

Irsud

Diadem, Book 3

Jo Clayton

1978

V1.0. Spell-checked, but not proofread.

V2.0 Proofread

Sold into slavery, Aleytys' fate was to be worse than that of the usual slave girl's bondage. For her new owners were insectoid and she was to serve as proxy-mother to the old Queen's successor. In short, like an Earth wasp's prey, she would be both bearer and food for that which was to come. Had Aleytys been any other human, this would have been the end. But she was the wearer of the diadem, that creation of galactic science that linked her nervous system to powers of strange potency. The fate of Aleytys on Irsud is a gripping novel of an eerie world and a dread conflict, a vivid step in the saga of a heroine that *Publishers Weekly* describes as being "as tough as, and more believable and engaging than, the general run of swords-and-sorcery barbarians."

SYMBIOTE

"You saw the egg. You saw them put it in your leg. As soon as the opening was sealed the egg began changing, triggered by the blood and warmth. Within an hour it had sent out a thousand cilia through your body so that the cleverest surgeon couldn't clean them out and it dissolved itself into a hundred nodes scattered around the webbing.

"The nodes grow but not much. She develops detail but remains small so that she does not inconvenience the host. She acts as a symbiote, taking food in return for comprehensive care of the host's well-being, doing this by instinct rather than conscious decision. For a year..."

Aleytys found it hard to comprehend what he was saying. She finally registered his silence. "After a year?"

"Don't think about it. It won't help you. You've a year, a whole year..."

Jo Clayton has also written:

Diadem From The Stars

Lamarchos

Maeve

Star Hunters

Prologue

Aleytys lifted her head. Standing in the doorway of her cell-like room on board the ship, the kipu stared at her a minute then stepped back to let another nayid slide past her, white velvet tunic scraping *schupschup* against the naked metal.

Black rod advancing. A sting in her arm. Black lenticular eyes slid back from over her. The white tunic flicked out of her sight as the drug-induced fog beat her toward insensibility. She fought but the psi-damper crashed on, sending her brain shattering into fragments....

Black multi-faceted eyes glittered above her. Two nayids vague, blurred, twisting like something seen through moving water.

“She’s coming out of the drug.” Dull red antennas twitched irritably. “I thought you said it’d keep her under till we touched down on Irsud.”

“Rab’ Kipu.” The white-clad nayid fidgeted with a short black rod. “It should have. It’s what I!kuk told me to use.”

“He said she’s a healer. The psi-damper is supposed to suppress those talents. Was he wrong about that, too?”

“No. The readings say she can’t be using her psi talents.” Her short stubby antennas wobbled uncertainly. “Unless she’s incredibly powerful or....” The doctor shrugged. “I’ll trust the readings.”

“Hunh. Put her under again.”

“It’s dangerous.”

“Will it kill her?”

“No. But it might burn out her mind.”

The kipu turned away. “I don’t give a damn about her mind. That’s not what we bought her for.”

Chapter I

Sweeping in a widening gyre through the dark confusion that swirled in stained snow flurries, her awareness fluttered toward a pinpoint light, cold striking into two arms, two legs stretched out from a torso shivering naked against naked metal. Aleytys opened her eyes.

A narrow face with round insectoid eyes the size of teacups hung dizzily over her, reflecting her body back like a double dozen octagonal black mirrors. “Kipu.” Aleytys pulled at the grip on her arms, a growing irritation heating her blood. “What...” She tugged again, more sharply. “Let me go.”

The kipu smiled, shook her head, short stubby antennas twitching slightly. With an angry snort Aleytys jerked against the wiry strength of the guards’ six-fingered hands. Struggling futilely to free herself, acid tears of frustration oozing from her swollen eyes, she fought a panting grunting battle against a strength that made nonsense of her own muscles. She humped her body in one last convulsive thrust to freedom, then fell back on the metal table snarling at the faintly smiling face that coolly waited for her to exhaust herself. The nayid came back and stood looming over her.

“An exercise in futility.” The rich deep voice was insufferably complacent.

Panting helplessly, raging like a netted tars, Aleytys scowled at the delicate mask-like face of the kipu, wanting to shatter that mask. On the cool metal her hands curled into claws, fingernails clattering harshly against the steel. “Bug!” she shrieked, then spat full in the nayid’s face.

The kipu stepped back without a word and stretched out a hand. Hastily a white-clad female nayid hovering behind her thrust a square of cloth into the imperious fingers. The kipu wiped her face and dropped the cloth without watching where it fell in an unconscious arrogance that struck a chill through the heat in Aleytys’ blood.

Aleytys shook her head, tossing her red hair, cooled to wariness. Her breathing slowed and she was abruptly conscious of a fuzziness clogging her mind. She shook her head again trying to shake the fog out.

The nayid’s antennas twitched as a faint flush briefly tinged her parchment cheeks. She stared briefly at Aleytys, then shifted her gaze, refusing to look at her captive. Speaking to another nayid, one out of Aleytys’ arc of vision, she said brusquely, “The psi-damper?”

“Functioning, rab’ Kipu.” The cool monotone seemed to sooth the kipu’s ragged emotions. Her face smoothed out, the fault supercilious smile curled her thin lips, her hands came together and brushed lightly palm against palm in a soft papery whisper.

“Good.” The word oozed satisfaction, sending a tiny shock of remembered response shivering down Aleytys’ body. Antennas swaying in a gentle rhythm that underscored the renewed arrogance in her stance, the kipu spoke softly to Aleytys. “According to the ardu-epesh I!kuk, your intelligence measures superior.” The deep voice turned coldly precise. “I suggest you apply that intelligence to your present situation. I suggest you stop these futile gestures, ardana.” Aleytys stiffened. “I’m not a slave. Don’t call me a slave.”

“Ardana,” the kipu repeated calmly. “Ardana.” Aleytys stared at her. After a moment her body relaxed. The kipu nodded slightly and the guards let the captive move by herself for the first time.

“Show her to me.” The hoarse bass voice thrummed from behind gauzy curtains behind the kipu. Aleytys pushed herself up and swung her legs over the edge of the metal table. For a fleeting moment her brain tilted dizzily. She sucked in a deep breath and watched curiously.

The curtains fell from a centerpoint on the ceiling, pinned there by a gilt bee-like insect with wings and legs spread against the center of a floral mosaic coiling overhead in a mass of elaborate convolutions. As the kipu swept the lacy blue-green gauze back from the elaborate bed, Aleytys gaped at the wizened and bedizened old nayid who radiated a vivid force that somehow dominated the whole room. Even the arrogant kipu was diminished by the lumpy decrepit figure lying among a ridiculous froth of lace and frills. The old queen poked a bony elbow into the heap of pillows and grunted herself a trifle higher, her eyes fixed avidly on Aleytys. Her free hand like a claw, she beckoned the kipu closer, the two-score bangled bracelets crowding up her skinny arm clattering like an Oshanti whore’s come-on beads.

“That?” The voice boomed in Aleytys’ ears. “Why?” She moved restlessly, the sagging flesh on her neck trembling with the palsy of extreme age. “It’s female?”

“Mammalian.” The kipu pulled her six-fingered hand—long flexible digits with the fragile beauty of a lizard’s fore-paws—in a fluid gesture across her flat spare thorax, the corners of her mouth tightening a fraction in disgust; her antennae twitched in a few sharp jerks. Before she spoke her long delicate face smoothed into immobility. “The ardu-epesh I!kuk guaranteed her genetic potency—so much that to control her I!kuk implanted a psi-damper to nullify her talents. Forget what she looks like. The egg will take the gifts and leave the rest.”

“Umph!” The round black eyes the size of teacups moved over Aleytys’ naked body in cold insulting appraisal.

Aleytys tightened the grip of her hands on the curved edge of the table, remembering eyes coldly measuring and assessing her as she stood in a forcecube on cold stone block in the slave market of I!kwasset. She shifted uneasily on the cold surface, wondering what the kipu was talking about with a sick foreboding that she wouldn’t like what was coming. Irritably, she jerked her shoulders. The psi-damper planted below her left shoulder blade itched furiously as she fought against the mind trap. She closed her eyes, shutting out the shifting groups of nayids, and concentrated on the inside of her head.

“Where are you?” She hurled the words into the darkness thick and musty at the back of her mind. “I know you’re there.” The psi-damper was a torment of small irritations, a fuzziness that sent her mind on veering orbits so that it was hard to hold onto—the logical progression of thought. Concentration was a physical effort that left her shaking. “Dammit, you weren’t so shy before.”

A pain-filled yowl jerked her head up. The bed was lost in a sea of white tunics circling in panic around a lanky nayid with a cold dignified face and gray bars running through the short black hair coiling tight to her narrow skull. A few quiet words brought order, sending the superfluous females to their posts.

As the crowd thinned, Aleytys saw the old queen collapsed on the pillows, bubbles forming at the corners of her mouth and slipping in a trickle of drool across her slack jaw. Thin wrinkled double eyelids folded up. As Aleytys watched, she shriveled visibly. The blazing personality that had dominated the busy room moments before was eroding into a kind of terminal decrepitude. The doctor bent over her, then glanced up impatiently at the nayid next to her.

With her soft spotless tunic flowing into agitated folds, the attendant bustled around the bed, jerked the curtains free, and swirled them shut, leaving the dying ancient in privacy.

The kipu snapped her fingers. Three spindle-shanked horse-faced amazons in loose-fitting red tunics popped from behind the bed and advanced on Aleytys. She slid off the table and backed cautiously away.

Stepping quickly to her side the kipu closed long slender fingers on her shoulder. "Return to the table, Ardana," she said coldly.

The fingers were dry and slightly rough. Aleytys could feel the hard articulation of her finger bones through the skin. She jerked away, tossing her hair out of her face. The wariness abruptly burnt out of her in a wild flare of rebellion. Like a tars on the prowl she shot rapid glances around the room, animal-intent on an impossible escape.

The white nayids clustering around the bed ignored her as if she didn't exist, but she kept a cautious distance from the red ones, retreating from the circling red tunics as the nayid guards stared at her out of their round black eyes, right hands wrapped around black rods thrust through the wide black belts hugging their crimson tunics to their thin elongated bodies. Past the irregular circle she saw an archway partially masked by a blue-green tapestry. Run, her muddled brain drove at her. Run.

"Ardana."

"Don't call me that," Aleytys burst out, momentarily diverted from her purpose. Impossible to hold two thoughts in her head. She jerked away from the kipu and darted toward the archway, diving toward the space between two guards. Long fingers caught hold of her hair and swung her effortlessly back with a terrifying display of strength. Aleytys slumped to her knees, breathing hard as the grip on her hair loosened, tears of pain oozing from her eyes.

"Calm yourself, slave."

Aleytys crouched on the floor looking up at the kipu past tangled strands of hair. "No. I won't be a slave."

"Slave," the kipu repeated, her antennas twitching slightly. "Bought and paid for. You waste your energy and my time fooling yourself. Your condition is a fact, to be neither denied nor affirmed. I own you. You're meat. If I choose to feed you, you eat. If not, you starve. If I choose to have you carved into meat for my sabutim you will be meat. Don't tell me about your life before. That's over. Forget it. You're meat. Bought and paid for. Accept that."

Aleytys stared at her for a minute. Quietly she stood up, pushing straying tendrils of hair behind her ears. The psi-damper itched in her back and her brain felt like hot mush and her nakedness was a vulnerability hard to ignore. She pushed the confusing betraying anger way, way down and fought to clear her head. "Never. Bought? You wasted your money."

"No. For your present comfort, slave..." The kipu flicked a long forefinger at the two guards behind Aleytys. "Come back to the table."

Aleytys glanced over her shoulder at the narrow stolid faces. The damper cut off her empathic reach and left her feeling worse than blinded. She faced the kipu again. "I could give you some trouble."

"Bring her." The kipu turned her back and faced the bed, dismissing anything Aleytys could possibly do as a minor pinprick not worth bothering about.

Aleytys watched her walk away and swore to herself that somehow... somehow... she'd puncture that arrogance.

Long cold fingers closed around her arms. Helpless as a naughty child, she let them push her back to the polished metal table. Smoothly, with scarcely a break in their movements, they bent and lifted her, stretching her out on the surface and holding her quiet.

A white nayid took hold of Aleytys' head, turning it away from her, her strength making nonsense of the long neck muscles. Aleytys felt a cold spot on her spine, round like the end of one of the rods, then all sensation in her body vanished. She cried out in sudden panic.

"It's only to stop pain." The nayid's voice was calm and precise as a machine. And oddly reassuring. She seemed so certain and matter-of-fact about what was happening.

"What are you doing?" Aleytys whispered. "Why..."

The kipu's face swam into her limited range of vision. "Calm yourself, slave," she said coolly. She rubbed a strand of Aleytys' hair between her thumb and forefinger.

"Red..." Dropping the hair she stepped back and spoke with a curious remote quality in her resonant voice. "You were purchased for a high and noble purpose. You shall live in luxury, your wishes demands on us until our purpose is fulfilled. Accept it, for your own comfort." She broke off and moved farther away as a series of hoarse shrieks rose in a crescendo of pain, then cut off abruptly.

A motion at the edge of her field of vision distracted Aleytys. At the cost of aching neck muscles she forced her head up and looked along her body. The middle nayid, a lanky female, bone-thin with a severe sharp-angled face, drew a sponge over her thigh, leaving a pale blue stain behind. Repeatedly the nayid dipped the sponge in a basin held by a second white nayid and smoothed the viscous liquid over the pale amber skin of Aleytys' left thigh.

Aleytys dropped her head back a moment to rest her trembling muscles then lifted it again as she heard a soft meaty slap. The tall thin nayid was peeling back the skin on the thigh while the basin holder had ditched her basin and was controlling blood flow with a quivering green jelly. When the skin was clamped back, the surgeon sliced deeper, cutting neatly between the big front muscles until she'd opened a cavity the size of a fist. Quickly, efficiently the cutter propped the cavity open with a pair of evil-looking spreaders, then stood back, patiently waiting.

The doctor with the gray-barred hair came from the bed, her hands cupped reverently around a rubbery ovoid, a grayish-green object with concentric ochre stripes.

Sick with horror, Aleytys watched the cold-faced surgeon lower the ovoid into the hole in her thigh. When she had it settled to her satisfaction, the nayid removed the clamps and eased the flesh back into place. Gently, with the same care she had shown with the egg, she pulled the flap of skin into place and ran a buzzing rod along the wound to seal the cut. With a quick sure twist of her long supple fingers she altered the setting on the rod and placed it against Aleytys' temple.

Aleytys gasped and spun off into darkness.

Chapter II

Groaning as pain pulsed around the back of her skull, Aleytys opened bleary eyes and cautiously moved her head. Her body ached so that she could barely gather enough energy to think through the fog in her brain, while the damper in her back triggered waves of itching. She moved restlessly, rustling the crisp sheets, a small pleasant sound that soothed her aching spirit.

Lacy, elaborately frilled pillows billowed up around her head. Impatiently she shoved against the mattress, pushing her aching body erect. She threw the covers off her legs and stared unhappily at her thigh, her fingers tracing the fine red line around the shrinking lump. "Damn."

Floundering to the edge of the bed she hauled the cobwebby lace curtains back and slid onto her feet, wincing as her skin touched the cold tiles. She stumbled to the center of the room and stared around.

Blue-green shrouds falling from a gilt bee-like insect splayed out against the ceiling. She spun around. In the narrowest wall of the wedge-shaped room, an arch closed by a heavy blue-green tapestry. That room. The old queen's bed. She could see once again the bulky decrepit figure of the ancient nayid... aaaagh!

Moving stiffly to the arch she pulled the tapestry aside.

The guard outside stepped in front of her, her blue-green tunic rippling softly about her stringy form. When Aleytys tried to move past her, the guard shook her head and pushed her gently but inexorably back into the room. The tapestry dropped between them with a heavy finality.

The damper still jumbled her thoughts but her mind was adjusting rapidly to a hippity-hop style of thinking. "Well." She rubbed her queasy stomach. "So I sleep in that hag's bed." She shivered and looked around.

The room was a blunted wedge with the long side walls covered by ornate tapestries suspended on rings from long polished poles. Imposed on an intricate and lovely design of leaves and flowers woven of earth tones with accents of rose and violet, a line of rampant male figures cavorted through a wild erotic dance, their lurid, explicitly sexual forms contrasting grotesquely with the delicacy of the background.

Aleytys examined the figures with interest, her body heating a little as she noted the genital similarity to the men of her own species. Glancing over her shoulders at the tapestries, she moved to the wide end of the room behind the head of the bed.

When she pulled the tapestry out away from the wall she discovered that it was apparently a single sheet of glass with a greenish blue tinge that was cool and restful on the eyes. Outside she could see a walled garden. Neatly clipped grass. Gently rolling ground. Patches of flowers. Short, flat, slender umbrella-like trees... mimosoids... with delicate lacy foliage... leaning gracefully over a small lively stream... She gazed hungrily at the crystalline water leaping down the miniature waterfalls, dancing around scattered boulders, passing under the heavy, nearly horizontal limb of a rugged live oak. Her need for flowing water was almost as demanding as for hunger or sex. She felt along the glass, searching for a way into the garden. "Hieno-nainen."

Aleytys jumped and wheeled, startled out of her concentration on the stream. She moved hastily around the bed and stopped in front of a small brown figure that knelt, eyes fixed servilely on the floor, a pile of clean sheets and towels heaped neatly beside her. The diminutive female had neatly braided dark brown hair tied in loops over small ears, light brown skin flushing pink on the cheekbones, a coarse brown wrapper pulled tight emphasizing a dainty waistline with an elaborately embroidered sash-belt.

Abruptly conscious of her nudity, Aleytys pulled the lacy cover off the bed and wrapped it around her. "Who are you?" she demanded.

"Aamunkoitta, hieno-nainen. I am hiiri assigned to care for these rooms."

"You're not a nayid." Aleytys eyed the full breasts thrusting against the wrapper. "You're mammal like me."

The brown face flushed. Full lips thinned for an instant then the stolid face mask slid back. "I am hiiri, hieno-nainen."

Aleytys tucked the cover absently around her. She hates them, she thought. I suppose she's a slave too. I wonder...

Damn! If I could just....She wriggled her shoulders as the itch intensified and her thoughts veered wildly until she disciplined her mind and seized hold of a remembered word. "Rooms?"

"Hieno-nainen?"

"There are other rooms here?"

"Yes, hieno-nainen."

"Hah! Aleytys glared at the petite woman. "If you think that stupid act is fooling me...."

The hiiri gaped at her. "Hieno-nainen?"

Rubbing a palm that itched to slap the tiresome little creature, Aleytys sighed. "Never mind. Show me the other rooms."

The hiiri rose gracefully to her feet

"Wait." Aleytys hitched up the trailing ends of the cover. "Where can I get something to wear?"

Silently the hiiri glided to the far side of the room. She reached up, got a handful of the tapestry and pulled it to one side, the rings clattering along the wooden pole. As she tugged more strongly, a portion of the hanging broke away from the rest, uncovering a section of wall pierced by another of the arches.

The hiiri reached up and spread her hand across a milky white square. A light came on, illuminating a small inner room.

Aleytys stepped on a trailing end of the bedspread and nearly strangled herself. Muttering impatiently she caught up a few more folds and padded cautiously through the archway.

Empty shelves, rods, hooks... the old queen's clothing had been swept away except for a few shapeless tent-like garments hanging from hooks beside the arch. The hiiri slipped past her and frowned thoughtfully at these. She lifted a shifting mass of blue-green from its hook. "There is this."

She shook the folds briskly and held the garment out to Aleytys. "The kipu must have put these here for you. If you want more, see that one, hieno-nainen."

Aleytys sighed. After a minute's struggle she got the multiple layers of the shimmering blue-green silk over her head and slid it down over her body, letting the cover drop to the floor. She settled the brooches on her shoulders and shook her body so that the silken layers of material slid across her skin and settled into graceful folds falling to her ankles. She felt immediately less vulnerable and turned to the hiiri with a new sureness in her movements. "The other rooms?"

The hiiri bowed her head and left the closet. Farther along the wall she pulled the tapestry apart again, touched the light switch and waited for Aleytys to come up with her.

"This room is for your body's needs, hieno-nainen."

A huge sunken tub took up half the room. An elaborate throne-like commode made of beaten gold studded with jewels had a matching fur-cushioned footstool. Aleytys blinked, then giggled. "My god," she said, voice vibrating with awe, "I've never seen anything like this."

"Yes, hieno-nainen." The hiiri's bland colorless voice sucked away Aleytys' sudden high spirits. She looked at the small stolid face and sighed. The hiiri lowered her eyes meekly and moved away toward the other side of the room, passing behind the big bed close to the glass wall.

"Wait." Aleytys ran lightly up to her, stopping in front of the clear glass. "The other rooms can wait. Is there any way out there?" She splayed her hand out on the glass and looked hungrily at the sunlit garden.

"Yes, hieno-nainen." The hiiri pulled the tapestry farther aside, baring a section of glass with two milky squares set in it. She tapped her fingers on the topmost square and stepped back as a section of the glass slid rapidly and silently upward, "To close," she said colorlessly, "tap there twice." She pointed to the lower square, now more than a meter beyond her reach. Aleytys brushed past her and stepped onto the grass.

The sun was the wrong color, an egg-yolk yellow instead of red or blue, and it was single in the sky. She looked up, shaking her hair out, letting the gentle breeze play through it.

The grass was cool under her feet. It felt right, though the green was not so dark as she remembered. Even the water looked lighter, brighter under this yellow sun. Again she felt the abrupt disorientation as her body reacted to the wrongness of the feel. She felt too light, too cool, too... it was hard for her to bring to consciousness all the things her body found wrong here. But the smells of the green growing things were just enough the same... She closed her eyes and took a few steps farther onto the grass, letting the feel and the smell take her back in memory to the valley where she'd spent her growing up time. For a deep aching moment she smelled the sharp clean penetrating fragrance of the horans that grew along the Raqsidan, heard the laughing roar of that mountain river. She sank to her knees, tears of aching homesickness running unchecked down her cheeks.

She jumped to her feet, ran back into the building, stretched up, tapped the square, stepped hastily back as the glass door slid down. Shivering slightly she twitched the tapestry back over the glass, shutting out the disturbing view of green and lovely garden.

The hiiri was gone. The bed was made up, the cover restored, the pillow slip a crisp unwrinkled white.

Aleytys walked along the wall, poking gloomily at the tapestry, her mouth twisted into a self-mocking curve as she studied a prancing male figure with organ impressively erect. After a minute she turned away, clamping down the disturbing memories that threatened to send her spinning futilely down roads she couldn't retrace.

She paced nervously around the bed, feeling disoriented and purposeless. An inchoate urge to do something, anything, ate at her. The damper itched in her back and scrambled her thoughts so that, without some definite point to claim her attention, she grew dizzy with the erratic leaps her mind took. She clenched her fists and banged them against the glass wall, crying out in her anger and frustration, wanting to hurt something, to strike out at something, and at the same time being appalled at the rage and nervous irritation that blew her soul to shreds. She pushed away from the wall and flung herself around the bed, determined to go out the arch, guard or no guard.

The nayid male standing at the foot of the bed smiled at her and bowed gracefully.

Aleytys halted and stared at him, for a long horrible moment incapable of any kind of response to her presence.

“Parakhuzerim,” he said calmly, his voice lighter, more musical than a female nayid’s. “May I serve you in any way?” The words were formal, but as he straightened he smiled at her again and his long feathery antennas swayed gently, sending the blues, greens, purples, reds rippling in iridescent giddiness across the crowning peacock eyes.

“What are you?” To Aleytys her voice sounded fumbling, mushy. She closed her eyes and clasped her shaking hands behind her. “How’d you get in here?” Her voice rose shrilly on the last word, shocking her with its touch of hysteria. She swallowed and said more evenly, “Can anyone who wants walk in on me?” A muscle beside her mouth began to twitch.

“I am... Migru.”

She heard the slight hesitation. Although the alien faces were still too strange for her to read, the quick jerk of his antennas and the flush on his pale cheeks suggested a certain dislike for the name. I don’t blame him, she thought. To be named Darling. How sickening... Damn, if I just... The damper kicked into high, sending her mind on a sickening spiral into chaos. It was a minute before she could see again.

Migru hitched up his short pleated kilt of blue-green silk and waited for her to say something.

“Migru,” she repeated, slowly regaining control of her mind and body. “Why—”

He bowed his head, the smile still curving beautifully chiseled lips. “I thought that you might perhaps have questions when you woke. A strange place. Strange things happening. I knew the kipu wouldn’t think of this, so...” He spread out his hands.

Aleytys lifted a hand to her head. “That was kind.” She looked around vaguely. “Sit down... yes... let’s sit down and talk... talk...” She plucked at the gauzy curtains with fumbling uncertainty. “Sit down...” She sank down on the end of the bed.

The nayid male stood quiet a moment, his mouth hardening for an instant. Then he walked quietly to her and settled on the bed beside her.

Aleytys shivered, his closeness waking confusing emotions in her. So long since a man sat beside her. Touched her. Held her. Loved her...

“Is something wrong, Parakhuzerim?” He frowned, reached out to touch her, then hesitated, fingers a thread above her skin. “Are you ill?”

Rubbing her fingertips along the blue-green material covering her thighs, she said cautiously, “This is the old queen’s room, isn’t it.”

He caught her trembling fingers in a warm gentle hold. “The queen is dead, the queen lives.”

“Why did they put me in her bed?” She let her hand lie quietly in his, a hard cold knot under her heart melting slowly at the friendly contact. “I’m no nayid.”

“In a way.” He hesitated as if reluctant to go on.

“I don’t understand.” But the muscles in her left thigh twitched painfully.

He dropped her hand and traced the outline of the wound. She could feel the heat of his fingertips through the silk. “You’re Parakhuzerim,” he said quietly. “The guardian of the seed.”

She shuddered. The surge of rootless anxiety sickened her, woke a need to run. Far and fast “Tell me,” she said urgently.

He hesitated. Then he cupped a hand over one of her breasts. “You’re mammal. Your young are born out of your body.”

At this unexpected touch her body responded explosively. A light film of sweat popped out all over her skin and an empty aching filled her, then his words jolted her out of her forgetting. Born. She mouthed the word. Born. Gritted her teeth, clamped her eyes shut. Sharl. My baby. My son. She lifted her hands and let them fall back. Empty. There was nothing for them to hold.

Migru ran his fingers lightly over her contorted face. Wordlessly he stroked the taut quivering muscles. After a minute he lay back on the bed, pulling her down beside him. Even in her misery she felt his gentle fingers tracing lines of heat on her body. Her body surprised her once again with its eager response to the caresses.

She pressed herself against him, whispering urgently... please... please... please... Migru... I need... But she couldn’t say the words.... He was a different species. In the terrible aching need of her body there was an embarrassment, a marrow-of-the-bone xenophobia that startled her immensely but locked her mouth.

But Migru seemed to know. His caresses grew more explicitly sexual. Aleytys shut her eyes and let her hungry body take control.

Chapter III

Gloriously relaxed, drifting in a semi-aware euphoria, Aleytys sighed and stretched. A single note chimed briefly, a pure lovely sound that broke the subdued night silence of the dark room. Startled, Aleytys probed at her head with trembling fingers. The smooth metallic threads of the diadem hadn’t materialized but she heard a second ripple of notes scarcely louder than a whisper.

She pulled her hand down and lay staring up at curtains more guessed than seen. Beside her she could hear the soft inhalations of the sleeping nayid. Impulsively she touched the smooth skin on his shoulder, the feel of the warm flesh confirming the peace within her. She closed her eyes. “Well,” she breathed.

“Here you are again.” Amusement and irritation were almost equally mixed in her. “Where were you when I needed you?”

An image formed behind her eyes. She found herself looking into a polished white room with stainless steel accents. Several nonhumans wrapped in spotless white milled around a woman’s nude body stretched out face down on a narrow steel table. Her skin was a pale gold that seemed to glow in the sourceless light. Her red hair flowed in a gleaming waterfall over the end of the table.

The gray wrinkled sophont lifted a rubbery tentacle, a scalpel sparking silver highlights as he slit open the skin just below her left shoulder blade. A second tentacle delicately inserted a small disc into the wound. Abruptly her head reeled with vertigo as the disc swelled until it filled her consciousness. The scene clicked off into blackness, then on again with the disc vibrating behind her eyes, again blackness, disc, blackness. . . .

“Yes, yes. I understand.”

A ripple of sound like a laugh answered her. Then the scene changed. A blind groping through blackness. This way. That. Working a tortuous road through blackness toward a light intuited rather than seen. A bright flash. Then, at last, a relaxation into a narrow freedom.

“Ah. Can you help me now?”

A feeling like a mental shrug. Once again the image of the disc floated in the forefront of her mind. Strong interrogation.

A hand touched her shoulder. She opened her eyes. Mouth pinched with worry, antennas swaying gently, Migru bent anxiously over her.

She smiled. Reaching up she caressed his cheek with her fingertips. “Don’t fuss, Migru.”

“Not Migru.” His face twisted with distaste. “My mother named me Burash. The other. . . the old queen. . . you understand?”

“Burash. . .” she murmured drowsily.

He lay back and began touching her again with gentle affection. “Growing up. . . mmmmh. . . it was a good time. For you?”

She nodded.

“I had two sibs. . . most of the time nayids come in threes, narami. We were inseparable. Like a sun with two shadows, mother said. Kanuu led. Being female she was always the strongest, mind and body. Gammal. . . he had a mind like wildfire—” He sighed.

Something kept nudging at Aleytys as she lay warm and content, listening to him ramble on about his childhood. Lazily she fished for the elusive thought.

“Burash!”

He broke off and pushed up onto his elbow. “What is it?”

“You never finished telling me about the queen egg.”

“Leyta.” His voice was low, his mouth curled taut, unhappy. “Why not just forget it?”

“No.” In her head she felt the subtle agreement of the diadem. She wrinkled her nose, suddenly realizing that her orgasms had been shared by the rider in her skull. Then she shrugged off the brief distaste and returned to the probing. “I need to know. I need all I can learn about this place.”

Burash pulled away from her to sit with his back against the headboard of the bed. “This won’t help you.”

“Tell me.”

“Your people and mine,” he began slowly. She could see his graceful antennas sweeping back and forth like a marvelous metronome. “We are alike in the way we manage impregnation of the female.”

Aleytys chuckled. “Yes.”

He tapped her nose. The strange huge eyes skewed her perception of his expressions so that she was never sure just what they meant, but she felt warm and protected. “After coupling,” he went on hesitantly, “our females walk another road. When the female is made fertile...” His hand reached out and closed around her fingers. “She produces eggs, three usually, and implants them in the flesh of a living food source. In these days this is usually a specially raised immeru.” He said thoughtfully, “That’s a long-haired beast with long curving horns, a graceful and loving creature.” He smiled reminiscently. “Gentle and loving. In our early days as a thinking species she would use the fertilizing male as host.” He grinned and bent over her, brushing the hair from her startled face. “The change, needless to say, has my enthusiastic approval.” He chuckled. “Turn on your stomach, narami. Let me relax you a little.”

She felt a little chill down deep, but turned over. “Go on,” she muttered, her voice disappearing into the pillow.

He began smoothing his hands over the taut muscles in her back, then started working up and down her shoulders, hitting the muscles with a series of light taps. After a minute he began talking again. “The queen is different. I was born on Sep. That’s a big island about a hundred stadia off the coast of this land. A thousand years ago all the nayids there were lived on Sep.”

She stirred impatiently. “The egg.”

“Yes.” He laughed briefly, unhappily, and tapped her on the buttocks. “A little patience, narami. Listen.” He began working on her spine. “All my people by this time had changed, male and female able to exist in amity. All but the queen. She was different. Mortal like us all, but somehow...” He worked quietly for a moment on her neck and shoulders. “Somehow her last egg was the old one born over, memories and personality intact.”

“Huh?” She lifted her head and gaped at him.

He pressed her head back down on the pillow. “Just listen, Leyta. Relax and let it flow over you.” He smoothed his hands rhythmically up and down the length of her back. “The queen egg has another peculiarity. As soon as it’s implanted, the grub absorbs the genetic potencies of her host, giving her, in effect, three parents.”

Aleytys blinked, her eyelashes scraping across the quilts. “Why me?” she murmured.

Unhurriedly he smoothed her hair back from her face and neck, touching the thick shining strands with firm gentle fingers. “My people finally rebelled and drove her from the island along with her most fanatical followers. We couldn’t manage to give her the death she deserved but we drove her from our island. She came here, built the city, took the hiiri, met the starfolk and here we all are.”

Aleytys turned over and scanned his face. “Why me?”

“She needed choice meat.”

Aleytys gasped.

“You asked,” he said tautly. “These are difficult times for these river pigs. That jealous old bitch slaughtered any of her daughters who showed the least bit of strength or intelligence. When she knew the next egg would be the last, would be the carrier of her essence, she sent the kipu searching for a special host. And the kipu found you. Strong, young, empath, healer, linguist, psi-potent to an almost immeasurable degree. The perfect host.”

Aleytys shuddered. “How do you know?”

He stroked a finger down her cheek, then curled a strand of hair around his wrist. “A harem’s a hotbed of gossip.”

“Harem?”

“The queen’s bedmates, narami.”

She twitched her nose. “How could you?”

“I live how I must, narami. And there are drugs.”

“And me?”

“A joy and a delight.” He bent down and kissed her lightly, then pulled the sheets and cover back over her. “You’re tired. Why don’t you go back to sleep, narami.”

“Not yet.” She pulled him down beside her. “Tell me the rest, Burash.”

He slid his arm around her shoulders and held her against him. “It isn’t good telling, Leyta.”

She said nothing.

After a minute he began again. “You saw the egg. You saw them put it in your leg. As soon as the opening was sealed the egg began changing, triggered by the blood and warmth. Within an hour it had sent out a thousand thousand cilia through your body so that even the cleverest surgeon couldn’t clean them out and it dissolved itself into a hundred nodes scattered around the webbing.” He spoke very rapidly, sliding the words out with a desperate casualness as though he were not pronouncing sentence on her.

“The nodes grow but not much.” His voice lowered so she had to strain to hear it. “She develops detail

but remains small so that she does not inconvenience the host. She acts as a symbiote, taking food in return for comprehensive care of the host's well-being, doing this by instinct rather than conscious decision. For a year..." He stopped again and pulled her tight against him.

Aleytys found it hard to comprehend what he was saying. The words dropped like rain onto her head, cool and quiet. She finally registered his silence. "After a year?"

He sighed. "She reels in the cilia and reassembles herself." He went silent again, then began speaking faster than ever so that some of the words escaped her entirely. "Changes... and goes... dormant... one week... transforms... larva... paralyzes the host... eats her way free... eats prodigiously... consumes... flesh, blood, bones... doubles in size hourly... half adult size when... host body gone... body alters radically... casts off old skin... emerges... young nayid queen... leaving the patterns of instinct for the life of an intelligent being."

Aleytys pulled back and stared at him, her tongue slipping around dry lips.

He caressed her face with fingertips like butterfly wings. "Don't, narami, don't think about it. I told you it wouldn't help you. You've a year, a whole year. There'll be no pain. You'll never feel any pain." He held her shuddering body in tender arms, rubbing his hands up and down her back until her cold skin warmed and the knotted muscles softened. "Do what you want, Leyta. Don't waste your spirit fighting what you can't change. It's done. Go to sleep now, my soft soft narami, go to sleep. You'll feel stronger, wiser tomorrow, tomorrow... tomorrow." He held her close until she sank into a heavy exhausted sleep.

Chapter IV

Aleytys scuffed through the aromatic grass, staring up at the yellow sun that hung solitary and strange over the eastern wall of the enclosed garden. Each time she saw that pale yellow splash on the pallor of the blue-green sky, it shook her to remember the incomprehensible distance separating her from the high mountain valley where she was born. At the ancient live oak she jumped lightly onto the low arching branch that curved out over the stream and ran along it to a secondary branch thrusting up at a wide angle at the highest point of the arch.

Clinging with one hand to this branch she lowered herself onto the rough bark and dangled her legs over the water, shaking her hair, enjoying the feel of the morning breeze slipping along her scalp. She kicked her feet and watched with delight as the rose chiffon of her garment billowed out and subsided gracefully.

Beneath her feet the water glimmered brilliantly in the long slanting light of the sun while the water magic sank into the marrow of her bones, soothing, healing, strengthening. She stretched out against the secondary branch, her body slowing until she drifted into a dreamy haze. For the first time in days the itch went away from her back and her head was clear of the artificially induced chaos.

Dimly she felt a stirring at the back of her head. "Well, hello there," she murmured. Immersed in the tranquility that was the water's gift, she accepted the advance, willing to wait the pleasure of the rider in her skull. After the difficult and dangerous collaboration on Lamarchos she no longer felt the horror and anger at her possession she had suffered when the rider had first touched her. After a while she murmured, "Who are you who share my body?" The presence stirred again. Surprise. She swung a foot. "I was busy on Lamarchos. No time to press for exclamations. Now it seems I'll have considerable leisure."

A chuckle rippled across her mind.

“So who are you? What are you?” She brushed the hair out of her eyes. Sunk in gentle contentment she watched the water flow past.

Feeling of frustration. The disc flashed and vanished. She kicked the chiffon out again, humming with delight at the rosy glow. “The damper. Mmmm. I’ve got to get rid of that some way. You’re my hope of getting out of this. You heard what the queen egg means?” Agreement and anger.

“Right. Since you climbed inside my head you’ve got me into more messes.” Strong objection.

She laughed. “All right. Not your fault.” The garden scents came strongly to her... flower sweetness... dark brown tang of moist earth... cool astringent bite of greenery... She moved her shoulders in vague discomfort against the limb that was propping her up. “I’ve got to get rid of that thing.” Quiet agreement.

She sighed and let the water magic wash away the strident emotions. After a lazy dreamy time she closed her eyes. “You have any ideas?”

An image formed in her mind. “Burash,” she whispered. Approval and a touch of impatience. Aleytys smiled up at the canopy of leaves. The image of Burash changed slightly. He held a knife to his right hand. Then he knelt beside the nude figure of a woman stretched out face down on the grass. He cut open her back and nudged the disc out of the flesh with the point of the knife. The woman sat up, winced, tossed the disc on a rock, brought a smaller rock down hard on it, a fierce pleasure in her intent face.

“Would he really do it?” she whispered.

A mental shrug.

“So I persuade him.” She frowned. “Another one. Use him? Like I used Miks? When does it end?”

A mental shrug.

“No. I won’t. I can’t.”

Impatience.

“I’ll ask him, though. I suppose I have to. But he has to make up his own mind.”

Acquiescence and more impatience.

“It’ll hurt like hell. If I start threshing around, he’ll crack wide. Once that thing’s out of me I can heal myself. Can you cut the pain before?”

Acquiescence.

“What about after that?”

“Talking to yourself?” The tenor voice broke into her musing.

Aleytys twisted her head around. Burash stood on the sandy bank of the stream holding onto the tree so hard his knuckles had turned white. “I came to say farewell, Leyta.”

Aleytys rubbed a finger against the corner of her mouth while she examined his face, aware that she could only guess what the subtle twists and turns of muscle meant. Her mind began to jump in spasms even now as it automatically struggled to reach him. She had to catch tight hold of her responses to keep from veering off into a chaotic jumble of bits and pieces of image and idea. It took her a while to sort herself out. When she opened her eyes she saw him quietly turning away.

“Wait.” She scrambled onto her feet and stood perched unsteadily on the gently swaying limb. “What do you mean, farewell?”

He turned. When he saw her standing, he flinched, looked away, and leaned against the tree, focusing on the water tumbling past, his chest fluttering rapidly as he gasped for breath. Aleytys watched, puzzled and more than a little disturbed by his manifest agitation. Finally he said, “Farewell. A word meaning I wish you well and happy but will not see you again, narami.”

She took a step toward him and nearly fell off the limb. “What are you talking about, Burash?”

He wouldn't look at her, staring instead at the eternally changing eternally persisting patterns of the water flow, his antennas fluttering wildly, their iridescent colors rippling through pattern after nervous pattern. When he spoke she had to strain to hear, balancing uneasily on the rough bark aware at the same time of the feel of it under her bare feet, the smells of the growing things, the shrill buzzing of insects she couldn't see. She was surprised to find how much he'd become a part of her.

“The old queen... her rites are tomorrow... no, the day after... she... her favorite things... live and dead... they'll all be burned... up there.” He nodded his head at the precipitous cliff rising behind the pile of rock the nayids called the mahazh. “The rite of passage,” he muttered. “I was her favorite just before... the egg is fertile from me... I will... they'll drug me... lay me at her feet... tie some hiiri around her... they won't bother to drug them... them... clothes... other things... these aren't my people, not my ways... I told you.” He clutched at the tree again and lifted his eyes with painful effort “I wish you farewell, Aleytys.”

She ran down the limb and bent over him. “You're joking.”

“I don't feel very amused.” His mouth twisted into a wry, self-mocking smile. “Or very honored. It's supposed to be an honor, you know.” He glanced up at her and looked rapidly away again. “Leyta, would you please come down from there?”

“Why don't you come up here?” She straightened. “It's cool and more comfortable than it looks.”

He shuddered. “God, no. Just looking at you gives me the shakes.”

“Madar!” She caught hold of the chiffon and pulled it taut against her body. “Move over a little, will you?”

He shuddered again and turned his back. Aleytys shook her head and jumped lightly down beside him. She put her hand on his arm and felt the bunched muscles quiver at her touch. “Heights bother you that much?”

“He turned to face her, his mouth twitching into a brief self-deprecating smile. “One step off the ground and I panic. Shall we sit down? I'm feeling a little weak in the knees.”

They sat on a stone bench near a miniature waterfall, a mimosoid scattering lacy shadow over them. She

sighed and leaned against his shoulder, eyes shut, feeling half home again.

“What are you going to do?” she asked dreamily.

“Nothing.” He shook his head. “There’s nothing I can do.”

Aleytys sat straight and stared at him. “Look,” she said sharply, “can’t you get away?”

“Do you think I’m any less a prisoner than you?”

“Madar!” She shifted uneasily on the bench. “But... even if they aren’t your people, they’re still your species. You could get away, lose yourself in the city. You said there’s a city out there. Anything... Isn’t it worth a try?”

He shrugged but said nothing, enigmatic insectoid eyes fixed on his long elegant feet.

She examined his face, then shook her head. “You knew this would happen, didn’t you. As soon as the old hag died you came to me. Why?”

He sat silent a minute then looked unhappily at his hands. “Yes. I knew.” His fingers closed into white-knuckled fists. “I wondered... I wondered what kind of person you’d be. Aleytys... I’ve got no claim on you, none at all. There was a moment of sharing... a little thing... a giving back, and forth between two tired and lonely people.” His antennas twitched and twitched again. “There is no debt.” He opened his hands and closed them again. His antennas jerked now in long agitated swoops. “The first moments of tenderness since I...” He broke off again, swallowed, stood up. “I came to say good-bye to you, I couldn’t go without that.” He reached out and touched her hair with a shaking hand.

Aleytys caught hold of the hand. “That. All that. It means there is a way and you don’t want to tell me.” She pulled him back beside her. “Look. We, neither of us... we’re different species. I don’t even come from this damn world. They stuck a thing in my back that keeps me from... never mind. I imagine there’s a million mistakes we make a minute about how the other is feeling, what the other is thinking. I believe you. In spite of all that. Do you hear me? I believe you because I have to. And I want to.” She smiled suddenly. “You came to me for one reason... one you haven’t told me yet... and stayed with me for a whole different other reason.”

His mobile mouth spread into a trembling smile. “God, I’m afraid, Leyta. To be burned alive.” He trembled so that his antennas shook like trees in a storm wind. “But I won’t whore for you. For my soul’s sake, Aleytys, believe me. I couldn’t have coupled with you if I hadn’t shared the joy in it with you.”

“I believe you,” she repeated gently. “Tell me how I can save you.” His hands were warm in hers. She could feel them tremble.

He pulled free and cupped his hands around her face. “If you go to the kipu,” he said rapidly. “And ask her for me, they’ll take another of the queen’s bedmates for the fire.” He watched her face go blank and turned away, dropping his head into shaking hands. “I don’t blame you, Leyta,” His voice came low and muffled, full of pain.

She ran her fingers distractedly through her hair. “Madar! what a choice! Damn. What do I know about the world? I woke up on a cutting table... ahai!” She plucked at the thin shoulder straps. “After all I went through, to end up like this.”

Burash caught hold of her jerking fingers and held them till she grew quieter. “At least you’ll have a year, Leyta.”

She shuddered and straightened her back. “She won’t conquer me, that kipu, I swear that, Burash. She might have bought me, but I’ll never be her slave. Never!”

Burash pressed his hand across his mouth. Speaking so softly she could barely hear the muffled words. He said, “You haven’t a chance, Leyta. Even if you get away. You carry your doom with you.”

“No!” She jumped up and began pacing back and forth on damp sand that crunched and squeaked under her feet. “I’ll believe that when I’m dead,” she said fiercely.

“Sit down, Aleytys.”

“What?”

“I said sit down. Don’t fight the air. It’s a waste of time and effort.”

Reluctantly she came back and sat down beside him. “Sometimes I feel like exploding. It’s not fair. What have I done that all these things happen to me?” She leaned back, folding her hands behind her head. “Forget that. Can you get hold of a knife. A sharp one?”

He stiffened. “You won’t—”

“No, naram.” She laughed. “I’m not going to kill myself and I damn sure won’t try to fight my way out of this trap with a silly little throat slitter. And...” She touched her thigh with probing fingers. “I’m not foolish enough to expect to cut the incubus out of myself. But I do need a knife.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“No hurry.” Aleytys smiled at him. “I’ll see the kipu this afternoon.”

He slumped beside her, eyes shut, hand trembling on his thighs, his body loose. “I feel sick,” he said after a while.

She looked speculatively at him, wondering whether to tell him about the operation. It didn’t seem to be quite the right time. “Tell me more about your people. I’m sorry, I just wasn’t listening last night.”

Smoothing his kilt over his thighs, he stared thoughtfully at the water. “I never wanted to be here.” He mused for a while, then leaned back and gazed dreamily into space, his voice slow and thick with memory.

“My family lived in the high country among the pines. We were herders of immeranu. My mother was well known. All over the island the name of Dannana meant the best of blood line, firm taut flesh, long silky fleece, spirit and intelligence. We lived quietly but well, with buyers from the cities coming thick in the fall and breeders when winter turned to spring so that our holding was filled with bustle and excitement twice a year. I remember....

“My mother. She was strong, vivid, alive. So alive her strength flowed like a river through us all, warm and blessing. And she was tender, gentle as a male, not like these river pigs. She was secure in what she was so she could afford to show a male tenderness. My father. He was gifted. His weaves and designs

brought high praise and high prices and the things he carved from the wood he seasoned himself... even traders from the star city came looking for them. It was a good time. I was happy....

“One day....” He shivered. “Kanuu, Gammal, and I had the black herd out. I remember it was just after foaling and the young ones were wobbling about, chasing each other and bumping into things, falling and getting up with sheepish sly sets to their gangly bodies. Even though spring was still new, it was quite warm in the patches of sunlight although Ac chill lingered in the shadows. The pine branches had pale green needles at their tips and a few poppies shone deep orange in the tender new grass thrusting up through the old year’s yellow matting. When I close my eyes I can see the smallest detail....

“Kanuu saw the skimmers first and yelled a warning. We ran under the trees but it was already too late.” His mouth tightened. “The bitch queen was bored again, sent raiders out for young males, sent them in the skimmers the starfolk sold her. She still hated us on Sep for throwing her out and they pandered to her hatred for their profit.” He closed his eyes and leaned against the stone back of the bench. For a moment he was silent. Aleytys waited patiently.

“Kanuu... they shot her... caught me... Gammal... he fathered the last daughter... Gapp... the hag bitch was irritated with him for some reason... or she had one of her cruel whims... she enjoyed hurting people... some stupid reason... made him host the egg... Gapp... that’s her name... his daughter....” His antennas dropped dejectedly and he swallowed again and again.

Aleytys stroked the short crisp curls at the nape of his neck, then moved her hands over his shoulders, trying to comfort him with her touch. “Ai Burash, isn’t it odd. My world’s so far from here the distance loses meaning, but you and I... we’re more alike than you and these... these river pigs you called them. I’m going to get away from here. Come with me.”

He dropped his hand on her knee, a tired droop at the corners of his mouth. “I’ve spent a lifetime in this place, Leyta. There’s no way out. The kipu knows everything that happens, maybe even knows what we’re saying right now. She keeps a tight grip on the country around here. Even if you could get out of the mahazh and out of the city, where would you go?” He pulled her hand down and turned it palm up. “Look, narami, what has this hand ever done?” He trailed his fingers across her pale gold palm and flicked her rosy fingertips. “Soft as a butterfly’s wing. And you want to go against an army?” With a shake of his head he closed the hand into a fist. “Even I’m stronger. This hand against one of the sabutim?”

Aleytys stretched and yawned, pulling her captive hand free. “The slaver I!kuk spent some time polishing me so I’d get a good price. Burash, I fought my way across half a world, alone and pregnant. I got off that world and I’ll get off this.” She sat up and wriggled her shoulders, her eyes sparkling with determination.

He fluted his antennas into a lively little dance. “One of the sabutim could tear you apart like wet paper.”

“You said that before.” She lay back with a laugh and scratched along the crease beside her nose. “Mmmm. I’ll just have to be smarter.” She turned her head and looked lazily around the garden. Across the stream the mahazh rose like a great gray beehive, blocking out a big piece of sky. As she watched an oval shape leaped into the air from the flat roof. She poked Burash in the ribs. “What’s that?”

He looked up, eyes following her pointing finger. “Skimmer.”

Together they watched the disc shrink to a black dot between two cloud banks. “Do you see now how impossible it is? How far could you get before the kipu found you?” Burash kicked at the sand. “There’s

no way out, Leyta.”

She squinted at the roof, a thoughtful glint in her eyes. Then she shrugged impatiently and turned back to Burash. “Is there someplace very, very private where we can meet?”

Chapter V

Aleytys pulled the tapestry aside and confronted the guard.

“Parakhuzerim?” The guard was a stone wall of indifference blocking the arch, the ornamental lance butted against her instep slanting in a long diagonal across her body. The single word—egg bearer—daunting in its implications, hit Aleytys a solid blow, only the slight question lift at the end marring its heavy forthright rejection.

Choking down the sudden surge of anger and damper-induced confusion, Aleytys tipped her head back and focused her blue-green gaze on the glittering black facets looking through her as if she were a ghost whose existence the guard refused to acknowledge. “I need to see the kipu,” she said sharply.

The nayid pulled her thin lips into a disapproving knot of blue-purple flesh. Her antennas twitched back and forth. “Why?”

“There’s something I need from her. She’s the only one can do it.”

“What?”

Spurred by anger and growing frustration Aleytys’ mind leaped to touch the guard, a lifetime’s unconscious conditioning overcoming her conscious knowledge of the futility of trying. Grimly she fought to regain control while the figure of the lanky horse-faced nayid blurred as her fierce battle with the damper blanked out everything but the turmoil in her head.

After a minute she blinked slowly. Her voice uncertain, words slow and thick, she repeated, “I want to see the kipu.”

“Not at this time.” The guard reached out to pull the tapestry between them. “The kipu does not sit to the public in the morning.” Aleytys thrust up her arm, blocking the nayid’s hand. “No.

“I need to see the kipu.”

With her thin austere frown the guard considered Aleytys. The minutes dragged by. Finally she nodded, the faintest jerk of her head, wheeled, and strode off down the hall, her boots clicking rapidly over the slick blue-green tiles. Aleytys sucked in a long breath, heart pounding in excitement. She ran after the nayid, her bare feet counterpointing the crisp military rattle with a fleshy slap-slap.

The corridor ended abruptly in an uncurtained arch. The nayid vanished around the corner. Stomach tightening with the outriders of panic, Aleytys ran full out and skidded through the arch just in time to see a polished black boot disappear upwards behind the central core of the stairwell.

The stairs crawled up and around in a white worm hole, the plaster ceiling a single handspan above the reddish knobs on the nayid’s stubby antennas. After a half dozen turns scrambling up steps meant for legs twice the length of hers, Aleytys was trembling with fatigue, her left leg cramping around the half-healed

wound.

By the time she stumbled out onto the second floor corridor's scarlet tiles she was limping badly and panting like a wind-broke horse. She leaned against the wall and scowled at the departing nayid who strode mechanically away, her straight spare body cosmically indifferent.

Aleytys rubbed her thigh absently, feeling the twitching jerk of the muscles. Sighing, she limped as quickly as she could after the retreating figure.

Two guards, hefty hard-faced amazons wearing deep-red tunics, stood on either side of an arch hung with a crimson tapestry. The blue-green guard halted in front of them, stood rigidly erect, and brought the butt of her lance down with an audible thump. She waited for the senior of the guards to speak.

"Your business?" Cold eyes flickered past the blue guard, resting for a minute on Aleytys as she limped up to them.

"The Parakhuzerim to see the kipu."

The red guard frowned, intensifying the angles of her hatchet face. "You have spoken for time?"

"No." The single syllable was leached of all expression. "The Parakhuzerim demanded."

"I'll see." The red guard pushed the tapestry aside and stepped briskly through the arch.

Aleytys glanced up at the blue guard's immobile face, shrugged, wandered over to the wall to take the weight off her quivering leg. The floral design burned red into the white wall tiles went up and over the arch in a convoluted pattern of leaf, flower, and vine that turned constantly back on itself in an intricate tracery like the background on the tapestries hanging in the bedroom. She traced a bit of the pattern with her finger then looked with puzzlement at the remaining guard. Strange, she thought. How can such... such... things as they produce this delicacy of line?

The guard came out and held the tapestry aside. "Come," she said brusquely. "The kipu will see you."

Beyond the curtain the room was half a large octagon whose side walls were lined with machines cased in cold gray-green metal interrupted by flickering dancing lights and a nayid-eye-level tier of screens, some alive with land unrolling like a ribbon beneath a hawk's gaze, some with static images of interior rooms, some black eyes of greenish phosphor. More red guards stood or sat before the instruments, their velvety tunics glowing strangely sensuous against the harsh lines and textures of the metal.

Gathered around a massive table set across the angle opposite the arch a motley scatter of nayids turned their goggle-eyed faces toward her so that she walked alone, feet scuffing louder and louder on the crimson tiles, toward a ragged line of cold alabaster masks. In the center of the standing figures, dominating them with the cold force of her personality, the kipu sat rigidly erect, hands resting lightly on the highly polished red-brown wood, antennas flicking in tiny irregular jerks.

"This is a busy time for me." The kipu's fingers tapped rapidly on the wood. The corners of her mouth jerked down as her glittering black eyes fixed on Aleytys, her nostrils pinched in as if a bad smell irritated them. "Well?"

"I want..." Aleytys shot a rapid glance at the kipu. "I want Migru."

“Migru?” The kipu’s impassive face broke into a startled looseness, waking a secret glee in Aleytys. “How did...?” She frowned and started over. “Never mind. Why?” She snapped her mouth shut, then continued slowly with some difficulty finding words. “We’re different species with different evolutionary histories. There is no possibility of interspecies fertility. Even... even copulation...” Her mouth twisted in disgust “Even that seems unlikely.”

Amusement frolicked in Aleytys until she nearly lost her grip on its tail. Lowering her eyes demurely to the floor, she said, very softly, “Oh no. He pleases me. He’s proved...” She paused deliberately, once more sneaking a sly glance at the kipu.

The nayid leaned tautly against the high carved back of her throne-like chair, her hands pushing stiffly against the edge of the table while her thin pointed face had a withdrawn look as if she divorced herself both mentally and physically from anything that smelled of sex.

Aleytys filed this as a possibly useful betrayal of weakness and went on briskly, lifting her head to stare eye to eye with the seated nayid. “He’s proved himself capable. I want him.”

The kipu shifted uneasily in her chair. “I don’t believe...” She hesitated and looked down at her hands. Aleytys saw her start then fold them precisely in front of her. “Another could serve as well.”

“No!” Aleytys straightened her body, her laughter turned grim. “My people don’t trade our lovers about like playing cards. I want him and only him.”

“No!” The word leaped from the mouth of the nayid standing to the right of the kipu. Aleytys glanced at her, surprised first at the interruption, then at the grotesque bulk of the speaker. She was the first fat nayid Aleytys had seen, a blubbery mass of flesh, repellent, sickening. Her pudgy face twisted into a malevolent scowl as she looked rapidly from the kipu to Aleytys. “The sarasipu is already set.”

The corners of her elegant nostrils twitching in a faint betraying tic, the kipu ignored the fat one’s outburst and gazed thoughtfully at Aleytys. “I suppose it’s possible.” Translucent inner eyelids slid momentarily over her protuberant eyes. She leaned back again, her body more relaxed, tapping her small square teeth with her thumbnail.

“You should have drugged her. I told you.” The fat one’s husky querulous voice broke into the kipu’s musing.

“Belit Asshrud.” A kind of weary patience crept into the kipu’s deep rich voice, an indication of contempt flaying the fat one until she quivered under the lash. In a brief flash of irrelevant wonder, Aleytys thought, that voice... it’s one of the keys to her power. Then she focused again on the conflict between the two nayids. The kipu’s antennae were jerking back and forth in an impatient flick-flick that said stronger than words how unimportant she found the fat nayid’s wishes and advice. “That was the council’s decision. You know why. I myself have explained why we don’t drug her. More than once, if you remember. Do I have to do it again? It shouldn’t be necessary to remind you...” Her words lashed the bloated face into twitches of pain and fear. “Of the need for discretion.”

A sudden shrill giggle jerked Aleytys’ intent gaze from the kipu. Standing at the left of the chair a young nayid grinned maliciously at Asshrud. She had a gawky unfinished look, a round face marred by a spoiled self-indulgent softness.

“Why not put Lisshan in Migru’s place?” she said, then giggled again, jiggling restlessly from foot to foot.

“Yes.” The kipu swung back. Nostrils flaring slightly as she curbed her descent into the fringes of emotion, she wrote rapidly then tore the sheet off the pad and thrust it into an embossing machine. She slapped the lever down, pulled the sheet free, then skimmed it across the table to a red guard, this one older with a seamed rugged face and crisply curling gray hair. “Sukall.”

“Im, rab’ kipu?”

“Take that to the sacerdoteHarran .”

“Im, rab’ kipu.” She slapped her lance butt against the floor, wheeled and trotted away.

The kipu folded her hands and settled her face into a chill alabaster mask. She spoke slowly, rolling the liquid syllables over her tongue as if she enjoyed the taste of them. “It is done. Migru is assigned to serve you. Lisshan will serve the dead.”

“No!” Asshrud’s face quivered in meaty agony. She stumbled against the table as she moved to confront the kipu sending the massive legs squealing several inches. “No. I forbid it.”

The kipu smiled. Her long reptilian fingers tapped gently on the tabletop, neat square nails clicking faintly against the hard wood.

“He’s mine.” Asshrud straightened and repeated the words, trying to infuse strength into her faltering voice. “He’s mine.” But the fire washed futilely against the kipu’s calm. Asshrud looked ridiculous in her quivering agony. She knew she looked ridiculous, but the agony was real. Aleytys felt a faint sickness in the pit of her stomach and looked away from the scene. Standing forgotten in the jostle and jar between the two nayids she felt suddenly sorry for Asshrud. She sensed vaguely, remembering her own troubled childhood, the agony of a fat ungainly child growing to repulsive adulthood in a place where all the others were lean and elegant. In spite of herself Aleytys felt the urge to soothe and comfort, but the damper interfered. It sent her mind reeling into confusion. She closed her eyes until the damper allowed her once again to spare attention for the scene in front of her. For the first time she noticed the nayid male hovering beside Asshrud.

“...Gave him to me. You know it.” Asshrud fumbled for the male’s hand, tears washing down her pudgy cheeks. She began to plead. “Don’t take him away, rab’ kipu. Please don’t take him away... Mother... she gave him to me. Please... Lisshan is mine. I need him. Don’t...” She broke down and sobbed pitifully, angrily.

“You can show me your deed of gift?” The kipu’s nostrils flared once again and her thin lips pressed tightly together. “She let you use his services to quiet your whining whenever it got on her nerves.” She wasn’t tasting the words now, she was spitting them out like bitter seeds.

Asshrud gulped and struggled to control her distress. “You could take another,” she blurted.

“No, this obsession for your mother’s bed slave...” The kipu hesitated, searching for the word she wanted. “Is nauseating. And the example you present...” She raked her eyes over Asshrud’s body.

The unhappy nayid flinched from the contempt in her gaze.

“These are difficult times,” the kipu went on, her voice icy, “We must all sacrifice the unnecessary, belit. Sabut!”

“Rab’ kipu?” A red guard, one of the anonymous huddle by the wall, stepped briskly to the table.

“Take Lisshan and prepare him.” She flipped a finger at the pudgy male who looked increasingly sick. He tried to retreat behind Asshrud’s bulk, then recognized the hopelessness of resistance and went numbly with the guard.

Asshrud followed him out of the room with her eyes, her face heavy with the agony working in her. She turned a blank glittering gaze on Aleytys. “You... you... I’ll pay you.”

“You forget yourself, belit.” A slight slick oiling of satisfaction tainted the words.

Asshrud wheeled, knocked clumsily against the table, but she didn’t seem to feel it although the table shifted several inches. “And you... why?” She stretched out quivering hands. “Why do you always strip me bare?”

The kipu drew back and brushed the tips of her fingers fastidiously together. “Belit,” she said coldly. “I think you would feel more yourself in your own quarters.”

Asshrud looked at her again, her face full of impotent hatred, then she waddled around the table and stumped slowly out of the room.

Aleytys watched her go, pity once more strong in her. Not even a dignified exit, she thought. What a cruel thing... to be so ugly, so offensive to the eye that no one would take your deepest hurts seriously.

“Belit Gapp!” The kipu’s sharp voice broke off Aleytys’ musing. That name, she thought. Where did I hear... ah! She shuddered. Burash’s brother’s child. She ate her father when she hatched from his flesh. Like the old one will do me. Aleytys looked at the immature nayid and shuddered once again.

Gapp sauntered around her end of the table, an impudent grin on her blunt features. She stopped beside Aleytys, looked her up and down, like a horse trader judging the merchandise, then put her arm around Aleytys’ shoulders and hugged her against her hard body. “You going to let me have this one? Favor for favor?”

With an exasperated sigh the kipu leaned forward and considered the untidy slouching figure.

Trying unobtrusively to free herself, Aleytys found time to notice that the subtle antagonism between the kipu and Asshrud was not present here. The kipu even exhibited a kind of indulgent fondness that one might give a spoiled but favorite child.

“Belit Gapp, as last-born you have a duty.”

“Yeah.” She pulled Aleytys around with careless strength, eyes moving up and down her body. Gapp let the fingers of one hand slide carelessly from Aleytys’ neck to her waist, ignoring her quiet attempts to free herself.

“Gapp!” The word lashed suddenly through the young one’s preoccupation, bringing her around so that she faced the kipu. “Release the Parakhuzerim.”

“Oh... come on. Let me have her.”

“Gapp!”

Aleytys shuddered, Gapp's touching hands bringing nausea sour into her throat. She rubbed her arms absently. When I get back, she thought, I'll take a bath. I'll take two baths.

"Take the Parakhuzerim and instruct her in her role so that she can take her place in the rites tomorrow."

"Im, kipu." Gapp grinned at Aleytys. Aleytys backed away another few steps and looked rapidly around.

"Must she?" she asked sharply.

The kipu ignored her. "Gapp," she said heavily. "Listen to me."

"Im?"

"Control your... your little fancies." Once again the kipu's face showed distaste. "If you touch her before the rites, I'll send Sukall with the Discipline. Is that clear?"

Gapp pouted sulkily. "Why? She coupled with that Migru, at least she says so." She caught the skin and muscle on Aleytys' arm between her thumb and forefinger then squeezed hard. "She might enjoy playing with me. Why not?"

"Because I said so. I don't want her marked, Gapp, or so jangled she can't do what is necessary. I know the games you play. Well?"

Gapp fidgeted. "After?" she asked hopefully. The kipu shrugged.

"You promised. I'll keep hands off her now, but remember, you promised her to me." She smiled wetly at Aleytys. "Just wait, soft one, we'll have some fine times."

"You. Parakhuzerim."

Because the damper was scrambling her head again, Aleytys was slow to understand and answer. At last she nodded clumsily.

"I don't want to see you again. Not here. You understand?"

"If I need anything?" The kipu shrugged. "Tell the guard."

"Yes, kipu." Aleytys spoke with proper submissiveness. But behind her back her hands closed into fists so tightly her nails cut small crescents into her palms.

"Hm." The kipu rubbed her long supple thumb across her chin. "Take a little advice, Parakhuzerim. You can have a very pleasant life if you choose. Serve us for a year, then I'll give you your freedom."

"Yes, kipu." Aleytys choked down a sudden flare of rage. Free, she thought. Liar!

"Although I would prefer not... for various reasons..."

I'll drug you if I have to. If you cause me too much trouble, I'll do it. You understand?"

“Yes, kipu.”

Chapter VI

Aleytys tugged at the tight crotch of the stiff gold bodysuit, while sweat trickled down her neck as the heavy elaborate helmet pressed on her head until it ached with a dull throb. The monotonous chant went on and on while the sacerdotess, wreathed in clouds of heavy incense, paced multiple circles around the pile of logs. After another few minutes of discomfort and boredom, Aleytys thrust her thumbs into the armholes and tried to ease the strain put on her breasts by naïve tailors who didn't know how to cut clothing for a mammal. She glanced along the line of blank-faced sabutim.

Near the eastern edge of the flat-topped butte, wrapped in layer on layer of thick gold cloth until it was a flattened, grossly enlarged seed resting on a shallow gold platter, the old queen's body lay in state on top of the bunting-draped criss-crossed logs. Seated at her feet, wound with blue-dyed ropes, the knots accented with gilt paint, Lisshan stared out with dulled unseeing eyes, lost in some fine euphoria, floating on the wings of a drug. Hiiri were looped below him around the base of the pyre with their own small peninsulas of crossed and criss-crossed logs less than half the diameter of the massive timbers in the main pile. But of course they didn't count... slaves now, slaves for eternity.

And the chant went on.

And the sacerdotess walked back and forth in front of the pyre wreathed in clouds of heavy incense.

Sick to the point of nausea, Aleytys glanced at the guards on both sides of her. They faced forward without a tremor in their rigid concentration on the rite. Abruptly she rebelled. She cautiously stepped back, slipping behind the guards to the edge of the cliff where the air felt somehow a little cleaner. Standing on the edge with her back turned to the interminable ceremony she looked out over the dreaming innocent land.

It spread out in muted patchwork interrupted by scattered towers of rock that were other buttes rising in rugged grandeur above the fields. Beside these buttes were dark blotches where houses clustered in walled cities clinging to the base of the precipitous rock. Here and there, on pale straight lines, vehicles like small black bugs scooted in nervous spasms belching behind them clouds of steam. The river came looping out of the blue in the east in long lazy bends, glinting gently in the light from the setting sun. That way, she thought, down the river in that blue mist where that sick blue sky comes down, there's the star city. That's where I have to go.

The river came to them and split in half, one side hugging the base of the butte, the other swinging out in a wide lazy crescent that circled the city and separated it from the farm lands. But I have it backwards, she thought. Funny. The current runs the other way, from me to the east. Why'd I think of it coming to me?

A hundred meters below she could see the small green patch of her garden sealed within the massive gray bulk of the mahazh and its outbuildings, a walled fortress inside the walled city, smooth and sterile except for that green nodule like a cysted tumor. She studied the city outside the walls of her prison. On the western side there was more green—scattered trees and shrubs around walled houses like gray beehives, the streets between quiet and empty.

So seductive was the peace and serenity below she could almost hear the cicada's drowsy hum and feel the warm sweet breeze ruffling her hair.

On the eastern side the beehive houses crowded in a kind of cheerful elbow-in-the-ribs confusion along twisting streets whose narrow strips of paving almost disappeared beneath awnings striped in brilliant clashing stained-glass colors. These streets were crowded and busy, though she caught only glimpses of tiny nayid figures bustling from shop to shop. Where the city met the river the walls widened into low blocky warehouses with piers stretching a short way into the river. Three ships were tied there, their lengths parallel to the bank, most of their cranes idle, one or two desultorily unloading bales which a few hand-truck pushers were wheeling into the warehouses.

Behind Aleytys the chant broke off momentarily and a single massive basso began intoning a long invocation which she resolutely ignored, running her eyes back along the river until she was staring intently at the eastern horizon.

The invocation finished. A sudden crackling sound closed her hands into white-knuckled fists. She swallowed and swallowed and still the sour taste came back. A chorus of screams from the hiiri trembled through her body. She felt the heat of the fire already burning through the heavy cloak hanging from the bee-broaches on her shoulders. She remembered the brown naked figures, tiny tiny people rubbed to a high gleam with the same oil that soaked the logs.... Aleytys stopped that thought but the smell of roasting flesh drifted past. She swallowed but the sour taste wouldn't go away. Blindly, breathing in short sharp gasps, she stared at the innocent lovely land below. The screaming went on, high descants to the heavy basso chant from the massed choir of hieratic nayadim. The stench hovered on the breathless air.

She felt a presence behind her and glanced quickly around. One of the huddle of strangers standing respectfully behind the kipu had come over to her and was watching her with mild interest, a dark brown man just a little taller than she with dull black hair standing out from his head in a tidy bramble bush. He smiled. White teeth flashed. Nostrils flattened. The yellow sun struck red-amber highlights from his dark dark skin.

“They do go on.”

She accepted the overture, glad to turn away from the horror behind her. “Yes.” She almost smiled at the banality of her answer. Her fists uncurled and she could feel herself relaxing. “You’re not nayid. Who are you?”

“Ffynch Company Rep,” he said crisply. “Sombala Isshi.”

She noted that he tactfully refrained from questioning her in return although his curiosity was clearly evident “Ffynch Company?”

There was cool speculation in his eyes as he examined her with almost insulting thoroughness, but still he refrained from asking her any questions. “Do you know the Companies?”

“A little.”

“Ffynch Company operates in this sector. Look there.” He rested one hand lightly on her shoulder. She could feel the heat of it through the cloth-of-gold cloak. Again she felt a fleeting twinge of gratitude. She looked down, following his pointing hand until she was gazing at the flat roof of the mahazh. She saw the skimmers clustering there like fleas on a hairless hog’s back. “We provide skimmers and maintain them. Among other things.”

“You’re traders, then.”

He smiled suddenly, widely, as if she'd said something that amused him. "In a way," he said temperately. "May I ask you something?"

She watched him for a while, feeling the flicker of chaos hovering. She yearned to reach out and read him, to break through his skilled facade, but she hastily clamped down on the urge. "What do you need to know?"

"About you. If I'm not nayid, neither are you, lady. What role do you play down there?" He flipped a long-fingered hand with over-size knuckles turning the narrow digits into gnarled roots at the mahazh. He smiled his charming smile again. "To a trader all knowledge has value."

She thought about what she should say. An imp of mischief tickled her stomach. "I'm nursemaid to the new queen. In a way," she said demurely. As the sacerdot's voice once again boomed into a monotonous invocation she looked restlessly away and saw a massive column of smoke climbing suddenly next to one of the buttes. "What's that?"

It was his turn to follow her pointing finger. "Ha! The wild hiiri choose good time for a raid with the kipu busy here."

"What?" She peered at the smoke, working out distant indications of turmoil, brilliant flashes breaking through the purple-gray coils. A flicker of motion caught the corner of her eyes, jerked her attention to the mahazh. Three skimmers rose from the roof and darted off to the east "Will they catch the hiiri?"

"They never have before. By now the raiders are scattered, sitting under shelter, laughing at the futility of the nayadimi effort."

"They must catch some of them. Where'd they get those?" Her hand moved slightly toward the hiiri burning behind them. "Or the others down there still?"

"The hiiri sell their own." He smiled cynically. "One tribe will fight another. They only started taking prisoners because they started getting a price for them. Before..." He shrugged. "Ritual torture. My enemy is not my enemy only if he's dead and his wife and his children and his brothers with him."

Aleytys shuddered. "I sometimes wonder why men are cursed with intelligence when they use it to such ends."

"Don't ask me. Takes me time enough to justify my own existence."

Behind them the stench of roasting flesh was becoming oppressive while the chanting began again and went on and on and on and on until she ceased to hear it. Together they stood and let tune flow over them in a sort of shared disgust. After a while she examined his face, meeting a humorous speculative look that stirred the driving curiosity that betrayed her once again as the damper roared on, blocking the mind thrust she aimed at him, not consciously but out of the habit that tripped her up so many times she lost count of them. She tottered and nearly tumbled over the cliff.

Through the whirl that blanked out everything but the fragmented images in her mind she vaguely sensed a strong grip on her arm. She fought back against the chaps, slapped her mind into order. Panting lightly, she righted herself. "Thanks," she muttered thickly. As her vision cleared, she smiled nervously at him.

"Rab' Sombala Isshi." The words were spoken almost in a whisper so they wouldn't interfere with the

chant. He glanced over his shoulder. Sukall stood mask-faced and rigidly erect waiting with total discipline for his response.

He turned immediately, bowed with careful respect. “Yes?”

“Kipu requests you rejoin your company.” Her message delivered, not doubting his instant compliance, she turned to Aleytys. “Parakhuzerim, your part in the rite comes near. Kipu requests that you come and prepare yourself.”

Aleytys glanced quickly at the funeral pyre where the flames still leaped high in the air. The hiiri were silent, to her great relief. She hoped that smoke inhalation had killed them before they had time to feel the pain of being burned alive. Driving the memory of the screams from her mind, she moved away from the cliff edge, her stomach knotting and unknotting in a sickening rhythm.

Chapter VII

Shadows stretched in a long thin bars across short springy grass still damp from the morning’s dewfall. Aleytys snapped the wrinkled sheet open, doubled it and spread it over the grass, then collapsed cross-legged in the middle of the pale yellow rectangle. She shivered and rubbed her knees, the slight chill in the early morning air magnified by the excitement that churned her blood. She moved restlessly, plucked at the shoulder straps on the rose chiffon falling in soft careless waves around her legs. As a leaf rustled and a six-winged insect zzzed past her ear, her body jerked, shivered.

A purposeful crackle snapped her head around. Burash pushed through the circle of giant bamboo and pines shutting her into the clearing.

Eagerly, Aleytys jumped to her feet and stood, fists clenched, heart throbbing, blood rushing so fast her body was bathed in a layer of cold sweat. Flushing then paling in rapid alternation she began to tumble into the too-familiar confusion as the damper sent waves of itch agonizing across her back.

Burash caught her as her knees sagged. Leaning against him she sucked in a deep breath, then another and another, disciplining herself to the smooth deep inhalations, making them longer and longer, slower and slower, not-thinking not-feeling until, shaking with reaction, her body colder, a dull feeling at the base of her stomach, she pushed away from him and lowered herself cautiously to the sheet, jerking trembling lips into a momentary smile for him.

Burash settled beside her and held out the knife. “Be careful with this, Leyta.” He cupped his free hand behind her head, his fingers warm and comforting on her neck. “What are you going to do with it?”

Aleytys pushed the knife down so that it rested on his thigh beside his open hand. “Keep that a minute.” She closed her eyes. *Rider*, she thought into the blackness, *remember your promise, remember, remember...*

“Leyta?”

“Never mind. What do you know of me, Burash?”

Letting the knife slide off his legs onto the sheet, he brushed a knuckle gently over the twitching muscle at the corner of her mouth. “Why, Leyta?”

“I have some... some uncomfortable gifts, uncomfortable for anyone wanting to control my actions.”

“So?”

“I need you to do something. No.” She held out her hand, not letting him answer. “There’s... oh god... I don’t know...” She wiped at her face, reached toward him, pulled her hand back. “I need you to do something for me. If you want... if you’re willing to do it.”

“Yes?” His voice was quiet, full of affection. Supported by this unspoken commitment Aleytys felt the febrile over-stimulation of her nerves flow away until she was calm and relaxed, able to speak with precision and detachment.

“Because he was warned, the slaver took steps to avoid endangering his investment. There’s a damn lot I don’t know, only the result. He put a thing, a disc, in the muscles of my shoulder, or rather, he had a surgeon do it.” She twisted around. “Here,” she said, “just under my left shoulder blade. Feel.”

He slipped his hand beneath the chiffon and probed the muscles in her back. “There’s something hard here.”

“That’s it. He called it a psi-damper.” She laughed nervously. “It sends my head into pieces sometimes. Burash...” The tip of her tongue flicked over her lips. “I want you to cut it out of me.”

“What?” He turned pale, his antennas thrashing wildly as the shock of her words bit into him.

“It won’t be hard,” she said rapidly. “It’s up to you... has to be up to you. The thing is just under the skin. You said you could feel it. Don’t be worried about hurting me, you won’t and soon’s it’s out, as soon as I can smash the damn thing, I can heal myself. You can do it, Burash, please... ah, please, it’ll only take seconds, naram, and you’ll set me free, you don’t know, you don’t know, it’s one thing being shut up in a few rooms, a prisoner, but being shut up in my mind, how would you feel, Burash, if one of the sabutim put her thumbs through your eyes, broke off your antennas, and it’s worse than that for me... remember what it does to me, you’ve seen it, you saw it just now, please.”

Drowning in the flood of words, Burash shook his head then shook it again, but more slowly, his reluctance dissipating, his resistance crumbling. “I won’t hurt you?”

“I won’t feel a thing. I promise you.”

“Not just feeling, what if I do something wrong? Injure you?”

“I’m a healer, Burash, when I’m free. I can heal whatever you do in... in seconds. Seconds!” Her lips vibrated against his palms, then slowly she pulled his hands away from her face. After a minute of heavy silence, she said slowly, “I need this terribly, Burash. But only if you want to do it. There’s something in me that reaches out when I’m in need and slaves those I need. I don’t want to do that to you.”

He pulled free. “If you’ll take off that thing and turn over.” His voice shook at first then strengthened as he settled into his decision. He picked up the knife, firming his beautiful mouth into a hard straight line.

When Aleytys was stretched out on her stomach, he felt her back, located the hard place, and touched the tip of the knife to the skin. It was harder than he thought, making the first cut. The knife was sharp but his hand shook, all the strength ran out of his fingers. He shut his eyes for a minute and drove the point through the skin. Grimly he cut the tough reluctant flesh until the point of the knife scraped on metal, then

worked the point beneath the smooth disc and with a quick convulsive twist snapped it out of her back.

Blood streaming thick and red down the smooth pale gold skin of her back, Aleytys squirmed rapidly around and closed her fingers on the blood-smearred damper. "Got you," she said fiercely.

At the southern edge of the clearing, bamboo growing tight against the cliff wall climbed over a pile of rock. Aleytys slapped the damper down on one rock and clawed another free of the pile. With a fierce pleasure she slammed it onto the disc, turning the delicate circuits into scrap. Then she grinned back over her shoulder at Burash whose face was still faintly green. "Watch," she said.

As he watched, the ragged wound closed until even the marks of the cut vanished leaving only a few streaks of sticky half-dried blood marring her back. She stood and came back to him, her spirits bubbling so high her feet barely touched the grass.

She dropped onto the sheet and closed her eyes, letting her mind flow free, drowning with delight, drowning in the glorious flood of life pouring into her, laughing, laughing, crying at the same time, tears streaming into her mouth open in wild free joyous laughter. She lay back, no, not lay back, flung herself onto her back and held out her arms. Burash laughed, fitted into them, came into her and she into him, body glowing hot to his touch, tasting his excitement until she no longer knew who was possessor and who possessed.

A measureless time later, sunk in a boneless lassitude, she leaned against Burash fitting her body against him as they walked out of the bamboo into the light-filled garden where the morning sun was warm and the stream danced in splendid brilliance. She moved her feet with slow dreamy grace, fitting herself against him, tired and warm and so much a part of him that it was his brain that moved her feet, his heart that beat in her, his blood warm and slow in her veins. She was drunk with love and sex and the hot sun and the pouring of life into the web of her nerves from every living thing—plant, insect, animal weaving their reticulation of life in the garden.

She tilted her head back against his shoulder, resting her hands lightly on the strong arm curling warm just below her breasts. "I could sleep a hundred years."

Tenderness flowed out of him in a warm wave that broke over her head and splashed a gentle amusement around her edges. "Better take a bath, narami, though most of the blood's been rubbed off." He chuckled, then sobered. She could feel small flutters of worry as he went on. "Better no one sees to report it to the kipu. Remember, she threatened to drug you."

She rubbed her head against his shoulder and laughed comfortably. "Don't bother about that one. Madar, I feel so happy, I don't want to see anything, think about anything, hear anything... come in the bath with me?"

He swung her around, radiating a delight that she felt in her bones with a shock of joy.

Raw red anger slashed through the glow.

Aleytys gasped and clutched at Burash. Reluctantly she twisted her head around.

Gapp slapped her bony thigh with the coils of a black braided whip. The crisp whap-whap-whap beat in Aleytys' blood while the fierce acrid flow of jealousy and rage radiating from the young nayid corroded her soft unwarded soul. She felt Burash's arms tighten around her. He was trembling.

“You. Migru.” Whap-whap went the whip. “Get away from my shigret.”

Burash went sick. The battle inside him threatened to tear him apart. He wanted to stay, to protect his love, because he sensed her unconscious expectations. But a lifetime of conditioning combined with the biological imperatives of his species drove him to obey Gapp’s command. Trembling, antennas drooping sickly, he dropped his arms and stepped away from Aleytys.

She snapped out a hand and caught hold of his wrist “No,” she growled. Fighting through the emotional overload scourging her nerves, she wheeled to face Gapp, pulling Burash back to her side. “No.”

An avid glitter in her huge multi-faceted eyes, small mouth curling in a tight grin, Gapp shook the whip out, unreeling the slippery black coils over the grass. With no warning at all she cracked the whip alongside Aleytys’ face, leaving behind a sharp small pain.

Reaching up slowly, eyes fixed on Gapp filled with astonishment and a waxing anger, Aleytys touched her face then held out her hand and looked at the fingers. A smear of blood reddened the pale amber flesh. She touched her face again and felt the short cut.

Gapp laughed and shook the whip so the narrow black line writhed on the grass like an angry snake. “Get out, Migru,” she said with soft slow vowels lush with anticipation. “This one’s mine.”

Aleytys could feel more confusion, trouble, pain in him, generated by his intuitive sensing on the conflicting expectations from the two females. Aleytys. On her world the male was the aggressor, the protector, the ravager of the female. Her body-mind set projected these basal assumptions to a point far below his level of conscious perception and his feeling for her impelled him to respond to it. Gapp. On her side was his genetic and social conditioning.

Aleytys lived in him as he struggled with the conflict and at the same time stood apart, observer, marveling at the sensitivity of this being who had no vestige of her psi-power. Abruptly she touched his cheek, feeling the muscles twitching beneath her fingers, waking a new ache in her at the sudden physical sensing of his pain. “It’s all right,” she whispered. “Do what she says. I’ll take care of her once you’re out of it.”

“Leyta.” He cupped his hand around hers. His antennas twitched briefly. “Be careful.” He glanced over Aleytys’ shoulder and shuddered. “I know this one. She likes to hurt. For her, pain is better than sex if it’s someone else doing the hurting.” Sweat dotted his forehead and trickled around his eyes down along his high-bridged narrow nose.

“Ah. But she can’t hurt me. Not now. Not now, naram, thanks to you.” She broke off as Gapp hissed malevolently, took a half-step toward them, twitching the lash over the grass. She flashed a smile at him. “Come back in a little. I’ll be in the bath.” With a sliding glance at Gapp, she stepped away. She scanned Burash’s face anxiously, momentarily caught up in her own internalized concepts of male ego needs. The twitching of his antennas and the rise of conflict in him jolted her back to present realities. “I keep forgetting, naram, how different we are. Scrub my back for me?”

“I’ll look forward to it.” Radiating relief and exhaustion he circled cautiously around Gapp and disappeared through the doorway.

Aleytys glared at Gapp. She stood hands on hips radiating pride and defiance, her posture an insolent challenge to the nayid. “Well?” She spat the word at Gapp.

Gapp dropped the whip into a slithery tangle on the grass. With a coaxing smile wet on her small triangular mouth she sidled toward Aleytys.

“Get away, you!” Aleytys tossed the hair out of her eyes. “You make me want to vomit.”

Gapp giggled and smoothed her hand over Aleytys’ head, pressing her hair against her skull, then jerked her tight against her hard narrow body, whispering love words, coaxing phrases into Aleytys’ ear until her stomach threatened to erupt. Gapp took a handful of the red hair and pulled Aleytys’ head back. As she slowly, sensuously lowered her head toward her, Aleytys saw small square teeth gleaming behind the plushy blue-crimson lips, saw sweat glistening in a film over the pale, pale skin. With stomach-twisting relish Gapp pressed her mouth over Aleytys’ in a long lingering exploring kiss.

Aleytys fought back a need to vomit and continued to pull back fighting to get away, her struggles futile against the careless strength of the nayid. Gapp’s tongue moved against her mouth, trying to force her lips open.

Aleytys shut her eyes and went limp. Help me, she cried to the blackness inside her head. Help me. Rider, please. Help me.

Black eyes opened in the back of her mind, blinked slowly, and she had a sense of waking, stretching, moving, fitting something into the crannies of her body. Power waking, flowing, filling. Don’t kill her, she thought hastily.

A chuckle she could almost hear rumbled through her head. “Move over, freyka.” Calm amused words in a resonant bass that shook the walls of her skull and the black eyes crinkled into a good-natured scowl. She could feel the strange being testing his control of her body, then a surge of power like a warm current poured through her.

Gapp’s movements slowed rapidly until her body was an ice-cold statue. Aleytys went briefly sick as she recognized the no-time state. “*Don’t kill her,*” she whispered. “*Not like the other times.*”

A grunt, impatient, crusty, tart, sarcastic. “Don’t bother me, freyka, this one’ll get what she’s asking for. Dammit, I don’t get any thrill from killing. Shut up and let me work.”

Aleytys watched as her body wriggled free from Gapp’s stone-hard arms. Around her the trees were cardboard cutouts, clouds like pats of cotton on the pale blue backdrop on the sky. Abruptly a deep low hum blew across her ears and shot rapidly upscale. She saw Gapp stir and stare gape-mouthed at Aleytys’ body standing just out of arm-reach.

“How....” She shut her mouth and leaped at her prey.

Aleytys’ body stepped aside with a deceptively smooth twisting motion. With a quiet economy of motion it slipped away from the nayid’s grasp and watched her stumble past. Gapp wheeled, her long stick arms and legs flopping awkwardly. She righted herself and frowned. “One way or another,” she whispered. Two steps took her to the whip. She scooped it up and stood flick-flicking it against her thighs. She smiled hotly. “One way or another, shigret, you’re mine.” She flicked her wrist and the tip scored the skin of Aleytys’ right arm, laying the skin open for several inches. Again the lash tip darted out, snapping one shoulder strap, then another, so that the rose chiffon pooled around Aleytys’ feet.

Aleytys’ body balanced on its toes. With a guttural cry it lunged toward the nayid, ducking under the whip, Blackeyes in fine control, sending the hands chopping blades against the tender flesh below the

jointed ribs of the nayid's thorax, driving the air from her lungs in an explosive whoosh. Chop at the wrist with the bladed palm. Seize the other wrist, slam the fist to the elbow. Gapp shrieks with pain. She flails out with her arms. Blackeyes moves the body with contemptuous ease. Chop again at the unprotected groin. Gapp tears a shrill squeal out of a tortured throat. Slam foot against the vulnerable knee to the right then the left. Gapp crashes as her legs go from under her. Slap the face with corrosive contempt until the nayid, destroyed in body and spirit, is a quivering mess on the grass.

Blackeyes moved Aleytys' body back and stood silent, still looking down at the writhing nayid. In her head Aleytys felt Blackeyes withdraw, nestling back in his corner, stirring until comfort was achieved, exuding a quiet satisfaction. Finally the eyes, narrow, corners crinkled with good humor, waited for her.

Aleytys shook herself and caught hold of her lower lip with her teeth, biting down just enough to have a feel of her own flesh. Thank you, Rider, she thought, and dipped in a mental curtsey that amused him.

"Swardheld's my name. If you want my advice..." The words rumbled in a sleepy slightly impatient bass. "... don't give her time to think. Get her on her skinny feet and drive her out." The eyes began to close. "You handle the voice," Swardheld went on sleepily. "Better not give her more to worry at." The black eyes closed and once again she was alone in her head. She heard Gapp's petulant whimpers and looked down in time to see her hand creeping toward the abandoned whip.

"No!" She brought her heel down on the reaching fingers, her notions of pity abruptly forgotten, regretting the softness of her bare feet, wanting a stout pair of spiked shoes to drive the lesson deep in Gapp's flesh. Gapp shrieked and Aleytys slowly took her foot away. Watching the nayid struggle to her knees, she backed a few paces away.

As soon as Gapp tottered to her feet, Aleytys lashed out with her foot and kicked the whip toward the building. "Now pick it up," she snarled. She stood, head back, defiant, arrogant, insolently proud of her body and strength, radiating confidence in her ability to control the situation. "Good," she said when the nayid scooped the whip up. "Now, coil it." Gapp complied sullenly.

"Good. Get out of here and don't come back. I don't walk your road and I don't feel like learning. Come at me again and I'll have the kipu lift your scalp."

Gapp snorted, her short stubby antennas jerking with disdain.

Aleytys felt the rising confidence, the new-born arrogance, and knew she'd made a mistake. So the kipu's fine words meant nothing. Well, that wasn't so unexpected. She caught hold of her own anger and blasted it at the young nayid, sending her staggering back.

"Get out of here." Aleytys flung the words at her with anger and disgust. "I don't need the kipu to handle you. Pull your tricks on me again and I'll smash you. Flat!"

Gapp stumbled through the doorway, disappearing into the mahazh.

Aleytys sighed and scuffed slowly through the grass toward the stone seat, feeling sick to the verge of nausea, sick and just a little pleased with herself. She picked up the discarded garment and slid it over her head, knotting the shoulder straps so that it would stay on, the sore spots on her shoulders and arms reminding her that she'd better get busy healing her wounds.

A high shrill scream loaded with pain jerked her around. It came from the bedroom. She began running toward the doorway.

Its swish-crack counterpointing with Gapp's harsh breathy giggles, the black whip swung, cutting bloody lines on Aamunkoitta's back as she crouched beside a tumbled pile of linen, shrieking wildly, yet oddly passive beneath the punishment. Aleytys caught hold of the entranceway's smooth edge, appalled.

The hiiri squalled and wriggled under the lashing that drew lines of blood crossing and recrossing her naked back, but she made no attempt to escape even though her hands and feet were free. She was hurting. Aleytys frowned, puzzled by the mixture of emotions emanating from the curiously involved pair, a weaving of pain and pleasure into a sickening vortex that lapped seductively at her, sucking her into the whirl that bound the two together.

She wrenched herself free, profoundly disturbed at the sexual response in her own body to the violent emotional involvement of Gapp and Aamunkoitta. Frightened, she whispered urgently. "Swardheld, help me."

The black eyes opened. Calm flowed into her twitching limbs, her body straightened, took on a subtly altered balance as Swardheld shrugged himself into possession and looked coolly around. Gapp and Aamunkoitta remained too self-involved to notice his/her intrusion into the scene.

Swardheld stepped quietly past the bed. He caught hold of the whip just above Gapp's hand, settled his foot against her skinny posterior, then straightened his leg, jerking the whip free as he sent the nayid into a broken-kneed slide that ended against the far wall.

Awkwardly, slowly, Gapp pulled her splayed-out legs under her and fumbled onto her feet. Snuggled safe and warm inside her skull, Aleytys felt the paralyzing astonishment radiating from the slack-faced staring nayid and she exulted in it. Swardheld felt it through her and laughed in his turn, a short sharp bark. He lifted the whip.

"Your turn, princess." Aleytys' voice under his manipulation sounded deeper, almost gruff. Grinning, he snapped the whip so that the tip swept in a deceptively gentle caress across Gapp's cheek. "Like it?"

He drove her along the wall, touching her with the whip's tip only, in delicate dabs that left behind small flecks of red. She reached the archway and fell through, nearly pulling the tapestry from its rings, stumbled past the astonished guard and fled whimpering down the hall, fled in terror from this terrible reversal in roles.

The horse-faced guard swung around, pulled the stun rod from her belt

"No!" The word was a guttural bark that snapped the nayid up short. Swardheld grunted and let the tapestry drop between them. He marched the body to the bed and set it down. "Your turn, freyka."

Aleytys flexed her fingers and stared at them a minute, this moving in and out of the flesh giving her an unsettled feeling. Deep in her head she felt a fugitive amusement, then the black eyes closed and she was alone again.

Sighing, she stood up. Aamunkoitta huddled on the floor, moaning desultorily, staring up at her out of a stupid mask that denied her interest, shut her out of the hiiri's world.

Exasperated, Aleytys dug her toe into the delicate figure's ribs. "Shut up, idiot," she said impatiently. "Your audience ran off. Stretch out flat."

Aamunkoitta glanced up at her cool skeptical face and let the whimpers trail off. She didn't move.

"Stretch out." Aleytys drove her toe into the ribs again, ignoring the hiiri's yelp of pain. "Stupid. I'm a healer."

Aamunkoitta looked resentfully over her shoulder at Aleytys, then slowly and reluctantly flattened her body on the tiles, her wrapper still clutched to her full breasts.

Aleytys knelt beside her and examined the smooth dark skin, wincing at the sight of the raw weals that cut across old whip scars. "She makes a habit of this?"

Aamunkoitta nodded, her looped braids scratching across the tiles. Then she waited submissively for whatever was going to happen.

Aleytys looked at her for a minute, realizing at last what it meant to be a slave. She knelt beside the hiiri and laid her hands down over the wounds. "Be still," she murmured as the slight form twitched at the pain. She closed her eyes and reached out to the swirling seething river of power rushing around... coiling around the stars... black warm whisper going on forever... channeled it into and through her fingers... the aura filled her body with a glory that warmed out the aches and ashes of anger. She moved her hands slowly over the bruised back, bathing it with that healing force.

Relaxed and remote, she opened her eyes and smiled affectionately at the tiny brown figure. "Aamunkoitta." Her voice was sleepy and faintly amused. "Are you hurt on your front?"

The hiiri sat up and twisted around so that she could see her back. "Takku!" she breathed. Eyes wide, mouth open, hands crossed limply over her breasts, she stared at Aleytys. After a minute she extended her arms, trembling slightly as she waited with mute awe while Aleytys drew her hands over the spidery whip markings.

As Aleytys sank back on her heels, Aamunkoitta pulled her wrapper around her and tied the belt with shaking fingers. "Kiitos, taikagarna," she mumbled. Then she shrank into herself and plucked half-heartedly at the scattered sheets and towels.

"Aamunkoitta."

The hiiri slewed around clutching a sheet to her breast "Kunniakas?"

Aleytys jumped to her feet. "Come with me." She shivered. "I don't like this place right now. Come outside into the sun and talk with me."

Aamunkoitta stroked a hand over the smooth material of the folded sheet. "Outsider?"

"In the garden, idiot. Come on, I want to talk to you." She hesitated in the doorway. "You have somewhere you've got to be?"

The hiiri nodded slowly. "I'll be punished."

"Even if I was responsible for keeping you?"

"Who'd believe?"

“Ah.” Aleytys ran across the room and jerked the tapestry aside. “Guard!”

The lanky nayid turned a stolid mask to her, but her antennas twitched nervously. “Parakhuzerim?”

“Send word to . . .” She twisted her head so she could see the hiiri. “Who?”

“Ardubel Budurit.” Aamunkoitta’s voice trembled, barely louder than a whisper. Aleytys faced the guard again.

“Send word to the Ardubel Buburit the hiiri Aamunkoitta is required by the Parakhuzerim for the rest of the day.”

“I cannot leave my post.” The guard’s face was bland, stubborn. Aleytys felt the smug satisfaction radiating from her as the nayid enjoyed thwarting her.

“On her belt.” The hiiri’s gaspy voice sounded behind her so faintly she could barely hear it “A caller. The hyon-teinen can call from here.”

Aleytys glared at the nayid, anger rushing up her body like a flame. Instead of calming herself, she roared with rage at the nayid: “Call!” With fumbling fingers the guard pulled the black box from her belt, a vein throbbing in the long thin neck as she tapped a code on its face.

A tiny voice like a mosquito hum answered. “Im? Who?”

“Masart Nunana. Message for Ardubel Budurit.”

“Well, what is it?”

“Parakhuzerim keeping hiiri Aamunkoitta till curfew. Parakhuzerim demand I call.”

“Acknowledged.”

The guard tapped the surface once and slipped the hooks back over the belt. Then she eyed Aleytys warily. “Is that all?” The muscles of her face were hard with resentment “What else do you require, Belit?”

Aleytys clamped her mouth in a grim line. “Service,” she spat. “Keep Gapp out.” Eyes burning she glared proudly at the nayid then let the tapestry fall between them.

“River pig.” Wrinkling her nose in disgust, Aleytys ran across the room to the glass wall. “Come on out into the sunlight. I need the fresh air and warmth.”

The small yellow sun was warm and pleasant on the stone bench. Aleytys stretched, yawned and sank down on the seat. She patted a second yawn and said lazily, “Sit down, Aamunkoitta. Ahai, Madar, what a morning.”

The hiiri looked warily around then perched on the edge of the seat

“Relax, Aamunkoitta. Ahai, what a name!” She smiled to take the sting out of her words. “Does it mean something?”

“Dawn, Kunniakas.” Aamunkoitta relaxed slightly, moved back farther until she was almost leaning against the back of the bench. She radiated wary respect. “My aiti—my mother... her birth dream over, the burning fenkolin hajuvesi was the sun coming up. So she called me after the rising of the sun. Aamunkoitta.”

Aleytys propped her feet up on a rock and rolled her head back and forth, stretching her neck. It felt good, soaking in the warmth, stretching, exploring this new and interesting being. “If you don’t mind, I’ll call you Kitten.”

“And does that mean something?”

“A small charming furry creature.” Aleytys yawned. “You called me hieno-nainen first time.”

“That is female person of high rank.” The hiiri glanced slyly at Aleytys. “Kunniakas, you are one of power?”

“Hm.” Aleytys contemplated her toes, wiggled them briefly. “Yes, no, whatever.” She linked her fingers behind her head and sniffed disdainfully at the egg-yellow sun. “You call me Kunniakas. What does that mean?” She yawned again and slid her buttocks over the smooth stone.

“One honored by the henkiolento-maan, the spirits of the earth.”

Aleytys laughed suddenly. “Here we go again.”

“Huh?”

“Spirits of the earth.”

The hiiri spat twice on the earth and closed her hands into fists leaving first and small fingers extended. “You know them?”

“Let’s say I’ve been involved with ones like them on other worlds.”

“Ah.” Aamunkoitta folded her hands in her lap. “You’re not hiiri.”

“Obviously.” Aleytys chuckled. “You mean why did I help you?”

“Yes.”

“Why! You were being beaten, Kitten. You think I could walk away from that?”

“Why not? I’m no clan-brother of yours.”

“Well!” Aleytys examined her curiously. “So.” She pursed her lips at the yellow sun. “I expected nayids to be different. Never mind. Just figure I don’t like Gapp.” She sat up and shook the hair back from her face. “Will she make trouble for you?”

The hiiri shrugged. “Why should she change?”

“Can’t you get back to your people?”

“What people?” Aamunkoitta spread her hands over her thighs, staring down at them. “Most of my clan was killed a year ago. The rest... sold. Some here. That’s all I know.”

“What happened?”

“I’m poletti hiiri. Poletti kissa came on us. A raid for horses, slaves in early summer. Each hutikuu the kipu holds slave market here.” She pointed at the outer wall of the garden.

“*Hutikuu?*”

“A month in the fall.” She sighed. “Some of us they buy, any not sold the raiding clans strangle.”

“Strangle! You own people?”

“No, no! Only the clan is mine. The others are strangers. No business of mine. Besides, extra mouths in the long trek to the winter place would be stupid. There’s little enough food at the best of times.”

“You mean, if you got away from this place any hiiri who found you would either strangle you or sell you back?”

Aamunkoitta looked puzzled that such a simple thing would be so hard for Aleytys to understand. “Rape me first, then, unless I put a knife in him, yes. Without a clan, there’s no place I can go.”

Aleytys wriggled her shoulders impatiently. “Madar! No wonder the nayids run things. Don’t your people ever work together?” As she finished the question she felt a deep uneasiness stir within the small woman. “Look, Kitten, I’m no nayid either. If I can help...”

“Ah!” The hiiri slid off the bench and knelt in front of Aleytys, placing her hands palm down on Aleytys’ knees. “*Taikagarna,*” she whispered. “*Kunniakas. Kuu Voiman. Shaman. Kuu of the night, Aurinko of the day. Save my people. Help my clan. Drive the hyonteinens from our land. Lend your power to the Paamies.*”

“Paamies?” Considerably startled, Aleytys stared at the eager intelligent face. The mask was gone, the change striking. The hiiri had finally capitulated, had accepted Aleytys as a force to cling to.

“Use your good sense,” Aleytys said hurriedly. “Get back on the bench. If the nayids are watching, and you know they’re like that, you must wake their suspicions acting this way.”

Aamunkoitta snorted. “Those stupid skat would think I’m making love to you.” Nonetheless she settled herself back on the bench.

“So.” Aleytys grinned at her, delighted with this new development. “You weren’t quite telling the truth before.”

Aamunkoitta flicked a brief tight grin at her in return. “It’s what the hyonteinens want to believe. We help it along.” She went abruptly serious. “And unfortunately, there are clans where it’s true. But not all. Not all.” She closed her hands tightly, one around the other until her knuckles turned yellow-white. “At times,” she said very softly... paused... glanced at Aleytys, cool speculation in her large brown eyes.... Aleytys could feel the euphoria engendered by the healing and her own offer of aid dying into an everyday cynical suspicion of everyone and everything outside her tight little circle.... Picking her way carefully, the hiiri went on. “At times one is born, one with signs, when kuu swims in the house of Loki,

one who is... has... is a johtaja. In the time of wintering when the clans come together, if the signs are right..." The hiiri hesitated, flashed a swift glance at Aleytys, then went on. "For the woman trade. And sometimes a man is such... he has the power in him... he is johtaja... then he is... he... I don't know exactly how to say this, this damn language... he is named Paamies. For him the clans will fight forswearing even bloodfeud and deathright."

"Ah." Aleytys rubbed her fingers together, then examined her palms. "So you have a Paamies." She touched the rising excitement in the hiiri, the tough suspicious core. "And you work for him even here. That's the real reason you stay."

The hiiri fluttered her hands frantically. "No, you're wrong," she whispered urgently. "What could I do? Don't even think..."

"Calm down, Kitten. Forget it for now. How many hiiri in this place?"

Aamunkoitta bit her full lips and once again she knotted her fingers together. Then she pulled her hands apart and held them up. Each hand had three fingers and an opposable thumb. "Five hands plus three," she said huskily.

"Twenty-three... hm... think about this. If you want to get out, all of you, when I jump the wall, let me know."

"Jump the wall?" The sullen stupid mask slid back over her small sharp features.

"Hah!" Aleytys jumped to her feet. "Escape. Run away. Break out of this prison. And you know exactly what I mean."

"I have work here," Aamunkoitta said quietly.

"And I have thinking to do. You mind leaving me alone a while?"

Aamunkoitta got to her feet, dipped her body in a deep but graceful bow, and shuffled over the grass into the dark rectangle that marked the entranceway. Aleytys watched her go then stretched out full length on the stone bench, resting her head on her folded arms, letting the water music play over her tired body.

Chapter VIII

"Swardheld." Aleytys turned over and stretched out on the bench, clasping her hands behind her head, lazy and comfortable on the warm stone with the water magic from the dancing stream running along her nerves, soothing her into a glowing dream state. The breeze played in her hair, dancing the tendrils in small tickles around the edge of her face. "Open those black eyes and talk to me."

A deep chuckle vibrated within her. Eyes crinkling with laugh wrinkles, Swardheld rumbled, "*Guda morga, freyka*, A pleasant day."

She snorted laughter. "Nothing like a little exercise to warm up the body."

"Stirs the blood, sharpens the appetite."

“Makes colors brighter, smells stink stronger...” Aleytys wriggled on the bench, itching all over with erupting giggles. She wiped her streaming eyes. “Sweet bit of exercise. Minor surgery by an amateur cutter, a neat little whipping with near rape by a horny female bug. What have I left for spice in my life?” She giggled again, feeling absurdly content. “And here I am,” she murmured. “Talking to the inside of my head. Am I crazy?”

“And all this under a skimpy yellow sun.” His voice was full of mock sympathy and she felt the laughter behind it. “Know what you mean, freyka. A sun that’s worth having should compel a little respect. That pale thing up there... why, you could sit naked at noon.”

“You’re a dirty old man, Swardheld.” Then she lay back and closed her eyes. “Why are you, who are you, my friend?” The bubbling humor that filled her a moment before slid gently away. “What are you?” She tapped her temple and heard the faint delicate chime of the diadem. “What is this thing?”

She felt the hesitation but no aura of reluctance. Rather a search for words to explain a complicated state of being along with a fringe of uncertainty about just what she wanted. “You know my life,” she said impatiently. “You know how the diadem leeches onto me. Am I going to be another set of eyes in the back of some poor idiot’s mind? Is that what happened to you? Were you a person... Madar! You’re a person now... I think...” She frowned then sighed. “Ahai Madar, words are stubborn things.”

The rumbling chuckle blew like a bracing wind through her disordered mind. “A step at a time, freyka. You do hop about.”

“Well?”

“Yeah, time was I had a body of my own.”

“Oh?”

“That was a bit ago, freyka. Let me see...” The black eyes half closed in the effort of memory, then slid to the right. “Harskari.”

Yellow eyes opened. Aleytys went rigid at this sudden intimation of other personalities inhabiting her skull. A cool contralto answered Swardheld’s basso query. “Five thousand of Jaydugari triple-years, Swardheld Foersvarat.” The amber eyes shut and the new personality was wiped away.

“How many more of you in there?” She pushed herself up and sat stiffly erect on the bench, hands clutching at her temples, a tremor of fear sweeping through her body. Eyes shut, face twisted into a frown, she concentrated her being in a demand for answer.

“Just me.” Huge purple eyes blinked open, accompanied by an aura of charm and bright intelligence. “Shadith, singer and maker of songs, wanderer hither and yon about the universe. We are three, Aleytys. Sorceress. Singer. Swordbearer. Caught in a golden web spun by a spinner a thousand thousand years dead.”

Swardheld grunted. “She gets drunk on words, give her half a chance,” he explained gravely. “But if you listen long enough she usually says something worth listening to.”

Shadith’s voice, rich and filled with music, shining like spun silver, broke into an affectionate laugh. “He wants you to think his brain’s all muscle, but don’t believe it.” Aleytys glowed with the deep feeling the three shared, giving her a tentative comprehension that it might not be so bad after all to join these

phantoms. She shunted the thought aside for later consideration and turned her mind back to the expectant pairs of eyes.

“A step at a time. You’re the one I knew first, Swardheld. How’d the diadem find you?”

The black eyes narrowed, then Swardheld grunted. “Scram, Shadith. The child’s not used to all this yammer in her head.”

Aleytys thought suddenly, all I see are eyes, why am I so sure he’s male and she’s female? But the auras were so vivid there was no mistaking them.

With a ripple of laughter, Shadith acknowledged the thought, then turned her eyes to Swardheld. “Leave you with the stage, you mean, old growler.” The purple twinkled. “ ‘Bye, Aleytys. See you later.’”

Aleytys settled herself back on the bench, stretched out on her stomach, head resting on crossed arms, hair flowing over her shoulders. The breeze slipped along her back, ruffling the rose chiffon, playing in the strands of her hair while she gazed dreamily at the lacy shadow of the mimosoid playing on the surface of the water as the stream glided over a smooth patch of mottled gravel.

“Mmm.” The black eyes took on a long-distance stare. “Time past I was sired in the mountains of Eldstad.” He chuckled. “Grew to manhood there. I wasn’t what you’d call one of your better citizens. To be blunt, a damn nasty brat.”

Aleytys gasped. He twinkled at her. “I’ve had a few years to think, freyka. Don’t know why someone didn’t bust my head for me except my father was weapon smith to the Jaegere fa Poaeng. One thing I got was good training in two paths—metalworking and fighting. What with this and that, I left the borg before I spent fifteen winters. Stole a sword from the Jaegere. Repellent brat. I don’t doubt he was glad to see the back of me. But that sword’s the only thing kept me alive the next few years.” His voice slowed and the black eyes stared into the distance, through and far, far beyond the bone of her skull. Then he shook himself out of the reverie and went on.

“The land was cut into a hundred little fiefs. Always fighting. A couple big cities where the fiefholders called themselves kings. And they all had pampered cadres of mercenaries. A man who could swing a sword’d never starve. I learned a lot those days, had some of the rougher edges knocked off me mainforce, picked up a good double handful of dirty tricks in the fighting game, survived and got a little name for myself time I was nineteen. I didn’t give a damn about anything those days. Ignorant brawling lout keeping alive because I was quicker than most.

“I’d have drunk myself slow and dead except Ledare Noje Omkringska walked into my fate. The stupidity of Jaegere Tjockskelle had nearly got me killed so I cursed him to his face, kicked the teeth in on his official hero, and stormed out of borg Sjobarre barely ahead of a flight of arrows.

“By the time I came up with Omkringska I was sore as a bee-stung bear, hungry as a fimbul-winter wolf, and parched with a thirst water wouldn’t dent. I ran into him and he had a couple veterans hammer some sense in my thick head and fed me, then offered me employment.

“I said my head was thick, but I wasn’t stupid even then, just stubborn and hot-tempered. He was quite a man, cunning and ambition and courage enough to conquer the whole damn continent. Did it, too. Took him five years. Time enough to grow me out of my conceit. He took a liking to me, saw something in me no one else bothered to scrape the crust off to find. Taught me the difference between strategy and tactics. I guess every man needs someone to trust. He could have walked on me with red-hot spikes and

made me like it and he knew it. Ah well... he stuck those little fiefs together one after the other and made them like it, too.

“Five years. Then he had time to look around. Marry. Beget heirs for the dynasty... the old, old story... the woman betrayed him with her cousin, a greedy snotty little princelet... a pinch of poison finished him. Bitch tried for me too, but I was drunk to eat that night. All that fancy court life got on my nerves. But in the morning Omkringska was dead, the princelet giving orders, and I was running fast and light with an army on my tail.

“I wore out half a dozen horses keeping ahead of them. The only place left for me was my mountains. Even Omkringska’d left them alone. It’d take more than an army to tame those crags and the human rocks that lived in them. The last horse died in a rainstorm that turned to snow toward a black and icy morning. All I had left was the sword I brought out from the mountains and I was damned if I’d let them have that. So I came back to the mountains exactly as I left them, on foot with just a sword to keep me company.

“In the middle of the blizzard, to top everything, the earth started shaking. Behind me the mountain muttered and threw down enough rock to block the pass for which I gave thanks to the spirits of the earth. Then I was lost beyond finding, all the shapes so changed mountain and valley almost switched places in front of my straining eyes. But I didn’t have time to worry about that. My most pressing need was shelter. I stumbled into a steep-sided valley that cut most of the wind.

“That I was a dead man anyone would have said, but I was too cross-grained to agree. Fortunately the snow let up before I froze my butt off though my toes should have been a dead loss. The valley was a little cup with walls like... well, walls. What I could see of it, with dawn a gray cold light in the lowering sky, sent a chill not born of cold to my belly. Everything dead. The stink of death about the whole place. Not that I could smell much with a nose half froze off my face.

“When I started to get out of the demon-haunted place, a fork of lightning licked down out of the sky and hit a dead pine. It flared like it was all resin, fell against another tree, set it going. The warmth whispered to me and I swallowed my uneasiness. The fire warmed the chill out of me and warmed life back in. I found the remains of a wrecked spacer there too, next the fire. Didn’t know what it was those days, but it was shelter. I crawled inside after testing the walls to make sure they wouldn’t crumple on me and mashed old bones to dust before I noticed them in the dark dry interior.”

Purple eyes opened suddenly. Aleytys caught the impression of an impish grin. “Me,” Shadith said. “The clumsy oaf put his boots right in the middle of my poor little bones.”

Swardheld snorted. “You were done with them, weren’t you? She had the diadem round her skull. It suckered me like it did you. Without thinking I set it on my own head.” A mental shrug. “After a bit longer, well... here I am.”

Yellow eyes opened. Impression of a vast age and wisdom, warm compassion for frail humanity. Aleytys felt a tinge of the glow she got when she dipped into the power river and an awe that had her in mental obeisance before this one.

“Harskari.” Shadith sounded startled.

“How did you...*you*... get caught in this?” Aleytys swallowed nervously as soon as the words rushed out of her mouth.

Impression of a wry smile. “We all have our weak spots, Aleytys, cracks in the facade we present to the world. I loved a man, I thought we shared our delight and our dreams but I was more gifted and he was jealous. He knew me. Ah, he knew me. He fashioned the diadem for me with all the skill he had and all the fire of his envy-born hatred. Unfortunately I was so wrapped in my studies, so insensitive to him that he trapped me easily. However. . . .” The amber eyes flicked from the purple to the black. “If you want the story, I’ll tell it another time.” Harskari projected quiet amusement, the understanding and acceptance of foible glowing over them all.

“Listen, young Aleytys. Gapp has gone to the kipu about what happened here. You’ll be summoned soon. You’ve about. . . .” The eyes closed briefly. “About two hours to get ready to counter.”

Aleytys jumped up to stand trembling beside the bench, a sudden panic jarring through her. “What!” She wrung her hands. “What can I do? Tell me what to do.”

“Use your head. It’s a good one, Aleytys. Don’t start depending on us to do your thinking—that’s foolish and futile. We can and will aid once you sketch out a course of action. I will say this. Don’t run in circles. Make the kipu work for you.”

“How? Do you know. . . .”

“Not enough. Do you forget we are as strange here as you? Talk to Burash.”

“Burash?”

“He waits.” The amber eyes looked quietly amused. “To scrub your back.”

Aleytys tingled to the combined auras even after the yellow, black, and purple eyes were shut and the personalities faded. She staggered as she took a step, paused, disoriented, as she sought the outward world after the intense inward turning. She licked her lips and said the names like a litany. Swardheld. Shadith. Harskari. There wasn’t even an echo inside her head. She was alone.

Circling around the bench she ran toward the mahazh.

Chapter IX

Burash looked up as she came in. “You all right?” His betraying antennas flickered erratically, the iridescent colors rippling. “Do you want me or should I go?”

His anxiety hit her like a blow, sending blood in a crimson flush over her face. The phenomenon startled her into stopping to look at him, then, after a moment’s futile search to reduce the experience to something she could handle, she moved to the bed and knelt beside him. Still disturbed, she touched his cheek a second then settled herself beside him. “I’ve been thinking. . . .” She stirred and looked. “Where’s the hiiri?”

He flicked a finger at the tapestry. “In there.” Her eyebrows went up.

He nodded. “The old queen liked to keep hands and feet around her to run her errands and fuss when she felt like being fussed over, but she wouldn’t have them underfoot.”

“The old queen.” She took his hand and cuddled it in her lap running a forefinger up and down the length

of it while she thought. "You knew her well?" She watched intently as he answered.

He drew his antennas together in a taut tense curve. "I was her migru for the past year."

She smiled and cupped his captive hand around the side of her face. "Poor love. Can the hiiri hear us?"

"There's only that between us." He indicated the heavy tapestry. "Why?"

She shook her head vigorously, a warning in her sudden frown. "Did you fix my bath?"

"The water should still be hot." His eyebrows arched gently while his antennas tilted into interrogating curves.

She stretched and yawned. "Scrub my back?" In the bathroom she slipped off the crumpled chiffon, letting it fall into a rosy pool at her feet. As she sank down on the deep-piled rug, she murmured, "Tell me about her." She curled her fingers around his calf, briefly pleased by the warm alive feel of his flesh. "If the kipu thought the old queen had waked in me, what would she do?"

He stripped off his kilt and knelt beside her, touching his lips to her palm.

Impatiently she freed her hand and put it over his mouth. "There's no time." Against her fingers she could feel his mouth curve into a brief smile.

Pulling her hand down he said, "Gapp?"

"She's probably with the kipu now."

"That's all you can think of to fight her?"

"That's all."

"You'll never fool the kipu."

"Does it matter? If she sees the value for her in the illusion?"

"Ah." He radiated a shrewd appreciation with an underlying aroma of humor. After settling himself more comfortably, he pulled her against his shoulder and looked past her at the image of two of them in the full-length mirror. "Hm." His antennas swayed gently. "When the old bitch was irritated, she'd rub her left thumb over the back of her right hand. Is that what you want?"

Drowsily she nodded, her hair sliding over his chest. As he spoke, softly, slowly, thoughtfully, building a picture of an imperious complex devious old female, she recorded absently what he was saying but on another level of consciousness let her mind drift, staring into the mirror, examining him as he frowned at the slowly popping bubbles in the bathtub.

Blocking her empathic outreach she ran her eyes over his image as dispassionately as she could. His body was human, more or less, enough that there was no shock to her senses. But his face... huge black eyes, size of teacups, divided into hundreds of tiny octagonal facets, bulging from a narrow rather elegant face. A thin nose, sensitive and mobile mouth, pointed chin. Rising above all, the spectacular antennas, whose movements reflected his every mood. He was alien... she let the empathy flood back and the strangeness was gone, evanesced into the steamy air, the image was simply Burash, the total effect of

line, shape, form, dear because it was Burash, coalescing into a tenderness that she hesitated to call love because she fled the responsibility. As his voice sounded quietly in her ear, though, she admitted deep inside herself that her feeling for him transcended form and species.

Her body curved against his, a pale amber figure, slender, full-breasted, her long legs sprawled out over the brilliant colors of the lush rug, her red hair over her shoulders in undisciplined tangles, her blue-green eyes disconcertingly strange in shape and size as she lay half entangled in Burash's mind set. How strange, she thought, how alien I must have looked to him that day. Madar!—only the day before yesterday. But he didn't hesitate. He sensed my fear and my loneliness and responded instantly, warmly, without bounds. He crossed that species difference that shook me, still shakes me when I think about it, crossed it effortlessly, discovered somehow that likeness we share, part sexual response but going beyond the mere hunger of body for body to speak directly to... what should I call it, it sounds pretentious to say soul... to speak to that place where my essence abides.

Burash cupped his hand under her chin and tilted her face so that she was looking at him. "Where are you, Leyta? Have you heard a word I said?"

Aleytys blinked slowly. "I heard you. What drives the kipu?"

"Drives?" He shifted slightly, easing his cramped legs.

"Ambition. She needs the old one's backing and she likes holding the whip over nayids who despise her. The other cities out there..." He swung his hand in a half circle, calling to her memory the scattered buttes thrusting up out of the fertile plain, each one with a walled city at its base. "Every rab maku on the council of cityqueens has ambition as strong as hers. But they're all terrified of the old one and too jealous of each other to pool their strengths. As long as the kipu holds the queen, the kipu rules the kibrata." Then I'm the visible symbol of her power." She sat up and rubbed her hands together. "Good. That should give me the edge I need."

"More than that. She's just as frightened of the old one as the rest of them."

"Huh? You mean she really believes all that nonsense?"

"Nonsense?" He pressed his lips together and stared somberly down at his knees. "A thousand years prove otherwise, Leyta. A thousand heavy heavy years."

"So." She spread out a hand and contemplated the fingers. "One. Scare hell out of everyone I can with the gestures and other things you coach me in." She folded down her forefinger. "Two. Work on the kipu till she gets to wondering how her head is sitting on her shoulders." She folded the second finger down. "Three. Figure out a way to publicly support the kipu so she'll have a reason to bolster the illusion." She pressed the third finger down. "Four. Demand as much freedom as I can get." Smiling tautly at him she pressed down her last finger and closed her thumb over her head.

Burash jumped to his feet and moved quickly to the dressing table. Over his shoulder he said, "You said two hours?"

"Yes." She looked at him curiously. "Why?"

He came back, his hands full of bone hairpins. "There's still time for bath and time for rehearsing." He knelt beside her and twisted the long hair into a knot on top of her head, driving the pins in with swift efficient flicks of his fingers. "And I'll have to find the right thing for you to wear."

An hour later Aleytys slipped her arms into the sleeves of a blue-green velvet robe heavily embroidered with knobby gold thread in the ubiquitous floral patterns. Burash smoothed the folds over her breasts, pulling them into rigid formal lines from shoulder to foot. "Remember, the old one was nonstop conscious of her clothes and her postures. She studied effect at all times, seldom moved spontaneously except under the influence of extreme irritation. Keep yourself in hand always, Leyta. You can't afford a slip, especially since this is so alien to your temperament." He stood up and touched her cheek very gently.

She moved her head slightly and touched her lips to his palm, then backed off and danced lightly in a circle, laughing and swinging her arms around in wide circles, tangling her hair and destroying the neat formality of the folds.

"Leyta!"

"A last fling, Burash." She quieted and smoothed out the tangles. As her hands caressed the sensuously soft material, she slanted a glance at Burash. "Where'd you get this gorgeous thing?"

"Don't ask, love."

"He grinned at her. "Watch the hem, Leyta. I had to cut off the bottom or you'd be drowning in the folds. Now. Don't muss yourself again; Sukall should be here any minute. You remember the lift?"

"I think you're more nervous than I am. Of course I remember." She laughed then sobered as the sound grew shriller than she liked. "Or maybe you're not. I wish the waiting were done."

"Stand a minute." He dived into the tapestry and came out again carrying a chair, heavy, intricately carved, like a throne with arms. Grunting with the effort he placed it carefully in front of the footboard of the bed, centering it with micrometer fastidiousness. Then he fetched a matching footstool. "Now. Sit down and let me fix you."

Aleytys clambered into the chair, moving with some difficulty as it was sized for the two and half meters of nayid. Sitting with her shorter legs dangling she felt like a child and danced her fingers along the arms, in her nervous irritation unable to sit still.

Burash pushed the footstool closer and smoothed the folds around her feet. Her toes protruded from beneath the hem of the garment. Giggling, she wiggled them, watching the pale gold digits move.

He clucked with disapproval, clicking his tongue against his palate.

Aleytys swallowed. Closing her eyes she breathed with deliberate slowness, striving to calm herself so that she could concentrate on the coming ordeal without distraction from her own body. After a minute she leaned back in the chair, resting her head against the carved wood. Opening her eyes she smiled reassuringly at the worried face hovering beside her. "Shouldn't I have shoes on?"

He frowned. "I didn't think of that. Let me..." He hurried away and came back with a small ceramic jar. "What's that?"

"Henna for your palms and the soles of your feet." He pulled the top off and dipped a finger into the creamy red substance. "Hold out your hands."

After Burash finished his fussing over her and vanished tactfully into the hidden waiting room where the

hiiri still crouched, the minutes crept by on leaden feet for Aleytys. She grew stiff and tired in her stately pose, but didn't dare lean back and relax. Hands clasped loosely in her lap she closed her eyes and murmured, "Harskari. Harskari, talk to me."

The amber eyes opened and once again Aleytys felt with awe and almost terror the aura of immense age and wisdom projected by the presence of the sorceress waking inside her. "Do you mind?" Her whisper was a stammered apology for disturbing Harskari. "I need reassurance like a baby needs patting," she breathed.

"You've chosen your course, Aleytys." The words were calm and unhurried. "What more do you want? Approval?" Aleytys sensed a mental shrug. "I gave the only advice I could. Consult Burash. You did and made this plan. Very well. Will it succeed? If I could read the future would I be here? Have you considered the needs and skills of the persons involved? Yes. Can you control chance events? No. If you fail now, can you try again, something else better suited to the situation having learned from experience? Yes. You know all this, it's simply your nerves chattering at the delay. Relax. Sukall comes. She'll be here in a minute." The amber eyes suddenly crinkled into a fault smile. "One thing you did forget, child. The kipu's instruments will detect the absence of the damper. No. Don't fly into a panic. I can handle that for you."

Aleytys clenched her fingers into fists and expelled a lungful of air in a short explosive burst "What else have I forgotten?"

The yellow eyes blinked thoughtfully then snapped wide. "Sit up straight. Get yourself in hand. Sukall comes."

The tapestry rattled its rings and a red-clad guard stepped briskly into the room. When she saw Aleytys sitting with regal calm waiting for her, her stubby antennas jerked in surprise.

"Good." Aleytys spoke crisply before the guard could say a word. "I have serious complaints to lay before the kipu."

The guard jerked her eyes from Aleytys' hands where her left thumb was rubbing slowly back and forth over the back of her right hand. She swallowed then stiffened into military rigidity.

Just as the guard began to speak, Aleytys moved her hand in a small imperious gesture. "Key the lift," she said, her voice cool and soft.

Sukall hesitated a second, then marched to the wall, swept the tapestry aside, and slapped her palm over the inset square of milky glass. As the carved panel slid silently into the stone, Aleytys slipped from the chair, smoothed the folds of her robe, and walked with ostentatious grace past the guard into the tall narrow lift. Turning to face the doorway she compressed her lips into an impatient line and once more caressed the back of her hand with her thumb.

Sukall glanced warily at the moving hands. She stepped inside, tapped the two-square, then faced front as the door slid shut and the floor began to rise beneath their feet. Aleytys disciplined sternly the thrill of fear that clutched briefly at her viscera, remembering....

"The old one always used it," Burash said. "When she wanted to talk to the kipu. Until she was room-bound."

"What's a lift?" Meeting his stare of surprise, Aleytys spread out her hands. "In my homeland,

the fanciest machine we had was a creaky old water mill we used to grind flour and run thread spinners. We lived by the skill of our hands, the strength of our animals.”

She pulled her mind back to the present while the floor surged gently upward under her feet. As her brief panic diminished, a sense of exultation grew in her, a feeling of victory anticipated, engendered by the mixture of confusion and fear radiating from the gray-haired veteran staring grimly at the front wall.

The lift shuddered to a stop and the panel slid open. Sukall started to step out.

“Behind me!” Aleytys said curtly. As the guard hesitated, she swept past her into the kipu’s private office. Without pausing, walking with studied grace, she crossed the office and stopped in front of the scarlet tapestry shutting off the archway. “Well?”

Sukall hastened to her side and lifted the tapestry out of her way. Without acknowledgment Aleytys stepped through the arch and moved daintily, swaying toward the kipu’s table-desk, hands tucked formally into the wide sleeves of the robe, back and head regally erect, face a glacial mask.

The kipu was too busy with Asshrud whining at her and Gapp shrilling abuse to notice Aleytys until she stepped behind the table and stood beside the high-backed chair, facing Asshrud and Gapp, an expression of faint distaste on her face.

“Parakhuzerim?” Curiosity and a rising anger rang in the lilting syllables. The kipu tapped irritably on the table with the fingers of her right hand.

Aleytys slid her own right hand out of the left sleeve and held it up, forefinger straight, the other gently curved, silencing the kipu with a gesture that jolted like an electric shock through the arrogant nayid. Aleytys sensed it and found it briefly hard to keep her pose but anger at her own stupidity steadied her and she flicked that extended finger around at Asshrud. “Shiru madis, your misshapen ugliness continues to offend me. Take yourself off.” She turned her shoulder on the trembling nayid and stared calmly and coldly at Gapp.

“Bu... bu... but...” Asshrud stammered, her beefy jowls quivering absurdly. “You can’t do that.”

The kipu looked thoughtfully at Aleytys then at Asshrud. Aleytys could feel her calculating against a background of fault perturbation. Abruptly she made her decision. “Asshrud, well continue this discussion later. Return to queen level.” Ignoring the offended outburst from Asshrud, she continued, “Sabut Ishat, escort the Belit to her rooms.”

Still protesting, Asshrud waddled out of the room just ahead of the bored guard.

Gapp giggled shrilly, but her laughter trailed off as she met Aleytys’ icy glare. “*Um alpitta*,” the young nayid snarled, her dissolute face contorting into a sulky frown. “Ardana. Slave,” she jeered. “Crawl back in your little hole.”

Aleytys lifted her head again, cutting off the tirade. “Useless empty-headed hatchling,” she said softly. Both hands were out of the sleeves now, the left thumb caressing the back of the right hand. “Self-indulgent brainless kalamat, you will take your feeble pretensions away from me. You will remember your place. You will cease annoying me with your puerile jabberings.” Her quiet acid-drenched words drove the color from the young nayid’s face, dredging up nightmare memories in her of countless skin-peelings the old one had given her in times past.

The kipu radiated indecision briefly and the tinge of fear grew momentarily stronger, but over all of this the hot green glow of corrosive ambition. The kipu despised thoroughly most of the intelligent entities she knew, the only one she had ever really respected was the old one and that because the old queen held her in a strangle-grip of fear. She tapped her thumb against her teeth, then slapped her hand flat on the table. “Enough of this. Gapp, take yourself out of here. Play your tricks with those who don’t object to them. Or can’t object. And don’t come whining to me when your pleasure objects prove to be unmanageable.”

“But...” Gapp began to recover her own arrogance. “You promised me. You said...”

“Nothing. You dispute with me?” Her flexible rich voice lowered to a harsh guttural whisper, reducing the lilt to a rhythmic screech. Gapp stared, astounded, her slack mouth gaping open.

“But...” She opened and closed her mouth like a fish. “But, kipu, aren’t you forgetting...”

The kipu slapped her hand down again, the loud splat breaking into Gapp’s speech. “I forget nothing. Ahrib, escort this Belit from here.”

“No!” Gapp shrieked. “No, not for that fakery, that slave, that imitation sarrrt...”

“This ranting offends my ears.” The soft drawled words burned through the noisy shrieks. Both the kipu and Gapp turned to stare at Aleytys.

Again her thumb was caressing her wrist; a small muscle jumped at the corner of her mouth, marring her icy supercilious mask. Inside, she whispered to Harskari to hold hard and she dared gather gloom and deep purple discouragement and hurl it at Gapp like an overripe tomato to splatter over the web of nerve synapse and jerking reflex she called her soul. Gapp shriveled. She wheeled and plunged out of the room in a frantic drive to escape the awful place, followed by an awed and frightened guard.

Aleytys allowed herself a slight smile. She reached out her left hand and tapped gently on the table catching the kipu’s attention. “We have talking to do.” She raised her right hand and turned her pointing forefinger in a slow horizontal circle. “There are too many ears out here.”

Chapter X

Aleytys stepped on the footstool and lowered herself into the throne chair in the kipu’s private office. Taking care to make no awkward movements she settled herself in the chair, smoothed the robe into its tiers of formal folds, and nodded at last to the kipu to sit down. Sukall stationed herself next to the archway, her austere face with military rigidity.

Thoughtfully Aleytys probed at the guard. Sukall looked like a pillar of granite. Aleytys stretched her hands over the arms, fingers reaching toward the clawed ends and tapping impatiently when her hands fell short. Sukall. Her surface was a lie. Inside she quivered shapelessly as an amoeba. The veteran guard who had survived her palace years by her clever adaptation to changing circumstance was finding herself abruptly awash in uncertainty. Nurtured in the hothouse of palace throat-cutting and back-stabbing, she suspected that Aleytys was playing a game. Her problem lay in choosing the attitude that promised the biggest return. Still, no one knew how the queen egg would react, especially in such outre circumstances. If the old bitch was coming awake... Gods! A thousand years was a long stranglehold on a people’s spirit So Sukall floundered and clung to the kipu as the strongest pole in the strengthening maelstrom.

And she's right, Aleytys thought. The kipu radiated a calm skepticism, a tinge of fear, a very small tinge, and a large helping of curiosity.

"I'm bored." The words broke the silence. The kipu's face kept its calm attentive look, but her antennas twitched briefly. "It isn't enough, that room and the garden." Aleytys smiled as her fingers traced small circles on the polished wood.

"Birka would like finding you out from behind the walls," the kipu said softly. "Or Arikin." She waited for comment but Aleytys simply tapped her fingers on the chair arms, her fingernails clicking lightly in the heavy silence that hung between them. "You're too vulnerable outside the walls."

"Mm. No. I think not. It might be a strong advantage for the people of the city to see and touch and know me." She lifted her hands, pressed the palms together and touched the tips of her joined forefingers against her lips, the longer middle finger fitting just below her nose, then she lowered the hands and rested them palm up on her thighs. Staring thoughtfully down into the palms, she could feel the idea working in the kipu's mind, feeding her ambitions. "Rumors," she said thoughtfully, enunciating each syllable with sculptured precision. "Rumors can be more dangerous than guns."

"An interesting thought. A sudden unannounced excursion. To let the people know their sarrat watches over their welfare." She smiled. "It will be arranged."

"Good. I rely on you. Anesh..." The kipu lifted her head and stared, startled to hear her seldom-used personal name. Ignoring this, Aleytys raised her hands and held them out, lifting them in a graceful arc. "You neglect me, my friend."

"Neglect?" The kipu relaxed again, waiting alertly for the new developments promised in the words.

"My jewels. I want them. My rings, bracelets. I want them. I find this plainness distasteful. Besides, how can I meet people stripped like a slave?"

"Ah." The kipu touched her fingers to her forehead and lips. "I am remiss. They will be dispatched immediately to your quarters." The kipu smiled broadly, with the charm of a hungry shark. "How am I to address you?"

Inside, Aleytys bubbled with appreciation. Force me to make my claim, she thought. Make me say it so she can repudiate the impudence of a slave if she finds it to her advantage. Or see how fast and carefully you can think, came the whisper in the back of her mind accompanied by a vivid purple flash. Shadith winked a cheerful eye at her.

"The name of this body is Aleytys," she said softly. Once again her hands rested lightly on the chair arms. "Wasn't it carefully chosen?"

"A thousand worlds were combed to find it." There was only the slightest touch of sarcasm in the kipu's voice.

Aleytys bowed her head in appreciation and her mouth twitched into a slight smile. "Then perhaps the best name for the condition here is Damiktana, the chosen one.

"It will be so proclaimed." The kipu relaxed and watched her with open curiosity. Aleytys felt the confidence flowing into her and pressed her advantage. "I feel that a formal inspection of the mahazh would be appropriate and good for the morale of the services. It has seemed to me that there are those

who give... hm... less than their full heart to their sworn leaders. If we studied the rosters... you understand?"

The kipu's black faceted eyes glittered reflecting the hot interest inside her, responding to the cunning offered her. She turned her head slightly, focusing a part of her attention on Sukall, then turned back. "The progress must be very carefully planned," she said slowly.

"Indeed." Aleytys swept the room with her own eyes. "I think you had better bring the required documents to the garden. We could begin the planning tomorrow."

"The garden?"

Aleytys hesitated. Then she said firmly, "The garden."

"Ah." The nayid placed her six-fingered hands palm to palm. "I'll join you tomorrow after the morning meal. No rain is forecast. The day should be warm and clear."

"Beyond this, there might be a council of cityqueens soon." Sudden suspicion chilled the kipu's rising amusement "You think it necessary? Damiktana?"

"Oh yes. Rumors, as I said before, can be dangerous as well as useful. It would be interesting to see what groupings, subtle groupings, you understand, can be found among them. For the smooth flow of blood in the body clots are dangerous and must be broken up or they lead to strokes, even death to the body. Their reactions to me should be... revealing. Clots in the body politic. There are various medicines that can be injected into the blood to cure this condition. Also at times radical surgery is required. For the health of the body." She tapped gently on the wood. "The Damiktana would not be present at the council of course, but perhaps a party afterward, music, food, drinks...."

Aleytys sensed a slow lessening of the skepticism in the kipu, apparently these answers were beginning to convince her since they seemed to fit the old one's style of devious thought. She almost snorted in disgust. *No other life form could be superior to mine... that idea has destroyed more than one*, whispered Harskari in the back of her head. *Don't underestimate her*, the soft ghost words warned. *for this blindness, don't overestimate the strength of this chauvinism, she got where she is through a shrewd understanding of nayid nature combined with sharp intelligence, watch your own blindness, my dear*. The glow vanished, the faint words trailed off, she was on her own again. Unaware of the whispered commentary, the kipu nodded gravely. "It will be done. Have you other suggestions, Damiktana?"

"Two things. I need clothing suited to this body. And for my feet." She thrust them from beneath the robe. "You see?"

"Yes?"

"The trader from Starcity could provide these things. It seems wise to me that he be convinced of the wealth and power of the leadership." She stared coolly into the black eyes. "I have the feeling he would not mind conflict among the cities, since this would create new markets for his arms. Indeed peace would not be very profitable for him so he needs to be gently nudged into a state of righteousness." She tapped her fingers on the wood. "The orderly transfer of power to be stressed. Touch on both sides of the... shall we say, the difficulty."

"A good word." Her antennas twitched jauntily. "I believe we can furnish sufficient personal adornment

for your excursion to the market and . . .” The expressive antennas dipped forward with alert amusement. “And the expedition through the mahazh. Next week will be soon enough for the trader.

Aleytys brought her hands together. The muscle began jumping again at the corner of her mouth. She stared coldly at the kipu, then with carefully evident effort she curved her lips into a smile. “What must be . . .” She looked thoughtfully at her hands, and rested them on the smooth wood of the chair arm. “I will remember.”

“Of course, Damiktana,” the kipu said smoothly then stood up with a bit more relief than she meant to show. “Is there anything else, Any other way I can serve you?”

“Yes. One thing. Or rather, two. Gapp. If she comes for me again, I’ll kill her. Keep that empty-headed voluptuary out of my sight. And while you’re doing that, change the guard on my room. She is insolent, uncooperative and far too susceptible to persuasion from Gapp.”

“Of course.” The kipu called over her shoulder, “Sukall, come here.” She faced Aleytys again. “If you’re finished, Damiktana, I’d best get started processing your suggestions.”

Aleytys dipped her head in a graceful arc.

“Sukall, escort the Damiktana back to her rooms. Remain on guard there and send the present guard to me. Clear?”

“Clear.”

Aleytys watched the kipu back out of the small room, her body curved in mocking exaggeration of respect.

Chapter XI

Ignoring the trailing Sukall, Aleytys swept into the bedroom, holding her rising excitement down, clinging to Burash’s instructions. . . be conscious of your body at all times. Never make an unconsidered movement; never move fast unless absolutely necessary, never never never. . . she heard the crisp military click-clack of the guard’s boots cross the room behind her, heard the rattle of the rings that held the tapestry, and finally a subdued and brief sound of voices.

Standing posed like a statue in the empty rectangle in the glass wall, looking blank faced at the garden which lay golden and drowsy in the afternoon heat, she heard the faint departing clicks of the hostile blue guard’s boots. Speaking deep in her throat, she drawled softly, “Burash.”

He came through the wall tapestry and stood beside her, his excitement barely restrained, antennas tick-tocking nervously back and forth like an opulent metronome. “Well?”

She walked with slow and stately grace out into the garden, feeling his anxiety and barely contained agitation, hearing his breath coming in harsh short gasps. Slowly she lifted her arms, touched her hair with probing fingers, then she swung around, her face split into an exuberant grin. She tore the pins out of her hair and shook the flaming strands free. “Yes,” she cried. “Yes, yes, yes, she bought it.” She wheeled around and around in a wild dance laughing in time to the pattering of her bare feet on the grass. “She believes it just a little. Sometimes. Just a little but enough, enough, enough.” She threw the words at him over her shoulder, ran her fingers through her hair and danced around him. “Madar, how did the old bitch

stand all that posturing? I was ready to scream.” Her words dissolved into laughter again and she ran away from him toward the live oak.

“Leyta.” Burash hastened after her. “Calm down a little.”

She blew a kiss at him over her shoulder, then jumped on the low arching limb and ran along it until she was standing out over the middle of the stream. Burash gasped and wrenched his eyes away from her. He stopped running and stood staring resolutely at the grass. For the first time her laughter sounded cruel to him. She was so preoccupied with herself that she’d forgotten all about him. The image of her leaning against the limb shuddered through him and he felt suddenly chilled, alien, left outside, left behind... left behind... the thought tumbled around and around in his head.

Shoulders bent beneath the burden in his mind, eyes on the ground lest he look at that mind-shaking view of Aleytys perched so precariously on her tree limb, he shuffled back toward the mahazh radiating black depression.

A hand touched him. Aleytys, face troubled, stepped in front of him. “I’m sorry. I’m a fool. I forgot...” Her hands touched his arms, his face, his chest with little patting movements. “It’s just that... no. No excuses. Please?”

He caught hold of the distressed fluttering hands and kissed the tips of her fingers. “Sh, Leyta.” His face dropped into quiet sadness. “I suddenly saw the future, our future, just a little too clearly.”

Aleytys tugged her hands free. “Ahai! Why do things have to be so complicated!” She swung around. “Come. Let’s go sit on the bench. We’ve got things to talk about.”

“No. Where we were this morning.” He looked startled. “Only this morning? Seems like a week has passed since then.” He glanced up at the sky. “The sun’s still an hour from setting. Can you believe that?”

Aleytys shook her head soberly, then laughter rose in her. “I missed out on lunch completely. I’m starved.” She put a hand on her stomach. “Hollow! I can feel my backbone from the front.”

He chuckled. “You’ve convinced me of the reality of all this. There’s nothing like a few hunger pangs to restore one to solid earth.”

They pushed through the heavy growth of bamboo and settled onto the warm sunlit grass. Aleytys lay back and smiled into the sky. “My suns would strip your skin off if we lay like this on my own world during high heat.”

Burash tapped her lips lightly with his forefinger. “Tell me about it, Leyta. What happened with the kipu?”

Aleytys sat up and tugged at the fastenings of the robe. “This thing is scratching me.” She jumped to her feet and ran to the stand of bamboo, the robe trailing out behind her. Slipping out of it, she hung it over the outstretched limb of a mimosoid that had somehow struggled through the matted roots of the bamboo and raised its head high enough to cast a dappled shade over part of the small clearing. Burash watched with amused exasperation. When she curled herself beside him once again, he said dryly, “If you expect me to make love to you again, Leyta, you overestimate my capacity.”

She laughed. “I was just being female. Didn’t want to muss my pretty dress.” She stretched out on the grass and sighed with pleasure as the warmth from the yellow sun hanging low in the western sky bathed

her tired body. “So. This is what resulted. I’ll get out of this prison. On a short leash, of course. But enough to get a closer look at what lies outside the walls. You know...” She ran her fingers up and down her body between her breasts, neck to navel and back again, staring thoughtfully into the sky. “That could be useful. Hm. In a day or so we’re going on a magnificent bust through the mahazh with all the pomp and ceremony the kipu can contrive, me with my eyes as wide open as I can contrive.” She flipped an arm at the gray stone wall distantly visible. “Especially the top where they keep the skimmers. And she’s going to get the trader from the city to bring me clothes and things. Later there’s to be a party with all the cityqueens and the trader and anyone else she thinks needs impressing.”

He sat with his arms wrapped around his legs, thoughtfully gazing down at her. “She’ll watch you all the time.”

Aleytys rubbed her nose. “I know. But I’ll be getting something she can’t keep away from me.”

“Oh?”

“Information. Until I know... and I mean *know*... what’s out there, I couldn’t possibly get anywhere with a plan for escaping.”

“Leyta...” His antennas drooped as did the corners of his mouth. He bent over and touched her leg. “Why escape? Don’t you realize there’s no escape for you?” He wrapped his fingers around the curve of her thigh. “There’s no doctor alive who could cut that thing out of you now. At least you’re comfortable here. You’ve got a year left, less a few days. Why not spend it...”

“A slave?” She sat up. “No thanks.” She stared down at hands clenched into fists. Opening her fingers so that they rested on her thighs, she said slowly, “I have resources I can’t talk to you about. There’ll be a way, Burash.” She rested a hand briefly on his shoulder. “It’s part your child too, don’t you...”

“Leyta.” He shook his head. “No. I can’t think of it as a child. No. It’s the old queen there. A horror, a monstrosity this world would be better without.” He lifted her hand to his lips. “Were the child ours, I would cherish it though it were to be hatched from my own body. I hated her. She disgusted me. They fed me drugs, the kipu organized that to keep the old one happy, or I’d have been limp as a three-day-gone fish. I hated her.” His voice trailed off and he looked sick.

Aleytys sat silent fending off the unhappiness he was radiating. Silence stretched between them as the shadow from the mimosoid crept to her toes and slid quietly over her feet “Will you come with me?” she asked suddenly.

“With you?”

“Off world.”

“Off world.” He closed his hand over her ankle. “Would you stay with me, Leyta? On my homeland, Seb?”

“I can’t.” She watched him with a troubled face. “I can’t,” she repeated unhappily.

He nodded. “I thought so. And I can’t go with you, Leyta. What would I do out there? What could I do?” A twisted smile on his face, he tapped his fingers along her leg. “Don’t ask me to whore for you, my love. Wouldn’t that be my only use to you?”

“Burash...” She plucked in blades of grass. “I can’t stay, I can’t. I have a son. I have a quest. Did I tell you?”

“Quest?” He looked startled.

“To find my mother’s world. To find a home for myself and my son. And perhaps for a man I knew. A thief called Miks Stavver.”

“Then we accept what has to be.” Burash sighed and smoothed his hand over her thigh. “Come. Take your mind away from all these sad things, Leyta. Look, I’ll go hang up your dress and get you something to wear. You rest here, get your mind straight.”

Aleytys looked up at him through the veiling of her hair. She managed a smile. “I don’t deserve you.”

He brushed the fluttering tangles out of her eyes. “That’s a sorry state of mind.”

“I suppose I’m tired.”

“Too much up and down, Leyta. Try for moderation, will you?”

She chuckled tiredly. “A little sunshine and a little sleep.” Laughter danced in her eyes. “And a little loving, maybe, when the moon, the single moon in this poverty-stricken sky, slides down the sky to morning?”

“And now you’re a song spinner?” He caught her chin and swung her face up to him, laughing as she protested. “Where’s the moderation in this?”

“I make a bargain. Sleep, love, and get your strength back. And I’ll work on the ups and downs and practice being the old bitch till I scare the teeth out of all these... hah!”

“Moderation?” She grinned sleepily at him, turning onto her stomach. He rubbed his hands gently along her spine. “You can’t help it, I suppose. Up and down. Up and down.”

Her eyes closed, the world noise blurring in her ears. As her breathing slowed and steadied, Burash stopped his massage and stood up. “I’ll come back when the sun goes down to wake you, Leyta.” He shook his head and moved to the tree where the robe was swaying gently in the rising wind.

Chapter XII

Aleytys floundered out of a deep sleep, coming slowly conscious under the pull of small hands tugging at her shoulder. For an endless moment her heart raced faster as her arms and legs lay log-like in a temporary paralysis then, an eyeblink later, the paralysis surrendered and she jerked up, pulling away from the hands, bumping into Burash and waking him as she peered into the darkness trying to find the owner of the hands.

“Kunniakas.” The word was a tiny thread of sound barely louder than her own breathing. Aleytys scrambled to the side of the bed.

Aamunkoitta crouched, head level with the mattress, almost completely hidden in the folds of the bed curtain.

“How...” Aleytys bent lower so she could see the hiiri’s face. “You’re crazy to be here, Kitten.” She kept her own voice low, glancing apprehensively at the silent archway.

“Help me.” The hiiri fixed her dark eyes imploringly on Aleytys’ face. Then she gasped and nearly fell over as Burash’s head appeared behind Aleytys’ shoulder. “No.” She clawed at the muffling curtain, sobbing in her frantic struggles to get away.

Aleytys seized hold of one of the flying hands. “Stupid,” she hissed. “He won’t hurt you. Stop it.”

Burash cupped his hand around her shoulder. “Leyta, for all she knows...” He slid around her and off the bed, ending up on his knees beside the sobbing panting hiiri. “Hush, little one.” He touched her shoulder then pulled his hand away as she tried to bite him. “No need to fear me. I’m more powerless than you. Quiet, child.” He caught hold of a flying hand and held it firmly. “Look at me. If I wanted to make trouble, all I’d have to do is call the guard. Out there.” Her struggles lessened. “Yes, just out there.” He jerked his head at the archway.

The sense of his whispered words trickled through her terror. She quieted, kneeling beside the bed. Slowly intelligence flowed back into her face. “Kunniakas,” she breathed. “Would he betray you?”

“No. Never.” Aleytys slid off the bed and stood beside the kneeling figures. “Kitten.” She touched the hiiri on the top of her head. “What’s wrong? It must be serious to drive you to take this risk.” In the darkness she could see Aamunkoitta’s small teeth shining against her dark skin as she chewed irresolutely on her lower lip. She was desperately anxious but her sidelong glances at Burash attested to her lingering distrust of the nayid.

Then she jumped to her feet. “Come,” she whispered.

Shivering slightly as the air from outside crept past their bed-warmth, Aleytys and Burash followed Aamunkoitta outside into the garden.

A man’s body lay huddled in the shadow next to the wall near where the stream passed out of the garden through a heavy grating, his crude blood-crusting bandages gleaming like mottled snow in the moonlight. As they came closer Aleytys saw his chest heaving in his struggles to breathe, heard the air sobbing and rasping in his throat. His eyes were dull, half-shut, but he clung to consciousness, held to it by a will evident in the taut muscles of his face and neck.

Aamunkoitta dropped to her knees beside him and looked over her shoulder at Aleytys, her face mirroring her agony and fear. “Heal him. Please? Please, Kunniakas?” Her eyes slid off Aleytys and fixed on Burash. She began to tremble. Aleytys felt the whirlwind of anger, anxiety, hatred, awe, fear wheeling out of the hiiri.

“Yes, of course,” she said reassuringly. She knelt beside the straining hiiri male. Tentatively she probed at the wounds, but the chill of the air distracted her. “Burash.”

He touched her shoulder. “Leyta?”

“I’m cold. Would you get me a robe?”

He looked down at himself, chuckling. “Not dressed for the occasion are we. Back in a minute.” He turned to go.

“No!” In a panic again the hiiri exploded. “No! He’ll call the guard.” She ran around in front of him and stood glaring at him, interposing her body between him and the mahazh.

“Aamunkoitta!” Aleytys twisted around and glared at her. “Fool! If you won’t trust him, what can you do?” She rested her hand on the wounded hiiri’s shoulder. “Can this one move? Look at him. And, dammit, the more you distract me, the closer he gets to dying. Make up your mind.”

“Ah!” The hiiri flung out her hands and moaned her distress. “No.” She fell to her knees and hid her face in her hands for a long minute. Then she dropped her hands onto her knees and said sullenly, “I can get your robe.”

“No. Come here.” Aleytys frowned and jerked her shoulders impatiently. “I’m sick of people using me. Either we’re companions helping one another out of need or forget it, Aamunkoitta.” She stood, dusted off her knees, straightened with an angry scowl on her face. “Well?”

Aamunkoitta’s eyes moved from the silent nayid to the wounded hiiri who struggled to breathe, moaning faintly, even his driving will unable to repress the sounds that agonizing pain forced out of him.

Aleytys broke the strained silence. “Burash is a nayid. All right. But he’s a slave here. Like you. Like me. His people are in another place. He owes these no loyalty.” She sighed. Kneeling again beside the wounded hiiri, she laid her hands on his laboring chest and said very softly, “Time is running out. Choose.”

Burash moved to the trembling little figure. “Aamunkoitta,” he said softly. She lifted her head and gazed up at him, her dark eyes gleaming from a face leached of all color by the hue-swallowing moonlight. “Aleytys is right. What I owe these river pigs is a dead brother a dead sister. Perhaps...” His antennas twitching briefly, he smiled at her. “These are not my clan.”

Aamunkoitta stared, startled again. Burash touched her shoulder and felt her shudder. He let his hand rest there and stood quietly beside her until the shuddering lessened. She sighed. “Go,” she muttered.

Burash nodded and trotted back into the building.

Aamunkoitta watched him go, terror rising in her again. Resolutely she stood and crossed the short stretch of grass and knelt beside Aleytys. “Can you help him?”

Aleytys’ face turned soft, vague, eyes staring into a distance the hiiri couldn’t even imagine. As her hands fluttered like white moths over the battered body, she swam in a black river, immersed in the symbolic magic of the power-river coiling around the stars, black waters singing their illusive hum of power, a music that flowed around her brain, warming her, caressing her, filling her until the power lapped over and slid in a wild torrent through her arms, a torrent that she directed and controlled more surely each time she summoned it.

It flowed into the dying lacerated body and filled it, driving death back with the strength of its pseudo-life, somehow... somehow, she was dimly aware... changing into flesh just as the food she ate changed into her own flesh, she didn’t know how it happened, not really, though when she thought of it she thought of logs feeding fire to warm the outside of the body, but even that was a mysterious process, the way her body changed food into life without her mind being aware of the process, this flood of strange power flowing through her groping fingers was the same, the same changing from the black water of her mind image into the man’s flesh so that the wounds healed themselves, the holes gouged in his flesh

filled with new flesh, strong healthy flesh, and the blackened charred skin was absorbed and changed, new healthy skin moving inexorably over the terrible burns so that when she took her hands away and fell back trembling with a terrible weariness, the only marks of his passage with death were the blood-encrusted rags that fell from his body as he sat up and looked dazedly around, his face slack with astonishment.

Burash caught Aleytys as she crumpled and wrapped a soft robe around her aching weary body. She smiled her thanks, content to rest against him, in touch with the ground, the good feeling of the earth beneath her, a warm flow of energy coming into her body from the elemental center of Irsud. For the first time she felt the world itself welcoming her. She closed her eyes and greeted them with respect and simple pleasure.

A sharp exclamation woke her from that dreamy lassitude.

The hiiri male was on his feet, a knife suddenly in his hand. "Hyonteinen!" With a low hoarse hissing cry he leaped at the nayid, one foot catching Aleytys painfully in the shoulder as he began the leap.

Burash rolled out of the way, escaping the vicious slash of the knife only because the hiiri was still dazed from the healing and off balance from hitting Aleytys on his way up. He scrambled to his feet and backed warily away as the hiiri rolled erect. "No," he blurted. "Don't. I'm not. . . ." He threw himself aside as the hiiri laughed at him again.

Aamunkoitta threw him off stride, clutching at his leg as he swept past her. "No," she hissed. "He's with us."

The hiiri shook her off and began stalking Burash, so intent on his prey he ignored both Aleytys and Aamunkoitta. "Hyonteinen," he whispered, his mouth stretched in a fierce killing smile.

"Do something," Aamunkoitta wailed frantically. "He won't listen to me. He's in the surrinhukkua, the killing frenzy, won't stop until he's killed him."

Afraid to turn his back on his stalker, helpless to fight him, Burash backed frantically away, but he made no sound, even in his terror. Aleytys stared, too startled to react.

Aamunkoitta beat her with her small fists. "Do something," she cried. "Look. . . look. . . hurry?"

Burash leaped back again, but this time the knife caught him and blood spurted from his outflung arm.

Aleytys cried into the darkness of her mind as she leaped to her feet. "Swardheld, help me!"

The black eyes snapped open. She felt him flow swiftly into her body. He plunged after the battle-mad hiiri. Scarcely breaking stride he kicked out and slammed Aleytys' bare heel against the hiiri's elbow, numbing the arm with the knife. As soon as his feet touched the ground Swardheld spun around, kicked out again, his heel striking the hiiri's wrist, sending the knife flying from the paralyzed fingers.

The hiiri snarled and leaped toward the knife. Swardheld caught hold of his flying hair and jerked him around, using his momentum to throw him into a flying circle that fetched him up, face digging into the grass with Swardheld in Aleytys' body kneeling him in the spine, twisting his knife arm painfully high across his back.

"Hiiri!" The word came from Aleytys' mouth in a harsh bark as Swardheld manipulated her vocal cords.

The body twitched under him. "Hiiri," Swardheld repeated brusquely. "You understand me?"

The hiiri muttered something but his words were lost in the grass.

"Listen, fool. Stop creating so much fuss, or you'll have the guards on your neck instead of me. Got that through that damn thick head of yours? Nod your head if you hear me."

The hiiri lay still a moment then the shaggy head nodded with an impatient angry jerk.

"If I let you up, will you listen?" Swardheld chuckled easily. "Go crazy again and I'll break some pieces off you. Got it?"

The hiiri lay stubbornly still. Swardheld yanked on the captive arm, forcing a grunt of pain out of him.

He twisted his head around and spat the grass out of his bruised mouth. "I hear you," he said reluctantly.

"Remember it. I got more tricks than a knockhead like you learns in a lifetime. Don't fool with me, boy."

"Boy!"

"When you act a man, I'll give you the name." Swardheld let go of the arm and leaped back, standing balanced and ready just out of arm reach.

The hiiri got painfully to his feet. He flexed his arms and probed carefully at his ribs, then his mouth twitched into a brief rueful smile as he looked over Aleytys' slender form. "You don't look it, woman."

Swardheld grunted, then loosed his hold on Aleytys' body, so that she stumbled momentarily. In her head she heard a chuckle as he settled himself. Good fight. Thanks, freyka. Lets me exercise my talents. But keep an eye on that one. Tricky bastard. His head's not all muscle."

Aleytys sent warm thanks to him then blinked at the hiiri. "I'll look at you in a minute." She hurried to Burash. He was staring down at his arm, his hand clutched futilely over the throbbing wound, blood pumping copiously between his fingers. His face was white and shocked.

Under her gentle hands he sank to the ground and rested his arm on his knee. Aleytys channeled the power into the arm and in seconds the wound was closed, the pale white line marking its place vanishing like a pencil mark before an eraser. He smiled at her and tried to stand.

"No, no," she said hastily. "Wait a minute." She kept her hands on his arm, the flow of power now directed to replacing the cups of blood he'd lost.

She opened her eyes. "You all right?" she asked anxiously, studying his face, listening with her mind to the jumble of emotions inside him. There was a vanishing tinge of fear, a quiet compassion with no anger at all for the hiiri and a growing awe of her. She threw herself on his chest, almost knocking him over, arms around his neck. "No. Don't back away from me. I need you." Tears filled her eyes and she trembled all over until she felt his arms come around her and then she felt warm and whole again.

Burash was calm. She could feel it. As long as she needed him, apparently he asked for nothing more. Again she marveled at the beauty of his spirit, nurtured in such hell, again she was more than vaguely ashamed of her own egocentricity. She sighed and turned to the hiiris, resting her back against Burash's

chest. "We should talk," she said slowly, tiredly.

The male hiiri shrugged and looked warily at the mahazh.

"They aren't stirring. Fortunately. But here we stand like statues in the moonlight. Come." Aleytys pushed away from Burash and started for the bamboo grove.

Burash saw where she was going and caught hold of her arm. "Not there."

She looked her puzzlement.

"Don't you care? That place is ours alone. If you take them—"

She understood then, angry with herself for her blindness. "I didn't think." She touched his cheek with trembling fingers in a silent plea for forgiveness. "Where should we go?"

"There." He pointed. "In the shadow of those bushes next to the wall of the mahazh. No windows overlook that section."

When they settled in the shadow of a thick-leaved bush, Burash and Aleytys backed against the mahazh, the others facing them, Aleytys rested her hands on her thighs and looked from Aamunkoitta to the strange male. "Well, Kitten, shall you introduce me?"

Aamunkoitta nodded. The young hiiri had lost her fear and doubts of Burash. She faced the stranger now, chin up, small face frowning. "Nakivas," she said brusquely. "Paamies. This one." She moved her three-fingered hand in a graceful gesture that swept Aleytys from head to toe. "She is one blessed by the spirits of earth. I felt it. The henkiolento-maan welcomed her a time ago when she healed your wounds. Look at yourself, aazi. Do you see the burns? Where is that bone that stuck like a white fish out of your left arm? Where is the hole that just missed your heart? Where are the cuts, the bruises? Where is the burning in your lungs? Huh! Like a bad dream it's all gone, isn't it, kortelli payay."

He opened his mouth, arrogant face black with anger.

"Frown, go ahead." Aleytys felt a curious mixture of rebellion, fear and satisfaction stirring in the young woman. "Tell me, if you dare, tell me I don't offer proper respect to the Paamies. Yes, I say it, huh! Should I have left you to bleed to death on the river? The hyonteinens would like that, wouldn't they? I see the kipu dancing with the joy of it."

A picture formed in Aleytys' head. The stately dignified kipu in a riotous dance on the body of her enemy. She stifled a giggle.

"Huh! did B... Bur... Burash..." She stumbled over the name but swept on. "No, I won't call him hyonteinen! He's not one of them, but from a clan enemy to them. Fool! You're supposed to be battle leader. Think! You went for him bare knife. All he had to do to save his life was shout and the guards would be swarming here. Did he shout? Did he? No!" She didn't wait for an answer, the excited words poured out so that he couldn't manage a word for himself. "Think, stupid. You try to kill one who has done you nothing but good? Do you keep on like that, I say such a one cannot be Paamies for me." She moved her head in a short assertive nod, then took Aleytys' hand, glared at Nakivas, defiantly took Burash's hand.

The startled nayid closed his fingers over hers. She trembled for a minute then smiled at him and tossed

her head at Nakivas.

“Will you let me speak?” He was calm.

Aamunkoitta shrugged.

“Of course you did right,” he went on. “But what could I think, waking to see one of them looking at me?” He glanced at Burash and his eyes went flat and hard. With visible effort he straightened his face. “Hyonteinen.” The word in his mouth was an obscenity. “You aren’t Mahazhlik?”

Burash shook his head, his antennas jerking nervously. “The place of my birth is many weeks’ travel from here. Even with the kipu’s skimmers it takes days to get there. The old bitch... the queen... she snatched me from my home when I was a child, killed my kin. I’ve no cause to love them.” He jerked his head at the mahazh.

“Ah! and you?” He ran his eyes appreciatively over Aleytys’ form, bringing a frown to Aamunkoitta’s small face. “You’re certainly not one of them.”

“He’s slave. So am I. The kipu bought me off-world for her own purposes.” She noted his lack of surprise. “You know about the other worlds out there?”

He shrugged. “If you’re kunniakas, how?”

“Long story.” She smoothed her hands over her thighs. “I’m still new to my power and there’s a lot I don’t know.”

She touched his knee. “You want to use me. So. Bargain with me.”

“Bargain?” He looked disdainful. “I’m no haggler.”

“Then you’re the blockhead Aamunkoitta called you.” She laughed softly. “I don’t believe it. You’d sell a man the skin off his own teeth and make him think he had a bargain. So. Bargain with me.”

“Hah.” Nakivas refolded his legs and settled his body into a comfortable slouch. “Bargain? What’ve you got I want?”

Aamunkoitta stared and opened her mouth.

Aleytys interrupted her. “Hush, child, or Nakivas will take time out to spank you.”

The hiiri looked indignant. Burash moved a little aside and beckoned to her. “Let them play their games, Aamunkoitta. We’re out of it now.”

“Huh!” But she crept over to him and settled against the wall, content for the moment to watch.

Aleytys fluttered her fingers over the material of her robe. “I can commune with the lesser lives of this world.”

“So can any trainer. There’s a man in my clan...”

“No. Not like I can do. Up there. A night hawk rides the winds.”

He examined the sky. "Either you're dreaming or your eyes are better than mine."

"Neither. I'm not using eyes, Nakivas. I feel the wild spirit in my soul so I know he is there." She smiled with deep relish in the surprise she was going to hand him. "Here's a trick none of yours can match. Watch."

She slid into the hawk's body, the old skills coming back with increasing ease, and brought him swooping down. The bird curved in a tight circle above their heads then dropped to earth beside Nakivas's knees. "What do you want him to do?" Amusement trembled in her voice.

Nakivas eyed the hawk a little nervously, though he concealed his wariness behind a faint amused smile. The big bird was a deadly fighter with a strong hooked beak and hefty razor-sharp talons. "My knife. Have him bring it."

"Walking or in flight?"

"In his beak. Walking."

"Done." Minutes later the hawk tottered awkwardly back to them, the knife held firmly in his beak.

Nakivas took it, not trusting his fingers so close to that beak, but unwilling to seem afraid.

The hawk took off as Aleytys released him, screaming his pleasure in his freedom.

"Interesting," he said coolly. "But what use is that to me?"

Aleytys lifted her brows. "Milk my mind as well as my talents? Shame, Nakivas, trying to squeeze two for the price of one."

He rubbed his nose and looked thoughtfully at the sky. "I see little use for that admittedly unusual gift." He was silent a minute. "The clans come to this place next month. Under truce. The slave market."

"Interesting," she murmured. "And when they leave? They go where?"

"Here and there."

"Hm. I have tautessa, the gift of reading emotions."

"Ah." He considered her intently, eyes tracing her outlines through the loose robe she had pulled around her. "A useful gift. I see I must keep a cool head. You can tell a lie from the truth?"

"Yes."

"Shading of truth from full truth?"

"More difficult but possible."

"Say a prisoner was being questioned. More than lie or truth, could you sniff other trails? Say the weak points in a defense? Or..." He shrugged.

“Emotions are seldom simple things. A man can be afraid for many reasons, or confident for others. But... given time and enough questions, yes. Properly used a great deal of information can be gathered. Accurate information.” She folded her hands and watched him.

“And if one were bargaining?” He chuckled. A quiet amusement filled him, along with a powerful desire for the power she represented. He knew what he was radiating, struggled with it briefly, then shrugged off a sudden sense of malaise, an uneasiness foreign to the driving self-confidence that usually possessed him.

“Yes.” Aleytys smiled brilliantly. “Given a few other factors, it can be an unbeatable edge in bargaining.”

“Ah.” He stared down at his hands, opening and closing them on his knees. “The hyon...” He broke off. “Him. He wishes to return to his birth clan?”

“It may be so.” She flashed a smile at Burash and rested her hand on his, slightly distracted for a moment by her too-tense physical awareness of him. Nakivas watched this exchange with considerable interest.

“If this could be arranged, one with tunteassa might perhaps be willing to aid the hiiris in bargain with a stranger?”

“It might be so.” She rubbed her forefinger across her lips as she considered his face then probed deeper. He seemed reasonably sincere with the offer. “Arranged?”

“One of the clans might be persuaded to give passage.”

“Ah.”

“It’s a long and dangerous journey. A healer would be useful.”

“Ah.”

“A healer might also find much honor among the clans.” He tapped his fingers gently on the hard wiry muscles of his thighs. “It will be difficult to persuade any hiiri clan to give sanctuary to one who so closely resembles those they hate. The honor of the healer might perhaps make the necessary difference. A healer who would remain among me hiiri to serve their needs.”

Aleytys sighed and stretched. “Agreed,” she said softly. “But the healer has needs also. One season.”

Nakivas narrowed his eyes, pursed his lips, and angled for as much as he could get “Value for value. A long service for a long trek.”

“Hm. Shorten the trek.” Abruptly she abandoned the sidling around. “Take Burash and me to the star city and I’ll give you a season’s aid in healing and bargaining and whatever use you find for my gifts.”

She felt his intense satisfaction. He took her sudden capitulation for weakness. “A year.”

“No. Don’t be silly. After I see Burash safely on his way back to his island I’ll come with you for one season. Or I find my own way.”

He sighed. “Very unfair. Done. One season and I see you and your friend safe as far as the star city.”

“Oh. You want to do it the other way around.”

“Seems to me you’ll be happier that way. You can keep an eye on him and make sure he gets where he wants to go.”

“Good.” She smiled at him, feeling a glow of response even though she realized that he had deliberately provoked the feeling in her. “I agree. One thing. The kipu’ll be hot after me and every cityqueen will have her greedy fingers clawing the hills.”

He shrugged. “The land speaks to us. They maul it with their machines and their poisons so that it resists them where it opens to us. I think once away we’ll have little trouble staying free.” He stood up. “I’d give a lot to keep you with us, Kunniakas. You know that. We would drive the hyonteinens from our land like you drove death from my body.” He looked down at his arms and closed his hands into fists so that his wiry muscles rippled under the smooth unmarred hide on his forearms.

Burash shifted to sit beside Aleytys, hand resting lightly on her shoulder.

“You... hyont...” He bit his lip. “What clan are you?”

“Seppanu,” Burash said quietly, answering without hesitation. “These...” Burash jerked his head at the mahazh and swung his hand in a tight circle. “They’re Reyshanu.”

Nakivas grunted with satisfaction, convinced at last of Burash’s status, convinced simply because he’d named two names. For a moment Aleytys felt intensely depressed, intensely aware of how alien both of them were, aware despite her gifts how often she misread, misunderstood both. “You will be welcome in my tents,” Nakivas said formally. He extended both hands.

Burash bowed his head then rested his hands on the hiiri’s. “You do me honor, leader of men.”

Nakivas nodded briefly. For a minute the two of them shared a common bond as males, shutting out both Aleytys and Aamunkoitta. Then the hiiri glanced up at the silent mahazh. “I don’t like it here.” Turning to Aleytys he held out a hand. “Have we anything else to say?”

She took the hand. “I think not. You’ll return?”

“One month. To arrange details.”

“Good.”

Nakivas nodded briskly then melted into the shadows, startling her by his lack of valediction.

“What a night.” She ran her hands through her hair. “You’ll be all right, Kitten?”

“Yes.” Aamunkoitta raised her eyes from the shadows.

“Let’s go to bed.”

Chapter XIII

Aleytys frowned at the elaborate red robe. Her instinct was to send it back to the kipu with a biting

rejection. Sensing her anger, Burash put a hand on her shoulder, his fingers tightening with unspoken warning. The guard waited, eyes fixed rigidly forward, antennas jolting uncomfortably in small agitated circles.

“I consider,” Aleytys said softly, emphasizing the lilt affected by the old one. “Wait outside. You distract me.” She flipped a hand in a two-fingered gesture at the nayid.

The guard snapped a hand to her forehead and lips, then retreated through the archway, radiating a strong relief as she left the disturbing presence of the parakhuzerim.

As soon as the tapestry dropped behind the youthful guard, Aleytys hissed to Burash, “Should I stand for this?” She poked a finger at the brilliant red material bunched over the arm of the chair. “All that red. It yells kipu. She’s really pushing.”

Burash patted her arm, smiling into her angry face. “Obviously she’s had second thoughts about you. Calm down, narami.” He waited a minute until she smiled back at him and let her shoulders relax. “The old one did wear red,” he said. “When she wanted to annoy someone.”

“Huh.” She poked at the material again, then looked back at him over her shoulder. “Everything tells me not to let her get away with this.”

“Take care, Leyta.” Burash looked worried. “You can’t afford to lose your temper.”

“Hah. Sometimes I can’t afford not to. Let that bitch have an inch...” She growled deep in her throat and twitched the robe into a heap on the floor. Then she arranged herself in a graceful languid curve against the side of the chair. “Call that guard back.” She shook her head at Burash’s frowning face. “I won’t blow it, naram.”

Aleytys waited until the guard was standing rigidly erect in front of her. “You can remember what is told you?” she asked, her soft cutting tones sending tremors through the young nayid’s body. The nayid’s voice when she spoke was husky and hesitant, although she strained to maintain her military crispness. “*Im, belit Damiktana.*”

“Excellent.” Aleytys packed sarcasm into her gentle murmur. “Tell the kipu this. I find her choice of robe a trifle too blatant. I request she consider again. A touch of this color is sufficient indication of commitment and would be, perhaps, more convincing. The rapier is subtler than the bludgeon and, to my mind, more effective.” She lifted a hand. “You have that?”

The guard touched her forehead, face pale, fingers trembling. She swallowed, throat working visibly. “*Im Damiktana.*”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Go.” Aleytys suppressed a grin as the nayid backed out of the room with more haste than grace.

“There’s one I’ve got more than half convinced.” She stretched and sighed.

“One.” He shook his head at her grin. “Get into your part, Leyta, and stay there.”

“Ahai. It’s so damn dull.” She stretched again and pattered across the tiles to stand staring out at the garden, glowing green and gemlike in the brilliance of the morning sun, drops of dew sparking and diffusing into the warming air. “Damn.”

She wheeled and pressed her back against the glass. “Why am I still here, Burash, tell me! I could get away, you know it. I could be gone from here tonight.”

“And go where?”

She rubbed her hands up and down the cool glass. “I don’t know. The star city?”

“What would you do if you got there?” Burash shook his head and crossed the room to stand beside her. “And how would you get there?”

“Steal a skimmer, one of those boats out on the river, a horse... I don’t know.”

Burash pressed the milky square so that the door slid up and the fresh cool air flowed in. “All this is froth, worth as much as those dew drops sublimating into the sun.” He turned her around and made her look into the garden. “Well?”

Her shoulders moved impatiently under his arm. Mutely she stared past the greenery at the massive granite blocks of the wall that made the garden a prison in spite of its beauty. After a while she sighed. “So. Back to the tedious sly maneuvering.”

“*Belit Damiktana.*” The nervous shrilling of the guard sounded through the tapestry.

“Pah.” Aleytys stepped backward, bumping against Burash’s solid chest. As he moved his arm and turned away she strode past him and climbed into the chair at the foot of the bed. “All right, naram. On your head. Send that shiver-shanks in.”

Burash held the tapestry aside while the guard sidled reluctantly inside. She halted before the chair with a double nayid arm-span between her and Aleytys, a blue-green robe folded stiffly over her arm. “*Belit Damiktana,*” she said hoarsely, then stopped to clear her throat as unobtrusively as she could. “The kipu thanks you. She requests you consider this robe.”

Moving awkwardly she unfolded the garment and held it out so that it fell in graceful folds from the points she grasped between thumb and forefinger, the other fingers lying curled stiffly against her palm.

The robe’s basic color was the queen’s blue-green, several shades darker. Tongues of fire were embroidered around the hem in a brilliant red that went leaping up the left side nearly to the shoulder.

Aleytys stifled her leap of pleasure at the sight of the lovely garment and waved a languid hand at the guard. “Give it to the migru.”

Keeping as far from Aleytys as she could, the guard handed the robe to Burash and edged back.

“Inform the kipu that the robe is acceptable.” Aleytys tapped her forefingers lightly on the wood of the chair arm. “She is to come for me in thirty minutes.” She stared haughtily at the guard. “Well, do I have to escort you to her myself?”

“Pardon, Damiktana.” The guard gulped. Hastily she backed out, her antennas semaphoring her agitation while her mind radiated her barely controlled mélange of hatred and fear.

Aleytys hopped out of the chair and ran to Burash, cooing over the exquisite robe. With his help she

pulled it over her head and fastened the ties. She looked down at herself and smiled with delight. "It's almost worth it." She laughed and danced around the room, the full skirt ballooning out from her body.

In the bathroom, she brushed her hair smooth and posed in front of the mirror, turning this way and that, immensely pleased with herself, forgetting for the moment the purpose of the thing that charmed her. Burash pushed the tapestry aside and laughed when he saw her.

"Flying high," he said. "Up and down again. Leyta, Leyta."

She flashed a grin at him, but the elation drained swiftly out of her. Sighing, she let the wings of the robe fall, smoothed her hair back from her face and walked back into the bedroom with Burash trailing behind her.

She settled herself in the chair to wait for the arrival of the kipu. "One more month," she said, then glanced at Burash. "Something strikes me as curious. That guard. She was blasting out fear and fidgetiness and antipathy, as if she were terrified of me and hating me at the same time. Why?"

"The old one." Burash leaned against the back of the chair and ran his fingers over her hair. "And I think she's one of Gapp's, Leyta...."

"Hm?" She rubbed her head dreamily against his hand, a sudden warmth in her belly, her nipples hardening.

"You asked me once why I came to you that first morning."

"You said..."

"I know." His hand slid down and curved around her neck. "I know. After I saw you, talked to you, after... I couldn't..." Though he stopped talking, the tips of his fingers kept rubbing up and down on her neck; he was troubled with a complex of emotions Aleytys found disturbing and confusing, chilling her. She leaned back and stared into his abstracted face.

His hand stopped moving. "I came intending to kill you, Leyta. Take your neck in my hands and squeeze until the life went out of you. Rid this world of that curse. She poisoned life here too many, many years. I couldn't do it." His voice broke and she felt anger and pain dominate him. "If you'd been different? I don't know. If I could kill the thing in you without... I can't." He pulled away from her and ran from the room.

Aleytys slid out of the chair and started after him. "Burash minaram, wait..." The door to the lift slid back and the kipu stepped out. Immediately Aleytys straightened, stiffened the mask on her face, cursing the inopportune arrival of the nayid. As the kipu moved aside to let the honor guard file out, Aleytys straightened her back and stepped daintily to her place a half step in front of the kipu. Simmering with impotent anger she fought for control as she silently tripped along beside the lanky insufferably complacent kipu, the guard clicking snap-snap-clank with military regularity behind them.

"Good girl, Leyta."

"Steady, child."

"Whip it to them, freyka."

The three whispers, soprano, contralto, basso, blew through her head, leaving her cool and calm, focused on a double purpose, escape and destroy. Escape. Destroy.

Chapter XIV

Hiiri's eyes, dark, lively, curious, speculative, following with sly persistence, lowering with hypocritical meekness before the nayid arrogance, blind arrogance, rising again behind nayid backs with mocking dark glances making nonsense of their submission waves of hatred and fiery anger poured out of them around the deaf ignorant bodies of the nayids, flooding Aleytys' mind until she trembled behind the austere mask held precariously on her face. Walk, feet slipping hollowly over tiles through miles and miles of ochre tunnels, storerooms musty with dust-covered bins, names, names, names, so many names, *bubutt lapashana patret mastifana-uzzin shiru nunnana kurmat alpapana shikarun*, the names slipping nimbly from the tongue of the cook-master until her head ached, her heart labored with dark terror to be so far underground shut in dun rooms, thick walled prisons, suffering, but her spine stiffened by the sardonic amusement pouring from the wiry arrogant kipu.

Eyes. Nayid eyes on her, curious, speculative, shuttered, flutterings of terror and from the kipu cold calm pressing waiting for her to break, to loose the hold on the game pressing, testing, driving to her limit and beyond, no fear here, amusement, sardonic and cruel, cat playing with mouse, extending the illusion of freedom and waiting to the very last moment to plant the razored paw on the fleeing tail, stubborn sullen refusal to surrender. It held her back straight and the stiff curved smile fixed on her face.

A massive door opened. Aleytys stepped delicately through. A respectful half-step behind her the cook-master said with red-neck pride, "These are the hiiri hadaa. You can see we keep them secure. And away from the stores. There's no way one of the little beasts can creep into them." She sniffed, ignorant, spiteful, contemptuous. "What they didn't steal, they'd spoil. Like rats. Destructive beasts without sense enough to respect property. You know, out in the wild, they're animals. No moral sense at all. Couple with their own mothers, no doubt," She shuddered. Aleytys couldn't see this but sensed the frisson behind her, the hatred and sly repressed envy blaring out from the cook-master's psyche. Harskari, help me. Help me. Shivering knees going weak, she cried out for strength to endure the battering of her senses. She closed her eyes a moment.

"Steady, child." The deep contralto voice was slow and kind, pouring like honey over her desperate spirit. "Look ahead. You had no part in birthing this horror, but you will have a part ending it if you go on with the plans." A faint chuckle. "The ones you haven't told hiiris about yet. Or Burash. Hold onto that thought, my dear."

"Yes." As she flung the word back at the closing amber eyes, exultation flooded her. Soaring up out of despair she coolly examined the dank cellar with its narrow barred embrasures rising steeply toward a distant light. Narrow wooden shelves projected from the walls in tiers of three with a narrow gap between each tier, a gap furnished with a few wooden pegs where the hiiri's meager possessions hung, a spare dress, or a tunic, an embroidered sash. And the smell. Aleytys wrinkled her nose. "Yes." She yawned delicately. "Admirable. Ah, kipu, commend the cook-master for me, if you please. Then let us rise to more pleasing surroundings. The smell—"

The kipu snapped her fingers. One of the retinue hastened forward to kneel in front of Aleytys. She selected an ornate medal and held it out to the kipu. "For careful husbanding of the mahazh stores and general competence," she murmured.

Exuding acid humor and cynical self-satisfaction, pleased with her cunning and contemptuous of the

flushing blunt-faced cook-master's absurd delight in the meaningless bauble, her rich sonorous voice resounding with calculated effect in the squalid room, the kipu intoned, "I kipumahazh of the aasabu-alu name you one honored among the servants of the queen." She pointed at the floor. "Kneel."

The cook-master dropped to her knees and the kipu dropped the metal disc on its ochre ribbon over the stiffly erect head. "Stand," she said brusquely.

The disc hung in the center of the cook-master's flat thorax, like a chunk of pastry dough set with raisins, the raised characters of the nayid tongue circling the apian form decorating all the queen's possessions. The honor guard stood stiffly erect, then in unison touched hands to forehead and lips. The cook-master strode out of the room trailing reeking clouds of pride, the guard click-clacking after her. Aleytys swayed gracefully behind, followed by the kipu.

Eyes. Nayid eyes, glittering with hidden fear. Hiiri eyes, alive with curiosity and a growing anticipation, counter-pointed by a fear of their own. They followed her to the stairs, a dank miasma of speculation, fear, lust, pride, arrogance, instinctive hate... ah, the hate of one species for another, reaching far below... low... low... into the ancient animal instincts, unthinking reactions by intellect grown sensitive enough to touch life in another form and say I and thou share this life that throbs in our veins and I and thou are a community of life and sharing respect and love, that which we have we have we will not relinquish, we will not rob from another we will... waves of hate rolled at her, instinctive and deliberate, not racial, not abstract, not personal hate that wanted to rend and destroy, that pictured bloody gobbets of quivering flesh torn from the living frame by hating fingers, a clawing slow tearing death intimately shared by death-bringer and victim, corrosive emotion reaching to the core of the soul involving all other emotions including the sexual. She melted before it, wax in front of a fire, melted bones changing to viscous liquid...

Swardheld charged into her body, stiffened it, held it upright, held the mask, roared at her, "Det svayra! Freyka. Get moving. Get starch in your legs. If you blow this now..." Like an icy wind off the mountains his vigorous personality cleared her mind and combined with the heat of her own anger at her weakness. The kipu's callous lack of consideration in sending her unprepared into the room where Asshrud waited with her hoard of sycophantic courtiers drove the last shreds of confusion from her brain. She glared blue-green ice at the kipu, met the enigmatic insectoid gaze, then brushed past her into the large room.

Eyes. Black glittering insectoid eyes. Curiosity, cold rejection, fear, greed, lust for power, ambition, driving ambition, cold, hot monomaniac ambition overlaid by acid hatred pouring out of the mountain of flesh sitting puffily in a throne chair at the far end of the room. Reluctantly, eyes fixed with malignant intensity on Aleytys, Asshrud nodded at the kipu, then touched her fingers briefly to her forehead.

Head high, her own eyes glittering like the blue-green heart of winter ice, Aleytys waited.

The silence in the room grew uncomfortable. Angrily Aleytys fumed at the kipu's cold usage of her, survive or be destroyed, it mattered little to the kipu except that marginally she desired the scheme to succeed since she'd get considerable benefit from it, but she wouldn't waste a milligram of her breath, an erg of energy to support it.

Cool and apparently at ease, that small curved smile on her empty face, Aleytys reached into her own depths to the places that made her sick to contemplate within herself and dredged up a handful of muck. With a sickly mixture of exultation and self-contempt she flung the metaphorical muck at Asshrud then watched it stain and mute her outpouring of hatred and stubborn rebellion, melting and corroding her resistance until her fat jowls trembled with the desperate anxiety breeding inside her.

Hands tucked into the wide sleeves of her robe, Aleytys walked daintily through the crowd of courtiers, driving an opening ahead of herself with radiations of subtly discomfiting emotion, reaching the throne chair as Asshrud waddled clumsily out of it. She climbed the steps and settled herself, pulling the robe tight against her body, deliberately emphasizing the difference between her and the bulky Asshrud, a cruelty that sickened her but suited the role she was playing, answering the expectations of the kipu and Asshrud and all the other nameless nayids clustering in the room. But strange feelings were stirring in her... stirring... I'm not like this, she thought, god, I'm not....

Ignoring Asshrud, she spoke to the kipu, her light lisping voice slicing through the emotion-saturated air. "Introduce me."

Eyes. Uneasy glittering eyes, insectoid eyes floating in a dream... a nightmare of soupy air—gumbo thick with psychic exudation, the kipu's voice blurred and faded the names she spoke, flowed over Aleytys' mind trailing slime like diseased snails crawling across her skin, petty petty emanations not worth noticing, sycophantic nonentities capable of small cruelties but too self-involved to risk their precious selves in major violence. The parade passed and was finished. Aleytys stood.

She turned her head and swept them with arrogant blue-green gaze, radiating cool contempt ego-shattering contempt, goading, cowing them into abject and steaming silence. Without a word she swept down the stairs and out of the room, followed closely by an increasingly impressed guard and the complacent kipu.

Blue tiles, blue tunics, staring eyes, antennas switching faster, faster. Gapp sullen hostile cold-eyed lovers jealous and covetous, coldly lizard reptilian cruel, capable of infinite variations in cruelty but petty... petty imaginations and spirit limited by a limitless stupidity....

Red tiles. Flitting red tunics, busy dedicated nayids doing work that convinced them of their own worth. Machines flickering a thousand enigmatic results. Data. Reporting. Acting. A headache lanced through her head looking at them, pretending to comprehend, dealing with the kipu's growing amusement and subtle put-downs, a puppet on strings jerked about by the kipu's arbitrary decisions, acting, saying, doing without recourse to her own will not knowing the reason or outcome of her actions her words....

Aleytys was exhausted and relieved when she climbed the stairs up from the red level.

Black tiles... black tunics... tough stringy fighting females. Barracks. Austere but comfortable. Beds bunked against the walls. Neatly tucked blankets. Polished shining lockers. Immaculate floor. Light airy rooms. And in the gymnasium....

Aleytys sat in one of the ubiquitous throne chairs and watched the warriors perform, the kipu stiff and secretly amused, still amused, sitting beside her.

Two black nayids circled in tiger alertness in front of her intent on each other, feinting and thrusting, leaping and recoiling in a fantastic ballet of violence, reactions frighteningly swift, so fast they had her dizzy, her body aching in sympathetic reaction to blows given and taken, remembering Burash taking her hand and caressing it with his fingertips. "One of the sabutim could tear you in rags." She saw the truth of that now and knew the kipu had staged this match with that precise effect in mind. She glanced sideways and felt herself grow tight with anger.

"Aleytys." Surrounded by Harskari's amber aura, the word flashed warning lights throughout her mind. "Freyka." Black eyes frowned impatience.

Swallowing her anger Aleytys focused her eyes on the match and whispered inwardly, “Swardheld, how good are they? Could you take them?”

The black eyes blinked and seemed to squint shrewdly. “Ah. In my own body, freyka, there’d be no question.”

“In mine?”

“A matter of speed, strength, wind. You’re a dainty little bit. Nice for gracing a man’s bed. But a fighter? I laugh. A little training, though... I admit you surprise me at times. A little training—”

“Training?”

“Speed. Strength. Wind. And skill. You’ve got the potential. Good bone, healthy muscle. Just needs a little refining.” A rumbling chuckle shook her skull. “Never done a pushup in your life. You’ve got an unpleasant surprise awaiting you, freyka.”

“Huh.” She watched as with a sudden flurry of blows one combatant drove the other out of the circle into defeat. Standing, she took the medal handed her by the kipu and languidly extended it to the victor. “Well fought, sabot,” she murmured. “Most entertaining.”

Green tiles. Heavy door with massive intricate lock. Swinging open silent and ponderous. Weapons piled neatly on racks, room after room, air-tight cartons pile on pile power cells, projectiles, bombs, acid gas... man’s ingenuity employed to destroy man. Aleytys looked at the piles, the racks, with Swardheld whispering in her ears naming and explaining as the kipu named, the double effect draining her spirit into a black morass of despair until her arms and legs weighed heavy as lead. She walked with effort like wading through gelatin... the place stunk of death.

Green tiles. The color of life. Green flower vines inlaid around machines of death. And in defended embrasures phallic cannon thrust potent noses out over the city. The air in the rooms felt dead. As if the heavy doors were tomb doors shutting in the dead bones of men.

Silent, oppressed, Aleytys climbed the last round of stairs. At the top, the walls felt weighty and metallic as the passage ended in a bronze door. After saluting the kipu, Sukall knelt and pressed an electronic key against one sensor while the kipu simultaneously pressed a second near the top of the massive slab.

With a soft reluctant sigh the door slid open. Aleytys felt the weight of it but even then was surprised at the actual thickness, a full meter of solid metal. The cool soft air of the afternoon slid through the gaping hole with sweet seductive beckoning. Masking her relief as she had masked her fatigue, Aleytys climbed sedately onto the roof behind her guard with the kipu in close attendance beside her.

Like lice on a hog’s back the round black discs sat on spidery legs in thick clusters of gleaming machines redolent of power. Aleytys counted them. Fifty. Fifty obstacles to a clear break from this stifling hulking prison. Or perhaps an easy escape....

“Shadith,” she whispered. “Look at them. Could you fly one?”

“If I could see the controls.” The violet eyes blinked thoughtfully.

Aleytys thrust her hands into her sleeves and ambled with careful grace about the rooftop then stepped nimbly up the ramp and into the pit of a skimmer.

The kipu watched with a frisson of nervous excitement that rapidly turned to amusement as Aleytys sat calmly in pilot's seat running her eyes over the complex instruments.

“Shadith?”

The purple eyes narrowed into an intensely concentrated frown. After a minute the silver voice rippled into laughter. “A piece of cake. Maybe a little rough at first till I get the feel, but no problem.”

Aleytys potted around the skimmer another moment then stepped calmly down and with guard in close pursuit moved to the roof edge and leaned over the parapet looking down into her garden then out over the city, the wind blowing her hair about and tugging at the heavy silken material of her robe.

“The streets are empty.” She looked over her shoulder at the kipu.

A tight mirthless smile on her hatchet face, the kipu murmured, “Have you forgotten, Damiktana? Strange. Umusiriu. The day of the serpent. The shops are closed and the people are in the temple burning incense to the spirit of...” She chuckled, a dry rusty sound. “But you know that.”

“Ah. With one thing and another I've lost track of dates.” She straightened and sighed. “I fear I'm tired, rab' kipu. Is there a lift down?”

“Not from the roof.” Again amusement rippled through the deep voice. “A matter of security.” She moved away from the parapet. “However there is a lift from the barracks level.”

Chapter XV

“Leyta!”

“Aleytys!”

“Freyka!”

The three voices roared inside her head jerking her out of a heavy unnatural sleep. Mouth opening and closing idiotically she stumbled to her feet, swaying dizzily. She caught hold of the curtain to steady herself, rubbing her free hand across sleep-shut eyes. “Wha...” she muttered.

“Get the fog out, freyka.” Swardheld's bass roar rattled the cobwebs loose. “Company coming.”

Dazedly Aleytys shook her head. “Company?”

“Raiders.” She could feel his impatience and struggled to collect herself.

“What should I do?” The words came out blurred.

“What do you think?” His black eyes sparked irritation. “Get help. Wake Burash. Get out of here. Shift your feet, freyka.”

The clear glass door suddenly darkened. Aleytys froze. She heard the faint sibilance as the door slid upward then saw dim black blurs flicker past the opening, oddly hard to see, outlines indistinct.

“Freyka!” Swardheld prodded at her again. “Get him out!”

Aleytys felt a shock drive through her body. “Burash! Run!” She repeated the words over and over as she shook him. His sleep felt unnaturally heavy to her then she finally grasped a sickness, a slowness in her own reactions. “Drugged... the food... Burash!” She threw herself across the bed and shook him, forgetting her own danger in her urgency. “Burash!” She shook him hard. “Wake up. Wake up. Try to wake up,”

Hands closed around her ankles, strong fine fingers like wire ropes, pulling her away from him. She cried out, kicked futilely, but slid like greased meat across the bed, hands closing over her mouth before she could make another sound.

Hands. Around face and arms, shoulders pulling against them, futile struggles, strength making a mockery of her efforts. Hands. One flipped out imperiously and like an extension of it a dark blurred form flitted silently around the end of the bed radiating death, cold, freezing cold, burning cold, hand closed around a black fang that shed the light and turned the eyes away.

“Burash.” Aleytys screamed his name again but the sound was blocked by the nayid’s sandpapery hand. She bucked and twisted and kicked only to have her struggles lost in futility, her strength nothing against the wiry muscles of the raiders holding her.

“Swardheld,” she cried into her head. “She’s going to kill him. Do something.” She twisted against the hands, struggled to cry out, struggled to wake Burash from the drugged sleep, struggled to alarm the guard... why wasn’t the guard in here already, couldn’t she hear?... a black arm swung up, the blackened sooty blade blurring against the pale lacy curtains. “Swardheld!”

The hands holding her turned stiff and cold as an amber glow lit in her mind. She could hear the swift descending chime of the diadem’s musical notes as they wound down into inaudible subsonic vibrations that shook the inside of her bones. Surrounded by the amber, the black eyes opened and Swardheld flowed into her body.

He pulled tentatively against the frozen fingers clamped around her arms, her face, her body, but they held like manacles. Flexing Aleytys’ body so he could use the power of her legs, he wrenched free from hold after hold, using knowledge and leverage to replace the strength he didn’t have. But it took time. Even in this strange frozen state. She felt a growing anxiety, a growing strain. The amber glow flickered uneasily and she felt rather than heard a thready “hurry”.

At last Swardheld managed to work the body free. He twisted around and plunged across the bed to the frozen tableau where the black knife touched Burash’s throat as he lay, eyes wide, face frozen into a grimace of dazed horror.

Aleytys’ hands reached out and struggled to pull the knife from the clutching fingers, but once again the strength in her slender arms was insufficient. Swardheld grunted with disgust. He twisted her body around until it was lying on its back, feet raised, legs pulled against her chest. He slammed her feet into the assassin’s throat and knocked her over, still locked into her lethal crouch.

“Hurry.” The whisper sounded urgent; the amber aura flickered in warning.

“Helvete!” Swardheld snarled the word, Aleytys’ voice sounding hoarse, abrupt. He slid off the bed and caught hold of Burash’s cold stiff body and worked carefully toward the foot of the bed. As he moved,

the diadem's chime became audible and rose faster and faster to the silvery tones of norm-time. Rough in his urgency, Swardheld sent Burash's loosening form sprawling off the end of the bed then he dived after him.

He pulled the nayid male onto his feet and shoved him toward the doorway. "Get the guard." Harsh and distorted because Swardheld spoke through her body, the words penetrated Burash's drug-dulled mind. He stumbled hazily toward the archway.

The five raiders ran at Aleytys, sooty knives swishing out of belt sheaths. Swardheld balanced on his toes... Aleytys'toes... wary, grim, determined but doubtful, aware too clearly of the odds against survival, five nayid warrior females each one much stronger than the body he manipulated.

He met the first lunge with a swinging kick and in recovery took out a second with an elbow to the throat. A sudden stinging pain drew a grunt from him as a knife he had no time to avoid slashed a shallow cut across the ribs. When he threw himself back a second knife slid into his side. He went down, thrown by the slippery film of Aleytys' blood, stumbling over a body crumpled in a heap behind him.

Breath whistling harshly through a straining mouth he hooked a foot out and brought down a third attacker. He clutched her bony form against Aleytys' breasts and swung her into the path of the other raider's slashing knife. A deadly numbness nailed him to the floor, so he focused his remaining energy on his arms, pulled the knife from his side and hamstringed a fourth attacker, at the same tune emptying his lungs in a roar for help.

Light suddenly replaced the darkness but the dazzle nearly finished him when the nayid still on her feet dived over him, driving her knife at his exposed throat.

The tardy guard flattened the raider with the stun rod seconds before the knife hit. Methodically she moved around the room, stunning any raider whose twitching showed her still alive. Finally she pulled the nayid's body off Aleytys, sucking in her breath at the gaping wounds in the frail body. Hastily she snatched the call box from her belt and buzzed the kipu. The angry voice whined out of the small speaker. "What is it?"

"Raid," the young guard shrieked. "Five..." She looked quickly around. "No. Six. Nightcrawlers. The Damiktana is alive but has two serious wounds, should have a doctor fast. The Amel Migru looks dead."

"Guard the door," the kipu snapped. "I'll be down with the doctor in minutes, let no one else in. No one! You hear?"

"Im, rab' kipu."

The guard's words slid into Aleytys' dazed brain. Amel Migru dead dead dead—"No!"

She meant to shriek the denial but the word came out in a broken whisper. She tried to sit up but her body was clumsy, a disjointed puppet with broken strings. "Burash..."

In her head Harskari's contralto whisper cut through the fog that was gathering about her senses. "Heal yourself, Aleytys, heal yourself, then you can help him. Hurry."

Numbly she recognized the truth in this and fumbled out of her magic river, for the black waters that rushed power into her hands. It was hard, too hard, her feeble reach dissolved and she slid toward a warm black velvety darkness.

“Leyta!”

“Aleytys!”

“Freyka!”

Three voices far, far off, shrill as insects’ buzzing, stung her out of her peace. She tried to lift a hand to brush them away but her arm was heavy, heavy, glued to the floor by the inexorable pull of the earth, warm earth, good earth, blood and bones, but the earth rejected her, a babble of a thousand voices pushed at her and the three buzzings grew louder and louder, then they all thrust her up out of the comfortable blackness.

“Reach, Leyta.” Shadith’s voice dug at her.

“Wake up, child.” The soft amber glow hardened, chilled, prodded at her, struck at her, jabbed her out of the peaceful haze.

“Freyka!” Swardheld’s authoritative roar blew her up out of the soft enfolding warmth.

“Lean on us, Aleytys.” Harskari’s contralto softened, beckoning her farther.

She felt them holding her, saw them then not just as the symbolic image of amber purple black eyes....

Harskari. Tall, slender, skin smooth, dark, eyes golden and gleaming, silver hair a glowing mass of silky threads blowing, snapping in a silent wind, purple and scarlet gossamer veils edged in silver blowing about her slight elegant elongated figure.

Shadith. Huge purple eyes, generous mouth, pointed face, small, dainty elfin, more richly curved than the sorceress, incongruous in the drab olive suitliner, hair red gold curling exuberantly, a halo about her head, a sambar... elegant stringed instrument something like a lyre... held lightly against her side, resting in the curve of her left arm.

Swardheld. Black hair, black eyes, reddish tan face crossed and recrossed with old scars, craggy irregular features, a body built for both speed and strength, long-fingered delicate hands, ironic intelligence in smile and eyes, a coarsely woven tunic reaching halfway down his thighs, a black steel sword on a battered baldric.

Aleytys warmed to them, slid toward them, lips open in a claiming greeting.

“Not yet.” Harskari held up a hand, palm outward and shook her head, the wild white hair exaggerating the movement, underlining the denial.

Shadith, purple eyes tragic, shook her head. “Not yet,” she said, her voice a singing whisper.

“Not yet.” Swardheld’s rumble was less distinct than usual. He held the black sword flat between them, barring her from them.

“The river, child. Heal yourself. Look.” Harskari knelt and pulled at Aleytys. “Reach out. Lean on us. We’ll help you.”

Aleytys felt the warmth of their hands on her, hot strength flowing into her aching leaden body. Reluctantly she turned her mind outward, away from the three... away... away... the power river flowed, leaped, called to her, called—

The earth teased her back, the soft black warmth beckoning; she sobbed with the pain of that longing but leaped out, plunged into the river and screamed with pain as her wounds ate like acid into her body, but the river flowed into her, healed her... she remembered the thing she had forgotten in the fogging of her own agony. “Burash....”

She opened her eyes. The guard was walking hastily to the garden door, her back to Aleytys, still walking, all that... seconds passed... time was leaping, crawling in strange whorls.... Aleytys flopped onto her face and raised her aching body onto hands and knees to look around.

Burash lay a foot away from her, one antenna limp, broken, pitiful, clotted with blood, a knife surrounded by blood froth protruding from his chest, bubbling, foaming blood rising and falling with the scarcely perceptible rise and fall of his chest.

“Ahai, Madar!” Aleytys scrambled to his side and pressed her hands around the dagger, terrified at the feebleness of the life spark she felt through her palms.

She sent the black water roaring through her hands to strengthen his laboring heart and steady the beat of life that tick-tocked within his brain.

“The knife....” She looked around. “The knife.” Dimly through the corner of the hanging curtain she saw the shadow form of the guard. “Come here,” she called urgently. “I need you.”

The guard’s voice came back after a moment’s strained silence. “Wait,” she said. “Wait for the kipu.”

Aleytys sobbed with frustration but she didn’t waste her time calling again. Not daring to move her hands she glared at the knife, “Ai—Madar, move! You. Move.” She cried out with frustration. “Harskari, Shadith, Swardheld, you moved my body once, help me, help me...!” But the roar of the energy flowing through her body drowned out the call. For the first time in an eternity she was totally alone, totally dependent on her own resources... the voices in her head... how she’d hated them once... once... a lifetime ago... two worlds back... the life under her hands flickered erratically... the warmth, the security they gave her... inaccessible... and she ground her teeth in frustration and wept in her agony but the voices were gone, the power futile, with the knife destroying the healing in the wound as fast as it started. “Out!” she screamed.

Maybe one hand... she tried to pull a hand free but it clung to the flesh, tied to the agony, of the flesh... she couldn’t free a hand... not a single hand... an eternity crept past between inhalations... the beat of life in him was tock-tocking slower and slower....

“Out. Damn you. Out.” she shouted at the quivering knife. “Get out of him.”

The knife slid from the wound in slow jerks then swung in a smooth swoop that hurled it against the nearest wall. With aching satisfaction she regarded it briefly, dully, then went back to the dim flame she nursed inside the broken form under her hands. With painful slowness the wound closed.

Shaking with exhaustion, she let the power flow dry to a gentle trickle. Dimly around her, behind her she sensed voices. Hands plucked at her shoulders but she ignored them, freeing her own hands at last from their desperate pressure on the pale pink wound-scar. Her fingers stuck together, her skin was crusty

with dried blood. Flexing her fingers she touched the wreck of Burash's graceful antenna, smoothing the soft delicate fibers, the sensory hairs that absorbed heat radiation from the air, that let him see, rather sense, living things in darkness or light. . . It must be agonizing, she thought, that complex web of nerves, the pain. . . . She straightened the antenna out, touching it as delicately as possible, intimidated a little by the fragility under her fingers, then she let the power surge again and when she took her hands away the frond was whole, still clotted with blood, but whole. . . . She trailed her fingers down the side of his face and smiled into the newly opened eyes that reflected her in the hundreds of facets, bright with steady life pulse, for that brief instant only he and she existing in a universe to themselves, a closed round golden sphere of shared joy. A brief instant.

Aleytys stood up, staggering with tired cramped legs. Face smoothed into boredom and insolence, she looked around the charnel house her bedroom had become, disgusted at the sickening sweet smell of the decaying blood. The nightcrawlers lay stacked in a heap next to the wall, two, perhaps, three, radiating stifled life, the others stiff and cold in death. Red guards shifted nervously from foot to foot, their dismayed black glances avoiding her constantly as if they couldn't bear to look at her. More were outside prowling in the garden.

Aleytys walked slowly to the bed and sat down, her body protesting the savage usage of the past hour. She looked down at herself. Red marks slowly turning purple streaked across the soft pale skin. She explored her body with the tips of her fingers, wincing as she touched the bruises. Smearred blood, pulling the skin like an astringent mask, drying along her ribs and buttocks, hiding the fading pink scars from the wounds, trickled onto her legs, matting the densely curling red-gold triangle of her pubic hair. She ran her fingers through the tangled clotted mass of red gold on her head, wrinkling her nose with disgust. Pulling the crumpled robe around her she stood up, walked silently through the circle of guards and stepped into the garden.

"Well?" She dropped the short syllable like a stone into the pool of silence.

The kipu turned to face her. "They came over the wall," she said quietly. "That will be patrolled after this." She moved past Aleytys and reentered the bedroom, glancing curiously at Burash who was getting slowly to his feet, darting her eyes back to Aleytys, swinging them finally to the austere gray-haired figure wearing the white of medicine standing silent just inside the archway. "Need the doctor see you, Damiktana? Or him?"

Aleytys looked with distaste at the surgeon who had planted the egg in her, the memory hot and strong of that flesh time bomb set to destruct in a year. . . less than that now. "I think not," she said.

"Not an hour ago the both of you tilted on the edge of dying. I'd be most interested in hearing your explanation of that miraculous recovery."

Eyebrows gently raised, Aleytys glanced at the attackers stacked like cordwood. "You're more likely to get answers there," she said softly.

"Perhaps." The kipu nodded toward the lift. "In any case, better discussed in private."

"No." As the kipu's meager face pursed into a heavy frown, Aleytys smiled again. "I'm filthy and tired. Any talking we have to do will wait till morning." She shrugged. "I'm sure you'll have milked these dry by then. Clear this place out, rab' kipu. If guards are necessary, and I can't dispute that after this, leave them out there." She waved at the glass wall.

The kipu frowned at her a minute, then nodded. Briskly she ordered a double hand of guards into the

garden and another twelve into the hall, keeping back the last twelve to carry the bodies of the raiders to the interrogation center on the floor above.

Within minutes the room was empty and quiet, the scattered sweet stinking blood smears the only reminder of the frantic battle. The kipu moved quietly to the lift. In the entrance, a black silhouette against the pale yellow light illuminating the small square room, she turned and gazed at Aleytys from eyes invisible except for elusive glints of reflected light. “We will talk tomorrow, Damiktana. Have your story ready but put a little truth in it.”

“Tomorrow.”

The kipu stepped inside and the door closed over her. Aleytys touched Burash lightly on the shoulder. “You all right?”

Holding out his hand, he said, “Look. Shaking like a leaf after a winter storm.”

“Otherwise?”

“Tired, mauled, sore as a rotten tooth, but yes, I’m all right. I’m alive.” He dropped shakily onto the bed and pulled her down beside him. “How about you?”

“About the same.” She ran her hands through her hair, wincing as they caught in tangles and tugged at her tender scalp. “That was close. I wonder why....”

“You’ve been making yourself noticed, Leyta.” He ran his fingers gently across her palms as he spoke. “The cityqueens are a greedy set of river pigs. You think they haven’t heard the rumors? Trust Gapp and Asshrud to get the news out to their pets. What did you expect?”

“They tried to kill me. What good would that do?”

“Ask yourself. Does any of them love the kipu? Anything that lessens her power aggrandizes theirs. Of course... when I was sleeping didn’t they start to take you away?”

“You’re right. They would have killed you, though.”

“Why not. What am I?”

“Ah. And we were drugged.”

“What did I say? Gapp and Asshrud. The next month should be interesting.”

“Ahai Madar!” She jerked upright and pounded a fist on her thigh.

Burash looked startled. He swung around, antennas leaping with curiosity, colors flashing starkly in the dim light. “What is it?”

“Nakivas. With guards on the wall....”

“Between the two of you.” He laughed. “You’ll think of something.” He bent over and sniffed at her skin. “You stink, Leyta. So do I.” He slid off the bed and held out his hand. “Shall we wash the grime off?”

Chapter XVI

Water. Rocking, endlessly cradling, caressing her body, lifting but eternal, unchanging, floating, immersed in water yet distance was meaningless as time was meaningless, passing but eternal, unchanging, floating, immersed in water currents, bloodwarm, soaking, unhurried, slow, sensuous, suspended in mindless languor, body warm, drifting, arms, legs trailing, fluttering without volition, strands of red gold hair straying a time in neighboring currents so they dipped and surged in patterns before drowsy dreaming detached eyes.

After an eon she roused enough to wonder dimly where, why, when. Golden bubbles separated from the dark water, dancing in complex circles around her body and her head, shedding a capricious shower of sparks into her eyes, marking her quiescent body with spangled flecks of glimmering gold darting in disturbing patterns over the mounds and shadowed hollows of her pale flesh.

Another eon passed.

She looked at her drifting hand and after a while lifted it, reaching for the dancing bubbles that stirred curiosity in her, tickling her out of her mindless dream. But they danced in mocking hilarity, soundless and elusive, away from her clumsy groping fingers, fingers moving with agonizing slowness. She let her fingers trail aimlessly through the water, abandoning the futile pursuit.

Her lips opened. Permeated by the water her body was immersed wholly within, she found no difference, no sound. "Come," she called soundlessly, coaxing the entrancing dancing bubbles.

The word slid out into the water shining, shining, sound made visible slow and slow. She watched it slide through the water and touch the clusters of bubbles that sparkled brighter than ever. They danced closer, wheeling around and around, in, over, around her face until laughter rose in a fountain inside her. She lifted her slow hands again and let the fingers flicker through the bubbles and it seemed to her they laughed in answer, small bell sound tinkling in her head made visible in showers of polychromatic sparks falling like confetti over and around her then drifting off in threads of color that died away before they reached her distant trailing toes.

An eon passed.

As she willed it the glimmering bubbles wheeled in undulant circles around her hands rising and falling rhythmically like horses horses... horses... turning round and round.

Horses. Galloping in packs over her stomach down her gently lifting and falling legs, leaping in elegant caracoles over her toes and sweeping back around, tiny glimmering gilded horses, glass horses with golden fires glowing at their hearts, rising, falling, light sparkles illuminating their sturdy barrels, bubble horses transparent as fine glass, prancing, leaping, galloping in precision teams around and around her body. She laughed in delight at the beauty of it then watched puzzled as the tiny horses melted again into bubbles flowing aimlessly around her.

Her placid formless face drew together in a frown as she drove her reluctant mind to consider this strangeness.

An eon passed.

She opened her eyes. Bubbles hovered around her but it seemed to her the dancing lights were dimmer, the drifting sparks fewer. She willed them into a sphere hovering over her breasts. The lights brightened, steadied. The center of the sphere rested over her heart. She watched it. Willed it to an arrow point. Watched the point stand steady over her breasts. Sent the arrow point swooping and darting about her body answering like a well-trained horse to her will, acting like an extension of her body, another hand. She had it now, coming and going; she formed an image in her head and the glimmering gold bubbles danced to the calling of her tune. She willed the tiny horses back and laughed with delight as they galloped over the plains and hills of her naked body.

An eon passed.

While she lay absorbed in the enchanting capers of the pliant bubbles, the water flowed around her body, changing warm to cold and back.

Sudden sensation of speed. The currents tossed her about, plunging her from one to the other, alternating unexpectedly... icy and bloodwarm... dip into the chilly ply: stimulus/shock/centricity... dip into the warm ply: relaxation/diffusion/outreach... wheeling haphazard, alert and dull, until her spirit was sick from the shock of changing.

Chill shot through her body. Her feet slapped hard on cool ceramic tiles dim-lit. A corridor swept away from her blinking eyes in a long smooth curve irritatingly familiar. Green tiles underfoot... walk the silent corridor, search a reluctant mind for the reason in the feeling of familiarity. No answer. She was a facade, a lay figure animated by pseudo-life.....

A massive rough-cast bronze door. She drifted to a stop in front of it and stared blankly at a complex lock that crawled like a nest of worms over its middle. After a long blank time she lifted a hand and pressed it against the door, fingers spread out in a pale starfish against the dark rough metal that felt cold and resistant against the skin of her hand while the front of the door turned transparent as glass, answering her will as the bubbles had. She saw tumblers sitting, squat trolls, in their tight niches.

An eon passed.

She stood stiff and still, arm outstretched, hand pressed against the metal until at last a slow idea awakened in her heavy mind. She willed the tumblers back... one by one... like the bubble horses... one by one they shifted; she could feel the heavy chunk-thunk through and through her bones then she pushed against the door. Slowly, massively, it slid open and she was drifting hesitantly inside, compelled inside without knowing why.

She slid past stiff silent nayid guards, statue silent, no beating of the eight-node hearts, no rise and fall in the chest, no hissing intake outgo of air. She drifted, heavy unwieldy body driven on, floating strangely. She looked down.

Her feet trailed into smoky wisps a handspan above the floor but in the thick, syrupy movement of her thought she registered this distantly, uninterestedly, the whole experience curiously remote... everything so strange that strangeness became normality.

Weapons lined the walls of the interior room. She watched calmly as her hand reached out and plucked a small weapon from its pegs. It felt impossibly heavy in her straining hands, chill and....

She couldn't bear being in the place any longer. The stench of death corroded her soul and she fled back the way she'd come.

She stood in the hall, weapon clutched to her breast, her feet firm cold on the slick green tiles. She reached out and pulled the door shut. As her fingers slid over the rough metal it turned transparent and without really knowing why, urged to it by a deep-buried wild fear, she nudged the tumblers back into their locking niches, then fled down the hall, bare feet slip-slapping on the tiles, weapon clutched over her hammering heart. . . .

The tiles turned blue-green. The guarding squad of sabutim stiff and alert in their blue-green tunics stood in her way in front of the archway screened by a heavy blue-green tapestry. . . heart thudding until her body ached with the pain of it, she crept up to them then was breathing again as their eyes stared unknowing through her.

After wriggling carefully between them, she hesitated in front of the tapestry then slid through the narrowest opening she could fit herself through and nervously smoothed the tapestry back flat. Driven by a growing anxiety, a sense of urgency that flashed alternately hot and cold through her, she fled toward the bed.

In the dim light filtering through the wall-window where the shielding tapestry was pulled back she could see the dark mass of the bed with the gauzy curtains like this fog around it. Moving slower and slower, with strange reluctance, she drew closer and stood staring with wide frightened eyes at the two forms cuddled close together in deep sleep.

The woman's red-gold hair fanned out over her naked shoulders, one breast bare, the silky blue-green cover clinging to the curled shape of her body. Next to her lay the strong compact form of Burash, his face even in sleep strained and tired. His antennas twitched raggedly, his fingers opened and closed spasmodically, his restless disturbed sleep serving to underline the depth and tranquility of Aleytys' rest. She reached out and touched the sleeper's shoulder.

Aleytys sat up, blinking. Burash muttered and twitched beside her. She bent over him, letting her fingers travel over his face and neck, caressing him, the feel of his firm flesh warm and good in her fingertips flowing like firelight in whiter through her body, for a moment masking all the tensions and fears of her life. "Rest, my own," she murmured, and let the warmth flow from her to him.

Burash's face unknotted, his clenched hands relaxed, and he sank deeper into a healing, restoring sleep.

She sighed and stretched. "What an odd dream." She glanced back toward the open slit in the tapestry. "I wonder what time it is." Yawning, she stretched, then she began to slide back down flat on the bed. Her hand struck a cold hard object. "Ahai, Madar," she gasped. She slid the thing from under the cover and held it in her two hands, the weight of the thing testifying to its reality.

It was the weapon from her dream.

Chapter XVII

Aleytys kicked her feet out and watched the bright yellow chiffon billow and flutter in the cool damp morning air. The yellow sun that she still found a little disturbing was a semi-arc above the gray stone of the wall with the patrolling sabutim crossing it, their long narrow black shadows like prison bars blocking, it seemed to her, something of the sun's too meager light and heat.

The shadows in the garden wrote long thin hieroglyphs over the smooth cropped green of the lawn.

Aleytys stroked the gun on her lap. Fingernails clicking on the hard surface of the weapon, she shifted her gaze to the singing water and contemplated the mottled stones at the bottom of the stream.

In their smooth roundness they reminded her of the bubbles in her dream. As she stared down, they began to tumble around then crawled up onto the sandy shoulder of the stream as she urged them along until laughter bubbled in her head and she sent them capering about over the grass like small imps in a herdfolk dance.

She called one to her and cried out as it came too strongly, glancing painfully off her cheek. She rubbed the small sting and stared thoughtfully at the scattered stones, then touched the gun in her lap, scraping her nails over the hard surface.

She rubbed her nose then turned on the limb and looked over her shoulder at the bedroom. First she saw the wide expanse of glass sparkling brilliantly opaque in the direct light of the rising sun. Then the side of the building opened out for her, turned transparent like the bronze door and she could see inside, as if she were standing there, standing in the middle of the room. She moved her eyes along the face of the mahazh and peeled it open, peering in at Asshrud unwieldy, lumpish, mouth gaping open, snoring and somnolent, Gapp busy with a sycophant lover, Aleytys jerked her gaze away sick. The kipu next, bone thin and nude, sitting erect, muttering some complicated mantra... sabutim tending gear, making beds, pacing, feeling of military precision, finicky neatness... Mind reeling under the impact of the kaleidoscopic images, she swayed precariously on her perch until the shock snapped her back to herself. She grabbed at her handhold then at the gun sliding from her lap. Turning the weapon over and over in her fingers, she examined the thing, slid her hand around the butt, stretched her finger along the side of it until she touched a fingernail-sized swing plate. She flicked it open and stared at a dull black sensor. She moved her finger toward it.

“No!” Swardheld’s voice roared in her head nearly startling her into dropping the gun.

“Helvete, woman, you want to bring the whole place down on your head?” As Aleytys resettled herself, he relaxed and chuckled. “Do you know what you’d do, touching that sensor?”

Aleytys stared down at the heavy metal thing crushing the delicate material of her gown. “What does it do?”

“Well, roughly...” She felt his eyes looking down thoughtfully at the weapon, measuring it against a wealth of experience totally beyond her comprehension. “Looks to me like it’d just about punch a hole in that rock you were pointing it at big enough to shove a horse in.”

She touched the weapon and shuddered. “Concentrated death. I wonder...”

“That’s how some men measure progress.” Harskari’s cool voice, amber-tinged, finished the thought for her. “In the more efficient killing of ever larger numbers of their fellow men.”

Aleytys felt a cold sickness around her stomach, a heavy weight of depression on her spirit. She slid her hands underneath the energy gun and held it in front of her. “What do I do with the damn thing?”

Harskari blinked her amber eyes. “Why did you bring it out of that room?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know why any of that happened last night.”

“Well.” She thought a moment then nodded. “You have to hide it. You brought it out for some reason, don’t forget that; probably you’ll find some use for it later. But if the kipu finds it in your possession. . . .”

“No.” Once again Aleytys shivered.

The purple eyes opened and Shadith spoke with a calm finality that forbade any argument. “Nowhere in the mahazh, too many sensors. Up there.”

“Where?”

“The cliff. You see that narrow ledge a little higher than the top of the mahazh?”

Aleytys scanned the rugged face of the cliff where it rose above the skirting of foliage at its base. “Yes,” she said after a while. “Is that the one you mean?” She fixed her eyes on the short horizontal break in the cliff face.

“You got it. You two agree?” Shadith’s purple eyes turned from one side to the other, questioning.

“Yes,” Harskari said thoughtfully. “If Aleytys can lift that far.”

“I can try.”

“Hm. Yes.” Swardheld’s burring voice muttered in reluctant agreement. “It’s an unhandy place, though.”

“That’s the point, old grumbler.” A twinkle in the purple eyes matched a delicate ripple of laughter. “Who’d look there?”

Aleytys moved the cover back over the trigger-sensor and frowned, stroking fingers slowly over the smooth metal. As she concentrated, the weapon came alive under her hands. First she felt it grow warm, then it wiggled, startling her again, then bumped lightly against her hand. When it bumped harder she spread out her hands like wings and the weapon leapt up between them, sweeping toward the cliff in a rapidly accelerating curve that panicked her.

With a gasp she jerked the hurtling gun to a stop a bare handspan from a spattering crash against the stone. Halting, clattering, bounding, it edged in jerky stages up the cliff, scraping noisily against the irregular surface. Gradually control came easier to her until finally she tucked the weapon neatly into the crevice. With a sigh, she relaxed, leaning back against the limb, crossing her ankles and letting her hair blow around her face.

“Well, that’s done,” she murmured.

Purple eyes glowed and light laughter glinted silver in her head. “There once was a red-headed lass whose multiple talents had class. She flipped in the air six eggs and a chair, two horses, five hogs, three cream-colored dogs, four hens, two cats and a hare.”

Aleytys giggled. She kicked a leg up and as the chiffon slid back, uncovering her thigh, sobered suddenly, her high spirits plummeting into deep depression. “Feeling and healing, lifting and shifting. How do I get rid of my incubus?” She rubbed her hand over her thigh. A cold chill vibrated through her body. She stared helplessly paralyzed at a swirl. . . a swarm of dots that gradually coalesced into the glaring face

of a nayid female, strong, imperious... frowning... no... it breathed like a mist through her body. "No!"

She blinked, the sensation faded, she was breathing on her own again. Cold with a fear that began as a seed in her belly, an ice seed that spread through her body, crystal on crystal spreading, breeding like the crystallization of super-saturated solution, her blood chilled, her breath came light and shallow off the top of her lungs. She pressed her hands over her eyes. "Harskari, help me."

The amber eyes opened slowly this time; Aleytys got the impression that the sorceress was puzzled. "Most peculiar," she murmured. "I had no idea. Shadith?"

"No, dammit. Of course not. Hey, grumpy."

"Shut up. Yammering females." Swardheld's gruff voice was moderated to a hoarse whisper. "Freyka, it's up to you. We..." The black eyes were grim. "We'll help how we can but not one of us could expel one of the others, so how could we throw out this invader in your body? Especially since she has a physical foothold."

Aleytys got shakily to her feet and ran down the arching limb to the bank. She hesitated a minute, hand on the rough bark of the trunk, breathing in the pungent green aroma, then leaped down and ran across the cold dewy grass into the room.

Burash lay deep in sleep. She bent over him and touched his face, feeling in him a security and a strength that she clung to gratefully, a center where she had meaning in all the flux of her tottering world. Reluctantly she forced herself to leave him, let him lie in peace. She could sense the deep exhaustion in him, the drained ache from the strain her healing had put on his body. Settling in the chair at the foot of the bed, she sighed and looked around.

The floor was blotched with scuffed scummy blood stains, ugly red-brown dull splotches on the complex pattern of leaves, vines, flowers etched into the blue-green tiles on the floor. She wrinkled her nose in disgust.

A murmur of voices came faintly through the tapestry masking the archway. A six-fingered hand grasped the edge of the tapestry and pulled it aside, letting Aamunkoitta push the serving cart into the room accompanied by a subdued rattle of dishes. Behind her Aleytys saw bits and pieces of her newly augmented guard, then the tapestry dropped again.

Aamunkoitta blinked as she saw Aleytys waiting for her. Her eyes darted toward the glass wall then back and her face looked puzzled. The sun marked her usual time but Aleytys should have been still in bed. "Hyvaa huomenta, Kunniakas," she murmured. "If you'll wait a moment." She trotted hastily across the room to the storecloset and brought out the light folding table Aleytys used for her meals.

As she unfolded the legs and locked them in position, she noticed the floor for the first time. Her mouth fell open, eyes wide. The table fell with a wooden clatter as she clutched at the coarse material between her breasts. "Kunniakas?" She licked her lips and glanced again over the stained floor. "All those guards... and that?" She freed a cramped hand and pointed to the floor, jerking the hand about in sharp interrupted lines that told without words the extent of her dismay. "What happened?"

"Raid," Aleytys said tersely. "Over the wall."

"But the guards. In the hall?"

“We were drugged. Burash. Me. To make it easier, I suppose.”

“Asshrud.” Aamunkoitta pushed the toe of her sandal against the rim of one of the blood splotches. “The kipu know that?”

“What do you think?”

The hiiri nodded. She picked up the table and straightened out the legs. “Has to be Asshrud. Gapp has the venom in her but not the brains. Asshrud.”

As Aamunkoitta set the breakfast dishes on the table, Aleytys leaned back in the chair and yawned. “Well, that should cancel out one of my problems.”

Aamunkoitta set the heavy stoneware jug on the table and took off the lid, letting the hot spicy aroma of the mastu coil out into the brisk morning air. She poured it out into a thick-walled cup without a handle and looked up as she set the jug down again, her face troubled. “You don’t understand, Kunniakas.”

“I know that.” Aleytys picked up the cup and cradled it in her hand, enjoying the feel of the warmth against her palm, “What am I missing this time?”

“The kipu won’t do anything to Asshrud.”

“Why?” Aleytys stared at her, astounded. “It’s the perfect chance, catching her with her fingers sticky.” She lifted the cup and sniffed at the steam. “Mmmmm. I’m hungry.”

Aamunkoitta shook her head. “You don’t see.” She shrugged. “You don’t know. First of all there’s no real proof. Those nightcrawlers still alive won’t know anything important. More important, Asshrud had strong ties with three of the cityqueens, one of the strongest factions against the kipu.”

“What’s that got to do with Asshrud’s immunity?”

“If the kipu touches Asshrud, that’s the one thing that would turn all the cityqueens against her. All the queens. Even she can’t handle that. Together they’d mop her up like a wet spot on the floor. Speaking of the floor, I’d better get a mop and clean up this mess.” She shrugged. “I wouldn’t count too much on that if I were Asshrud, though. The kipu’ll find a way to take her out sooner or later. She’s a canny bitch. You watch out too, Kunniakas.” She started to turn away then she swung back. “How bad was last night?”

Aleytys set the cup down with a too-loud clunk, her hands trembling. “He nearly died... and I... I walked just this side of dying, a hairline this side. A lot of that blood is mine.”

“Take care, Kunniakas, Asshrud’s a viper with poison sacs the size of melons.” The hiiri squatted close beside Aleytys. “Strikes without warning too.” She gazed thoughtfully into Aleytys’ face.

“Warning. That reminds me. Look out at the garden, will you?”

Aamunkoitta raised her eyebrows, but jumped to her feet and pattered across the floor, her straw sandals scraping faintly against the stone.

“Do you see them?”

“Them? Ah. The guards on the wall. I see them.”

“Get word to our friend, will you? The guards are there day and night from now on.”

“Yes.” Aamunkoitta backed silently away from the glass wall and went into the storeroom again, coming out with a mop and an empty bucket.

Aleytys lifted the cup again and sipped at the cooled liquid, took a mouthful of the mastu, swallowed, took another....

Pain. It jagged through her body eclipsing everything else. Pain. Burning. Animal claws tearing her apart. Burning. Her brain burned in a fire that ate at her nerves. She screamed. Moaned. Threw herself out of the chair, knocking over the table, the pot of mastu spreading on the tiles like a malignant cancer. Pain. It invaded her world, nothing else there, white hot claws tearing her brain and body apart atom by atom.

Her body shuddered, spewed out the corrosive substance that was killing her. Her sphincters loosed until she writhed helplessly in the mess of her body fluids. She retched again and again, nothing left in her stomach to come, another pain, another convulsion another tearing ache, muscles wrenched and knotted by the dry heaves. Dimly she heard Aamunkoitta cry out, felt cool hands touch her face....

Harskari woke in her head and the amber glow of her presence came so strongly that it dominated even the tearing agony of the poison pain. “Heal yourself, Aleytys.”

The voice rang like a deep-toned bell. Again and again, the sound penetrating, demanding, compelling. Compelling. Driven out of her pain-controlled frenzy, Aleytys plunged into the power river and let the black water flow through and through her body, burning, purging, washing out the corroding poison... again she saw the three shadows holding her, comforting her, supporting her and grew warm and content in their care....

She opened her eyes. Burash and Aamunkoitta bent anxiously over her. With difficulty she forced herself to her feet and stood trembling, leaning on Burash, nauseated now by the stench of her expelled fluids, the vomit and feces and urine and poison her body had cast off in its extremity. “Bath...” she whispered.

Jerking the tapestry impatiently aside the kipu strode in and halted, staring at the tableau that greeted her goggling eyes. Behind her Sukall waved the guard back, then entered herself, letting the tapestry fall behind her.

“What happened here?” the kipu demanded.

Aleytys turned to face her. “Poison. In the mastu.”

“Who brought it?”

Aamunkoitta began trembling. “I... I did,” she said hesitantly. She had no choice. Any of the guards could tell the kipu that.

“Take the hiiri. Destroy it.” The kipu’s voice was cool and devoid of any emotion. Sukall stepped around her and reached for the hiiri’s thin shoulder.

Aleytys pushed Burash away and stood tottering on her own feet, anger cold and hard inside her. “No.” She pushed at Sukall’s stringy powerful arm. “Don’t touch her.”

Sukall hesitated, looking over her shoulder at the kipu.

“She brought poison.” The rich voice was cold and inflexible.

“Get behind me, Kitten.” Aleytys confronted the two nayid females, eyes burning now, hands cold, stomach knotted, trembling with weakness of body that sapped her spirit “No!” she repeated.

Sukall put hands on her shoulders to move her out of the way, then screamed as black fear, terror, weakness, pain, anxiety flooded through her.

With cold sick precision Aleytys plucked the strings of the guard’s weaknesses, exaggerating them enormously until she crouched in a whimpering heap at the kipu’s feet.

Aleytys turned her dark gaze on the kipu. “No,” she breathed and projected the load of negation at the kipu, spending her emotional strength prodigiously, accepting no limits in her attack.

The kipu backed until her shoulders touched the tapestry.

“If you have to punish someone,” Aleytys whispered, her strength draining away, “punish the guilty, not a convenient scapegoat. Asshrud poisoned me. You know it. The hiiri is innocent. She is mine. Touch what is mine and I fight you.”

Recovering slightly the kipu nodded, then said dryly, “So you’ve given up your play-acting.”

Aleytys laughed. “Funny. The old one has really waked in me. Never mind. I’m loyal to my friends. You don’t understand that, do you. She doesn’t either, the old one. Just promise and punish, buy the service. You’ll give her good service, won’t you, kipu?” She laughed again, this time her voice shrilling into hysteria.

The kipu nodded. “Indeed, I serve my queen.” She smiled, a small tight movement of her thin lips. “Very well, the hiiri remains. Sukall!”

The quivering nayid pulled her lanky body onto her feet, stumbling awkwardly, still mis-coordinated and uncertain in her movements. She stared briefly at Aleytys, radiating incoherent scraps of emotion all overlaid by a bitter hatred. She straightened slowly. “Im rab’ kipu?”

“Return to your duties. Say nothing about this to anyone.”

Sukall saluted snappily and strode from the room, her boots clattering in super-military emphasis.

“Another enemy.” The kipu sounded amused.

“Yes, rab’ kipu.” Aleytys felt her anger dissolving. She felt as if she would collapse, melt into a heap on the tiles. Only the kipu’s continued presence kept her on her feet

“The Ffynch company trader is coming after thenoon meal.”

Aleytys laughed shakily. “Thinking about a meal is rather beyond me right now.”

“The old one is to override.”

“Ah.”

“The Damiktana will wear the red robe.”

“Concession for concession. I’ll wear the red robe.”

“Your meals will be watched from now on by my sabutim.”

“That’s a comforting thought.”

“I’m sure you’ll find it so. Though poison seems somewhat ineffective.”

“You never can tell. Perhaps the poisoner was inept, used too little.”

“Perhaps.” The kipu puckered her face into a disgusted grimace. “Have the migru taste for you.”

“No.” Aleytys shivered. “No.”

“Stupid. The old one wouldn’t be so squeamish.”

“Neither of you understands loyalty. Anyway I think you know I’m not the old one.”

“I always knew.”

“But it was convenient to pretend.”

“See that it stays convenient.”

Aleytys nodded tiredly. “I’ll do that. Anything more you want?”

The kipu looked at her for a moment. “You’re supposed to be intelligent.”

“I am.” Aleytys took a step toward the bathroom. “I know my limitations. Do you?”

“I know my road. Keep out of my way.”

“I’ll remember.” Followed by a silent worried Burash and a trembling Aamunkoitta she walked to the bathroom and waited for the hiiri to pull the tapestry aside for her. Looking back over her shoulder, she said, “You have anything more to say to me?”

The kipu shook her head and left without another word.

Chapter XVIII

Aleytys sat stiffly erect, uncomfortable in her flaming red robe. The mimosoid curving over her head swayed slowly back and forth as the afternoon breeze blowing up from the river curled over the wall and tickled the upper branches into motion so that the fragile shadows of the leaves danced in lacy patterns over her lap. Behind her, on the wall, the silent black figures of the slowly pacing guards moved back and forth, an oppressive reminder of her danger and her captivity.

The kipu came through the door into the garden, the dark flamboyant figure of the Ffynch company representative pacing beside her.

“You see our difficulty.” The kipu stopped in front of Aleytys and sketched her outline with an expressive hand. “This one is more like your females.”

“Hm.” He ran his eyes over the stiffly erect. Aleytys then turned back to the kipu. “You have her measurements?”

“What ones do you need?”

He smiled suddenly, his teeth glinting pearly white in his dark face. Little red sparks flashed in his eyes. “I’ll take the measurements if you don’t mind.”

The kipu frowned. “Why?”

“As you said, she’s more like my species. I know where to loop the tape.”

The kipu tapped the communicator at her waist. When a guard appeared in the doorway, she said crisply, “A tape measure.”

“Im, rab’ kipu.”

The Rep walked casually over to Aleytys while he waited. “Remember me?” he asked softly.

She glanced coolly up at him. “Sombala Isshi.”

“Nursemaid?”

“I said ‘in a way.’ ”

“I’m still curious.”

She examined him calmly. “No, you’re not.”

“All right. I’m not.”

The kipu’s voice sounded behind him. “The tape measure.”

Isshi produced a pad and a stylus from a pocket inside his crimson and green blazer. “If you would take off that thing you’re wearing?”

Aleytys snorted. But she stood up and let the robe slip off her shoulders. The afternoon air was cold on her skin. She shivered. “Hurry with it.”

“Hold out your arm.”

He spread the tape here and there over her body, a grin on his face, taking extra time over the breast and hip measurements, chuckling softly so that Aleytys felt like slamming her knee into his face.

“I believe that should be sufficient.” She stepped back and pulled the robe about her body again.

“A pleasure, Damiktana.” He stood up and brushed the sand off his knees.

“If you’ll come, Damiktana?” The kipu stepped back.

Aleytys knotted the last tie and stalked past Isshi. As she moved with exaggerated grace past the two of them, she heard the kipu talking to the Rep.

“That little matter I sent to you yesterday.”

“Yes?” Isshi’s voice was cool, curious.

“The runner.”

“Ah. Yes. We threw a net through the Agora and the surrounding Kalybionta near the spaceport. We’ll have her today, probably.”

“There’s no way she can get off world?”

“The only ships off this world are Ffynch company owned. No, she won’t slip out of the net.”

“Good.”

Aleytys glanced back over her shoulder. She smiled at the kipu then stepped aside and waited for her to come and hold the tapestry for her. As the nayid sauntered past, moderating her long stride to Isshi’s shorter legs, Aleytys murmured, “I get your point, rab’ kipu.”

The kipu’s short stubby antennas twitched briefly but her face was impassive as she pulled the tapestry aside and waited for the other two to walk through.

In Asshrud’s quarters the procession halted briefly. Asshrud stood reluctantly and waddled down from her chair to salute Aleytys. “Ilu-annana, my adann is yours.”

Aleytys lifted a lazy hand in acknowledgment and bowed in her turn. From somewhere deep inside her an impulse welled up irresistibly, she felt cruel and savage, felt a hatred that in another part of her disgusted her but she had no control of it. Wanting to scar, to hurt, she murmured, “May your loves be numberless as the radiance of your beauty deserves.”

She felt a wave of hate and fear almost smothering in its intensity roll out from Asshrud, the hate understandable, the fear something else. And something in her chuckled at it. She could feel the laughter shaking her. I wouldn’t do that, she thought, I couldn’t... even if she’s trying to kill me, that’s no reason to... damn you, you old bitch. Keep out of my mind!

Face a vapid mask, she swayed out of the room followed closely by the kipu and Isshi and the honor guard.

The ceremony was repeated in Gapp’s rooms.

“Ilu-annana, my adann is yours.”

“My dear child, I see your tastes haven’t changed. Such sweet and lissome loves. And not a brain among them.”

“Ummu, please....”

“Dear, dear daughter.”

“Nih-a-annana, Damiktana.” Gapp bowed, touched palm-to-palm hands to her lips, her face pale gray, the formal act made to conceal the pain.

Aleytys, weeping inside, fought for control of her tongue, but the old one used her anger and frustration, used the sick sour suppressed unlovely side to her nature. Sneaking up on her weak side, the old one mocked her and tripped her tongue wickedly.

And all the while the cynical knowing red-flecked eyes of Sombala Isshi glinted with admiration and the kipu radiated smug satisfaction, not believing the old one’s presence, relishing the kow-towing to the acid tongue that merely added to her own power, preening herself like some insectoid cock.

Locked in the pattern, feeding it with the anger and frustration she couldn’t help building up as helplessness closed in on her, Aleytys paced, pale, expressionless, swaying gracefully through her role.

On the roof Sombala Isshi inspected the skimmers and grunted his satisfaction as the kipu placed an order for another skimmer to replace one gone missing. Could the hiiri have gotten some energy weapons and taken it out? Aleytys felt a spark of interest driving through her gloom.

Walk the bazaars, Isshi purchasing this and that handiwork from hiiri slave or worker nayid, humble nayadim bobbing and bowing slavishly before then....

Aleytys retreated into her head, let her body move, tuned out to save her sanity all that happened, walked a zombie through the streets and back into the mahazh.

“Most impressive.” Sombala Isshi halted on the wide esplanade in front of the mahazh.

The kipu wasn’t listening. Shading her black insectoid eyes with a narrow fine-boned hand, her attention was focused on a black speck rapidly enlarging as it swooped through the sky toward the building. Forgotten for the moment, Aleytys lingered on the steps that led with sweeping majesty up to the soaring pointed arch filled with a massive door built of metal-sheathed planks.

“Harskari,” she muttered. “Help me.”

“Your feet are strong enough to hold you.” Harskari’s even, measured tones, combined with the aura of age and wisdom that surrounded her presence, brought a measure of calm to Aleytys. Leaning against the edge of the arch, shoulders losing their tension as the coolness of the polished stone blocks struck through the stiff scratchy robe, Aleytys followed the large skimmer as it floated smoothly down onto the stone slabs of the barren esplanade.

A ramp extruded. Two short dark men dressed in dull olive suit-liners pushed a nayid female ahead of them down the slope. Bent-shouldered, arms held tight against her sides, the lanky miserable female shuffled along, moving with evident difficulty.

Aleytys leaned forward tautly, staring at the nayid’s arms and legs trying to see the bonds that held those

thin arms to her bony sides.

“Tangle web.” Shadith’s cool silvery voice answered the unspoken question. “Feels like glue. You can move. Barely. But any quick tricks are no-no.”

Aleytys wrinkled her nose. “Something else the kipu can use on me.”

“Oh, I doubt Isshi lets the nayids have that.”

“Why?” Aleytys shifted her eyes to the cliff face barely visible from where she was standing. “He sells those damn guns.”

“For which he has quite adequate defenses. But the kipu’s technicians could learn a little too much from a tangle-web field.”

“Too much what?”

“Too much about trans-light flight.”

“Huh? I don’t see the connection. Damn! Even Kitten makes me feel like a child.” She watched the captive nayid stumble painfully up to the kipu. “Looks like heading for the star city isn’t such a good idea.”

“Depends. But it doesn’t look like we’ve much choice. These company worlds!” The purple eyes blinked rapidly.

Sombala Isshi saluted the kipu and walked up the ramp. The two guards followed him. Just before they stepped into the skimmer, one touched a stud on his belt. The captive nayid stumbled and swung arms suddenly released. She moved her head carefully then straightened and faced the kipu, mouth firmed in a rigid line. Waves of anger and fear swirled out of her bringing a touch of sickness to Aleytys’ stomach before she blocked the emotion out.

Abruptly the captive leaped at the kipu, six-fingered hands locking around her thin neck. But the attack was futile. Two of the honor guard leaped forward, pressed a stun-rod to the growling Runner’s neck. As she crumpled into a heap on top of the kipu, the guards picked her up and trotted her past Aleytys into the mahazh.

The kipu stood and brushed herself off. Boots clicking precisely on the stone, back straight, literally bathing in smugness, she strode up the steps and paused in front of Aleytys, a smile curling the ends of her thin lips.

“Yes,” Aleytys said calmly. “You certainly made your point, rab’ kipu.”

Chapter XIX

Sitting in the shadow beneath the over-curve of the bamboo, Aleytys nervously dipped here and there in the darkness, exercising her new-found talent for eyeless vision, carefully avoiding Burash’s gloomy figure.

He sat with his back to her broadcasting a deep trouble in his spirit, a stubborn pain that made her wince

even as she rejected the basis for it.

Impatiently she swung around to glare at his back. “Burash, I had to. There wasn’t anywhere else safe enough to meet.”

He hunched his head lower between his shoulders.

“You know there’s nowhere else.”

“I know.” he lifted his head and turned himself so he faced her, his antennas spread wide arching into a shallow curve. “Stop acting like some dizzy female.”

He stared at her, startled. “But—”

“Damn. I keep forgetting.” She slapped a hand onto her thigh then winced at the loudness of the sound. “Sentimentality, that’s all. False. You know it.”

“False?” He shrugged, the antennas jerking briefly upright, then drooping again. “It certainly shows what means most to you.”

She jumped up and threw out her hands. “Hahunh! You make me want to tear my hair! I do the best I can, that’s all. Our place. Hunh. Your place is here.” She touched her forehead. “And here.” She flattened her hand over her heart “We’ll be leaving here soon anyway.”

He tilted his head to look up at her. “You’ll be leaving me soon too, did you think of that?”

She knelt in front of him and touched his face with her fingertips. “Burash?”

He sighed. “Leyta, Leyta, you don’t understand.” He caught her hand and held it between his. “No.” She sighed. “No.”

“Leyta—”

She freed her hand and lay back on the grass beside him. “Look up there, Burash.” Sweeping her hand in a shallow circle she encompassed the visible stars. “There they are. Mother hen suns with circling worlds like chicks around them. Somewhere out there my own mother flits from one to the other. Somewhere out there maybe a warped and twisted woman is tormenting the baby she stole from me. If my friend hasn’t found her yet. Somewhere out there he waits for me. Out there maybe I’ll find a place where I can belong, really belong. A home.”

He bent over her and kissed her forehead lightly. “I wish you good fortune in your search.” Abruptly he jumped up and pressed back into deeper shadow. “Someone comes.”

Aleytys glanced around, saw nothing, closed her eyes and looked with the new sense. “Nakivas and Kitten.” She sat up and sighed. “Relax, naram.”

A moment later the two hiiri slipped cautiously into the clearing, edging around the side of it so they remained in deep shadow as they drew nearer to Aleytys. Like shadows they flitted over the uneven ground making no more noise than hunting cats.

“How did you spot them?” Aleytys whispered, her quick-trigger curiosity flaring.

“Heat sources.” Burash ducked his head and wiggled his antennas. “Obvious.”

“Ah.” Aleytys frowned. “Can those guards do that?”

“A little. Not like a male.”

“Could they spot us here from the wall?”

“Not this far.”

“Hah. I was about to panic.”

“Why so, Kunniakas?” Nakivas sank to the ground beside them. “I hear you’ve had some busy days.”

“Interesting times.” Almost inaudibly she chuckled. “That’s an old curse I heard somewhere. May you live in interesting times. I begin to know what they mean.” She sighed and swung a hand in a brief arc. “All that. You see why I need to get away?”

“Yes.” Nakivas looked cautiously around, then leaned forward until his face was inches from hers. “The clan saaski will be coming to the market under safe conduct. They won’t break truce to take you but will give you passage to the hills if you get to them outside the truce line. That’s a full day’s journey from this place. The headman has sworn by the totem of his clan.”

“The hills?”

“Our bargain, Kunniakas. A season’s service.”

“Mmm. How do we get a day’s journey away from here?”

“You can ride?”

“Yes.” She smiled. “Though I haven’t had much opportunity lately.”

Nakivas leaned toward Burash. “And you, Seppanhei?”

Burash twisted his mouth into a wry smile. “I rode a little as a child, but not for twenty years.” He stared down at his hands. “Since then I have developed a strong fear of heights.” With a sigh he brushed his hands together. “I won’t enjoy it, but I can stay on a horse’s back.”

Nakivas shook his head. “My god,” he said hoarsely. “You really want to go through with this?” Without waiting for an answer, he went on. “I suppose you do. I’ll have a guide with horses waiting for you. Aamunkoitta can show you where.”

“Good.” Aleytys tapped her fingers on her thighs. “I could amend the bargain?”

“How?”

“I want to cut the time of service.”

“No.”

“Even if I can get you energy weapons?”

Nakivas caught hold of her hand then dropped it and relaxed, smiling wryly as he remembered her talent. “How many? And what kind?”

“I’d like to know the answer to that.” The kipu’s resonant voice cut through the hush of the clearing. “No. Don’t bother getting up. Look around.”

Silently, ominously, black guards stepped out of the shadow, the only opening to the ring of bamboo and silent figures that section where the cliff rose blocking escape.

Slowly, half in shock, Aleytys got to her feet. “How?”

“I can’t believe you’d be so stupid.” The kipu flicked a hand at a bunched group of nayids close behind her. “Take them.”

Nakivas flowed onto his feet and dived toward the bamboo close behind him. Aleytys heard a dull thud, then two guards came around her carrying the hiiri’s limp body.

“Ishe...”

“Damiktana.” The kipu voice sounded wearily patient and condescending. “Damiktana. Where did you leave your head? Would I waste such a fine advantage? The Paamies of the hiiri in my hands?”

“How...” Aleytys looked around. Nakivas lay across a nayid shoulder, Aamunkoitta struggled half-heartedly in the grasp of another. Burash... She wheeled to face the kipu again. “How did you know about this meeting?”

“Think, Damiktana.” The exaggerated lilt in the kipu’s voice blended nicely with her complacent self-satisfaction and genuine amusement. “You saw the screens in my workroom. What did you think they were for?”

“How could I know?” She shook her head, feeling terribly helpless. “I don’t understand anything about machines.”

“I’ve had you watched from the beginning. My ‘eyes’ watch that room twenty-six hours the day.” She frowned and looked around. “Not here, though. I admit I overlooked this place. However...” She turned to the guards. “Sukall.”

“Im, rab’ kipu?”

“You know where to take these.”

“Im, rab’ kipu.” Refusing to look at Aleytys, Sukall stalked off with the guards carrying Nakivas and Aamunkoitta close behind.

When they had vanished into the darkness, the kipu turned to Aleytys. “If you will, Damiktana?” She gestured toward the mahazh. In her living quarters, Aleytys settled herself in her chair and looked anxiously at the kipu.

The cold-faced nayid stood in front of her, hands clasped behind her.

Aleytys' stomach knotted with fear and anger. "What are you going to do to them?"

"The Paamies?" The kipu twitched her lips in a tight mean smile. "After I ask him a question or two..." She paused, smile broadening. Aleytys shivered at the sadistic pleasures showing in the tight-skinned face. "I think I'll hang him in a cage at the market. Let all the hiiri see their Paamies and know where he is. They're tough little beasts, these hiiri, he should last quite a while even without food and water."

Aleytys pressed her lips together. She flattened her shaking hands against the chair arms and spoke hesitantly. "The others?"

"I should have them executed."

"No!"

"No. You're right. With the alternative of drugging you and the uncertainty I feel about that after your performance with that poison, I think I'll keep them as insurance for your good behavior, Damiktana. Damiktana." Her voice lingered on the word.

"Ah." Aleytys leaned back in the chair and sighed. She touched her face with a shaking hand. "You won't hurt him... them?"

The kipu smiled even more, her small gleaming teeth sharp and carnivorous. She shifted her hands around in front of her and tapped a stud on the caller at her belt. "That depends on you, Damiktana."

"What did you do just now?"

"Shut off surveillance." The kipu stepped back and eyed Aleytys warily. "There are guards right there." She nodded her head to the tapestry behind her.

Aleytys pressed her hands hard against the arms of the chair. "That's funny. That's really funny." She fixed her eyes on the kipu. "So. I keep up the act for you."

"Yes."

Aleytys sensed a tautness, a waiting in the nayid. "There's something else."

"Hostages. They can be relatively comfortable."

"So?"

"Or they can be very very uncomfortable."

"So?" Aleytys looked grim. "What do you want from me?"

"A life." The calm casual word hung vibrating between them.

Aleytys closed her eyes. "Harskari," she whispered, "help me."

"Listen to what that one says." The amber eyes blinked impatiently. "Don't depend on me for

everything, Aleytys, you're an adult, intelligent, use it."

"Harskari—"

The amber eyes closed with chilling finality. A muscle twitching beside her mouth, Aleytys gathered herself and asked, "A life?"

"Asshrud."

"What?" Aleytys swallowed and huddled in her robe feeling somehow shriveled.

"You heard."

"What makes you think I could..." She licked dry lips. "Or would... kill... kill someone. Especially for you?"

"The migru. The him."

"Ah." She pressed her hands over her eyes. "I'm a healer," she muttered.

"Death. Life. Two sides of the same coin, not a hair's difference between."

"But... someone told me you couldn't touch her."

The hiiri girl."

At this reminder of the watch on her life, Aleytys flamed into sudden anger. She swallowed it and said tightly, "Well?"

"I can't touch her."

"But I can?" She pulled her hands down slowly and clasped them in her lap. "Isn't ordering the killing the same as doing it yourself?"

"I? Order you? My queen?"

"Oh." Her mouth twitched. "What happens to me? I suppose I must claim the kill."

"She tried to kill you." The kipu's antennas jerked in short angular arcs underlining her irritation with Aleytys' stubborn refusal to see where her interest lay. "Don't be stupid. What choice have you? A life for a life. The hiiri for Asshrud."

"What about my life?"

"What you carry protects you."

"Explain about the hiiri."

"Isn't it obvious? If Asshrud lives, the hiiri dies." She straightened her mouth into an impatient fine line. "Need I say very very painfully? I only need one hostage to hold you and the migru will do just fine."

“No. I believe you.” Aleytys looked down at her hands. She rubbed them together helplessly. “I need time.”

“Time? What for?”

“You don’t understand.”

“I don’t need to.”

“Right. You don’t need to understand me. Just use me.”

“I knew you’d eventually realize where you stand.”

“Why don’t you do it and give me the name? I can’t deny it while you hold my friends.”

“No. I can’t touch flesh of the queen.”

“No. You only order it.”

“That’s different.”

“No.” She shrugged. “It’s not different. But I expect you’ll never see that. How long?”

“What?” The kipu frowned. “What’s that mean?”

“How long do I have to make up my mind?”

“Now.” The kipu strode to the archway and paused, hand on the tapestry. “Make up your mind now. What choice do you have?”

“Don’t push me.” Aleytys leaned forward, her face set in grim lines. “Unless you want a negative.” She slid out of the chair and stood up. “I need time.”

The kipu ran her eyes over the arrogant stance of the woman facing her. She capitulated. “Very well. I’ll return with the morning meal. Have your answer. The hiiri or Asshrud.”

“Yes. Aleytys brushed the hair back from her damp and sweaty face, the momentary rebellion washing out of her leaving her feeling gray and wilted. “I know.”

She watched the kipu saunter through the arch. She felt strange... distant and remote... stomach clenching and unclenching... knotting spasmodically... head floating eerily... she stumbled out into the garden and sat down heavily on the bench by the stream, watching the water flow past, sparking silver in the moonlight.

The single moon floated lightly between slowly thickening clouds. “It’ll be raining tomorrow.” Aleytys leaned back staring at her hands. “I can’t do it.”

“What a bitch!” Shadith’s purple eyes flashed with anger.

“What do I do, Singer?” Aleytys spread her hands out, fingers trembling palely in the intermittent moonlight.

Harskari's golden eyes opened crystalline crackling cold. "You have two feet, Aleytys. Stand on them."

"Harskari..."

"Well?"

"You... all of you... you helped before when I needed you. On Lamarchos. You took out the horde master for me when I asked." She let her head drop onto the seat back and closed her eyes. "I can't do it myself. I simply can't make my hands kill someone."

"What do you want of us?"

"Help me!"

"To do what? What do you want of us?"

"Hey, go easy, will you, princess?" Swardheld's gruff voice held a hint of reproach. "She's just a kid yet. This is heavy stuff."

"Cotton candy will keep her a baby. Is that what you want?"

"Well, you've picked a stunner to be stubborn about." Shadith sniffed. "Come on, tarmno, I agree with old grumbler here. Let up on the poor kid."

"Be kind. That's easy, isn't it. Makes you feel good, feel like a warm and loving person. Forget what it does to her." The expressive voice snapped with knife edges. "Pander to her weakness. That's what you want?"

"Stop it!" Aleytys dug her fingernails into her palms and clamped her eyes shut until they hurt. "I know the situation. Dammit. I know the choice I have to make, the only choice I can make. I can't let Kitten die. And I'm not the kipu either. I know what my responsibility is if I ask you to do the killing for me. I am... I can't... I can't do it. I don't know how. And I don't think that it's any easier for you, my friends, for any of you, even you, Swardheld. You're a fighter, but this is slaughter. Damn distasteful execution. I don't even know if you can do it either. I only say this. Help me if you can. I need your help. Please." She forced her eyes open and flattened her hands on her thighs. "My hands." She looked down at them, rubbed them back and forth, watching the thin silky material of her nightgown bunch and stretch. "Nayid! Animals."

"Burash." Harskari's quiet voice dropped the single word into the tense silence.

"Ah. I can't believe he's even the same species." She smiled involuntarily.

"Male, female differences, an alien species... it's called culture shock, my dear." Harskari chuckled. "Better that you accustom yourself to it. My impiadjawa... foreseeing... tells me we'll be seeing quite a few widely differing sophonts and cultures."

"You'll do it for me?"

"Leave it to me," Swardheld grunted. "My hands know their job." The black eyes squinted. "Not a thing for pride, freyka. I'm glad you've never had to learn that particular skill."

“I thank you,” she breathed. “My friend, my friend.”

“Vaelcomm, freyka.”

Shadith blinked impatiently. “Why sit around and stew over this business? Get it done now.”

“Fine. You handle the time shift, Harskari?”

“Of course. Aleytys?”

“Yes?”

“Will you watch or do you prefer to sleep?”

“Are you babying me now, Harskari?” Aleytys laughed shakily. “No. I’ll take your advice. Face up to the consequences of my own decisions. I may be just a rider, but I keep my eyes open.”

“Good.”

Swardheld shook himself into her body. He stood up, stamped her feet as if putting on long boots, and strode purposefully over the grass. At first Aleytys felt a little uneasy, the edges of her sense of her being trailing helplessly around like ragged cheesecloth in a high wind. But Shadith helped her tuck the ends in and by the time they reached the archway on the far side of her bedroom she was nestling comfortably, watching with a slightly queasy interest.

“Hit it, princess.”

“Take it fast as you can, Swardheld. I’ll be in half-phase through the hall, full shift in Asshrud’s bedroom, back in half in the hall. You understand. I can’t hold it the whole way.”

“Fine. You okay, freyka?”

“Yes. Go ahead.”

The diadem flared, briefly running its notes down to a semi-audible burring. Swardheld dragged the stiff tapestry aside and slipped quickly through the hall, brushing past guards who moments later glanced around confusedly for the half-seen shadow form. At the entrance to Asshrud’s rooms the diadem sounded again, going to the subsonic range that put an itch in Aleytys’ bones, an itch she felt only distantly, insulated as she was in her niche.

This time Swardheld had to thrust his body against the tapestry to shove the material aside. He swam against the gelatin air and slipped into the small side room where Asshrud slept.

Aleytys watched sadly, pity almost destroying her will to go through with the killing, the huge ungainly shape in its solitary cell pleading strongly with her for understanding and compassion.

“Now, Leyta, remember.” Shadith’s voice sang in her ear. “You’re saving a life. Besides your own. Kitten. Remember? And she’ll keep trying to kill you.”

“I know.” She dragged her mind gaze from Asshrud’s face. “It doesn’t help much.” She gave a small

snort. “If it were the kipu, now—”

“Igaza ti.” The light laughter felt warm and friendly.

Aleytys heard a dull thud. While Shadith had distracted her, Swardheld had neatly broken the sleeping Asshrud’s neck. He straightened and plunged back through the heavy resistant air. As he shoved once more past the tapestry, the diadem swooped up to the basso tingle. Again Swardheld wove through the alerted guards. They were still gaping around moving in exaggerated slow motion, searching futilely for the elusive shadow that shifted through them a second time. He slid past the tapestry and sped across the room to the bed.

The diadem notes rang out like fire sparks drifting through the air while the stiffness around her body slid away. “Done, freyka. Dive into bed and look like you’re asleep.” The black eyes closed and she was abruptly alone.

Dithering nervously Aleytys shrugged out of the robe and fumbled at the covers. Outside in the hall she could hear an increasing murmur of voices as the guards reacted to the mysterious events just moments before. “Hurry...” A thread of sound... she couldn’t even tell which it came from... shocked her like a hot wire against her backside and she dived into bed. The empty bed.

For an instant grief overwhelmed her, driving out everything else; tearfully she reached out for the pillow beside her, buried her face in it and sobbed painfully.

The guards came streaming into the room. Three flitted through into the garden while the saydi-res padded cautiously to the bed. “Damiktana?”

“What?” Aleytys sat up and wiped her eyes, glad of the curtains’ added privacy. “Why are you here?” She sharpened her voice at the guards’ ears.

“Something...” The nayid’s voice broke and she paused, annoyed and apprehensive. Aleytys could feel her stiffening her back. “Something brushed past us and came into your room. Did you see anything, Damiktana?”

“I was asleep. You mean another attack on me?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know much. Something. Some nebulous thing. Came through here. Why didn’t you stop it, whatever it was? That’s what you’re there for.”

“It moved too fast, Damiktana, and it was hard to see.”

“Well?”

“The sabutim are searching the garden.”

“If you couldn’t get a look at the thing in a well-lighted hall, how do you expect to catch it in that?” She swung an arm toward the garden, forgetting that the guard couldn’t see it. “It’s dark out there.”

The guard clicked her boots. “We have to try, Damiktana.”

“Ha.” Aleytys scrubbed her face with the sheet. “Call the kipu.”

“Damiktana...”

The sabutim trooped back into the room, interrupting her. The saydi-resh turned to them with relief. “Well?”

“Nothing, elu Resh.”

“Nothing? The wall guards?”

“Saw nothing.”

“You searched the whole enclosure?”

“Im, elu Resh.”

“Im. Return to your posts.”

Relieved, the trio silently saluted and strode out of the room.

Aleytys pulled her robe back around her. She stepped into the center of the room and waited for the saydi-resh to come around to her. “Call the kipu,” she repeatedly sharply.

“Yes, Damiktana.” Subdued, the guard tapped her caller. After several calls the kipu’s angry voice sounded in a mosquito whine of irritation. “It better be good.”

“Rab’ kipu, the Damiktana.”

“Again! What happened?”

“Something came into the hall from her room then returned seconds later.”

“Something? What?”

“I don’t know. We caught half a glance of a shadow thing. No shape we could get. It moved so fast it was gone before we had a chance to do anything. We searched the Damiktana’s room and the enclosure, found nothing. The Damiktana insisted I call you.”

“Ah.” There was a moment’s silence. “Return to your post. I’ll be down presently.”

“Im, rab kipu.” The guard tapped the communicator off and bowed briefly to Aleytys then strode from the room as rapidly as she could move and keep it under a run, clutching desperately at her beleaguered pride.

Shadith opened her eyes and laughed. “Like you stuck a pin in her balloon.”

“You can laugh. I’ve got to face her boss. Could she follow us on those damn electronic eyes of hers?”

“Insufficient data, love. Well have to wait and see.”

“Ha! Well, Harskari, would I be leaning too much if I asked for your help here?”

“What kind of help do you need? Be specific,” Harskari snapped forcefully.

“Advice. You. All of you. Constantly remind me these are different species. That I can’t really trust my readings of their emotions. You’ve all had experience dealing with aliens. I keep acting like they feel the same as I do, think the same as I do, I know it’s a mistake, but I keep doing it. If I seem to be falling in that hole, give me a kick, will you? And if you think of anything, any of you, let me know, will you?”

“Good. A legitimate request.” Harskari smiled. “Well watch out for you.”

“Thanks.” As Aleytys settled herself in her chair, the lift panel slid open and the kipu stepped into the dark room. She frowned, palmed the light on and stepped over to Aleytys.

“Well?”

Silently Aleytys held up her hand, then tapped her belt. The kipu frowned again.

“Why?” she snapped.

“All right.” Aleytys shrugged and folded her hands in her lap. “If you want this on tape.”

“What?”

“Our little chat a while back this night. Remember?”

“So.” The kipu stepped briskly away from her until she had a three meter space between them. Then she tapped the communicator again.

“That does it?” Aleytys eyed the black cube with rising curiosity.

“Done.” The kipu folded her arms over her flat hard thorax. “Now. What do you have to tell me?”

“The job is done.”

“What!”

“I did my part. I expect you to reciprocate.” She glanced down at her hands, then hastily rucked the trembling fingers under her legs. Lifting cold eyes, she considered the nayid in front of her. “I trust you, kipu. As far as I could throw you. You understand?”

Frowning uneasily the kipu shifted another half-pace backward.

Aleytys laughed harshly. “You needn’t be afraid of me. You’ve got a hold on me that’s stronger than you could ever know. Pull my strings, puppet master, make me dance for you. But I’ll dance better if you throw a few sweets my way. I want to see the hiiri and Burash, see they’re really alive.”

“Why should I?”

“Send the guard to check Asshrud and Gapp.”

“Gapp?” The kipu sounded startled.

“Why advertise your interest? Or suggest privileged information?” Aleytys sighed. “I’m tired. And there’ll be a lot of flap after they find her. Show me now.”

“Why wake them? I’ll show you in the morning.”

“No. Now.”

The kipu pursed her blue-purple lips. After a minute she tapped the communicator again. “Etiru-resh.”

“Rab’ kipu?”

“Bring the prisoner Migru. Let him speak.”

“Im, rab’ kipu.” The tiny voice sent shivers through Aleytys’ taut body.

“Let me speak to him.”

The kipu detached the box from her belt. “You can ask him how he is, nothing else. Understand?”

“I understand.” She held out shaking hands for the box.

“Press this when you want to speak. Let it up when you listen.”

“Thank you,” Aleytys said absently, polite out of long habit. She pressed the button down. “Burash.”

“Let up on the button so he can answer.” The kipu’s voice was cool and faintly amused. She had quickly overcome her uneasiness as Aleytys demonstrated the depth of her commitment to the hostages.

“Leyta, is that you?”

“Burash, how are you, how are they treating you?”

There was silence a moment. “Sorry, Leyta, can’t get used to this thing. I’m all right. For now anyway. It’s not the pleasantest place to be, but it could be worse. I suppose.”

The kipu tapped her arm. “That’s enough.”

“Good night, love. I’ll do what I can for you. Believe me.”

“Leyt...” His voice abruptly cut off, to be replaced by that of the nayid guard.

“Is that enough, rab’ kipu?”

Aleytys shook her head violently. “No,” she hissed. “The hiiri. I want to talk to her, too.”

The kipu sighed impatiently. “Etiru-resh, bring the hiiri. The female prisoner.”

“Im, rab’ kipu.”

The kipu lowered her head, her antennas flicking up and down at Aleytys. “Just ask her how she is.”

“Yes.” She pushed the button down. “Kitten, are you there? Are you all right?”

After a moment’s strained silence, Aamunkoitta’s voice came through tiny and startled. “Kunniakas, is that you?”

“Yes, yes, it’s me. Kitten. Are you all right?”

“Enough all right that it scares me. I expected a lot worse.”

“Keep your heart up, my friend, I’m...”

The kipu took the box from her. “Etiru-resh.”

“Im, rab’ kipu?”

“Continue with the prisoners as before—securely locked but well-treated. You hear?”

“Im, rab’ kipu.”

The kipu returned the box to her belt. “Are you satisfied?”

“As much as I can be, given the circumstances. Call the guard. May you be happy with this night’s business.”

Chapter XX

Aleytys scrubbed at her hands again and stepped into the steaming garden. The morning’s rain had dribbled to a chill, depressing fog that crept through crevices and snuggled against the bone to steal the marrow warmth. Too restless to stay under roof she kicked her way barefoot through the soaking grass, feet cold and tender with it until the occasional stone was a real punishment, the punishment for her guilt. Aleytys shied away from that thought, even changed the direction of her feet.

The stone bench had a slippery film of water mixed with dust. She slid a hand over it and frowned at the muck staining her palm. Kneeling in the damp sand beside the stream she scrubbed at the stain, looked at her hands, and scrubbed again, harder.

After a while she stood up, tugged at the drag of the mud-soaked robe and moved aimlessly around the cheerless garden, shivering occasionally as dollops of icy water dropped from overweighted leaves onto her neck or shoulders. Absently she rubbed her hands now and then against her sides.

The ground felt mush ugly under her feet. She pulled herself up onto the arching branch of the live oak and settled against the upjutting limb, the leaves around her and above her drip-dripping mournfully around and onto her, the cool green oak musk strong and somehow comforting.

Her hands were dirty again, loose shreds of bark, a slathering of moss and mud from summer dust collecting in the crevices. She rubbed her palms against her sides, inspected them and rubbed them up and down again over the damp material of her robe.

“Madar!” She felt like crawling out of her own skin; there was no place inside where she felt comfortable. In a last desperate try for a fraction of peace she sent her mind dancing haphazardly through the mahazh in a deliberately disoriented maze pattern...

“... I accuse you.” The kipu flicked a finger in the face of a furiously angry cityqueen. “Asshrud...”

A stabbing ache in her chest drove her away from there.

... to black tunics marching in anonymous mindless lockstep into wide-bodied lift...

... the chunky kitchen master grunting in anger and a hiiri-form crouching before her, back bent under the clumsy slaps....

... Gapp pacing some anonymous room, angry, petulant, flinging herself recklessly about...

... skimmer floating to the roof with a deceptive delicacy...

... Burash sitting hunch-shouldered, antennas drooping in dejection...

... Kipu sitting back smiling in the midst of yelling chaos...

“Burash!” She jerked upright nearly toppling from the limb. A sob exploded out of her, then another. And another. She held out her sore trembling soap-burned hands. “I could have found him before... if I’d just thought... I didn’t have to do it... I didn’t have to do it... I didn’t have to do it...” Rocking back and forth on the limb she laughed, sobbed, screamed, laughed again with great jerking sobs tearing through her. “I didn’t have to do it.”

“Aleytys!” Harskari’s cool impatient voice tugged at her for a minute then sank in the whirling ocean of horror that held possession of her.

“Aleytys.” The voice came again, more demanding, louder. It pricked at her, repeating again and again until she had to answer.

“Harskari.” Calmer... a little... still weeping, face streaming, contorted, accusing. “I didn’t have to do it. If I’d just thought—”

“I know.” The voice was quiet and soft now, gently comforting, supportive, caressing. “Come, child, you’ll catch pneumonia here. Think how good a hot bath will feel.”

Aleytys flinched away from her touch. “Humor me! Hah! You knew, didn’t you. You knew I could have got them out without killing her.”

“What I know has nothing to do with the matter. You got what you asked for.” Harskari’s voice was cool, scholarly, detached. Then, shockingly, she chuckled. “I was always a lousy mother. Come on, Leyta, climb out of the slough of self-indulgence. What is done... well, it’s done. Regret is the most futile of all futile emotions we semi-sapiens manage to accumulate.”

Aleytys gasped. “Asshrud is dead!”

“So? It’s done. Forget it.”

“It was unnecessary.”

“Was it?”

“Huh?” Aleytys jerked upright nearly falling out of the tree. She caught hold of the limb she was leaning on and regained her balance. “You know I could have got them out.”

“Crawl out of that self-pity.” Harskari’s contralto deepened with contempt. “You wallow in that maudlin sentimentality until you lose sight of reality.”

Stung to action by Harskari’s scorn, Aleytys scrambled out of the tree and marched across the grass to the mahazh. At the doorway, for just an instant, she hesitated, reluctant, overpoweringly reluctant, to go inside. The amber eyes opened wide in cool derision.

Aleytys flounced her way inside to the bathroom. She slapped the hot water on, stuck her hand under, jerked it back, exclaiming with pain as the boiling hot water scalded her skin into bright red welts. Defiantly she healed the damage and moderated the heat. With sullen snapping movements she kicked off the muddy robe and plopped herself into the sunken tub, waiting for the water to rise high enough to cover her trembling body.

Harskari chuckled. “Watch it, Leyta; I doubt if even you can cure the common cold.”

Aleytys suddenly saw herself... pouting, petulant child sulking because her hand had been slapped... she burst out laughing. “Ahai, Harskari, even when I was four years old—”

“Well, it was a shock.”

Aleytys sighed and leaned back against the sloping end of the tub. “Why didn’t you remind me that I could find them without the kipu, even get them out without her?”

“Can you?”

Aleytys stared at the water flooding over her toes, surprised. “I—”

“Can your...?”

“I could open the locks.”

“Yes.”

“I could find where they are.”

“Yes.”

“With you helping I could get to them and get them out.”

“Yes.”

“Then...?”

“Well?”

After a long pause Aleytys reached absently for the liquid soap and rubbed it over her arms and shoulders. “I don’t know.” She stopped rubbing a minute. “I don’t know what to do next.”

As her body warmed she felt her mind clear as well “So it wasn’t useless... not completely.”

“No.”

“I think that was what hit me worst.” Luxuriating in the warm soothing soapy scented water she felt calm even happy after the intense depression of the morning.

“However—” Harskari’s voice cut through the upward swing as it had the downward plunge. “I think we’d better get all of us out of this place within the week. Before the kipu wrings all the advantage she can get out of you and decides to cut her costs.”

Chapter XXI

“Damn.” Aleytys crouched in the only bit of shadow the open-faced cell provided, haunches stiff and cold on the grimy stone behind the end of the plank bunk. In the echoing corridor outside small knots of sabutim kept trickling by in both directions, grim-faced and intent on a series of errands that kept them shifting back and forth like busy ants.

Sitting on the bunk as partial cover for her, Burash glanced down. “It’s been like that all night.”

“Think I don’t know that?” She chuckled under her breath. “I’ve rheumatism of the ass from sitting on cold rock waiting for that pack of ants to break up long enough to let me get here. What time is it, anyway?”

“About an hour pastmidnight .”

“Don’t they ever go to bed?”

“Something must have happened. An alert.”

“Ahai, Madar. I should have known.” She shivered. “My fault. I’ll tell you later. It’s not pretty.” She laid a trembling hand on his thigh, touching him to reassure herself. He covered it with one of his. “Let me think a minute,” she murmured.

She closed her eyes. “Harskari.”

“Yes?”

“Can you get us out of here?”

“Time shift?”

“Yes, or...” With a silent chuckle she added, “Is there an easier way to do this? See, you’ve managed to teach me a little.”

Harskari chuckled. “I don’t know,” Aleytys said thoughtfully. Her amber eyes narrowed and stared out.

After a minute, Harskari sighed. “Given all circumstances, no. The best compromise between time limitations and necessity—”

“Wait. Time limitations. You hinted that before. How long can you hold that no-time thing?”

“About a minute real-time. Not longer. Half-phasing is easier; that I can hold about five minutes, real-time.”

Aleytys frowned. “How...”

“Later, child. When we have time.” The contralto voice sounded cool and amused. “How close is Aamunkoitta?”

“Five cells down.”

“Nakivas?”

“They have him in interrogation now, damn that bitch.” She gnawed on her lip and bounced up and down until the thin scattering of coarse dust over the stone squeaked in protest. “Ordinarily he’s another five farther on.” She shuddered remembering suddenly the twitching pain-racked form of the hiiri. “Why the hell, with all that’s going on—”

“Yeah, I know.” She sighed and opened her eyes to find Burash watching her curiously.

She smiled at him. “Don’t ask.”

He shook his head. “I’m confused enough without more.”

She stretched her aching legs out for a moment then pulled them back. “Well.”

“Well?”

“Hurry up and wait.”

“What?”

“Nakivas is being interrogated right now. We have to wait till they bring him back.”

“What if the kipu checks up on you?”

“I left a dummy in my bed. Besides, she’s too busy right now to do more than sneak a peek to see if I’m still where I should be.”

“What about here?”

“No eyes here.”

“How do... never mind.” He settled a hand on her head and gently stroked her hair, running his fingers through the shining tresses.

Aleytys purred like a cat under his caressing hand. “I’ve missed you terribly,” she murmured.

“Leyta. Narami...”

Time passed slowly as they sat in silence, speech unnecessary, even intrusive. Outside, the nayid traffic died down a bit, though it never quit completely, until finally the solid stamping arrogance of the interrogator’s boots disturbed the gentle dream in the dank cell. Aleytys pulled her legs in and crouched lower. “They’re bringing him.” she whispered.

As the close-bunched group stalked past, she took a quick look past Burash’s knees. One of the group had a limp body tossed carelessly over a brawny shoulder. Nakivas. Barely alive. She felt the pain, the dead cold deep-buried corroding hatred, the stubborn will locked into staying alive, locked into frustrating the kipu.

They slung the body in the cell and came tramping back. To Aleytys’ horror the kuulu-resh grunted the squad to a stop in front of Aamunkoitta’s cell. She closed her eyes and extended her vision.

The kuulu-resh flashed a light into the cell, shining it directly onto Aamunkoitta’s face. The hiiri opened her eyes, gasped, scrambled back against the wall trembling into momentary blind panic. The nayid pinned her there for a long minute with the light, chuckling like a rusty wheel. Then she snapped the light off, grunted the grinning squad of nayids into motion again. *Ahai Madar!* Aleytys thought. *If she does that here...*

“Calmly, Aleytys. Animals like those smell fear.” The amber eyes blinked slowly. “Think. Make them not want to look in. Use your gift, Should I need to remind you again?”

“Panic...” Aleytys leaned back and concentrated, gathering, then projecting negation in thundering waves.

“Moderation, Aleytys,” Harskari cut in hastily. “Make them feel vaguely uneasy, their minds will do the rest for you.”

“No steamroller then.” She moderated her emotive projection feverishly. Outside the stumping footsteps broke their rhythm briefly then speeded up to double time. She risked a glance around Burash and saw the black forms trotting past, sweat a pale sheen on their brutal blunt faces.

“Enough.” The sound was a thready whisper. Well, she thought, I wonder what other little gifts my mother passed on to me. Shaking her head she turned and touched the nayid on the knee. “Burash?”

“Yes, Leyta?” He sounded strange.

Aleytys jerked her head up. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He pushed himself onto his feet. “What do you want me to do?”

“You sure you’re all right?”

“Just a little overwhelmed. Like riding a cataract on a leaky raft.”

“Sorry. But—”

“I know. Go ahead, Leyta. I’ll keep up if it kills me.”

She laughed. "I know, love. Stand over by the door. I'm going to unlock Kitten's cell door and ours. See if you can spot a clear space so we can get there."

"Right." Relief at being something other than a passenger on the escape vibrated in the word. Aleytys tightened her mouth, angry at herself again. She swore a quiet but fervent oath that she would make sure he had a part in what followed.

Quickly she threw back the tumblers in the two locks. "That's done. Doors unlocked." She touched his shoulder. "How about the traffic?"

"A space coming up, Leyta. Clear both ways for several minutes."

"Sure?" When he nodded Aleytys closed her eyes. "Save it, Harskari, I think we won't need you this time," she whispered.

Burash touched her arm. "The whole hall will be empty after those." Three shadows sped past, nayid sabutim armed to the eyebrows.

As soon as the sound of their boots grinding on the stone died away, Aleytys jumped to her feet. "Go," she whispered urgently.

Burash pushed the grating open and ran down the hall, counting as he ran. In front of the fifth cell he halted, pulled at the grating and slid aside, Aleytys on his heels.

Aamunkoitta was on her feet, surprise and fear in her face, terror suffocatingly thick around her.

"Kitten, we've come to take you out." Aleytys broadcast soothing patterns of emotion but it was scarcely needed. Aamunkoitta reacted swiftly to the new situation, immediately excited. "Burash." Aleytys slid behind the bunk, crouched out of sight. "How's the traffic outside?"

"Still clear." His antennas strained erect, quivered, visibly searched. "At least another minute."

Aamunkoitta rushed to the grate.

"Wait," Aleytys said hastily.

Burash touched the hiiri on the shoulder. "Leyta has to unlock Burash's cell and make sure he's alone."

"Nakivas!" Her small three-fingered hands pressed against her full lips. "Jumala! I forgot about him. I didn't even think of him."

Burash laughed softly. "You had other things to think about. He's just down there." He flicked a hand to the left.

"Burash, I'm finished." Aleytys joined them at the door. "Is it safe to go?"

"Wait a moment." Once again his antennas quivered intently. "No! Kitten, stand here, screen us as much as you can." He stepped quickly back from the grating. "Leyta, you'd better get your magic working, there's a whole squad coming."

Aleytys made a sharp impatient sound, then crouched behind the plank bed. “This damn stone gets colder every time I have to sit on it.” Burash knelt close behind her and held her against him. “Mm, naram, that feels....”

“Mind on your business, narami.”

“Ha!” She closed her eyes again. “Harskari.”

“Yes, Aleytys.”

“Something I forgot to ask. I remember, I think, you took a horse along in the time spell, for a while anyway. You can take all of us under spell? When Stavver and I were in the hall on our way to steal the poaku on Lamarchos, Stavver... I had to push him along like a doll. What about now? Do I have to drag these behind me?”

There was silence in her head. “If it’s absolutely necessary,” Harskari said after a while. “I can take the three over a very very short distance. It’s very debilitating; it’ll drain you of nearly every ounce of energy you have.”

“We’d better wait here, then, until the hall clears out.”

“I concur.”

Opening her eyes, Aleytys concentrated once again on the subtle negation she spread in waves around the cell.

The groups of nayids, moving swiftly past, twitching her nerves, clumped rapidly on their way, too involved with their own necessities to waste even a casual glance at the dark cells. As a last pair of stragglers hastened past, Aleytys felt giggles bubbling in her irresistibly. *Oh, damn it*, she thought. She bit down on her lip and buried her head against Burash’s arm. Her whole body quivered with those insane giggles.

“Leyta?” Burash’s concerned whisper almost was the straw too much but she clung desperately to the flickering tail of her sanity. In another minute she sucked in a lungful of air and went limp in his arms. “I’m all right, love. For some dumb reason I nearly had a fit of giggles.”

“Giggles.” The disgust in his voice nearly sent her off again.

“Don’t,” she gasped.

He got up and lifted her onto her feet. “Get busy.”

With a long quivering sigh she pulled her scattered mind together. “His cell is unlocked, he’s alone. All we need is a little clear space. Burash?”

He moved to the grating beside Aamunkoitta, antennas quivering intently. “Miles of them,” he muttered. He moved away again and sat down on the bare wooden planks. Looking from one disappointed face to another, he said, “Groups of two or three. Both sides. Scattered just close enough to... too close.”

“Damn, we haven’t got time.” She stared down at her hands. “And the kipu could get a bright idea any minute.” Abruptly she stood up. For the first time she spoke aloud to the dweller in her skull. “Harskari.”

With Burash and Aamunkoitta watching, curious and more than a little awed, she went on, “Can you do it? What do I do?”

“Take a hand of each. Get the grating open first. You’d never shift it even half-phase.”

The amber eyes glowing behind her own, Aleytys turned to Burash. “Let me know when the corridor’s going to be clear for at least half a minute.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry, I’m going to pull some of my magic. I think. You’ll both be feeling damn uncomfortable but it won’t last long. Trust me.”

He nodded. Hands on the bars he searched. “Space coming up,” he said tautly, restraining his excitement with difficulty.

A pair of shadows flickered past the grating. As soon as the sound of their feet faded, Aleytys used her own clairvoyance to double check the hall. It was clear, just as Burash had said, but only for a heartbeat or so. She shoved the grating open and seized the disparate hands of her companions.

The diadem flared and chimed, the air turned still and stiff. Ignoring the startled gasp of the hiiri she rugged at the hands, communicating the urgency and the need for haste through the tightness of her grip. Wading against the thrust of the air the three fought down the hall, taking an eternity, an eon, a dream-fantasy of futile running before they reached the fifth cell door. The chime swung uphill.

Hastily Aleytys tugged the grating open and slid through the opening as soon as it was wide enough, the other two rumbling in on her heels. Burash pulled the grating shut and stood beside it while Aamunkoitta ran to the crumpled body on the planks and crouched beside it staring wide-eyed at Aleytys who lay gasping in exhaustion on the grimy floor.

Weaker than she had ever been in her life, Aleytys sucked in lungfuls of the filthy air, struggling to regain some of the strength drained out of her. In her head she heard a whisper almost beyond her ability to decipher... heal... heal... exhaustion... a kind... of... sickness... heal. She fumbled for the power, the effort almost beyond her. Then the water poured over her, restoring her strength. She sat up.

“Watch the door.”

Burash nodded and turned back, his body taut with concentration.

Aleytys put her hands on the unconscious hiiri and reached back for her river. Her arms still felt like clumsy lead weights, her head woolly, thoughts blundering and indistinct, but her talent flowed smoothly, the healing got done, the hiiri sat up and stared around from lively dark eyes.

“The traffic’s thinning, Leyta.” Burash’s quiet voice broke through her tiredness.

“Good. Because I think that sort of magic has worn thin for me.” She took hold of the edge of the bunk and sat up, staggering as her knees buckled briefly. “Madar! I’m weak as a two-day kitten.”

Chapter XXII

Nakivas slipped out of the chill soggy shadow and knocked at the patched rickety shutter of a crumbling house on the outermost rim of the city, a house that seemed to owe its continued existence to the massive wall it leaned against like a decaying wart. He rapped again, repeating the pattern twice this time.

The shutter cracked open and the hiiri slipped inside.

Aleytys shivered. "What time is it?" she whispered to Burash who crouched beside her in the tangled tree-brush mixture at the base of the wall.

"Three hours until dawn." He was trembling with cold, his antennas bedraggled and drooping, the fine feathering beaded with drops of icy water. He glanced at her. "Do you know... has the kipu missed us yet?"

Aamunkoitta looked up alertly.

"No." Aleytys pulled her robe tighter against her body, but the cold wet material wasn't much help in cutting the chill in her bones. "But Nakivas better hurry. Damn. I'll never be warm again." She looked down at the tiny calm figure of the hiiri. "You don't seem to mind the cold, Kitten."

The hiiri shrugged. "What is, is. Accept and be one. Kunniakas, the henkiolento-maan would speak to you if you listened. Let them. Be one with the earth, then the cold is one with you and will not harm you."

Burash touched Aleytys on the shoulder. "Look."

The door was open. Nakivas slid out. He darted to them, bent over, keeping to the darker shadows. "Come." His voice was a whisper almost disappearing into the whispering rustling leaves of the trees around them. Aleytys first, then Burash, with Aamunkoitta as rear guard, they trailed him into the dilapidated house.

Aleytys started and grimaced wryly as a musty shrouded figure slid around her and swung the bar into its slots. She sniffed. The interior of the house smelt of rotting wood, rotting food, and human sweat and urine. The walls groaned, murmured, shifted continually, and the tiny ominous scrabbling of vermin feet combined with the stale thick blackness to work on her nerves until she jittered with the urge to get out of the noisome place. A hand touched hers, took it.

"Hold onto the others. Follow me." Nakivas's voice came to her out of the fetid blackness. Aleytys swallowed and reached out

"Burash, can you find my hand?"

He laughed. "You forget, Leyta."

"Oh. Catch hold of Kitten, will you? I think we're supposed to make a chain."

"I hear."

Nakivas moved off with the others stumbling along behind him. Aleytys could have cleared out the blackness for herself by using her clairvoyance, but she didn't want to. The thought of penetrating that blackness to see what lived there brought a quaver to her stomach.

After an eternity Nakivas stopped. "One minute," he said, freeing his hand. The blackness cracked apart

just ahead of them. "Come," Nakivas muttered.

Thankfully she stumbled out into the rain. She lifted her head and let the cold clean water wash over her face and hands, pour through her hair. She shook herself after a minute and turned to Nakivas. "Now what?"

"Come."

Ahead of them, sheltering in a hollow where the butte met the level ground: five horses waited restlessly, tails brushing, feet scraping on the littered stone, four saddled, one loaded with a pack.

Silently, the four of them mounted, Nakivas and Aamunkoitta with a single smooth movement, Aleytys cautiously, Burash lengthily with eyes screwed shut, sweat streaming off his tense face. Eventually Nakivas gave him a hand up and helped him get settled into the saddle. "You all right?" He frowned. "Think you can keep up?"

Burash shifted in the saddle, eyes still closed. Speaking through clenched teeth, he muttered, "If it kills me."

Nakivas gave a short sharp bark of laughter, then kned his horse out of the hollow. Aleytys waited for Burash and together they followed. Again Aamunkoitta went last, her bright eyes darting about alertly.

With rain falling in dreary sheets they rode interminably into the featureless plain. A vague graying of the east proclaimed the coming of the sun but the rain kept coming down, the sky lost in leaden gray smoke. Aleytys glanced repeatedly at Burash. He was clutching painfully at the saddle horn, passing into that trance-like state that went beyond mere tiredness into total exhaustion. She remembered that first night when she fled her own home, remembered the ache, the bone-deep tiredness, the stubborn refusal to quit. Her body throbbed in sympathy with his. She rode ahead to Nakivas. "Could we stop?"

"The Seppanhei?"

"Yes. He won't quit, but he's tranced by exhaustion." She frowned. "Give me a minute and I think I can fix that."

"Even that, Kunniakas?"

"Why not?"

The rain will be breaking soon and well need cover anyway." He looked over his shoulder at the nayid. "Could he ride another half hour?"

"He'll ride till he drops."

"That'll do then. And you, Kunniakas? How do you ride now?"

She laughed. "Stiffly, my friend. But the old skills come back and tomorrow will be better."

The rain abated to a light drizzle and Aleytys could see what other senses had been telling her. They had left the plain and were in gently rolling wooded country. Nakivas threaded his way through the trees and finally dismounted in a small grassy clearing. "We rest here till the night," he said crisply.

Aleytys slid down and hurried to Burash's side. "How are you?" Anxiety made her voice sharper than she intended.

Swaying precariously in the saddle, he forced his eyes open and tried to smile at her.

"Let me help." She caught hold of his hand and set it on her shoulder. "Lean on me. Just let yourself fall off. Come on, the easiest thing in the world. And I'm here; you don't have anything to fear."

He nodded and slid toward her, grunting as the saddle brushed past tender thighs. Aleytys caught hold of the clumsy burden, stumbling as his whole weight came on her. He couldn't stand, could only move feebly. She let herself fold downward until she knelt with him, then let him stretch out flat on the wet cold grass.

"Close your eyes a minute, naram."

The thin delicate membranes slid over the faceted eyes. He was trembling with the cold, his whole body shivering with cold and exhaustion. Aleytys reached to her river and let the power flow through her hands into his body. As it had flushed the poison from her body, it washed away the fatigue from his and healed the scraped spots on his thighs.

Burash felt the strength flowing back into his body and opened his eyes, smiling up at her. "You never fail me," he whispered.

"May I never," she answered. She touched his face with her fingertips. "Think you can stand now?"

Not bothering with words he jumped to his feet and held out his hand for her.

She laughed and let him pull her up. Then she looked around. The sod had been opened up. An irregular circle of grass on a timber backing had been pulled aside revealing a dark hole. Aamunkoitta was leading the pack horse down, stroking and coaxing him into skittish submission.

"Surprise, surprise." Aleytys went over and looked into the hole but could see little except the rear end of the descending animal. "What an organization."

Aamunkoitta came back to the slope. "Come on down, Kunniakas, so we can close the top. The kipu will have skimmers out hunting us by now."

"It's dark down there."

Aamunkoitta laughed. "Not for long. Not once we get the top on. It's very comfortable. You'll see."

Sniffing skeptically, Aleytys held firmly to Burash's hand and walked with exaggerated care down the incline. Nakivas brushed past her and joined Aamunkoitta. Together the hiiris pulled the lid back into place then groped their way through the thick blackness back to where Aleytys and Burash were standing.

"Take my hand." Aamunkoitta's soft clear voice sounded oddly distorted by the darkness. Aleytys couldn't locate her at first. Then a small three-fingered hand touched her arm and slid down it to take her hand. "Come."

"Burash?"

His answering laugh was warm and comforting. “You forget.”

She chuckled. “I always do, naram. Well, then come on.”

“Lead off, Kitten.”

They wound a little deeper into the earth, then a light sprang out and Aamunkoitta clapped her hands, laughing delightedly at their gasps of astonishment. They were in a smallish domed chamber, soft furs on the floor and hanging from the walls, the ceiling set with tiles, with the flower patterns so familiar winding in crimson gold and green convolutions.

“Those.” Aleytys pointed, swept her hand in a small circle. “It was your people made them?”

“You don’t think the hyonteinens could?” He made as if to spit.

She shrugged. The drag of her stained, soaked, muddy robe against her shoulders reminded her of another pressing need. “Is there a place where I can wash?” She plucked at the clinging material. “And some dry clothes for us.”

A while later... clean, dry, hunger comfortably sated... she dropped onto the furs beside Burash and fell into an endless dark chasm of sleep.

Chapter XXIII

Tiny figures curved out of undefined distance and swam vaguely round and round the equally undefined point that represented Aleytys’ conscious being, red-haired figures, images of herself sitting, riding, screaming, laughing, making love, fighting, images out of the past, immediate and distant, scattered pieces of her life... figures came, transparent twisting veils shaped like... Harskari dark and slim, glowing amber eyes austere, shimmering with a power barely confined to her delicate image, radiating power, Shadith vibrating on a single sustained note, wild clustering curls a glimmering halo about her pointed face, fingers sweeping in soundless rhythms over the strings of the silver lyre... power, challenge, rejection, negation... Swardheld standing foursquare, arms crossed over his chest, ironic amusement glinting in his black eyes, implicit in the fleeting glint of tooth against the black of his shaggy moustache as his mouth moved now and then into a fleeting smile....

Images of the queen young juicy reborn greedy in her outreach... wait... no I will not wait... the words screamed soundlessly through the miasma of the dream; screamed and bounced back from the sword blade of Swardheld, the bodies of Harskari, Shadith... no... no... no... the rising tide of negation battered at the unripe queen, her black eyes glittered like new-formed bubbles of black water, the multiple facets alternately catching and losing the light... launching her person into a projectile she bounced away and momentarily disintegrated into quivering fragments... came roaring again, a missile driving faster faster... and rebounded again from the wall of the three, shattering into fragments spinning off into the dimensionless mists at the edges of perception....

Aleytys jerked up, trembling into a panic.

“Gently, love.” From the opaline half-light Burash’s voice broke through the nightmare. She felt his hands touch her and lay back on the furs beside him sighing with relief.

“What’s wrong?” One hand brushed the hair back off her sweaty forehead. In the gloom where the light was lowered to the outer edge of visibility for the sleeping, his face was a pale blur, the huge eyes black patches gleaming. She smiled at him.

“Nightmare. First I’ve had in months. Go back to sleep, naram, you need it.”

“I’ll never become fond of that horse.”

“You’d be surprised. Another two or three days....”

He pulled her face against his chest, smothering the rest of the words. “Don’t remind me.”

As his grip relaxed she moved her head back and smiled at him. “I wish—”

“Go to sleep, Leyta. I don’t perform in public. Not with you.”

“Mmmph.” She felt him relax beside her. Warm, content, her body ticking in slow steady tock-tock, the tension of the nightmare flushed out of her, she drifted into a half-doze and heard Burash’s breathing slow and deepen also as he sank back into the sleep her nightmare had disturbed. She stuck where she was, not truly awake, not able to lose herself in the amnesia of sleep.

“Shadith.” Drifting drowsily she went back to the symbols that comfort and sharing had robbed of their terrible power.

“Leyta?” The purple eyes blinked open.

“The old queen. It wasn’t just a dream. Was it? She tried to take me over, didn’t she?”

“Right. We can handle her. Don’t worry.”

“But she’s getting stronger.”

“Yes, Leyta, but we’ll kick her yellow teeth in if she gets bumptious.”

“You sure?”

“Sure, Leyta,” Shadith chuckled, the laughter making delicate music at the back of Aleytys’ skull. “I’m not much in this line, but Harskari’s a raging terror when she starts swinging, and the old grumbler’s shocked the pants off me time was. Figuratively speaking.” Her laughter rang out stronger. “Hard to have pants without a body.”

Aleytys smiled into the darkness, then frowned. “Still... I think she’s beginning to tap my talents. What happens if she does?”

“That’s a pain. Haga-roszh! Ill talk that over with our resident expert, let you know later. You’d better get some sleep, too, it’s a long day tomorrow.”

“Yeah.” Aleytys turned over onto her back. Thoughtfully she ran her fingers up and down the right side of her body.

“Something else?” The purple eyes blinked curiously.

“Something else. Maybe I’m pregnant.”

“What!” That really startled Shadith. “Impossible.”

“Burash... he’s a different species, of course.”

“But you’d like having his child.”

Aleytys felt Burash warm and relaxed beside her. “Yes,” she murmured. “I’d like that.”

“My dear... you and Burash, I know you’ve made love, how could I help it, but you... you’re hominid and he, well, I suppose he arises from some insectile reptilian combination which is, I believe, limited to this particular world. At least I’ve never seen another like it in all the worlds I’ve visited. There’s no possibility of cross-fertilization. Not in all the science I know.”

Aleytys continued to rub her fingers over her side. “I should have started bleeding yesterday. For two months now....”

“That could be stress. Has it ever happened before?”

Aleytys chuckled briefly then stifled the sound as it echoed hollowly over the soft inhalations of the sleepers. “Yeah,” she murmured. “When I was pregnant before.”

Shadith grunted. “I still think... no, it must be something else.”

Suddenly sick, Aleytys clenched her hands into fists and laid them over her side. “I know,” she whispered. “I know what it is. Oh god.”

“Leyta? What’s wrong?”

“I know what sits in my womb. Oh god...”

“Ah.” The purple eyes squinted thoughtfully. “Yes. You’re right. You have to be. Wait, Leyta, keep your cool. You’ll be all right, we’ll see to that.”

“It won’t let you.”

“Hah! Let Harskari get wheeling and she’ll know she’s in a fight, the old bitch.”

An involuntary bark of laughter startled Aleytys, the sudden amusement washing the melodrama out of her laboring mind. “With my body as battlefield. Do I have anything to say about that?”

“Tagadas, I’m afraid the fight occurs where the combatants are.”

“Yeah.” She yawned and stretched. “Ahai, friend, I’m tired.”

Chapter XXIV

The long shadows spread like black ink over the grassy rubble flooring the narrow canyon. Beyond

Aleytys the horses in the pack train pawed restlessly at the ground and shook their halters until the small metallic clinks danced like bells around them. The settlement was a big one, she thought, but you'd never know it. Each of the semi-permanent houses was their multi-pointed leather roofs and log walls was built close to or around the squat leathery leaved trees. Burash stood in shadow close to the shaggy trunk, half invisible. Here and there small faces peered around corners and out of their own patches of shadow, radiating curiosity, tentative hostility, uncertainty. They had tried out a few noises and insults before and had been cuffed into silence and manners. The adults had been grave-faced, accepting, formally courteous.

"Kitten."

"Kunniakas?"

"They won't hurt him?"

"No. Of course not." The hiiri hesitantly put her hand on Aleytys' arm. "I'll take care of him. But he was the word of the Paamies."

"I know. But Nakivas won't be there."

"I'm here. I know the worth of this one."

"Thanks." Aleytys smoothed her hands over the soft white leather tunic. "I like this thing," she said absently. "It was good of your people to make it for me."

"Not my people."

Aleytys shook her head. "Kitten, Kitten." She brushed the long graceful fringes hanging to her knees. White leather leggings clung to her legs fitting over soft low moccasins. She sighed and swung lightly into the saddle. "I don't feel good about this trip, Kitten."

Aamunkoitta shrugged. "It's a debt."

"And debts must be honored." Aleytys looked up, surprised to see the sun sliced into a nubby orange half glowing in layers of sunset gilding. There wasn't a cloud in the brilliant bowl of the sky. A chill passed over her... black over the sun... high and thick... but passing too fast to seize on... the image was extraordinarily vivid, strong enough to overcast the reality around her at least for a fleeting moment. She shivered and shoved away the uneasiness.

Nakivas called out and the pack train began walking toward the slowly disappearing sun.

All that night they wound through the knife-edged canyons moving in alert silence, the only sounds the thudding of hooves, an occasional scraping sound, the creak of leather and the muted jingle of the halter rings.

They came over the edge of a ridge and wound down to a steep-walled flat-bottomed canyon bisected by a gently roaring mountain stream that plunged around boulders bubbling white water. Behind them the sun crept up, growing rounder as it oozed over the rim of the world, sending long shadows stark and beautiful over the pale gray stone, stark and beautiful too in its way, the morning fresh and new, waking to sound with scattered birdsong.

As they crept down the side of the mountain on the layered switchbacks, Aleytys searched the still silent canyon for the silver needle of the smuggler's ship. Eventually she found it. But it was no silver needle. It blended against the stone so that it looked like smoke floating insubstantial and unreal above the ground.

The pack train picked carefully through the scattered boulders that dotted the floor of the canyon like spilled marbles, some higher than the horses' backs. The water of the stream was icy cold, the sound of the horses' hooves muffled on the hard-packed sand of the ford. Across, at the edge of the shadow that marked the edge of the circle of ash, three men sat, still and silent, beside a black cloth spread out on the ground, a deep black cloth offering silent piles of small glittering things, knives and needles, arrow points and bullets, darts and projectile throwers, pots and rope, bolts of cloth and jars of beads, and more knives, axes... heads not hafts... dark gray-blue iron wedges, pots of paint, brushes, and shiny anonymous things that screamed for fingers to touch.

Nakivas stopped his horse when its forefeet touched the trade cloth. "Hyvaa huomenta, salaku."

"Aspash, trax." The center figure of the three spoke, his voice a light tenor.

Watching, sitting hands crossed on saddle horn, Aleytys waited for the signal to dismount, spending her waiting time examining the three strangers.

They sat impassively with a dignified formality beside their goods. The center, obviously the leader, had straight black hair tied back from his face with a wide leather strap, a thin bony face projecting a sardonic cynical enjoyment of life's absurdities, enjoyment even of his own personal follies. A man who took few things seriously. To his right sat a pale man. The sight of his shock of white-silver hair, colorless translucent skin, watery blue eyes, thin thin wiry body, all these brought a flush of excitement flashing through her. He looked so much like Miks Stavver he might have been the thief's own brother. But the face was different enough, somehow more vulnerable. He was, in a way, less of a man, like a paler copy, emotions, wants, needs, all more muted. Aleytys looked away, turned to the third man.

He sat on the leader's left, crouched rather, a small dark cat of a man, quick pointed ears that moved restlessly through the ragged thatch of coarse dark hair. He stared at her briefly then his eyes slid away sweeping over the rest of the hiiri, then darted back to her.

Nakivas grunted. "Trade-truce, salakul." He took the knife from his belt, leaned forward over his crossed legs, and placed its hilt toward the three. Eyes fixed on the leader, he straightened his back and waited. Wide mouth twisted into an irreverent smile, the leader produced a knife of his own and placed it hilt to hilt with the other, eliciting a small but audible click. He straightened, beckoned to the pale man. "Paoengkush." He lifted two fingers and the pale man nodded.

He came back with a silver tray, on it a silver pot steaming in the crisp morning air and, beside the pot, two crystal cups. With a murmured word of thanks the head smuggler took the tray and set it between himself and the hiiri. He poured two cups full of the steaming liquid, a gold-brown translucent liquid with a delicate herbal scent. Then he waited, hands spread, for Nakivas to make his choice.

Nakivas smiled tautly, lifted the cup on the right and waited in his turn. The smuggler, grinning, took the other, sipped briefly. Nakivas sipped then from the cup, then held it as he beckoned to Aleytys.

She slid off her horse, noting that the rest of the hiiris followed her example, settling themselves in a mute ring between the horses and the bargain ground. Nakivas touched the earth beside him. "The bargaining begins now, Kunniakas. Take a sip of this, will you? I've often wondered what it was."

Aleytys took the cup from him and tasted the still hot liquid. “Good,” she murmured. “I recognize this. Tea. Nothing underhanded here. Simply a refreshing herbal infusion. By the way, if you’re interested, I understand what he’s saying, I speak his tongue.”

“Ah.” Nakivas glanced shrewdly at her. “If you hear anything to my profit. . . .”

“Of course. Then you don’t want me to let them know I understand what they say?”

He laughed, eyes twinkling with good humor. “Kunniakas, never give anything away without getting something for it. Never.”

“Not even for the sake of improved communication?”

“We communicate well enough, Kunniakas. You watch and tell me what excites him, I’ll make the bargains. We begin. Now.” He snapped his fingers and the silent hiiris began unloading the packs, setting them down beside their leaders. Nakivas took out a pelt, ran his fingers through the pale amber fur, emphasizing the rich glow and the thick texture.

Sipping cups of the brown-amber fluid, sipping delicately like the masters they were, they wound their slow way through the complex transactions until the transferral of goods left on the black trade cloth only those things neither wanted.

Aleytys stretched surreptitiously and glanced up at the sky. The yellow sun was just past zenith and her stomach was clamoring for hernoan meal. She could feel the enjoyment of his power fermenting slowly through Nakivas, could feel the puzzlement in the smugglers, their interest in her. She glanced at the ship, puzzled in her turn by its peculiar lack of definite outline. Even in the full light of the noon sun the edges were fuzzy and indistinct, the oddly blotched paint blending so effectively with the cliff face in the background that the ship seemed part of the rock. Close as she was, it was still very hard to decide which was ship and which was rock. She closed her eyes. “Shadith.”

“Leyta?”

“Is it just the paint that makes the ship so. . . .” She hunted for the right words then gave it up. “You know. . . .”

Eyes blinking Shadith considered the ship. “Probably not. I can’t say, not without looking closer or asking him some questions. Why?”

“Just curious. And bored. I’m damn tired of sitting.” She shifted slightly and wrinkled her nose at Nakivas and the smuggler captain as they went through the ritual closing to the bargaining.

Nakivas stood. Aleytys got thankfully to her feet and stood behind him, her head a double handspan higher than his. The hiiri spread his hands then pointed to the ship.

The smuggler stood also, his two men rising with him. Moving lithely, he bent to touch the ground. Then he stood, pointed to the sun, ran a hand in large circles then counted off six fingers on his five-fingered hand, touching the forefinger twice. “Kateleusomai en mesis hexis.”

Aleytys leaned toward Nakivas. “He says he’ll be back in six months.”

Nakivas made a small warning gesture. “I know already, Kunniakas. In six months.” He smiled quietly at

the smuggler, pointed at the sun, then folded back his thumbs, extended his two three-fingered hands.

The smuggler nodded. Behind him the other two put the remaining goods in containers and folded up the trade cloth. He held out his hands palm up. Formally, quickly, Nakivas laid his own smaller hands on them then bowed slightly. Hands at his side again, he called over his shoulder, "Pack it on. Kunniakas."

"Yes?"

"On your horse, woman. We're leaving." Snapping his fingers he marched to his own horse and swung into the saddle. Facing the smuggler for the last time, he saluted and said, "In six months. We'll be here."

Aleytys laughed and mounted. With Nakivas bringing up the rear, the pack train crossed the stream and wound into the jumble of boulders.

On the way up the cliff Aleytys looked out across the valley. The long-haired one, now tiny as a mannequin, was watching them, hands on hips, body a living question mark. The other two were marching to the ship carrying the packing boxes.

The cold chill passed over her body again. She shivered and felt vaguely depressed, increasingly disturbed, as they moved into the shadow under the trees and began the roundabout trip back to the settlement. She should have felt relief... why don't I, she thought... why... instead she endured an uncentered free-floating anxiety that would have suited a raving paranoiac.

That too passed and she settled down in the saddle, steeling herself for the long ride home.

Chapter XXV

The pack train was slow. Far slower in the return than the coming, because the loads were heavier. Aleytys tilted her head back and stared up at the heavy barrier of leaves that blocked out the sky. She shivered again. The anxiety was back stronger than before. Something out of the sky... it was coming... something bad.

As her nervousness increased it infected her mount, making the gelding difficult to manage as he transmuted his uneasiness into head jerkings, skittish sidelong leaps, abortive attempts to bolt which she quickly curbed. The pack animals nearest her picked up the taint and shied at moving shadows until the drovers cursed them tensely, sending wary glances around for the source of the nervousness.

Aleytys kicked her mount into a faster gait and rode to the front of the train to catch up with Nakivas. Riding beside him, she glanced nervously around. "I'm skittish as a month-old foal, Nakivas. It's messing up the tram, compromising your security."

"What's wrong?" He looked alertly around at trees and the scattered fragments of sky visible through the heavy thatching of leaves. "Something threatening us?"

"No..." She let the word trail off. "Not here. Not now. Something about Burash. I'm terrified, Nakivas. And the settlement. I don't know. Since I'm creating such a problem here." She waved her hand at the pack horses behind them. "Give me a guide and let me go ahead to the settlement." Her mount jumped suddenly as a leaf rustled near his ear. She pulled him in and waited for Nakivas to answer.

"No one will touch him." Nakivas frowned, more than a little angry to find his word doubted. "We're

not honorless wood rats.”

“I know that.” She pressed her lips together unhappily as she ran her eyes over the heavy canopy of branch and leaf. “From the sky, danger from the sky. Please?”

“Pastaa! Come here.”

Around the curve of the trail Aleytys heard the soft thuds of hooves hastening toward them, a quick thudding sharp against the scuff-scuff of the slow sedate packers. By the time the hiiri reached them Nakivas’s mount had caught the jitters and was shying constantly, tossing his head, pulling against the bit.

Nakivas nodded briskly toward Aleytys. “Kunniakas here has a bad feeling about the settlement.”

“Well?” Bright brown eyes glanced curiously toward her.

“Take her there. Fast.”

“The ridges?”

“Carefully.” Nakivas glanced back along the pack train. “Have shelter handy all times. You know.”

“Right?”

Aleytys broke in. “When we get close, I’ll go in alone. If there is trouble, Pastaa can bring back word to you.”

“Right.” He flicked a hand along the trail. “Go.”

The ridge trail was high and hot but Aleytys barely noticed. She was shivering constantly, driven by an anxiety that shrouded her sun with black. On the winding precarious trail leading down into the steep-walled canyon that hid the settlement, her horse twice shied dangerously near the edge, stumbling in his growing fear until only her hands held him on his feet. Her anxiety retreated slightly under the need to concentrate on the immediate danger, but returned full force when they reached the floor of the canyon.

The ground under the trees was soft and wet, muffling the sound of the horses’ hooves until only the faint squeak of the leather and the occasional jingle of bridle rings as the horses shook their heads broke the heavy silence. The hiiri held out his hand.

“What is it?” Aleytys felt a tightness in her chest that squeezed her heart into a painful cramp.

“The settlement’s around that.” He fanned a hand at the curving wall in a short economical gesture. “You go first. I follow.”

Aleytys’ hands tightened around the leather reins until they ached. She closed her eyes. “Yes. All right.”

Still feeling a black depression, she nudged the horse into a slow walk and edged around the curve. Nothing in the placid scene gave any reason for the feeling. The wood and leather huts were still. Too still? She kicked the horse into a trot and rode into the center of the hidden settlement. A hiiri female, one she didn’t recognize, looked out at her.

“Where is everyone?” Aleytys called impatiently.

The hiiri looked back over her shoulder then she shrugged. “We prepare,” she said sullenly.

Aleytys stared around. The feeling of danger was oppressive as the sultry air before a too-long delayed storm. The hiiri radiated fear and anger in a confusing mixture. “Why are you angry with me?”

The hiiri shook her head, eyes fixed on her toes.

Aleytys lifted the reins, turning to look ahead deeper in the village, looking for a more responsive individual.

Behind her she heard a sudden thudding scrabbling sound. She swung her mount around.

Burash darted around the corner of one of title huts. “Run,” he shrieked. “Get—”

A wide cone of brilliant red-orange light flared out. For a timeless fragment of a second, Burash’s body, twisted with pain, arms flung out, shaping a silent scream. . . . For a second he was a black silhouette against the brilliant red halo from the energy gun. Then there was a stench of hot meat. In her nostrils then the frozen moment evanesced, the black silhouette disintegrated into a handful of gently floating ash that fell slowly, slowly, agonizingly to the ground, the stench gone the air clean green cool.

Aleytys slid off the horse. Slid off the horse and stumbled half a dozen steps. Stumbled a few steps, knees threatening to give way, whimpering, unaware of the sound coming out of her. Stumbling in a morass of pain and disbelief, she reached the charred earth and knelt. Knelt beside the scorched earth and touched its veiling of fine gray ash, dreadfully horribly tiny remnant of a whole person. She stretched out a shaking hand, pulled it back, stretched it out again. Touched the ash, sobs shaking her. Touched the ash, loss and anger roaring through her. Why, why, why, you, you damn rider why didn’t you do something something something. Sitting in my head, nothing, oh god, nothing, nothing, nothing, noth. . . .

She fell face down in the dust plunging into a blackness that surrounded her, protected her, cut off the pain, pain, pain. . . .

A rough hand caught hold of her hair and jerked her head up. Grinning, Sukall slapped her out of the blackness forcing her back to the light, the light, the terrible light. Radiating a sick enormous pleasure in the pummeling.

Dazed, Aleytys stared at Sukall, the realization creeping through her pain that the heavy metal weapon swinging from the nayid’s belt was responsible for the ash that covered her body, her aching face. She stared at Sukall then past her into the calm cold face of the kipu.

“Sukall,” the kipu said softly, “enough. Remember what she carries.”

Sukall’s fingers tightened around Aleytys’ neck, then her grip relaxed. “What do I do with it?”

“Stun.” The kipu came closer, looming like an evil ominous cloud over Aleytys. “Quickly, I think, sabut.”

A black rage built and built inside Aleytys, a vein throbbing painfully at her temples. She looked first at Sukall, then at the kipu, at Sukall, at the kipu, the rage built, built, built, she was consumed by rage, she opened her mouth, a scream tore out of her, she. . . .

A cold metal circle touched her neck. As the rage in her formed into a blast that burst toward Sukall tearing, destroying, carrying with it the hate, the rage that seemed all that she had left in her... a cold circle touched her neck and her body went loose, cold, and she slid from under the blast she aimed at Sukall and she washed into a blackness that wiped away all grief, all anger, all horror, all...

Chapter XXVI

Faintly, distantly, hazily a slow awareness of being firmed from the gray-black haze. A tugging... it disturbed the being, an irregularity stirring up unsteady waves of feeling. Aleytys sought to pull away from the growing urgency of the interruption of her quiet, her peace, her rest, but the very battle to remain quiet, unthinking and unknowing, solidified her sense of herself, woke her irrevocably into the hardness of the physical world, into the cold dark night. Aamunkoitta was shaking her, tugging at her arm with all the strength in her small wiry body. Aleytys tried to turn her head. Her mouth flooded with a sour fear-called liquid when a hard rubbery net closed around her muscles, held her rigid. She strained harder, fought against the netting, turned her head to look at the hiiri.

The netting clamped her mouth shut. Painfully she forced her lips into a hoarse horrible sound that she drove into an approximation of normal speech, an approximation close enough so that the hiiri could understand. "Wha... wha haaaa'enn?"

"Kunniakas." Aamunkoitta stammered, tears flooding from her large brown eyes. Her face was thinner, older, a narrow strand of gray running through the hair above her left ear.

Fighting the net that sought to control her movements, Aleytys pushed herself up and swung her legs clumsily over the edge of the bed. She worked her arms, opened and closed her hands until the stiff webbing criss-crossing the underside of her skin seemed to tire and retreat. Temporarily. She was shudderingly aware of the temporary nature of her victory. Her whole body ached, she felt sick, flabby, weary, as if she were recovering from a long and difficult illness. There was a sick sour smell on her skin.

She licked her lips then spat. In disgust at the scummy crumbly deposit on them, the hard crumbs that flaked off at their corners. She tried to speak again. "Ow... how... how long?"

Aamunkoitta chewed on her lower lip. "Six months," she muttered. She stirred restlessly. "Kunniakas..."

"Six months." Aleytys rubbed her hands over her body, sick with the stink of the layers of dirt on her skin. "They kept me drugged."

"Yes."

Moving her hands over her scummy oily body, Aleytys stopped in sudden shock. "Madar!"

"You're with child, Kunniakas?"

"No. No." Feeling sick and heavy, Aleytys probed at the bulge on the right side of her body. She closed her eyes, shuddering, weeping, tears of horror, disgust dripping slowly over her too thin face, cutting wavy trails through the grime. She knew what lived in her womb. She knew where the web came from that tried to control her movements, her speech. She knew... and the knowledge terrified her. And there was something she couldn't remember... something... something that could help... she gave up the futile painful search and looked around.

Near the archway with its blue-green tapestry a nayid form lay crumpled on the floor, still and stiff, a black finger sticking from her neck... knife... in her throat. Aleytys turned stiffly back to the hiiri.
“How?”

Aamunkoitta shrugged. “People forget, get careless. Especially hyonteinens. They think we’re too stupid to plan and wait. She was coming to drug you again. I thought if you would wake up, you could talk to your spirits, do something, make the kipu pay for your lover, kill that damn bitch. Mind or body, like you killed the mind of that hyonteinen guard.”

“Mind?” Aleytys struggled to remember. “Sukall.”

“Her body lived until the kipu tired of having her cared for and had her strangled. But her mind was burnt away.”

“Ah.” Aleytys shivered as the sudden grief came searing back. Bringing with it an agony of loss. For a short breath of time nothing else had meaning for her, the world faded, grayed out, but the knowledge that it was all six months past altering, the knowledge in her body that went far deeper than consciousness, the time center in her mind that counted the passing heartbeats, the thousand on thousand heartbeats that had passed since... it blunted the fury of her grief. She sighed and opened her eyes.
“What happened?”

“Kunniakas?”

“In the settlement. Then.”

“The kipu came down on the settlement, sneaking her skimmers down in the dark before the sun awoke. When we woke the hyonteinens were all around us. We looked into the noses of those energy guns and could do nothing. The kipu herded the children into the skimmers, sent them off as hostages, questioned the rest, the women, old men. They drugged us to make us babble, but I doubt she found much, at least what I heard was willed lie... Burash... she found him, beat him, drugged him, he told her nothing even under the drugs, he screamed, he cried, not like a man, not like one of our men, but he told her nothing at all, he wouldn’t speak your name, he wouldn’t say a word, he screamed his pain into her face and defied her even with his screaming and so she let him rest. I suppose she thought he was hurt worse than he was, cowed into terror, but when you came in on the horse and the kipu saw you, she forgot about him, me. I was there too, she made me watch.” Aamunkoitta swallowed, her small face filled with shame. “I promised you he would be safe, Kunniakas, I gave my word....”

“You couldn’t help that, Kitten.” The sound of the pet name Aleytys used for her brought a wail from the hiiri. She caught hold of Aleytys’ hand and pressed it against her face.

“You came riding in alone,” she murmured. “He... he’d worked his hands free. They watched you, couldn’t take their eyes off you. Even in their trap, their trap closing and you unaware, they were jittering in their terror of you. I laughed inside to see it. Burash didn’t waste his time gloating. Somehow he freed his hands. He jerked the ropes from his legs. He ran out to warn you.”

“And Sukall shot him.”

“Yes.”

“How did you get away?”

“They weren’t watching me. They went out to you and left me. I got free and ran into the trees. I suppose by the time the kipu remembered me and sent someone for me I was too far away. Anyway I saw a few skimmers but no one bothered me.”

“And while I lay here?” Aleytys plucked at the cover with shaking fingers. “What did you do? How’d you...”

“How did I live?” Aamunkoitta stared down at her hands. “I got to Nakivas. Well.” She shrugged. “I lived. It was difficult.”

“I see. You finally came to me. Why?”

“I... I couldn’t leave you in the kipu’s hands. I argued with Nakivas, quarreled until he threw me out of camp.”

Aleytys felt the quiet desperation in the little body. “You have my thanks, for what that’s worth. But why?”

“I had to do it. Perhaps Burash’s spirit is restless, won’t let me rest, perhaps the henkiolento-maan have bound me to serve you.”

“Don’t say that!”

“Huh?”

“I thought it worked on men. Oh god. No, Kitten. I’m the one, it’s me doing this to you. Even if I don’t want to. There’s some kind of thing in me that binds people to me.” She shook her head. “I have affection for you, Kitten. I don’t want a slave. You can have a good life without me.”

Aamunkoitta lifted her head and smiled. “So I am under geas to serve you. Where you go, I go. Or I die. I know it in the center of my bones. I know it as the breath that passes in and out of me.”

“Well, there’s no use discussing it now.” Aleytys pushed against the bed, shoving her unresponsive body to a sitting position. Then a sudden thought jerked her sagging back straight. “Kitten. The eyes. Get out of here fast, before—”

“No.” The hiiri chuckled harshly. “The kipu’s too busy to bother about a sodden body. She’s got a dozen subtle rebellions on her hands. The other cities are seething with trouble and the queens defy her as much as they can, pushing her to the danger line of explosion again and again. The murder of Asshrud and your escape... they stirred up ambition in those greedy bitches. Every day brings some new thing to keep her busy. She likes it, though, I think, because her power grows each time she triumphs, but the bubbling under the crust is still dangerous. So, with you drugged, Kunniakas, she pushed the problem of you into the back of her mind to make room for more pressing problems.”

“What about the hiiris?”

“They fight.” Aamunkoitta’s dark eyes flashed. “I still send news to Nakivas and he hits where the weak spots are.”

“Ah. And the kipu’s preoccupation is why you waited so long to waken me.”

“Yes. Until she forgot to be alert with you.” Aleytys slid closer to the edge of the bed. “Help me stand. My body has turned to mush with all that lying in bed.”

Before Aamunkoitta could catch hold of her arm, the web tightened again jerking her back onto the bed. She was paralyzed, couldn't move arms or legs, head forced into a dazed stare up at the gauzy curtains falling from the gilt insect, mouth locked shut, the old one's face floating in the forefront of her mind, eyes glittering, mouth stretched in a triumphant smile. . . . It reminded her. . . . reminded her of something. . . . but she couldn't remember, she didn't want to remember, something wiggled away or rather, she slid away from looking at it. . . . The old one's image fluttered, broke into fragments, reformed.

“No.” The word hissed malevolently through her brain, through her body, she could feel it in her toes, rustling in the middle of her, screaming in her brain. “*No.*”

Aleytys screamed silently, the muscles in her face straining against the control of the webbing, the claustrophobic mesh that locked her from her own body. . . . the sensation was weirdly familiar. . . . she refused to think of that. . . . no, she thought at the old one, denying her, no. . . . and her answer was a triumphant peal of laughter that went on and on.

Without thinking, acting from instinct alone, she reached for the power river and plunged her symbolic body into the symbolic waters, the symbols strong as. . . stronger than. . . so-called reality, images that represented a reality that went beyond what hominid mind could grasp. Writhing, struggling, she held herself in the flow of power though the old one fought too, fought to draw her back from the river. Like a hand-to-hand battle by two wrestlers struggling in a tub of mud each striving to control the actions of the other, trying. . . testing each other, each spot to find a weakness. . . slowly, slowly she forced the old one to retreat, the black water powering her body-mind strength, peeling the rubbery tendrils of the old one loose, forcing her to retreat, losing her grip on nerve and muscle. . . first the head, the center of consciousness, then arms, legs, the periphery of her physical being; the cilia retreated gradually as they were made too uncomfortable to hang onto their holds. Like fish line the old one reeled them in until Aleytys' body was freed of them and they had retreated into the central mass nestling in Aleytys' womb.

A rising tide of triumph burnt wild in her blood and her body went into birth contractions. Pain tore through her but she laughed her triumph into the night darkness of the bedroom. The old one tore at her, lacerating her organs but the black water poured in, healing the wounds fast as they were made. Slowly, slowly, in spite of her struggles, her desperate battle to remain inside the laboring body, the old one, blasting out rage and hatred, was forced out of the womb. The contractions quickened, intensified, strengthened.

Screaming silently in terror and blind anger, the nayid embryo still clawing and fighting was propelled into the chill night air. Swathed in blood, wound about with the gelatinous cilia, the thing floundered, raged, died.

And the black waters raged through Aleytys' battered, exhausted body.

A while. . . length unknown. . . Aleytys opened her eyes, feeling light and free, almost happy. . . there was still that thing she had forgotten. It teased at her at intervals but she ignored the prod. She sat up and looked around. Aamunkoitta, hidden in the folds of the curtains, stared at her, mouth open, horror written in the slack muscles of her face. Aleytys moved impatiently, felt a cold slimy lump between her legs. She looked down.

In the dim moonlight that shone through the narrow slit in the wall-window tapestry, she saw the

misshapen lump staining the pale sheets, a gray nauseating stinking mess. She slid off the bed, careful not to touch it again.

“What’s that?” Aamunkoitta spoke slowly, reluctantly, surrendering momentarily to her curiosity. “It isn’t…”

“No child of mine. That’s the old queen’s reincarnated flesh. She’s dead at last, finally absolutely dead.” Aleytys glanced back at the thing on the bed with a quiet satisfaction, then turned away briskly. “I need a bath.”

“Now?” Aamunkoitta sounded strongly disapproving.

“No.” Aleytys chuckled, the sound odd in the chill silent room. “Naked I came into this world, naked it seems I leave it.”

“What?”

“Nothing, Kitten.” She pulled the tapestry aside and palmed the light on in the bathroom. Leaving Aamunkoitta hopping impatiently from foot to foot she stepped inside.

Later, with the luxurious warmth of the bath still clinging to her, Aleytys drifted sleepily out of the bathroom. “Kitten?”

“Here, Kunniakas.” The hiiri crouched in the shadow beside the bed almost invisible a few feet away.

Aleytys wrapped the towel around her damp hair. She looked around. “I wonder if there’s anything to wear left in this prison.”

Aamunkoitta shrugged. She stood up. “Why don’t you leave?” she whispered. “There aren’t any guards out there now.”

Aleytys smiled. “No,” she said softly. “No, I have too many things to do here.” She moved along the wall then twitched the tapestry aside again.

In the clothing storeroom the shelves and pegs were bare with one exception. Folded neatly, covered with a faint film of dust, the white leather suit from the hiiris lay waiting for her. She shook the folds out. Before anonymous hands had laid the thing away, they’d cleaned off the dirt and blood, leaving a few faint almost invisible stains behind. It smelled a little musty. Aleytys wrinkled her nose.

Suddenly the memory of the last time she wore the dress flooded her mind, the red flare, the black screaming silhouette.

She thought she would cry. Her eyes burned. No. No more tears left, just a sick feeling in her stomach, a lonely coldness that left a bitter taste in her mouth. She closed her eyes and leaned against the wall for a minute until the bad time passed.

Fixing her mind on the moment, sliding away from the disturbing memory Aleytys slipped into the deep fringed tunic, the soft supple leggings, the moccasin-boots and walked dully out of the room carefully palming the light off, carefully pulling the tapestry back over the arch, arranging the folds into straight symmetrical pleating.

She walked stiffly across the room to the door in the glass wall and touched the milky square that opened it. Looking back over her shoulder she stretched her mouth in a brief travesty of a smile. "Come," she said softly.

Keeping in the shadow Aleytys circled the open grass of the garden. At the stream she hesitated a minute, then stepped from stone to stone and in two strides was on the grass on the other side. She reached out, touched the smooth cool stalk of bamboo. It bent with a springy resilience that pierced her self-involvement, shocking her back into the here and now, into the immanent and dangerous present.

"Why do you stop?" Aamunkoitta's warm body pressed against her. Her whisper was barely louder than the rustling leaves. "Go on, you know where."

"Quiet, Kitten." She drew in a deep breath and let it trickle out again. "No. I came here for another reason. Wait a minute."

Aleytys lifted her eyes and searched the face of the cliff. She found the hairline break then closed her fingers tightly around a thick bamboo cane and shut her eyes. For a time, long enough to send her heart into a panic flutter her stomach knotting painfully, nothing happened. Then the eyeless seeing came creakily back.

Layered with dust and spattered with rain splotches, small leaves plastered to the grip, the energy gun lay hidden, still waiting for her. If she could get it down. She struggled to reach out, to project the mind fingers to catch hold of the weapon. Again her mind creaked with disuse. She reached for the gun. "Ah," she gasped, "come on... come on—"

Her legs began to tremble and she slid down, still holding onto the bamboo until she was kneeling on the grass. "Come on to me," she whispered.

The minutes dragged past. Sweat streamed over the contours of her face, soaked her hair wet again under the towel. She opened her eyes and slumped heavily.

"Kunniakas?" Aleytys felt small hands touch her. The hiiri's whisper was anxious, uncertain.

"I'm trying too hard." Aleytys slid her hand up and down the smooth bamboo cylinder. "It isn't working."

"Kunniakas, I don't know what you're talking about, but..." Aamunkoitta hesitated, her hands warm on Aleytys' arm. "The henkiolento-maan. Let them help you."

Aleytys frowned at her.

"Or your spirits. Call on them."

"You said that before. Spirits? I don't know what you're talking about."

"Down there." Aamunkoitta nodded at the mahazh. "I heard you. Heski, you said, or something like that. You said that and Heski or whatever it was swept us out safe."

"Heski?" Aleytys rubbed her hands over her aching eyes. I don't remember anything like that. Heski?" She tried to remember because it sounded important, but there was nothing in her head like that, nothing at all. Shaking her tired head she raised up a little on her knees, then shifted her legs around until she was

sitting, the earth cold even through the leather. Then through the cold, without displacing it, a warmth leaped through her, flowing up from the earth, up from the world itself, a welcoming soothing strengthening warmth even while she was beginning to tremble from the cold that struck clear to her bones. She spread her hands out flat on the ground on either side of her legs. "Henkiolento-maan," Aamunkoitta breathed. Aleytys paid little attention to her. A new calm, a new assurance was warm inside her. She reached out to the weapon and lifted it smoothly. Smoothly, surely she brought it down the cliff, swung it out over the treetops and brought it gently to rest in her lap. Reluctantly she lifted her hands from the earth, breaking the contact so that the warmth flowed away and she was shivering continuously. She got to her feet. "I've gotten out of the habit of enduring cold."

Aamunkoitta jumped up. Eyes sparking, she touched the weapon, shivering a little in her awe. "An energy gun."

Aleytys nodded. "I've a delivery to make. There's a... it's probably dangerous."

The hiiri shrugged. "What isn't? But I think we should leave this place now."

Aleytys shook her head. "No. But you can go if you want. I've got something to show the kipu."

"Ahgh." The sound was a low shapeless growl deep in the hiiri's throat

"Come if you want." Aleytys stepped across the stream again and stalked into the mahazh. She stopped by the bed.

Aamunkoitta frowned in puzzlement until Aleytys stripped the sheet from the bed and gathered it into a bundle with the stinking already decomposing embryo. Aleytys laughed angrily and bitterly. "A good present, don't you think, Kitten?"

"Good." The hiiri opened her mouth in a fierce grin and a silent feral pleasure shone in her eyes. "Trade. A life for a life."

The triumph spilled briefly out of Aleytys. "That's no balance," she muttered. She crossed the room to the lift, clutching the improvised sack in one hand, the weapon in the other. Tucking the gun under her arm she pressed her hand over the panel. "No. To pay for that life...!" She leaned her forehead against the bluish stone. "Nothing's enough."

The lift door slid open, releasing a flood of yellow light. Aleytys set the bag on the floor. "Wait," she said sharply. "I need something to buy passage." She stepped past the hiiri. "Wait for me in there, will you?"

Without bothering about an answer she ran back into the bedroom. When she returned she had a large wooden box slung by soft ropes over her shoulder. "The queen's jewels," she said briefly.

Aamunkoitta nodded approvingly. Then she glanced at the bag on the floor of the lift. "What now?"

"The kipu's nest."

Chapter XXVII

Aleytys handed the sheet to Aamunkoitta. "You know what to do?" she whispered.

“Sure.” The hiiri’s breathed answer was vibrant with excitement.

Flattening her hands against the warded metal Aleytys probed the lock. After a brief struggle she sucked in a deep breath, filling her lungs then letting the air trickle out again, her body relaxing, for the lock was unlocked, the wards neutralized. For a moment longer she rested, leaning on the hands pressed against the metal.

Then she jerked the door open and slid inside, energy gun leveled, the sensor under a quivering finger poised ready to fire. The kipu lay in a narrow bed in the narrow austere room, still sunk deep in sleep, her slow steady respirations the only sound. And it was no pretense. Aleytys felt the lowered life-beat, the placid steady throb of the sleep state. She slid her hand over the switch plate, filling the room with a sudden glare of light.

The kipu woke, jerked upright, stared open-mouthed at Aleytys standing beside the door. Aleytys saw her throat work, intelligence return to the narrow face.

“Don’t bother,” she said in a soft silky whisper. “They can’t hear you, not the shape they’re in.”

The kipu looked at the gun held steady in Aleytys’ hand. “If you kill me, you won’t get out of the mahazh.”

Aleytys chuckled. She felt almost light-headed. “Not even a good try, kipu.”

The kipu plucked at the blanket, pulling it closer about her nude body, making her uneasy in her nakedness, feeling vulnerable and frightened in a way she’d never allowed herself to feel since her childhood. Aleytys sensed this and laughed again, her bright blue-green eyes traveling derisively over the nayid’s narrow upper body.

The kipu blushed, the red blood rising across her shoulders and face. She reached for the tunic folded neatly over the back of a chair placed with finicky precision exactly parallel to the bed.

Aleytys stiffened. “No.”

The round black eyes fixed on her unblinking. The thin body arm halted for a minute then the kipu calmly continued the movement, reaching for the tunic. “Don’t be stupid, woman.”

A hot tight anger flared in Aleytys’ chest. For a moment she aimed the gun at the kipu’s body then turned it aside. The flare crisped the tunic to ash, seared the kipu’s hand and arm, burning it off halfway to the elbow, went on, ate away a deep bite out of the thick stone outer wall. “Now!” she hissed to Aamunkoitta.

Eyes glittering, a tight fierce smile on her small brown face, Aamunkoitta took a step forward and snapped the sheet open, flipping the dead embryo onto the moaning nayid’s lap.

“Your queen,” Aleytys said softly. “Good bye, kipu.” She leveled the gun. “Good-bye.” The red flare licked out. Like Burash the kipu’s straining body was a sudden black silhouette against the fire cone then nothing but a scattering of gray ash while the wall behind her let in air through a roundish jagged hole, air that stirred the ashes briefly and brought a flash of heat back into Aleytys’ face. She rubbed a shaking hand across her face, not feeling the fierce pleasure she expected, just a quiet sickness, a chill loneliness, a vast tiredness.

“Kunniakas.” Aamunkoitta tugged at her sleeve.

“Yes. I know.” Hitching up the fringed tunic, she tucked the energy gun into the belt holding up the leggings.

The lift took them to the barracks level. Cautiously they crept through a short length of corridor, meeting no one, then went up the coiling stairs to the green level of the armory.

Aleytys leaned against the whitewashed wall and closed her eyes. “Kitten, stay here. Keep an eye on those.” She touched the jewel box with her foot. “That’s my way off this world.”

“Kunniakas, can’t we leave?” The hiiri spread out her small hands, the three short fingers starred in a warding gesture. “You push your gods too hard, they go away. Gods are like that.”

“Gods.” Aleytys laughed bitterly. “Madar, I’m tired.” She held out her own hands and looked at them, rough, torn, ragged nails, hangnails. “These are my gods. Not so pretty, but strong.” She closed the hands into fists. “They do what I ask, not like the gods my people called on. Gods!” She turned around and stepped to the arch leading into the corridor. In the opening she looked back over her shoulder. “You hear trouble, I don’t come back soon, get out of here. Take the jewels.”

“Kunniakas, let me come with you.” The hiiri clutched at her arm. “I can fight well as any man.”

“I believe you, Kitten.” She smiled affectionately into the small brown face, reached out and touched the firm lips tenderly. “The kitten has claws.” She shook her head. “No. I need someone I can trust here with these.”

Aamunkoitta sank disgustedly onto the box. She sniffed. But as Aleytys sped out of sight around the curve of the corridor, she breathed, “Henkiolento-maan carry you safe, Kunniakas.”

Aleytys got the armory door open, her talent working almost automatically now, smooth as breathing. She pulled it open and leaped inside, the single watch nayid crisping in the beam from the energy gun before she made a sound. Breathing shallowly, carefully not thinking of what she was doing, she swung the weapon full on over the sleeping guards, then left the piles of ash and pushed into the main storeroom of the arsenal.

Standing in the middle of the room she looked around at the heavy weapons neatly stacked and stored in niches in the wall. She knew what she wanted to do, but how to do it... *Madar*, she thought, *I don't understand weapons more complicated than a knife...*

A vibration started in the back of her mind, a purple glow spread over the room, startling her, reminding her of the thing she found disturbing, the thing that avoided her memory, but there was so much pain in trying to search out what it was that she shied away from trying. The purple glow intensified and suddenly the knowledge she needed was there in her mind, clear and whole, like a page in a book.

Without questioning this, afraid to question it, determined not to question it, she sped to one of the larger niches filled with an ugly metal egg. Hands moving without needing direction from her mind, working with a knowledge in her fingertips, she armed the bomb, set a delay fuse, then moved to the next. And the next. And the next. By the time she finished she had armed five bombs, left them alive quietly humming their songs of waiting power...

Back at the stairwell, she saw Aamunkoitta’s tense face relax, saw her make the blessing motion with

her right hand. She laughed. “Gods! Come on, Kitten. To the roof.”

“The roof?” Aamunkoitta touched her arm hesitantly. “But—”

“A skimmer, Kitten. How else.”

Aamunkoitta slipped the carrying ropes of the jewel box over her shoulder. “You can fly one of those?”

“If I can’t, well have one hell of funeral pyre, Kitten.”

Stair. Around and around. Unlock the massive double-locked door that led to the roof. Aleytys leaned against the metal, breathing hard. “I’m tired,” she said slowly. “Tired.”

“Can’t you—”

“The gods again?”

“No. Heal. Like when we rode from her the first time.”

“I really must be wiped out.” Aleytys closed her eyes and bathed in her river until her body tingled with life, her spirit soared high into a new excitement. Once, just once, the elation faltered, she heard Burash’s light amused voice saying. . . up and down. . . up and down. . . moderation, Leyta, a little moderation. . . She pushed the memory aside and laid her hands on Aamunkoitta’s temples, sharing her power with her small friend. “That help?”

“Yes, Kunniakas.”

“Right. When I go on the roof, wait in shelter behind the door.”

“Kunniakas!” The hiiri sounded indignant, her eyes flashed.

“Don’t argue, Kitten. Those guards will have energy weapons, too. We don’t need to give them lots of targets.”

Aamunkoitta looked stubborn.

“You’ll just distract me, Kitten. I’ll be worrying about you when I should be concentrating on the guards.” She held up the gun. “After all, we only have one weapon. And we haven’t time to argue.”

Aamunkoitta caught hold of her arm. “What did you do, Kunniakas?”

Aleytys shrugged. “Set bombs to go in half an hour. About twenty minutes now.”

“Ah.” The hiiri’s eyes glowed fiercely. “Burn the nest out. Good!”

“I’m sorry about your people here and in the city, Kitten.” Aleytys frowned, sliding down from her high. She shivered. “I didn’t think of them till now.”

Aamunkoitta shrugged. “To kill the city they’d gladly die. Living here their lives were forfeit sooner or later anyway.” She put the jewel box down and settled herself on it. “But I’d rather not join them unless I have to. Hadn’t you better stop talking and get busy?”

Amusement bubbling up in her again, washing out the depression, soaring on her way up again, Aleytys chuckled and ran out of the thick-walled tunnel, crouched low, keeping in the shadow next the parapet.

The guards were careless, too certain of the security behind them. There were only two of them and both stood backs to the entry, caught in a desultory conversation, alert in their way to danger from the sky but half their sense deadened by their casual words. Coolly Aleytys leveled the weapon and touched the sensor. The guards died in mid-word, not knowing where their death came from.

Aleytys grimaced. That too was getting easier, the killing, and it frightened her a little. But she didn't have the time to chew over philosophical problems and tucked the worry away to join all those other things she had no time or inclination to think about. "Kitten."

The hiiri came from the tunnel, clumsy because of the one-sided weight of the jewel box. "That was fast."

"They were dreaming."

"Nakivas would have had their skins." She looked around at the skimmers parked beside the jutting entry ramps. "What now?"

Aleytys shrugged. "I suppose it doesn't matter." She stepped quickly to the nearest skimmer and ran up the ramp with the hiiri close behind.

With Aamunkoitta sitting uneasily beside her Aleytys settled into the pilot's seat. She ran her fingers over the varying textures of the metal and glass, all cool and mysterious to her touch. Then the purple glow came back and after a minute she grunted; hands danced over the controls so that the skimmer rose smoothly and darted away until the city was a dark blotch nestling against the paler stone of the butte. She swung the skimmer around and held it hovering. "Any minute now, Kitten."

The minutes ticked by, slowly building tension in both of them, especially in Aleytys as Aamunkoitta's nervousness echoed and reechoed in her. Then the darkness erupted in a vast searing white light, a fireball bigger than the sun, blinding even at this distance. Aamunkoitta cried out and ground her fists into her eyes. Aleytys whipped around, her motion sending the skimmer wobbling uneasily. She covered her face with shaking hands and wept silently.

"A clean death. And a quick one." Aamunkoitta's voice sounded hoarse in her ears, comforting, like the hiiri's small hands patting her shoulders with helpless light touches.

Aleytys sighed. "Thanks." Lifting her head she slid her eyes cautiously around to the city. The fireball was gone, its place marked by a hard red glow.

"Where now?" The hiiri's voice broke through her lingering horror at the destruction she had caused.

"You said six months."

"What?"

"I was drugged six months."

"Yes."

“The smuggler said he was coming back in six months. You think you could find the place where he lands?”

“I’ve been there a number of times.”

“You think Nakivas will come again?”

“Of course. He must.”

“That’s where we’re going.” As the purple glowed around her once again, without knowing exactly why, Aleytys took the skimmer down low until it was scarcely two meters off the earth and sent it as fast as she could toward the southeast where the flat and fertile plain broke up into low hills thickly furred with trees and rocky ravines.

Chapter XXVIII

Aleytys watched the camouflaged smuggler slide down the curve of the night and settle with a minimum of fuss onto the floor of the canyon. “There he is,” she said quietly. “Wake up, Kitten.”

“I’m awake.” The hiiri sat up.

“I haven’t changed my mind, you know.”

Aamunkoitta spread her hands on her thighs. “My people are dead. You are my clan now.”

“Nakivas?”

“Has many women panting after him. I’d be lost in the crowd besides. You know how it is with me.” Her eyes closed, her face drew in with the pain inside her. “I’m not fit for...”

“Kitten, don’t.”

She rubbed her hands up and down her thighs. “I don’t run from the truth, Kunniakas. I couldn’t live the life of a clan woman now, too many things have happened to me, changed me.” She shook her head. “Besides...” A sudden smile chased the gloom from her face. “You’ve shown me that a woman can be more than a drudge for men. There’s no place I want to fit on this world now. Let me come with you.”

“Kitten—”

“You’re a holder of power, Kunniakas. You need someone to serve you. Let me do it.”

Aleytys shook her head. “Even with the mahazh gone, the nayids still hold the land, but your people have a chance now. Make friends with them or drive them out, take your own land back. You’ve still got work here, Kitten. Besides that, teach the other women what you’ve learned.” Aleytys chuckled. “You might start another whole revolution on this chancy world.”

“You don’t want me.”

With a weary sigh Aleytys pulled her legs under her and stood up. “I don’t want to see you hurt. Or

killed. I'm not stupid enough to think you're going to have an easy life here. But at least you'll be among your own kind with important work to do. You may be miserable but you'll be alive."

"Alive."

"Don't knock it."

Aamunkoitta shrugged. "You better get ready. The ship.

Someone comes."

"Wait here with the box."

"Henkiolento-maan strengthen you, Kunniakas." Aleytys laughed and walked to meet the long-haired smuggler, a smile illuminating her face. She met her surprised stare and murmured, "Aspash, phorea."

"Aspash, despina. So you speak interlingue." He examined her, his amused sardonic gaze traveling from feet to head. Then he looked past her at the jumble of rock on the far side of the stream. "Where are your friends?"

"They'll be along." She waved a hand at the ship. "And your companions?"

"Busy. You're early."

"I want passage off world."

"Oh?" His mobile mouth spread into a smile, white teeth glinting against his dark-tanned skin. "Why should I bother?" He nodded at the ship. "That's no passenger liner."

"Profit." She answered his smile. "The best ointment for discomfort."

"They going to pay your way?"

"The hiiri?" She shook her head. "No, I've a few baubles you might find interesting."

"Let's see them and I'll let you know."

Aleytys looked at him silently. "You're a reasonably honest man," she said after a while. "But no friend of mine. I learned a while past that trusting doesn't pay if you haven't the strength to enforce the bargain."

"Well." He folded his arms across his chest "How do you get over that little problem?"

"If I had a weapon. . . ." She lifted the energy gun and handed it to him butt first. "Let that be part payment. I don't need it. Besides you could take it from me most any time you wanted."

He raised his eyebrows then turned the weapon over in his long strong fingers. "Ffynch Company work. Nice. But you don't expect that to cover cost?"

"No." She twisted her head back over her shoulder. "Kitten, come here. Bring the jewels."

"Jewels?"

She faced him. "Some of them for you. Some."

The hiiri came trotting up, the heavy box bumping against her thigh. "He will take you?"

"He hasn't decided yet. Open the box."

The hiiri knelt beside Aleytys and lifted back the lid. As the moonlight glittered on the jewels Aleytys felt the leap of interest in the smuggler. The sudden clutch of greed.

"How many layers to that thing? Are they all like that?" He dropped to his knees and touched the glimmering gems with fingers that trembled in appreciation of their beauty and worth, surprising Aleytys with the sensitivity behind his facade.

She nodded and when he didn't look up, said, "Yes. Those on top are yours to take us off world to a place I want. They're enough, I think."

He stood, disciplining his eagerness to a bland mask. "Two levels."

"No. What you see." She chuckled. "Before you try further, phorea, I'm empath. I read your feelings as soon as you have them."

"Very unfair." He shrugged. "Then you know I'll take these. Where do you want to go?"

"You know a world called Ibex?"

He frowned. "No, it's nowhere around this sector. You have the coordinates?"

"89-066 Dhube-Thrall 64 Aurex Corvi 100.47." The numbers were burned deep in her mind and tripped swiftly off the end of her tongue, carrying with them sad memories of her life before this world. She shook off the pall of memory and waited for the smuggler's answer.

Though his face was still bland and unrevealing, she felt the surprise in his mind. "That's halfway across the galactic lens. No way I go that far."

"That's true." She sighed. "Damn. I was afraid it wouldn't be that easy. Looks like I've a long weary time ahead of me. Take me as far as you can. Deal?"

"Deal."

"Give him the top tray, Kitten."

Aamunkoitta nodded. She lifted out the tray and placed it in the smuggler's hands. Then she closed the lid of the box and slid the ropes over her shoulder again.

"I want to board ship before the others come. They shouldn't see me." Aleytys closed her eyes a minute, searching the hills with her mind. "The other hiiris are less than half an hour from here," she said when she opened her eyes again. Meeting his startled gaze she smiled, then chuckled. "Another talent."

"Well then, follow me."

“One minute. What I said before.”

He raised his mobile eyebrows.

“About reinforcing trust with power.”

“Well?”

“Watch.” She wrapped the fingers of her mind around a stone and lifted it until it was even with his eyes.
“You see.”

“A gifted lady.”

“You don’t understand.” She let the rock fall. “If I held your heart like that...”

She felt the understanding flood him, a wariness replacing his confidence. “I see. No wonder you don’t need a gun.”

“Right. A weapon no man can take from me no matter what his strength.” She spread out her hands.
“Tie my hands, my mind goes free. So I protect myself. If necessary. Only if necessary. A guarantee. You understand?”

“Only too well.” He chuckled in his turn. “So I’m glad I make a practice of keeping my word.”

At the foot of the lift Aleytys stopped, touched Aamunkoitta on the cheek. “Good-bye, Kitten.”

“Farewell, Kunniakas.” She slid the ropes off her shoulder. “Looks like I wait for Nakivas. Do I tell him you’re leaving?”

“He’ll ask, I suppose. All right. Tell him. I won’t see him.” Lifting the jewel box Aleytys stepped onto the lift and let it take her into the ship.

Aamunkoitta was a small forlorn figure as Aleytys stepped into the lock.

On board the ship—walk past the curious eyes of the pale man and the cat man. Walk down the narrow battered corridor, feet slipping noiselessly over the spongy rubberoid matting. Into a sterile narrow room...

“This is the second’s cabin. He’ll be in to clear his things out after the trading.”

Aleytys looked around the empty space. “Show me how to operate this place.”

“You don’t know about foldaway?”

“I’ve only ridden two ships, once as guest, once as prisoner. My experience is limited.”

“You don’t mind admitting to ignorance?”

“Ignorance is a sickness easily cured.”

He shrugged. “Here. The bunks.” He pulled the tiered bunks out of the wall, the bottom first, then the

top, showed her how to open and close them... water basin... shower... toilet... depositories for possessions....

“That’s it.”

“Thank you.” She looked around. “May I join you on the bridge for take-off? I’ll stay out of your way.”

“Why?”

“I have a feeling....” She moved restlessly about the small cabin. “I have a feeling I’ll be needed. Somehow.”

“Needed!” He snorted incredulously. “You know nothing about ships.”

“But I do know it’s stupid to ignore my premonitions.”

His eyes swept her from head to foot “Very well, I’ll make a place for you.”

“Thank you.”

He hesitated in the doorway, curiously reluctant to leave her. “Do you need anything more?”

“No. Not now. Hadn’t you better get ready for the hiiris? They come.”

He frowned. “You feel uneasy in my presence?”

“No.” She smiled, spread out her hands. “Why should I? But I don’t know you.”

“You’ve read my feelings.”

“Knowing is more than that. I feel your interest in me, you are attracted to me as a woman.”

He plucked at his eyebrows. “Katrak! You’re a damned uncomfortable woman.”

“Yes.” She sighed. “Phorea, I find you interesting also, but I’m not ready to relate to a man again. I’ve just come from a....” Her voice faltered, her eyes filled with tears, she could weep again, gently, sadly, for the dead Burash. “My love has died and it’ll be a while before I seek another. I need a time of mourning. Do you understand?”

“No.” He spoke a little coldly. “Let the dead be dead, leave them behind, don’t clutch the moldering corpse.”

“I’m not.” She sighed. “No. But I can’t switch on and off that fast.”

He shrugged. “Well be leaving in an hour or two. I’ll come for you.”

“Thank you.” She pulled the lower bunk out again and sat down. “I’ll rest here. Good bargaining.”

He nodded coolly and vanished.

Chapter XXIX

The ship curved up from the world, slipping along the terminator, hiding on the edge of shadow, then darted away into deeper space, driving to the change-over point as fast as the laboring motors could contrive. At first the going was smooth, routine, unexciting. Then a bell rang repeatedly, its sharp sound a warning that sent adrenalin shooting through the veins, knotted the stomach into a hard lump. Aleytys rose from her seat on the matting to stand behind the pilot. "What's wrong?" she asked, then saw the ship curving from behind the world below them. "Who?"

"Ffynch company enforcer. Don't bother me, woman." The smuggler hunched over the controls staring intently into the screen.

Aleytys watched the ship. It had an aura of menace that shook her. Light flared, hiding the ship a second, then the smuggler's craft shook, throwing her off her feet onto the matting, sending the smuggler into vicious fear-driven curses. She stood again, ignored by the laboring man. The ship danced in the screen as they took evasive action, but it kept on coming. The light flared again.

This time Aleytys felt a laboring in the smuggler's ship after the effects of the jolt had passed off. Without being told she knew it couldn't take another of those blows; fear and anger poured from the smuggler pilot, sweat rolled down his face and back as he struggled in ways she couldn't understand to escape the nemesis. But the struggle was futile. She couldn't read that from the instruments, but she could read the man.

She closed her eyes and sent her sight out to the pursuing ship. There was so much she didn't understand. But the purple glow came again... what is that, she thought, what... but there was no answer... only an image in her mind... a diagram... she sought through the trailing ship until she found a place that matched the diagram and then tore it free.

The ship blew up, vanishing in a fireball that glowed brighter than the sun so close and bright behind them. She clutched at the metal railing on the back of the pilot's chair... that purple... what happens... what tells me... the smuggler's voice interrupted her whirling thoughts.

"You did that?"

"Yes." Lips trembling, she tried to smile at him. "I said my premonitions were worth listening to."

"How?"

She shrugged and didn't bother answering.

"A useful gift."

"But unreliable. I can't always control it."

He frowned. "A danger to this ship?"

"No, I didn't mean it's out of control. I just can't make it happen whenever I want." She sighed and stretched. "I'm very tired. If you don't mind, I'll sleep a while."

He barked a short sharp laugh, sardonically amused at the thought of interfering with her. "Pleasant

dreams, despina.”

She flashed an inquiring glance at him, read his amusement, smiled. “Need I say, my services are at your command if needed.”

“Thanks.” He lay back in the chair relaxing from the tensions of the brief conflict. “I’ll remember that.”

In the small cabin Aleytys lay on the bunk and stared at the metal surface close over her head. Once again she felt that there was something she could not remember, something vital to her well-being, something connected with that strange purple glow that was the prelude to sudden influxes of information. She probed delicately at the blank places, flinched away as she struck the painful memory of Burash silhouetted black and contorted against the red cone of the energy gun’s flare. There was a deep cold loneliness in her, a frozen ache without surcease that built and built. . . .

“No,” she murmured. “Let it go.” Stretching out her hand, she spread it flat against the metal, feeling the slow steady beat of the power throbbing in the side of the ship. “On my way again, but this time I know what’s happening. Mama, here I come. Ready or not.”

After a while she went to sleep.