to show it, but I can tell. I've heard rumors about Vellod's latest threats. It's become personal. He's vowed to target Janna and Mykkoin -- in order to hurt Wygann. For the past ten days Janna's been afraid to leave the palace. Mykkoin's an innocent little boy.”

“All the more reason for us to be on that morning packet and on our way back to Floran.” Nyk extinguished the lights. “Veska told me Janna's the real power behind Wygann -- she's the one who convinced him to suspend elections and declare himself chancellor- for-life.”

“I don't believe it for an instant. It sounds like typical anti- *ax'amfin* resentment. Many people believe us to be power-hungry witches. I've known Janna since my first day at Vebinad Academy. She and I are very much alike. Could you see me doing something like that?”

“Of course not. You're right, it sounds like something I'd have believed before I knew you as a real person.”

“Wygann named himself chancellor because it's what the people wanted. He's a beloved leader, and Janna's their princess. They call her that out of love for her.”

“I'm fond of Janna, too. We're friends-for-life.”

“You've bonded with Janna? I think you take that silly ritual more seriously than I do.” She stroked his face. “Mykko has been very good for this colony. He's raised the standard of living and there's a waiting list to immigrate here. It's a real success story.” She clutched him. “Listen ... the guard's been put on full alert. Vellod's sure to know Vadima's been caught, and he's likely to assume, interrogated.”

“And, he's likely to assume Wygann assumes he'll try something out of desperation. If there's to be an attack, it'll be when Wygann's guard is down, not when he's on full alert.”

“I have a bad feeling, Nyk. I think something's going to happen, and soon.”

“Let's try to get some sleep. We must be up early to catch that packet. Nyk kissed her forehead. “Good night, my kindred spirit and friend-for-life.”

Nyk escorted Andra to the dining room and helped himself to a breakfast buffet. Daya entered. "Princess will join you shortly." She looked over the buffet table. "I'll have them bring some more tea."

Light from the Lexalese blue sun streamed into the dining room. "That sunlight's so harsh, but this place is so cold," Nyk said. "It is a beautiful world, though. I think I could grow to love it. Have you spent time on any other of the colonies?"

"No," Andra replied. "I would like to spend some time on Mytaxya before I die."

Janna entered carrying a handheld vidisplay. "I have the summary of Vadima's interrogation. The extent of Vellod's organization is truly staggering."

"Vellod's sure to know Vadima's been captured," Nyk replied.

"We've announced on our news broadcasts that Vadima was injured, is in a coma and we're awaiting his recovery before interrogating him. It's not too far from the truth -- I'm afraid our security chief was a bit heavy-handed with truth drug."

"Do you mind if I look over that summary?" Nyk asked. Janna handed the vidisplay to him. "I think Kronta should see this. There's no doubt of involvement from other colonies in Vellod's plan."

"I'll order a full transcript for you," Janna replied. She placed her hand over a proximity pad. Daya appeared, then left to fetch the transcript. "It also appears from his interrogation that I am indeed a primary target -- along with my son. I can't allow Andra to go on that packet. I'm afraid it's too dangerous to permit her outside the safety of this palace."

"Why do you say that?"

"Vellod has operatives stationed around the capital. These agents are armed with small, concealable Earth handguns. They'll be on the lookout for an *ax'amfin* traveling outside the palace. I'm afraid they'd mistake her for me. I'm confident she's safe within the confines of these walls." Janna turned to Andra. "I'd advise you stay here until Mykko's guards can neutralize the threat."

"What about a disguise?" Nyk handed the vidisplay to Andra.

"A disguise might work," Janna replied. "I'll have Daya look into it."

Nyk sat before a vidisplay in his guestroom. He entered Kronta's locator code and marked the call urgent. Kronta's image appeared. He rubbed his eyes. "It's nadir-one, Nykkyo. This had better be important."

"Illya, Mykko Wygann's security force has captured and interrogated Rud Vadima. I have the transcript of his interrogation here. I'll transmit it to you."

"Vadima?" Kronta asked.

"Yes -- it's proof positive the Altian and Deltan colonies are secretly providing support to the Vellod faction on Lexal -- with the intent of deposing the Wygann regime. Lexal is the victim in this, Illya -- not the aggressor."

“This is unbelievable.”

“It's all in the transcript.

“Transmit it to me. Then, I want you and Andra on that packet -- and that's an order.”

“Are you ready to receive?”

“Go ahead and transmit.”

Nyk inserted the datacel into the vidisplay. The screen went blank. He poked the touchscreen but couldn't re-establish communications with Kronta.

He ran into the corridor carrying the datacel. “Daya! Daya!” He ran alongside her. “My vidisplay conked out as I was transmitting this transcript.”

“I know -- all our communications are down. We're working on it. This happens from time to time -- an overload in the relay station. It comes with being the furthest-flung colony. Come -- we should get you and Andra ready to leave. I've been working on her disguise. Follow me.”

Daya led him into the dining room. She pointed to clothing of the sort worn by Lexalese workers. “I think we can darken Andra's hair. You can pass as factory workers. We'll mix you in with one of the tours and you can leave via the visitors' entrance.”

“You're conducting public tours of the palace under these circumstances?”

“Of course. We don't wish to give the appearance of being cowed by these threats. Everyone entering the palace is screened, so there's little risk. Now, I'll be right back. I want to find something to use on Andra's hair.”

Daya returned and approached Janna. “Princess -- it's more serious than we thought. The comm relay station's been damaged.”

“Damaged?”

“Yes -- this report was relayed from one of the shuttles. The tachyon antenna on the relay station was sheared off by something -- perhaps an asteroid collision.”

“Maybe it was shot off,” Nyk replied.

“The thought has crossed our minds. The Communications Corps believes it will be several days before it can be repaired.”

“Then, it's even more urgent Andra and I get on that packet. We'll hand-deliver this transcript to the High Legislature.”

Nyk observed Andra and Janna standing before a window. They were conducting an animated conversation in a language he had never heard.

“I'm not going.” Nyk heard Andra's voice and turned to her. She was standing alongside Janna

and holding her hand. "This is undoubtedly the beginning of Vellod's offensive."

"Or -- an attempt to flush me into the open," Janna added.

"We must get that transcript to the High Legislature," Nyk replied.

"Vellod knows only Mykko or I have the credentials to petition the High Legislature. And, he knows my husband is needed here."

"Janna and I have a plan, Nyk," Andra said. "You will escort her to Floran in my place. Once there, she will deliver the transcript to Kronta and plead before the High Legislature."

"What will you do?"

"I'll take her place as a decoy -- attend state functions -- sit beside Mykko for his broadcasts. Vellod won't know Janna's off colony."

"But -- your safety..."

"I feel safe enough inside the walls of the palace. Once the HL sees Vadima's transcript and hears Janna's plea -- they can't help but send reinforcements. As soon as Vellod's threat is neutralized, I'll return to Floran."

"Andra -- this isn't our fight."

"It is mine. Janna and I are Vebinad Academy sisters. When we graduated, we both gave up our family names and joined the Vebinad line. Sisters come to each other's aid. *Unu Deva Feti*, remember? Nyk, this must be why Destiny sent me here."

Nyk changed into the worker's clothing Daya had procured. He walked from his chamber to Janna's drawing room. Andra was wearing Janna's long gown and belt. Janna had donned a female worker's costume. He looked at the two women. "No wonder they called you the Twins. What was that language you were speaking?"

"Vebinese," Andra replied. "All the finishing schools have their own private language."

Daya entered with a polymer pot of a brown material. "This is some of Mykkoin's finger-paint, Princess. Let me comb some through your hair." She daubed the material onto Janna's head, combed it through and clipped her shoulder-blade length hair into a ponytail. Daya then rubbed some into Janna's eyebrows.

Next, she turned to Andra. "Your hair isn't as long as Princess's. I can't style it into the twist she wears..." Daya looked at Andra from several angles. She placed the tiara on her head. "It'll pass if no one sees her from the rear."

"What do you think?" Andra asked.

"Amazing," Nyk replied. He looked Andra over from head to foot. "I hope you know what you're getting into."

“Unu deva feti,” Andra replied.

“One more thing,” Daya said. She obtained some makeup foundation and began applying it to Andra's right arm to conceal her black, diamond-shaped marriage crest. She picked up a violet marker and began copying Janna's crest onto Andra's deltoid. “That should be convincing from a distance...” She applied the same material to Janna's shoulder, obliterating the Lexal crest. Janna slipped into a shawl and pulled it over her upper arm.

Mykko entered the room. “Unbelievable,” he said. “I knew you two bore a strong resemblance. Now I know just how strong. I'm to make my morning address. Janna sits by my side. I like the notion of her being spirited away while her decoy is beside me on a colony-wide broadcast. I've asked my speech-writer to be extra verbose today.” He crooked his arm. “Come along with me to our media center.”

Andra embraced Janna. The two women exchanged words and kisses. Then, she slid her arm through Mykko's and headed from the room.

Mykkoin's caregiver led the little boy into the drawing room. He, too, had been dressed in a rude Lexalese costume. The teenaged girl knelt before him. “You be a good boy, Mykkoin. We'll see you in a few days.”

Daya switched on a vidisplay. Nyk watched as Mykko and Andra took seats. Mykko leaned and engaged her in small talk. The camera zoomed into a tight shot of Mykko and he began his speech.

“This is such an odd feeling,” Janna said.

“Come,” said Daya, “we'll slip you into the palace tour.”

Janna scooped up Mykkoin and put a cap on his head. He pulled it off. “Now, now,” she said softly. “Mykkoin must wear the cap.” She replaced it on his head. Nyk followed as Daya led them to a lift and down a corridor. She cracked open a door. Janna stepped through and Nyk followed.

“This is the hall of pictures,” a tour guide recited. “This room is used for important state meetings and dinners. The images on the wall are permanent photos of important events in the history of the Lexal colony.” The guide glanced toward Nyk and proffered a quick smile. “For the benefit of any offworld visitors, the image over the head of the table is that of our current chancellor, Mykko Wygann and his wife Princess Janna.”

The guide gestured toward the long conference table in the center of the room, made of wood with a purple finish. “The table is made from locally grown lumber, and stained with inkroot -- a native plant providing the violet color -- and it's delicious as well.

“Now if you'll step through the door to the right...”

Nyk took Janna's arm and escorted her toward the door. The guide turned and faced them. “I'm sorry, you two and the child will have to wait here.” She passed her hand over a proximity pad. Three security guards surrounded Nyk and Janna. “These three weren't in the group when we started,” she said.

One guard nodded. “We'll take care of them. Please step this way.”

“You're making a mistake,” Nyk protested.

“We'll see who's made the mistake.” The guards escorted them into a security office. The vidisplay in the office showed Mykko delivering his address.

A guard captain was watching the display. “Our beloved leader -- he can certainly drone on, can't he? Today, his blathering is worse than ever.” The captain looked up. “What have we here?”

“Potential security breach. They slipped into one of the tours.”

The captain yawned and stretched. He grabbed a scanpad and presented it to Nyk. “IDs please.”

Nyk pressed his wrist against the pad. The captain looked over his profile. “ExoAgent... Earth based... What are you doing here?”

“I'm here in an official capacity -- ExoAgency business,” Nyk replied. “I'm an envoy from the High Legislature. You'd do well not to interfere.”

“You'd do better to hold your tongue. We're none too fond of the HL here.” The captain presented the scanpad to Janna. “And, now the little lady...” She pressed her wrist to it. He looked at the display and at her face. The color drained from his. “Your high...”

Janna gestured. The captain nodded and looked up at the other guards. “These two are okay. Let them return to the others.”

“This way,” the guard said, led them down a corridor and opened a door. He caught the tour guide's attention and gave her a hand signal.

The guide motioned them into the tour group. “This is our last area, the Morning Room. Normally this room is used by Princess Janna to receive official callers. This is her favorite room and you can see her touch in the decor.”

Nyk and Janna looked around the room. The tour guide motioned the group out and into a reception vestibule. She approached Nyk. “I apologize for the inconvenience.”

“What is your name?” Janna asked.

“Kovina, m'am. I'm sorry. I couldn't remember if you were in the group or not. Everyone's on edge lately.”

“It's all right, Kovina,” Janna said. “You're only doing your job, and you're doing it well.”

The guide gestured the group to the exit. Nyk slipped his arm around Janna and they walked out the visitor's entrance. A line of tourists stood awaiting admission to the palace. Each in turn stood with arms outstretched as a guard used a handheld scanner to screen them. Nyk took Janna's arm and led her to the parking lot. He popped open the cowl to the groundcar and flipped open the rear seat to form a child restraint. Janna slipped Mykkoin into the seat and then sat beside Nyk. “Do you think your disguise is convincing?” he asked.

She put her hand over her mouth. “I especially enjoyed seeing the look on that guard captain's

face.”

“We have two seats on the morning packet,” Nyk said.

“Two seats?” she asked.

“Yes, for you and Mykkoin.”

“What about you? Aren't you coming?”

“We've only two seats reserved. This packet is filled with passengers returning to the homeworld from Myatasya. Veska tells me it's always full.”

“I wouldn't know -- I've never flown on it ... I've always used Mykko's courier.”

“I'm staying here. If Andra feels safe in the palace, so should I. Besides, with Vadima's interrogation, the HL can't possibly deny your requests for aid. How long should it take to neutralize Vellod's threat?”

The groundcar pulled into the shuttleport parking lot. “Now for some play-acting,” Nyk said. “I know you Vebinad grads excel at it.” Nyk popped the cowl and escorted Janna into the terminal. He walked up to the podium.

“IDs please,” the agent said. First Nyk, then Janna pressed her wrist to the scanpad.

The agent looked down, then up at Janna. Her jaw dropped. Janna put her finger to her lips.

“This is very delicate,” Nyk whispered. “She and the boy must board that shuttle -- as inconspicuously as possible. You have two reservations for Kyhana and Baxa -- they're to fill those seats.”

The agent poked her vidisplay. “Certainly -- two seats confirmed. You may wait over there.”

Nyk took a seat beside Janna. She held Mykkoin on her lap. The child grabbed for her hair. Nyk pointed to a young man standing near the rear wall. “I'll bet that's one of Vellod's men,” he whispered to her. “It's a suspicious bulge under his jacket.”

“Perhaps we should put on a little performance for his benefit.” Janna threw her arms around Nyk. “Oh, I'll miss you so much!”

“Please, Lydda -- don't fret. I'll be all right. Have a good trip and give my regards to your mother.”

“I shall. I'll call when we arrive on Floran.” The agent made an announcement the shuttle was ready for boarding. “Good bye,” she said and wiped tears from her face. She gave Nyk a long and passionate kiss. Nyk kissed Mykkoin's forehead. Janna arose and stood in line for the shuttle.

Nyk watched as the passengers paraded onto the polymer concrete landing apron and climbed into the shuttle. The door slid shut, the shuttle pulled from the terminal, nosed up and shot skyward. He watched it disappear, then headed to the parking lot and climbed into the groundcar.

He scrolled through the list of destinations on the groundcar vidisplay and picked the shopping mall. The car pulled from the lot and headed away from the shuttleport. After he had ridden a distance he cancelled the destination and selected the palace. The car turned around, drove up the roadway to the palace and parked. Nyk walked to the guard station. Soon Daya was escorting him into the living quarters.

“I didn't expect to see you again. What are you doing here?”

“No seat for me on the packet,” he replied. “I think our subterfuge worked. Janna had no problem getting on board.”

Nyk walked into Janna's drawing room. Andra was sitting at her desk. “Being a princess is hard work,” she said. “Mykko's asked me to greet a delegation from Gamma-5 tonight.” She adjusted the tiara.

“You do look the part. You're absolutely stunning.”

Andra smiled. “This belt is so heavy.”

“I think that belt conceals a shield generator.”

“Really? How does it work?”

“Try pressing the large black gem.”

Andra pressed the gem and a shimmer surrounded her. Nyk picked up an object from the desk and tossed it at her. She began to duck, but it encountered the shield, slowed and dropped to the floor. Andra laughed. “That's good to know,” she said and pressed the gem again.

Nyk stretched out on the bed in his guestroom. The doorchime sounded. “Come,” Nyk said.

Daya entered. “Dinner is served.”

Nyk followed her to the dining room. Andra was standing beside Mykko. “So far, so good,” Wygann said.

An attendant entered and handed a datacel to Daya. “Via courier, m'am.”

She slipped it into a handheld vidisplay and scanned the text. “For you, Chancellor.” She handed it to Wygann.

He glanced at it. “Janna is safe on Floran.” He buried his face in his hands, then turned to Nyk. “Thank you for your help getting her offworld.”

Wygann turned to Andra and took her hand. “It's such a relief to know she's safe. I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to her or to my boy. I don't know what Janna's told you about me, but be assured I do love her very much. She joined me out of duty, but we quickly learned we love each other, and I've never been happier in my life than the day Mykkoin was born. I never forced myself on her, Andra. She had my assurances when she joined me I would never do that. She came into my bed willingly and eagerly. Mykkoin's a natural child -- we wouldn't have him any other way. You're a very

good friend. I can see Vebinad Academy turns out consistently good work. I had thought maybe Janna was an aberration -- that I had been lucky with her. Now I see how very much alike the two of you are.”

“Vebinad starts with the finest raw material,” Nyk replied. “Both would still be remarkable women if neither had set foot inside that school.”

“I’m afraid there’s more, Chancellor,” Daya interrupted.

Wygann continued to scan the document. He looked up at Nyk and Andra. “Janna presented Vadima’s transcript at the HL committee. It’s contents are being disputed by the Altian and Deltan delegates. They’re rebutting it point-by-point, and they’ve produced our news report of Vadima’s coma. They’re asking how a comatose man could yield such an interrogation.”

“So, the transcript’s been neutralized.”

Wygann nodded. “It means we can’t count on the HL for help. No matter -- I hadn’t counted on them in the first place. What does matter is -- Janna and Mykkoin are out of harm’s way.”

8 -- The Intruder

Nyk sat in Janna’s private office. He could see the moon hanging low in the western sky. Daya walked in. “Chancellor has offered you and Andra the use of Princess’s chamber. We’d like the palace routine to be disrupted as little as possible by our ploy. We’ve informed the personal guards of our subterfuge, but the fewer that know the better.” Nyk turned and gazed out the window again. “Of course, the door adjoining the chamber to Chancellor’s will be locked.”

Nyk faced her and smiled. “Daya, are you ever off duty?”

“I receive free time two days out of ten. It is an honor to be Princess’s assistant. Do you require anything?”

“No. How long do you think this Gamma-5 reception will last?”

“It should be wrapping up shortly.”

“I think you may call it a night, Daya.” She snapped her head in acknowledgement, turned and left. Nyk paced around the room.

The door slid open and Andra entered. “I’m exhausted. All the concentration and watching Mykko for cues.” She removed the tiara and began unpinning her hair.

Wygann entered the office. “Well done. Tomorrow should be a lighter day.”

“What's on the schedule for tomorrow?”

“My press conference. Janna was scheduled for some charity work, but that's been cancelled for security reasons.” He stood and looked out the window. The moon had set and only the sweep of the searchlight illuminated the courtyard below. “Nykkyo and Andra ... If you'd like, you can have transit off this world via my personal shuttle. It wouldn't be without risk. Vadima's transcript indicates Vellod has an old deep-space shuttle, and several Deltan and Altian shuttles are at his disposal. We're assuming they're armed.”

“Might he regard an attempt to take the princess offworld as a signal to begin an attack?” Nyk asked.

“He might. I believe you're safer in the palace. I'll be spending the afternoon tomorrow meeting with our security planners. Perhaps by then we'll have a prognosis. Did Daya offer you Janna's chamber?”

“She certainly did.”

“Please come with me.”

Nyk looked over Janna's bedchamber. The walls were draped with brocaded curtains. Ambient light emanated from fixtures dripping with iridescent baubles.

“I recognize this room,” he said. “Janna answered my vidphone call from here.” He approached the wide, canopy bed, sat on it and bounced up and down. “It'll be quite an experience sleeping in a princess's bed. I wonder if this is where Mykkoin was conceived.”

“That I don't know,” Andra replied. “I do know Janna and Mykko are devoted to each other. Daya tells me they sleep together every night without fail.”

“So, no swapping bedpartners for them.”

“I wasn't invited to spend the night with either of them,” she replied.

“Were you expecting to?”

“Janna and I used to make love at Vebinad.”

“I had surmised as much.”

“Their sort of fidelity reminds me of Earth practices,” Andra observed. She unclasped the buckle, slipped out of the shield-belt and stepped into a private lavatory.

Nyk turned down the covers and slid in. Andra stepped from the lavatory and lay beside him. He rolled to face her and stroked her white eyebrows. “My kindred spirit and friend- for-life,” he said. He leaned toward her and kissed her lips. Then he took her hand and placed it upon his chest.

She shook her head. “We shouldn't.”

“You're not in the mood?”

“How would Sukiko feel?”

“She and I have talked about the differences between Earth and Floran attitudes.”

“Does she understand?”

“I don't know for sure.”

“Nykkyo, as much as I love you and want you, I want your happiness more. Your happiness depends upon a loving relationship with your Earth woman. You and I dare not do anything to jeopardize that.” She stroked his cheek. “I spent time on Earth -- enough time to pick up a bit of the language and some of the customs. Some day, Sukiko will understand the Floran way -- and, she will do so with her heart. Until then, we mustn't.”

“Of course, you're right.” Nyk slipped his arm around her and she cuddled against him. “What if something happens to either of us and we're unable to reach that day?”

“If that's the path Destiny is tracing for us -- so be it.” She kissed his cheek. “We'll forever have those days in Sudal.”

Daya pinned Andra's hair back and handed her the tiara. “We must hurry -- the press conference is about to begin.”

Nyk followed Andra and Daya to the auditorium where they had heard the schoolchildren. A pair of chairs had been set on the stage. The seats were filled. Wygann was standing on the stage behind a curtain. “The conference will be broadcast colony-wide. I've instructed the cameraman not to dwell on my consort, but to make it clear she's by my side.” He crooked his arm and Andra slid hers through. An aide parted the curtains and the two stepped onto the stage.

Nyk stood beside Daya and watched the proceedings on a vidisplay. The camera held a medium shot on the two of them engaging in small talk. Wygann patted Andra's forearm and she looked ahead, sitting straight with her hands folded in her lap. The camera zoomed to a tight shot of Wygann.

“The poise they're taught,” Nyk said. “It's amazing.”

“She's so convincing,” Daya replied. “I must keep reminding myself it's not Janna.”

Wygann began fielding questions from members of the audience. The image in the vidisplay cut back and forth between the tight shot of Wygann and shots of the audience.

“Who's the one who seems to be trying to get Andra's attention?” Nyk asked, gesturing toward a disheveled-looking older man with long, unkempt grey hair.

“That's Zygon Vellod.”

“That's Vellod? You let him into the palace?”

“Vellod's still a member of the colonial senate, and a citizen of this colony. Until we can prove he's involved in something illegal, we can't touch him. He's been cautious not to do anything that can be directly tied to himself. Even the threats he delivers are constructed so he can credibly deny them.”

“At least as long as he's in the palace, an assault is unlikely.”

“That's some comfort, I guess.”

“Andra's ignoring him. Was she briefed he might be here?”

“No. I think she knows instinctively how to deal with someone who's trying to be disruptive.”

“I've always hated the finishing schools,” Nyk said. “I had a poor opinion of the *ax'amfinen*. Now that I know Andra, I see how wrong I was.”

“I felt the same way. After Mykko won the chancellorhood and we heard he was looking for a consort, I felt he was making a big mistake. Then, notices were posted that Janna needed an assistant. I needed work, so I interviewed and was awarded the job. I fell in love with her almost immediately. She's strong but kind -- so beautiful and so gracious...”

Wygann took the last question. The image on the vidisplay cut to the colonial emblem. Nyk could hear the hub-bub of the audience filing out of the hall.

“Mykko!” From his vantage behind the curtain, Nyk heard a voice. He stood close so he could hear. “I have a proposal for you.”

“What now, Zygon?” he heard Wygann answer.

“A plebiscite! Turn the question over to the people.”

“Zygon, I'm not about to subject the population to another election.”

“You fear the results.”

“I know the outcome. There's no need to subject Lexal to the expense and inconvenience of an election when the outcome is clearly predictable. We've already had two elections on the issue.”

“But, not one with observers.”

“What do you mean?”

“Outside observers to monitor the fairness of the vote. We could enlist the services of impartial third parties.”

“Parties from where?” Nyk heard Wygann ask.

“From wherever. I'm sure some other colonies would be more than happy to provide monitoring teams.”

Nyk peeked through the curtains. Andra was still seated with her hands in her lap. Wygann was standing at the edge of the stage, bent over speaking with someone on the floor below.

“Fair enough,” Wygann said. “We'll call another plebiscite.”

“I'll make arrangements for impartial observers.”

“And, I'll make arrangements for observers to watch the observers,” Wygann replied. “To make sure the watchers are as impartial as the election will be. Now, Zygon, if you'll excuse us.”

Nyk watched as the old man turned and headed down the aisle toward the door. Andra stood and walked with Wygann through the curtains.

“In a way, I wish he'd try something,” Wygann said. “It would give us an excuse to detain him or at least ban him from the palace.”

Nyk followed Andra and Daya as they headed back to the chancellor's quarters in the palace. “I'll order lunch,” Daya said.

“I don't understand why Wygann doesn't simply haul Vellod in,” Nyk said.

“Mykko's not a monarch,” Andra replied. “This colony is still governed by the rule of law. One reason the people are so solidly behind Mykko is his respect for their rights.”

Nyk looked out the dining room window. A dense fog was settling around the palace.

“Looks like a spell of dirty weather.”

Nyk lay in Janna's bed with Andra sleeping at his side. He could hear her deep, regular breathing. He closed his eyes and attempted to will himself to sleep. A heavy rain pelted against the floor-length windows. Images danced in Nyk's head. He wondered how Suki was doing on her dig in Turkey. He thought about Janna and Mykkoin on Floran. Slowly he pushed intrusive thoughts aside and began to empty his mind. He relaxed his body and modulated his breathing.

Something made a tap at the window. His eyes opened wide and he felt his heart jump. He heard the sound again.

Nyk jumped up and in the dim light proceeded to the dresser. He found the drawer from which Janna had withdrawn her handgun. He opened it, grasped the weapon and stood near the door, facing the window with his hand on the ambient lighting actuator.

The window cracked open and a figure slinked into the bedchamber. Nyk switched on the lights. “Freeze!” he commanded, pointing the handgun at the intruder. “Freeze or I shoot.”

The intruder shouted a word out the window and Nyk saw a skimmer pull away. “You'll have to kill me,” the intruder said. He walked toward Nyk. “Shoot me. Go ahead -- press the trigger.” Nyk backed away from him until he was against the wall. “Do it -- press the trigger ... coward.”

The intruder grasped the gun barrel, wrenched it from Nyk's hand and threw it onto the floor. Andra sat up and screamed. She pressed her hand over the proximity pad beside the bed. The door to the corridor opened and Daya stepped in. She saw the intruder and pressed an alarm button.

Guards, weapons drawn, began streaming into the room. The intruder attempted to make a run for the window. One of the guards lunged and tackled him. Two other guards jumped on him.

“It appears an attempt to abduct you, Princess,” Daya said. “Everything's under control.”

The guards escorted the intruder down the corridor.

“Perhaps you should return to the guestroom for tonight,” Daya said.

Nyk picked up the handgun and replaced it in the dresser drawer. “It's a good thing I couldn't sleep.”

“Why didn't you shoot him?” Andra asked.

“I couldn't. I didn't have the interlock key.”

Daya led them to the guestroom Nyk had been using. “We'll post a guard. I'm sure the security forces will want to go over Princess's bedchamber with a fine comb.” She snapped her salute and left the guestroom. Nyk slid into bed.

Andra snuggled against him. “That was too close.”

Daya entered the dining room, picked up a breakfast cake and sat at the table. “What do we know about last night?” Nyk asked.

“We know someone slipped a skimmer past our perimeter guard. With the weather so bad, it wasn't too difficult a thing to do. Someone on the palace staff defeated the alarm and jimmied the latch on the bedchamber window so it could be pushed open from the outside. We're collecting physical evidence to determine who the culprit might be. Until then, the private quarters are off-limits to all except those whose loyalty is unimpeachable.”

“What of the intruder?” Andra asked. “Has he been interrogated?”

“No. He's dead.”

“A suicide?” Nyk asked. “Is Vellod desperate enough to send operatives on suicide missions?”

“It's even more intriguing. It appears our intruder had been ... equipped with a medical implant. This particular drug has the property of interacting with truth drug -- with fatal results.”

“Vellod has interrogation-proofed his operatives.”

“I wonder if he knew the purpose of the implant,” Andra added. “This certainly demonstrates to what lengths our enemy is willing to go.”

“He was armed with an injector loaded with a strong sedative,” Daya continued. “No doubt the plan was to drug and abscond with the princess. Our security guards shot two more dead in Mykkoin's nursery. Chancellor is very distressed. His security chief has tendered his resignation.”

Wygann entered the dining room. “I'm terribly sorry,” he said to Andra. “On the other hand, if

you had not had a bed partner, you might be in Vellod's hands right now.”

“What do you think he would've done once he realized Andra wasn't the princess?” Nyk asked.

Wygann shook his head. “I don't know. I'm ordering the palace closed. There will be no more tours or live audiences. My experts are going over the bodies of the intruders looking for anything that'll connect them to Vellod so we can move against him.”

“What were their IDs?” Nyk asked.

“They're all Altians,” Wygann replied. “I don't know how much stronger evidence we need of inter-colonial collusion in this affair. I don't understand why the HL is so blind.” He handed Nyk a handheld vidisplay. “This is a statement from Vellod. 'Lexal chancellor refuses to hold monitored elections.' It's utter rubbish.”

“What's on the agenda for today?” Andra asked.

“Nothing. I'm meeting all day with my security chiefs.” Wygann bolted down a breakfast cake. “We have re-established offworld communications -- on a limited basis. We have the palace vidisplays back online. The rest of the colony is maintaining a communications blackout.” He headed out of the dining room.

Nyk sat at the vidisplay in his guestroom.

“All deniable,” Kronta said. “I agree with you and Janna that, at the very least, Altia is involved in this. But, until someone does something that's undeniable, the HL won't commit the strike force.”

“Not even in defense of the legal and rightful government of one of the colonies? Certainly the other colonial governments are uncomfortable with the notion of one colony working to destabilize another.”

“They're even more uncomfortable with the notion of the HL intervening in colonial affairs,” Kronta replied. “Look, Nyk -- I've met with Janna and I agree with you and with her. But -- we must have undeniable evidence.”

“What about Janna's credentials?”

“The Altian and Deltan delegates' credentials are equally valid. It's her word against theirs.”

“Then, what about the Altian agents who attempted to abduct Janna and her child?”

“The fact someone was born on Altia doesn't make them an Altian agent. Again, it's the issue of deniability. Look, Nyk -- I'm as frustrated in this as you are. My hands are tied. I want you and Andra off that planet. I want both of you on the next packet if you have to stand.”

“We can't. Wygann's ordered the planet sealed. He's closed the shuttleport and ordered the fleet parked on the runways to prevent any craft from taking off or landing.”

“I'll work with Veska to find a way to get you two off that colony.” The vidphone session went dark.

The doorchime sounded. "Come," Nyk said.

The door slid open and Andra walked in. "Nothing to do but wait," she said.

"I hate being cooped up."

"Wygann doesn't even want us walking in the courtyard," she said. "He's afraid one of the perimeter guards might get trigger-happy." She slipped off the belt-shield. "Let's get ready for bed."

"After last night, I'll feel more comfortable sleeping in my clothes." He stretched out on the bed and laced his fingers behind his head.

Andra lay beside him and kissed his cheek. "Being together takes some of the sting out of confinement, doesn't it?"

Nyk extinguished the ambient lights. He closed his eyes and relaxed.

His slumber was shattered by a loud explosion. Andra sat up. "What's happening?"

"Vellod's assault, no doubt."

Klaxons were sounding and Nyk heard shouting and more explosions. The guard opened the door. "Quickly," he said. "Into the bunker."

Nyk pulled on a pair of shoes. Andra headed out the door.

"Wait! The belt -- don't forget the belt!"

Andra snatched the belt-shield and buckled it around herself. Nyk followed the guard down several flights of stairs, into the basement of the palace and through a tunnel. The tunnel opened into a low room of polymer concrete. Dull thuds of explosions could be felt through the bunker.

Wygann was pacing in his dressing-gown. "Our worst fears have materialized," he said. He looked at Andra. "As soon as it can be arranged I want the two of you off planet. The last thing we need is for Vellod to claim we're being helped by the homeworld -- or the ExoAgency." Wygann turned his back to them. "The Lexalese are a strong people. The truth will win, eventually." He turned again and faced Nyk. "Eventually the HL and the whole hegemony will know what's happened here, and who the perpetrators are. The other colonies will not stand for this."

One of Wygann's aides stepped to him. "The shuttle's ready, Chancellor."

"Nykkyo, Andra -- you have my thanks. My wife and son are out of harm's way. May you have a safe journey."

One of the guards handed Nyk a pair of handguns. He handed one to Andra.

She snapped open a clip on the side. "It hangs on your belt, thus."

"Let's hurry," the aide said and led them into another tunnel. "They're using artillery to breach the outer wall. This tunnel leads to the palace landing strip."

Nyk ran down the tunnel, hearing and feeling more thuds as rounds hit.

The aide led them up a set of steps onto a polymer concrete apron. The chancellor's shuttle sat with its hatch open. Nyk climbed in and gave Andra a hand. He pointed toward the palace. The structure had sustained heavy damage and fires burned in several areas. A thick black smoke hung over the complex. Lexalese guards stood on the perimeter wall firing on their assailants.

The shuttle's hatch snapped shut. Nyk took a seat in the forward cabin. A woman in a blue jumpsuit sat behind the controls. "I'm Nayva," she said. "Where to? I should warn you, we're apt to be followed."

"To Floran," Nyk replied. We might as well take this right to the HL's back door."

"To Floran it is," Nayva said and began the launch sequence.

9 -- Marooned

The shuttle nosed up and shot skyward. Nyk looked down on the palace. Outside he could see troops with assault rifles using groundcars for cover, shooting up at the palace guards. Behind them a group of men were dropping rounds into a mortar. "Well, now we know for sure where those Earth weapons ended up," he said.

"I can't believe Zander could supply so much," Andra replied.

"He didn't. I'm sure the Earth material served as patterns for manufacture elsewhere. Perhaps that's where T-Delta comes in."

The shuttle rose out of the Lexalese atmosphere and into a parking orbit. "We have company," Nayva said. She pointed to a sensor display on the control panel. "They're coming in close -- no doubt to prevent us jumping."

"Can you evade them?"

"I'll try. I can't get jump coordinates without fixing our starting point... I'm assuming they're armed." She pulled the shuttle's unistick and flew a corkscrew maneuver. The other shuttle fell back.

"Okay, now let's jump... come on, computer... there -- hold on!" She moved her hand to the jump actuator when a proximity alarm sounded. "Let's try it again..." She began more evasive maneuvers.

"It looks like they're trying to target us broadsides," Andra said, looking out the viewport.

“I'm presenting a minimum cross-section,” Nayva replied. She rolled the craft.

Nyk looked out the viewport. He saw a muzzle flash and heard the sound of something striking the shuttle.

“That was close,” Nayva said. She rolled the shuttle again and pitched the nose upward. The pursuing craft closed in. More rounds struck the shuttle.

Nayva pushed the stick forward and dove toward the planet. The shuttle was spinning and the blue planet swung around in the forward viewports. She pulled the stick back and brought them around behind the enemy shuttle. “Let them think we're armed,” she said. “It's an Altian shuttle.”

“How much more evidence do we need than this?”

The Altian craft executed a tight turn and came toward their port side. Nyk saw a muzzle flash and heard a pop and a hiss.

“They've hit a viewport! We're losing atmosphere.”

Nayva pressed a control and the warp-jump shutters closed. “That'll slow it down. We don't dare a deep space transit with that damage. We'll have to set down and effect repairs.”

“Can you repair that?”

She put the vessel onto autopilot and stepped back to examine the damage. “Yes, we can seal that. It's no worse than a meteorite impact.” She returned to the cockpit and began a reentry maneuver.

Nyk heard more rounds strike the shuttle. “We're losing power in the number one cell,” Nayva said. “We've no choice but to set down, now.”

“Where can we go?”

“Under the circumstances, we can't afford to be fussy.”

The shuttle headed into a thick cloud cover. The craft broke through and a white continent stretched before them. “Brace yourselves ... I'm diverting all power to the inertial sink.”

The shuttle landed hard, belly first on a hilltop. Nayva popped open the hatch. “Quick, the power cells may be damaged enough to blow.”

Nyk helped Andra out. Nayva grabbed a pouch, slipped the strap over her head and jumped down. They ran for cover behind a boulder. The shuttle exploded, sending pieces of debris flying over their heads.

“What's that?” Nyk asked, pointing to the pouch.

“Survival kit. We're going to need it.”

“Where are we?” asked Andra.

“Southern continent. It's uninhabited -- uninhabitable.”

“It'll be dark soon,” Nyk said looking at the blue sun hanging low in the sky. “We must find some shelter. How about over there?” He pointed to a rock outcropping. A large, flat overhanging stone formed a roof over an alcove. “Maybe we can build a fire.”

Nyk led the two women across the rocky terrain toward the outcropping, pushing his way through the shoulder-high brush.

Andra stopped. “Is there a knife in that kit?” she asked.

Nayva opened the kit and withdrew a folding knife. Andra took it and began hacking off her gown above her knees.

“You'll be cold,” Nyk said.

“I can't maneuver in this thing.” She folded the cloth and tucked it into the pouch.

The sound of a growl came from a thicket. “There may be some large carnivores inhabiting this region,” Nayva said.

“Perhaps a fire will keep them at bay,” Nyk replied.

Nyk stepped up to the natural alcove. “This'll do. Let's start gathering firewood.” Nayva and Andra fanned out from him and began collecting bits and pieces of dead trees and vegetation.

“Dusk,” Nyk said. “It's getting cold.” He looked at the pile of firewood the three of them had gathered. “I hope that's enough.” He made a pile of dried vegetation and placed some smaller twigs on top. “Is there anything in that pouch to start a fire?”

Nayva began rifling through the pouch. She shook her head.

Nyk took two sticks and began rubbing them together. Andra laughed. “Do you really think that'll work?”

“Do you have a better idea?”

Andra found a flat rock and slipped it under the pile of kindling. She unclipped the handgun from her belt. “Stand back.” She pointed the handgun at the pile and pressed the trigger. It discharged with a dull poomph, its pellet shattering the rock, showering the tinder with sparks. Tiny flames flickered up.

Nyk knelt and fanned the fire. Soon the twigs ignited and he fed larger sticks and logs onto the blaze. “It's getting dark. We'll take turns tending the fire. I'll go first.”

Nayva took the piece of fabric from the pouch and used it as a blanket. She and Andra held each other. Nyk crouched by the fire. He could see large forms moving in the background, their shadows thrown large onto the trees of the woods beyond.

Dawn came. Nyk was shivering and holding onto Nayva for warmth. Andra knelt by the fire. He sat up. “That pile of firewood looked so large last night.”

“We'll need better shelter than this,” Andra said. “And, we'll need some food.”

Nayva sat up. “Tell us about the southern continent,” Nyk said.

“It's one big glacier. We're in the piedmont.” She pointed toward a white mass stretching to the vanishing point. “The piedmont's too small and too rugged -- that's why it's never been colonized.”

“When was Lexal settled?”

“About two hundred years ago.”

“We'd better gather some more fuel,” Nyk said and headed toward the scrubby woods. He began carrying sticks and placing them on the fire. Nayva carried an armload and dumped them on the pile.

Andra picked up her handgun. A six-legged creature was approaching, creeping toward them. She lowered the handgun and fired. The animal yelped, began to run and fell over.

“Why did you do that?” Nyk asked.

“We need food. That is food.”

“How do you know it's edible?”

“If *lagexeva* is edible, I'm sure this is, also.”

“You've tried *lagexeva* ?” Nayva asked. “You're braver than I thought.”

Nyk helped Andra drag the carcass toward the alcove. “Hand me that knife,” she said. Nayva slipped it from the pouch.

Andra slit open the carcass and eviscerated it. Nyk fed some sticks to the fire, and soon the carcass was roasting. The flames burned its feathery coat, filling the air with an acrid smoke.

“How did you know to do that?” Nyk asked.

“I was on Earth long enough to see a deer dressed from the hunt.”

“You'll have to tell me about your Earth adventure some time.”

“We should fill our bellies,” Andra said. “No telling when we'll eat again.” She ripped off one of the six legs, peeled off charred skin with the knife and handed it to Nyk.

He took a bite. The meat was sweet, with a hint of the camphorous note he had tasted before. “This isn't bad at all.”

“Force yourself to eat all you can hold,” Andra said. “Then, eat some more. The best place to carry food is in your stomach.”

“I need some water,” Nayva said.

“I encountered a stream over there,” Nyk pointed. Nayva stood and walked in that direction.

Andra ran her hand along her stomach. “I’ve never been so full.”

“We should rest a bit,” Nyk said. “Then, let’s look for better shelter.”

Andra began cutting chunks of flesh from the carcass and impaling them onto sticks. “Maybe we can carry some food like this.”

Nyk picked up Nayva’s pouch. “Let’s see what else is in here... healing salve... broad- spectrum bioagent... communicator... binoculars... lamp.” He picked up the communicator. “Nothing. It must be short-range and we’re too far from the comm net.” Nyk took the binoculars and began scanning the rugged countryside. He pointed. “Up there -- a cave. Maybe that will be better shelter, and maybe the elevation will bring us into communications range.”

Nayva returned. Nyk pointed toward the cave. “We’re heading up there. If we get started now, maybe we can be there by nightfall.”

Dusk fell and Nyk cuddled with Andra and Nayva for warmth. The three had collected a large pile of firewood and had started another fire by the mouth of the cave. They ate more of the meat Andra had impaled on the sticks. “We’ll take turns tending the fire again,” Nyk said.

“I’ll go first this time,” Nayva replied.

“The warmth feels good,” Andra said. “There’s something oddly romantic about having an entire continent to ourselves.”

Nyk took the portable lamp from the pouch and switched it on. “I wonder how far back this cave goes. He swung its beam around in the darkness. “There’s another room behind this one. It’s a tight squeeze. Oh! My goodness!”

Nyk flashed the light around the rear chamber of the cave. On the walls were pictures and characters. Against the back wall was an altar, and on it was a crude clay model of a spacecraft. Surrounding it were bits of charred wood.

Andra and Nayva squeezed into the rear chamber. “I don’t recognize that writing,” Nayva said.

“I do,” Nyk replied. “It’s Esperanto, written in the ancient Roman characters. Nyk pointed to a section of the text, illustrated by a pair of circles and lines. He began translating, “In the year 154 After PlanetFall, we under the leadership of Midoro Kyhana took leave of Planet Floran...”

“How can you read that?” Nayva asked.

“It’s the language of the original Floran settlers,” Nyk replied. “The language of the failed Centauri mission. I taught it to myself so I could translate Koichi Kyhana’s journal.”

“Who’s Midoro Kyhana?” Andra asked.

“I don’t know. An ancestor, no doubt, but not one I recall from the family genealogy.” Nyk continued to read the text. “It says here Midoro was among the crew of one of the first interstellar vessels

built after PlanetFall -- in the year 154. I hadn't realized we were engaged in interstellar travel so soon after the founding. I'd always heard the first successful interstellar expedition was 342 APF."

"Perhaps the operative word here is successful," Andra said.

Nyk continued reading. "Midoro was a member of a group wanting to break free from the main colony and form another. He was unhappy with the leadership on Floran. He and his band insinuated themselves into the crew of this vessel and commandeered it on its maiden flight. I'll bet as far as the homeworld knew, the mission was lost."

"And that assumption pushed back the interstellar travel program almost two hundred years," Andra said.

"They selected this world upon which to build a colony," Nyk added.

"A colony that failed," Nayva said. "Lexal was uninhabited when colonized."

Nyk pointed to the text. "They called this world Abo. This text, these drawings have survived here for over sixty-five hundred Floran years."

"This is an amazing find," Andra said.

Nyk shone the light onto the clay model of the spacecraft. "This is what their vessel looked like." He picked up a stick of charred wood and sniffed it. "Some sort of incense. This must've been a sacred place for them." He handed the stick to Nayva.

"It smells so fresh."

"The cave's moisture preserved it. Look -- the clay's still soft. I can see the sculptor's fingerprints. I wonder how long the Abo colony thrived." He swung his lamp around to another section of the wall. "Look here!" He pointed to the Kyhana crest -- the three *katakana* characters in a circle. "Once we're out of here, we must report this find to the Floran museum."

"If we get out of here," Nayva replied.

"We must be careful not to disturb any of it." Nyk replaced the charred stick onto the altar.

He squeezed through the passageway into the front chamber. Nayva stoked the fire. "It's actually quite comfortable in here, now," she said.

"Let's see if we can get some sleep." Andra cuddled against him.

Dawn's light streamed into the cave. Nyk looked behind him at Nayva and Andra, sleeping in an embrace. He fed sticks into the fire. Then he picked up the communicator and climbed to the summit of the hill and attempted to make contact.

He returned to the cave. "Any luck?" Andra asked.

"No." Nyk grabbed the last stick impaled with meat and began heating it over the fire. Andra arose. "I must relieve myself," she said. "I'll be back in a moment." She headed toward a clump of

bushes.

“No real need for modesty,” Nyk called after her. “We're all one family, now.”

Nayva arose and rubbed her eyes. She looked at the communicator. “Any luck?”

“No. I'll keep trying.”

“I wonder what the situation's like in the capital.”

Andra returned. “You know, I thought I saw smoke coming from the woods down the slope.”

“Where?” Nyk followed her, carrying the binoculars.

She pointed. “Over there.”

Nyk lifted the lenses and peered. “I don't see anything -- perhaps it was some morning mist.”

“I swear it looked like smoke.”

“Maybe our pursuers have struck a camp,” Nyk said.

“Wouldn't they more likely be hunting us from skimmers?”

Nyk shrugged. “Lets have breakfast. Later today we can go on a hunt for some more food.”

Nyk banked ashes around the coals of their campfire. “That should keep it while we go forage for some dinner.”

“Listen,” Andra said. “Something's coming.”

“Maybe dinner's coming to us,” Nyk replied.

Andra lifted her pistol. She took a position behind a rock.

The approaching sounds grew louder. Nyk could hear twigs breaking underfoot, a crunch-crunch-crunch sound of something walking unevenly. He heard humming -- hmmm-hm-hmmmm, hmmm-hm-hmmmm...”

Andra stood and aimed the pistol, then pointed it to the sky. Nyk looked at an old man with a long, grey beard approaching with the aid of a walking stick. He was wearing a cloak made of a feathery pelt as on the creature they had slaughtered. The man stopped short, his eyes wide and his jaw agape. He spoke in a language Nyk couldn't comprehend. Andra and Nayva looked at each other.

The man spoke again. He repeated it a third time, speaking slowly and enunciating each word. Nyk began to perceive the meaning. *Who are you? Why have you defiled our sacred place ?*

Nyk concentrated, formulating a response in Esperanto. “I am Nykkyo Kyhana.” He picked up a stick, drew a circle and each of the *katakana* characters of the Kyhana crest. “Ky-Ha-Na.” The old man backed away. “In the year 154 After PlanetFall, we under the leadership of Midoro Kyhana took

leave of Planet Floran,” Nyk recited. “Are you of Abo?”

“I am Kyto,” the man replied. “I have come to fetch medicine.”

“What's he saying? Andra asked.

“He's speaking Esperanto,” Nyk replied. “His name is Kyto and he's here to fetch medicine.”

“It's a good thing you know the language,” Nayva said.

“This is my first experience speaking it -- I've only read it before.”

“I think we know how long the Abo colony lasted,” Andra replied. “I thought this planet was uninhabited when colonized.”

“Is it possible two colonies exist here -- and neither knows of the existence of the other?”

Nyk opened his arms. “We are friends,” he said in Esperanto, “from Floran.” He pointed toward the back of the cave. “Our ... vessel ...”

“Flying machine,” Kyto replied.

“Yes.” Nyk slammed his fist into his palm. “Crashed.” He pointed skyward. “Home. We must go home.”

Kyto shook his head. “I cannot help you.” The old man climbed the hill above the cave. He began plucking blossoms from a groundvine.

Nyk watched as he carried the blossoms into the rear chamber of the cave. He placed some vegetation litter on the altar, then removed a pair of stones and struck them together. The tinder caught a spark. He fanned the flame with his breath and ignited a stick of incense.

He placed the incense in his mouth and inhaled the smoke, then blew it onto the blossoms. Finally, he lay the incense stick on the alter and stepped to the cave entrance.

Nyk opened the survival pouch and retrieved the folding knife. “Kyto, for you.” He pulled the knife open and handed the handle to the old man.

Kyto examined the blade and smiled. “This is good -- very good.” He regarded them. “You look like good people. Come with me and I'll try to help.” He folded the knife and led them down the hill.

Kyto looked at Andra. "The white one must be cold. He removed his cloak. Underneath he was wearing a hide shirt. He handed the cloak to Andra.

"*Denke*," she said.

The old man smiled and gestured toward the forest. He pushed aside brush with his stick.

"Fire plant, very poisonous," Kyto said and pointed to a shrub with long thorns and leaves tinged with red. He noticed a vine, stooped to strip leaves from it and stuffed them into a hide pouch. Then he motioned them onward with his staff.

By mid-afternoon Kyto had arrived at the edge of the woods. Nyk followed him through the trees. The vegetation became more dense. Nyk could hear sounds of human life ahead -- talking and children laughing.

Kyto parted the vegetation with his stick. Ahead lay a stockade of poles about two metres high. He followed the old man around the stockade to an open gate. Inside was a village comprising clusters of huts made of woven sticks. A large fire burned in the center of the village. A lodge, also of woven sticks, sat adjacent to the fire.

A group of women sat around the fire, nursing infants. Small children ran and played. Some older women chatted as they dressed a carcass for the fire. Men worked at crafts on benches outside the huts.

Kyto motioned to a hut near the lodge. "Please, wait in there." Nyk gestured to Nayva and Andra and they all stepped into the hut. Nyk stood by the doorway and saw Kyto engaging in a lively conversation with another, middle-aged man.

"That must be the chieftain," Nyk said. "No doubt, they're discussing our fate."

"What do you think they'll do with us?" Nayva asked.

"I don't think these are dangerous people. I don't see any weapons -- no spears, bows and arrows." He looked at the faces on the women and children. "Interesting physical characteristics. They look Asian, but with blond hair, blue eyes and light skin."

"How many accompanied Midoro?" Andra asked.

"I don't know. I didn't read the entire story on the wall of that cave."

"For some reason, this settlement never hit critical mass like the Floran colony", Andra observed. "They look to be in decline."

"Perhaps there are more villages," Nyk replied. "I wonder how they were overlooked during the scouting missions. Life-form scanning should've picked them up."

"These people appear not to have any advanced technology," Nayva said. "Perhaps the assumption was they were native animals. This planet has a well-evolved fauna."

"As we've tasted," Andra added.

Kyto entered the hut. He motioned to Nyk to follow him. Andra and Nayva stood, but Kyto gestured with his staff.

“You'd better wait here.” Nyk followed the old man into the lodge. Lying on a feather fur on a slab was a boy. He was naked and appeared to be in discomfort. Kyto and the chief continued their heated discussion. Their speech was rapid and laced with unfamiliar words.

The chief made a gesture, turned and left the lodge. Kyto bowed, walked to Nyk and gestured him outside the lodge.

Nyk returned to the hut. “Kyto is their medicine-man. Inside the lodge is a very sick boy, in my estimate about fifteen Floran years old. From what I gather he's the son of the chief. Kyto believes the boy has appendicitis, and he'd like to remove his appendix.”

“He can do that?” Nayva asked.

“He could, assuming he had a sharp knife. Unfortunately, his knife broke. The village smith will fabricate a new one, but he must gather raw materials -- a two day trek into the hills. Kyto has told the chief his son's prognosis is poor, but he went up the hill to gather some herbs to make medicine that might help him.”

“When you gave him our knife...” Nayva said.

“He viewed it as a gift from Destiny. The chief is not so happy to see outsiders in his village, though. Kyto has convinced the chief to permit him to operate. If the boy recovers, it's a sign from Destiny. If not -- well, that's another sign. The chief wants me there during the procedure -- to remind Kyto of the stakes.”

“What about us?” Andra asked.

“This is a patriarchal society,” Nyk replied. “I'm afraid females are not welcome for the procedure.”

“When does he begin?” Nayva asked.

“As soon as he gathers the requisite materials.”

A village woman entered the hut carrying three bark trays loaded with meat cutlets and some stringy, dark-green vegetables. Nyk accepted the trays and passed them to Nayva and Andra.

Kyto appeared in the doorway. He motioned for Nyk to follow him. Inside the lodge a number of other men sat on benches near the boy. “Sit there,” Kyto said and gestured toward the corner. The chief sat near him, holding a metre-long staff in his lap.

The old man approached a fire burning in an earthenware brazier and placed a stick into it. The splint ignited. He carried it to the boy, blew out the flame and pressed the glowing end against his bicep. The boy winced and a blister raised on his arm. Kyto repeated the procedure twice.

Kyto withdrew a small earthen jug. The men on the bench averted their eyes. He took the folding

knife, snapped it open and punctured the three blisters. Then, the old man reached into the jug with a swab and daubed a thick liquid onto the three wounds. He replaced the jug and motioned to the men on the bench. They approached the boy, rolled him onto his side and held his head.

The boy began panting. Kyto approached him with a basin hewn from a piece of log. He stroked the boy's hair and spoke to him softly. The boy began vomiting. He gasped once and was limp. The men rolled him onto his back and stood at his feet.

Kyto used the knife to make an incision in the boy's abdomen. He motioned to one of the men, who slipped his fingers into the wound. The medicine man cut through layers of muscle to expose the viscera. Another man lent his fingers to keep the tissues retracted.

Nyk craned his neck to see past Kyto. He saw the old man drop something onto a bark tray, and take what appeared to be a bone needle and some filament from a kit.

Another man placed a dressing of fiber wool onto the incision, covered it with a piece of hide and held it in place. Kyto packed his implements, approached Nyk and smiled. The chief stood and went to the boy. Nyk could see his deep, regular breathing.

Nyk returned to the hut. "It was remarkable," he said and described the surgery. "Kyto has excellent knowledge of human physiology and anatomy. His tools may be primitive, but he's a very wise man."

"Will the boy survive?"

"Assuming he recovers from the anesthesia, I think he will."

Dawn awoke Nyk and he slipped from under his feather-pelt blanket. He picked up the survival kit, stepped from the hut and looked into the lodge. Kyto was conferring with the boy, who was propped up on the slab. The old man headed toward the rear of the lodge.

Nyk followed him into a workroom. An earthenware cauldron sat on a fire pit. A young woman stood at a rough-hewn bench sorting stems of herbs and tying them into bundles. She looked up at Kyto. He gestured with his staff and she hustled from the workroom.

"How is the boy?" Nyk asked in Esperanto.

Kyto looked Nyk over. "You are outsiders. Where are you from?"

"From the colony on the other continent," Nyk replied. "Are you aware you share this world with others?"

"We see craft flying over from time to time. We surmise it's outsiders. Whether from this world or another is of no concern to us." Kyto opened a basket and removed an object. "This is a piece of a craft that crashed here a generation ago -- there were no survivors. I was a youth at the time. I recognize your clothes and those of the brown-haired woman. I've never seen a woman the likes of the white one." He returned the object to the basket. "How is it you speak our tongue and the women don't? Do your women speak a different language than the men?"

"No. I learned your language in order to translate Koichi Kyhana's journal."

“So you can read the old words?” Kyto picked up a jug and beckoned Nyk to follow him back into the lodge. He opened the jug and removed a stick saturated with liquid. The boy opened his mouth and Kyto inserted the stick.

“How is he doing?”

“He's doing well,” Kyto replied. “He must remain here until his wound closes. I will apply a fresh dressing.”

Nyk opened the survival kit and withdrew the bottle of healing salve. “Put some of this on it.”

Kyto eyed him and dropped the salve onto the incision. The boy winced and grimaced. The wound began to close. Kyto closed the bottle and began to hand it back to Nyk. “Also for you, my friend.”

“Come with me,” Kyto said. Nyk followed him into his hut near the lodge. “Our chief will keep to his bargain. You and your friends may lodge here, and we'll attempt to aid you. There's little we can do to return you to your world.”

“Kyto, how many live in this village?”

“About two hundred men and women.”

“Are there other villages?”

The old man shook his head. “Two generations ago, the last remaining villages merged into this one. In not too many more generations there will be no more Abo.”

“Why the stockade? You have no enemies.”

“To protect us from the night stalkers.”

“Predators?” Nyk asked.

“Yes. Once in a while an infant or child gets carried off. The stockade permits us to sleep easily.”

“Why did your people settle here?”

Kyto opened a door on a cabinet constructed of the same woven sticks as the huts. He withdrew a book and handed it to Nyk. “You can read the old words. That is a skill lost to us.”

Nyk opened the book and saw pages of polysheets filled with handwriting in Roman characters. He realized it was a journal kept by Midoro Kyhana. Nyk read out loud. *We have made planetfall on a world we shall call Abo. This planet possesses two continents -- a northern and a southern. From our exploration, it appears the southern continent is the more hospitable .*

He looked up. “This continent was once a lush paradise?”

Kyto nodded. “Over the generations the glacier grew and pushed us to the shore. Only in the past two generations has it shown signs of receding.”

Nyk flipped through the journal. “That cave where we camped -- where you found us. You put those marks on the wall, didn't you.”

Kyto nodded. “That was many years ago, when we built this village. We needed a sacred place nearby.”

“You copied the words from this book.” The old man nodded again. “No wonder it all looked so fresh. Do you know what these words mean?”

Kyto shook his head. “No. I know of the words. 'In the year 154 After PlanetFall, we under the leadership of Midoro Kyhana took leave of Planet Floran...' I know that.”

Nyk read more of the journal. He learned Midoro eschewed technology and desired an agrarian paradise where men and women could live simply, off the land. Midoro believed reliance on technology would doom the settlement on Floran.

“Do you know what became of the Floran settlement?” Nyk asked.

Kyto shook his head. “No. I know when Midoro left the colony was in decline and he believed founding a new settlement was the only hope.”

“Kyto, the Floran hegemony now boasts a population of nearly twenty-four billion, inhabiting more than a dozen planets.”

“Twenty-four billion? I can't fathom such a number.”

“Would you like to rejoin the Florans?”

Kyto shook his head again. “This is the path Destiny traced for us, Nykkyo.”

“Maybe that path leads you to reunification.”

“Maybe ... some day.”

“As some day Floran may reunite with Earth.”

“It does little good to speculate on such so far in the future,” Kyto replied. “We live in the now -- and now, tonight, we will have a celebration. Ylak -- that's the boy's name -- will emerge from the lodge healed. You and your friends are welcome at that event.”

“What was that substance you used to sedate him?”

“It's the venom of a sea-dwelling creature, and it must be used with great care. Too little and he feels the knife. Too much and he never wakes. We use the venom for rituals, and for this. Once, we used it to execute prisoners.”

“Execute prisoners?”

“In the days when there were more villages. Once in a while, a member of one village would make mischief on another. We'd use the venom in that case. It's been generations since that was

necessary.”

“Kyto, who will heal these people after you... after you're unable?”

“Ylak desires to be my apprentice. He's not quite of age. I am fond of him, Nykkyo, and I'm happy he's recovered.” Nyk handed the journal to Kyto. “No. It is yours, now. I can't read it; neither can anyone in the village. The marks on that page benefit none of us.”

Nyk nodded and headed for his hut.

“When will we be permitted to show our faces?” Andra asked.

“Quite a change from princess, isn't it? You may feel free to join the women -- in women's work.” He picked up the communicator. “Let's see if we can get anywhere with this...” He activated it. “I have a lock! Let me try sending a distress signal...” He pressed controls on the gadget. “I'm receiving an acknowledgement ... lost it.”

“Maybe someone heard us,” Nayva said.

Nyk sat beside Andra and Nayva around the communal fire outside the door of the lodge. Members of the village joined them. The villagers began chanting. Kyto stepped through the door of the lodge. He motioned with his staff and Ylak stepped through the door wearing a feather-pelt robe. The villagers cheered.

Young women began passing bark trays of food to those assembled. Nyk popped chunks of meat and pieces of vegetable into his mouth. The villagers broke into song.

A young woman approached Nyk. “May I sit with you?” she asked. Nyk moved aside. “My name is Vipsa.”

“I'm Nykkyo.”

“You're one of the newcomers. Welcome to our village.” Vipsa rested her tray on her lap and began eating her meal. Nyk regarded her. Her features reminded him of Suki and Yasuko -- she had high cheekbones, an oval face and full lips. Her eyes exhibited Suki's pronounced epicanthic fold. But the similarity stopped there -- Vipsa's hair was strawberry blond and she wore it braided in cornrows. Her eyes were brilliant blue. She had a peach complexion and freckles. Nyk thought she looked to be about Dyppa's age -- fifteen or so Earth years.

“You were the one in Kyto's workshop,” Nyk said.

“Yes. One of my chores is to assist him. I bundle his herbs and clean his crockery.”

“Is he teaching you the healing ways?”

She shook her head. “No. The healing arts can't be learned by a stupid girl. I do know the herbs as well as anyone -- which ones ease fever and soothe the stomach.”

The villagers began moving opposite the door to the lodge. “What's going on?” Nyk asked.

“Bek, the story-teller will be here,” she said. “Here he comes.”

The story-teller stood by the lodge entrance. He began to relate a tale of a long-ago battle between two peoples on another world -- of kings, heroes and beautiful women; of monsters and supernatural beings; of valor and treachery. Nyk began to translate Bek's Esperanto into *Lingwaflozan* for Nayva and Andra.

“I think I'll go to bed,” Andra whispered.

“Don't you want to hear this?”

“I already know how it ends -- the Trojans lose.” Andra beckoned Nayva and they headed toward their hut.

Nyk felt Vipsa lean against him. He glanced at her -- her eyes were transfixed on Bek.

Bek finished the night's installment of the story. The women stood and started toward their huts. “Good night, Nykkyo,” Vipsa said to him.

“Are you tired, too?” Nyk asked.

“It's men's time, now, and the women must go to their huts.”

“Then, good night Vipsa.”

Kyto eyed the women as they retired to various corners of the village. Then he produced a pipe about half a metre long with a cup carved near one end. He filled the cup with a finely-divided powder and handed it to the chief, who placed it to his lips and inhaled sharply.

The old man passed the pipe around to each of the men, reloading it with the powder. Nyk took it, placed it to his lips and inhaled. He could feel a burning in his lungs as the finely divided powder filled them. He began coughing and gasping.

His breath began to return. Nyk sat, transfixed by the flames in the communal fire. He noticed movement around the periphery of his vision; but when he glanced in that direction the movement was gone. Then, a flame leapt up and became a dancing, writhing serpent. Other flames transmogrified into many legged animals. A sense of warmth and community filled him as he watched the fire-beings act out a drama -- the serpents were vanquished and bird-like creatures took wing and flew overhead.

Morning came. Nyk felt as if his head were stuffed with sponge. “How are you this morning?” Andra asked.

He groaned. “If everyone feels like this, there'll be little work done in the village this morning.”

“It appears most of the work is done by the women,” Nayva said. “They're sent to bed early without benefit of ... whatever that was you indulged in.”

“Kyto tells me today is a ceremonial hunt, to celebrate Ylak's recovery. With luck, tonight we eat well.”

“Are you participating in the hunt?” Andra asked.

“I suppose I must, to bond with the men of the village.”

Kyto appeared at the door and gestured to Nyk.

“What was in that pipe last night?” Nyk asked.

“In the forest grows a special plant, one that has no color. It produces a fruit, which we can eat. If the fruit is left to mature, it splits and fills the air with a cloud of dust.”

“Spores,” Nyk said. “You inhale the spores.”

“We collect the fruit before it opens and dry it by the fire. The resulting dust opens the gateway to the spirit world. Did you see the spirits of the forest last night?”

“I saw hallucinations. Kyto, do you believe spirits exist alongside humans?”

The old man regarded him. “Of course not. The dust releases something in the subconscious -- something we all share. It promotes a sense of community.”

“The villagers believe in spirits?”

“They wish to believe. They need to believe.”

“Don't you feel badly telling them things that aren't true?”

“Come here,” Kyto said and led Nyk into his workshop. “When I'm not collecting plants or making potions, I spend my time reading and writing.”

“I thought you said you couldn't read.”

“I can't read the old words.” The old man climbed a stepstool and took down a staff from a rack under the workshop roof. “I'll imagine you can't read this.” Nyk regarded the staff. It was covered with symbols the likes of which he had never seen. “This is the formula for an herbal remedy for diabetes.” He replaced the staff. “That was written by my predecessor, eight generations ago.

“We simplify for the benefit of the villagers, who need answers to how the world operates. Come, the hunters are gathering.” Kyto gestured with his staff toward a band of men heading into the woods. “Bek is our best hunter,” Kyto said. “Go with them.” Nyk saw most of the men carrying metre-long staffs and wearing small baskets of plaited fiber.

“Step quietly,” Bek admonished Nyk. He attempted to modulate his tread.

Bek gave a signal and the troop stopped. He pointed into a tree.

One of the men opened his plaited basket and removed an object that looked to Nyk to be as long as his little finger. It was pointed, with a fiber-wool plug at the end. He slipped it into the end of the staff, brought it to his lips and exhaled.

The dart hit a four-legged bird-like creature. It took wing, flew a short distance and fell to the

ground.

“That was a fire plant thorn,” Bek explained. “Very deadly -- one can kill a man.”

“Is that our dinner?” Nyk asked.

“Oh, no. That's the bait. Today we're hunting the hunter.”

Bek carried the dead bird into a clearing. Other men in the troop produced lines of fiber cord. They tied the dead bird to a log, and tied lines to the wings and head. Some men climbed trees and together they operated the bird carcass like a marionette, causing it to strut and flap.

One of the men motioned Nyk to take cover behind some brush. They waited as the puppeteers manipulated the dead bird. Another man imitated a call.

The Lexalese blue sun reached its zenith, casting its harsh light onto the clearing. Bek nudged Nyk and pointed in the distance. A large six-legged creature was making its way into the clearing. Nyk glimpsed the animal's face and assumed it was the carnivore to which Nayva alluded.

Bek grabbed Nyk's shoulder. “We wait until our prey has seized the bait,” he whispered. “At that point, he is committed and much more vulnerable. Patience is the art of the hunt.”

The animal slunk low to the ground and approached the flapping bird. The puppeteers made the bird stop and appear to look in the direction of the predator. The animal stopped in its tracks. The bird resumed its mating display. Now within striking distance, the predator reared back, grasped the bait with its forepaws and sank fangs into it.

The brush around the clearing erupted with the village men, each loading and shooting darts into the carnivore. The creature dropped the bird, rolled to dislodge the darts and yelped in pain. It turned and began to run, but the fire plant toxin was doing its work. Paralysis spread to its limbs and it fell to the ground. Its eyes clouded over and the beast expired with a groan.

The men stood and whooped. They brought poles, tied up their prey and headed back to the village.

Once there, the men turned their catch over to the women, who skinned and dressed it. A group of women took the hide, laced it on a stretcher and began scraping it with bone and metal tools. Another group impaled the carcass on a pole, placed it over the fire, and supervised youths who took turns rotating it.

One of the village men gestured to Nyk. “Help me to construct a screen,” the man said. “My ward is tending the roast.”

Nyk walked to a spot near a pile of long, thin sticks. The villager picked up a pole and stuck one end in the ground. He grasped a tool made from a hollow log with a rock lashed to one end, slipped it over the end of the pole and hammered it into the ground. He pointed to where he wanted other poles driven and Nyk obliged.

The villager showed Nyk how to weave the sticks around the poles. Nyk picked up sticks and took turns with the man building up a panel of woven twigs. “My name is Gan,” he said.

“Where do you gather these sticks?” Nyk asked.

Gan pointed toward a section of forest near the village. “That’s a coppiced wood,” he replied. “We cull out the sticks to keep the growth straight.”

“What do you use to cut them?” Gan held up a saw. “This looks like bronze.”

Gan nodded. “Deposits of copper and tin are found in the hills.”

“Do you have iron for steel?” Nyk asked.

“I know of iron,” Gan replied. “That blade you gave Kyto is of iron. It’s too much trouble, too difficult to work. Long ago we used it, but not now.”

Nyk continued to weave the sticks onto the poles. He noticed a village girl standing near him. “Hello, Vipsa. Doesn’t Kyto need your services this afternoon?”

“I’ve washed his crockery. Now, he’s busy studying his staffs, so he sent me on my way. He doesn’t wish to risk me learning his secrets.”

“Can you read the staffs?” Nyk asked.

“Some -- a little.” She picked up a stick and drew in the dirt. “This means leaf ... this is blue ... blossom ... low ... vine. This means leaf from the low, blue-blossomed vine. Kyto doesn’t know I know this.” She smiled and rubbed the symbol from the dirt with her foot. “Tell me of your world, Nykkyo.”

“Which one?”

“You have more than one?”

“I have two. Floran and Earth -- three if you count Lexal.” He bent a twig around the end pole and tucked it among the others. “Lexal is another world right here on this planet.”

“Tell me of your homeworld, then.”

“Floran -- it’s where I was born. Andra was born there, too.”

“Is she the white one?”

Nyk nodded. “It’s very different there. The climate’s warm -- so warm people go around half naked.” He picked up another stick and began weaving it onto the poles. “There are no animals on the land -- only in the sea. And, none of them can we eat.”

Vipsa sat cross-legged on the ground. “What do you do for food, then?”

“We grow the food.”

“Grow it?”

“Yes.” He picked up another stick. “Our food grows under great domes.”

“Domes? What are they?”

Nyk pointed to the lodge. “Like that, only much, much larger. You could fit your entire village, many times over in the corner of one of the domes -- and we have thousands of them. The roof is transparent, like ... like ice. It lets in the sunlight.”

“You can't go out and gather food?”

Nyk began weaving another stick. “No. We must work very hard to have food for everyone.”

“What is your village like?”

“I grew up in a place called Sudal. It's a city.”

“A city?”

“A large village, with about a hundred thousand people.”

Vipsa's eyes widened. “A hundred thousand!”

Nyk picked up another stick. “Sudal's small. Our biggest is Floran City, with over seven hundred million.”

A village man approached with some boys and youths. “Bek is taking some boys on a training hunt,” Vipsa whispered. “Borryk is among them.”

“Which one is he?”

“The oldest youth. He's Bek's ward -- Bek desires him to be the next chief. The chief wishes Ylak to succeed him.” Vipsa glanced over her shoulder and whispered. “I'm happy Ylak is healing -- I dread the notion of Borryk as our leader.” She turned to conceal her face. “Best to ignore them.”

“Vipsa!” Borryk shouted. “Come on the hunt with us. Maybe you can earn the hero's portion.”

“She could kill it and cook it, too,” another boy called.

“Vipsa doesn't stain her hands with inkroot,” Borryk said, laughing. “She has soot from the old man's crockery under her nails.”

“Come on, it's getting late,” Bek admonished and herded the boys toward the forest.

Vipsa looked up. “Borryk doesn't like me. He thinks I'm odd because I'd rather help Kyto than tend the fire or peel tubers. The other boys follow his lead.”

“I wouldn't worry about what some foolish boys think. Why don't they help Kyto?”

“They fear him and his magic.”

“And, you don't.”

“Kyto is a kind and wise man who's learned to use the things around us. The villagers think it's

magic, but it's only wisdom. They think he talks to ancestors -- but it's ancestors talking to him, through the staffs." She looked down. "Girls aren't supposed to occupy themselves with such. Sometimes I wish there were somewhere else I could go." Her eyes widened. "A place like your city -- tell me what it's like."

Nyk sat on the ground and faced her. "There are many tall buildings -- as tall as those mountains." He pointed to the distance. "From the top of one of those buildings you can stand and look out at the city and not see the end of it."

"It must take a long time to climb to the top."

"We have machines to carry you to the top..." He gestured skyward. "...in an instant."

"Vipsa!" Nyk heard a voice from the village call out. "Vipsa! Where are you?"

"That's Kwama," she said. "She's my sponsor. I had better go." He watched her head toward a cluster of huts.

Nyk sat beside Andra and Nayva near the communal fire. Village women passed bark trays piled with chunks of meat from the day's kill -- along with pieces of inkroot and a white, starchy paste. Nyk began eating. "This is very good," he said to Andra.

She nodded. "This is as good as any Earth meat I recall."

Vipsa approached carrying a bark tray. "Nykkyo," she said, looking at the ground. "I'm sorry for disturbing your work today."

"You've no need to apologize," he replied. "You didn't disturb me."

"Kwama scolded me. She said if Gan was dissatisfied with your work, I'd be to blame."

"Not in the least," Nyk said and slid over to make room for her. "Would you like to sit here?"

She smiled. "May I?" She sat beside him and began eating her meal.

"You have a new friend." Andra whispered to him.

"That's Vipsa," he whispered in reply. "She's a nice kid. She seems to have taken a liking to me."

"I hope for your sake she doesn't have a boyfriend -- at least not one of the jealous type."

"She's too young for that."

"I don't know, Nyk. She looks past the age of consent to me."

"Do we know what consent is to these people?"

"It seems to me you'd be smart to watch your step."

Vipsa stood and faced him. "If you're done, I'll take your trays." Nyk collected their trays and

handed them to the girl.

Vipsa returned and sat beside Nyk. "Bek will tell more of his story."

"Does Bek know many stories?"

"Many times many," she replied and leaned against him.

A shaft of dawn's sunlight fell across Nyk's eyes. "Another hangover?" Nayva asked him.

"Please don't talk to me. Every word makes my head throb."

Kyto came to the door and beckoned Nyk. He followed the medicine man into the lodge. Ylak was back on the slab. "He's sick again."

"What is it this time?" Nyk asked.

"This is bad. It's probably infection -- it frequently follows the opening of a person's belly. We try to be as clean as possible, but we often face this. I never go inside a patient unless he's certainly dead otherwise -- I've explained this all to the chief."

"What does this mean?"

"The chief intends to stand by his bargain. As long as Ylak lives, so do you ... I must gather herbs for medicine."

"I'll come with you." Nyk headed after Kyto into the forest.

"The chief is convinced your presence is what's making his boy sick."

"Kyto, we have broad-spectrum bioagent with us. Let's use it on him."

"What sort of thing is that?"

"It's medicine that will kill what's making him sick."

Kyto shook his head. "I dare not. The chief is watching my every move."

"Doesn't he trust you?"

"If I permitted this and the boy dies, it'll be very bad for me as well as for you."

"But, what if it cures him?"

Kyto looked at him sideways. "That would be bad for me, also."

Nyk followed Kyto into the woods. The old man walked slowly, examining plants. He selected leaves, pieces of vine and roots. He led Nyk into his work room where he ground the material into paste, placed it in an earthen pot and added hot water. "That must steep. These herbs work to help the body fight infection." He poured the fluid through an earthenware strainer into a wooden bowl. "The root will

deaden his pain, and the vine covers the unpleasant flavors. Let's check on our patient.”

Kyto led Nyk into the lodge. “Take this,” he said to the boy. Nyk helped Ylak sit up to sip the tea. They boy lay back onto the slab and Kyto covered him with a feather-pelt.

“This is not good,” Kyto said upon returning to his work room. “We'll be lucky if he's alive in the morning. We must prepare for the worst. I can count on some of the men to take you out of the village.”

“Don't go against the wishes of your chief, Kyto. We can find our own way, if we must.”

Kyto accompanied Nyk to the hut. He eyed Andra. “There is another hope -- if the boy dies. The chief has shown interest in the white one.”

“No, Kyto. I won't permit that.”

“Then it remains to be seen if Ylak is strong enough to throw off this infection.” The old man left.

Nyk looked toward Nayva. “Kyto was saying, if Ylak perishes, we may be able to buy our safety -- with Andra. I told him to forget it.”

“No, Nyk,” Andra replied. “I'm prepared to do what is required. Remember Vebinad's motto .. *Unu Deva Feti* .”

“I won't permit you to be sold.”

“I was sold once.”

Nyk sat on a bench, looking out the doorway toward the lodge. “No celebration tonight. Kyto doesn't expect the boy to last 'til morning.”

“We should slip quietly into the forest,” Nayva said.

“They've closed the stockade gate for the night. I saw the chief posting a guard there. I think they've anticipated that move.”

“What do we do?”

“I'd hate to,” Andra said. “but we could force our way out. We still have our weapons.”

“These are peaceful and gentle people,” Nyk replied. “But I wouldn't want to place odds on the three of us with handguns against a hundred of them with poison darts.” Nyk opened the survival kit and removed the vial and injector. “We must get this bioagent into Ylak.”

He looked out of the door again. “There's a sentry by the lodge entrance. Maybe we could distract him.” Nyk looked around the hut. He removed a length of fiber cord that was part of a lashing holding together two members of the hut's frame.

“Distract him with that?” Nayva asked.

“No -- this is for a tourniquet. Andra, why don't you try distracting him?”

“Me?”

“You're a very beautiful woman.”

“And, a very blond one,” Nayva added.

“I know Vebinad grads are excellent play-actors. You should have no trouble distracting him.”

“I don't even speak the language.”

“Use that to your advantage. Distract him and Nayva and I will slip into the lodge and administer the drug.” He fitted the vial to the injector, slipped off the needle guard and pressed the actuator to flush the drug through the needle. He replaced the guard.

Andra stepped to the door of the hut and slipped her feather-pelt robe from her shoulders. She headed in her tattered gown toward the latrine. Nyk saw the sentry follow her with his eyes. He beckoned Nayva and handed her the piece of cord.

Andra headed from the direction of the latrine, stumbled and let out a cry. “*Mu pveda!*” She grabbed her ankle. “*Ow .. ow! Mi mu maleola fracture es pens!*”

The sentry sprinted in her direction. Nyk and Nayva headed for the lodge. Ylak was on the slab, semi-conscious and delirious. Another sentry sat inside the lodge on a bench, slumped and snoring.

Nyk approached the boy, took his arm and felt for an appropriate vein. He wrapped the cord around Ylak's bicep. “Hold this tight,” he whispered to Nayva as he patted Ylak's arm.

The sentry let out a groan. Nyk grabbed Nayva and ducked down behind the slab. The sentry resumed snoring.

Nyk pulled the needle guard from the injector. He held the needle parallel to the boy's skin and punctured the vein. “Release the cord.”

He pressed the actuator and the injector began emptying the vial.

“How much are you giving him?” Nayva whispered.

“All of it.” Nyk watched the vial empty. He removed the needle and pressed his thumb against the spot. “The needle's coated with healing salve,” he said. “The wound should close quickly ... Let's go!”

Nyk led Nayva back to their hut. Andra limped in, supported by the sentry. He helped her lie on a feather-pelt. “*Denke,*” she said. The sentry backed from the hut and she gave him a little wave.

Nyk looked toward the lodge in the dawn twilight. The sentry was being relieved by another village man. "I wonder how Ylak's doing."

"He must still be alive," Nayva replied. "Otherwise, there'd be a commotion, don't you think?"

Kyto approached the hut and faced Nyk. "I understand we have a broken ankle in here."

"Last night, Andra tripped. She thought she broke her ankle, but I think it's only twisted."

Kyto nodded. "I had better examine it." Nyk led him to Andra. He felt her ankle. "Not even sprained." He looked up at Nyk. "Ylak is much better this morning. His fever is broken and the pain is receding. I wondered if you might have anything to do with it."

Nyk shook his head. "What would make you think that, Kyto?"

Kyto held up the piece of cord. "I found this by the boy this morning." Nyk shrugged. The medicine man held up the needle guard. "And, I found this."

"I gave him the bioagent," Nyk replied.

"I thought you might." The old man smiled. "It's why I slipped Ylak's watcher a sleeping draught."

"You can take the credit for healing him."

"As I intend to do."

Nyk stood with Kyto as he sponged an herbal preparation over Ylak's body. He covered the boy and patted his hand. "He's recovering rapidly. I shall send him to his hut this afternoon." He handed a bowl to the boy. "Sit up, Ylak, and drink this." Kyto turned to Nyk. "I told the chief your presence helped cure his boy. It's not exactly a lie, and not exactly the truth." Kyto refilled Ylak's bowl. "The chief is grateful and wants to offer you the opportunity to join the village."

"How would I go about doing that?"

"You would submit yourself to the ordeal. In two days -- when the moon is full -- two village youths will undergo the ordeal. You are welcome to join them."

"Ordeal? What sort of ordeal?"

"I will administer a ritual drug --a poison -- the same I used to deaden Ylak for his surgery." Kyto looked into Nyk's eyes. "In large amounts it causes unconsciousness. I will administer a smaller dose."

"What does that cause?"

“Dreams... fear .. your worst nightmare. It's a rite of initiation, Nykkyo. Since you're an outsider, you're not obligated to do this.”

“Is the drug dangerous?”

Kyto shook his head, “No. Not overly so. It wouldn't make sense for us to concoct a rite that carries a high risk of killing or crippling our youth, would it? Our numbers are small enough as is. The experience is ... unpleasant, but we've all gone through it -- and survived. You'll know yourself better, afterward. That's really the point of the ritual.” The old man smiled. “Some say the drug shows you the future ... It doesn't. But you will learn what it is you fear most. I recommend you accept -- for your safety.”

“My safety?”

“You may find yourself with us for a while. It's been a long time since we've had to deal with outsiders. There may be some who'll blame every misfortune on your presence.”

“Like the chief.”

Kyto nodded. “If you're a member of the village, no one may ask for your death. That may be asked only of an outsider.”

“What of Andra and Nayva?”

“They've nothing to fear. As a woman has no free will, no one may ask for her death.”

“I hope you don't really believe that, Kyto. Andra and Nayva possess two of the freest wills I've ever encountered.”

Kyto cracked a smile. “What is your answer, then?”

“I'll do it.”

“That's a good decision. It'll benefit you and your friends.” Kyto bid Ylak to lie down. “Nykkyo -- you must fast the day of the ritual.”

Nyk entered the lodge wearing a feather-pelt robe. Village men had brought in stones heated in the communal blaze and set them in a pile in the center of the lodge, making the place quite warm. Torches along the walls provided flickering illumination, and a small fire burned in an earthen brazier. Nyk sat on a bench beside the two youths. He recognized the boy on the right as the one who had taunted Vipsa.

Vipsa entered the lodge with three bowls piled with chunks of inkroot and starchy tuber. She handed a bowl to Nyk and smiled at him.

“Thanks,” Nyk said. She held her finger to her lips and handed bowls to the two youths. They began eating from theirs.

Kyto entered and approached Nyk. “Eat it all -- even if you must force yourself.”

“Why only vegetables in this meal?”

“No reason to waste good meat.”

“Waste?”

“The drug will cause you to vomit.”

“Is that part of the ordeal?”

“It's the nature of the drug. Stuff yourself -- it will be easier for you on a full stomach. Also, drink plenty of water.”

He nodded and began eating. Vipsa brought a bucket of water. Nyk drank from a dipper and forced himself to empty the bowl. He gulped another dipper of water, slipped his hand beneath his robe and felt his distended stomach.

Vipsa returned with three wooden buckets and placed them at the feet of the initiates. She collected the bowls and left. The chief and village elders entered and sat on a bench across from the initiates. The two youths slipped off their robes. Nyk slipped off his and sat, naked, on the bench. Kyto placed a stick in the brazier to ignite it. He carried it to the first youth.

“These three are to be initiated into the village,” Kyto announced. “All have agreed to the ordeal. I shall now administer the poison.” He blew out the flame and pressed the glowing tip to the boy's arm. “With fire I break the skin.” Kyto approached Nyk. He closed his eyes as he felt the ember burn his arm. “Just one blister,” the old man whispered. “Ylak received three.” The second youth received his burn.

The elders averted their gaze as Kyto picked up the earthen jar. “The venom.” Nyk saw him apply the drug to the first youth. He turned his head as the medicine man opened his blister with the knife and daubed the wound with the thick liquid. It stung.

Nyk felt his heart begin to pound. A cramping sensation gripped his stomach. He attempted to modulate his breathing but found himself panting. The youth to his left began vomiting. Nyk gulped. Perspiration began to bead on his forehead as he experienced wave after wave of nausea. The other youth retched and vomited. Nyk folded his arms across his abdomen and rocked back and forth. He leaned over the bucket and vomited. He heaved until his stomach muscles ached.

His nausea passed as the effects of the drug deepened. He looked up and across at the village elders. The lodge began to spin. He closed his eyes and saw colors pulsing with his heartbeat.

The faces of his mother and father appeared. He was sitting with them on a platform shuttle. Through the viewport he could see the indigo sphere that was Floran. The craft entered the atmosphere. Soon he saw the agridomes as the shuttle made its approach to Sudal. The craft began to spin. Through the viewport he could see land and sky swirling. One of the agridomes loomed large. There was a flash.

Nyk saw Sukiko lying in a pool of blood in her apartment bathtub. He knelt by her, listened for her heart and breathing. He looked into her face. He saw her sitting in her mother's kitchen, nursing an infant. She looked up at him and smiled. Then, he saw her walking. The infant was in a stroller she was pushing. They turned to cross the street. A truck careened through the intersection and Nyk watched as it mowed them down.

He was in a room with deep-pile carpeting, the walls lined with heavy draperies. Rows of folding chairs were set up. At the far end was a tiny closed casket beside an open one. He saw George and Yasuko approach the casket. She bent and kissed the occupant. An attendant closed and latched the cover.

He was aboard an unfamiliar spacecraft. Panic and despair surrounded him. He saw corpses ejected into space. A crewman placed him in a discharge tube. He found himself falling in the black of space -- falling toward an indigo world.

He stood on the familiar bluff, and he could smell the bitter, musty scent of the Floran sea. He looked toward the west. The Residence was not there, nor was the access road, nor the memorial plaque commemorating the deaths of his parents, nor the tops of the tall buildings of Sudal. Nyk sat on the ground, cradled his head in his hands and began sobbing. A fog enveloped him.

Nyk opened his eyes. He was lying in the hut and he felt someone stroking his hair. Tears flowed down his face. "Nyk ... Nyk..." He looked up into a pair of pale blue eyes. "Are you all right?"

"Andra... oh, Andra!"

"You said you'd face your worst fear. What was it?"

"Death."

"Your death?"

He shook his head. "No -- Suki's ... and her child. I saw the consequences of my temporal interference. I saw the *Floran*, lost and adrift in deep space, its crew and passengers dying. I saw our homeworld, empty and uninhabited. We must find a way home, Andra. I must return to her."

Kyto entered the hut. He looked at Andra. She glanced at Nyk. "I don't need to speak his language to know when I'm not welcome," she said and stepped outside.

The old man followed her with his eyes. "You did well."

"What now?" Nyk asked.

"Now, you are a member of the village. Come, you must be recognized. Tonight we feast in your honor."

"Kyto, do you feast in honor of every event?"

"As many as possible," the old man answered with a twinkle in his eye. Now, come. You won the first place."

"First place?"

"Yes -- you bore the poison the best -- you were the last to vomit. You get first choice."

"I didn't realize it was a competition. First choice of what?"

“You must choose a maiden. Then, tonight we feast in honor of our new villagers.”

Kyto led Nyk to the doorway of the lodge, where he joined the other two youths. Kyto raised his staff and addressed the assembled villagers. “We welcome three to our village.”

The villagers began chanting. An elderly woman led five young women to face Kyto. Nyk saw Vipsa among them.

“Choose a maiden,” Kyto whispered to Nyk.

“What for? Kyto, I already have a woman.”

“This is part of the initiation ritual. You must choose.”

Nyk stepped forward. “I choose Vipsa.”

Vipsa's lips formed a faint smile. She bowed her head and stepped back. The two youths chose their partners.

Kyto tapped his staff on the ground. “We convene at sundown for the feast. Now, make ready.”

Nyk followed Kyto into his workroom at the rear of the lodge. “You made a good choice,” Kyto said. “Vipsa is a nice girl. I wish I could make her my apprentice.”

“Why can't you?”

“The village would never accept a woman as their healer.”

“Kyto, faced with the choice of Vipsa or no one, they'd accept her.”

“Ylak will become my apprentice when he's of age.”

“Ylak doesn't want to be healer -- he wants to be chief. Can't you see that?” Kyto glanced at him. “Vipsa's smart and eager, and she already knows much.”

Kyto nodded. “I've shown her more than I should. You're right, Nykkyo. Ylak does have his eye on the throne.”

“You're teaching Vipsa on the sly.”

The old man smiled. “The forbidden fruit is often the sweetest.”

“Did you encourage her to approach me at the village assemblies? The rest of the villagers prefer to keep their distance.”

“They fear the unknown -- the unfamiliar. Vipsa doesn't -- her mind has an appetite, and I've been feeding it -- as have you. I'm getting old. Some day -- and fairly soon, I'm afraid -- it will fall upon Vipsa. I've waited a long time for a youth to come along -- one with an open mind and a desire to learn.”

“That youth came and she's a girl.”

“Yes ... You observe well. I had hopes for Ylak, but his mind doesn't hunger -- his appetite is for power. The village may have no choice but to rely on her.” Kyto approached his workbench and examined some earthen jars. He opened one and invited Nyk to sniff it. Scratched into the side of the jar was the same pictogram Vipsa had drawn for him. “Vipsa compounded these oils for me. She'll be busy today readying herself. I am pleased you chose her, Nykkyo. I care for her and I know you're a kind and gentle man.”

“Kind and gentle? What happens next?”

“Tonight, after the feast, you will go to Vipsa in Kwama's hut and open her.”

“Open her?”

“Yes, to initiate her into womanhood.”

“Do you mean make love to her? She must be a virgin!”

“Of course she is.”

“I'm no virgin, Kyto.”

The old man cracked a smile. “Neither are the two youths.”

“I really don't want to do this.”

“Nykkyo, is there a reason you're objecting?”

“It's ... it's ... it's that ... defiling virgins ... isn't something I go around doing!”

“But, you're not. This is her rightful initiation into womanhood. If she were to give herself to a man and lie with him before tonight -- that would be defilement.”

“She seems so young.”

“She's of age and fully eligible.”

“I've pledged my love to another woman.”

“One of the two with you?”

“No. My woman's on another world.”

“Then, she's not here to object, is she? You must do this, Nykkyo. You accepted initiation into the village. This is part of the ritual, and it's too late for you to back out of it, now.”

“What if Andra or Nayva objected?”

“That would ... complicate matters. I can't recall such a precedent. I hope for everyone's sake they hold their tongues.”

“But... but...”

“Enjoy yourself tonight. It's a happy occasion for Vipsa, and if I know Kwama, she'll be well prepared.”

“Prepared?”

“Kwama will have explained to her what she should expect.”

“Am I now married to Vipsa?”

“Married? I don't know that word.”

“Is Vipsa now my mate -- my partner for life?”

“Oh, no. If you don't desire pairing with her, you're under no obligation.”

“After tonight, that is.”

“Yes, that's right. After tonight, you and Vipsa may go your separate ways.”

“Kyto, how do families work within the village?”

“Families? I don't know that word, either.”

“Children -- How are children cared for?”

“Children belong to the village. Rearing them is women's work. Women who have milk feed the infants. Once a child reaches adolescence, a sponsor is assigned -- a man for a boy and a woman for a girl.”

“So, Ylak's not really the chief's son?”

“The chief is Ylak's sponsor.”

“Who are Ylak's mother and father?”

“His mother is Kwama. His father is ... who knows? One of several men.”

“So, the men and women pair up ... however they want?”

“Yes -- some pairings last for years and others only for days. The chief was paired with Kwama when Ylak reached adolescence. He desired to be the boy's sponsor.”

“You wanted to sponsor Ylak.”

Kyto nodded. “What the chief wants, he usually gets. Tonight we will pass the pipe in your honor. You may not indulge -- you'll need your full faculties for Vipsa.”

“Kyto, there were five maidens but only two youths.”

“We're fortunate to have a surplus of maidens.”

“Did that surplus have anything to do with your people inviting me to join?”

“You're perceptive for such a young man. I was hoping to inject some new blood into the village.”

“You mean for me to make her pregnant? I'm afraid it's not possible -- I'm sterile.”

Kyto shook his head. “That's a shame. No matter -- we'll still have another fertile woman joining our ranks.”

“What if there had been a surplus of youths?”

“We can only induct as many as we have maidens. Some would have to wait.” Kyto opened a cabinet and withdrew a small earthen jug and handed it to Nyk. “You may use this. It's a rare, fragrant oil -- pleasing to women. The blossom that yields this is very scarce. Now, you should join one of the hunting parties.”

Nyk walked to his hut. “What was that about?” Andra asked.

“I'm expected to deflower Vipsa tonight.”

“Lucky you!”

“No. I don't want to do this.”

“Don't protest too vehemently, Nyk -- if you wish to maintain your credibility. Vipsa is a cute girl.”

“I've never liked making intimate with strangers. Kyto says I must do this -- it's all part of the initiation. I have a plan, though.”

“Which is?”

“I'll explain my situation to Vipsa and spend the night with her -- chastely, that is -- and in the morning we'll both agree she's no longer a virgin. After all, isn't virginity more than anything a state of mind?”

“Not to these people, I think,” Andra replied.

“If you'll excuse us,” Nayva interrupted, “Andra and I must go foraging for inkroot.”

Nyk sat on a dais made of lashed poles, his stomach full of game, inkroot and tubers. Beside him sat Vipsa, and on either side, the youths and the young women they had chosen. The villagers chanted and sang. Vipsa leaned against him.

Kyto produced the pipe and held it aloft. The women stood and began heading toward their huts. “I'll see you in a little while,” Vipsa whispered and stepped off the dais.

One after another, the men lifted the pipe to salute Nyk and the two youths. Then, the village men began heading toward their quarters.

Nyk stood near the entrance to the lodge. A late-middle-aged woman approached him carrying an earthenware grease lamp. "Nykkyo, I'm Kwama. Please come with me." She led him to one of a cluster of huts and pulled back the hide flap that served as a door.

Nyk stepped into the structure -- larger than the hut he had been assigned. Inside was a stone hearth holding a small fire. Screens of woven twigs separated the interior space into rooms. The floor of lashed poles was carpeted with a layer of moist, green leaves from low-growing vines Nyk had spotted during the hunts. The place exuded a smoky, musty aroma.

"Why the leaves?" he asked, pointing at the floor. "Our hut doesn't have them."

Kwama pointed toward the hearth. "Your hut doesn't have a fire. Should a spark fly -- the leaves won't burn." She gestured him behind one of the screens. "Vipsa will join you shortly." She hooked the grease lamp onto a cord hanging from a rafter pole.

He looked around the room and saw a sleeping platform with a pair of feather-pelts. He removed his robe and slipped beneath the top pelt.

Vipsa entered and stood at the foot of the platform. "Nykkyo, I've come, for you've chosen me," she said, slipped from her feather-pelt and stood nude before him. Her breasts and stomach bore intricate patterns rendered in a violet dye.

"I'm not too keen on this," Nyk said. "Are you?"

"I'm eager to join the village. The ordeal made you a member -- now you must make me one."

"This is how you become an adult -- a woman?"

"Yes. Nykkyo, I'm honored you chose me. You earned the first place, and you chose ME! Now, you're unwilling. Don't I please you?"

"You're a very pretty girl, Vipsa."

"Kwama bathed me and anointed me with fragrant oils..."

"You smell very sweet."

"Don't you like my decorations?"

"They're stunning." He turned back the top pelt. "Please, join me. You must be chilly standing there." She slid under the cover with him. "These feather-pelts are very cozy." He lay facing her and traced her eyebrows. "You have beautiful eyes." He stroked her eyelids. "It seems odd to me to see blue, Asian eyes on a blond person."

"Asian? What does that mean?"

"The little fold of skin that gives your eyes their beautiful shape is called an epicanthus. My people don't have them, but I know from where they came. The shape of your eyes is a legacy of

Midoro Kyhana, whose family originated in an Earth region called Asia.”

“I like talking with you, Nykkyo. You're as wise as Kyto.”

“Not likely. Vipsa, I have a deal for you. You and I can spend the night together, and in the morning we'll both agree that you and I ... that I ... opened you.”

“You mean you don't want to...”

“I'd rather not. When I accepted Kyto's invitation to join the village, I had no idea this was expected of me. Who'd be the wiser?”

She shook her head. “This won't work. Kwama must see.”

“Kwama must watch us? I'm sure I couldn't with ... someone watching.”

“No, but afterward she must inspect me, so she can tell the village I'm now a woman. Then, tomorrow...”

“Let me guess. Tomorrow we have a feast in honor of the new women in the village?”

“That's right.”

“Can't someone else ... do the honors?”

“No. You chose me, so I can't be chosen a second time. Nykkyo, if Kwama can't certify you opened me, you'll be a laughing stock and I'll be disgraced -- I'll never be a full member of the village.” A tear formed in her eye. “I'd rather not be chosen at all and be a spinster -- than to be a discard, an outcast -- a failure.” She began crying.

“No, Vipsa, no.” Nyk stroked her. “It's all right. If this is so important, I'll do it. I never intended to harm you. I chose you because I like you.”

“Hurry up.” He heard a voice from outside the hut. “I'm tired and I want sleep.”

“That sounded like Kwama.”

“Yes. She's impatient.”

“She can wait.” He stroked her cheek. “For me to do this, I must get to know you a bit. I can't make love to a stranger. This can't be rushed. It shouldn't be like one of Kyto's procedures.”

Vipsa giggled. “Nykkyo, that's so funny! To think of Kyto with his herbs and oils...” She began laughing out loud.

“Kyto was a young man, once. He must've opened a maiden.”

She regained her composure. “I suppose you're right -- I never thought of him that way.” She giggled again. “It does strike me as funny, though.” She smiled and looked into his eyes. Nyk saw a shadow of Suki's face in hers. “I like you, too, Nykkyo.”

“Are you feeling warmer?”

“I’m comfortable. She folded back the pelt. “Do you like my decorations? The patterns represent plants and animals important to us.”

“They’re very pretty. The dye -- it’s inkroot?”

“Yes. Kwama spent the whole afternoon drawing them. They’ll fade over the next several days.”

“So much preparation. This is a special event, isn’t it?”

“The most important in a woman’s life.” Nyk ran his hand along her shoulder and arm. She took his hand and held it against her neck. “Your hands are warm. Kwama said that would be a good sign.”

“How so?”

“Warm means you’re relaxed ... comfortable ... knowledgeable. Cold means you’re tentative ... unsure ... nervous.”

“Are you nervous?”

“I was a little, but you’ve put me at ease...” She placed her hands against his neck. “Feel -- my hands aren’t cold.” Nyk caressed her forearm, took one of her hands and guided it to his chest. “Were you nervous before your ordeal?”

“Yes, and more than a little.”

A woman’s voice cried out from across the village. “Oh, no,” Vipsa said. “That sounded like Minta.”

“Who’s she?”

“She’s the girl Borryk chose.” Vipsa held his hand against her neck again. “I trust you, Nykkyo. Kwama said I could trust a man with warm hands. I ask only one thing of you.”

“What’s that?”

“That you not hurt me too much.”

Nyk began to trace the designs on her body. He caressed her and watched the purple patterns flow beneath his fingers. “I’ll try not to hurt you at all.”

“Come on, you two.” Nyk heard Kwama’s voice from outside the hut. “Stop the talking and get on with business.”

“Pay her no mind,” Nyk said and gazed into her eyes. “I’m not familiar with the customs here. Would it be all right if I kissed you?” Vipsa smiled and nodded once. He kissed her lips, and then her neck and shoulders.

She stroked the back of his head as he gazed into her eyes. “Thank you for choosing me. I told you the boys don’t like me. I don’t like them much, either. But -- if I wasn’t chosen by the ninth moon, I’d

no longer be eligible.”

“How long have you waited?”

“This was my fourth moon. I feared I'd end up a spinster...”

“Those boys are so short-sighted, Vipsa.”

“...or worse -- one might choose me as a prank. I worried that might happen today, with Borryk among them.”

“What do you mean?”

“That he'd treat me unkindly -- use his strength to ... to...”

“To force himself on you?”

“...to teach me a lesson ... to put me in my place. At her opening a girl must submit to whatever the man demands. You might not think yourself as wise as Kyto, but you are as kind.”

“Vipsa, I have no doubt some village man will appreciate you. When the time comes, I hope it'll be someone you love and who'll love you.”

“I have had offers. Gan would like to pair with me. He's had to wait, though -- until my opening.”

“How do you feel about him?”

“He's all right -- as village smith, he knows how to coax metals from the soil. He's a bit like Kyto that way -- but, he's not as gentle -- nor, as wise. If I could, I'd pair with you. I suppose that's not possible.”

“I'm already paired. My woman is far away. I shouldn't be talking of her at a moment like this, but I love her very much, and I miss her.”

“I understand, Nykkyo. It's the reason you were reluctant... I think I'm ready. Are you?”

“I suppose there's no sense postponing the inevitable.” Vipsa rolled onto her back. Nyk turned down the feather pelt to her knees. “I won't keep you uncovered for long. I wanted to take a look to see how much trouble we'll have...” He caressed her thigh as he examined her. “Well -- I don't have much experience with virgins, but I don't think you'll have any trouble at all.”

“Kwama said there must be some blood. Some of the boys think the more the better.”

“Boys like Borryk?”

She nodded. “I've heard tales of boys boasting how much blood they draw. I know sometimes a maiden must heal for many days before she can proceed with her pairing.”

“It's inhuman,” Nyk said.

“It's another reason I'm happy you chose me. I feel sorry for Minta.”

“Hmm ... must be blood,” Nyk mused. “Do we have anything sharp?” Vipsa's jaw dropped. She crossed her legs, rolled onto her side, drew up her knees and bit her lip. He stroked her shoulder. “No, Vipsa. If we need blood I was going to offer you some of mine.”

She looked up at him. “You ... you'd do that for me?”

“There's no reason lovemaking should be an ordeal. Not the first time -- not ever.”

“I have a shell knife in the pouch of my robe. I use it to trim Kyto's herbs.”

Nyk stood and retrieved the knife. He tested the blade against his thumb. “This will do.” He slipped it beneath the lower pelt. “In case we need it -- okay?”

Vipsa smiled and rolled onto her back again. Nyk knelt between her legs. He caressed her body, running his palms down her sides and tracing the muscles in her abdomen with his thumbs. Then, he lay atop her and pressed his hips against hers. She winced.

He pulled back. “Are you all right?”

“Yes...” She reached down, felt herself and showed him her finger. “We won't need the knife.”

“I'm so sorry -- I didn't want to hurt you.”

“I know you didn't. Don't feel badly, Nykkyo. It only stung for an instant. I'm all right -- and this is something I want.”

“You're no longer a virgin, Vipsa.”

“Now, plant your seed.”

“So -- it has to be all the way...” Nyk lay atop her again and began rocking his pelvis in a slow, gentle rhythm. Vipsa embraced him and ran her hands along his spine. He slipped an arm under the small of her back and held her. She touched his face and smiled. He pushed against her and drew in a deep breath. “Ohhh!” he groaned and let his body go limp.

“Are we done?” Nyk nodded. “It was starting to feel good...”

He rolled from her and attempted to catch his breath. “I've heard that complaint before.”

“Kwama,” Vipsa called out. “I'm now a woman.”

Kwama stepped into the room. “It's about time.” She unhooked the lamp from the cord, pulled back the cover and examined between Vipsa's legs. With a nod she pulled the covers over the two of them and, carrying the lamp, stepped from the chamber.

Orange light from the fire in the central room filtered through the woven twig wall and danced on Vipsa's face. “Did you really think I was complaining?” she asked.

“No. I was being a smartass.”

She put her hand over her mouth and laughed. "I've never heard that word."

"It means..."

"I understand what it means." She giggled.

"Vipsa ... lovemaking is like any activity -- you improve with practice."

"That sounds like something Kwama would say."

"What I mean is ... as a woman -- you are gifted with an amazing ability to enjoy the pleasures of lovemaking. Perhaps it's to compensate for the ordeals of childbirth. I hope Gan -- or, whoever you pair with -- will be..."

"Will you two stop it?" Kwama's voice came from another part of the hut. "I'll never get sleep. Are you going to talk all night AFTERWARD, too?"

Vipsa giggled again. "You were beginning to sound like Kyto." She smiled. "I understand ... thank you, Nykkyo. I respect your loyalty to your far-away woman. You're free to go."

"Is it all right if I stay?"

"You want to stay with me?"

Nyk coaxed Vipsa to lie against him. "I think feeling the other's warmth as you fall asleep is the best part of having a bed partner."

"The best?"

"The very best." He put his arm around her as she rested her face on his shoulder, then he kissed her forehead.

"Better than the moment?"

"Yes, because it lasts all night."

"Some of the older girls told me stories of their openings. Wait 'til I tell them of mine! I'll never forget this, Nykkyo."

Nyk walked through the village to a group of women sitting around a wooden tub. Andra was removing the skin from some inkroot with a bone scraper. She looked up at him. "So, how went the big night?"

"I'm not the sort that kisses and tells."

"Did everything go according to plan?"

"Not quite."

"I didn't think so. I saw Vipsa with some other girls. She's absolutely glowing. I don't mind telling you, Nyk, I'm a little jealous. I wonder how Sukiko will react."

"I did this for the well-being of all of us."

"Keep telling yourself that," Nayva said and tossed a root into the tub.

Andra dropped her root into the tub and looked at her hands. They were stained a deep purple. She picked up the last inkroot and began scraping. "I suppose you think this is amusing."

"I said nothing."

"I'm not amused," Nayva added.

Nyk slipped the communicator out of his pocket. "I received a lock again."

"Did you transmit the distress signal?"

"Yes. I lost the lock, but it's back." He sat beside Nayva. "I'll send the signal again." He pressed a control on the handheld device. "There, an acknowledgement. Let's see if anyone answers us."

Nyk held the device on his lap. One of the elder women picked up the tub of inkroot and carried it toward the fire. She dumped the contents into a large earthen pot sitting on the communal blaze.

A young woman brought a small bucket and handed it to Andra. She lifted it to sip from, but the youth waved her hands as a signal to stop. The girl dipped her hands into the liquid.

Andra smiled and nodded. She dipped her hands into the bucket. When she removed them the inkroot stain was gone. The girl handed the bucket to Nayva.

The communicator chirped. "Distress signal, identify yourself," came a voice.

Nayva picked it up. "This is Lexal-One. We were forced down on the southern continent."

"Lexal-One -- we've been looking for you. What is your condition?"

"The craft was destroyed. Pilot and two passengers in good condition. We request rescue."

"Acknowledged. We're more than happy to oblige. We'll need to form a rescue party. Keep your communicator on standby and we'll call with details."

“Acknowledged,” Nayva replied. “What’s the situation in the capital?”

“Situation is good. The capital is in friendly hands.”

“We’ll stand by for your call. Lexal-One out.” Nayva jumped up and embraced Andra. “We’re going to be rescued!”

Vipsa approached Nyk and he made room for her. She sat beside him and placed her bark tray on her lap. He looked at her face, illuminated by the glow of the communal fire. She leaned against him. “I hear you’ll be leaving us.”

“Yes, we expect in a day or two a craft will come and take us home.”

“I’ll miss you, Nykkyo. Will you ever return?”

“I won’t say never. I’d like to return and find you paired with a man who cherishes you. I’d like to learn you’ve given strong children to the village.” He took her hand. “I’d like to see the villagers accept and trust you as their healer.”

“You’re a member of our village, Nykkyo. You’re always welcome, as is your far-away woman.” She mopped the remaining tuber paste from her tray with the last chunk of meat. “I’ll take your trays.”

Bek took his place to deliver the night’s installment of his story. Vipsa returned and sat beside Nyk. He slipped his arm around her and she leaned against him. “I’m sorry you won’t hear how Bek’s story ends,” she said.

“Andra knows the story,” Nyk replied. “I’ll learn the ending from her.”

“Andra knows Bek’s story?” She leaned to look at Andra. “How does she know it?”

“It’s an old story, common to both our people. Let’s listen.”

Nyk sat by the brazier in the lodge. To his right was Kyto and to his left Ylak. The chief sat across and some other tribal elders filled the circle. Kyto loaded the pipe with the hallucinogenic powder and passed it to Nyk. “It’s an honor to take the first draw. I grant it to you in light of your departure.”

Nykkyo lifted the pipe to his lips, inhaled deeply and held his breath. He exhaled slowly through his nose and passed the pipe to Ylak. The boy lifted it to his lips but did not inhale -- then passed it on.

The drug was working, filling Nyk’s head with a foggy sense of well-being. The faces of the village men dissolved and reformed into a single ring of humanity. He pressed his palm against Kyto’s. “This is our sign of friendship. If you accept my offer of friendship, open your fingers and lace hands with me.”

Kyto spread his fingers and held Nyk’s hand. Ylak pressed his palm against Nyk’s and joined hands. Soon the circle was united.

“Tell us about Floran after Midoro’s expedition,” Kyto said.

“After ... Midoro departed around 150 APF.” He closed his eyes and searched his memory for his school lessons on the planet's history. “That was our darkest time -- the time we came closest to annihilation. Midoro was not wrong to do as he did.

“Floran emerged from the dark times around 300 APF. A generation later, we returned to the stars. By 400 APF we had made contact with Earth.”

“The mother planet,” Ylak interjected.

“Yes, the world from which our life originated. We knew the need to keep our true nature secret from the Earth population. We still must walk the surface of that world with great care. I am one of those walkers.”

The circle murmured. “How many Florans walk on Earth?” Kyto asked.

“About two dozen at any time.”

“Then, it's a great honor to us that you walk Abo.”

“No, Kyto. The honor is mine.” The pipe returned to Nyk and he took another draw. “We also began exploring the galaxy around Floran, for we knew the need for other worlds to support our numbers. Our planet cannot support a very large population.”

“How large?” the chief asked.

“We have a billion and a half living on Floran.” The circle murmured upon hearing the number. “Believe me, it's quite enough.”

“Over a dozen colony planets!” Kyto said. “Tell them how many Florans in all.”

“Twenty-four billion,” Nyk replied. The circle let out a gasp. “By 1000 APF we had founded our first colony -- after Abo, that is. It's called Gamma-5.” Nyk faced the chief. “Chief, it's clear the Abo colony is in decline. I'm sure the Floran people would embrace you, should you wish to return to our community.”

“No,” he replied. “Not for this generation. Perhaps for the future. I see a day when our people will not be able to feed or care for themselves. Perhaps then.”

“I admire your community. You live life, and you love life. I see more happiness in this village than in Floran cities many hundred times this size.”

The chief nodded and smiled. “Humans find joy and sorrow in any community, Nykkyo.”

A shaft of morning light fell across Nyk's eyes and he groaned. “You're going to have to lay off that stuff,” Nayva said.

“It's part and parcel of a council-of-elders meeting.”

“Think what you want,” Andra said. “I have some breakfast. Are you tired of inkroot yet?”

"I'm tired of whatever roast beast it is we've been served the past four days. It's beginning to taste a little off." Nyk sat up and rubbed his eyes. He felt his face. His sparse beard was showing six days' worth of growth. "I'd give anything now for a sharp razor and a basin of warm water." Andra handed him a bark tray and he began eating his breakfast.

The communicator chirped again. Nayva picked it up. "Lexal-One here."

"Ah, Lexal-One. This is your rescue squad. We're dispatching a shuttle to the southern continent. It should be there shortly. Place your communicator into transponder mode and we'll home in on it."

"Very good." Nayva pressed a control on the device. "I can feel that hot water already."

"Kyto would prefer we draw our rescuers to a spot away from the village. He doesn't want Abo's whereabouts widely known."

"It's out of the bottle," Andra said.

"I know, but let's adhere to his wishes. We'll take a hike to the top of that hill."

Nyk and Andra huddled under a feather-pelt while Ylak showed Nayva how to shoot a blowgun. Nyk looked down at the valley. "Their village blends well with the forest. I wouldn't know it was there from this vantage."

"Only when someone stirs the fire and sends up some smoke," Andra replied.

The communicator began chirping. "They're homing in on us," Nayva said.

"Watch the sky. We'll wave them in."

The chirping became more frequent and intense. "They're very close now," Andra said.

"Look!" Nyk pointed skyward. A craft circled overhead, leaving a double contrail. It began to lose altitude.

Nayva picked up the binoculars and peered through them. "They're quite high up -- I'm sure they can't see us." She followed the craft as it circled. Then, she picked up the communicator and switched it off. "Run! That shuttle's Altian!"

Nyk started running toward the village. "Are you sure?" he panted.

"Yes! Altian shuttles have a distinctive twin-tail configuration."

"We've been tricked!" Andra said. "The capital in friendly hands. Friendly to whom?"

Ylak ran ahead of them into the village. Nyk was greeted by Kyto and the chief.

"What is the trouble?"

"We've been tricked," Nyk replied. "Or, perhaps we tricked ourselves, desiring rescue so badly. I'm afraid we've given our whereabouts to our enemy. We may have placed you in jeopardy, too."

“It seems to me,” Kyto replied, “in such a situation, one has no choice but to hunt the hunters.”

“How would we do that?”

“With bait.”

The communicator chirped again. “Lexal-One this is rescue. We lost your signal.”

Nayva held the device to her lips. “Our communicator is having power cell problems. We're working on it.”

“Rescue standing by.”

“What do we do?” Nyk asked.

“We'll call a council meeting,” the chief said.

Nyk sat with the village men in a circle in the lodge. “What is it your enemies want?” the chief asked.

“They want Andra.”

“The white one? I don't blame them -- she's a very beautiful woman.”

“They want her dead. They believe she's the wife of ... the chief to whom we're loyal.”

The chief nodded. “You're a member of our village, Nykkyo. We can conceal you.”

“They know we're here, and they'll stop at nothing to find us. More will come with powerful weapons. Concealing us puts your whole tribe into danger.”

“What do you propose?” Kyto asked.

“If we could seize their vessel -- Nayva can fly it. She can draw their attention from you, and perhaps take us to safety. It's our best hope, now.”

The chief looked around the circle. “We will help you.”

Nyk followed Bek to a clearing some distance from the village. “This is a good spot.” He motioned to some village men, who began gathering firewood.

Kyto stepped forward with his fire stones and ignited the blaze. Andra sat alone on a log near the fire.

“Signal them,” Nyk said.

“Rescue, this is Lexal-One.”

“Rescue here.”

“We're turning on our transponder now.” Nayva pressed a control and the gadget began chirping. She set the device next to Andra on the log.

“I'm all set,” Andra said. She pulled the remnant from her gown around her shoulders.

Nyk retired to a spot behind some brush. He could hear the transponder chirps from the communicator.

“Patience is the art of the hunt,” Kyto said.

“Patience is something I lack.”

“You'll never be a good hunter, Nykkyo.”

Nyk fidgeted. Kyto placed a hand on his shoulder.

The chirping became a solid tone. Ylak pointed skyward and they saw the twin-tailed shuttle circling and then drop below the horizon.

Nyk started to jump up, but Kyto restrained him. “Our prey has sniffed the bait. We must wait until it's been seized.”

Nyk squatted behind the bush and watched.

Ylak tugged on his sleeve and pointed toward the horizon. An open skimmer was headed toward the clearing. Nyk looked into Kyto's eyes. The old man smiled and nodded.

Nyk could see about a half dozen troopers on the skimmer. One was carrying an Earth-style shoulder arm. The craft headed toward the clearing. “Now, Andra,” Nyk thought. Andra kept gazing at the campfire. “Now, Andra!”

Andra touched the black gem in her belt buckle. For an instant a shimmer surrounded her. She kept her eyes on the fire, warming her hands and rubbing them together.

The skimmer hovered about fifty metres from where she sat. The trooper lifted his shoulder gun and aimed. The silence was broken by the crack of its discharge. Andra fell backwards and lay still on the ground.

Kyto began to jump up, but this time Nyk restrained him. The old man looked at him and nodded.

Nyk could hear the corpsmen speaking in *Lingwaflozan*. “Good shot,” one congratulated the marksman.

“Let's grab the princess's body and get out of here.”

“What about the others?”

“They can rot here.”

The skimmer flew to within a few metres of the campfire and touched down. The troops stepped off and headed toward Andra.

The chief gave the signal and the brush erupted with villagers loading and shooting their fireplant darts. In an instant the Altians were on the ground, dead or dying. Andra stood and switched off the shield.

Nyk embraced Kyto. "Thanks. I hope our paths cross again."

"Nykyo..." Kyto handed him the ancient journal. "Go with luck."

Nayva climbed aboard the skimmer. "Come on!"

"I'll come with you," Ylak said and climbed aboard.

Nyk helped Andra aboard and climbed on himself. Nayva took the controls and headed in the direction the troops had come.

"Where do you think the shuttle is?"

"There's only about one place they'd want to set down." Nayva pulled back on the stick to gain altitude. She pointed. "There!"

Nayva piloted the skimmer directly over the shuttle and put it into station-keeping.

The shuttle pilot leaned from the craft. "What're you waiting for? Do you have the princess?"

"Yes," Nyk called. "Get ready to give us a hand."

The pilot stepped out of the craft. Ylak retrieved a thorn from his pouch and loaded it into his blowgun. Nayva dropped the skimmer to the ground. The boy stood and blew the dart into the pilot's neck. The man reached for it, then fell to the ground in convulsions.

"Quick -- leave the skimmer here," Nayva said. They clambered aboard the shuttle.

Nyk turned to Ylak. "You'll have no trouble finding your way back to the village?"

The boy flashed a broad smile. "No trouble at all."

Nyk climbed into the shuttle, turned and waved at Ylak and gave him the two-fingered Floran salute. The boy turned and ran into the forest. Nayva closed the hatches and started prelaunch. The power cells whined as they spun up. "Do you still want to go to Floran?"

"Yes, yes! Let's see the Altians deny this."

The shuttle headed skyward, and soon achieved orbit. Nayva operated the navigation computer. The sensors picked up other vessels orbiting Lexal. She set course to join them in formation.

"White, this is leader," came a hail. "Do you have the princess? ... white, do you copy?"

Nayva switched off the communications system. "Prepare for subjump. We're not following their script."

"Can they track us?"

"I'm afraid so."

The viewport shutters closed and Nyk felt the jolt of the subjump. Nayva operated the navigation computer again. "Prepare for warp jump." The ship shook. "One more -- subjump."

The viewport shutters opened and Nyk looked down on his indigo homeworld. "That's a beautiful sight!"

"We're not done yet," Nayva said. "Another vessel just came out of warp jump and is heading toward us. Hold on."

"Head for Sudal. We'll hole up in the Residence until this blows over."

"Is that the best place?" Andra asked.

"It's built like a fortress. Do you have a better suggestion?"

She swung the craft around to enter the Floran outer atmosphere belly-first, then oriented to fly as an aircraft. "I'm computing a trajectory toward Sudal. But, for now it looks like we're heading for Floran City. They'll have a harder time tracking us in the lower atmosphere, and this bit of evasion might buy us some more time."

Nyk looked out the forward viewports and saw Floran City looming before them. "We're diverting to Sudal," Nayva said. She pulled hard on the stick. The craft swung around and flew past the mons and toward the southern city.

Nayva switched on the communications system. "Sudal, this is Lexal-One requesting priority landing."

"Lexal-One, acknowledged. Bearing one-eighty-two, left. You are cleared."

"One-eighty-two, left. Acknowledged."

Sudal appeared before them in the forward viewport. The shuttle lost altitude and velocity. The landing approach vector appeared on the nav display. Nayva trimmed their approach, dropped landing gear and touched down. She pulled the craft off to the side of the polymer concrete apron.

Nyk popped open the hatch and helped Andra out. "Are you coming?" he called to Nayva.

"I'll stay with the shuttle -- in case you need it."

Nyk held Andra's hand as he ran to the groundcar lot. He picked one, popped open the cowl and climbed in. He pressed his wrist to the scanpad and selected Sudal University as the destination.

The cowl slid shut and the car headed to the south. Nyk switched off the automatic guidance. A unistick popped up from the floor. He grasped it and piloted the car by hand out of the city limits and

toward the east. He pulled onto the access road running past the Residence and drove toward his childhood house.

13 -- The Assault

Nykkyo drove the groundcar up to the house, popped the cowl and helped Andra out. "Go inside -- I'll be along shortly."

Andra headed into the house. Nyk rolled the car into the lower level, hopped out and headed up the spiral staircase.

He spotted Andra in an embrace with Senta. "Andra -- I'm so happy you're safe. I was so worried when I heard of the situation on Lexal." Senta stepped back and regarded Andra -- her soiled and tattered gown. "What happened to you?"

"It's a long story," Nyk said from near the house's main control panel. He pressed an actuator and the storm shutters slammed down. "I'm not sure we're safe -- we may be having uninvited guests."

Senta moved toward Nyk. "Nykkyo! You would be behind this." She threw a punch at Nyk but he ducked and stepped back. She advanced toward him and slapped his face.

Andra grabbed her arm. "No, Senta. Nyk came to rescue me. It was my idea to get involved."

"No matter," Nyk replied. "I'm sure the Altians will track us here. I hope this structure is strong enough to hold them off until help arrives. Now, I must make a call."

Nyk entered Kronta's locator code. "The Altians have overplayed their hand," Kronta said. "They've seized Lexal and now there's a pitched battle at the Sudal shuttleport. The stunners our internal affairs boys have are no match for those Earth firearms."

"What's the HL's response?"

"We've been in contact with Wygann, who's in hiding somewhere outside the Lexalese capital. The HL has censured -- and muzzled -- the Altian and Deltan delegates and has offered to activate the strike force -- to help Wygann. He's refused."

"Wygann refused the HL's help?"

"That's right."

"Send that force to Sudal, and to the Residence. Andra and I are holed up here and we could

use reinforcements.”

“I’ll send the word.” The display went dark.

Nyk paced around his childhood home. “I hate being confined.”

Senta glowered at him. “How long do you expect it’ll take them to find you?”

“Not long. No one can keep their whereabouts secret on this world.”

Andra picked up one of the handguns and tested it for balance. “I’ll show you how to use this. Press the safety release with your index finger. The thumb-trigger is here.” She handed the pistol to Nyk.

“There’s an update on Lexal on the vidisplay,” Senta said. Nyk and Andra stood behind her and watched as a mob marched on the ruined Lexalese palace. “Wygann’s been recruiting Lexalese citizens and they’re about to retake the palace.”

“How big is that crowd?” Nyk asked.

“Half a million,” Senta replied. “Maybe more. They’re armed with tools -- kitchen knives, saws, farm tools.”

“Not a match for firearms.”

“But Wygann has the numbers. There’s no more than a thousand or so of Vellod’s supporters and Altian troops in the capital. It’s unbelievable.”

A bang came from one of the storm shutters, then some pounding. “Quick, into the lower level,” Nyk said. He stepped to a vidisplay and placed another call to Kronta. “Where’s internal affairs?”

“They have their hands full in Sudal. Two more Altian shuttles have landed.”

“We have commandos trying to break into the house.”

“They’ll be there, Nyk.”

The pounding was joined by some scraping. “How long will that shutter hold out?” Senta asked.

Nyk shook his head. “I don’t know.”

One of the troops taunted them through the shutter. “Janna, we know you’re in there. We killed your pilot, now we’re coming for you!”

Andra looked up at Nyk. “They killed Nayva!” She grabbed one of the handguns and headed up the spiral staircase.

“Where are you going?” Senta asked.

“I’m going to do something to discourage them. Maybe I can take out one or two of them in the bargain.”

Nyk picked up the other handgun and headed after her.

“No, Andra!” Senta shouted. “Don’t!”

“We’ll have the high ground,” Andra replied. “And, I’m wearing a shield.”

“You don’t have a shield, Nyk!”

“I’ll keep down.”

Nyk pushed open the trapdoor to the observation deck in the center of the Residence’s domed roof and followed Andra. She pointed to a large skimmer parked on the bluff. Four commandos were leaning against it. Two of the troops were attempting to pry up one of the storm shutters. Another pair were standing back, watching the sky.

Andra pressed the gem in her belt buckle. She lifted the handgun and held it in a two-handed grip, her finger pressing the safety release and her thumb poised on the trigger button. She lowered the weapon and aimed at one of the commandos working on the shutter.

The weapon discharged with a dull poomph. The commando was thrown back and fell to the ground, blood oozing from his helmet. He convulsed for a moment and was still.

Andra turned the weapon on the second trooper and fired, knocking him to the ground. He stood and ran for cover behind some rocks. The commandos near the skimmer ducked behind it and shouldered their assault rifles.

“You’d better get down,” Andra said. “They’re about to return fire.”

Nyk ducked into the trapdoor. The troops began firing at Andra, their rounds striking the shield with blue flashes, losing energy and dropping at her feet.

“I’m keeping them pinned down,” she shouted. “Got one in the leg. He’s out of commission.”

One of the troops near the skimmer hopped into it and two others sat on its tail. The craft began to lift off. Andra turned and fired at it, hitting one trooper and knocking him off. He staggered backward and fell off the bluff onto the rocks below.

Andra fired at the skimmer. Fuel from its power cell began spraying. She fired again, and a spark from the round’s impact ignited the fuel. The skimmer burst into flames, and Nyk could hear the two troopers screaming. “I denied them the use of their skimmer. It’s down to four against one -- better odds.”

“You’d better get down,” Nyk shouted. “Every round that shield stops uses energy, and the power cells won’t hold up forever.”

Andra ducked down and switched off the shield. The shooting stopped. “Now what?” Nyk asked.

“These boys will be a bit more careful, now.” Nyk and Andra knelt on the stairway beneath the trapdoor. “Maybe I should take a look,” she said.

Nyk shook his head. "No, keep down."

"I just spoke to Kronta again," Senta called from below. "He says an internal affairs skimmer will be heading our way shortly. He's very upset about this whole thing."

"As if we're not upset?" Nyk replied. "Can you hear anything?"

"No. Nothing."

"I wonder what they're doing?" Andra asked.

Hammering and scraping resumed at the shutter. Andra switched on the shield, climbed to the roof and began firing again. "They've set up a cross-fire," she shouted. "One behind each of those big rocks. They want to keep me occupied so the others can cut through the shutter. It won't work." She fired at the troops near the house and drove them back. "Got one! Now it's three to one!"

The commando near the house fell back behind a rock and began firing at Andra with a handgun.

"That Lexalese pistol isn't very powerful," Nyk shouted. "You can tell by the sound, compared to what they're using."

"It's powerful enough to be deadly," Andra replied. "It uses some sort of fuel-air technology ... Nyk, toss me the other handgun. This one's empty."

Nyk handed her the pistol. "They're wearing some sort of body armor," Andra shouted.

"That must've been part of Zander's shipments, too."

"I have to aim at their legs ... or their heads. I wonder if they counted on this shield. Got another one! Now, it's two against one!"

Andra turned back and forth, pinning the two remaining commandos behind their rocks.

"Where is that skimmer?" Nyk shouted. "How many more rounds do you have?"

"I haven't been counting," Andra shouted back. Nyk continued to hear shooting. Then, Andra screamed and fell to the roof.

"Andra!" Nyk poked his head through the trapdoor. Andra was lying on the roof, writhing. A red splotch was forming below her ribcage.

Nyk pulled her into the house and secured the trapdoor. He carried her to the main living level and stretched her out on a bench. "Senta!" he shouted. "Andra's been shot!"

"Oh, no!" Senta sat and held Andra's head.

"Is it bad?" Nyk asked.

"I'm bleeding inside," she gasped. "I can feel it."

“Try to lie still. It may keep the bleeding to a minimum.” He turned to the vidisplay. “Kronta, where's that skimmer?”

“It's on its way, Nyk. A Lexalese shuttle landed to help mop up in Sudal. They'll be there shortly.”

Nyk sat and held Andra's hand. “Friends for life,” she said.

“Does it hurt?”

“It won't hurt for long. I'm going to sleep, now.”

“No!” Senta cried. “Stay with us, Andra!”

“Nyk...” Andra panted.

“Save your strength.” He pet her hair.

“Nyk -- when you see Janna -- tell her ... tell her ... *Unu Deva Feti* .”

“I will.”

“We got the princess!” a voice outside the shutter shouted. “Now, let's finish the job!”

Nyk could hear more hammering and scraping.

The shutter creaked open and one commando stuck his head inside. Andra lifted the pistol she still clutched, pointed it and pressed the trigger. The three of them were splattered by blood and brains. The commando sank to the floor and the shutter slammed onto his body.

Andra dropped the pistol to the floor and groaned. Nyk picked it up, opened the storm shutters and stepped outside. The last commando picked up a pump shotgun and jacked a shell into the chamber. Nyk lowered the handgun and fired, striking the trooper in his vest and knocking him to the ground. The shotgun discharged into the air, its pellets raining onto the roof.

The trooper attempted to climb to his feet, but Nyk fired again, knocking him down. The man looked up from the ground as Nyk stood over him, pointing the muzzle of the handgun into his face. “Mercy!”

“This is for Nayva!” Nyk shouted and fired into the man's forehead. He pressed the trigger again and again, until pistol refused to respond.

Nyk looked at the mangled corpse and then at his own hand. He threw down the pistol, buried his face in his hands and began wailing. He felt a touch on his shoulder, turned and saw an internal affairs officer.

“They're all dead or captured,” the officer said to him.

Nyk heard a scream from inside the house. He and the officer ran inside. Senta was holding Andra.

“She's dead!” Senta shrieked.

Two Lexalese security troops pushed into the house. “Princess!” one shouted. “Get the stasis chamber!”

The other trooper headed from the house. “Wait -- that's not the Lexalese crest.” He pointed to her right shoulder.

“That's not Janna,” Nyk replied. “That's Andra Baxa.”

“Baxa!” The guard spat. “I can't utter the name without spitting. Best to leave her dead.”

“No -- Andra despised her husband as deeply as you. She put herself into harm's way to protect your princess, who's right now safe in Floran City.”

The second Lexalese guard entered dragging a field stasis chamber on a levitating pallet. “Quick -- get her inside.”

Nyk helped slide her into the tube. “I can't get good stasis,” the guard shouted.

“The belt!” Nyk replied. “It's a shield and may be interfering with the stasis fields.”

The men slid her out and Nyk removed the belt. “We have good stasis, now. Is there a clinic in Sudal?”

“Take her to Central Clinic in Floran City,” Nyk replied. “Ask for Dr Kurso Aahhn.” He watched the guard drag the pallet toward a skimmer.

“Take her to the shuttleport,” the first Lexalese guard shouted. “Transport her to Floran City by shuttle.” The Lexalese corpsmen nodded acknowledgement.

The Internal affairs officer approached Nyk. “A shield? Let me see that.”

The Lexalese guard snatched it. “This belongs to Lexalese Security Forces.”

“Come,” he heard a voice shout from outside. The Lexalese guard took the belt with him to the skimmer and it lifted off.

Nyk looked at his shaking hands. “I'm a killer! I killed a man!”

“You preserved your own life and the lives of your friends,” the officer said.

“He begged for mercy. I had none. I shot a man when he was down -- I shot him between the eyes. I killed him!”

“If he had gotten up, he'd have done everything in his power to overcome you. I'm certain it'll be ruled justified.”

“And then -- I emptied the gun into him.”

“It's no crime to shoot a corpse. Come, two more skimmers are on their way. We'd like you to

come into Sudal and tell us your story.”

Nyk stepped from the skimmer and into the Residence. He looked at Senta. “Senta, can we call a truce?”

“Truce,” she replied. “You’re a mess -- go get cleaned up. Then, we can walk on the beach.”

“You want to walk on the beach? You, Senta?”

“We have some things to discuss.”

Nyk stepped from his childhood bedroom in a tunic and sandals. He saw Senta sitting at a vidisplay. “You look so much better.”

“I wish I felt better.”

“Are you interested in discovering whether or not you and I are half-brother and sister?”

“Aren’t we better off not knowing?”

“Are we? It’s bad for me if we are, and bad for you if we’re not.”

“What do you mean?”

“You threatened the prospect of incest to persuade me to grant the separation. You don’t want to know because you’re afraid it’ll destroy your strongest argument.”

“Senta, after everything I went through, I’m in no mood for petty bickering.”

“A dissolution of marriage is hardly petty,” she replied. She poked the touchscreen. “I have my DNA sequence here. I also have the sequence of Ryddo Tibran, my legal father ... and of Veska. A couple touches on the screen and we’ll all know for sure.”

Nyk looked into her green eyes. “All right. Do the comparison.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“You’re not just saying that, are you?”

“You do enjoy tormenting me, don’t you?”

“Do you really believe that?”

“Senta, just go ahead and run the match, will you?”

“Okay. Remember -- you asked for it.” She poked the touchscreen. The display flashed as it performed the statistical match of the two DNA sequences. The results were displayed. “Percentage match with Veska is 92.52 percent,” she replied. “Percentage match with Ryddo is ... 99.99995

percent.” She looked into his eyes. “I’m a Tibran, legally and biologically.”

“You knew, didn’t you? You ran the match before, while I was on Lexal.”

She smiled. “Yes, Nyk. I needed to know.”

He sighed. “All right, Senta -- you win. Tell me what I have to do before you’ll grant the separation.”

“For starters you can take a walk with me.”

He took Senta’s hand and led her out of the house. “Did you tell your stepdad?” he asked. She shook her head. “Shall we tell him?”

“I think it would be all right to let him keep guessing, don’t you?” Senta replied.

He headed toward the bluff. The burned-out skimmer sat on the edge of the cliff. Nyk pointed. “They’ll be by tomorrow to remove that.”

Nyk helped Senta down the rocks to the black sandy beach. He slipped off his sandals. She slipped hers off her long, narrow feet and walked with him barefoot toward the surf.

“I didn’t think you could stand the smell.”

“The smell grows on you,” she replied. “Sudal grows on you. I thought I’d miss the excitement of Floran City. I’ve discovered I don’t, but I do appreciate the peace and quiet here. Maybe I’m getting older.”

“Why couldn’t you see that about Sudal before?”

“Why, indeed? Nykkyo, I am sorry I never permitted myself to appreciate what your home has to offer. I’m sorry I never let you share this with me.”

“It wasn’t from my lack of trying.”

“Certainly not.”

He walked with her along the edge of the surf and felt the waves wash over his ankles.

Nyk stopped and stared out at the sea toward the horizon. He glanced Senta’s way and saw her savoring the breeze, her face lifted and her eyes closed as it caught her red hair.

“Now, Senta -- what are your demands? You know I have little I can give you. You’ll keep the rights to the house. What else do I need to do?”

“Nyk, we’ve called a truce. For Andra’s sake let’s honor it.”

“I want us to remain friends, Senta. We’ve known each other so long and the years we were married do count for something.”

“I’m pleased to hear that. After our last vidphone conversation, I was afraid they didn’t.”

“I don't know why you'd want to stay married to a killer.”

“Nyk, I don't blame you for what you did.”

“All I could think of was poor Nayva. She saved both our lives. She didn't deserve to die.”

“A great many have died in this adventure. Andra still may. Few deserved to.” She pointed to a rock overhanging the surf. “That's Andra's favorite place. She sits there after dinner...” Senta brushed tears from her eyes. “I love her, Nyk. I don't know what I'll do...”

“She loves you, too, Senta. You and I are bonded through her. Aahhn's a miracle worker. He reanimated Suki after her suicide.”

“There's a limit even to what he can do, Nyk.”

A warbling signal came from Senta's *lifxarpa*. She withdrew from her sash a handheld vidisplay and looked at it; then handed it to Nyk. “Vidphone for you.”

Nyk pressed it to his wrist to answer the call. He saw his friend Aahhn.

“Nyk, we reanimated your friend.”

“Will she live?”

“We believe so.”

Nyk turned to Senta with tears in his eyes. “Did you hear?”

Senta threw her arms around him and kissed him. “Let's take the night train to Floran City.”

Nyk escorted Senta into the clinic and was directed to a treatment room. Andra was lying on her back on a therapeutic pallet. Her skin was green and her lips black. “They've given her artificial blood,” Nyk said. He walked to her and took her hand. It was limp and she was unconscious.

A figure in hospital garb approached them. Nyk recognized his friend Aahhn.

“How is she?” Nyk asked.

“Oh, she'll recover. It's a serious wound. The ... projectile entered here, below her left ribcage.” Aahhn pointed on his own body. “It grazed her stomach, put a nick in her colon, severed a rather large artery and lodged near her spleen. She lost a significant amount of blood.”

“Did you have to remove her spleen?”

“No, the surgeons patched it all up.”

“It's fortunate she was wearing a shield,” Nyk said.

“A shield? Hmmm ... it appears it didn't work very well.”

“It worked very well -- it stopped hundreds of rounds. You should've seen her, Aahhn -- standing on that roof, firing on those commandos. By the time she was hit, its power was depleted. I imagine it was still able to slow the impact of the bullet. Otherwise, she'd have been cut up even worse inside -- perhaps beyond repair.”

“She's still recovering from the neural block. She should be coming around in a short while.”

“Why don't we take turns waiting up for her?” Nyk said to Senta. “I'll take the first shift.”

“Fine, Nyk. You'll call if there's any news?”

“Of course.”

“I'll be by in the morning.” Senta headed out the door.

Nyk pulled up a seat beside Andra. He kissed her forehead, then leaned back and closed his eyes.

The sound of an attendant caring for Andra roused him. He looked up and saw the nurse leaving the treatment room. Andra's eyes were open. “How are you feeling?”

“I'm not feeling much ... I have a neural block ... on my spine ... I can't feel anything below my ... shoulder blades ... it's also controlling ... my breathing ... a very odd ... sensation...”

“Other than that?”

“I feel happy ... to be alive ...” Nyk took her hand and she squeezed it. “We make quite a ... team ... don't we?”

14 -- Back to the Grind

Nyk walked into Andra's treatment room. Senta sat in a chair, dozing. “Good morning. How are you today?”

“They removed the neural block.”

“So, you have legs again.”

“And pain. Not too bad, though. They told me I can go home as soon as I've displaced most of the artificial blood.”

Nyk stroked her oat-straw white hair. "That green skin makes your hair look even lighter."

An attendant brought in a meal tray and handed it to her. "Doctor wants you to try eating."

Andra brought the pallet into a sitting position. She removed the cover on the meal package and scooped a spoonful. "I had forgotten how bland the food is on this planet. I'm in the mood for a chunk of meat."

"Maybe we can have some *lagexeva* shipped from Lexal."

"No thanks." She scooped another spoonful.

"Andra, I must ask you -- how did you feel after you killed Zander?"

"Good. He deserved it."

"How can you feel no remorse?"

"Nyk, it's easy. It's lesson number one from Vebinad Academy -- the first order of business is survival. I knew I wouldn't be free of Zander until one of us died. I had a little bet with myself as to which of us would die first. I thought it would be me. I was wrong -- I lost my bet but I won the game. Think how many more would've died if he'd been able to carry out his plan."

"Plenty of others died anyway."

"Exactly."

"And the commandos?"

"They had no regard for life -- none for their own, and you can imagine their regard for yours and mine."

"Don't you think about their families?"

"They were all career criminals. They were dead the moment they joined this adventure. My only regret is I didn't kill all of them."

"I couldn't sleep last night. I kept seeing them in my dreams. I keep hearing the screams of those in the skimmer. And the one I shot -- he begged for mercy, but I shot him. I shot him in cold blood." A tear ran down Nyk's face. "I don't know how I'm going to live with myself. I don't know how I'll return to Earth -- to a mundane little job in a dingy little office with that man on my conscience."

"Nyk, remember they killed many more in cold blood. They shot Nayva in the knee to induce her to tell them where you and I had gone. Then, they shot her in the head. If you hadn't killed him -- he'd have killed you, me and Senta. And I doubt it would've been quick, like a pellet in the head."

"You're a tougher man than I am, Andra. This is a side of you I never wanted to see. It's a side of me I never knew I had. Is it Earth? Have we been corrupted by that planet? Does everyone who has contact with that world end up tainted somehow? I'm sure Earth corrupted Zander. I think it's corrupted Seymor, at least in a way. Is anyone immune?"

“It's not Earth, Nyk. It's human nature. You and I are the same species that lives on that planet, and we think and feel and love and hate the same way. If Florans weren't every bit as human, the school that formed me would've died for lack of clients generations ago.”

“I'm no better than those Altian commandos.”

“You are the better man, Nyk -- much better. That commando wouldn't have shed a tear over you.”

“What of you? You almost paid for our adventure with your life.”

“I survived, and I'll heal. This was good for me, Nyk.”

“Good for you? How can you say that?”

“Ever since Zander took me from the school, I've had doubts.”

“Doubts? You?”

“Yes. Zander did terrible things to my self-esteem. I wondered if I had what it takes to perform the assignment for which I was trained. Now I know I do. This has strengthened me, Nyk. I don't have any desire to repeat it. What I want to do is to recover from these wounds and spend my life with what I love -- with what you showed me to love -- to study the life in the sea.”

“Would you go back to Lexal?”

“I would. I know Janna's safe. I have no idea what happened to Mykko.”

“It was remarkable. After we left the palace, Wygann's bodyguards got him into a skimmer. Vellod's forces, with Altian reinforcements, were too much for the palace guard to hold off and overran the place.

“Wygann declared martial law and formed a government-in-exile. He exhorted the Lexalese people to rise up and throw off this alien infection that had afflicted his world. The people came out in droves.

“His supporters took over the communications facility. He recruited over the vidphones, and Janna gave encouragement from her exile in Floran City. The Lexalese people were driven into a fury of outrage over the actions of Vellod.

“He formed an army of citizens armed with kitchen knives, wrenches, farm tools -- even sticks and rocks. A mob of more than a half million Lexalese citizens swarmed over the palace. Many were shot and killed, and many more were injured. Wygann himself was wounded, but he's expected to recover. His supporters found and decapitated Vellod, Vadima and his henchmen. Lexal erupted into a spontaneous celebration.

“The audacity of the Altians to attack fellow citizens turned the HL against them, and the legislature voted to authorize sending an expedition to Lexal to keep the peace. Wygann said they were not welcome.”

“He turned them down?”

“Yes. Wygann said the Lexalese need no outside help to preserve their security, and any HL forces would receive the same as Vellod got. He is scheduled to make a major address tonight, and it will be broadcast across the entire hegemony.”

Nyk stepped from the tubecar platform and took the lift to the 353rd floor apartment he had shared with Senta. He scanned his wrist and the door slid open. Senta was sitting at a vidisplay. “It’s handy you’ve kept this apartment,” he said. “I thought you planned to turn it back to Central Admin after moving the labs to Sudal.”

“I still spend time in Floran City -- meetings and all.”

“And the occasional assignation.”

“I thought we were observing a truce, Nyk.”

“Yes -- you’re right, Senta. I’m sorry.”

“How’s Andra tonight?”

“She’s doing well.”

“I’ll go over there and spend time with her.”

“You two can watch Wygann’s speech.”

Nyk sat eating a cold dinner package. The vidisplay signaled a call. He answered with his wristscan and saw Janna. “Greetings from the palace, or what’s left of it.”

“I’m glad to see you home. I’m planning on watching your husband’s address.”

“I wanted to call to thank you personally for all you did. Is Andra around?”

“Andra’s in the clinic. She sustained a rather serious wound.”

Janna looked down. “Will she be all right?”

“Yes,” Nyk replied. “She’ll make a full recovery.”

“Thank goodness. If anything had happened to her... I wouldn’t have been able to live with myself.”

“Janna -- Andra wanted me to tell you -- *Unu Deva Feti* .”

Janna closed her eyes and nodded. “So many did their duty and paid the price. We lost so many loyal staff and supporters. We had a hundred and twenty-seven members of the palace staff and guard killed in the initial assault. Daya is dead.”

“Daya? Dead?”

Janna nodded and brushed a tear aside.

“She loved you, Janna. She told me so.”

“I know she did. She was devoted to Mykko and me. So many loyal staff -- they were our friends, Nykkyo. I knew many of the casualties personally. In the liberation of the palace, we had many, many more ordinary citizens lay down their lives. The final count isn't known yet, but it's certain to be more than any of us can imagine -- or bear.”

“I'm so sorry,” Nyk said.

“No, Nykkyo. I'm the one who's sorry. I'm sorry to have embroiled you and Andra in this. You had no business getting involved. I shouldn't have agreed to Andra's plan.”

“Andra's plan?”

“To petition the HL -- it didn't work, anyway. I should've been with my people.”

“That was Andra's idea?”

“She insisted on it.”

“What would Mykko have done if you were in harm's way? What if you had fallen into Vellod's hands? What could he not have coerced your husband into doing to spare you? What of your son?”

“Of course -- you are correct, Nykkyo.”

“Having you in safekeeping freed his mind to deal with the attackers. Mykko told us how deep is his love for you. If Vellod had gotten hold of you, he'd have done anything in exchange for your safety -- anything.”

“Yes, it might have turned out very differently.”

“Might-haves don't count.”

“I do hope you'll return to Lexal, Nykkyo. We are a peace-loving people. You and I are bonded fast, friends-for-life. I will honor that bond.”

“As will I. I not only honor it -- I cherish it.”

“Thank you, Nyk. Now, I must prepare myself for the address.” The vidisplay went dark.

Nyk pressed the touch screen to access the public affairs channel. He saw the auditorium in the Lexal palace. The camera panned around the facility and he could see evidence of scorching, and holes in the roof. Mykko Wygann limped onto the stage with Janna standing beside him. She was wearing the long gown and tiara, but no belt-shield.

The camera zoomed into a tight shot of Wygann's face. “Citizens of Lexal and citizens of the

Floran Hegemony,” he began. “Tonight is a moment of triumph for our people. We have eradicated a threat to the security of our land and population.

“A band of thugs, led by a deranged and disgruntled ex-chancellor, and illegally aided by forces sanctioned by the governments of two other colonies attempted to seize control of this world. They were vanquished, not by weaponry but by the will and resolve of this planet's population.” Nyk could hear the crowd in the auditorium cheering.

Jana spoke. “In our time of distress, I, representing the legal government of the Lexal colony, petitioned the Floran High Legislature for support and relief. The High Legislature, in control of an inter-colonial strike force and equipped with state-of-the-art particle beam weapons, refused us each time. Only after the depth of commitment to our defeat made by the Altians became irrefutable did they offer to intercede.”

Wygann spoke again. “I have refused their assistance. The Lexalese people -- our own, fine people -- had by then already arisen and vanquished our oppressors. The weapons we employed were sticks and stones ... Sticks and stones! ... And our numbers and our own resolve.” Nyk heard more cheering.

Wygann raised his hand to calm the crowd. “Our victory did not come without a price. Seven thousand four hundred and eighteen peace-loving Lexalese citizens who answered our call perished in the palace assault.” The camera panned across the crowd again, who now sat in silence.

“Their families will be cared for. In addition, more than ten thousand were injured, and some will suffer the rest of their lives. The blood of our dead and wounded now stains the hands of the High Legislature delegates who turned blind eyes and deaf ears to our plight.

“Never again! Never again will the Lexalese people permit such a threat to materialize. It has become clear to me that the security of Lexal can be had by one means only. We cannot rely on alliances with others. We cannot rely on the empty promises of inter-colonial security made by the High Legislature. We must rely on ourselves -- our own, independent, colonial militia.”

The crowd cheered again.

“Consequently, I am announcing tonight that all Lexalese citizens desiring them may acquire, possess and carry firearms. This is so ordered by me under the provisions of martial law, and will remain an executive order until the colonial senate can amend our constitution to include language guaranteeing the right of the people to keep and bear arms.” The audience erupted into wild cheering.

“No, no, no!” Nyk said to himself. “We need fewer weapons, not more of them.”

The camera panned to a shot of Janna. “I would like to add my thanks,” she said, “to each and everyone who came to our aid -- for you were aiding yourselves. The times ahead will be difficult, as we grieve for the casualties and as we rebuild the capital. If we all work together for the greater good, we will return to normal -- and better life for all.”

The crowd began chanting “Jan-na! Jan-na! Jan-na!” Nyk pressed the control on the vidisplay to switch it off. He went into the apartment's spare bedroom, flopped on the bed and attempted to will himself to sleep.

Nyk walked into Andra's treatment room. Senta was sitting in a chair near the therapeutic pallet. Andra spotted Nyk, smiled and waved.

Nyk embraced and kissed her. "How are you feeling today?"

"I'm starting to be bored," she said. "I can't wait to go home."

Senta looked up at Nyk. "Did you watch Wygann's speech last night?"

"Yes. I hope he's doing the right thing, but I fear it's the wrong one."

"What are your plans?" Senta asked him.

"Tomorrow I make transit. Seymor's picking me up on the relay station. I'll take a few days to relax before going back to my grind. And, I have to pick up Suki. She'll be returning from the dig in Turkey." Senta put her hand to her mouth and suppressed laughing. "What are you giggling about?"

"I was just thinking -- what are you going to tell your Earth woman about the last few days?"

Nyk rolled his eyes. "I don't want to think about it right now."

A middle-aged man wearing an official *xarpa* walked into the treatment room. "Nykkyo, I'm Illya Kronta. Pleased to meet you in person." He turned to Andra. "Andra Baxa -- it's an honor to meet you in person, too. The reports I've heard are correct -- you are indeed a beautiful woman."

"Thank you. You're not seeing me at my best."

Kronta reached into his *xarpa*, withdrew a small package and opened it. Inside was a medal on a cord. "This is the ExoAgency Service medallion. It's awarded for service above and beyond the call of duty." He placed it around Nyk's neck.

Nyk looked at the medal, then removed it and handed it to Andra. "This really belongs to you. I can't take it with me to Earth."

"Nykkyo, please accept my deepest apologies for insisting you involve yourself in this affair. You had no business on Lexal, and I had no business insisting you to go there."

"You're forgiven, Illya. You'll be pleased to learn I have another Kyhana journal to translate."

Nykkyo stepped from the packet into the communications relay station. Inside the workroom he saw Seymor. "Welcome back, lad." Seymor opened his arms and embraced him.

"What's the weather like?" Nyk asked.

"A very pleasant June, so far."

Nyk stepped into the wardroom and selected a polo shirt, shorts and running shoes. He picked up his keys and wallet from his personal effects locker. "Well, I've learned one very important lesson from all this."

“What's that?”

“Never get involved in something outside your own domain of responsibility.”

“Come, lad, before we lose the dark.” He followed Seymor into the shuttlebay.

Sitting next to his old shuttlecar was Seymor's bubble shuttle, designed to be mistaken for a two-man helicopter -- including sham rotors that could be deployed within the atmosphere for verisimilitude in taking off and landing.

Seymor sat behind the control panel and began prelaunch diagnostics. The shuttlebay depressurized, the spacedoor opened and the shuttle lifted off the deck and headed into deep space.

Seymor initiated the subjump. The shuttle's bubble went opaque and Nyk felt the jolt. Transparency returned and Nyk looked down on the brilliant blue sphere of Earth.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I'm eager to be home,” Nyk replied. “But I'm also dreading it -- I don't know how I'll function.”

“You've been through a war, lad. I've seen enough reports of Earth wars to begin to understand.”

“I can't sleep. Every night I'm haunted by the face of the commando I killed.”

“Those commandos made a choice when they joined, lad. They knew the risks.”

Nyk shook his head. “That man had a mother, a father, perhaps siblings or a wife or loved ones.” He looked down at his hands. “I took that away.” He brushed away tears.

“I assure you none of those men would grieve for their victims.”

“Andra said the same to me. I'm not just grieving for them. I'm grieving for something that died in myself. I don't know how I can return to Suki and her parents. I certainly can't talk about it with them.”

“You can talk about it with Sukiko.”

Nyk shook his head again. “No, I don't think I can. She wouldn't understand what this means to a Floran.”

Seymor activated counter-measures and began a descent toward North America. He piloted the shuttle onto the roof of the building where he had a penthouse co-op. “Are you going to the house?”

“It's two in the morning. I don't want to disturb Suki's folks.”

“I have a spare room. Be my guest, Nyk. I'm not expecting you in the office for a few days. Take some time to think things through.”

Nyk nodded. He opened the door to the shuttle and helped Seymor attach safety tethers to lash the craft to the roof-top helipad. Seymor escorted him through sliding glass doors into the penthouse. “This is my humble abode. The guestroom's over there.”

“Good night.” Nyk walked into the guestroom, flopped on the bed and sobbed himself to sleep.

Nyk paid the cabby and climbed the steps to the house in Queens. He reached into his pocket, withdrew his house key and opened the front door. “It’s Nick, Yasuko,” he called toward the back of the house.

Suki’s mother stepped from the family room. She opened her arms and embraced him. Nyk kissed her forehead and held her tightly. “I’m happy to see you,” she said.

“I’m happy to be home.”

“Anything exciting happen on your trip?”

“Nothing worth mentioning.”

“Sukiko called several times while you were gone. She was asking for you. I told her you were called out of town unexpectedly.”

“How did she take that?”

“She said perhaps it was good for you -- to keep you preoccupied and your mind off the two of you being apart.”

“Preoccupied ... I was preoccupied, all right.”

Nyk knelt on the *tatami* mats around the dining table. Yasuko handed him a bowl. He picked up his chopsticks and poked the objects swimming in the broth.

“I made *miso* soup,” Yasuko said. “I know it’s one of your favorites.”

Nyk sipped the broth. “Yes. It’s very good.” He set the bowl down.

“How’s business?” George asked.

Nyk looked up. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“I asked how’s business. I assume you were called out of town on some field problem.”

“A field problem. That’s a good way to express it. Business is fine.”

Yasuko looked into his eyes. “Nick, is something wrong?”

He shook his head. “I’m tired. I need to lie down.” He carried his bowl to the kitchen, set it by the sink and headed up to the apartment.

Nyk opened the closet and took down a cardboard carton from the top shelf. He withdrew a polymer fiber sack, dipped his hand inside and grabbed a handful of uncut diamond crystals. He let them fall through his fingers back into the sack. Then, he kicked off his running shoes, flopped on the bed and laced his fingers behind his head.

A rap on the apartment door roused his napping. “Nick? Nick?”

“Yes George?”

“Sukiko's on the phone.”

Nyk headed down the stairs and took the handset. “Hello *korlyta* .”

“Nykkyo, so good to hear you. Mom said you were out of town.”

“Yes, I was called out on a ... special project.”

“Anything interesting happen?”

“No ... How's the dig going?”

“It went well. We're finishing up right now. In two days, Vlad and I fly home.”

“Did you find anything?”

“We found the site of a thousand-year-old village.”

“That's amazing.”

“When I was in Syria, we were excavating a five-thousand-year-old site. That's truly the cradle of our civilization.”

“It's not your civilization. You're Japanese.”

“It IS my civilization. I told you -- I'm an American.”

“See you in a couple of days, *korlyta* .”

Nyk sat in International Arrivals at JFK airport. The monitors showed Suki's flight had landed. He paced.

Some passengers began coming from Customs. Nyk looked toward the doorway. He spotted her as she came through the door, pushing a cart piled with baggage. Her eyes met his and she broke into a run. Nyk opened his arms and held her. He placed his lips to the top of her head and inhaled.

“Lord, don't do that -- my hair must be disgusting. I need a shower so badly.”

“Roses wouldn't smell sweeter.”

She lifted her arms and turned around. “Do I look any more pregnant?”

“Not much more.”

“See? We didn't miss anything. I'm home in plenty of time for birthing classes and picking out

nursery furniture.”

Suki descended the stairs from the apartment combing her wet hair. “I hadn't realized how much I missed plumbing.” She sat beside Nyk on the sofa and leaned against him. “Mmm, this feels so good.”

“Are you glad you went?”

“Oh, yes. It was great working with Vlad again.”

“Are you planning on more digs?”

“No. I was really bothered by the heat and the dust and the lack of hygiene. It didn't bother me in Syria -- but, maybe I'm getting older.” She cuddled against him. “Mom, open that suitcase. I brought gifts for everyone. I'd open it myself, but this feels too good.”

Nyk felt her body relax against his and he saw her eyes drifting shut. He scooped her up and began carrying her upstairs. “Where are you taking me?”

“To bed, little girl. You've had a busy day.”

Nyk helped her out of her robe and turned down the covers. She climbed into bed. He undressed, slid in beside her and put his arm around her.

“Oh, Nykkyo -- despite the heat and dust, it felt so good to be in the field and using my degree. This was my first opportunity to use it since I graduated. I had my doubts, and I needed this to dispel them.”

“Andra said something quite like that to me not too long ago.”

“Vlad and I had some nice long talks. There's an opening for an assistant professor in history at Pace. He convinced me to go for it. He thinks I'm a natural. Some Pace undergraduates came along for this dig and I really connected with them. I enjoyed teaching in Wisconsin, and now I'm more certain than ever it's what I want to do.”

“What about the baby? Won't that hurt your chances?”

“Vlad said if this job at Pace is the right fit, they'll work around my maternity leave. I'll call tomorrow and see if I can arrange an interview. Now, you tell me about your trip. Did Seymour send you to some meetings?”

He shook his head. “No. I was doing a favor for ... one of the Agency bosses.”

“Did you see Andra?”

He nodded. “Yes, I saw Andra.”

“Did you sleep with her?”

“No ... yes, I did sleep with her a couple times. We didn't make love. Andra didn't want us to.”

“I thought you said you have a little love in your heart for her.”

“I do.”

“Doesn't she have some for you?”

“Andra's a remarkable woman...” He stroked her arm. “She thought we shouldn't -- out of respect for you.”

“Andra said that?”

“She doesn't want us to do anything that would threaten what you and I have together.”

“Andra is remarkable. I really would like her as my friend. Do you think she'd agree?”

“Undoubtedly she would.” Nyk reached and switched off the light. He closed his eyes and relaxed, willing himself to sleep. He felt Suki drowse beside him.

He saw the commando lying on his back. The pistol was in Nyk's hand pointing at the trooper. “Mercy,” the trooper pleaded. He pressed the trigger and watched the pellet emerge from the muzzle. It traveled its trajectory in slow-motion and shattered the man's forehead.

Nyk gasped. He opened his eyes and looked around the darkened room. He closed his eyes and attempted again to will himself to sleep. He saw the commando standing before him, holding the shotgun. He jacked a shell into the chamber, pointed it at Nyk and pressed the trigger. Nyk saw the flash.

“Yaaaah!” he screamed and sat up.

“What's the matter?”

He was panting and his heart was racing. “It was a bad dream! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to disturb you.”

“It's all right -- it's all right.” She kissed him. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

He shook his head. “No. No, let's try to get back to sleep.”

Nyk sat in his office staring at the screen of his laptop computer. Seymor walked in and pulled the door closed. “Still troubled?”

“I can't keep my mind on my work. I need all my energy to keep a happy face at home. I can't sleep, I can't get anything done and I go home exhausted.”

“You haven't talked to Sukiko about it yet?”

“No. I don't know how I can.”

“Nykkyo, I'd have thought you, of all people, would've. Do you want a leave of absence?”

Nyk shook his head. “I don't know what I want. I'd give anything right now for some homeworld

drugs.”

“Gads, lad. You have to get over it.” Seymor stood at the window looking out at the New York skyline. “You don't know how worried I was -- especially after I started hearing the reports of the assault on the Lexal capital. I told Kronta I'd never forgive him if anything happened to you.” Seymor turned and looked at Nyk. “He told me he'd never forgive himself.”

“Kronta didn't shoot someone in the face. Seymor, I hope I never get my hands on another weapon. I don't know what I'd do.”

“I've read the reports, Nyk. No one is blaming you. No one thinks you did anything but the right thing.”

“I keep wondering about that poor man's family.”

“That commando wouldn't have thought twice about you or yours. Nyk, you're depressed. Let's give Grynnya a call. She can hook you up with a psychomedic who might help you.”

“I don't want to involve Grynnya.”

“As your superior I'm ordering you to. I may have to order you to the homeworld for treatment.”

Nyk held Suki and stroked her arm. “Mmm,” she said.

“Mmm?”

She took a deep breath. “Mmmmmm. It always feels so good.” She kissed his cheek.

Nyk switched off the lamp. Suki cuddled against him. “I always fall asleep so easily after making love with you. It's a great sleep aid.”

“Not from boredom, I hope.”

“Of course not. I missed you so much in Turkey. Going to bed alone was the hardest part.”

He felt her body relax and her legs twitch as she drowsed. Nyk closed his eyes. He could hear the sounds of the city through the open bedroom window. Periodically sirens wailed in the distance.

Images of Lexal and Sudal crept into his head. He concentrated on other memories -- when he first set foot on Earth, when he met Suki ... when he told her he loved her. He modulated his breathing and began to relax. His mind entered a twilight state as he let go of consciousness.

A popping noise from outside the window jarred him. He sat up, hopped off the bed and crouched beside it.

He climbed back into bed. “Nykkyo, you're shaking!”

“I heard a noise -- it startled me -- something outside. It sounded like a shot.”

“It was probably some truck backfiring. I'd have thought you've been here long enough to be

acclimated.”

“The window's open.” He stood and shut it. “There. That's better.” He climbed into bed.

“Won't we be too warm? You know, I have a little furnace inside me.”

“If you need it open, we'll leave it open.” He got out of bed and started opening the window.

“Nykkyo ... I don't care. Leave it shut if it'll help you sleep. Please -- come to bed and stay here.” He slid into bed and put his arm around her. “Now, relax and go to sleep.”

He stroked her arm. “I may need to make another trip to the homeworld.”

“Again? I thought you were permanently assigned to New York.”

“This would be for ... personal business.”

“What sort of personal business?” Nyk continued to stroke her arm. “Nykkyo, what sort of personal business?”

“It's nothing that concerns you.”

“Oh. Well, fine, then. Far be it for me to interfere with your personal business.” She rolled over and lay with her back to him.

Nyk laced his fingers behind his head. “I'm thinking of quitting the Agency.”

“And then what? Return to Floran? What of your promise?”

“No, no. I'd stay here -- go native. I'm keeping my promise. I just don't think I want to remain in the Agency.”

“But, Nykkyo, you love the Agency. What would you do otherwise?”

“I have those Floran diamonds. I could make money selling them.”

“How long would that last?”

“It could take a few years to move them into the market. I could invest the money... your father said he could help me find a position at his investment bank .. It would be better -- I'd never have to go home again.”

“Which is it? Do you want to go to Floran, or do you want never to see the place again? You're contradicting yourself.”

“It was just a thought.”

“Nykkyo, what is wrong? Sometimes I think I came home to a different person.”

“Nothing's wrong. Good night, *korlyta* .”

15 -- Medical Leave

“Nykkyo ... Nykkyo!” Nyk woke to Suki shaking him. “Aren't you getting ready for work?”

“I don't feel like going to the office today.” He rolled onto his stomach.

“Are you thinking of taking a day off? I wish you had told me. I would've planned my week at the university around it. It's going to be a nice day -- it would be great to spend some time together. You know, ever since you moved in, we've been going and doing without taking time to enjoy each other. It won't be too long and the baby will be here and he'll occupy all our time. Wouldn't it be nice to have a day all to ourselves without any structure? I could show you some of the sights. What do you think?”

“Yes, it would be really nice.”

“Maybe I should phone the university and see if I could swap my schedule around.”

“I don't feel like getting out of bed.”

“Are you sick? I thought ExoAgents had their immune systems pumped up and you never got sick.”

“No. I didn't sleep well last night.”

“Was it more bad dreams? I wish you could tell me what's been wrong with you. Is it anxiety over the baby? I've had some bad dreams about him.”

“No. It's not the baby.”

“What is it, then?”

“It's nothing.” He climbed out of bed. “I can see I'm not getting any more sleep.”

“Pardon me for disturbing you. I'll be downstairs having some coffee.”

Nyk showered, shaved and slipped into a pair of dress trousers and a white shirt. He grabbed a pre-tied necktie hanging on a hook in the closet, slipped it over his head and cinched the knot.

Suki was sitting with her mother in the kitchen. “Coffee, Nick?” Yasuko asked.

“None this morning. I'll be late.”

“You're not leaving without me, are you?” Suki asked and set her mug into the sink.

Nyk took her hand and they headed for the bus stop. He slipped his card into the farebox and took an empty seat in the middle of the bus. Suki slid into the seat beside his and leaned against him.

“Please,” she said. “If something's bothering you, let's talk about it. Maybe you could come to one of my counseling sessions. They've really helped me get my arms around some of my issues.”

“You know there's little in my background I dare discuss with a counselor. I'm working through some things. I'll be fine. I just need some space.”

“The dreaded 'I need my space.’” She pulled away from him. “Nykkyo, those counseling sessions have really helped me. Maybe you're right and you don't dare speak with one. I'll tell you this -- when you first moved in, I was sure I couldn't go through with this pregnancy by myself. Now, I'm beginning to think I could.”

“Do you want me to leave?”

“Of course not.” She choked back tears. “I want you the way you were. Nykkyo, when a woman goes away for a month and comes home to find her partner aloof, distant -- distracted -- she begins to worry. She wonders if there's ... another.”

“There's no other.”

“Something happened while I was away. I know it. You're different. Even Mom notices you're different.” He looked at the floor of the bus. “All right, don't tell me about it.”

The bus stopped at the subway station. He hustled to the platform and climbed aboard the train. Suki sat beside him and took his hand. “I'm sorry to be in your face. I never expected to return from Turkey to find you like this.”

“It has nothing to do with you or with Turkey. I have a lot on my mind and I'm working through it. Okay?”

“Okay.”

He slipped his arm around her. “I'm sorry, Suki. I'll get over it.”

She leaned against him as the train made its way toward Manhattan. “Here's Grand Central,” she said. “See you tonight.”

Nyk looked at the floor of the car as it headed west. He heard the announcement for Time Square and stepped out. He headed toward the platform for the number one train. The train arrived and he slipped into a seat. He buried his face in his hands and closed his eyes. He could feel the lurching of the train as it traveled through the tunnel.

The sensation of the train slowing for a station snapped him to attention. He looked out the coach windows. “Excuse me, which stop is this?” he asked a man standing by the door.

“Clark Street -- Brooklyn.”

Nyk stood, stepped onto the platform, climbed the steps to cross to the inbound side and waited for a train back to Manhattan.

Nyk lay in bed. He could hear Suki completing her nightly routine in the bathroom. She stepped into the bedroom. "It doesn't look like you're getting over it."

"Leave me alone."

"I'll be happy to." She picked up her pillow and headed toward the living room.

"Where are you going?"

"To sleep on the sofa."

"No, you're not." He jumped off the bed, grabbed the pillow from her and threw it on the bed. "If anyone sleeps on the sofa it's me."

She grabbed the pillow and headed to the living room. He ran to block the doorway.

"Get out of my way!" She tried to push past him. He grabbed her arm and pulled her into the bedroom.

"Get out of my way, I said!" She swung the pillow at him. He raised his arm to block it and struck Suki below her collarbone. She lost her balance and fell hard to the floor.

Nyk stared at her. "I'm so sorry. Are you all right?" Suki looked up at him. "Are you all right? Do you need to go to the hospital?" She stood and rubbed the base of her spine. "Suki, are you all right?"

"Do you care?"

"Yes, I care."

"Do you care about me or about this child I'm carrying?"

"I care about you -- and the child -- both of you."

"You've developed an odd way of showing it." She picked up her pillow and pushed past Nyk. He followed her into the living room. She threw down the pillow, lay on the sofa and pulled a crocheted afghan over her.

He knelt by her and touched her shoulder. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hit you."

"Leave me alone."

"It was an accident."

"I said leave me the fuck alone." She pulled the afghan to her chin.

Nyk headed into the bedroom, flopped on the bed and buried his face in his pillow. He turned

over and lay with his fingers laced behind his head. Sounds of traffic came through the open window and the house creaked as it cooled in the night air. He tried to will himself to sleep. He wasn't successful.

He stood, slipped on a pair of shorts and headed from the bedroom. Suki was sleeping in a ball on the sofa. He crept past her, descended the stairs and stood in the living room.

Nyk approached the golden Kyhana pendant hanging on the living room wall. He ran his finger over the disk, tracing the *katakana* symbols. His eyes were drawn upward toward another object on the wall, hanging above the pendant.

Nyk reached and took down the antique *tanto* -- the *samurai* dagger. He turned it over and over in his fingers. The simple form-following-function design appealed to him. He slipped the wooden sheath off the blade and tested the sharpness of the edge. Discussions he had with Suki and her father about the *bushido* code of the *samurai* rolled through his mind. He recalled how the weapon was an integral part of the rite of *seppuku*, the ritual suicide that could cleanse a family of dishonor.

He sat on the floor and contemplated the blade. He touched his finger to the point, then gripped the handle in his fist.

"The traditional way is to insert the blade below the left ribcage," Suki said from behind.

Nyk jumped.

"Then, draw it across to the right. Make sure the blade goes deep -- try to sever the aorta, if you can. Your blood pressure will drop to zero and you'll go into shock and lose consciousness quickly. If you miss the aorta, you're in for a slow, painful death."

She approached him. "Of course, for proper *seppuku* you'll need a *kaishakunin* who'll lop off your head with a single, clean stroke after you plunge the dagger. I don't think you'll find a swordsman so skilled here in Queens. Not on such short notice, at least." She pointed to her neck. "Another way is to sever the carotid artery. That technique was favored by women."

He slipped the sheath onto the blade. "I ... I came down here to look at the crest. This ... thing caught my eye." He handed the dagger to her and she replaced it on the wall. "I was just looking at it. I had no intention of using it -- believe me."

"I don't know what to believe." Nyk stood. "Let's go upstairs. We're going to have this out."

She followed him into the apartment. "Now, tell me what's wrong." He shook his head. "Nykkyo, tell me! Something must've happened on the homeworld. Tell me what it was."

"I can deal with it. Just give me some time. You asked me to be patient with you. Why can't you be patient with me?"

"So, you think I have a monopoly on emotional problems? I admit, I was a mess. I still am a mess, but I'm making an effort. I'm going to counseling. I resisted but I went and I'm glad I did. I've been feeling better about myself than I have in years." She wiped tears from her face. "I never expected to come home to find you in a state of meltdown. Tell me what happened."

Nyk sat on the sofa, buried his face in his hands and sobbed. "You're right. Something did happen on Floran." He shook his head. "I don't know how I'll live with myself."

She sat beside him and stroked his back. "Tell me what it was."

"It was horrible..."

"You've given me a shoulder to cry upon, now it's my turn." She took his hand and led him into the bedroom.

He lay beside her as she held him and caressed his hair. "It was so horrible ... oh, Suki..." he sobbed. "Suki, hold me ... love me..."

Nykkyo climbed the stairs to the FloranCo offices, unpacked his laptop computer and sat behind his desk. Seymor poked his head into the door. "Doing any better?" Nyk shook his head. "Have you called Grynnya?"

"No."

"Call her, Nyk. That's an order." Seymor pulled the door shut behind him.

Nyk rested his head in his hand as he stared at the screen. He closed his eyes and began weeping softly.

A beeping noise startled him. He was slumped over the laptop with his face resting on the keyboard. The clock on the display read 1 PM. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. A knock came at his office door. "Come in."

Jaquie cracked open the door. "Mr Seymor wants to see you in his office."

"Let me make a call. Tell him I'll be there in a minute."

"He wants to see you now."

Nyk stood, walked to Seymor's office and opened the door. Seymor was sitting behind his desk. "Close the door, lad. Take a seat."

"I was just about to call Grynnya," Nyk said, and he became aware of another presence in the office. He turned and saw Suki sitting in the corner.

"I'm delighted to meet your ... friend," Seymor said. "I only wish it had been under happier circumstances. Sukiko tells me you had a rough night." Nyk nodded. "I was pleased to receive her call this morning. Lad, I can't bear to see such a solid contributor in this state." He picked up the phone and pressed a button. "Now, Jacquie."

Seymor's office door opened and Jacquie handed him an envelope. He dismissed her with a nod and handed the envelope to Suki. "These are two first-class tickets to Kansas City. Your flight leaves in three hours. Sukiko has agreed to make sure you get on the plane here in New York and get off in KC. Grynnya will be awaiting you at the airport."

"You're not sending me up, are you?"

“That’s not my intention. We’ll let Grynnya be the judge of that. She has the authority to send you home, if she deems it necessary. I hope it won’t be ... You are relieved of duty and placed on medical leave. Go take care of yourself, lad. We need you.”

“Come on,” Suki said. “Jaquie’s calling a cab.”

“What about my stuff?” Seymour produced a suitcase from behind his desk. Nyk grasped it and followed Suki to the street.

“I’ve obviously never met this Grynnya - Nellie person,” Suki said. “Seymour tells me she’s helped other Agents with emotional trouble. I realize you can’t talk to a counselor here, but maybe you can talk to her.”

The cab pulled to the curb, the driver stepped out and dropped the suitcase into the trunk. Nyk climbed in beside Suki. “Airport ... La Guardia,” she said. She picked up his hand. “It’s going to come out. You might as well tell me.”

Nyk stared out the window as the cab made its way to the east side of Manhattan and pulled into the lane for the Triborough bridge. He saw the exit ramp for La Guardia.

“Which airline?” the cabby asked.

Suki opened the envelope. “United.”

The cab stopped at the terminal. Nyk reached into his pocket. “I have it,” Suki said and handed the driver some bills.

Nyk sat by the window as the aircraft hurtled down the runway. Suki looked around. “This is the first time I’ve flown first class.”

The flight attendant approached to inquire about beverages.

“No thanks.” She reached for Nyk’s hand. “Now, tell me about it.”

He bowed his head and brushed away tears. “When I was on Floran ... I ... I killed a man.”

She gasped. “Oh, my God! Are you a fugitive? When you said you’d need to travel home -- was it to face charges?” Her eyes widened. “Oh, no! Are we headed into a trap? Is Grynnya going to turn you over to your authorities? This is why you’re thinking of quitting the Agency!”

“No. Internal Affairs ruled it justified.”

“Justified?”

“I was at the Residence, defending Senta and Andra.”

“A man’s home is his castle -- on Floran as well as here. How did it happen?”

“I’d rather not go into it. Ever since, I’ve been haunted by it.”

“Why didn't you tell me?”

“You wouldn't understand. I don't know how I'll live with myself.”

“Why don't you think I'd understand?”

“I have a man's blood on my hands. You can't know what this means to a Floran. No Earth person could.”

“Do you think you put a higher value on life than I do? I don't swat flies!”

“But ... violence is part of Earth's culture. You live with it on a daily basis.”

“Me? No, Nykkyo -- I don't live with violence.” She looked directly into his eyes. “So it finally comes out -- you're prejudiced. You're a racist!”

He shook his head. “No ... no ... this has nothing to do with the fact you're Asian. I cherish your Asian heritage.”

“It has to do with my planet of origin -- you think I'm more of a savage. Nykkyo, I'm accustomed to dealing with racism. I expect a certain segment of the population to think I'm subhuman because of this.” She pointed to her eyelid. “I never expected to hear something like that from your lips! Do you really think your culture is so superior?”

Nyk gasped. “You're right! I'm so, so sorry. Forgive me. I feel so ashamed!”

She stroked his face. “It's all right. Now I know what it is -- for a while I thought it might be something with me.” She shook her head. “We've much more in common than do we differ. We're both no more nor less human than the other. I do understand.”

“I've never hurt anyone -- not intentionally at least. To have this on my conscience...” He sobbed again.

“Something like this happened to my best friend in high school -- my only friend. She was driving and hit a patch of ice in an intersection. She struck and killed a little boy. She went through what you're going through -- the unbearable guilt, losing interest in school and withdrawing from her friends.”

“How did she deal with it?”

“She didn't. One morning she didn't get up for school. Her mother went to her room and found her in bed with a plastic bag over her head. Then I felt guilty -- that I hadn't been more of a help to her.”

“I keep thinking, I might've done something differently and this wouldn't have happened.”

“What do you tell me? Might-haves don't count. Nykkyo, my friend thought things might've been different if she hadn't taken the car to go across town. I thought things might've been different if I'd been a better friend. What's done is done. You must get on with life.” She looked at him with tears in her eyes. “Nykkyo, let me be the friend to you I couldn't be to my girlfriend. I couldn't bear to lose you. I can't bear to see you like this.”

Tears ran down his face. “You do understand. I'm so sorry...” He opened his arms to her and

embraced her. "Can you forgive me? Can you love me? Do you still love me?"

"Of course I do." She caressed his hair. "Of course I love you. Would I put up with this from someone I didn't love?"

Nyk smiled, kissed her and held her again. A flight attendant approached. "Are you all right?"

"I think we will be," Suki replied. "He's been through a terrible ordeal and this is cathartic."

"I'll leave you two alone."

Nyk tightened his embrace, buried his face against her and wept. "Let it out," Suki whispered. "Let it all out, like you tell me to do." He felt her lips against the top of his head.

Nyk walked toward the terminal. Near the security checkpoint he saw Grynnya. She spotted him and waved.

"So, this is the little Kyhana woman," she said. "Nykkyo told me of you. When's it due?"

"December."

"You have my best wishes. Come -- my car's outside."

Grynnya led the way to the parking lot. She opened the door to her station wagon. "You can sit in the front," she said to Suki. "We can enjoy some girl talk." She started the engine and began backing out of her parking stall. Her eyes met Nyk's. "Look at you! Have you been crying?"

"Yes," he replied.

"He blubbered like a baby the whole flight. He needed it."

"He probably did." She pulled out of the parking lot.

"Nykkyo says you're Earthbound. How long have you been here?"

"Twenty-five years. That's twenty-five Earth years."

"What made you decide to be Earthbound?"

Grynnya smiled. "In general, Florans prefer to return to the homeworld. We find Earth a hard place to like. A few of us feel differently. Isn't that right, Nyk? I understand you've seen our world."

"What little I could see of it from a hospital window," she replied. "Every Floran I've met has been so sweet. I love your people."

Grynnya smiled again. "Your woman has good taste."

"What can you do to help Nykkyo?"

"He's suffering post-trauma depression. I don't think it should be too difficult to deal with. Did he

tell you what he's been through?"

Suki nodded. "It must've been horrible."

Grynnya pulled into a long driveway and approached her ranch-style house. She reached under the seat and retrieved a garage-door actuator. The door opened and she pulled next to her shuttlecar. "Let's have something to eat," she said. "We'll get started after dinner."

Nyk followed Grynnya to her basement. "Take your shirt off," she said. Nyk complied. She looked him over and clicked her tongue. "Your Earth woman is one lucky gal. Take a seat. Remember, you still owe me a night."

She opened a cabinet and withdrew a Floran handheld blood analyzer. "Give me your finger." He pressed his finger against a detent and winced as a lancet jabbed him. She swabbed the wound with some healing salve.

"I spoke to a psychomedic earlier about your case. Once we get some body chemistry nailed down, we'll give you some treatment. The psychomedic wants to have some regular consultations with you, but you can do that over vidphone. The most important thing is to get something into you to adjust your brain chemistry."

"Some feelgood preparation?"

Grynnya poked controls on the analyzer. "That'll take a moment to work ... No. Nyk, I've had experience with cases like yours. Not exactly like yours, but similar. You're not the first Agent to find yourself in a depression." She read the analyzer report, picked up a handheld vidisplay and poked its screen. "You've suffered emotional trauma. Your brain responds, chemically. Now, it's become used to that chemical environment -- it thinks this is the way to be. What I'm giving you will be a kick-start to get your brain chemistry back to somewhat normal. The guilt triggered this. The talk therapy will help you resolve it."

"Explain to me why I needed to remove my shirt."

"We're coming to that." She removed a kit from the cabinet and opened it. With a pair of forceps she removed a flexible strand and placed it into a cylinder. She adjusted a calibrated plunger, then attached a needle. "You're a lucky guy -- you get a green one."

"That's a rather impressive looking needle," he said.

"This is an implant that'll deliver the drug. It's a mild anti-depressant and it includes some other brain-chemistry modifiers."

"I figured it was an implant. It is a daunting looking needle."

She lifted her left arm. "Feel here." He ran his finger along the inside of her bicep.

"Your contraceptive implant capsule. I used to feel Senta's from time to time."

"It's as big around as a pencil," she replied. "Every Floran girl experiences that -- it's a sort of rite of passage into puberty. Trust me -- this needle's nothing. Lift your arm." She swabbed the inside of his

left arm with some antiseptic. Then, she removed the needle guard, held the needle flat and drove it beneath his skin. She pressed the plunger.

Nyk winced. "Ow, that hurts."

"It's coated with salve. It'll be better in a moment. I'll see if I have any candies for a good boy."

He rubbed the inside of his arm. "Now what?"

"You'll have to work out the schedule with the psychomedic. It'll be a challenge with the time difference, but I'm sure you'll manage. I'll check your blood chemistry in the morning. If it looks okay, you're free to return to New York."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"I was afraid I'd have to return to the homeworld."

Grynnya packed her equipment. "You may yet. Let's see how you make out here. That implant may make you groggy, so you should lie down. You and Sukiko can use the master bedroom. I insist."

Nyk awoke to Suki stroking his face. "*Bon'matina*," she said.

"*Bon'matina*." He looked into her eyes. "Did I ever tell you how sexy you look pregnant?" He stroked her hair and kissed her lips.

She smiled. "That sounds more normal. Did you sleep all right?"

"Fine."

"No bad dreams?"

"None I can remember."

"How do you feel? Do you still feel guilt?"

He nodded. "I hope I never stop feeling guilt for what I did. I hope I go to my death feeling guilt. If I ever stop, I'll know something inside me truly has died."

"Grynnya's medication didn't help, then."

"No, it's helping. I feel guilt, but I'm not consumed by it. I can push it aside now." He sat up. "I feel odd -- loopy. Grynnya said she'd need to do some tests this morning, maybe she needs to adjust a dose or something." He stood and Suki supported him. He slipped into a bathrobe.

"Let's try to get to the kitchen," she said as she helped him walk.

Grynnya watched him walk in. "How's the patient?"

“A bit dizzy.”

“I'll get my kit.” She returned and obtained a blood sample. “Everything is nominal. You may need some time to adjust to the implant. Take it easy for a few days.”

“You're discharging me?” he asked.

“Do you feel up to flying?”

“I suppose. I have a pile of work to get to.”

“You're taking some time to relax. Doctor's orders.”

16 -- Not TOO Angry

Nyk sat in his office reviewing his email. Seymor walked in, closed the door and sat on the desk. “How are you doing, lad? Still having bad dreams?”

“Yes, but it's getting easier. I have another vidphone appointment with the psychomedic this afternoon.”

“Do you have time for lunch at Bronfmann's?”

Nyk headed down the block to the deli. “It was truly a delight to meet Sukiko,” Seymor said. “To be speaking to someone known to be an ancestor of the man who founded our world was quite an experience.”

“I'm pleased you two hit it off.”

“She spoke to me in our native tongue. I was skeptical when you told me your plans to live with her. Now, I'm sure it's the right thing.”

“She's practically an honorary Floran.” He stepped to the deli counter and ordered a pastrami sandwich.

Seymor pointed to Nyk's order. “Giving up on vegetarianism?”

“My time on Lexal cured me of that. I've learned to savor the local delicacies. Have you ever tried *lagexeva*?”

“I can't say I have.” Seymor glanced up at him. “I received a call from Kronta. Mykko Wygann

would like to borrow you.”

“Borrow me?”

“Yes, Nyk -- he wants to use your services in negotiating with the Abo.” Nyk rolled his eyes. “Wygann has an idea to bring revenue into Lexal -- and, he'll need plenty to rebuild his colony.”

“Let me guess -- he wants to exploit the Abo for ecotourism.”

“Exactly, and he needs someone they trust and who speaks their language to negotiate terms. There are plenty of government high officials and upper-echelon bureaucrats who are tired of their annual vacations on Myataxya.”

“And, he thinks they'll pay big to rough it with the Abo? I know them, Seymor -- they want nothing more than to be left alone.”

“Wygann thinks such an arrangement would help both peoples.”

Nyk bit into his sandwich. “Wygann deserves reparations from Altia and T-Delta.”

“Speaking of which -- I was looking over some reports from the homeworld. The High Legislature has sent their strike force into its first action -- to root out the last of the independence cells on Altia. They're reconstituting the Altian legislature. The Deltans are scrambling to explain how materiel support for the Altian adventure originated on their colony. There's some serious spin control going on. If it turns out T-Delta's government sanctioned any of this -- it'll really start hitting the fan.”

“So we're seeing the first instance in our history of the HL sending a police force to control a colony.”

“It's the first time a colony's misbehaved badly enough to deserve it,” Seymor replied.

“What of Lexal?”

“The Lexalese senate has been making noises about independence. Wygann hasn't done anything to discourage such talk.”

“I've met Wygann,” Nyk said between bites of his sandwich. “He's the sort of man who's accustomed to getting his way. How would the HL react to that?”

“There's a big difference between a handful of malcontents on Altia stirring up trouble and colony-wide support for independence. It would put the HL into a terrible bind -- having to choose between the precedent of permitting a colony to go independent, or suppressing the popular will of the people. My guess is Wygann will strike a compromise. He'll propose greater autonomy for the colony while keeping ties with the hegemony.”

Nyk finished his sandwich, crumpled its paper wrapper into a ball and stuffed it into his empty soda cup. “Now, are we back to the potato crisis?”

“I understand the Agency has recruited someone they can train to be an exobotanist and send down here.”

“That'll be a few years yet,” Nyk said.

“A few Floran years. By the way, this candidate is someone you know.”

“Who do I know who'd be interested in becoming an ExoAgent?” He tossed his soda cup into the trash barrel. “We'd better get back. I have to get through those field reports.”

He accompanied Seymor to the office. Seymor put his arm around Nyk's shoulder. “Good to have you back, lad.”

Nyk stepped into his office and looked through his email. He spotted a telemessage from the Floran comm net, converted to email. He opened and read it.

Dear Nykkyo.

My treatment is going well. I've been drug-free since that time on Earth. It hasn't been easy -- some days I didn't think I'd make it, but I've kept with it. I wanted to tell you because I thought you'd be proud of me. In a few days they'll let me go live with my mother. She's now amfin to a gentleman with a house in Altropolis -- he's an assistant to a member of the new Altian senate. He has two other amfinen, but I think Mom is his favorite. He's used his influence to help me.

Now for the big news -- I've been accepted for ExoAgency training. Once I'm done with my treatment, I'll be off to the Agency training center in Floran City. I suppose you know what that's all about. In the meantime, I'm catching up on my studies and am taking a course on exobotany. I hope I'm good enough to make the cut -- so I can make use of that course.

So, the next few years of my life are mapped out. I don't know if I'll be able to keep that date, Nykkyo. I think of you and how you helped me, and I hope our paths do cross again.

Thanks for everything -- Dyppa.

Nyk stepped into Seymor's office and sat on his desk. “I received a nice note from Dyppa.”

“So did I.”

“It puts it all into perspective -- and it finally gives us closure on this Zander business.”

“How do you mean?” Seymor asked.

“Zander's plotting wrecked some lives -- but, it also turned some around. Andra has been accepted into the Sudal University Sea Research Center, and she tells me she's happier than she's been her whole life. Dyppa's turned her life around, too.”

“It wouldn't have happened without your involvement, lad.”

“Yes -- I realize that. It's all part of the path Destiny is tracing for me. This will give me some material for my afternoon vidphone call. In the meantime -- I have some items falling under my domain of

responsibility to deal with.”

Nyk carried his briefcase and walked, holding hands, with Suki from the bus stop. He climbed to the apartment, unpacked the laptop computer and plugged it in. Suki stepped into the bedroom to change her clothes.

The vidphone indicator flashed and Nyk answered the call. “Nykkyo, I’m finally home!” Andra exclaimed. “Do you want to see my scar?”

“Sure.” She lifted her tunic and showed her abdomen to the vidphone camera. “That doesn’t look bad at all. In time, it’ll hardly be noticeable.”

“Aahhn and his team did a good job. I was sure I’d end up with a second navel.”

“I like little scars. They’re testimonies to overcoming adversity. How are you feeling?”

“I’m still a bit sore, and a bit weak. But, otherwise well. And look...” She held the backs of her hands to the camera. “I’m no longer green!”

Suki came from the bedroom brushing her hair. “Who are you talking to?”

“To Andra.”

“There is Sukiko?” Andra asked. “Hello Sukiko!”

“*Saluti, Andra. Kil fet-zi?*” Suki asked as she stepped around the table and looked into the screen.

“Good. Good. I good. Home from ... *Nyk, hopitala es-ka ?*”

“Hospital.”

“*Ji-ji*. I home from hospital am.” She lifted her tunic again and pointed to her scar. “Me shot, but I okay am.”

Suki looked at Nyk. “Andra was shot?”

“Nykkyo and me ... big adventure have.” Andra looked up and waved. “Company here is. *Zi dev ziven !*”

Nyk saw Janna step beside Andra. Her hair was down and clipped into a ponytail, and she was wearing a Floran tunic without *lifxarpa* . “Hello, Nykkyo.”

He replied in his native tongue. “Janna -- good to see you.”

“Who’s that?” Suki asked. “She looks like Andra’s twin!”

“That’s Princess Janna Wygann, wife of and consort to the chancellor of the Lexal colony. Check out the crest tattoo on her arm.”

“Since the palace is being rebuilt, I decided to come here -- to get out of the way, and to help Andra recuperate. And, to give her this.” She opened a box, removed a medallion and held it to the camera. Nyk recognized the design as the Lexalese colonial emblem. “This is the Lexalese Medal of Honor -- our highest award.”

“What's she saying?” Suki asked. “I can't follow.”

“Janna was Andra's roommate in school. She came to help her convalesce and to give her that award. It's the Lexalese medal of honor -- their highest.”

“What did Andra do to deserve that?”

Janna slipped the medallion around Andra's neck. “I have one for you, too,” she said holding another box to the vidphone camera.

“Thanks, Janna.” Nyk replied.

“I've also given one to Nayva's parents.”

Suki stared into the screen. “Was that your name on the other box?” She eyed Nyk.

“This is a lovely house, Nyk. I like it very much. Mykkoin loves playing on the beach. I may take all my vacations here.”

“You're welcome any time.”

“What else is she saying?”

“She likes the house and so does Mykkoin.”

“Who's Mykkoin?”

“Her son. He's about two or three Earth years -- an adorable child.”

“Nykkyo, Andra and I are wondering -- how did you know my belt contained a shield?”

“It was too bulky for fashion alone. During our vidphone conversation when Mykkoin startled you -- you reached for it.”

“You're an excellent observer. Our arms-master assured us no one would suspect. You must come to Lexal to receive our thanks in person. Come after the palace is reconstructed.”

“Yes. To Lexal go you must,” Andra added. “*Kon li Sukiko pren-li vave?*”

“*Ji-ji!*” Janna replied.

“See? You, too, Sukiko come. To Lexal come. It very pretty world is. We now go must. Good bye, Sukiko.”

“*Bon'taka, Andra. Bon'taka Janna,*” Suki said.

“*Bon'taka Nykkyo ky Sukiko!*” Janna and Andra slipped their arms around each other and waved as the session terminated.

Suki looked at Nyk. “It's obvious you haven't told me the whole story about what happened while I was in Turkey. Who shot Andra? Why are there two of ... those women at your house now? What's Lexal? And -- what was your name doing on that medal?”

“I told you. It's one of our colony planets -- about seventeen hundred lightyears away.”

“How does Lexal fit into this?”

“Well -- Andra was visiting Janna there. Some questions about Zander's smuggling came up and Illya Kronta asked me to go there and bring Andra home.”

“You were worried about me going to Turkey, and then you traveled seventeen hundred lightyears to another planet?”

“Once I arrived on Lexal, Andra and I got mixed up in some colonial squabbling. Janna was being targeted for assassination. Andra decided to pose as her double so she and the boy could be sent to Floran.”

“Assassination target?” Suki looked at him with eyes wide. “Andra posed as her double?”

“You saw they look enough alike to be twins.”

“How did you fit into this plan?”

“Janna and Mykkoin used the two packet seats reserved for Andra and me.”

“You and Andra stayed behind -- in harm's way -- while Janna fled to safety. What happened next?”

“Then, the palace was attacked. We fled and ended up in a shoot-out at the Residence in Sudal. That's when I killed one of our attackers.”

“You killed a man in a shoot-out? With guns?”

“Andra got shot, but she'll be okay.”

Suki glowered at him. “Nykkyo, I think you had better tell me the whole story -- from the beginning.”

He swallowed hard. “The whole story from the beginning. Okay, I'll tell you the whole story...”

Nyk sat at his laptop computer. He read an incoming email message from Andra. Suki sat across the table from him with a yellow legal pad. She reviewed photographs of artifacts from Turkey and wrote on the pad.

Nyk looked up at her. “Working on your article?” She looked up at him and returned to her work. “I think I'll get a soda. Do you want one?” She glanced up for a moment, then looked down. “I

guess not..." He retrieved a can from the refrigerator, popped it open and set it on a coaster. "Oh, Andra would like you to give her a vidphone call. You know her locator code, I think."

Her eyes flicked up at him again and then back to her work.

"Suki, if you're upset with me about Vipsa, please believe me when I say I don't have any feelings for her. I found myself in that situation and I didn't have any way out. I tried to get out of it, honest. You can ask Andra -- she'll tell you."

"Nick?" He heard Yasuko calling from the kitchen downstairs.

He stood at the top of the stairs. "Yes, Yasuko?"

"Sorry to bother you. Can you reach something for me?"

Nyk descended the stairs. Yasuko handed him a lacquer tray. "It goes on the top shelf." He stood on a chair and slipped the tray into the cabinet. "Thanks. Is she still not speaking to you?" Nyk shook his head. "What did you do to earn the cold shoulder?"

"I'd rather not go into it. Let's say I'm prepared for a few nights on the sofa, if it's required."

"Use the guestroom," Yasuko said. "I insist."

"I will, if it comes to it." Nyk heard Suki's voice and laughter coming from the apartment.

"Who's she talking to?" Yasuko asked.

"A friend -- a mutual friend. Do you need anything else?"

"No, Nick. Thanks. Remember what happened last time -- use the guestroom."

"How could I forget? I promise I will, Yasuko."

Nyk climbed the stairs to the apartment. Suki had returned to her legal pad.

"Were you talking to Andra?"

She looked up at him for a long moment. "Yes -- we had a very nice conversation -- considering her grasp of English and mine of Florian."

"What did Andra say?"

"Andra thinks you're a hero -- that you saved her life, as well as Janna's and her little boy's." Suki wrote a couple sentences on the pad and picked up another photograph. "She told me a bit more about what happened on Lexal and in Sudal." She glanced up at him. "It makes my flesh crawl." She flipped over a new leaf on the legal pad. "Andra implored me not to be too angry with you." Suki scribbled a sentence. "I don't think I'm TOO angry. Do you?"

"I think you're angry enough." He sat at the laptop computer and began writing field reports. "I think it's nice you and Andra can have these conversations." He became aware of Suki glowering at him and he looked up.

A tear ran down her face. "Mom doesn't know. Neither of them know, or will ever know how close we all came to losing you. But I know -- and I will never forget!"

She stood and fetched a facial tissue. Nyk switched off the computer. "I think I'll turn in."

Nyk readied himself for bed, climbed in, locked his fingers behind his head and sighed. He could hear Suki performing her nightly toilet, and crying.

She walked into the bedroom in her short robe, closed the door and leaned against it.

He looked up at her. "Do you want me to sleep downstairs? Your mom said I could."

"No. You don't have to do that." She slipped off her robe and hung it on a hook. Nyk regarded her five-month pregnant belly. She walked to the bed, folded down the covers and lay beside him.

She looked into his face and touched his eyebrows. "Are you really..."

She pressed her finger to his lips. "Don't say anything." She ran her hand along his neck and shoulders. "This is something I need to do."

She explored his body, running her hands along his arms. Her finger touched the scar where Kyto had burned him. "This is where they administered that ordeal poison?" she asked. He nodded.

She caressed the backs of his hands and turned them over. She ran her finger along the scar on his right palm.

With her finger she traced a prominent vein up his forearm to the bend of his elbow where it dove into his flesh and out of sight. "We are such fragile beings. This vein reminded me of how close to the surface our blood flows -- and how easily it's spilled."

Nyk felt her hands caress his body and legs. She worked her way up from his feet, kissing his legs and abdomen.

Her kisses and touch grew more erotic and he became aroused. Suki knelt and straddled his hips. He placed his hands on her thighs and smoothed them along her yellow-brown skin. She picked up his hand and pressed it against her breast.

"I'm ready to forgive you for this Lexal business," she said. "I know you'll need to travel to your homeworld from time to time. I know interstellar travel is as routine to you as air travel is to me. Nonetheless, every time you go, a seed of doubt gets planted in my head -- that I'll never see you again. I worry that something -- maybe something political -- will keep you from returning home, and there'll be nothing I can do about it. Something like that has happened, once. I accept this as the price of having you in my life.

"I'm not going to tell you what you may or may not do, or what you should or should not do. We are adults, and as you say, adults have free wills. Nonetheless, there are consequences to our actions." She ran her hands across his chest.

"I'm sorry to use lovemaking this way. But, before I could forgive you, I needed to remind myself of the possible consequences if I couldn't -- that I might lose this.

“This Lexal thing was different. It seems to me you acted with a careless disregard for your own safety. Nykkyo, you gave me a promise. How could you keep that promise if you were dead? Think about what it would've been like if I had returned from Turkey to find you gone -- gone forever. It would have destroyed me. It's not just me -- there are two other people in this house who love you and need you, and a third on the way.

“On top of that, you weren't forthcoming about it. That's what hurt the most -- that you kept it from me. This is closer to an outright lie than I ever expected from you.” She wiped away a tear. “I know how gentle and peaceful your people are -- how alien violence is to you. You have helped me through difficult times, yet you denied me the chance to reciprocate. Do you understand?”

Nyk nodded.

“It's always been difficult for me to forgive and forget. I recall how effortlessly you forgave me for the Alice incident. Your ability to forgive is one of the things about you I admire most. It's why I want you as a role model in my life, in my family's lives, and especially in my baby's life. How much better the world would be if we could all forgive so easily. I strive to be more like you in that regard, but I know I have a long way to go.

“So ... as of this moment ... I forgive you.”

“You're absolutely correct.” She stroked a tear from his face. “Now, I must work on forgiving myself.”

“There's time for that. Nykkyo, there is nothing you can do or say that'll change how I love you.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing. We've joined each other heart and soul. Now let's prove how strong our love is.”