



Illustrated by Kurt Huggins

Burning the Ladder

Adam-Troy Castro

Ambassador Porleth Heng considered herself a blessed woman.

Unlike most members of the Confederate Diplomatic Corps, who had indentured themselves to that service out of economic hardship or an ache to escape the terrible conditions on their respective home worlds, she'd been born into wealth on a paradise planet and had no pressing reason to seek advancement for its own sake. She'd just wanted the leadership position she was entitled to, one where she could control people and show how superior she was to them.

With the support of powerful friends, she had built her rise in the Confederate Diplomatic Corps on a series of unchallenging but high-prestige appointments to alien worlds where the local politics were peaceful, the local weather pleasant, and the local stance toward humanity

kind and indulgent. They were all essentially places where any important diplomatic work that had needed to be done had already been taken care of years earlier, by people who were more willing to work than she was; places that were shiny and prosperous, and thus places where pretty much all she had to do was enjoy the ambience. They were not places where important decisions needed to be made.

Under such circumstances, she had built herself a sinecure so low-stress it practically qualified as paradise. Indeed, she had so completely established herself at her career pinnacle—head of the Confederate embassy to the advanced peoples of Grethai, situated on a spacious and elaborately landscaped estate overlooking their magnificent capitol. She was able to rule her little fiefdom as absolute unquestioned leader, only occasionally derailing the careers of any indentures who failed to treat her with sufficient deference. One word from her could get some unpolished young idiot reassigned to a world of ice, or one where the embassy was a little shack with an airlock that protected its staff from a toxic atmosphere. It was not something she took pleasure in, but it helped everyone around her remember who was in charge.

She almost never had any trouble.

Again: a very lucky woman.

It was therefore deeply surprising and upsetting to her when her second-in-command, a quite satisfying toady by the name of Felis Harmon, poked his head into her office and said that there was some real trouble coming, from one of her embassy's more isolated remote outposts.

This was genuinely upsetting, because she'd had other plans for the day, but when he assured her that this really did seem to be an emergency, she followed him up to the stairs to the embassy roof, to face the kind of glorious day that never should have indicated any trouble: a bright sun, a blue sky, the perfume of the local flowers carried by a pleasant breeze. The manifestation of the promised trouble hadn't happened yet, but the skimmer carrying it was flying in from the southern hemisphere, and the pilot had made it clear that she was arriving with a diplomatic crisis of significant proportions.

Heng wondered, "Exactly what kind of godforsaken incompetence would it take to create a diplomatic crisis on this planet?"

It was a good question. The three-legged, three-armed Grethaians were one of the few races who had genuine affection for human beings, without any cultural points of friction. Grand conversationalists, they were; practically human, which was the greatest compliment in her vocabulary.

"I don't know," Harmon said. Something about the local plant life disturbed his sinuses, and he tended to get sniffy whenever outside the Embassy's filtered air, a disgusting trait that he had somehow never gotten around to treating. "They just say it's important. They won't say why."

"And who was this, again? Who would even have the power to cause a diplomatic incident, all on her own in the middle of nowhere, that would be such an irritation I'd stash them away in such an out-of-the-way place?"

"The trainee," Harmon replied. "The Cort woman."

This explained little. Cort may have been an eighteen-year old, who had the colossal bad taste to also be a prodigy—so much a prodigy that her superiors back at New London had put her on the fast Prosecutor track and sent her on this internship for seasoning—but she was also, like so many prodigies, a social irritant whose desperate attempts to prove herself had irritated the living hell out of Heng in record time. (Mediocrities were by contrast much easier to deal with.) Rudely corrected by Cort on a matter of procedure, Heng had ordered her sent to some piece of crap detail on the ass end of the planet, just to teach her some humility, and had not expected to hear back from her until she learned how to grovel properly.

That had been less than a week ago, not enough time to Heng to relent, and so she vowed here and now that if the quiff's premature return was based on anything less than a crisis, it would be the price of never seeing anything with sunlight, ever again.

As if aware what Heng was thinking, Harmon sniffed, "She says it's life and death."

"It better be. When I tell people to get out of my sight, I want them to stay out of my sight."

"I know. But she'll be here in a minute."

Heng cast a longing glance at the towers of Su-Jin, that glorious Grethaiian city that was a fit home for someone like herself, at the peak of a long and exemplary if trouble-free career; a place with cuisine that she adored, a culture she had come to love, and friends among the locals who never stopped treating her as what she was, an honored luminary from another world. She regretted not being on a day trip to the mineral baths there, right now, and vowed that as soon as this Cort nonsense was over she would take the rest of the day off and indulge herself in that particular joy. Soon, she promised. If this were just what she remained sure it would be, a young indenture overreacting to a minor problem. Otherwise there would be hell to pay.

And then a tiny speck in the distance drew close, circled the building twice, and lowered itself to a position half a meter above the rooftop. There was only one human being aboard, the intolerable Cort, who as the vehicle came to a stop directed a few words at some presence hidden by the skimmer's rim, then picked up something and painfully lowered from the vehicle.

She looked like hell.

It was not like she'd been through a war—there were no obvious injuries—but she was pale and red-eyed, and there were dusty streaks on the legs of her affected severe black suit.

She crossed the distance between the skimmer and Heng as if it were entire kilometers through a battlefield and not just the few steps through sunlight, on a perfect and peaceful day.

“Ambassador,” Cort said. Her voice was hoarse.

Heng addressed her by the most disrespectful term she could, the one that emphasized the lease placed on Cort's services, by their superiors back at New London. “Intern. What's the meaning of this?”

Cort opened her mouth but appeared unable to find words—a failure that Heng's brief prior association with the young twit had established abnormal for her. (Among Cort's many irritating qualities already impossible to tolerate was, normally, an inability to shut up.)

Heng suffered a moment of uneasiness. She found that she did not want to know.

Cort tried again, but apparently changed her mind, and instead just handed Heng an object.

It was a small box made of a distinctive hand-carved wood derived from one of the Grethaiian trees. Heng had multiple artifacts hewn from the material in her office, and had broken protocols by telling a relative back in New London to invest in it, on the artifact market that Dip Corps personnel were not supposed to participate in, themselves.

Not expecting much, Heng opened the lid.

And then she gasped and dropped the box to the ground.

* * *

1.

43 HOURS EARLIER:

The air of the remote Grethaiian village named Here was acrid from a burning wind that gathered the desert sands and turned every breath into an exercise in filtering grit.

This was not a place meant for human beings like Andrea Cort, but to be fair, it was not an ideal place for most civilized Grethaiians either.

Despite the visible biological differences between them and human beings, the species as a whole defined comfort by the same criteria that *Homo sapiens* did, and thus would have mostly classified this little spot on the map as too dry, too hot, too harsh, and too stingy with food, for comfort to be possible.

The continued existence of the village was at best a tribute to inertia. It was not one of their civilization's showcase cities, not one of the great achievements of a race that had spread to four solar systems totaling thirty planets and moons and artificial habitats in space. On a world that was a showplace, this village remained a primitive dump, depressing without a stop at quaint, off-putting without the appeal of the exotic. That it still existed was due to a phenomenon also observed of humanity: that any future they built arrived unequally, leaving some places to languish in medieval times even as others touched the stars. This settlement's access to a well must have once made it an important if unlovely destination for primitive Grethaiian caravans traveling in or out of the hostile wastes. But the village now existed in an era where there was no need of caravans to cross the desert; where there were flying machines capable of crossing those wastes

in hours; it was living anachronism. And yet, a little less than two hundred descendants of the village's original settlers still lived here, in the poverty that had permanently moved in when their home's historical function as important stop for travelers had moved out.

The buildings were low, stone things the same color as the dust they rose from. Many were crumbling or poorly patched. The streets were dirty and soiled by the fossilized dung of pack animals. It was the height of the day now, and every resident was inside their homes, in part because local conditions made it sensible to pursue a work schedule of early morning and early evening, and in part because of a local religious holiday that Andrea Cort had been told about, but completely forgotten.

As she strolled through the dusty streets, its sand erupting in boot-high clouds with every step she took, the only visible movement came from droges, scrawny and sick-looking predators, knee-high to a human, that scavenged in the narrow places between the squat houses. They were inhabitants of the desert's edge, who subsisted on the six-legged lizard-things that subsisted by digging for insects. The droges would have made a happier living a few kilometers further away, where the conditions were milder and where there was more food to fight over; but this particular pack had made its territory the very edge of its species range, and had adapted to the proximity of civilization by learning to eat its garbage. Cort had been warned that these droges were notoriously aggressive pests, and best not approached, but that they would leave her alone if she left them alone. So far in her circuit of Here this had turned out to be true. She caught mere glimpses of a visiting pack of about four, who whenever she drew near backed away with their equivalent of snarls, testifying to the lessons that generations of Grethaians had taught them, by throwing stones.

This did not help her own mood, which was right now, as often during her eighteen years of life, self-lacerating.

What was wrong today was going to be true many times in her life.

She was in trouble and damning herself for being so stupid.

One week earlier, Ambassador Heng had ordered her attached to a medical outpost the Corps had established in this very village fifteen years ago. The assignment was open-ended and, in the absence of an apology to Heng, could very well last years. Cort had the idea that Heng would be perfectly happy if it did. The only way out was a groveling apology on the record, a step Cort had been unable to bring herself to take.

For almost a week now she'd stayed within the walled compound of the outpost and felt sorry for herself, reviewed her studies and felt sorry for herself, dosed herself to incapacity with topical euphoric buzzpatches and felt sorry for herself, all while noting that the two other permanent appointees to this installation, who did not have her easy way out, were not living a life of any greater productivity.

Only this morning did she awake from her latest drugged stupor, her head throbbing, to feel herself teetering on a potentially career-length abyss. Late this morning, she'd used the hoarded three-days-worth of her bathing-water allotment—unlimited at the Embassy, cruelly limited in this desert location—to render herself passably respectable.

Then she'd donned her habitual black suit to go out and take a walk in the sweltering heat.

It was early afternoon by the time she left the compound, and scarcely an hour later by the time she'd completed her stroll from one end of the village to the other, all without encountering a single local resident or feature of interest.

By the time she was on her way back to the compound to dig deeper into her supply of euphorics, she almost wondered if the village was home to any Grethaiian at all; all she'd seen was those droges.

But then she heard a Grethaiian child screaming.

* * *

2.

Throughout the known universe, the young of most species with voices audible to the human ear emit cries similar to those of a human child.

There are exceptions. There are, in fact, any number of exceptions. Given the diversity of life

in the universe, it's an uncounted teeming number of exceptions. But there is a commonality that has come about because there are multiple evolutionary reasons for young to emit a distress call of that specific pitch. First, because they are smaller and their vocal apparatus are not yet mature enough to have deepened; second, because any unbearable piercing sound increases the chances of adults stirring themselves away from other urgent business in order to intervene; and third, because the urgent message the helpless fling out into the universe can sometimes produce positive results even when transmitted between species. Cross-species pity exists. The ability to inspire it can be a survival mechanism. On some worlds, including humanity's cradle, piteous cries have led even the most vicious predators to attempt care for their orphaned prey.

On this world, Andrea Cort found the Grethaian child cowering on an overflowing trash bin, where she'd climbed to escape being taken by four droges.

The child was small, wide-eyed, and clad in what amounted to a canvas sack, open at the bottom to reveal a trio of spindly legs ending in bare, clawed feet. Its resemblance to a human of the same developmental age was limited to its upright stance. Beyond that, it had a craggier head, three blacker eyes without a hint of white sclera, three arms around a triangular shoulder structure, and a mouth that opened not using a hinged jaw but instead with an iris-like mechanism on its pointed chin.

What expressions this head could produce were not at all congruent with a human being's, but that high-pitched cry of terror had no difficulty crossing the species divide to communicate sheer terror and the universal message, *Help me*.

Cort didn't waste any time worrying about why the child was on the street by itself, or why no one of its own kind was bursting from any of the surrounding hovels to help.

Instead, she charged the droges.

They had mutually exclusive responses. The smallest and scrawniest darted away in instinctive panic. Another, who barely noticed the sudden complication, refused to release its grip on the trash bin and hung there, its rear leg scrambling for purchase. A third also retreated, whirled toward Cort, and assumed a defensive posture, snarling. Only the largest by half, a mean-looking bastard with rippled burn scars dominating its face and only one out of three intact eyes, advanced to meet the threat.

Cort was not insane. She did not rush in to take them on. She stopped as soon as she knew that she was close enough to seize their attention. She doffed her jacket and held it before her, swinging in it from side to side like a pendulum.

One-Eye advanced, snarling.

Cort took the jacket by a sleeve and turned the pendulum swing into a full overhead orbit.

One-Eye backed up a step, uncertain how to deal with this new phenomenon.

Cort drew closer.

This made her a more compelling threat to the meal the pack had found, and so One-Eye decided that this could not be tolerated. It advanced again.

Cort kicked the beast in its one intact eye.

One-Eye yelped in panic, dropped the sleeve, and fell back, its reaction immediately infecting Stubborn, who also retreated and watched its pack leader in search of a next course of action. Its yelp freed the jacket, which Cort returned to spinning. This time she did not target One-Eye, who had already learned that it could be caught, but Stubborn, who received another stinging impact from the button.

Stubborn was more frightened by the sting than One-Eye had been. It yelped and backed up and waited to see what its leader decided to do.

What One-Eye, who was still blinking from the direct hit on its remaining vision, decided to do was let Cort know how pissed-off it was. It did this by emitting a roar that made Cort go chill with the certainty of her own imminent death. It bared its teeth and snapped, not hitting Cort, but promising all manner of pain. Cort reversed the direction of the jacket's swing and hit it in the face with an arc that came up from below, driving the animal back.

Cort responded in kind.

"Come on, you piece of shit! Stop putting this off! You think I'm made of time? TAKE ME!"

One-Eye was already fighting a creature that had no business being on this world that its own instincts had not evolved to understand, with a smell that marked it as not good for its kind to eat. It had fought this battle for as long as it had only because it was protecting the prey it had cornered. This sound, clearly not the panic of a defeated prey animal, clearly instead something powered by rage and aggression, was another alien element, and forced a sunk-cost analysis that amounted to a calculation of just how many calories were being expended to claim a meal that might not be worth further combat with an unknown. It made One-Eye waver.

Andrea Cort tried to kick it in the eye again.

In a second all four were gone, abandoning the alley and, judging just from the speed of their departure, the village. Andrea Cort found herself swaying on her feet from the terror she now had the time to feel. She considered putting her jacket back on, but instead turned to the top of the covered bin, where the little Grethai child was still cowering, as afraid of Andrea Cort as she'd been of the things with claws and sharp teeth.

Cort said, "Are you all right?"

The child recoiled.

Cort saw that poor little thing was bleeding from a bite-wound in one arm.

"Come on," Cort said, aware that the kid almost certainly didn't speak Mercantile. Maybe her tone of voice would be enough. "I'm a friend. I just want to help you."

For a few heartbeats, the child remained hostile. Feral, perhaps, in the way that even the children of intelligent species can be, as Andrea Cort, who had been, had reason to know. It struck Cort, as if from someplace far away, that she was looking at the product of an alien society with Juje alone knew what factors contributing to the spectacle of a child no one would save from wild animals; and that she really ought to be satisfied with what she'd already done and not tug on threads she knew nothing about.

Then the child advanced and wrapped Andrea Cort in its arms.

Andrea Cort said, "... god damn it."

* * *

3.

She took the child back to the Dip Corps compound.

The home of her punishment detail was a stupid fortress surrounded by a wall about four meters high, and containing five prefabricated habitats that had been dropped here, temporarily, back when there had been a relevant purpose for establishing an outpost in this remote place. Its veneer was now that of a hospital, established here by the Corps in the interest of good will. But it was rare indeed that any of the locals, no matter how ill or injured, deigned to use it. These Grethaians hated human company, and so, among people like the ambassador, it had been for years a place to dump unwanted human beings.

Built to accommodate a staff of twenty in five buildings, it was now the permanent home of only two personnel, one an administrator and one a medical technician, both stranded here for political reasons and afforded only occasional human company whenever anybody like Cort got themselves on the wrong list.

These two had joined Cort in the communal dining area, stark room with shelving for food storage, a counter for preparation, and a dusty collection of games and other recreational tools that must have been popular when the outpost was crowded with ten times the staff. There was a little cage where one of the little lizard-like creatures so common in many of this world's environments now sat on a rock, watching but not comprehending the human drama: a pet, resentfully cared for by the kind of people who do not keep pets.

The child's arm was now sheathed in cryofoam, while a cloud of nanites adjusted to Grethai anatomy tended to her wounds. Her demeanor was that of a beaten animal, waiting for the three strange and alien adults to manifest cruelty.

Erwin Thawk occupied a chair like a sack of heavy parcels that had been dumped there and was in danger of sliding off at any time. He had been deep in narcotic recreation at Cort's arrival with the child, had dosed himself with enough to last his whole day, and despite the application of a topical counteractive that had unwillingly dragged him back to sobriety, now still

looked bleary, regarding the outpost's predicament through red-rimmed eyes. He was not fully clothed and wore a white sleeveless undershirt and knee-length shorts. Despite the region's brutal sun, he was pale to the point of illness, with a yellow tinge that testified to some deep, untreated illness inside him. He scratched his silvery beard stubble. "You still shouldn't have done it, girl."

Thawk's default means of addressing her, as *girl*, was a significant irritation but far down her list of reasons to despise him after only a few days of proximity.

"If you're saying I should have allowed a local child to be torn apart by wild animals, I promise you that it's not an argument I'm willing to entertain."

Thawk shook his head. "Saving her? Was a good thing. Taking her into our compound? Was not a good thing. You might find yourself charged with the local equivalent of kidnapping."

"The droges could have come back."

"They could have," Thawk replied. "It would have been a tragedy, but it would have been a tragedy that had nothing to do with you. Or with us."

"I don't like that math, sir. Or you, much, for advancing it."

Thawk snorted. "You could have just left the kid with some local."

"I haven't been introduced to any of the locals. I don't know who's responsible and who's not, and I certainly don't know who her specific people are—if she even has any. I made a decision and brought her here to people who are *supposed* to be running a clinic. Do you have any instruction more acceptable than telling me to slather her with some tasty condiments and put her back where I found her?"

Thawk rolled his red-rimmed eyes and glanced at the outpost's other permanent resident, the medtech Esa Chorin, currently leaning against a wall with both sculpted arms folded over her chest. "You've been listening?"

"Affirmative," Chorin said.

"You have any friends among these people?"

Chorin was a tall woman about a head and a half taller and about ten years older than Cort. She had a bronzed physique that she must have devoted the bulk of her time here to sculpting. She was dressed for comfort, in a jet-black one-piece that bared her muscular arms and strips of skin at her hips. She was certainly healthier than Thawk, but she also looked tired, in the manner of anyone whose obsessive self-care was beginning to lose its battle with too many years without purpose.

"I was friends with Grethaians, in my days in Si-Jan. *Civilized* Grethai. We got along. I wouldn't say that for any of the people I've met here. They're okay for a few minutes of conversation, but they also keep telling me they want us gone."

Thawk said, "You still interact with them more than I do. You should know who we should approach about a situation like this. Like: who's in charge?"

Cort regarded Thawk with frank disgust. "Isn't that the sort of thing you should have picked up in your years here?"

"Be quiet, girl. I'm already angry at you—Chorin, who's the mayor, or closest equivalent?"

"There is no mayor," Chorin said. "There's so little to do here, so few decisions to make, that they don't bother to have one. This isn't a village. It's a heat rash."

"I said, '*or closest equivalent*.'"

"I know someone the others respect. One who won't mind me asking a question, at least."

"Then go to him. Specify that our trainee, here, wasn't quite sure what she was doing. Play up her helpless idiocy if you'd like. Stress that we are contacting him as soon as possible and that we will surrender the girl—"

"The genders here don't correspond to male and female."

The Grethaians had two distinct egg-laying genders, each of which also possessed attributes human beings classified as stereotypically male. It was complicated and it was real, and the clumsy human terms for what they were of fortunately no difference to the Grethaians, who were already quite aware of what they were and at worst deeply amused by *Homo sapiens* difficulty with describing it.

Thawk rolled his eyes. “Pass the message along, and either invite his honor to return with you, or ask who the kid belongs to, so we can return her ourselves. Either way, go get this done.”

Chorin propelled herself away from the cabinets and stormed off, almost colliding with Cort on the way out.

Cort turned to watch her go, felt an unwilling moment of appreciation for Chorin’s departing shoulders, and turned her attention back to Thawk, who still regarded her through those red-rimmed yellow eyes. She perceived in him an infinite sadness that did not improve her opinion much.

As if aware of what she was thinking, Thawk said, “You don’t like me much, do you, girl?”

“My name’s not *girl*.”

“I call you *girl* because you’re *temporary*, and I prefer not to waste any brain cells storing anything about you after you’ve gone back to a career that, unlike mine, is capable of being repaired. Answer my question. You don’t like me much, do you?”

Cort had to overcome a pounding heartbeat to respond. “After you’ve gone to such lengths to ingratiate yourself? No, sir. Not at all.”

“You don’t think I’m likeable?”

“I think you probably left charm behind years ago. Sir.”

Thawk released a half-snort, half-hiss that may have been as close as he could come to a laugh. “I think the same is likely true for you. You seem to be consciously jettisoning whatever little you have left.”

“I’m comfortable with that, sir.”

“You’re not just comfortable with it; you’re proud of it, and I think that makes you dangerous. I’m fairly certain that if you escape this dump and manage to make a name for yourself in this line of work, your file back on New London will eventually be a long history of people you’ve offended, alienated, hurt, or ruined. I also believe that no force in the universe aside your own arrogance can possibly deny you excellence.”

Cort did not know exactly how she was expected to respond and therefore defaulted to the simple. “Yes, sir.”

Thawk continued. “As it happens, no force in the universe aside from a fit of utter madness on the part of superiors can possibly shepherd me to any future quite so glorious, which is why I’m so protective of this little patch of hell, my only sanctuary. This little compound is what I have *instead* of a future. Do you get that?”

“I do.”

“The consequences of your little act of heroism, positive or negative, will be entirely yours. I don’t want them, not in the slightest. Is that clear?”

This was more solid ground. “In perfect focus. Sir.”

“Keep the brat company until Chorin’s friend comes to claim it. I’ll be in my quarters, getting indisposed. If any report needs to be filed with the embassy, make sure it says that I had nothing to do with it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Thawk rose, an exercise that furthered his resemblance to a heavy sack containing a large assortment number of unwieldy objects. He did not ask Cort to step aside so he could pass through the narrow hallway she occluded, and she was so completely expecting him to say anything else that she had to move in a hurry, just to make room for him before a collision. As he passed, she caught a whiff of him and was reminded of her own unwashed state before leaving this morning: a ghost of the way he smelled now, and an eloquent warning of the future she faced if she did not issue the required apology to the ambassador who controlled her fate.

But with him gone, she glanced back at the child, still huddled in a corner and licking the hands sticky with the food she’d been given. The child saw that she (and yes, despite the biological inexactitude, Cort did have to surrender, more or less permanently, to thinking of it as a she) was being looked at, and her eyes went very wide and very round.

Cort possessed no great love of children. Her own childhood had ended too suddenly and too

violently for her to appreciate the reminder. But she saw the necessity of the moment, and she approached, as unthreateningly as possible, with a smile that might not have communicated any meaning past the difference in the gulf between the girl's facial structure and hers.

"Was that good?" she asked. "Are you still hungry? Would you like some water, maybe?"

The child's response to his was some gabble Cort couldn't understand.

The best Cort could do was keep her tone gentle, her moves measured and easy to track. "It's okay," she said. "No one here wants to hurt you. We're working to get you back with your people as soon as possible. Just stay right there, and I'll be back with some water."

Cort went to the sink, presented her thumb as a draft against the outpost's stringent water allotment, and returned with a tall glass filled to the brim. The child made no move to take it, but flicked a pointed black tongue at the edges of her dilated iris mouth.

"Filtrated for human consumption," Cort said. "Sorry if that makes it tastes a little funny to you."

The girl took the glass and lowered her tongue into the tall glass. The water level descended, not all the way to the bottom, a possible sign that a tall narrow glass was not the best vessel for the species' facial geometry. She still emitted an appreciative coo.

"That's right," Cort said. "Mmm."

Cort's reward was a sudden stinging jolt in her forehead. The girl had just returned the glass by throwing it at her. Resentment came to replace the shock, and she thought something like, *why, you little piece of shit, I'm trying to help you*, before civilization arrived to supplant the resentment, and she found herself thinking, *you poor thing*.

The girl stared at her and started emitting the soft, musical chatter that was her kind's equivalent of laughter.

Pleasure in being naughty? Or something else?

* * *

4.

Half an hour later, Chorin had returned with an adult Grethaiian, who in Cort's mind immediately defaulted to male.

By that point the child had found the cage with the lizard and was staring at it with wide, fascinated eyes: the kind of tropism familiar to the caregivers of children, for smaller living things. It was apparently one of the many things that transcended species, and it provided proof that the child could talk, in that she kept up an intermittent monologue, addressed to the lizard, that appeared to address great issues, and that Cort, with her non-command of the language, could not understand at all.

Cort mentally assigned the newcomer as male only because he was large and imposing, and then immediately flagellated herself for this math. He loomed so large that he had to duck his head to fit inside the habitat. His black gaze performed a brief measurement of Cort and then turned to the child, who immediately abandoned the lizard cage and fled back to her corner under the counter watching the older member of her species with a cautiousness that might have been fear.

"This is Hafecht," Chorin said. "Not the mayor, as I said, but he is the guy the people of Here turn to, whenever important decisions need to be made. It isn't often."

Hafecht uttered a few words in a tongue Cort did not recognize, not as any of the languages she had most often heard from Grethaiians, during her time in the capitol.

Chorin responded with a few words in the same language, that included the accented phrase, spoken as a single word, *Andrea cort*.

Hafecht responded, and once again *andrea cort* leapt out of a train of incomprehensible words.

Cort said, "What's he saying?"

Chorin said, "Their genders don't align—"

"If human terminology doesn't bother them, and I have been assured multiple times that it doesn't, then it doesn't bother me. What's he saying?"

"*He's* saying that he has never been able to discern the relative age of human beings, but

accepts my explanation that you're an immature child who has not yet attained the age of responsibility." A sniff. "Your size helps you there."

Cort was indeed a little on the shortish side for adult women, especially in contrast with the looming Chorin, and had more than once endured the predictable inane comments from louts and dullards who had nothing else to contribute to a conversation. "And the child?"

(Who was once again making herself as small as possible.)

Another exchange ensued.

"Shit," Chorin said.

"What?"

"He says that you should have let the child die."

"Shit," Cort said.

"He says that she is a dangerous undesirable and that no adult of his people will raise a finger to help her. He says that now that you have taken her inside this human place, her fate is on you; that you may not return her to the dust where you found her, because the people of Here will consider it a vast and unforgiveable insult. He has used all of his most vehement words to emphasize this point. In his language, Andrea, when something is said in this precise phrasing, any argument in response is a mortal insult. I wouldn't if I were you."

Cort's cheeks burned. "Is it okay to ask a question?"

"If I think it isn't, I won't translate it for you."

"Ask him if this village makes a habit of abandoning children to be eaten by wild animals."

"I won't put it that way," Chorin said, "but I'll ask the essential question." She chattered a bit, received a response, and shook her head. "You've certainly put us in it."

"What did he say?"

"He said that you dishonor him by asking. His people, like all people, treasure their children as gifts from the universal divine. He considers your implication a grievous insult. But he also says that this only applies to actual children. This creature, here—and the word he uses for *creature* is an actual obscenity, Andrea, the one his people apply to vermin lower than droges—does not count. She is, according to him, not a thing that can be called child. She is . . . a toxin. Your interference, however ignorant, is a major trespass, one you can only atone for by taking responsibility for what you have done, by either making the child your charge for life, despite the misery she will bring you, or abandoning her to a similar predicament where she may meet the end the divine intended."

Cort was not entirely flabbergasted that such a position could be taken against a child. She'd spent much of her childhood being similarly positioned as monster. But the fury rose up in her like an ignited flame. "You've been stationed here for years, right?"

"Too many," Chorin said. "With more to come."

"Have you ever encountered anything like whatever he's talking about?"

"No. What he says about his kind's treatment of their children is true, though. Normally, they dote."

Cort said, "Can you ask the murdering bastard exactly why this child does not qualify as child?"

Chorin relayed the message and passed along the response: "He says she's *Hurak*."

"And what is that? Some ethnic minority targeted for extinction?"

"I've never heard the word before." Chorin listened to a few words of explanation on the part of the Grethai and said, "*That* word, *zhoke*, I know. The closest human premise is *abomination*. It appears to have a religious meaning. He said that the child has no *colka*, and this word I do know; it's the local term for . . . intestines, I believe, though I cannot imagine that he meant this literally. I might be missing a connotation, if not an entire separate meaning for the word."

"But what does it mean? Is the child disabled in some way?"

Another exchange between Chorin and Hafecht. "He just repeated, *ur-colka*. No *colka*. No intestines. I think this might be one of those baseline premises that can't be defined without meaningless repetition."

Cort said, "I bloody presume it impossible that the child has no intestines."

“He didn’t actually say intestines. Grethai have a different collection of digestive organs that between them do the needed job, and intestines are simply the closest human equivalent. For simplicity I translated not just vocabulary but biology.”

“So all right. Let us stick with intestines.”

“It’s close enough,” Chorin agreed. “And no, it’s impossible for this to be literally true. It’s an idiom of some sort, possibly distorted by his low level of education.”

Cort felt a churning in the intestines that she did have. “All right. Ask him where the child comes from, and how she got to be this age, if she can’t be allowed to live. Did she just, I don’t know, just show up one day?”

There was another exchange, Chorin’s question resulting in a lengthy response from the Grethaiian.

Chorin provided the running translation. “She has lived in this village since her birth, the product of a mated pair. I won’t get into the differences between the usual Grethai marriage contract and what they have here—it’s a mated pair, a mommy and daddy, raising it as they would raise any child. . . .” A pause, listening. “The child’s only recently been condemned to abandonment. Maybe two days ago, when they confirmed that it was *zhoke*.” More. “The parents informed the village leaders and ejected the *ur-colka* from their home.”

Cort’s head hurt. “And they won’t let us give her back.”

“Nope. They have washed their hands of her. It looks like you’re her mom, now.”

Cort glanced at the child, who immediately recoiled from her gaze. “Terrific.”

Hafecht uttered a few additional sentences.

Chorin said, “He’s asked if that’s all.”

“Tell him he can drop dead.”

“I won’t say that.” Chorin said *something*, though, and the big Grethaiian placed all three of what it had for hands together, dilated its mouth iris, spoke again for about a minute, and turned to go. Chorin went with him and returned a few seconds later, alone, leaning her oversized frame against the doorframe as she joined Cort in watching the child.

Cort said, “What was that last bit?”

“He said that you are a fool and that you might someday amount to something if you stop interfering with the order of things.”

Cort rubbed her bruised forehead. “That’s my second time in an hour.”

“Like I said, you’ve really put us in it.”

Cort managed to keep the tone of her response down to a mere strong irritation. “Stop saying that. It’s not like I had to worry about what these people would think of me *saving* this *child*.”

“No,” Chorin said. “You didn’t. But you sure as hell did stumble knee-deep into cultural differences, didn’t you?”

“I stopped the kid from being *ea ten*.”

“The desperation of the moment is both understood and conceded. And *now* what are you going to do?”

“I’m open to suggestions.”

Chorin snorted. “You assume that because I spend more time with these people than Thawk does, I know them well enough to offer useful advice.”

“You knew them well enough to find Hafecht.”

“I spent a year of my life at the embassy before taking my swing at Heng. In that time, I made friends among the Grethaiians in the capitol. I honestly like and respect the species, overall. But I knew the ones sophisticated enough to meet me halfway; the diplomatic class. The merchants, the city-dwellers; others I encountered, while traveling the northern continent, even in remote areas. But since being exiled here, I’ve found out that these particular Grethaiians, this bunch of backward assholes living in the Stone Age, are xenophobes who barely tolerate our presence. If I’ve interacted with them at all, it’s only because, unlike Thawk, I can’t spend my whole life within the walls of this compound. I have to go out. I take hikes in the desert. I walk around the town. I occasionally buy things from them, when their markets are open. I help with their little ailments, when I have the opportunity. They tolerate that. But converse with them? This bunch

is effort thrown down a black hole.”

This raised another question. Cort said, “Do we even know that the piece of crap was telling the truth? Is it possible that she’s just lost, and that he’s a malicious pig, dooming the kid for his own entertainment?”

“That would be an act of extraordinary evil.”

“It would be. And can we be sure he isn’t capable of it?”

They both turned to the child, who had during this conversation ventured away from the corner, and a little further away from the center of the room. Evidently, she felt safer with the two women, if only slightly, than she had with the large adult of her own kind, condemning it for a fictional absence of intestines. But now that she saw how attention had turned back to her, she withdrew again. A sound emerged, not quite wailing as during the attack of the droges, but nevertheless an upsetting high-pitched hum, unpleasant to the ear. Fussing, Cort supposed. The kind of sound the young of a species produces, to make not immediately addressing her needs wholly intolerable.

Cort said, “I’m not quite up to consulting the embassy.”

“Neither am I,” Chorin said. “I learned the hard way that even talking to the bastards, at this point, gets penalty time added to my contract. Heng doesn’t even like being reminded of me; I once made the mistake of signing a requisition order instead of waiting for Thawk to get around to it, and she extended my servitude contract by two months. No, I’m up for handling this by ourselves.”

“Both of us?”

“I’m as stuck with this fiasco as you are. Might as well help.”

Cort was unexpectedly touched. “I didn’t expect that.”

“Don’t mistake it for affection,” Chorin said. “I’m just grateful for a change in routine.”

* * *

5.

Chorin left Cort with the child and went to make more inquiries in the village.

Cort was not happy about being relegated to babysitter, but it was a natural division of labor. Between the two of them, Chorin was the one with some command of the local language; Cort was the one who had some claim on the child’s loyalty even if the child did not yet seem inclined to honor it.

So Cort let Chorin go and sat herself on the floor, the child’s level, making herself available as a comforter without doing anything to force the issue, in large part because comforter was a role that never had, and she thought likely never would, come easily to her.

She spoke a little, none of it in any words the child was likely to know. She said a little about knowing what it was like to be little and alone; to be without natural defenses and yet the target of hostile forces, to be forced to see the universe as one giant cutting edge intent on cutting her throat. She said that it was possible for a creature as seemingly without power to discover that she had a strength that would get her through the hard days to come, and she voiced a secret mantra that she had only uttered out loud a few times, that she suspected would be with her all the days of her life: *Happiness is overrated*. She knew that the child possessed no tools to process any of it, but she shared the thoughts and hoped that some got through, if not through language then through the membrane that connects any two thinking beings, in proximity with one another, when their pain was the product of similar wounds.

After a while, the absence of any pressure did a little magic, and the child scuttled across the floor to investigate Cort from a closer distance. It was impossible to tell what the girl was thinking, because her features did not communicate anything to Cort’s alien perspective, but she appeared to have calmed, or at least come to terms with the premise that she was not going to be killed immediately. After a while she said something in the local tongue that Cort did not understand, seemingly a question, and Cort could only utter a few words of apology for not understanding.

Except that maybe, on some level, she did understand.

Cort’s own childhood had ended suddenly, in one night of blood and fire that had ended her

life as innocent young girl and begun a life where most adults she encountered saw her either as a monster or as a problem that they had to solve. This little creature who for reasons that evaded understanding seemed to have been ejected from her own people now faced a future of much the same kind, that could afflict her the way that Cort had been afflicted; that could scar her, the way that Cort had been scarred. She was not human; she was not even a she, except as a vague metaphor to human experience. But the crime seemed much the same.

The child rifled through one of the cabinets, just exploring, and emerged with that most unlikely of all artifacts, a doll that was probably an artifact from the village. It was crude, a thing of twigs and twine, but easy to identify as a simulated child of her kind. She examined it intently and started whacking it against the floor. Pieces flew off. The child cocked her head and emitted that laugh again.

Then she turned to Cort and asked what sounded like a question. After a pause, she added a word. "Ami."

"Ami," Cort repeated. Then she had an epiphany. "Is that your name?"

"Ami," the child hugged itself. "Tosche An-Ami."

"Ami," Cort repeated, with a confirming touch.

"Yahn."

"Andrea Cort," Cort said, with exaggerated care.

The child did not seem to understand.

With no way of knowing whether what she did now was the proper thing, Cort then hugged herself in as close to the child's gesture as she could (which was not extremely close, as she had only the two arms that were not attached to her shoulders in the same way that the child's three were attached to hers). She could only hope that her own effort was close enough for the child to make the logical leap, as she repeated, "An-dre-a Cort."

"Cor-uth," the child said.

"Cort."

"Cor-uth," the child repeated, before drawing still closer, and pulling itself into the basket formed by Andrea Cort's legs. Two of its three legs wrapped themselves around Andrea's shoulders, before it rested its strangely shaped head against Cort's chest. Then she withdrew and said, "La-Szik?"

"I don't know what that means."

The girl dropped the doll, crossed to the lizard cage, and started fiddling with its door.

Cort gently stopped her. "I'm sorry, Ami. I don't know how tame that thing is. I wouldn't want it to bite you."

The child froze, apparently stuck between rebellion and sensible respect for the adult's as-yet-unmeasured tolerance for any flouting of the rules. Then she trembled a bit and sat.

What Cort felt was not affection, not entirely. She had walled herself off from that emotion many years earlier, and while she was willing to entertain the possibility of a future when it could come roaring back in to overflow the dam she had built, her reaction now was more analytical, closer to the model of a detached observer analyzing a phenomenon alien to her.

She experimented with a label recently provided, *zhoke*. What had Chorin said?

The closest human premise is a bomination.

"I'm an abomination," Cort muttered. And it was true. She'd endured some labels very much like that. She'd seen how, once applied, they tended to stick. They had pushed her into a social and professional purgatory, against which only her fierce intelligence had provided means for advancement.

But why had it been applied to this child?

* * *

6.

Chorin returned about ninety minutes later, her clothes plastered to her skin, and her face shiny with sweat. She held off Cort's questions with one upraised finger and went straight to the sink, where she thumbed the usage monitor and took enough out of her water allotment to splash some on her face.

“Hot out there,” she reported, with a tremble. “More than I’m used to, which is saying a lot.”

“Did you learn anything?”

“Well, to start with, the news is all over town.”

Cort said, “Sounds like they’re more responsive to neighborhood gossip than they are to children screaming.”

Chorin looked up from her towel. “That’s the impression I got. It went viral, I guess, though I don’t know whether they signed in to some local hynet network or, more likely, went door to door. I wasn’t welcome anywhere I went, which is nothing new, but a couple did agree to talk to me, and they said pretty much the same thing: that they all knew the child was being left out for droges, and they all considered it righteous and proper that she should be.”

“Because she has no intestines.”

“Yeah. I tried the phrase *ur-colka* with a couple of the Grethaians I spoke to, and they seemed to know what I was talking about, and to think I knew what I was talking about. No one gave me any further explanation, except for various other synonyms for *monster* and *abomination*. The general consensus I ran into is that that you’re a stupid outsider who didn’t know enough to mind her own business, and that the kid’s all your problem, now—except that since I was the one who ran around asking questions, I was clearly in charge and that made her also mine.”

“Nobody would explain anything?”

“I think you’re imagining more extensive conversations than I got. Most of it took place in doorways by Grethaians telling me to go away. The ones who did talk to me were the ones who complained about you, who wondered why we would give positions of authority to feeble-minded children.” Another splash of water on her face, addressed with the towel, and she said, “I can tell you that someone pointed me at the family.”

“What were they like?”

“Not like a couple of fiends reveling in their blessedly empty nest. The family has three other kids, ranging from infancy to the species equivalent of young adult. All three of them joined their parents at the front door and all three looked like they’d been through hell, mourning the sister who’d been put out to die. Mom and Dad, or whatever you want to call them, told us what they thought of stupid off-worlders who didn’t know better than to harass a grieving family on the day it declared one child *Hurak*.”

“Grieving? Really?”

“Throwing their kid out to die isn’t something they seem to take lightly. But neither is it something they’re prepared to reconsider. I kept getting the same words over and over again. Being *Hurak* means you’re *zhoke* and that means you’re *ur-colka*, and all of that is so self-contained that they see throwing the kid out the door as the only possible option. I hope that what we’re facing here is only local. But it’s clear that we won’t find the kid a home anywhere within a stone’s throw of Here.”

“One of the bigger cities, then?”

“What I’m thinking. Stay with the kid. I’m going to reach out to some sources.”

Chorin went away for a bit. She returned reporting that she’d briefed Thawk, somewhat against his will. He hadn’t been coherent enough for any helpful instructions. Since the arrival of the child, the man had done exactly what he’d promised to do, retreated to the state of intoxication that he found preferable to the stark realities of his daily existence; a state that accounted for the majority of his time.

Cort, whose response to stultifying boredom between useful activities also involved the use of narcotics, briefly imagined herself losing all track of time and waking up a moment of clarity to discover that she’d spent years medicating her intellect to silence. This was more plausible an image of her own possible future than Cort wanted to admit, and it could still be her fate, if the powers that be saw no advantage in ending her professional exile. The knowledge hit her like a harsh, cold wind, so much so that she had trouble bringing her attention back to the here and now when Chorin said, “I got on the hynet and looked up those words, in a Grethaiian medical database. It was a long shot, given that the people here speak an obscure dialect with little similarity to any tongue I know of, and I didn’t get much that added to our general store of data.

Zhoke has a more theological connotation than I'd picked up; it's closer to *demon*, really. *Hurka* I couldn't find at all. *Ur-colka ...*"

She shook her head.

Cort said, "No intestines."

"Again, it has to be an idiom of some kind. There is a once-common birth defect, rarer now, where the child has an underdeveloped digestive system, down to absolute absence, and that is what the compound word means, when taken literally. But anyone who actually has that is probably dead or seriously disabled, and neither of the two is true of this kid. We're going to have to find some more sophisticated expert to explain this to us in terms we can understand. Which I've also researched."

"You've been busy," Cort said. "You didn't need me at all."

"Not true; I needed you to cause the bloody problem in the first place. There, you've shown a genuine excess of talent. I've filed a travel plan with the embassy. Didn't tell them what was going on. I categorized it under recreation, so they won't ask any questions."

Cort said, "They might be upset at both of us abandoning the outpost at the same time. More so in my case. I just got here."

"If the assholes thought that either one of us had any duties worth mentioning, we might have some explaining to do. As it is, I can say I ordered you to escort me. At the very worst you'll just have some additional groveling to do, whenever you make up your mind to help yourself."

This accrued to Cort's general bad mood, unusual even if a lifetime where bad moods were her default; but she had to admit that it was the smallest thing she had to worry about right now. "What about the Grethaians?"

"I've found someone in power to talk to us. Go pack clothes for a couple of days and meet me back here."

Cort returned to the quarters assigned to her, threw some clothes and contraband weaponry in a satchel, and put on a fresh black suit unsullied by the layer of dust she'd picked up during her eventful afternoon walk. She did not neglect to throw in enough buzzpatches to get her through the trip.

When she returned, she saw that Chorin had donned a shiny white outfit that appeared to contain star-fields, accessorized by a nasty two-pronged golden dagger that she wore at her hip. It was, she explained, the preferred professional wear of her caste, on the world she came from. "Servants," she said, with distaste, adding, "not that it was the work we did." No explanation for the remark seemed immediately forthcoming. She had also packed her medical bag, which was mostly a cryfoam tank, a nanite gun, and a few isolated rolls of infused buzzpatches: probably as reserved for personal use as Cort's own collection.

By now the child seemed to be a little more comfortable with the two women and did not recoil with anything near her prior vehemence when Chorin told her, in her own language, that they were going to take a little trip now. They had no trouble coaxing her into the installation's one skimmer, a vehicle that had been collecting dust for so long that their ascent released a veritable curtain of it as it rose from its home tucked within the compound's multiple habitats.

Ami plopped herself down at the bulkhead and, gripping the rim with two of her three arms, chattered at the receding landscape with the level of fascination capable of banishing fear.

Cort asked, "What did she say?"

"That this is her first time in a flying machine." Another few words from the child. "Her first time away from Here, in fact. She's asking all the questions you would expect."

"She's gone pretty verbal all of a sudden."

"She's at the stage of life where trauma lasts only until something sufficiently shiny arrives to replace it."

"I'm not exactly an expert in how long Grethaians take to develop."

"Another thing you're not an expert at," Chorin said. "She's about where a four-year-old human being would be. Still dependent on adults, but capable of simple conversations. And, before you ask, *with* the structures her kind uses for intestines."

Cort said, "Is she up to answering some questions about what her people have against her?"

Chorin said, “I might have to, but for the moment I’d rather not ask why her parents threw her out like garbage and why the people of her village think she’s a piece of excrement who deserves to die. Let her have the novelty of the journey. It might keep her calm until we get where we’re going.”

The skimmer achieved altitude, found a point on the horizon, and began its flight in the direction of the harshest expanse of Here’s desert. As they left the little speck on the map behind, the view became that of an endless expanse of dirt, flat in the regions closest to Here, more mountainous toward the east.

Chorin spoke a little about the geography, about how the heights ultimately grew high enough to function as a weather brake, blocking rain of any kind from leaving the comparatively wet region on the other side. There, she said, is where the caravans of old had come from, bringing goods from a region rich in resources, to those of Here and beyond, a great distance by the standard of pack animals. “And that,” she said, ultimately, “is more than you wanted to know.”

It had indeed been more than Cort had wanted to know, but she’d learned early in her education that she should never object to any offer of information, because there was no way to tell, in advance, what would be relevant and what would not. This went beyond the mere accumulation of data, and so she looked closer when Chorin’s recitation of fact petered out, for the personal side that human beings only let slip when they’re not actively trying to communicate. She saw a loneliness in the other woman, tinged with anger and regret; and more, absolute uncertainty whether she should have gotten involved in this politically sensitive situation.

Cort said, “A question.”

“Please don’t ask me what problem I have with you. I have problems with everybody.”

“That’s not the question. It’s just that—you always had access to this skimmer. The ability to set your own schedule.”

“Yes.”

“So you didn’t have to spend all your days cooped up with a creature like Thawk, did you?”

“No. My punishment, like yours, was packaged as a reassignment, not a prison stint.”

“So you could have flown to Si-Jan, or any other center of Grethaiian civilization, whenever you wanted. Seen something of this world, smelled something other than a man who’s almost given up bathing. Had some fun.”

Chorin’s gaze went level. “You think you’re telling me something I don’t know?”

“If you prefer, characterize it as ‘asking.’”

A nod, with Chorin looking suddenly very old and very tired. “I had my share of adventures, the first couple of years here, on the seven or so days per thirty when I haven’t been obligated to perform the physical maintenance Thawk is too much of a wreck to do. The problem is that it’s still exile, if not to a specific place I was denied from living, then from other human beings. Thanks to Heng, nobody at the embassy will associate with me. Take them away, and all I have left are places like Si-Jan and the other Grethaiian cities, which have a terrible exchange rate even if they had anything I wanted to spend money on. Anything I do spend outside my expense allotment is an advance that accrues to my time-debt, meaning I’ll be stuck on career-length punishment details even longer. Better to keep my head down and do my time. A lesson you’d better learn soon, if you really intend to keep inflating your debt with the fines for diplomatic incidents.”

Cort said, “Debt doesn’t make a difference for me. I’m indentured for life.”

“For life? Does the Corps even have such a thing?”

“They have it with me, at least.”

“That really stinks, Andrea.”

“I wasn’t given a choice.”

“Juje, even I only signed up for fifteen years. Got that much because the world I came from was an industrial hell, and the Corps knew how desperate potential recruits were to leave. Got an additional five years tacked on when I had my little incident, but . . . that only makes twenty, and if I keep my head down, I’ll be out in another seven. But life? What are you working for, if

not the P and P?”

P and P was Dip Corps slang for the rewards that awaited those who paid off their debt: a pension and free passage to anywhere within the Confederacy.

“A third P,” Cort said. “Protection.”

“How’s that?”

“Diplomatic Immunity. Freedom from extradition.”

“To where?”

“To one of several places that want me.”

Chorin regarded her with outright awe. “Whatever it was, kid, you sure started early.”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“I don’t suppose you’re eager to share what you did.”

“I’ll tell you about me in exchange for hearing everything about you.”

“For that, I’d have to be in a special self-lacerating mood.”

Cort replied, “Well, who knows. That might happen.”

Ami, who had still been peering at the landscape far below, chose this moment to approach the two human women and ask a question of Chorin. Chorin replied in the same tongue, the child asked another question, and Chorin spoke more sharply. The child retreated as if chastened.

Cort said, “What did she say?”

“She asked me what would happen to someone who fell from this height.”

Flight had to be a fascinating new phenomenon to a child who had been raised on flat ground and never ridden in a vehicle capable of leaving the ground. Cort could only imagine. She asked, “What did you say?”

“I told her the truth: that they would die.”

“What did she say then?”

“She asked if I’d ever seen it.”

“And you said?”

“That I had. And that I did not wish to talk about it.”

* * *

7.

Their destination was not Si-Jan, the home of their embassy and a glittering showcase city in a cooler region to the north.

Instead, Chorin flew the skimmer to another metropolis carved out of the region beyond the mountains, where the land leveled and became a basin dominated by rain forest.

Veshac, built on the mouth of a great orange river that carried its special tint from the mud of the heights and through its great snaky path to the sea, was older than Si-Jan. That city was a showplace for its world, the center of its economic ambitions and a vivid display of how well it prospered in interspecies commerce. This one was more authentic as a representative of its planetary past, and thus still possessed of much of the character the civilization had developed before the Grethai’s development of space flight: which was to say, fewer glass towers, more structures designed along Grethaiian lines, more slanted roofs designed to channel the daily torrential rainfall into the gutters that delivered it back to the river and sea. It was a place where the afternoon clouds brought the dark of night before the setting of the sun did, and where every structure bristled with the fast-growing barbed vines that, without judicious pruning, would have swiftly choked this aspect of civilization beneath a blanket of orange overgrowth.

Cort did not know why Chorin would have picked this city out of so many, as a place to seek some resolution to their problem. Perhaps it was simply a place, one of many where a solution could be found, and one that offered the additional advantage of short travel time.

Either way, they swung low over the city’s squat buildings before heading to the rural outskirts and to one specific walled compound in the hills.

It was an estate of significant size, occupying multiple hilltops, with enough low buildings sufficient to house a population of a couple of hundred in comfort, and open fields set up for recreation and exercise.

They flew low over the campus and received the awe of a few score Grethaiian children racing across a pitch in some kind of athletic contest. The cheers were audible from the air. They did not sound like human cheers, but the excitement and joy remained palpable. Some things just translate, even without words, and Cort felt a stab of sadness, for the lost childhood when she had known such things.

It was an orphanage, Chorin explained as she searched for a landing place, one that worked differently than the traditional human model. Here, she said, homeless or orphaned children didn't just wait for interested parents to offer themselves as caregivers; they stayed for a little over a year to have their personality and their needs evaluated, and were then put in the queue to be handed to some responsible adult. It was how the adults were chosen that contrasted with the usual human model. Here, it was a draft. Worldwide, any adult Grethaiian could be living a prosperous and carefree life only to receive word that it had been judged the perfect parent for a specific child in need, whose requirements only they could meet. This was not something that the adult would have a right to argue about, or even question, and the practice was so well established that few would think of evading the call of duty. Refusal delivered a stigma capable of destroying lives, as with the widespread human loathing of those showing cowardice in wartime.

Cort shuddered. "I'd be afraid of children winding up in homes that didn't want them."

"That happens in many human adoption models. At least here, there's no advantage given to those who might have only stepped up because they want somebody to abuse. Here, it's the system in charge of deciding who gets the call."

"Pregnancy by decree," Cort said.

"Something like that. It's a different approach to the problem, and this is their world, so I can't second-guess it. It means that if we're lucky, this kid," Chorin said, indicating little Ami with a gesture, "won't have to wait very long until they find a home for her."

Chorin landed the skimmer in an orange field outside the compound, and they disembarked, the two humans helping Ami to climb down and leading her down a path of paving stones to a security gate where two large Grethaiians sat in a booth, acting as guards. The two had received advance warning of the imminent arrival of human beings, but were not Grethaiians who had experienced much in the way of contact with their planet's current small population of human visitors, and their welcome was defined by their curious stares. They spoke an accented version of the tongue most widely spoken in Si-Jan and were able to have an exchange with Chorin that Cort was almost capable of understanding.

"They're calling somebody," Chorin translated.

Ami drew close to Cort and hid behind her, using her as protective shield from the attention of the guards. It was not, Cort sensed, that the guards were threatening at all. As far as she could tell, with her limited understanding of Grethaiian body language, the two did everything they could to establish how welcoming they would appear to be in the eyes of the child: they made no sudden moves, and they displayed empty hands. But Ami continued to hide. Cort could only wish that she was perceptive enough to understand whether this was normal childhood shyness, or a manifestation of recent trauma. But her own experience with children, for the last few years, had been so limited that she might not have been able to tell with a human child, let alone this alien one.

A new figure approached the gate. This one was slight by the standard of her species, and bearing on its face the pinkish marks that were a key indicator of advancing age. Cort's default identification of type was *old woman*, a judgment that seemed close enough when she used a soft feminine whisper to greet Cort and Chorin in formal Mercantile.

"Good day to you," the newcomer said.

Her voice was gentle and soothing, as sometimes happens to creatures who spend much of their lives dealing with children, the quality becoming innate and a default audible even in exchanges with adults.

Chorin replied, "And to you. I'm impressed with your command of the language."

"I am so pleased to hear that. I once sought out a career in diplomatic circles and went to a

school where I also learned tongues common to the Bursteeni and the Tchi. Life delivered its usual surprises, and I went into education instead. You happen to be my first human beings not glimpsed at a distance, and so I am pleased to hear that I am still capable of making myself understood in your language. I am Hathia Si-Kan, the Ring Maternal of this Facility.”

“I’m Esa Chorin. This is Counselor-In-Training Andrea Cort. We believe this child’s name is Ami.”

“Let us find out for sure.” Hathia passed a few words to the child, who was both clinging to, and hiding behind, Andrea Cort. After a break exchange, Hathia reported, “She is indeed Ami. An unusual name. Where did you find her?”

“Cort here rescued her from a pack of droges.”

The Ring Maternal’s arms fluttered in a manner that communicated volumes past any barriers that must have existed, between her kind’s body language and that of human beings. “That must have been frightening. For both child and adult.”

“It was,” Cort said.

“You are blessed then, as are all who offer protection to children. I presume that you administered some medical assistance as well.”

“That was me,” Chorin said.

“Do not take offense when I make my own examination. It is not that I don’t trust your intentions, but you are from another world and cannot be practiced—”

“No offense taken.”

The Ring Maternal knelt to examine Ami. She tilted her head a little and allowed her eyelids to sink to half-mast, but aside from the impression of kindness, it remained impossible to see what she was thinking or feeling. She still seemed solicitous enough, and she must have exhibited the cues that put Grethaiian children at ease, because Ami stopped using Cort as shield and began regarding the Ring Maternal with a level of attention that was if not acceptance then at least willingness to engage.

Hathia said, “She is very beautiful.”

“We know.”

The caregiver made an amused sound so much like human laughter that it must have been another sound she’d learned, to express her kind’s form of amusement to any human beings she encountered. “You are very kind, Andreacort. I am of course aware that your kind’s standards of beauty are very different than our own, and that you praise the child for this quality because you wish to respect the common pretense that the children of all species are beautiful. The response is appreciated, but I take it as the kindly pretense it is. I only tell you that she is lovely by our own standards, an appealing child in our own eyes. She shows every sign of having been raised by a caring and attentive family, and of having been treated with kindness for her short period under your own protection. Tell me, has she said anything that might help us find her parents?”

Chorin said, “We’ve spoken to her family. They have no interest in taking her back.”

“How horrifying. Have they offered any explanation?”

Chorin said, “We were told that she had no . . . digestive organs.”

If either Chorin or Cort expected the Ring Material to rear back in horror and reject Ami as totally as the residents of her own small village, that reaction did not materialize. Instead, Hathia seemed downright confused. “. . . that is clearly nonsense.”

“It doesn’t mean anything to you?”

“I have no idea why anybody would make such a ridiculous claim. Did they tell you anything else?”

“That she was *zhoke*.”

“A curse word, one that I could easily apply in anger to a heavy tool I have dropped on my foot. Was there anything else?”

“They called her *hurka*.”

It was a warm and sunny day, not oppressively hot in the way the desert had been but here, many hundreds of kilometers away, warm and humid and tinged with the perfume of

the surrounding rain forest. But the friendly welcome the Ring Maternal had given them now seemed like an artifact frozen in amber. “*Hurka*. That’s . . . also not a word.”

Cort’s life had given her an innate skill at detecting lies, and she found to her surprise that she could sense one even in the demeanor of this creature with no human tells. “It means something to you.”

“It is like this idea of absent digestive organs: nonsense.”

Cort pressed. “But it *does* mean something to you.”

“You have raised a possible cause for concern and something that needs to be investigated. I will not neglect my responsibilities toward this child just because of an allegation I have no reason to trust.”

And yet it seemed to Cort that the Ring Maternal was now subconsciously placing excess distance between herself and the little girl—that among the emotions that drove the caretaker of children right now was fear. She almost said, *to hell with you, then. We’ll find some other place for her.* But she was still young, still a Dip Corps trainee doing a few months of apprenticeship in between sessions at the University of New London, and she had fallen into a role subordinate to that of Esa Chorin, who knew more about this world and its people and seemed better equipped to navigate what threatened to become an uncomfortable diplomatic incident. She did something she might not have done, with more confidence in her own judgment. She deferred to her superior.

Chorin said, “What do you suggest?”

“I will take her. I commit to this evening alone with her, which will be time enough for me to investigate the . . . nonsense. You will need to find lodging in the city. This is not Si-Jan, as far as amenities for off-worlders is concerned, but there are a few places here that can accommodate human beings, where you will be comfortable enough, for one night. Seek out one of those and return in the morning, when I’ll be able to tell you whether this facility will be able to accept her.”

Cort said, “I still get the idea you’re not telling us everything.”

“I have made you no promises. I have offered you no commitments. I have not claimed any expertise based on what I have seen so far. I can only tell you that I will give the child an exhaustive evaluation and meet with you in the morning.”

Cort and Chorin exchanged unhappy looks. Chorin muttered a few words in a language unknown to her, and the Ring Maternal responded. Then Chorin said,

“Will you see to her safety?”

Hathia said, “I will take all possible care of her until we meet again.” She turned to Andrea and said, “Andreacort: I have said that you two are my first human beings not glimpsed at a distance. I therefore ask you to answer what might among your kind sound like an idiotic question. I have trouble telling. I can see what Chorin is, but which of your kind’s two genders are you?”

“There are more than two,” Cort replied. “I’m female.”

“Fascinating. That is the one that produces eggs?”

“Yes.”

“I produce eggs too. But then that is true of both genders of my own species. I’m aware that the perception of your kind is distorted by your own experience, as I suppose is true of my perceptions and the experience of my own. So forgive me if I ask: Do you classify me as female, as well?”

“For mental convenience, yes. I am aware that it is an imperfect translation.”

“Yes,” Hathia said, “but one that, in the limited case of myself, is likely closest to what commonalities we have. I am of the gender you might simplify as more likely to take up the responsibilities of early child-rearing. I suppose that this makes me a *woman* in your eyes, or at least *closer* to that human classification. It is no insult, and I can bear your definitions as a matter of honor. It is indeed something I prize, in my nature. Will you accept, by that measurement, that I will conduct my investigation in full accordance with this caring quality we share? That I will protect this child while she is in my care?”

“Yes,” Andrea Cort said. “I will.”

“Then I thank you, and we will make arrangements.”

What followed over the next few minutes was the arrangement of an early-morning appointment, a short exchange of information over places where a human being could find shelter in the city, and that interval in which a child realizes that it is being passed from the custody of one adult to another and is not willing to consent to that handover. Ami tried to get back to Cort, only to have her way refused; and then she was handed over to the Ring Maternal, whose protection she did not want. Protests became wails.

Cort had already learned during the droge attack that the cries of the immature Grethaian were uncannily close to those to the immature human being. Here, she learned it again, and she had to summon an inhuman chill just to walk away while those screams persisted, screams so similar to those that had ended her own childhood, to the screams that she had herself made. Not turning around, not answering Ami’s call, was as difficult as anything she had ever done, and it left her stone-faced and trembling by the time she was back in the skimmer, trying not to look at a Chorin who was trying not to look at her.

“Shit,” said Cort.

“You have no idea,” said Chorin. After a moment, she said, “Big deal the Ring Maternal made about you being a woman. Do you think that means she thought I was a man?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. You are taller.”

“Yeah,” said Chorin, who did not seem all that happy about it.

* * *

8.

Despite Hathia’s doubts, the city known as Veshac did have enough traffic from off-worlders to support accommodations that could be customized to human standards of comfort. What Cort and Chorin found was a place with suites with environmental controls that could be adjusted by over fifty metrics ranging from preferred temperature and humidity levels, to more exacting conditions like air pressure, trace elements, and background odors.

The bed was among the customizable elements and just raising a soft platform to a meter above floor level, and arranging for it to be parallel to floor level and not some angle that could have caused injury, was a process sufficiently irritating that Cort and Chorin were less than exacting when it came to fabricating the blankets, an oversight that resulted in them deciding not to use the scratchy, ill-smelling mats that first emerged from the dispenser.

By the time they got the temperature and humidity down to levels they could stand, the awfulness of the process had made them punchy, and they ended up intoxicated on buzzpatches while experimenting with weird light spectra.

After dinner—tasteless travel rations they’d brought from the outpost, more fuel than meal—they went further and activated one of the room’s odder features, a subliminal sonic throb that for a time neither one was sure had been successfully turned on, but which after a while seemed to synch with the buzz and the synched light and did what it was intended to do, make them both feel pleasantly tired and stupid, not to mention horny.

They spent some time talking about their shared nemesis Ambassador Heng. Then they shared the low points of their respective shittiest assignments in the Corps, a range of experiences that was limited to Grethai in Cort’s case but in Chorin’s produced a delightfully nasty series of anecdotes about the sixteen months she’d spent on a frozen hellhole where the temperatures had required frequent replacement of blackened toes. Chorin’s apparent long history of telling this story had honed her account into an epic saga of escalating punchlines, and this in conjunction to Cort’s medicated state was enough to reduce her to helpless, resentful giggles, and this descended to a series of intermittent snorts that ended with the two of them, by then curled into opposing parentheses, regarding one another in uncomfortable silence.

Cort half-expected Chorin to kiss her. She found that she wanted it, and this did not disturb her all that much, even if it had taken the buzzpop to tear down the barriers she usually put up. She told herself that she saw the complementary feeling in this older woman whose damage mirrored her own, and for a few seconds she lay there, lost in that gaze, anticipating.

Then Chorin said, “You know, you’re not so horrible.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s not a compliment, necessarily. Just an observation. Advance word was that you were some kind of maniac. But you’re not so horrible.”

Andrea Cort grimaced, because she had lowered her defenses long enough to expect a compliment and had been hoping for one. “All right.”

“You belong to that class of human beings who think their own baggage is the worst in the whole universe. I bet you think you have a grand tragic backstory and that if you shared it, I would find it a big pile of crap.”

“I bet you wouldn’t.”

“You imagine yourself the keeper of your own epic, then?”

“It’s not imagination, unfortunately.”

“So how bad was it?”

This kind of question was common among the indentured of the Dip Corps, most of whom had joined only because they’d come from worlds that offered no other way of leaving. How irritating Cort found it, that what she’d thought was imminent was now pushed back by the boring need for flagellating self-revelation. She hoped that Chorin would take the hint when she provided the most minimal response possible. “Bad.”

“You’ve said that you depend on your diplomatic immunity. Your freedom from extradition.”

“Yes.”

“I bet you must think you’re some kind of monster.”

Chorin’s questions had entered the realm of knowing mockery, something Cort had known more than her share of and was no longer willing to tolerate. “Do we really need to have this conversation?”

But the other woman was not finished. “It has something to do with children, I guess. The way you look at little Ami.”

“How do I look at little Ami?”

“Like you think saving her is your ladder out of hell.”

The buzzpop had left Cort so languid that she was able to contemplate several responses, from the curt to the enraged, at sleepy leisure. By the time she’d come up with one, her usual default anger seemed too much effort. “What about you, Esa? Where’s your ladder?”

“I think I’ve set mine on fire long ago.”

“You must have really irritated Heng.”

“I damned myself before I ever left my homeworld. That was someplace genuinely evil, Andrea; and I bet if we did a comparison, point by point, my details would overwhelm yours, by a factor of ten.”

“Most people come from evil, Esa. It’s not that unusual.”

“I’m not talking about ordinary corruption, or everyday greed of the sort that turns so many human societies into hellholes. I’m talking about actual bloody evil. The worst. That’s what I came from. That’s what I was raised in. It’s in my blood.”

The words would seem to be the product of an uncontrolled emotional release, but Chorin’s tone remained level. There were no obvious markers of trauma or pain, just the cold admission, coming from a face that had looked sleepy only a few minutes before.

Cort sensed danger ahead and did her best to head it off. “You don’t have to tell me, if you don’t want to.”

“You mean it would be easier on you if I didn’t tell you. But you need a reality check about just how petty and pathetic your particular pile of crap is, and I’m just buzzed enough to talk about mine without screaming.” She met Cort’s look with a gaze that was cold and gray but not especially furious, one appropriate for confidences that were about to be shared without special histrionics. “It was a poor place, overall. We had all the usual human problems: an upside-down economy, a ravaged environment, the usual assortment of people over *here* who were upset that the people over *there* weren’t suffering enough . . . the kind of society that fits into the category of civilization but has spent a couple of centuries being ruled by people who didn’t *care* about any of the purported benefits of civilization.

“At the local level, that meant constant fighting over scraps. That meant families organized into gangs.

“I grew up in those of those gangs, Andrea. And where I came from, that meant I was trained in the family business early. You want to know what our specialty was?”

Cort had one of those terrible moments of supreme disconnect all people have experienced, when their soft focus on another human being pulls out, and is replaced by a full reminder of the stage: in this case, the bed, the vaguely floral aroma that she and Chorin had left as a default flavor to the air, and that low subliminal throb, here purposed as the dramatic drumbeat before something awful is said.

“Kidnapping,” Chorin said.

“Esa.”

“It’s not all that uncommon, in societies experiencing social turmoil. Kidnapping becomes quite the industry. Put enough poor people in proximity with extraordinary wealth and power and it becomes inevitable, even common. An industry. We weren’t even the only family that made a go at it.”

“You don’t need to tell me about this, Esa.”

“No,” Chorin said. “I want to tell you about it.”

She took a deep breath, and continued.

* * *

9.

“Kidnapping.

“It was the family trade.

“We had a real assembly-line approach. We took people from their homes and from their vehicles and from those moments in their daily routines when they weren’t careful enough to avoid us.

“And then we dragged them back, not to where we lived, but to a special underground place we had access to, where we kept them prisoner for days or weeks or even months, all while negotiating with the people who could pay for their return.

“It was an understood part of the local economy, Andrea, and most of the time it was okay, a little inconvenience for the people we took, and a lifeline for us.

“But you have to understand that for it to work we had to threaten to hurt these people, to make paying us important, to make it something no one who cared about our victims would ever refuse to do, and one of the things we threatened, one of the things my mother and father and aunts and uncles threatened, one of the things we did, when it was not enough to say we would slice off fingers or ears, things that made our guest suffer but that medical science could fix once they were returned home, was use this device we had, to inflict targeted brain damage.

“I had a cousin named Shedo. Big burly bear of a man, nice guy, gave me horsey rides when I was a toddler; helped me with my homework, when he was in school. In the family, one of the best people I ever knew.

“He was the best at using the machine.

“It was stolen Magrison tech, left over from the nightmarish days of his cult and from the release of the terrible Fugue. I won’t get into how we got our hands on it, but it sure as hell made us feared.

“Shedo was a genuine artist at it, my father said. He could take away recent memories, which was useful in that our guests could offer no testimony about us. But sometimes circumstances forced him to demonstrate what else we were willing to do, what our targets had to be willing to pay to prevent.

“So he would take away a year, or a decade.

“He would make husbands forget their wives, mothers forget their children, children forget their parents. He would turn scholars into imbeciles. He could reduce strong people to infancy. Everything he did was permanent, and if families didn’t pay, if we became absolutely sure they wouldn’t pay, he would make sure that the people we’d taken were returned as empty

shells, missing so much that they would have to be cared for by mechs, for the rest of their lives.
 “That’s what I came from, Andrea—and to me it was perfectly normal, because I was raised to it. It made sense to me. Do you understand?”

—No, don’t interrupt. I’m not done.

“What you need to know is that I didn’t use the Corps to escape that life until I hit seventeen. I did it only because my family had overreached by taking somebody we never should have taken, somebody whose family was far more dangerous than us. We were threatened with consequences that promised imminent slaughter.

“I was not superior to my environment. I left out of self-preservation, not moral revulsion. But I had been a participant for years. When I was very small it was my job to be the companion to every child we took. I was the kid who lied to them and said I was a prisoner too, who made them feel less alone. I had friends who were captives for a month or two or in case for a couple of years.

“And it was okay, Andrea, because I had company and my own presence kept them happy and healthy, and there was absolutely no risk to me because memories of me were the first thing that got taken away, whenever they were returned to their families. I never had any friends who would remember me after the last time they said goodbye, not once in the first twelve years of my life.

“And then I hit twelve and another big decision got made: that it was time for me to learn my position in the family trade. It didn’t take all that long for Shedo to teach me how to use the machine, and by age fourteen on, I was able to handle it all by myself. I carved away at people, sometimes just their memories of captivity, and sometimes more. Sometimes a lot more. There was one kid. There was the one kid, one I liked, who.”

Chorin did not finish the sentence. She just fluttered her eyes, like someone waking from a difficult dream who must now take in the shape of the solid world and remember that it is the reality where she must now live.

“That one kid,” she said. “Who I liked. Who it was my mission to destroy.”

“And did you?”

“I emptied him, Andrea. I made a creature who saw no universe around him, who cared for nothing but being left alone, in a dark room where he could see no other human beings.”

Not one word of her confession had expressed any regret or grief. If it existed, it existed behind the happy fog of the euphorics.

Cort was not completely spared her own revulsion, but it, too, was a distant, theoretical thing, lurking behind a filter of default wellbeing.

She did manage to ask, “Why would you tell me that story?”

“Because it was normal to me, then. Because it was the alien thinking I grew up with. I didn’t see any of it with what I would now call clarity, and if I now feel differently, it’s because I’ve been to other worlds, and I can now see through other eyes. It’s not that I’m a better person. Trust me; I’m inside this skin and can tell you I’m not. It’s just that my *reality* is different. All of it.”

“And?”

“And,” Chorin said, “aside from dealing with a trainee who thinks her own brand of awfulness puts her in a different class of awfulness than everybody else, I can’t escape what kind of reality would lead people who love their children to let one like Ami die in the street.

“These aren’t savages. They aren’t buffoons, or idiots. They’re a civilized race, who like us spent thousands of years working out all of the same ethical problems we had to, often got them wrong, sometimes got them right, ultimately put together a collection of answers that worked for them long enough to get them to the point where they could trade with the stars. It’s more than possible that we just encountered a local evil. But it’s also possible that we don’t have the slightest idea for what’s going on here. That we haven’t asked the right question yet. Or gotten the right answer. Or properly applied the way we’re screwed up to the way they are.”

She stopped abruptly, her gaze searching Cort’s for some answer that, even if available, remained lost to her. Cort, who had a habit of subjecting others to the same level of scrutiny,

could only think that she had never, until now, seen another human being even more adrift than herself, one who presented a more concrete warning to the future that she might be damned to, if she did not find a way out of the isolation that her past had dictated for her. The problem was there. But she did not know what to do about it.

After a bit, Chorin said, "We'll find out, I suppose." And did not speak another word that night.

* * *

10.

They woke to a gloriously sunny day that reeked of the region's rain-forest perfumes. Cort remarked upon the especially strong aroma this morning, and Chorin muttered some words about the perfume always being strongest in the morning, but that was all they had in the way of conversation. Her volubility of the night before had vanished, and she appeared to be a foul mood, perhaps because she'd said things about herself that she did not want to say and perhaps because she had gone back to resenting what responsibility she and Cort now shared for Ami's fate.

In another mood, she might have asked Chorin if she was all right, but she was still processing the other woman's confessional of the night before, and wondering how to respond.

Somehow, to a woman whose own legal status as "war criminal," moral revulsion for another seemed too simple.

How, she wondered, do you earn back the right to take the moral high ground, when you've committed acts beyond redemption, yourself? Is it even possible?

Even before being sent to Grethai, Cort had already begun to sense that these were questions that might consume her life, if she let them, and the morning's saturation in them kept her under a cloud as the two of them flew back to the Ring Maternal's orphanage.

Then Chorin set the skimmer down, and said, "Stay here."

Cort had been gathering her satchel. "You don't want me to go in with you?"

"If you need a reason, it's because I speak the language."

"Hathia spoke Mercantile," Cort objected. "I had no problem communicating with her."

"Yes, and what I have to say to her, I'm not going to trust to Mercantile."

As a superior, Chorin had the right to sideline Cort if she wanted to, but this action and the anger behind it seemed to come out of nowhere.

"Why?"

"Because I bloody say so. Stay here and count lizards, or something."

Chorin hopped out of the skimmer and stormed toward the care facility's front gate. What Cort sensed in the firm set of those shoulders was an anger deeper than the situation seemed to warrant, a coldness that matched what Cort had perceived from her the first couple of days in Hawk's outpost, before the distance was complicated by the presence of an endangered child.

It was for Cort suddenly not difficult to imagine Chorin as the child raised in a depraved family enterprise, and maybe that was the point. Maybe Chorin had revealed more the previous night than she could endure in the light of morning. And maybe Chorin had simply reminded *herself* of who she was, in one of those terrible moments of self-discovery that Cort knew so well.

The thought led to bad memories and kept her subdued in the muggy sunlight, for so much time that she did actually spend some of it watching the little six-legged lizards that darted to and fro in the grass. Their lives appeared to be simple; just motion, without self-examination, and Cort fell into a brown study, envying them.

Then she spotted Chorin returning, with a delegation that included the Ring Maternal and the Child. It also included two large Grethaians wearing the same uniforms as the pair who had guarded the facility's front gate yesterday; perhaps even the same two, and perhaps not, a detail Cort could not confirm, one way or the other. The Ring Maternal held one of Ami's hands, while Ami used the two that remained to clutch an ornate little box. There was nothing about their connection that reflected anything but a child under the careful supervision of an adult; certainly, there was nothing about Ami's attention to her new possession that reflected the fear

of a child whose fate remained an open question. But the overall mood among the Grethaians seemed subdued, and almost grim.

Chorin wore a grimace of disgust. "We're leaving."

"With the child?"

"Yes. With the child. I wouldn't leave her with them, even if they wanted her."

"Why not?"

"Because they're vicious assholes, like the pack back at the village. I don't want to talk about it."

She hauled herself into the skimmer and secreted herself at the control panel, a silly place that existed even though the vessel was perfectly capable of piloting itself, and was in many cases only useful as an excuse for the nominal pilot to turn her back on any other conversation taking place behind her. To Andrea Cort's eyes it was a clear tantrum, part of whatever had been nibbling on the other woman's ass all day, and it made no immediate sense to her, not with Ami still in the Ring Maternal's custody.

The Ring Maternal stopped beside the vehicle, still clutching Ami by one hand. She said, "Will you take her, Andreacort?"

Cort reached out for Ami, and the child held out two of her arms, to assist in the lift, while continuing to hold that little wooden box close to her chest with the third. It was a moment when the undertones of trust and responsibility and the possibility of love were mixed in underneath, along with other things that Cort could not understand, that might have been strictly alien and might have been odd only when associated with herself, a broken creature who could expect few of them. Either way, Ami disengaged as soon as she was aboard and retreated to an alcove partially obscured by an obstruction where the vehicle's propulsion system intruded into the passenger space, in order to kneel there and focus her attention on her new possession.

Cort spotted the Ring Maternal trying to get her attention. The impression this made was that she was trying to impart some remaining words even though Chorin was no longer willing to listen to them. Cort went to her.

The caregiver said, "I understand your confusion, Andreacort. But there was nothing you could do, and nothing I could do, that would enable this facility to provide a bed for the child."

Cort said, "Why not?"

"Because a community of children is like a community of adults. It is only as secure as the damage that can be done by its most troublesome individual. What Ami has, what our examination has confirmed she has, a cruel condition, falls outside our limited powers. But this is a large world, with a few smaller facilities that have been put aside for the care of her kind, and so I have contacted one on her behalf. I can promise you Ami will survive an acceptable lifespan there."

"Yeah," Chorin said, from a distance. "Acceptable."

It was impossible to escape the implied bitterness.

Ignoring her, the Ring Maternal said, "I repeat an offer I made to your companion. If you wish, I'll come with you. I am of this world. I am of my people. I may have a stronger grasp of the challenges in play, and if you approach the other facility I recommended, I will be most useful at communicating—"

Chorin said, "No, thank you."

She had spoken with her back to the Ring Maternal, with a visible reluctance to even look at her that bordered the edges of revulsion.

Though the alien architecture of the Ring Maternal's face remained difficult for Cort to read, there nevertheless seemed a special concern, a respect tinged with sadness, in that gaze. "As for you, Andreacort: I wish you to know that the same skill I possess at seeing beneath the surface of my own kind, sometimes can be applied to those born on alien worlds. I cannot be sure, you understand. But you are a female, Andreacort. And it is as my kind's equivalent of that gender, however inexact, that I appeal to you. Take this child to this place where she might be cared for, and be satisfied that you have done all that needs to be done."

Cort said, "I don't understand."

"I do not know if there is a Mercantile word for her condition. I will dance around it. She is someone who does not know the difference between good and evil, between her whims and the trespasses she must not commit. She is someone who will see no reason not to indulge her cruelest whims. She is a danger to everything she loves. She is . . ."

And Andrea Cort understood. "Sociopath."

"I have not heard this word. But if you know it, then you know what I say is true. She must be separated from these other children, because it will be impossible to prevent her from trying to do harm to them. This is not cruelty to her. It is concern for them."

Cort understood. "Yes."

Chorin cried, "Tell that bitch to stop wasting our time!"

But the Ring Maternal still clung to the skimmer's rim. "Understand this: I believe I am speaking to someone *with* digestive organs. If it comes to that, be a woman."

The Ring Maternal then turned its back and walked away, flanked by the two larger individuals of its kind. It was no easier to read their respective body language now, but Cort thought she perceived weariness in the set of its shoulders, and protectiveness in the attention of two larger figures.

Cort said, "What—"

"Not a word," Chorin snapped. "Not a word until we're away from here. I want to get the hell out of this city before I choke on the sanctimony."

This was not a good time to object. Cort backed off, silently surrendering to one of the padded seats that lined the inner wall, where the only sight that might have explained Chorin's special vehemence was the child's fixation on the carved wooden box.

* * *

11.

They took off. What the hell else could they do.

The Grethaians became ants, the fields of the orphanage mere patches of colored landscaping, and the structures of the city models of a civilization rather than the actual manifestations of one. The haze of the rain forest basin obscured the harder edges of the local architecture behind a layer of fog, obscuring the abundant life to be found here. And then the city was also left behind, as Chorin set a course for some other destination to the west.

Cort felt confident enough to pose a question. "Where are we going?"

Chorin didn't face her, merely stared straight ahead, at a horizon obscured by mist. "We've been given a couple of options. The officially *recommended* one is a certain compound on an island off the Aiaian peninsula. A few hours from here. Not as nice as the place that just gave us a firm no, but at least a place equipped to care for Grethaiian young."

"Will they take Ami?"

"The Maternal's called ahead, and they will."

Cort glanced at Ami, who still clutched the box but appeared to be headed for a nap. "You don't make that sound like a happy ending."

"It's not even close to one. *This* place won't waste any effort trying to find Ami a permanent home, in a loving family. It won't even waste any effort loving her. It'll provide food and a bed and some activities in the form of chores, but only at the stark minimum that qualifies as care. It'll be a prison with soft corners, make-work activities, and no future."

Cort had spent much of her own life in a prison of similar dimensions. "And the other option?"

"Is worse."

"How?"

Chorin said, "Leaving the kid in the desert to be eaten by droges."

Cort glanced at the child again, a reflex that assumed the kid could understand Mercantile; but then nothing they'd seen so far had suggested Ami could. "Why droges?"

"For Juje's sake, it doesn't have to be droges. There are plenty of places on this hellhole planet where there are no droges. But there are other predators. Abandoning to kid to nature, putting her out on an ice floe, dumping her in the middle of some wilderness and daring her to

attempt survival, putting her in the hunting ranges of worse predators—those would all qualify. They're faithful to the spirit of the thing: execution by neglect."

"That's *crazy*."

"Welcome to interspecies diplomacy. To any outsider who has not been raised according to its precepts, any truly alien culture processes as crazy. These are the choices we're faced with, for Ami; prison or death. Nobody's concerned about you being comfortable with that. Least alone me."

Cort changed seats and settled in where she could see Chorin's grimace in profile, a harsh slice of an angry woman enraged by the very choices that she was expecting Cort to accept.

She found that she was beginning to understand this, a little. "You're not surprised."

"I was beginning to get it, yes."

"How? Just yesterday, even the Ring Maternal didn't even know what we were talking about."

"She didn't understand the specific words we used, which is not the same thing. They were phrases we brought from an obscure little throwback village with a protected dialect of its very own, one that the Grethaians living in most of the big cities would have just as big a problem understanding. Those words would have been frustrating gibberish even without the intervening voice of a human being, filtered through our vocal cords and flawed pronunciations."

"What were we saying, then?"

"*Hurak*? Is not a word the people of this region know. The closest they come, in this country, is *Zhutag*. Different alphabet, different pronunciations of the consonants, different interpretation of the same root. Sufficiently different that the Ring Maternal couldn't make the cognitive leap at first. *Zhoke* has a modern interpretation that means disease, but in another usage is an antiquated term derived from the specific religious traditions of Here; also not one the Ring Maternal, born and raised in a different country on the other side of her continent, and fluent only in the more common tongues of this planet, could be expected to know. Even *Colka* and *Ur-Colka*, which did translate, only made sense as literal concepts: the conditions of having, or not having, digestive organs: phrases the Maternal understood only as medical conditions, not in the sense that a native of Here would mean them, in specific application to a child like Ami. Not one of them is a scientific term. They're idioms, all of them, as impenetrable to someone who hasn't heard them as the New London phrase *Tchi Shit* would be to a human being who had never been to New London; which would lead anyone who hadn't to miss that you were calling someone the lowest of the low, and wonder why you were trying to accuse them of being literally, the droppings of a Tchi. We were speaking words, Andrea. But we weren't getting our meaning across, not during most of that consultation."

"The Ring Maternal seemed to be figuring it out, when she took the child in, last night."

"The bitch was beginning to. Initially, she thought everything we said was nonsense, as she told us, but by the time we uttered the third or fourth iteration that didn't translate to Mercantile or to any terminology she knew, she had applied all of it to our story of child abandonment and made the logical leap about what all of it *probably* meant, something so terrible that she had to confirm it for herself. She took Ami in because she saw that it was something she had the ability to test, herself."

Cort said nothing.

Chorin went on. "For most of their history, children like her would have been mercy-killed, or abandoned to whatever the locals had in the way of a wilderness. Then for a while, there were a few places, like the one we're taking her to, that would care for them, without much in the way of actual love. And then prenatal care became more common. Genetic surgery became widely available. Abortion lost whatever stigma it might have had. Living children like Ami became rare, almost unheard-of. Legends. Ami inherited the misfortune of a throwback, born to an advanced world that no longer has much of an infrastructure for children like her. And we have a place to dump her, but not a place where she can be happy—if she's even capable of being happy; if she's even capable of bringing anything but misery to anyone who knows her."

* * *

It was a long flight. Andrea Cort had no idea how long. She'd hunkered down in the rear of the skimmer, depriving herself of a view, and while she was there, beneath the skimmer's rim, the only light open to her was the open sky, which turned bright, then dark purple; then bright again. It felt like a form of limbo.

Throughout, she watched Ami, a child who had been abandoned by her own, whose world appeared to have subtracted to the size and shape of a little box. What the box contained remained a mystery, but for the child it appeared to be the answer to everything, the doorway to a world she ached to enter, the instant someone provided the rite of passage. At times this terrible knowledge appeared to make her tremble, and at other times she seemed bowed by the very weight of it. Sometimes, and this was difficult to read because of the impassiveness of the Grethaian face, she appeared almost at peace with whatever she was thinking: buoyant, even, though this left Andrea Cort at even more of a loss.

She made a few attempts to engage with Ami, as had seemed possible just yesterday, but Ami appeared totally withdrawn into the world of the box, focused upon it so exclusively that her attention to the outside world remained shrunken to the virtually catatonic. Only the box mattered. Only the box provided the proper response to wherever she was right now.

And in the meantime, time passed. Cort's mind started to wander other places, such as just how she was going to smooth over the offense that had gotten her exiled to Here in the first place and still retain some sense of her own personal dignity, when Chorin came over carrying two steaming bowls of food. "Lunch," the other woman said.

Cort took the proffered bowl, winced at the aroma—it was a soup made of a certain form of meat that was too frequent in field rations, that no self-respecting person would ever eat if sitting down in a place with menus—and unsnapped the utensil clipped to the rim. "Thanks."

"Eat up. I didn't expect another detour today, and it's the last we have until we get back to the outpost."

Cort obliged, provided the additional obligatory wince upon her first taste, and said, "You're still not telling me something."

"Eat," Chorin said. Cort obliged, and she continued: "Everything I told you about my own past? You still remember it?"

"Of course."

"There were a couple of occasions, not involving me but stories I got to hear, when my family kidnapped people nobody wanted back. A husband and father whose chief form of interaction with the rest of his family was terrorizing them. A kid or two so manifestly without ambition that they were not just embarrassments but burdens, fit for nothing but a lifetime of obsessing over the toys of his childhood, in some sibling's spare room. An old woman who had spent her entire life flagellating everybody around her and had aged out of any other pleasures she ever had, and become nothing but the reliable dispenser of cruelties, to everyone around them. We would take them, not knowing the place they had held in the families that had been stuck with them, and expect a king's ransom for their return—only to find that the first emotion their so-called loved ones felt, when they were gone, was relief. You understand?"

"Of course I do," Cort said. (She herself sometimes wondered if she had any living relatives somewhere, and whether any of them would have paid anything to get her back, as she was now: angry and misanthropic and alone.)

Chorin watched silently as another spoonful of field rations transferred itself from the bowl to Cort's mouth. "In some of those cases, the families did everything a kidnapper could have hoped for, in the first few days, maybe even the first few weeks. They followed the instructions, they met the conditions, they even made the preliminary payments and indicated their willingness to send more. But as time went on, and they realized that their primary emotion to the absence of their loved one was relief, they became less and less cooperative, to the point of defiance. It became an exercise in daring us to commit the murder they had outright refused to. Family legend had it that we sometimes took the dare, because we had to, in order for future families to take us seriously. We returned our prisoners as corpses, and wrote our losses off as the price of being feared; after that, committing a little more research to make sure the people

we took were loved, or at least, valued in some other manner that would make returning them a desirable outcome—as with one Uncle who happened to be the only one who knew the numbers of the family’s hidden accounts. People like that, and the people whose deaths would break grandma’s spirit, those were the ones people would pay for. Bastards and monsters, by contrast? With those, we had found out that with them, we were not kidnappers. We were essentially assassins, hired killers who had made the mistake of doing all the work before arranging to be paid.”

Her eyes were wet.

Cort said, “I don’t know what you’re trying to tell me.”

Chorin said, “You think you’re so cynical. You think you’ve seen all the darkness there is. But the truth is, you’re still so goddamned young that you know almost nothing.” She shook her head, and said, “You should mix that up, a bit more. All the gravy’s at the bottom.”

And then she returned to her place at the front of the skimmer. It struck Andrea Cort then, and later, as the walk of a condemned prisoner marching toward her execution.

In later years, with her own sharp edges more firmly defined, Cort might have discerned what was actually being said, and if so certainly would not have allowed it to pass without challenge—but Chorin was further down this life’s path than she was, and carried with her the air of a hard-won cynicism that impressed her too much. The woman who would very soon not let anything to pass without challenge, allowed this, without understanding, without objection, and without resistance.

It was one of the worst mistakes of her life.

* * *

13.

Andrea Cort thought: *something’s wrong*.

It might be too much to say she thought it. It might be more accurate to say she dreamed it, and more accurate still to say that some burning part of herself woke before the rest of her and screamed those words again and again in the middle of what had been a chaotic jumble of images from the terrible night of bloodshed and fire that had ended her childhood.

Something’s wrong, and her eyes fluttered opened up, to find a sky dotted with stars.

It took her a second or so more to register the skimmer’s metal floor digging into her back, and the ache that came from lying flat on that surface for what might have been hours.

There was a bad taste in her mouth, and it was this as well as the persistent buzz in her head that made her recognize her own drugged condition. She was only barely mobile, and she might have drifted back asleep before a faraway sense of urgency led her to her belt and to a roll of counteractive patches that she carried with her at all times, for those occasions when she found herself being called back to duty in a hurry, after a night of one chemically-induced narcosis or another.

She slapped the patch against her wrist.

Consciousness returned with a hard snap.

Chemically-induced sobriety was, as somebody who had introduced her to the meds said, a bastard and a half: similar in pleasantness to having your cranium snapped against a stone wall, and sobriety arriving as the first ringing dizziness in the wake of that concussion.

She gasped, cursed, grasped her pounding heart, and damned the universe for having such a feeling in it.

Then everything came back. Ami. Thawk. Chorin. The Ring Maternal. The box.

The oddly impenetrable phrase that meant something like, *without intestines*.

The soup.

The Ring Maternal urging her, *Be a woman*.

Chorin urging her to eat. Being oddly insistent on it. Telling her that horrific story, the latest in what had become a series of confessions; a story that did not so much answer questions as circle them, providing the illusion of revelation by flying near an explanation, but did not arrive at one; that was, it now seemed, just a distraction while Chorin manipulated her into drugging herself.

Chorin was a medic. She had the equipment. The bitter taste in Cort's mouth seemed to indicate something chemical, not nanotech. Just something to make Cort sleepy and stupid. Chorin had probably spent quite some time flying in circles, waiting for her to pass out.

And where was Chorin now?

Where was Ami?

The sky remained a speckled starscape, documentation that some time had passed, though consultation with the onboard brain remained the only means of determining where, in a realm of possibilities that included every location on the planet. The precise address didn't matter, only the conditions. The bubble of controlled climate conditions under the vehicle's ionic shielding prevented Cort from feeling them, including whether the skimmer sat on firm earth or was hovering at altitude; only that she was now on some part of the planet that was now night.

While she remained seated as she was, below the skimmer walls that hid any surrounding landscape from her, she would never know, and for one shivery heartbeat she held on to that, certain that any sight that awaited her would be as horrible as the suspicions growing inside her, that she feared might have arrived too late.

Still, this was nothing she had the right to avoid, and so she stood.

She saw mountains. It was dark and impossible to see much topological detail, but the stars lit up enough of the landscape for her to make out the gleam of snow covering some of the heights. Safe in the vehicle, she felt none of the cold herself, but somehow sensed the bitter wind, the chill that would turn deep breath into an exercise in inhaling razor blades.

She took a step, and in that second she accidentally kicked something that skittered across the skimmer deck, under one of the seats.

Irritated only by her clumsiness, not yet comprehending what the object was, Cort knelt and felt around the hidden space until she encountered the object and could pull it out.

It was the box that had so fascinated Ami.

And this was alarming enough, because it was impossible to believe that the child who had been so enraptured by this object would have just abandoned it when taken elsewhere, unless forced—or unless she'd needed to put up a fight.

Cort had the mental image of Chorin taking Ami by one of her arms and urging her off the skimmer: the child understanding enough of her purpose to put up a fight, three arms to two. It hadn't necessarily happened that way, but this was the scenario her mind conjured, even if she had not yet put together exactly why. It urged haste. But the box remained, and it seemed to be part of the path to understanding, the one element she needed to resolve before she decided what to do.

She opened the lid.

Absorbed what she was looking at.

And did something that she had only rarely done, since that one terrible day in her childhood that she sometimes believed to have burned out her capacity for horror.

She cried out.

* * *

14.

As soon as Cort left the bubble of controlled climate that the skimmer carried with it, and hopped down to the rocky ground with its light dusting of snow, the bitter cold took her breath away.

She felt the sting in her cheeks but knew it was not life-threatening, just one of those unpleasant manifestations of weather that she had once been used to but that after her lifetime spent in orbital environments, somehow become distasteful and discomfiting to her. To her it indicated a loss of control, the wild subsuming the controlled and civilized. But she had felt colder, and she knew that she could bear it long enough to follow the recent shallow footprints illuminated by the light she'd taken from the skimmer's emergency kit.

They were the footprints of a human woman and a Grethaiian child.

It was not actively snowing now. The wind shifted the few centimeters on the ground, but it

was not dumping more snow, not erasing those footprints and reducing her pitiful attempts to follow them into an exercise in guesswork. With the light she carried she would be okay, and with the light she followed them uphill through a steep rise that, at one point, displayed the smear that could only be the result of a woman and child slipping and falling either because of the treacherous conditions, or because of some struggle between them.

Cort was unencumbered by struggling child and could only hope that this would allow her to move faster and make up the ground while there was still time to make a difference.

Midway up the very steep part she slipped and slid twice her body length; and here she almost screamed again, because even if the angle of that slide made the mishap less than catastrophic, she was still aware that that she was in the heights and likely surrounded by any number of places where stepping into the wrong patch of shadow might mean death. It didn't help that she had always possessed a healthy fear of heights. But her boot caught an outcropping, and she was able to take a deep breath and return to her climb, this time passing the especially slippery part by taking it on all fours, and by ludicrous excesses of care getting past it to a gentler grade that took her another fifty meters up.

By the time the slope flattened out into a relative plateau, her knees and lower legs were sopping wet from exposure, and her hands were numb from cold.

The wind at this new elevation felt stronger and colder, and so she despaired of being able to stand up against it for very long. Worse, something about the angle of the ground and its greater funneling of the crosswinds helped keep this patch clear of snow accumulation. There were no footprints, no signs obvious enough for her to track.

Not far ahead, the rock continued to curve upward, as a nearly vertical rock wall, but it also bore no marks that could have encouraged her on a climb into heights too distant and too rarefied and too distant to make return a possibility.

Maybe, she thought, this is as far as Chorin and the child came.

Maybe this is where the wind took hold of them.

Maybe this is where they got disoriented and wandered into open space.

She had heard of the dangers of loud noises in snow-covered mountains and had no idea whether that popular premise was true or not. But she was just frightened and desperate enough to attempt something, all right another something on top of the chances she'd already taken, that might have meant a foolish and pointless death.

She yelled.

"Esa! Ami! Can you hear me?"

She received no answer, just the low howling of the same winds that must have shaped these stones for eons. Maybe other people, Grethaians, had come to this place from time to time, and also had need for hopeless cries against the surrounding wind. Maybe they'd fallen to their deaths, as she now feared could have happened to Chorin and Ami, and maybe the winds had howled a little more forlornly when they'd died.

"ESA! AMI! CAN YOU HEAR ME?"

Cort swept her light over the rocky plateau, finding nothing; swept it upslope, and found nothing. She moved her circle of light across the stone ahead, following its curve across the mountain face as best she could, finding to her right a pitch of darkness dark enough to terrify her, and a clear path around the edge of the rise, that seemed to continue after the edge of what topography she could see.

She feared not being able to find the way back to the skimmer.

But just as much she feared returning to the skimmer and becoming seduced by the shelter it offered, only to find out later that she had abandoned the search too early and in so doing allowed the others to die while she could have saved them.

So she followed the curve of the cliff, on the flatter place that refused to share any clues as to whether she was heading the right way to follow her companions, and after a bit she heard a sound up ahead that could have been a woman gasping.

This she went after.

Less than a minute later she found a new place, a rebuttal to the tabletop ledge of the cliché,

flat as a board with a sudden perfectly vertical drop at its edge. Instead, it was a gentle curve, proceeding from the nearly horizontal at the edge of the cliff, to the absolutely vertical of the deadly drop, in degrees so gradual that it would have been possible for an adventurous climber to stand halfway down that slope before some form of clumsiness caused her to fall to her death. A jagged line of darkness in the distance eclipsed the lighter star-scape of the sky, and Andrea Cort saw nothing in the intervening space but emptiness, and the promise of a screaming fall toward whatever lay far below.

But here, hugging the cliffside as closely as they could, knelt Ami and, separated from her by about four meters, Esa Chorin.

Chorin was kneeling and cradling her face in her hands. Cort could only see the back of her head, but the set of her shoulders testified to the bereft helplessness of someone who had gone as far as she could, and knew no way forward or back.

Cort said, "Esa."

Chorin did hear her, because she cocked her head and lowered her hands to the stone, as if only its solidity kept the planet itself from ejecting her. Her response was more that of a woman whose problems had just multiplied, than one who had just been offered a lifeline.

"Go away!"

"We both know I can't do that."

"I have to leave her here! Or see to it that she falls!"

"I'm not going to let that happen."

Chorin shifted, dislodging a little pebble that bounced away from her and skittered down the downward curving surface before it disappeared into the darkness. Her features appeared in profile. "What do you picture, Andrea? One of those climactic battles so beloved of cheap stories, that takes place on the edge of a precipice and ends with both combatants rolling toward the edge and only one catching the edge?—I'm stronger and heftier than you are. If this comes down to a fight, I'll be the one who manages to toss the other over the side."

What Cort heard in that raging voice was bereft of anything that expected to see dawn.

She said, "I don't doubt it, Esa. This comes down to a wrestling match, I'm dead."

"So go away. Get warm. I'll be back soon enough."

Cort edged a little bit closer. "I don't get that impression. From what I know of you, any sequence of events that begins with Ami going over the edge ends with you jumping to your death out of self-loathing only a couple of minutes later."

"You don't know me! The things I've done—"

"I know the things you've done. And I know why you made sure I knew about them. You were protecting me from blaming myself for what you thought you would have to do today."

"SHUT UP!"

But with this cry, Chorin had shifted enough to turn all the way around, revealing in Cort's circle of light features contorted with rage and glistening with tears. It was the look of someone who had already lost everything; and Cort, who knew what that was like, was for a moment lost for words. The abyss, she remembered, called for her too. Hesitating, she flicked the beam toward the more distant figure of Ami, and in that glimpse thought she detected trembling, though it was impossible to tell whether it was from hypothermia or fear.

This somehow gave Cort the strength to say what came next.

"You're a trained medic. You know what drugs do, how they work. You know how long they should last. You wouldn't drug my damn rations only to abandon me when I was only minutes from fighting my way to consciousness. When you landed, you had plenty of time to do what you thought you had to do before I came looking. And if you'd just tossed her out of the vehicle and taken off, you would have. Instead, you climbed higher on foot. You procrastinated. You miscalculated how hard this would be."

"I told you to shut up!"

"You know why you're paralyzed, Esa? You're somebody acting out of conscience who is trying to do something unconscionable; somebody who thinks she's taking responsibility for a tough decision, when what she's really doing is giving up; somebody who hates the crimes of

her childhood, who is now trying to do something that puts all of them in their shadow; somebody tired of hating herself who is trying to do something that would make her hate herself even more. Don't you see? There's a reason why this is taking so long. Everything you're telling yourself to do contradicts the kind of person you'd rather be—and the kind of person you can be.”

“That won't solve anything. Did you look inside the box?”

“I did. And I understand everything. But this is not the answer. Please. Come to me.”

Chorin was silent for so long that Cort really did think her lost. But then she shuddered and began to make her way along the cliff wall, toward the child. There was nothing in her demeanor, her air of purpose, that indicated malignant purpose; and indeed, when she started calling things like, “It's okay,” and “Come to me,” in Mercantile, and words of unknown meaning in the language of Here, it became clear that this was not some attempt to finish what she started.

This was something else, an attempt at redemption.

Whatever it was must have been clear enough to Ami, because the child did not retreat any further, but instead tentatively approached, to meet Chorin's offered hand, with an extended hand of her own.

“Good girl,” Chorin said.

Ami drew closer, and for Cort this was the most terrifying moment of all, the one agonizingly close to deliverance, when safety was a short gesture away and it would take only a cruel turn on the part of circumstance, to rip it out of Chorin's grasp.

But she was scared for the child, not for Chorin.

And in that instant, there was a flash of movement.

Cort did not understand what had happened until it was over, but once she could put it together, she knew that Ami had lashed out and raked at Chorin's face with her free hand.

It was a weak strike, a child's. It should have had no effect against the woman, who was larger and surer. It was meant to startle, not to harm. But there was just enough claw to it, and that sufficiently close to the eye, that the surprise was enough. The woman loosened her grip on the stone, lost her balance, overcompensated, and struck the cliff wall to her left.

The slide began.

Chorin left the relatively level ground and slid three meters along the curved stone before coming to a rest on her back, at what seemed the precise demarcation between a climb that would have been possible for her to manage, and the part of her descent where gravity would have been impossible to deny.

That she stopped at all was a little miracle, and as she raised her head from the stone and took in her predicament, it still remained possible for her to survive.

She said, “I'm okay,” and shifted her weight, in order to position herself for the climb back up.

That's when Cort saw that she wasn't okay at all.

Ami was descending toward her.

A Grethaiian was not a human being. Three arms instead of two, three legs instead of two, each ending with clawed fingers and toes, provided better traction on a treacherous stone surface. Even this untrained child was more deft, on the slope to a shattering fall; also, a greater tactical advantage, when it came to a fight to the death, because with all the other limbs hanging on, it was easy to fully dedicate two hands to the cause.

What she did now was not a childish accident. It was an act defined by deliberate intent.

She grasped both of Chorin's ankles and pulled both legs from the rockface.

Whatever the variables were that allowed a body to decide whether it had enough traction to stay put, this particular shift violated them in precisely the wrong way.

Chorin slid another half-meter and for an instant it looked like she might still be able to stop herself, and it was such a near thing, really, that Andrea Cort would never know if there were ever a moment that the other woman arrested her fall at all, but even if there was, she hesitated at the point of no return and another shift of exactly the wrong kind made the end inevitable.

The slide became a tumble and over she went.

If she screamed at all, it was carried away by the wind.

Cort found herself on her knees, one arm extended in what she would always remember as one of the great useless gestures of her life. She was too stunned to feel grief or horror or regret. The moment was too big to comprehend.

And then Ami turned around on the rockface, caught her eye, and started to make her way back up.

For Cort it seemed the preliminary for an assault she could only lose. In any fight under these conditions, Ami's special physical advantages gave her a chance at survival not available to a bipedal, two-armed human, whose hands and feet were already going numb and whose lungs were also growing tight from the freezing air, and from fear.

When Ami took the last meter or so with a scramble and jump, there was little Cort could do but shut her eyes in full expectation that her own life would end here.

Instead, she felt the child's limbs wrap around her, with a relief that would have been too easy to mistake for love, even though Cort now knew it could be nothing of the kind.

"Cor-Uth," Ami said.

* * *

15.

Andrea Cort had spent the three days since her return to the embassy under house arrest while the powers that be decided whether she should be prosecuted on multiple charges.

The biggest one, the murder of her fellow indenture Esa Chorin, had loomed large until Ami happened to share her own culpability with a translator.

Cort was also briefly in big trouble for attempting to resolve a politically dangerous situation without input from her superiors: but that had gone away too, once it became clear that Chorin had been the ranking diplomat in the field and that Cort had respected protocol by taking guidance from her. Factoring in the useless Thawk, there had been two orders of professional protection between the tragedy and Cort herself, who—it was argued—had just been doing what more experienced people had authorized her to do.

But there were still significant political forces here that could lead to her ruination; among them the anger of Ambassador Porleth Heng, who was furious at her for having put this blot on her embassy's record. Heng needed a sacrificial lamb, and Cort was in perfect position to become one.

Hence this hearing. At the long table before her sat Ambassador Heng, flanked by Thawk and that obsequious second-in-command Harmon, along with several other figures of lesser importance. But it was Heng who was prepared to destroy her.

Heng said, "Should we be worried about you, Counselor? You show a significant lack of remorse about a colleague's death."

Cort replied, "I have nothing but remorse, Ambassador. I liked the woman. I saw her, in some ways, as an older version of me. What I don't have is shame, not when my biggest sin where she was concerned was trust."

"You were certainly very slow to see what she was planning."

"That I also feel remorse for. But she was an older and more experienced person. I deferred to her in full confidence of her judgement, and I probably should not have. From now on, I'll know better. If I still have a career when this procedure is concluded, I'll learn from this unfortunate incident and never again trust a superior in defiance of available data."

It was a simple statement of principles, one Cort would stick with forever, but it displeased the panel.

Heng said, "Are you mocking us?"

"No, sir. Simply providing information."

And what she said was true. Chorin had been authority, and her actions had shattered what was already a strong distrust of authority, hard-won after the years she'd spent in the custody of the Corps. From now on, Cort knew, she would trust only herself. She would also, thanks to the last few nights of sweat-inducing dreams, stay away from high places, at least insofar as she could.

“Why else do you think it took you so long to see what Chorin was planning?”

“I confess: I was not up to applying my own cruel life lessons to forecasting her actions, but: as I said, I am young. I will try to do better. From now on I will certainly not try to be twenty-four hours behind somebody else’s criminal acts.”

A stir. “You think it was that premeditated? A full day?”

“There’s no way to know. I think it was certainly weighing on her mind, the night before. But I think she started to get the basic idea even earlier than that, when the Ring Maternal took the child in for testing. By that night, Chorin was beginning to process what we knew of Ami through the prism of her own experiences. I, unfortunately, still didn’t get it; not even after the Ring Maternal bridged the language barrier and succeeded in getting Ami’s nature across to me.”

Harmon said, “You mean sociopathy.”

“No, unfortunately, I do not. It’s certainly one of the words that applies, but it’s also a weak manifestation of the phenomenon we’re talking about here.”

“In the judgment of some of us,” Heng said, “and in particular, the psychological evaluations in your record, you might be one.”

“I believe not, though I’m not about to have that argument with you.”

Cort said this while looking at Heng.

When no immediate explosion erupted, she said, “Sociopathy is common. It exists in one out of every ten human beings, and in most of our institutions. It exists in this room. What Ami’s village and the Ring Maternal detected in Ami, was even darker: the specific extreme form of the disorder so difficult to explain in clinical terms that we are reduced to using the poetic label, *evil*. They are people so broken, so devoid of a central connection to life, and so incapable of actual emotional response, that they must commit bloody atrocities in order to feel anything; and they’re so common in our own history, from Elizabeth Bathory on down, that we have come up with a special name for them: *serial killers*.”

This prompted one of the lesser counselors on the panel to sniff, “Still, you’re a murderer yourself, aren’t you?”

This was of course an attempt to get Cort to admit a level of mental disturbance that Heng could use to blame everything that had happened on her own derangement.

Cort did not deflect. “It’s true. I killed, in childhood. I have killed a couple of additional times, during my captivity by the Corps. Each time it was not an experience I sought out. It was something I did because I was threatened and because I saw no other option. In such cases my lack of hesitation was a survival trait. I will not apologize for it.

“But I do not need to seek out the experience in order to feel pleasure. I do not escalate as a means of feeling alive. I get past the moment and then I feel guilt, as Chorin did. All judgment of me aside, this is not a difference of scale so much as kind. Ami would kill because she wants to. She will always seek to kill.”

“You realized all this, when you looked inside Ami’s box?”

“I was in the process of realizing it, because of everything Chorin had said, and everything the Grethaians had said to us. What I saw in the box was just the trigger.”

The box had contained one of the lizard-like creatures common throughout the planet. Other Grethaiian children kept them as pets. Even Thawk and Chorin had kept one, for no reason other than the pleasure it brought them. But Ami’s fascination with it had not been that of a child for a living thing—as the Ring Maternal had determined when she handed Ami one, to play with.

Given her choice of activities, Ami had wasted no time twisting its little limbs off.

Cort said,

“We did not know that the Grethaians have made it their business to detect such . . . for lack of a better phrase, soul-disfigurement, in early childhood. It’s partially based on observing the behavior, as we do, but they also have other techniques, the product of significant research, that place the diagnosis in the realm of near certainty.

“I presume that in the past, the phenomenon must have caused tragedies so significant, on a societal scale, that they came up with a zero-tolerance policy toward any developing children

who show any of the symptoms. By long-standing tradition, they made it something for nature to resolve, in nature's own murderous fashion. They have followed this policy for so long that further manifestations have become rare—so rare, in fact, that only a few exist at any one time; so rare that until now the human presence here has not encountered any local reference to it. I would not be surprised if they were so ashamed of it that they kept it from us, never suspecting that we have had more than our share of people afflicted with the condition.

"The people of that village, including the parents, understood what it meant to abandon Ami to death. They felt the tragedy of a child who by their lights could not be allowed to live; they just thought that the alternative was worse. Nowhere else on the planet would any other child-care facility that realized what she was have agreed to take her in—one exception being the hellish warehouse that Esa Chorin was offered as option, that is more like a prison for their monsters.

"The Ring Maternal explained all this to Chorin, who had already figured out some of it—and who understood as a result that the decision was ours. What followed was her trying to take it all on by herself. To spare me."

And even so, Cort thought, the Ring Maternal saw me as an alternative, told me I had a soul and urged me to act like a member of the human gender known for protecting children. *You knew I might end up here, didn't you, old woman?* But she did not speak this out loud; it was part of the story that she would keep to herself, so she could examine it later and determine what use she could make of it.

Instead, she proceeded directly to the end, or rather, the almost-end, the part that came before the one card she'd been hiding to this point. "Chorin found the math simpler in theory than it was in practice, the plan more difficult to carry out in the moment than it was in theory. She dithered on that ledge for more than an hour. I had time to come out of sedation and come after her . . . to change her mind. And whatever happens to me, I want it on her record, at least, that she did change her mind. She died, in the end, because she tried to save Ami, not to kill her."

"Done," Heng said. "And that returns us to the big question, just what we're going to do with you."

Cort sipped some water, then looked at each of the grimacing counselors in turn, and then turned her full focus on the woman she despised, the woman who if not dealt with immediately would twist this situation to destroy her. "No, actually, we have an even bigger problem than that."

"What?"

"Ami." Who had spent the last few days being cared for by the embassy's medical staff. She was reportedly quite happy and not traumatized at all. Her caregivers were quite careful to never turn their backs on her.

Heng was not prepared for her the conversation to take such a left turn. "What about her?"

Cort smiled. It was a special smile, one that many people in her life would learn to consider frightening, and she aimed it directly at Heng, letting the ambassador know the force if not the letter of what was coming.

She said, "The Grethaians deal with their potential future serial killers by flat-out murdering them. I won't make any moral judgments about this. They, at least, think they have no other option.

"But the Dip Corps has a history of taking people from hellhole environments where the only way to survive is through criminality, and training them to some level of usefulness, as I was; as Chorin was.

"Maybe, just maybe, we can do the same with Ami.

"It's clear that she has no future among her own kind. That's a given. But I think she can have a future among ours. I think it's probably the easiest diplomatic solution to accept her as refugee. The Grethaians won't object; they've washed their hands of her. But the Corps can take her into custody, raise her in full view of what limited freedom she can be trusted to have among other living things, provide her with as much in the way of counseling as she needs, and ultimately give her a life, even if all that fails utterly and the most she gets to know is a life forever

spent in some form of custody. Who knows? Her murderous impulses might be brought under control. She might repress them, even learn to control them. It's possible. And it's better than killing her or telling ourselves that we spare ourselves any guilt by letting nature do the job for us. We can *try*, damn it." Cort faltered, at the sudden awareness of her own rising volume. She looked down at the tabletop before her, then looked up again. "We can try."

The silence that followed was broken only by a single uncomfortable cough, emitted by a minor presence who also averted her eyes, as if unwilling to admit that she made even that much of a contribution at this most uncomfortable of moments.

Then Heng sniffed. "For a trainee, you're awfully generous with Dip Corps resources."

"You disagree with me?"

"I think you are very foolish."

And that was exactly what Cort had been hoping Heng would say. "Very well. Then let the record show that the person in power to resolve this problem in the manner I suggested refuses to. At long last, at this stage of your career, you finally have a tough decision to make."

"You little—"

"Know this, Ambassador Heng. This is not a decision you can get away with delegating. You cannot put this decision in the hands of an underling. You will not imply that abandoning the child would be nice and allow someone else to act for you, based on that strong implication. This is a life and death decision that will shape how people will come to regard you forever, and something *you* must do: must do, personally. You may *personally* take that child aboard a skimmer with you and fly her to some remote, hostile region, chosen by yourself, where you will *personally* abandon her to die. You will do it yourself, experience the psychic price yourself, carry it around for the rest of your life yourself. Or you will personally err on the side of compassion and hope, spend your own political capital to make sure that Ami is sent somewhere safe, regardless of the cost. I make the challenge to you, where your entire command staff can see it, and will to the best of my ability share it with every other Dip Corps staffer I encounter, between now and the end of my life.

"This moment is yours, Ambassador.

"If you think we must handle this the Grethaiian way, I require only that you own it. Because I may not possess the power to make sure you decide this the way I want, but I can see to it that everybody after you knows that it was in your hands, alone."

Heng had gone white. And it was not just because a young snot of an indenture had given her an ultimatum; it was because everybody in the room was now looking away from her. The terms had been perfectly presented. The weight was on her, after all. No one else would help.

It virtually guaranteed that the woman would now have no choice but to put her full weight behind Ami's protection.

"Damn you," she said.

"Already taken care of," Cort replied.

She stood up and was halfway to the exit when Heng said, "We're not done."

"I am," Cort said. "You can come to any decision you want, about me. You will anyway. But I have confidence that you'll find vindictiveness a political risk, now. Because I was the first to save the life of the child whose fate is now in your hands, and I don't think you want the record to reflect that you were punishing me for doing that. Good day."

And she turned her attention back to the exit, which was flanked by two security officers who moved to take their positions as escort. It was not just contempt that fueled her eagerness to leave—it was thirst for oblivion. The supply of buzzpatches was waiting; would, she sensed with grim resignation, always be waiting.

But behind her came one more damnable barrier between herself and the fleeting peace she craved: a voice that did not belong to the ambassador stricken by the choice she had to make, but to Thawk, who had not spoken up much, before this point.

"Before you go."

Cort turned, weary and unwilling but aware that this last query could not be avoided.

Thawk still looked like a man who had given up on his life, on his career, and on his reputation,

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but behind those weary eyes there was now something else, something that may not have existed there, for years. A spark. Actual interest in the job. And maybe something else, something Cort had not seen enough of life to define.

She said, "Yes."

"You've explained everything but this idiom that gave you so much trouble. *Ur-Colka*. The one about missing intestines. Even this Ring Maternal said she didn't understand that one. Please. Did you ever figure that out?"

Cort's first attempt at speech resulted in her lips moving but her mouth not releasing any audible sound. Then she tried again, and this time her voice broke only a little bit.

She said, "It means that the child's empty," and left before the panel could think of anything else to ask.