

Invasive Species

Catherine Wells

Rath van Dorn groaned and rubbed at eyes that were sore and red, his long brown fingers prying grit from the dry corners. Damn, but he wanted to be out walking the floors, the grounds, the drill site—anywhere he could be in motion! But no, he'd been put on desk duty, so here he was processing reports. How the hell did they expect him to concentrate on reports when his wife was missing? Had been missing for weeks. He tried to calculate how many, but he couldn't remember what day of the week this was.

He had expected to be part of the search. He was a Senior Security Officer, after all, with three years in the Military Police before he signed on with Halstaadt Security. He'd been trained in search techniques. But he'd been sidelined as too close to the situation. A suspect, that meant. The husband was always the first suspect. He'd been on-shift, though, when Lakshmi disappeared—first monitoring CCTV in the admin building with another officer, then at his desk writing a report, also under CCTV, so they'd had to give up that notion pretty fast. What excuse did they have now?

He glanced up as Winky slipped into his office, barefooted like all its kind, but clad in a Company jumpsuit. "Clear skies and fresh fruit," it said in a reedy voice.

"Soft rain and dry sleeping." Rath wiped the report from his desktop, standard procedure for when an alien was present. Although technically, he was the alien and Winky the native, and frankly, Parsans were the most innocuous species on this planet, right down to and including the algae growing in the sewage treatment ponds. But Osminog Company had dozens of mining operations in as many star systems, and the same policies and procedures applied at them all. "What is it, Winky?"

The Parsan shifted uneasily, and a ripple ran through its auburn hair. The chamelioid Parsans did that sometimes when they were nervous: let a feature ripple as though adjusting it to a closer approximation of human form. Rath gave his head an impatient shake, though his own curling black hair did not ripple. He was too tired to deal with Parsan niceties. "Just say it, Winky."

"Supervisor Brown wishes to speak with you."

Was that all. "Did he say why?"

Winky blinked several times, a gesture Rath had learned to interpret as an attempt to distance itself from a situation. “No, sir.” *Don’t shoot the messenger.*

Rath lurched forward in his chair, the taste of bile in his throat. Oh, God, was Lakshmi dead, had they found—No. No, Arte wouldn’t have sent for Rath, he’d have come himself and brought a counselor. A stab of anger locked Rath’s jaw as he realized what it had to be. It was Matisse, she was behind this. He’d seen the new Site Administrator earlier in the hallway, and she’d done a quick turn into a side corridor as though avoiding him—He launched from his chair and strode past Winky, down the hall, and into the supe’s office.

Artemis Brown rose as Rath entered. He was a big man, blunted by age but still solid. He eyed Rath carefully. “Jesus, Rath, you look like death warmed over.”

“Are you surprised?”

Arte’s broad shoulders slumped. “No. No, of course not. But—hell, can’t the medics give you something to help you sleep, at least?”

“I can’t take meds, I have a child to care for. I have to hear her cry.” Nissa was barely six months old, not yet sleeping through the night.

Stymied, Arte looked away, reaching down to straighten a holoframe on his desk. “Well, sit down. We need to talk.”

“I’ll stand.”

Again Arte ran his appraising eye over Rath, lips compressed beneath his bushy gray mustache. “Okay, have it your way.” His concession reinforced Rath’s suspicion. Arte ran a finger around the console on his desk, tapped it once, then looked Rath in the eye. “You’re not going to like this, and I don’t blame you. But we’re closing the case. We have to.”

Bristling, Rath came to his full height and bored into Arte with molten lava eyes. “You mean you’ve been instructed to.” Damn Matisse with her sugar-coated drawl and her titanium gaze.

Arte’s eyes sparked. “I don’t need instruction to know when we’re beat! I don’t know what happened to your wife, Rath, I may never know, but I know one damned thing: we tried everything to find her. We’ve exhausted our options, used all our resources—”

“All you can spare.”

“What resources do you see that we haven’t poured into this search?” Arte’s color rose with the pitch of his voice. “We’ve gone building to building, we’ve covered every inch of the drill site and pits, we’ve talked to anyone who might have seen something—What else do you think we can do?”

“You can ask the Parsans to let us fly drones.”

“Damn it, Rath, you know they won’t let us do that, what with their paranoia about flying things! And we don’t need drones to cover the Zone, I told you we—”

“You can petition to search outside the Zone.”

Arte sucked in breath. Humans were restricted to the Terran Zone of Parsa on penalty of expulsion. “You know we can’t go out there, and neither could she. The Parsans would have dumped her back in a heartbeat, and probably fined the Company to boot.”

“Not if they didn’t know.” Original pictures from orbit, taken before the Parsans objected to such surveillance, showed thick stands of jungle to the west, beyond the blackened borders of the Zone, alien vegetation climbing twenty-five meters into the sulfur-hued sky. “You think they know everything that goes on out there? They’re not mystics, they don’t have any intuition that triggers the moment a human sets foot outside the Terran Zone—”

“They do a damn good imitation!”

Rath lunged forward. “They don’t know!”

He hung there, trying to loom over his supervisor, but Arte had been a linebacker for the Bruins and then a Marine drill instructor before signing on with Halstaadt. No one loomed over Arte. “The case is closed.” Arte’s eyes were as flat as his voice now. “I’m sorry for your loss. Go home. Your shift is over.”

Stubbornness locked Rath’s jaw. “I have three hours left.”

“Not today. You’re done. Go home.”

One deep breath, another, willing his heart rate to slow. *If you can’t go over a wall ...* Rath

eased back, giving Arte space. "I'm owed leave."

Arte relaxed some. "Good." He reached for his console, tapped the controls to bring up a schedule. "You take some leave. There's a freighter going out tomorrow, I can get you on it. You and the baby—"

"I'm not leaving Parsa."

Arrested, Arte shifted his eyes back to Rath's face. "Just what do you think you're going to do?"

"Look for her myself."

Arte threw up his hands. "What do you think you can do that we haven't already done?"

"I'll redo it all. I'll start at the beginning; I'll interview everyone; I'll track every lead—"

"And you'll find nothing!"

Rath lifted his chest. "But I'll do it myself."

For a long moment, Arte just stared at him. Finally his shoulders drooped, and he jabbed the console controls. "I'll send you the file. Hell, I'd probably do the same thing, in your place."

Relief washed through Rath. "Thank you."

"And, Rath—get a nanny-kin for that baby, will you? You need some sleep."

* * *

Winky slid out of the Admin Building as though it had been sent on a legitimate errand, hurrying down the walk to the dull charcoal-colored street. The streets were far older than the buildings currently perched along them. Before the Company had come to Parsa with their Compact for Native Rights and their guarantee of noninterference, the Cold Eyes—the G'Maht Zhee—had carved out a base here by stripping the ground of all vegetation, then throwing up cheap plascrete buildings that soon melted under the Parsan sun. But they'd paved incredibly tough, resistant roadways of a material the humans were still trying to reverse engineer. Though the Cold Eyes were long gone, recalled to their homeworld by internecine wars, their roads still dispelled heat, shed water, and smothered plant life throughout the Zone. Winky hated them.

But it used them because they were convenient when one was in a hurry, and Winky felt compelled to carry its news swiftly to the liaison. So it hastened along the walkway edging the street to the eastern end of the Zone, where Parsans had created a simple encampment tucked up against the northern edge. This was where Winky had lived, with brief respites, since coming to work for the humans. This was also where the liaison kept its office.

Winky trilled as it approached, and the liaison came to the doorway to meet it. It had allowed its human appearance to slip a little, morphing into the softer contours of its natural form with sagging cheeks and drooping eyes, rounded shoulders and sharply angled knees. "Sweet air and balmy breezes, Kreshkhup," it greeted in Parsi.

"Sparkling waters and soft soil," Winky replied. "How fares your labor, liaison?"

The liaison's mouth puckered at the question, recognizing that Winky wished to speak of business matters. "As well as can be when dealing with aliens. And yours, Kreshkhup?"

"There is much turmoil," Winky admitted. "May we dispense with the usual courtesies in the interest of time?"

The liaison's mouth widened in a show of teeth. "I think you have been too long among humans, Kreshkhup. But let us proceed as you desire." He waved Winky inside.

Winky passed through and waited for the liaison to sink into a crouch by the low table, then crouched across from it. The posture was not as comfortable in its human guise as in its native state, but the familiarity was comforting. "I come with a warning, liaison. Today I overheard a conversation between Supervisor Brown and the security officer called Rath van Dorn." Winky suspected most of the office had overheard it, given the volume level. "The humans have ceased their search for Officer van Dorn's bosom companion." There was no Parsi equivalent for "wife" or "spouse," for Parsans were hermaphrodites. They had a word for "mate," but it was considered crude and not used in polite conversation.

The liaison bobbed sagely. "But is this not good news?"

Winky knew what the liaison meant—Parsan leaders had feared the search would prompt humans to breach the borders of the Terran Zone. "It would be, if that were an end of the matter.

But the officer intends to continue the search on its own.”

“Ah.” The liaison scratched at its bare chin as though fur still grew there. “I find Officer van Dorn is one of the more respectful humans.”

“If your bosom companion disappeared, would you rest until you knew what had happened?”

“I would stop at the boundaries of my territory!”

Winky cocked its head. “You are not human.”

A rumble sounded from the liaison’s chest.

“The council should hear of this,” Winky said.

Lexitus drew a deep breath. “Of course, you are right. It will take several days to assemble. In the meantime, we will be . . . watchful.”

* * *

Rath strode north along a tree-lined boulevard, hardly registering his surroundings. The Company had offered wristbands and other communication devices to the natives, but they were uninterested in human technology for communication or anything else. The liaison had one in its office but rarely responded to it in a timely fashion, so Rath found it more expedient to visit the Parsan encampment in person. He had gone several times in his role as a security officer, chasing suspected vandals or petty thieves. In the end, the perpetrator never turned out to be Parsan. Never. That made no difference to the residents of the Terran Zone; when jewelry disappeared or property was damaged, the victim was always sure it was the house-kin/delivery-kin/nanny-kin. So Halstaadt Security trotted over and spoke to the liaison, then to the suspect. Rath never minded going because, as often as not, the suspect provided information the victim had overlooked. And it was widely held that Parsans could not lie.

Now he wondered which of his colleagues had come here to ask about Lakshmi’s disappearance. Not all of them had the patience and finesse required to deal with the natives. But Rath had always gotten on well with Lexitus, and he hoped today’s visit would be fruitful.

An odor penetrated his musings, and Rath chided himself for losing track of his surroundings. Imported trees had given way to a mix of shrubs, both imported and native, that were overrun by flowering native creepers. The fragrance was both sharp and sweet. He knew from previous visits that many Parsans employed within the Zone liked to doss down here, taking comfort in the familiar smell. Rath suspected it also masked the human musk permeating the rest of the zone.

A tall hedge marked the boundary of the Parsan encampment, broken here and there by access points. Across the street from the largest of these sat a hut of native materials, intricately woven stems mimicking the brickwork pattern of surrounding human structures. How like the Parsans to construct a building designed to blend innocuously into the streetscape! Or was that a function of the plants they used? On this planet, it was hard to know. The form-altering Parsans had not come from nowhere: other native flora and fauna had an unnerving tendency to adapt their appearance to blend in with the surroundings. Rumor had it the first humans laying out a drilling site had used several chunks of plascrete debris as rough markers, only to have the “rocks” scuttle away when their backs were turned.

A gray-haired Parsan in a civilian jumpsuit appeared in the doorway of the hut and smiled. “Fresh fruit and clear skies, Officer van Dorn.”

“Soft rain and dry sleeping, Lexitus.”

“I am pleased to see you. Although—” The liaison’s smile disappeared. “I am saddened by your current circumstances.” It gestured toward the small patio fronting the building, where a table and chairs stood. “Please sit down.”

Rath hesitated. In all the times he’d been to the liaison’s office, he had never been invited inside. He wondered if Parsans were accustomed to conducting business outdoors, or if they simply couldn’t tolerate the smell of humans in so small an enclosed space. Drawing a deep breath, he took a seat and tried to shed the tension in his neck and shoulders.

The liaison took a seat opposite him, its skin darkening slightly. “Oh, my, you look tired, Officer van Dorn. Is there any news of your wife?”

Rath had noticed this darkening of Lexitus’ complexion during previous visits and wondered

if it was a response to his own coloring. He also wondered if the liaison was even aware of it. “No, Lexitus, no news,” he said. “In fact, that’s why I’ve come.” He wet his lips, tried to find the best way to make his request. He couldn’t afford to offend the Parsans, not when he needed their help so badly. “Lexitus, I—The Company has called off the search.”

Lexitus thrilled sympathetically. “This must be difficult for you.”

“They have—” He hated to admit it, but he’d read the entire file before he came. “They have looked everywhere they know to look. Many times.”

“Might she have left aboard a freighter?”

Not without a major conspiracy, of that Rath was sure. But why would anyone want to whisk Lakshmi off the planet? She was a skilled equipment operator, for Pete’s sake, not a quality inspector or a computer tech with access to sensitive information. And she’d been out on maternity leave for six months before she disappeared. “I don’t think so, Lexitus. Too many people would have to know, and someone would have . . . She has to still be here. Somewhere.”

The liaison made a ticking sound. “So you have not given up.”

“No.” Rath inhaled. “Which is why I wish to petition the Elders to let me look for her outside the Zone.”

Lexitus leapt up, knocking over its chair. “Oh! Oh, Officer van Dorn, I—”

“Please.” Desperation crept into his voice. “Just ask them, please. I will be respectful, I promise. You know me. I just want to—Maybe she strayed into the jungle.” And left Nissa alone in the house? Impossible. “Or someone may have hidden her there.” It was the only explanation. But why? Who would want to take Lakshmi?

“I—I—” Lexitus’s hair rippled and one foot shivered—highly agitated. “Of course, since you ask it, I will relay this request. But—you understand—we just don’t let others—” It sat down abruptly. “I will bring this to the Council of Elders.”

Something inside Rath unclenched. “Thank you.” He took a deep breath, felt a residual ache in his chest. “One more thing, if I may presume upon your kindness.” He tried to smile. The grimace he got in return was also meant to be a smile, he knew. He wondered if his own failed as miserably. “I—I need to hire a, uh, caretaker for my daughter.”

Lexitus’s eyes widened. “Do you not take her to the Company nursery?”

“I have been, but I’m going to be on leave. That’s—it’s like a temporary stop in my employment while I look for Lakshmi. So I can’t really use the Company nursery during this time.”

Lexitus nodded, though its brow furrowed as if it weren’t quite sure it understood. “I see. So you need someone to care for an infant?”

“Yes.” Lakshmi had suggested getting a nanny-kin when her maternity leave was up, but Rath had scoffed at the idea. That’s what the Company nursery was for, he’d said. Now here he was, requesting the very service he had scorned. “If you know of someone with experience, I would appreciate your recommendation.”

This time the nodding was firmer. “Yes. Yes, that I can help you with, I am sure. There are many among us who enjoy raising children.”

“I don’t need someone to raise her,” Rath objected, “just—” And that was the problem, wasn’t it? He didn’t want Nissa raised by someone else while he and Lakshmi worked. “It’s just for the short term, until I—until my leave is up.”

Lexitus bent its head. “Of course.”

Rath stood up. “Thank you for your assistance, Lexitus. You are an excellent liaison, and I appreciate everything you have done for me in the past.” It had not escaped his notice that Parsans responded positively to praise. “I trust you can be helpful in this, too.”

“I will do what I can,” Lexitus said, rising and giving a slight bow. “Clear skies and—and calm evenings.”

* * *

Rath paced the length of the living room absently, Nissa cuddled against his shoulder. Being in the house without Lakshmi made him restless. He should talk to his neighbors again. Three of them had been home the day Lakshmi disappeared, but all claimed to have seen nothing, heard nothing, until Edna Ivanov from next door noticed the baby crying incessantly just after shift

change. Unable to raise Lakshmi on the comm, she checked and found the van Dorns' back door standing open, along with several windows. Of Lakshmi there was no sign. A call to Rath had brought him on the double, closely followed by two other security officers. They searched the house and found her wristband in a trash bin, but they found nothing missing, nothing disturbed, just—no Lakshmi.

"She wouldn't leave Nissa," Rath muttered to himself now, remembering how his colleagues had questioned him. How were things at home? Any arguments? Money troubles? Was Lakshmi happy on Parsa, or did she want to return to her parents on Earth?

Rath had laughed. "She grew up here. Her parents only transferred back five or six years ago, so she could go to college. She couldn't wait to come back to Parsa." The investigators hadn't wanted to believe that—who would want to come here?—but none of her clothing or belongings were missing, not even her storage orb, or "storbie," where she kept all her personal files, photos, music. Someone had taken her, someone she knew, leaving no sign of either forced entry or struggle.

So Rath would start with the neighbors, question them all again, because someone must have seen something, noticed something. Any little thing that seemed out of the ordinary—or maybe very ordinary, so routine it didn't stand out. Had she been in the garden, weeding her vegetables? Had she left the door open to be sure she could hear Nissa if she cried? Was that where her kidnappers had found her?

Maybe they hadn't expected to find anyone home. Nervous about leaving Nissa at the nursery, Lakshmi had arranged to stretch her maternity leave by working part-time for the past month, three days on and three days off. Maybe someone had broken in and—But there was no forced entry. It had to have been someone she knew, someone she had let in. In a population that shifted every couple of years, Lakshmi didn't have close friends, but there were her coworkers, neighbors in the housing row, people who might stop by to see the new baby. However, footage from the front door camera showed nothing.

Back door, then? Ironically, the report Rath had been writing when she disappeared was on the scarcity of security cameras in company housing. Each house had a front door camera, but that was it. The report demonstrated how a person could move from house to house through back gardens without being detected. At other company sites, drones filled in the blanks, but here drones were banned by the contract Osminog had with the Parsans. Arte maintained the natives had a phobic aversion to flying things, but Rath suspected the idea of robotic scrutiny was unsettling to a race that had always relied on camouflage for survival.

As if on cue, Rath's front door camera chimed now. "Lanny, put door camera on screen," Rath called to the house system, and the video of swimming fish he'd had on the wall screen to entertain Nissa was replaced with a view of his front stoop. A Parsan stood there, slight of build with wavy golden-brown hair, flawless pale skin, and beneath its snug jumpsuit—breasts. Small, but definitely breasts.

Rath jerked open the door. The Parsan startled but recovered quickly. "Sunny days and quiet nights," it said. "Officer van Dorn? I am Myrna. The liaison sent me."

Myrna's hairline still encroached on smooth cheeks—a common effect in Parsans who reverted to their natural appearance at night. "Fair skies and sweet blossoms," he said, trying not to look at those incongruous breasts. "Please, call me Rath. I take it you're the—ah—" He hated to use the word "nanny-kin" in front of her—of it—unsure if it would find that demeaning. "The amah."

Her—its—head cocked slightly as it reached for a translation and came up blank. "Amah?"

He cleared his throat. "Someone who takes care of a child in the child's home."

A smile lit its face—it had practiced that gesture, it looked more natural than most Parsan smiles. "Yes. Yes, I am the amah. At least, I hope to be. I assume you wish to interview me first."

"Of course." In truth, he hadn't given it a thought. "Please come in. Have a seat." It entered and perched primly on the edge of the sofa while he took a chair opposite, Nissa sleeping now on his shoulder. "Myrna. That's a very . . . feminine name."

"Yes, I thought it would be better for the child to have a gender-specific nanny—amah—and

since you are male, it was only logical I should become female.”

“Logical,” he agreed, his eyes dropping to her breasts.

“Have I done them right?” she asked anxiously. “I know they’re small, but I only began growing them a few hours ago. I’ll continue to work on them.”

“They’re fine,” he hastened, forcing his eyes back to her face. “Really. Don’t put yourself out.” He didn’t know how Parsans were able to manipulate their bodies at the cellular level—no one did, since they wouldn’t allow themselves to be studied—but he did know that radical changes could be painful. “So—do you have experience with children?”

“Among Parsans, child rearing is a group activity, and I have done quite a lot. Nurturing human children is much the same.” Her skin darkened slightly as she spoke. “Also, I have been employed in the Company nursery for half a rotation. So I actually know your daughter Nissa and have cared for her there.”

“Good. That’s good.” He had no idea what else to ask her. “Ah . . . would you be able to stay overnight if I need that?”

Myrna hesitated. “I could do that. If needed.”

“It won’t be at first, but maybe later.” If his petition to search outside the Zone was granted, it might involve several nights away. “Are you sure you don’t mind? If you do, please say so now.” He knew some nanny-kins and other domestics lived with their human employers, but not very many. And while Rath had grown up in a mixed-racial community, he sometimes found it uncomfortable to be the oddball in a non-blended setting. He understood the Parsans’ reluctance.

“Oh, I have no trouble with humans,” Myrna said, and Rath blinked. Had she just implied humans were inferior? *Well, maybe we are. We’re violent and greedy, and we insist on adapting our environment to us, not the other way around.* “I am quite enjoying my time among you,” she continued. “It is an adventure.”

There was really only one other thing he wanted to know. “Myrna, why do you want this job?”

Her eyes widened. “The liaison said you need someone. That you are taking leave to look for your wife, but you can’t really do that without someone to care for Nissa while you are out following leads.”

“Leads.”

She blinked several times and corrected herself. “Leads. So you need a nanny. An amah.” She did something funny with her lips, pulling them in. “Is that not correct?”

“Yes, it is entirely correct,” he assured her. “I just . . . wondered. And thank you. For being willing to do this.”

She flashed that smile at him, a stunning arrangement of very straight and even human teeth. “Am I hired?”

“You’re hired. I’ll pay whatever your salary was at Nursery,” he said. “Plus your meals, and an additional stipend if you’ll take care of shopping for Nissa, whatever she needs. Oh, and, uh . . .” He cleared his throat. “I don’t know what kind of foods you eat.”

“Oh, just about any Terran vegetables will do.” This smile was a little forced, with no teeth showing.

“My wife is vegan, so I know how to do that,” he said. Lakshmi would cook anything for him, but she was unbending about her own diet. “And—is there a Parsan market in the Zone? I’d be happy to—”

“I have access to native foods whenever I like. But sometimes the shift to human form can cause . . . digestive issues. It’s better if I stay with Terran vegetables.” She blinked rapidly.

He decided to revisit the topic again later, when she had settled in. “Fine, I’ll buy lots of vegetables. As usual.” Sitting back, he studied her again briefly. Shy, a bit nervous, but no more than a young human interviewing for a job. With those budding breasts, she looked about twelve. “When can you start?”

“Would tomorrow morning be acceptable?”

Now it was Rath who smiled, possibly for the first time since Lakshmi disappeared. “That

would be great. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

* * *

Grekhekh stood with its eyes closed, taking in the scents of the forest, the chattering calls of the arboreal thneken. It had walked two days from a place near the western river, cutting short its journey to bring news back to the Elders. Now it stood once more at the verge of its home territory, its message delivered, its responsibility discharged. It was up to the Elders now to decide what to do.

Slowly it inhaled, finding the fragrant air still marred by the four-moons charring. Then it opened its eyes and gazed across the blackened belt of ground surrounding the Terran Zone. Long before Grekhekh's birth, the Elders had decreed this strip of land be burnt regularly to keep any alien plants from drifting beyond the Zone. Like cauterizing a wound, Grekhekh thought, to prevent infection. Ugly, painful, but necessary.

"Grekhekh."

It turned at the sound of its name to see Kreshkhup standing outside the Council bower. The old one bothered Grekhekh. It had lived so long among humans, Grekhekh wondered if it had lost its Parsan identity entirely. These days it was seldom seen outside the Zone, where it was known as Winky, and Grekhekh had been surprised to see it with the Elders today. Perhaps, like Grekhekh, Winky brought news. Grudgingly, Grekhekh hunched its shoulders in respect for Kreshkhup's age, if nothing else.

"The Council wishes to speak with you again," Winky said.

How strange it looked with that high forehead and bald cheeks. How strange it sounded, its voice high and shrill uttered through human vocal chords. But Grekhekh bobbed its head. "It is my honor to attend them." Approaching the bower door, it asked, "Do they question what I saw on my journey?"

Winky blinked rapidly. "That is for the Council to say."

Something in this response sent a ripple through Grekhekh's skin, shading it instinctively toward the green and brown of the surrounding forest.

* * *

Homer Santiago sagged against the jamb of his front door. "I'm sorry, Rath, I don't know what to tell you," he said. "They were just days. Normal days. Nothing out of the ordinary, until . . ." He sighed heavily.

Until Lakshmi was gone. Rath had questioned his neighbors, even those who had not been at home, about the days leading up to the kidnapping. He insisted on thinking of it as a kidnapping, unable to admit another possibility. Lakshmi was alive, somewhere. She had to be.

But where? Security had been over every inch of the Terran Zone: buildings, mines, open space. They'd even scanned down to a depth of ten feet with the Company's mining radar and found nothing. All departing freighters had been held until they could be searched. Rath was convinced he needed to search outside the Zone.

"And after the . . . incident?" he prodded his portly neighbor. "No one skulking around? No looky-loos behaving oddly?"

Homer snorted. "Just your cop friends. That Darnell Hoskins, he thinks he's Sherlock Holmes or something."

Rath suppressed a smile. He was well aware of his colleague's over-dramatic approach to working an investigation, born of an over-inflated ego. It reinforced Rath's desire to redo every step of the search process. But after three days, he had found no flaw in the procedures, no new evidence, no overlooked clue.

"Besides, I was asleep most of the time," Homer added. "You know that. Night shift."

Rath remembered night shift all too well and was profoundly glad his posting on Parsa had come with a day-shift guarantee. "Well, if anything pops into your brain," he said, "no matter how insignificant, don't hesitate. I don't mind chasing ghosts." Then he turned from Homer's door and crossed the street to his own.

Most of the three hundred residents of the Terran Zone lived in multi-family units near the Company's administrative complex, planning to stay only for a two- or three-year posting. But

Lakshmi had grown up here in an upscale rowhouse on the outskirts of the Zone, so when she and Rath had come back, she'd wanted a place with "a back garden, not a lift." Rath wasn't about to provide anything less for her. He liked it; it reminded him of his childhood home in Ohio, and he enjoyed the walk to work.

As he entered the rowhouse now, he heard Myrna singing. It sent a spasm through his stomach—Lakshmi used to sing like that. Softly, sweetly, her voice floating like a fragrance on the air. It was how they'd met, back in Odessa. Osminog Company had sponsored a picnic on the shore for its employees, and Rath had drawn the security detail. As the new guy with Halstaadt Security, he'd been given the task of patrolling the outbuildings while his colleagues enjoyed the sunshine and balmy breezes nearer the beach. As he made his third circuit past a wooden gazebo, an ethereal voice lifted his heart like a dry leaf and drew him in.

She sat on a railing, her back against a post, gazing past the crowded canopies where people thronged around tables laden with food. He didn't recognize the song, but he thought the language was Italian and wondered if it was from an opera. Her colorful sari fluttered in the breeze, and sunlight winked off the bangles in her ears and on her wrists. Rath thought he had never seen anything so beautiful.

He waited till she paused before he spoke. "That's lovely."

She startled, nearly losing her balance on the railing, and swung around to face him. "I—Thank you," she managed, the lilt of a native Hindi-speaker in her voice. "I didn't know anyone—" She took a breath, straightened herself on her perch. "It's all right to be here, isn't it?"

"Yes, we have the entire grounds today," he assured her. "Gazebo included."

"I just—I'm not used to this many people. Strangers."

"Then let me introduce myself." He held out his hand. "I'm Ratherby van Dorn. Call me Rath." He tapped the Halstaadt name and insignia on his jumpsuit. "I'm the lucky guy working today."

"Lakshmi Bhatt. My father is a personnel manager with the Company." She adjusted her seat on the railing, and he was afraid she meant to leave, but instead she said, "Ratherby. That's a—British name?"

He chuckled. "No, that's my mother's idea of a joke. When she was dating my father, he asked if she'd like to be a Nubian princess, and she said, 'No, I'd rather be van Dorn.'"

Her trilling laugh sent a jolt of electricity from his breast to his groin. "Bhatt. That's—Punjabi?" he guessed. "Is that where you're from?"

"My family is from Kashmir, actually," she said, "but I grew up on Parsa."

She'd gone on then to explain about life in the Zone—"There weren't as many people in the whole installation as there are at this picnic!"—and how her parents had transferred back to Earth so she could attend college—"But a small college, here in Odessa, and I still live at home. Till I make the transition, anyway. You know. Adjust."

Rath didn't know if she'd ever really adjusted. And the only transition she'd made was from her father's house to his when, eighteen months later, they were married.

Now he closed his front door loudly enough for Myrna to hear, and the singing stopped.

"It's just me," he called.

A moment later, she appeared in the kitchen doorway. True to her word, she had enlarged the size of her breasts. They curved very nicely beneath her plain tan jumpsuit. A string of fresh yellow flowers circled her neck, dipping fetchingly toward those soft globes. "Any luck?" she asked.

Rath forced his gaze up to her face and exhaled heavily. "Not really. I took a rover out to the drill site and the pits early this morning, but that's just acres and acres of rocks and tailings and terraced cuts—you couldn't hide anything out there." It was no wonder the Parsans had been perfectly willing to allow mining on the barren land. "So I came back here to canvass the neighborhood again, catch some people I missed before. Much as I hate to say it, the initial investigators did a pretty thorough job." He rubbed his chin in frustration. "How's Nissa?"

"She was a little fretful earlier, but she's napping now. I think she might be getting a tooth."

He nodded, wondering how much more that would disrupt his sleep. Or maybe that was the reason she wasn't sleeping through the night yet. "Well, I'm beat," he admitted. "Would you

mind sticking around another half hour while I grab a catnap?"

"I'd be glad to," she said, and she looked genuinely happy. "Would you like me to cook something for you before I go?"

It was tempting—he wasn't much of a cook, relying on ready-mades and cafeteria fare since Lakshmi had disappeared. But he didn't want to abuse her good heart. "Um . . . no, that's okay, I'll manage."

"It's no trouble, really. Your power stove makes it so easy."

He was about to give in when his wristband chimed with an incoming call. Glancing at it, he saw the call came from the Parsan liaison. It knew how to use a comm when it wanted to, though it was awkward and clearly uncomfortable doing so. What had prompted the liaison to comm him now? Dread crept like a snake into Rath's bowels.

"Hold that thought," he told Myrna. "I need to take this." She faded away into the kitchen as he tapped the wristband to accept the call. "Yes, Lexitus?" Belatedly he realized he'd forgotten to greet the Parsan before coming to the point. "Fair skies and . . . fresh water," he added lamely.

The Parsan's smile looked more like a grimace than ever. "Calm seas and fresh winds," it replied, and Rath wondered if that was a jab at his manners. On Earth, that was the sailor's paradox: wishing for calm seas and a brisk wind. "How is your little one?"

"She's doing very well," Rath said. "She still fusses and seems to be looking for her mother, but she's taken to her nanny."

"I am glad to hear this. And you—Are you finding Myrna's services satisfactory?"

"Yes, Lexitus, most satisfactory."

The niceties taken care of, the liaison moved on. "You asked me to approach the Council of Elders regarding a journey outside the Terran Zone to look for your wife." Lexitus took a deep breath. "This was not well received, as you might imagine. I understand there was much discussion before a decision was rendered."

Rath's chest tightened, his heart beating a slow *thump ka-thump ka-thump*. "I know it's a lot to ask."

"I received their decision this afternoon. Your request will be granted—"

"Thank you!" It burst from Rath's lips before he could think better of interrupting.

"—with certain conditions."

Rath sucked in air and closed his eyes. "Anything."

"You will be accompanied by a Parsan guide. You must not go anywhere outside the Zone without this guide."

Relief flooded through Rath. "That's wonderful. I need a guide, I'd be grateful for a guide. Thank you, Lexitus. And my thanks to the Elders."

"And you will have one week only."

His elation collapsed like a deflating balloon. "But . . . if I find—"

Rapid blinking by the liaison. "There is no appeal. One week, or nothing."

Rath forced himself to inhale slowly. "I understand. One week."

"You will have a day to prepare," Lexitus continued. "You will need to carry food—I'm afraid our plants do not always agree with human digestion. The temperature range will be tolerable in a standard jumpsuit, but you may want an extra covering at night. Your guide will provide shelter. And lead you to water, but bring a container to carry water with you. The terrain outside the Zone can be . . . challenging."

"Can't be worse than what I saw in the army," Rath assured him. He had done a tour in the Soutpansberg Mountains in Africa, though in fact he had done very little hiking since then. He had good boots, though, and that was 50 percent of it.

"Your guide will come to your house later today to introduce itself. It has been traveling through outlying villages for a time, so it is—what do you humans say? Rough?"

Ra w, Rath thought, but he didn't say it. In this context, the word sounded coarse. "Yes, rough. No problem. I'm just grateful for the help."

"Clear skies and dry ground," Lexitus said, and this time the convention rang with truth.

* * *

“Will you be able to stay with Nissa while I go?” Rath asked anxiously. He had joyously relayed the gist of the call to Myrna, then realized the burden it would put on her.

She blinked rapidly, seated on a stool at the kitchen table. “I—why, yes, I think I can do that.” The flowers around her neck gave off a soft fragrance, clean and light. Lakshmi had come home from the market one day wearing a wreath like that, and he had chided her for it, pointing out that no one but natives wore flowers. Why had he done that? So what if she’d wanted to wear flowers?

But, “You’re right,” Lakshmi had said, taking them off and coiling them into a tight ring that she set aside. Later he’d seen them in the composter. *Honey, I’m sorry, you can wear all the flowers you want. Just come home safe.*

Now he gave a sigh and rolled his neck, encouraging the tension there to exit. “You don’t know how much I appreciate this, Myrna. I’m headed out to pick up supplies now, but when I get back I’ll arrange for one of the neighbors to check with you while I’m gone, make sure everything’s okay. See if you need anything. And of course I’ll pay you extra. I’ll ask the Nursery coordinator what’s fair, she’ll know.”

“I’m sure that will be fine.”

Parsans never seemed very concerned about money, Rath had noticed. And why would they be? What would they buy with it? Basic food and clothing, he supposed, but they preferred to sleep outdoors or in shelters of natural materials, they shunned the electronic gadgets or entertainments humans enjoyed, and the only adornments they wore were fresh flowers. He thought it admirable that human greed had not worn off on them, but it left him feeling he was missing some essential part of the picture, some key to the Parsan psyche that was not visible.

His comm sounded again, and Rath stepped out of the kitchen to take the call. Arte Brown’s weathered face appeared on the screen. “You look better,” was his first remark. “Getting some sleep?”

“Some.” He’d felt weary when he came home, but now all thoughts of rest had fled, and his brain hummed with plans. He’d need to visit Supplies for gear—some multi-goggles, a tracker to record his movements, maybe a spare storbie to record what he saw. And food. Shelf-stable ready-mades were better heated, but they were tolerable as-is. Oh, and he’d have to authorize Myrna to get medical care for Nissa if she needed it, or any other kind of care and—

“I hear you went to see the Parsan liaison.”

Rath’s attention came back to Arte. “Who told you that?”

“Doesn’t matter. Listen, Rath, you—”

“Yes I went to see him, and you know what? The Elders gave me permission.”

Arte’s jaw sagged. “Per—permission—”

“To go outside the Zone to look for Lakshmi. I guess *they* don’t think that’s an unreasonable idea.”

Arte licked his lips. “Rath, I don’t think you want to do that.”

“Why not?”

“Jesus, Rath, you don’t know what’s out there! Animals. Poisonous plants. Do you know how easy it is to get lost in a jungle like that?”

“They’re giving me a guide.”

For a long moment, Arte just stared open-mouthed at him. Then, “Rath, this is a really, really bad idea.”

“Why?”

“It’s an alien planet, Rath. They haven’t let us explore it. No satellite imaging allowed, no aerial surveys, no—”

“The Parsans have explored it. And they’re willing to take me.”

“Yes, but there’s no comm service outside the Zone, and Parsans—Face it, Rath, they may be nice people, but they’re no good in a fight. And think about it: there must be a reason Parsans developed that insane camouflage. They must have predators!”

“You could issue me a weapon.”

“You know I can’t do that!”

Rath did know. Weapons were only issued upon proof of a deadly threat, and only to senior security officers who had passed assorted psychological fitness tests. "I'll have my pocket knife, I can whittle myself a spear," he said.

Arte sighed. "When do you leave?"

ASAP. The reply was on Rath's tongue, but he hesitated. "In a couple days. I have some things to finish up first." Why had he lied? To Arte? "I want to follow up with the delivery-kin who covers this neighborhood, for one thing. It may have seen something on another street, something out of place. You know how they are—they don't volunteer information. You have to be specific." He'd already talked to the delivery-kin and learned nothing.

"Okay, just promise me you'll take some time to think before you head out of the Zone, okay?"

Arte asked. "Give me a call and let me know how you do with the delivery-kin."

You mean let you know before I leave the Zone. "You bet." *Not.*

* * *

The creature on Rath's doorstep made his heart stutter momentarily. He'd met raw Parsans before, but this one was the rawest he'd ever seen. A fine coating of taupe-colored fur covered its exposed skin from its short forehead to its four-toed feet, leaving only minimal bare patches around its drooping, deep-set eyes, flat nose, and wide mouth. Even the small earholes were edged by fur. It was nearly as tall as he—unusual in a Parsan—and its shoulders sloped deeply, beneath a woven shirt that hung to its wrinkled knees. If it wore short pants beneath the shirt, Rath could not tell.

"Rraath van Dorr?" it growled in a deeper voice than Rath had heard from any Parsan before.

"Yes. I'm Rath van Dorn," Rath said just as Myrna came skittering in from the kitchen with Nissa in her arms.

"Fair skies and soft breezes," Myrna called, her nose twitching briefly. "A pleasant day and fine weather, don't you agree?"

Rath was puzzled by her sharp tone and the fact of her interruption until he realized the creature at his door had not begun with the customary Parsan greetings. Myrna was trying to make up for its rudeness.

The coloring around the stranger's eyes and nose darkened slightly, then lightened as the creature straightened itself, worked its jaw a few times, and swallowed visibly. It spoke again. "A pleasant day and fine weatherr," it said, the pitch of its voice slightly higher, its articulation clearer.

"Fresh fruit and sweet water," Rath responded.

As he watched, the creature's throat undulated again with some internal working. When it spoke again, its voice had shed even more roughness. "I have been sent to the home of Security Officer Rath van Dorn."

Rath was about to welcome it in when Myrna snapped, "And does one have no name?"

It glared at her, then wrinkled its nose and pursed its lips. "I beg your pardon. And yours, Officer van Dorn. I am Grekhekh, of Mshtoina and—"

Myrna stamped her foot.

The creature huffed. "But the Elders have given me a human name, as it pleases them. You may call me—" It puckered its lips again. "Patience."

Rath brought a hand to his mouth to cover his urge to laugh. Once he had—he hoped—wiped the smirk away, he gestured broadly for the creature to enter. "Welcome, Patience, I'm glad to meet you. Please come in."

Myrna bobbed slightly as Patience stepped into the living room. "And I am called Myrna. I care for Officer—for Rath's child Nissa." It had taken Rath several days to convince Myrna to call him by his first name. "I am an *amah*." Her lips twitched into a smile.

"Safe walking and sound sleep," Patience said. Its voice had smoothed considerably, although Rath thought he still detected a certain hesitancy in its speech. "I did not know an amah lived here."

Myrna stiffened but said nothing. Rath wondered what in that sentence had offended her.

"Your home is warm and pleasant," Patience said to Rath.

Rath was stymied. Apparently further pleasantries were required, but he had no idea how to respond. “Uh . . . you are welcome in it,” he ventured. “Would you like to sit?”

“Thank you.” Patience stepped onto an area rug and dropped into a crouch.

Myrna hissed, but Rath waved her off. “It’s all right, Myrna. Let him be comfortable.” He took a seat on the sofa facing Patience. “I take it you are the guide the Elders promised me. Have they explained my situation to you?”

Patience’s shoulders relaxed, and its chin dropped fractionally. “I am told you wish to travel outside the Terran Zone. That you seek your—” He searched for the word. “Wiff.”

“Wife. Her name is Lakshmi.”

“Lakhhshhmeeee.” Patience rolled the word in its mouth and gave the approximation of a grin. “This is a beautiful name.”

“She is a beautiful woman.” Giving up on the indirection of Parsan discourse, Rath gave Patience a quick summary of Lakshmi’s disappearance.

“The truth is,” he finished, “I don’t know where else to look for her, except outside the Zone. And I have no idea where outside to begin a search.” He had looked at the satellite images taken before first contact, but they told him very little about the planet’s single continent. To the east, the terrain looked like dried lakebed—flat and lifeless. To the west, a remnant of prairie shifted quickly into wooded foothills and then densely forested highlands.

Patience nodded. “We should begin on the jungle side. The desert side is . . . unproductive.”

“That makes sense.”

“And we should start soon.”

“That also makes sense.” Rath gestured toward his waiting backpack. “I’m ready when you are.”

Patience furrowed its brow as it studied the pack. “Why so big?” It tested the air with its flat nose, then said, “Ah. You need human food.” Rising deftly from its crouch, it headed for the door. “In the morning. Come to the shtruggpik at dawn.”

Rath threw a questioning look at Myrna. “The Parsan gathering place. Encampment, I think you call it.”

“Of course. I’ll be there.”

“Soft rain and dry sleeping,” Myrna called as Patience opened the door.

It cast a glance back over its shoulder at them. “Peaceful rest and pleasant imaginings.”

It had scarcely closed the door behind it when Myrna rounded on Rath. “I do not like this one.” In her arms, Nissa began to fuss. “It is ill-mannered and abrupt. And its parting wish was . . .” She pursed her lips. “Forward and backward.”

“Double-edged.” Rath nodded. *Sweet dreams.* “Yeah, I caught that. But he’s my ticket outside the Zone, so I have to go.”

Myrna’s eyes darted back and forth. “I do not understand why the Elders assigned such a rude person. They must have others better suited to interact with humans.”

Rath touched her shoulder. “I’m sure they had their reasons.” As she turned her face up to him, he saw her dark brown eyes were wide and hopeful. “I’ll be fine,” he said, and she relaxed fractionally. He wanted to kiss her smooth forehead, just to reassure her, but he doubted the gesture would be well-received. “I’m sure Patience was chosen for its skill as a guide, rather than its diplomacy.”

Myrna nodded and turned away. “I’m sure you are right,” she said. “But the Elders have never let a human travel outside the Zone. Never. And to send you with this one—” She shook her head. “I do not like it.”

* * *

Rath did not wait for dawn. With only one of Parsa’s moons glimmering dimly in the east, he stole through the Zone’s streets, keeping to shadows, until he slipped through a break in the tall hedge surrounding the Parsan encampment. For a moment he stood there, assessing his surroundings, wondering how to find Patience among the dozens of bodies slumbering under shrubs and arbors and in makeshift huts all around him. Even his goggles with night-vision would not help him pick out one raw Parsan among so many.

Nearby, one of the bodies stirred, raising its head to look in his direction. It seemed unperurbed by his presence, only made a soft chuffing noise, then pointed toward the main entrance. Rath nodded. Apparently he was expected. He hitched up his backpack and headed for the entrance.

Weaving through shrubbery in the darkness, he nearly ran into a large tree-like plant. He'd seen a few of these monsters scattered throughout the Zone and wondered if they were Parsan or something left behind by the G'Maht Zhee. Nearly a meter across, its squat trunk branched quickly into bare limbs that sprouted flowers the size of dinner plates.

"Be careful or it will eat you."

Rath whipped around to see Patience standing not a pace away, it fur limned in moonlight. Gone was its tunic. Only an apron of woven leaves skirted its loins. "I—is it actually carnivorous?"

Patience chuffed. "No, it does not eat flesh. But if you place something in its branches, they will quickly grow around it and make that thing part of itself."

"Encapsulation." Rath shivered. "And is it native to Parsa?"

"The Cold Eyes brought it. They offered things to their gods by putting them in the k'nonk pa." Patience tapped a branch. "And now it creeps through our forests. We try to kill it, but—" It waved a hand.

Rath nodded. "An invasive species."

Patience grunted, then gestured at the entrance ahead. "You do not like our gate?"

"I didn't want anyone to see me."

It was silent a moment. "Any human," it clarified.

Rath snorted. "As though keeping anything secret from Parsans were possible. You're the biggest gossips I ever met."

Patience's teeth showed white in the dim light. "But only among ourselves. We can keep secrets from humans."

A cold finger skittered up Rath's spine. "I have no doubt of that."

Patience turned its head toward the entrance. "You think someone watches you."

"I don't know why," Rath admitted. "But something's happened to Lakshmi, and I can't explain it, no one can explain it, so . . ." His voice trailed off.

The Parsan's head bobbed slightly. "We will exit another way."

* * *

The boundary surrounding the Terran Zone was kept, not by the Terrans, but by the Parsans. For a hundred meters on all sides of the Zone, the rugged ground was rocky and bare, scorched black by repeated burnings. According to some calendar Rath did not understand, Parsans from within and without the Zone would gather along its perimeter where, with ceremonial chanting and crude torches, they would set fire to every green thing within the boundary, destroying any flora that might have crept in from the outside, or drifted out from within.

"You know why we do this?" Patience asked, waving at the sooty strip of ground while it led Rath across. It had a satchel slung across its shoulder and chest, a strip of woven leaves tied around its forehead.

"To stop invasive species," Rath said promptly.

"Like you." Patience made a chuffing noise Rath took for laughter.

Rath bridled. "I'm not an invader! I'm just—passing through. Just out here to look for my wife, and then I'll go back to the Zone."

Patience stepped over a football-sized rock that had cracked from the repeated heating and cooling. "And what will you take with you?"

"Take with me? Nothing!" Rath was as much surprised as irritated. The question felt accusatory—unusual behavior for a Parsan. Their standard demeanor bordered on obsequious.

"No recordings on your storage device?" Patience prodded. "Pictures of plants and creatures? Memories of odors and sounds? No knowledge of the trails we walk, or where our rivers lie?"

Rath tried not to think of the storbie in his pocket, or the tracker he wore to record his meanderings. "We already know where your rivers lie," he said gruffly. Looking at the satellite

images earlier, glittering lakes and gorges with large rivers had been visible breaks in the thick vegetation.

"But not what lies beneath the forest canopy," Patience pointed out. "Or under the waters."

That was true. In exchange for mining rights in the Zone, Osminog had agreed to make no further incursions into the planet, including the use of additional penetrating imagery. *If it weren't for that, we might have looked for Lakshmi from space.* "I don't care what lies under your oceans," Rath snarled. "Or in your rivers or on top of your mountains. I only care where my wife is."

Patience bared its teeth in an attempt at smiling and jinked its sloping shoulders in imitation of a shrug. "Of course. And that is what we are here to determine." They had reached the far side of the burnt area now, and knee-high plants with slender stalks waved like grass in a fresh breeze. "And since you have no idea where to start, we will skirt the Zone here first to search for some evidence of human passage."

Rath took a deep breath and blew it out. "Yes. Thank you." Maybe it was because Patience was so raw that its questions felt almost aggressive. Maybe its command of the language was responsible.

Or maybe not all Parsans were as deferential as those who worked in the Zone.

* * *

They hiked up into the foothills, following barely-perceptible trails through washes and cuts that took them up into the timber. There were no twenty-five-meter giants here—Rath guessed the tallest boles reached no more than fifteen meters—but the boles branched quickly and were thick with leaf-like foliage. Their skins were not rough bark but a smooth, sometimes slick covering. "What do you call these?" Rath asked his guide. "Not this species, but, you know, the whole . . ."

"Angprakh," Patience said.

"I mean, in my language."

The Parsan curled its lip. "Trees."

Rath shook his head, feeling foolish. He should have realized it was the closest term Parsans could find for their native flora.

For nearly five hours they labored on, Patience scanning the ground carefully, Rath using his multi-goggles first as binoculars, then with infrared, looking for heat signatures. They worked their way from ridge to ridge until, on the north side of a shallow defile, Patience held up a hand to stop their progress. Rath immediately pushed up his goggles and reached for his water bottle. It had been several years since he'd done this much physical labor at one stretch, and while the temp-tolerant fabric of his jumpsuit kept his limbs and torso cool, the goggles made him sweat. He wiped his face with an arm. "Rest break?" he asked.

But Patience shook its head, staring down at the ground. With one finger he beckoned Rath to look.

A boot print. Blood surged through Rath's veins as he recognized the imprint, saw another beyond it and one beyond that. "They were here. Someone was here!" The track pointed away from the Zone, along the defile into deeper cover. Rath turned and pushed through the undergrowth back in the direction from which the tracks had come. In a few strides he broke out of the timber into thick shrubbery that came to his waist. A finger of rock curled out from a hillside here, blocking his view of the Zone.

Patience appeared at his elbow. "This could be it," Rath said, his voice sharp with excitement. "If they came across the boundary at night, even at dusk, they could have been out of sight here while we were still searching the town."

The Parsan grunted. "Perhaps we should see where the tracks lead?"

"Yes." Rath turned abruptly and headed back into the timber. "Of course. Let's see where they go."

They found half a dozen more leading up the defile before the trail crossed a streamlet and disappeared on rocky soil. Patience sniffed the air, then shook its head. "Old," it said. "No smell left." And though they scoured the area, they could find no other trace of human passage.

“At least we have a direction,” Rath said. “Up the ridge and into the trees.

Patience stood and looked around at the terrain. “From here they might have—”

“Up the ridge, they’re clearly headed up the ridge! Why else cross the creek?”

The Parsan shifted its sloping shoulders. “If you say so.”

They mounted the ridge and stopped again, searching to no avail for more boot prints. “They had to have come this way, though,” Rath insisted.

“There are many paths through this country,” Patience said.

“Then we’d better get started.”

* * *

For the next two days they combed a broad swath of the forest. At night Patience cut supple branches and arranged them in a hut that was more screen than shelter, pulling additional foliage across the opening after they had crawled inside. Then it curled up and slept. Rath listened to strange clickings and screeches in the forest outside for the few minutes until he, too, was abducted by sleep.

On the third morning, as he munched a protein bar and Patience stuffed its mouth with some green fronds, Rath surrendered. “So. What do you think we should try next?”

Patience was deconstructing their shelter as it ate, tossing the branches aside. “It is your search.”

Rath snorted. “Yeah, but you know these woods. Don’t you? Where do you think we should go from here?”

Patience pulled one more branch and the low structure collapsed. “Nothing survives without water,” it said. “I would follow the creek.”

“Which creek?” Rath had been filling his water bottle in tiny streamlets they crossed, collecting enough mud with the water that he had to let it settle before drinking.

“The big one.”

Rath didn’t remember any large waterways. “And where is that?”

Patience snapped a frondy stem from a nearby shrub and stripped the green stuff from it. “Not far from where we saw the boot print.”

Rath seized the Parsan’s wrist. “Why didn’t you bring this up two days ago?”

Patience shrank back. “You wanted to climb the ridge,” it said.

Rath immediately released it. “I know I—” Then he stared down at his palm, where fur had come away in his hand. “Patience, are you all right? Did I hurt you? I didn’t mean to—”

Patience shrugged, a gesture more human than its previous twitching of shoulders. It pointed to Rath’s wrist, poking out from his sleeve and mostly hairless. “It happens. There is no pain in the shedding.”

Rath blinked as he realized what the Parsan meant. Then he studied his companion and noticed that its shoulders had less slope now, its nose more definition. “But you—don’t you control it?” he asked. “I mean—you can make yourself more or less like humans, right?”

“We have some control,” Patience said. “We can make intentional alterations, choose certain features to enhance, although it can be . . . taxing.”

“Painful,” Rath guessed.

Patience hunched its shoulders. “We can resist changes, to a degree. I—” It touched its torso, where the barrel frame of its chest extended further down than a human’s. “Struggle to. But changing is what you call instinct, and resisting is not our nature.”

“I’m sorry,” Rath said, not knowing what else to say. He had always assumed Parsans chose to imitate human appearance.

“You are what you are,” Patience said. “And I am what I am.”

Rath brushed the Parsan’s fur from his hand. “Well, listen. If you have some idea where they might have gone—you lead the way. I’ll follow you.”

Patience nodded, then started off through the timber. Snatching up his gear, Rath hurried to keep pace.

* * *

It was near midday when Patience stopped suddenly and held up a hand, testing the air with

its broad nose. The wrinkles of fur edging its earholes perked up into flaps of furred skin which cupped this way and that, zeroing in on a sound. “Quick!” it whispered urgently. “Climb up!” It pointed toward the thick trunk of a nearby tree, then cupped its hands into a recognizable springboard.

Rath asked no questions but placed a foot into the Parsan’s hands. Patience hoisted him easily toward the lowest branch. “Climb!” it hissed, and Rath climbed to a higher branch and the one above that, before peering back down at the forest floor. Patience had scrambled onto the lowest limb and was now stretching himself along its length. Already its color was changing, and Rath watch in amazement as it buried its face in the crook of one arm, shivered twice, and disappeared against the gray wood, leaving its woven satchel looking forlorn and forgotten on the branch.

He could hear something coming now, and taking a cue from his guide, he stretched out along his branch, willing himself to blend with its contour and wishing for the camo fatigues he’d worn in the service. He stripped off his goggles, turned his face away from the sound and lay still, heart pounding. *I am a log. I am a branch.*

Beneath his perch something rustled the undergrowth as it approached. A moment later it trilled softly, hesitated, pawed at the tree, and sniffed audibly. Rath resisted the temptation to peek at it. Finally it trilled again, sniffed a final time, and moved away through the undergrowth. Overcome by curiosity now, Rath turned his head slowly and opened an eye, shielded by his arm. He saw bushes swaying and caught just a glimpse of a crested blue-black head bobbing among the fronds.

Below him, Patience was still a lengthy lump along the lowest branch. He waited until the lump shifted, raised its head slowly and tested the air, ear flaps twitching back and forth. Then, satisfied, it pushed up and straddled the branch, flattening its ears as its fur shifted back to a normal color. “It’s gone,” Patience reported.

Rath eased himself up likewise. “What was it?”

“A shinkchat.”

“Which is?”

Patience sighed. “A predator. Four legs. Big teeth.” It grasped the branch in both hands and swung down.

“It couldn’t see you at all, could it?” Rath asked as he worked his way down through the branches.

“Its eyesight is poor. It relies more on smell.”

“Huh.” Rath dropped to the ground as well. “Didn’t it smell us?”

“It smelled you,” Patience said, “but it didn’t know what you were.”

“And you?”

Patience bared its teeth in a recognizable grin. “Do you smell me?”

Rath leaned toward the Parsan and inhaled, then pulled back in surprise. “You smell like those flowers, the yellow ones!” The ones Lakshmi had tossed into the composter.

Patience chuffed in delight. “Come,” he said. “We must leave this place quickly. The shinkchat will be back. This is its territory.”

Rath didn’t argue.

* * *

Patience moved confidently through the forest now, leading Rath by ways that were more like hesitations in the undergrowth than actual trails. As dusk shaded toward night, it stopped and pointed ahead. “The creek is there.”

Rath could see a thinning of the canopy ahead, a hint of rapidly dimming sky. “Good,” he said, pushing up his goggles and moving to pass the guide. “I need to fill my water bottle.”

But Patience held out a restraining arm. “Not until we have checked for dangers.”

Rath stopped, irritated. He should have known better than to charge into open terrain—but then, what did Patience imagine might be waiting for them? Surely Lakshmi’s captors wouldn’t be holding her in a forest clearing—if you could call the meandering path of the creek a clearing. And they had seen no wildlife on their precipitous trek, no doubt scaring it off with their

noisy passage. “What dangers?” he asked.

The Parsan’s nose twitched—it was definitely not as flat as when they’d first met. “Night flyers,” it said. “Or . . .” It fished for a word. “Mud.”

“Mud?”

Its lips twisted as it fished again. “Sucking mud.”

Rath puzzled over that. “Quicksand?”

Patience frowned. “It is not quick.”

“Soft, wet ground that looks solid but sucks you in.”

“Quicksand,” it repeated. “There is a long stretch of such mud along this creek. It may be further along, or—”

“Well, let’s go test it out!”

Patience shook its head. “In the morning.” It waved a hand to indicate the fading light. “This is a bad time, when the eyes lie.”

“But I’m thirsty.”

“If the ground is bad, the water may be bad. From dead animals that have been caught in it.”

Rath wanted to say something about being a dead animal himself if he didn’t get some water, but he knew that wasn’t true.

Patience eyed him carefully. “We can go upstream,” it said finally, pointing. “Where I know the water is fresh. And in the morning we will find the crossing. There may be tracks.” Moving more cautiously in the dim light, it backtracked through the trees.

“What makes you so sure they crossed?” Rath asked.

Patience hesitated. “The tracks will tell us if they did or didn’t.”

Rath couldn’t argue with that.

* * *

By morning, though, Rath had grown suspicious. Lakshmi had been missing for weeks. Surely any tracks would be lost by now, covered over or washed away. What could they hope to find? But having no better notion of what to do, he followed Patience back to the boggy ground alongside the creek.

“See the stones?” it asked, brushing a bare foot over the damp ground to reveal a scattering of pale pebbles.

“So?”

If his tone upset the Parsan, it did not show. “Where there are stones, it is safe to walk.”

Rath pushed petulantly at the ground with his boot and tested his weight on the sprinkle of stones, found the footing was solid. “And how will you find tracks in this?” he asked.

“Not here.” Patience pointed across the creek. “On that side.” It stepped confidently along the trail of pebbles beside the stream for several meters, then turned and splashed into the creek.

Seeing no alternative, Rath followed. Once at the creek’s edge, he could see broad stepping stones just under the water’s surface, and he used them to cross. His boots were wet, and the moisture seeped through seams into his socks, but it could have been worse. On the far side, Patience squatted a meter or so from the stream, studying the ground. Rath joined him.

The tracks were indistinct: a heel gouge here, a squashed plant there. The occasional tread imprint told him these were made by boots, not the bare feet of Parsans. But Lakshmi had small feet, and these—“How old are these tracks, do you think?”

Patience considered that. “It has not rained for five days, and these were here before then.” He indicated a gap in a heel print. “See where the water has drained.”

“And what makes you think these were made by the people who took Lakshmi? Or anyone who had anything to do with Lakshmi?”

Patience drew back, eyes widening. “Who else would dare?”

Rath balked. Human incursion outside the Zone could cost Osminog its mining contract, that was true. Whoever had made these tracks was up to something nefarious, because why else take the risk? And Lakshmi—had she stumbled onto something, some incriminating document, some suspicious data? Was that why they’d taken her? And who were They? Rath knew nearly

every Company employee by name. Which of them might be involved?

That had always been the question, of course. Which of his neighbors, his coworkers, was responsible for abducting his wife?

He blew out a breath. "Okay. Let's follow them and see what we find."

* * *

The faint tracks led along the creek bank for half a kilometer or so, then veered into the timber. Patience pointed to spots in the plant litter as signs of passage, but Rath could not see them. Still, he followed the guide. Eventually Patience stopped and straightened, and Rath noticed it no longer appeared stooped when it stood. Its facial hair had thinned but coarsened, and Rath rubbed his own cheeks, which were now sporting several days' growth of beard.

Patience tested the air, then shook its head. "From here, we can only guess." It looked back the way they'd come, then forward. "But not far from here is a bigger stream. Good water."

Rath nodded. He'd feared the faint tracks must eventually peter out. Something else bothered him, though, and he finally put it to Patience. "Back there at the creek—how did you know the tracks would be on the other side?"

Its eyes widened. "Because there are patches of quickmud going downstream, and only one place to cross."

"Quicksand," Rath corrected. It made sense, but . . . "Did you know the tracks were there?"

Patience spread its hands. "How could I know?"

Because you might have been there before. Rath stopped short of voicing his suspicion, but a new line of thought tore through his brain. What if it wasn't humans who had taken Lakshmi? The Parsans had quietly infiltrated human society, taking the roles of menials and servants, but what if that was part of a plan? What if they were not quite so gentle and subservient as they seemed? What if they resented—No, he knew they resented human presence on their planet. They had to. What species wouldn't? Even shape-shifting, violence-abhorring, conflict-avoiding Parsans—they *had* to resent the invaders.

Because that's what we are, isn't it? An invasive species, like the plants they take care to burn out around the Zone. Like those big trees the G'Maht Zhee left behind.

But why take Lakshmi? What importance could she have for them? Was it to get to him? He'd always thought he had a good rapport with the Parsans, taking care to observe the niceties, to recognize them as people, to treat them as equals. But maybe that was it. Maybe they had taken Lakshmi to lure him out here, to—what? To see something. Something they couldn't just tell him.

Crazy. Absolutely crazy. That's the way humans thought, not Parsans. But Parsans were oh, so adaptable . . .

Rath drew a great breath and exhaled in a rush. "Okay," he said. If the Parsans had Lakshmi, the sooner he saw what they wanted him to see, the sooner he'd have her back. And if it was someone else who'd taken her, what harm in following his guide? "Lead on. Let's see what we find."

* * *

At the end of the day, they crested a ridge to see a rocky cleft slashed through the land. The forest thinned and vanished as it dived toward the bottom, and on the opposite side Rath noted a number of dark, shadowed openings that might be caves. He adjusted his goggles for a closer look. Definitely caves, but the deep shadows made it impossible to see inside. "Looks like a good place to hide someone," he said, pointing.

Patience made a low throaty sound, eyeing the steep slope before them. Dotted with shrubby vegetation, the descent was slipping into shadow as the sun eased below the opposite rim. "We must wait till morning."

Rath frowned and pushed the goggles up. "How many days do we have left?" He'd lost track somehow, and he hesitated to consult his tracker, not wanting Patience to know he was recording their wanderings. Had they been searching four days now? The Elders had only granted him a week. "How far is it back to the Zone?"

"Two days, maybe less." Patience shifted its feet, eyes still on the slope below. "We have all of

tomorrow to search.”

“And you think we’ll find Lakshmi here? Maybe in one of those caves?” He watched carefully for the Parsan’s reaction.

He was disappointed. Lifting its head, it tested the air. “Humans are here, or have been here recently. I can smell them. I cannot know if your wife is among them.”

Cold crept along Rath’s spine. “This is the first time you’ve been able to smell humans. Even when we had footprints.”

“The trail was old. This place—The smell is stronger here. More humans. And they have been here longer.”

Rath wasn’t sure he believed that, but he had no foundation for his suspicion. Although it was widely held that Parsans could not lie, and certainly Rath had never caught one in an untruth, he knew they could sidestep, deflect, obfuscate. The idea of waiting till morning to continue his search made his jaw tighten, but Patience was right. Trying to navigate the steep slope in the gloaming—“Can you see in the dark?” he asked.

Patience blinked. “Not like a night creature.”

“Well, I can,” Rath said, adjusting the settings on his goggles. “These things have night-vision.”

Patience stared at the cumbersome headgear. “That lets you see in the dark?”

“Among other things.” Rath peered down the slope. Ghostly forms took shape as the goggles enhanced the failing light: rocks, shrubs, tussocks. “It also has infrared capabilities, shows heat signatures. You see that stone outcropping over there?” He pointed. “There’s something sitting on it, a what do you call, a thrishet? Is that right?” Thrishets were among the fauna Patience had pointed scuttling through the trees along their way. Rath looked back to where the forest was denser and saw a shape perched on a branch. “And up there in those trees, among the blossoms, I can see some kind of—”

Suddenly the creature launched itself into the twilight sky, a malevolent shape with wide wings and a narrow body. Patience jumped back, then dropped to the ground. “Down!” it hissed.

Rath hit the dirt, knocking the goggles askew as he buried his face in his arms. Over the sudden pounding of his own blood he heard a squeak of terror, a thump, a long, chittering victory cry—then silence. Peeking up, he saw the shadowy creature, backlit by the last of the sun’s rays, gliding off over the valley with the thrishet dangling in its talons. “What was that?” he asked, his voice a hoarse whisper.

Hearing no response, he looked over at his companion. Patience had pressed itself against the dirt, its fur mottled so it looked like nothing more than a lump of ground. Rath tugged his goggles back into place. Now the infrared showed Patience as a warm glow, but the lumpish quality remained. Rath glanced out over the valley again—no sign of the predator with its prey. “It’s okay,” he said, “it’s gone.”

Slowly, the lump that was Patience quivered, then shifted. Rath watched entranced as arms and legs took on definition and the Parsan inched up into a crouch. Had it really made itself into a formless heap, or was that just an illusion created by its elaborate camouflage?

“A jitjit,” it said, voice rough. “That was a jitjit.” It sighed heavily. “They hunt at night.”

Rath considered the implication. “And are they really a threat for something as big as us?” The jitjit hadn’t looked that big, maybe the size of an eagle or a flying fox.

Patience struggled to its feet, resting its hands on its knees. “If one strikes your head with full force, it can snap your neck. That one has its prey, but others of its family may be nearby.”

“Oh.” Rath sat up, searching the surrounding hillside and timber with his goggles for signs of any other animals. “Then I guess we’ll wait till morning to search the valley.”

He kept checking overhead as they built their shelter for the night, listening for the chittering sound the jitjit had made. *Maybe Arte is right, maybe that’s why the Parsans hate drones. An instinctive fear of flying things.*

Patience moved slowly, giving Rath a chance to try out what he’d observed the Parsan doing on the previous nights. He cut slender stalks with the mini-saw on his pocket knife, then lashed them together for a frame. Patience grunted disapprovingly at his attempts to weave grassy stuff

between the struts and showed him how to bind a handful of stalks with a stem, creating tufts that were easier to work with. But it willingly let Rath do the bulk of the tasks, resting in a squat, its eyes blinking slowly.

Once safely concealed inside the shelter, Rath opened his water bottle and guzzled the contents. "Where can I fill this up?" he asked.

The eyes Patience turned on him glowed yellow in the darkness. "Streamlet. Up canyon." Rath heard a rustling and barely made out the Parsan's long arm pointing the direction. "Not far." The eyes closed. "Stay in the trees."

With his goggles back in place, Rath slipped out of the hut. They were camped well back from the ridge crest, among the dense foliage, but he scanned the branches above him as well as the ground as he stepped quietly and carefully in the direction Patience had indicated. The streamlet he found was hardly worth the name, but he managed to fill his bottle without getting too much dirt in it. On the way back he noticed a patch of the frondy stuff his guide liked to eat; he cut an armful with his pocket knife and carried it back to the hut. "I thought you might be hungry," he said.

He got no response. The Parsan was sound asleep.

* * *

Rath slept badly. His dreams were haunted by the flying monkeys from the *Wizard of Oz* and a dragon that roared and snatched Lakshmi from a rocky precipice. When dawn finally seeped through the hut's walls, he woke to find Patience sitting and wolfing down the greenery he'd brought the night before. "You look better," Rath said.

Patience stopped chewing and blinked at him. "Better?"

"You looked pretty beat last night. I guess that shift really took it out of you."

It resumed chewing and said nothing.

Rath sat up. "What does it feel like?" he asked, genuinely curious. Parsans had confounded Terran biologists by refusing to allow any scans or study of their physiology. He suspected the G'Maht Zhee had conducted such investigations without regard for the physical and emotional damage caused, leaving the Parsans traumatized and refusing any further study, by any means. And whatever the G'Maht Zhee had learned had been lost when they withdrew to their homeworld to exterminate each other.

The Parsans' reluctance to talk about their chamelioid abilities left fertile ground for rumor and speculation. Now, Rath wondered if they knew themselves. His suspicion was reinforced by Patience's response. "It just happens."

"But is it . . . painful?"

It shrugged. "Sometimes."

"Taxing?" That earned Rath a blank look. "Hard work?"

Its chest sagged as if in a sigh. "It can weaken me if it is abrupt."

Rath nodded. "That's what I thought." He drank from his water bottle, being careful not to tip it so far the dirt swirled up from the bottom, then dug a meal bar out of his pack. He thought of Myrna and her budding breasts. How much had it hurt her to grow them? "So the Parsans who live among humans—does it hurt them to look like us?"

Patience took another mouthful of greenery and chewed, but Rath saw it was thinking over its answer. Finally it swallowed and said, "Some shift more easily than others."

"And you? Do you find it hard?"

Patience chewed another mouthful. "Resisting is hard," it said. "I do not wish to look like a human. I think humans are ugly. But the pull is strong, and—" It flapped a hand whose back, in the filtered light of their shelter, looked nearly as hairless as Rath's.

"And that's just from hanging around me?"

Patience shrugged again. "It just happens."

The idea that his very presence caused Patience discomfort was disturbing to Rath. He didn't mean to hurt anyone, least of all the Parsans who had been so polite and helpful. But what could he do? It wasn't intentional, and he couldn't control it. Pushing the topic aside, he finished his meal bar, took another drink, then reached for his pack. "Well. Ready to go?"

Patience sat where he was. "I will not go with you today."

Rath stopped, hand on the bag's strap. "Why not?"

"You will not need me." It settled onto its back, knees bent, staring at the roof of the shelter. Apprehension flooded Rath's gut. Why didn't it want to come? "Are you afraid of what I'll find?"

"No."

What then? Did it know what was in the canyon? Was it staying back to avoid trouble? Rath found his teeth clenched, forced himself to relax his jaw. "Patience, is my wife down there?"

The Parsan turned its eyes on him. "I do not know where your wife is."

But she's not here, is she? Again Rath wondered what it was his guide wanted him to find. Alone. His options were limited, though. If the Parsans did have Lakshmi, he wouldn't get her back until he'd seen what they wanted him to see in the canyon.

So he went.

* * *

Rath moved cautiously down the slope, constantly scanning the area—and the sky now—for any threat. If Patience's assertion that humans had been here was true, they were in blatant violation of Osminog's contract, not to mention the Compact for Native Rights, and would not want their presence known. So he scuttled from shrub to rock, keeping low, working his way downhill, praying he didn't encounter a drone. Sure, drones were forbidden, but anyone involved in illegal activity would scarcely hesitate to employ illegal technology.

What could anyone want so badly they would risk the consequences of violating both contract and Compact? What on this planet had that kind of value? Ore, of course. So, was the Company itself behind this incursion? It seemed terribly risky, but eventually the mines in the Zone would play out, and Osminog would have to seek elsewhere. Survey satellites were forbidden, but they could kick one out of an orbiting freighter. . . . No, the Contract Compliance Office of the Agency for Interstellar Mining kept a close watch on orbital traffic. Drones? The small mechanicals were certainly easier to disguise, but you'd need an army of them to do any serious surveying unless you already knew where to look.

Those old images, the ones he'd looked at before he came out here, might show general areas of interest. Geological features would indicate where deposits of ore were most likely to occur. Drones could narrow that field. But eventually you'd have to send in ground-penetrating radar, and how would you transport it to the site? ATVs tore up the landscape, and both heavy drones and jetpacks—also illegal—made too much noise. They couldn't hope to avoid detection. No, you'd have to send people on foot. People who left boot prints. Then, after you'd confirmed the deposits, they could go to the Parsans and say, "We'd like to search for more ore. Let's negotiate a contract for this area here."

The scenario was plausible, but what did Lakshmi have to do with all this? She was a skilled equipment operator—had they tried to recruit her to run the radar and had she refused? Or had they simply forced her? Kidnapped her and brought her out here to run the machinery?

Rath stopped under the cover of a stubby tree. Earlier that morning, a thorough search of the far side of the cleft with his goggles had revealed a number of horizontal crevices that might be cave mouths, all in the same strata of rock. However, there was no sign of activity at any of them—no scuffed ground, no broken vegetation. It was harder to see the slope where he crouched. He took a drink of water, then picked his way downward, stopping periodically to scrutinize the area to either side. When he was parallel with the cave strata across the chasm, he found this side pocked with openings, as well, though he couldn't see them well from this angle. He thought of going across the ravine for a better vantage, but the river rushing through the bottom looked too wide and swift to cross.

Downhill would give him a better viewing angle, but it would also make him visible from any openings in the rock. Instead, he climbed back uphill till he was above the openings, then began working his way west. If he found nothing, he'd have to come back and try going east, but Patience had been leading them in this direction, and if the Parsan knew more than he was saying . . .

The openings in the rock were invisible to him now, but he'd picked out landmarks and was able to find the general area above the first two. Peering downslope, he could see no indication of human presence in the area, either current or less recent.

He was approaching the next landmark when a humming noise sent him scuttling into the shadow of a boulder, crouching to wedge himself under its protruding top. Heart pounding, he tried to identify the sound. Just the wind? No, the wind was a background sigh, present but unremarkable. This humming was different. One of those jitjit things? Unlikely—they were nocturnal. Some other flying creature that haunted the daylight? But no flapping sound reached him, and the source of the sound moved too slowly for a flying or gliding creature. An insect maybe?

No, this was a mechanical sound. And variation in pitch and direction bespoke a moving object—a drone, had to be. Modern drones were quieter than their ancient ancestors, but they were not silent. Rath dared not peek out from under his sheltering rock, but if he could position his storbie . . . Fishing the device from his pocket, he slipped an arm along the ground and placed it with its lens pointing up toward the noise. He started it recording, then drew a flexible screen from his wristband to watch.

At first he saw nothing but sky and the tips of wispy branches swaying in and out of frame. Then a palm-sized object flitted across the view and disappeared. He waited a heartbeat, but the noise was fading, so he slid his hand back out to adjust the angle. He caught the drone just as it vanished into a shadow some ten meters downhill and twenty to the west.

Rath stayed in his hiding place, thinking. The drone meant something illegal was going on, and now he had evidence of it. But beyond the use of a prohibited drone, what did the evidence prove? And who was involved? Was it the whole company, or just an unsanctioned inner cadre? Furthermore, if he took his evidence back to the Zone, who could he trust with it? No one at Osmynog, he was pretty sure of that.

He listened intently, but the noise of the drone was gone now, leaving only the whisper of the wind, the soft rustle of shrubby branches. It must have landed, maybe in one of the caves. He was about to retrieve the storbie and venture closer when voices cut through the background murmur.

"I told you he wouldn't find this place," said a man. "What's it been, five days now? He's probably still stumbling around fifty kilometers north of here."

Rath didn't recognize the man's voice, but he knew the one that responded. "If Brown had stopped him before he left, I wouldn't be concerned," Cassidy Matisse drawled. "But he gave us the slip, and that means he suspects something."

"I don't care what he suspects," the man said. "He's got thousands of square kilometers to search, and he's no Daniel Boone. Hell, the natives don't know we're here, how could one overwrought security guard find this place?"

"Because his wife is missing!" Matisse hissed. "Which gives him exceptional motivation!"

"I told you, we had nothing to do with that."

"Then who the hell did?"

"I don't know! Maybe the damned natives took her! Maybe she just left!"

Rath sagged back against the sheltering rock. They didn't have Lakshmi. So they said. *If you'd made a mistake along the way, one that jeopardized the entire operation, would you tell your boss?*

"You keep a close eye on things just the same," Matisse was saying. "I'll get these samples back for assay, and if he shows up here—just make sure he doesn't get back to the Zone."

"And you make sure that jetpack of yours doesn't tip him off."

A shrill laugh. "Don't worry, I'm a giant bat, see?" Something rustled.

"Those bat-things are nocturnal," the man said. "And they don't hiss like a steam engine."

The answering laugh was lost in a hoarse whoosh as a jetpack fired up. A moment later a winged shape shot across Rath's viewscreen. It might have been a jitjit for all he could see, but once he got back to the Zone, he'd be able to enlarge and enhance the image. Then he'd see if the jitjit had Cassidy Matisse's face.

* * *

Caution warred with a need for haste as Rath made his way back up the slope. He had to be quiet—a sound might travel to the man in the cave—but he needed to get away, get back to the Zone. And yet, whom could he go to when he got there? Not his supervisor—Arte had been supposed to stop him leaving, he must be part of the conspiracy. And if the Halstaadt supervisor was a part of it, and the Company administrator was a part of it, who did that leave? No one on Parsa. He had to get a message offworld. The comm on his wristband was useless for that, it only connected via a tower in the Zone to other Company devices. If he could get to his office, he could get a message out through the single sanctioned satellite in geosynchronous orbit over the Zone, the one monitored by the Contract Compliance Office of the AIM. That was provided his security clearance had not been revoked.

So he had to get back to the Zone, back to his office, and he had to do it without raising suspicion. He had to pretend he hadn't seen or heard a thing.

And what exactly had he seen? Human presence outside the Zone. Use of contraband equipment. But what did that prove? If Lakshmi was there in the cave, she could tell the authorities much. Trying to extract her himself, though, was a fool's errand. He needed backup and he knew it. And there was no backup on-planet.

Not to mention there was still the possibility that the Parsans, not the transgressors, had Lakshmi. That they had used her disappearance as bait to lure him out here, to show him this illegal operation. After all, they could not report directly to the Contract Compliance Office, nor to the Offices for the Compact for Native Rights. Until an inspector showed up from one of those agencies, the only communications technology available to the Parsans was through Osmnog, and no Parsan had the skill or the clearance to use it. They needed help from a human. They needed him.

Patience waited at the top of the ridge. It had broken down their hut and now handed Rath's pack to him. Rath took it but did not put it on. "Okay," he said. "I've seen it. And I've got it recorded, Cassidy Matisse jetting around outside the Zone. Sounds like illegal prospecting." He glared at the Parsan. "Now can I have my wife back?"

The guide blinked slowly. "I do not have your wife."

Rath snorted. "Not personally. But the Parsans. The Elders."

"The Elders would not do such a thing!"

"Then who did?"

It blinked again. "Not these other humans?"

Rath was about to shout "No!" but restrained himself. It was still the most logical assumption, even though the man on the hillside had denied it. He turned away and shrugged into his pack. "Let's go," he said. "I need to get back to my office and turn these creeps in." To someone.

* * *

They approached the Zone's perimeter at dusk the next day, a full day before Rath's week was up. As they cleared the timber, his comm beeped. A glance at his wristband showed a call parked, waiting for his attention. Arte Brown. The call had been parked since last night.

Rath hesitated, wondering if he should ignore the call and try to sneak back into the Zone before anyone knew he was there. But his comm had been pinged by the tower; it would tell Arte he was within range, whether he answered or not. He picked up.

"Rath!" Arte sounded breathless. "You're back. Thank God."

Hair raised on the back of Rath's neck. "Yeah, I'm back, or almost. Why?"

"Are you inside the Zone?"

"Not yet."

"Well, get here! Something's come up and we need to talk ASAP."

Rath looked around him at the gathering darkness. "Can it wait till morning?" He needed to get to his office, get a message off—

"You coming in the north gate?"

Rath balked. "Uh . . . yeah, that's closest."

"I'll meet you there." Arte cut the connection.

Rath sighed and looked at Patience. He had filled the Parsan in on what he'd heard on the hillside and on his speculations. "If they arrest me or something," he said, "tell the Elders. And give them this." He handed over his storbie. "I've got a copy of the video on my wristband, but this—this has the evidence of what's going on."

Patience nodded and took the storbie.

* * *

The perimeter gates of the Zone were another leftover from the G'Maht Zhee, non-functional like the rest of their abandoned technology. They simply arched over a roadway that left the Zone and swung east toward the drill site and pits. Arte called to Rath from the shadow of a stanchion as he and Patience crossed into the Zone. The supe gave the Parsan only a fleeting glance as they joined him, then focused on Rath. "You find anything?"

How much should he tell Arte? As little as possible. "No sign of Lakshmi."

"Sorry, kid. But listen." Arte's tone shifted from gruff to earnest. "Something's going on. Before you left, Cassidy Matisse told me to stop you. Only you'd gone out early."

Relief flooded Rath. Maybe Arte wasn't part of this after all.

Then his gut chilled. Maybe this was just a ruse to gain his confidence. So he simply nodded. "I was eager to get started. My guide was willing to take me out early." He nodded toward Patience.

Still Arte paid the Parsan no attention. "Listen, Rath, there's another thing. I don't want you to hear it from somewhere else." He pursed his lips, then continued. "A medtech was cutting down a tree in her back garden, one of those big monsters, and she found some remains inside it."

Rath's heart lurched in his chest, but then he remembered what Patience had told him about the k'onk pa. "Yeah, I guess the G'Maht Zhee used to put offerings in the trees, and the tree would just grow around it."

"These were human remains."

The world went gray. Rath closed his eyes, inhaled carefully, fought panic. "But—they have to be old, to have been enveloped by the tree."

Patience grunted, and Rath glanced at him, but the Parsan said nothing.

"Exactly. See what I'm saying? She's been in the house about five years, so they're at least that old. Plus they look small, like a kid's bones."

Not Lakshmi, not Lakshmi, thank god thankgodthank . . .

"Of course, there's no record of a missing person anywhere in the Zone, not in the twenty-odd years since first contact. Not till your wife—" Arte stopped, licked his lips. "It's just another stink, and I don't like it. But I didn't want you to hear it somewhere else and get . . . ideas."

Rath nodded, still trying to calm his pounding heart. "And what have you done about it?"

"The bones? Having tests run, DNA, etc. I hate goddamn mysteries." Arte blew out a breath. "Listen, I don't know what Matisse wants with you, but I'd lay low for a while. You're not due back till tomorrow, right?"

Rath touched the controls on his wristband. "Don't answer this." Then he spoke into the comm on the band. "Hey, Arte, it's Rath. I'm back, but I've got a day's grace, so I'm going to search around the perimeter one more time. Call me if you have any news. I'll see you tomorrow night."

Arte grinned. "Atta boy." Then his grin faded. "I'm sorry you didn't find your wife."

Rath swallowed down a lump in his throat. It seemed more and more likely that Lakshmi would not be found, not alive. "Listen, I'm going to slide into the office, then I'm going home and see Nissa. I wasn't lying—I'll see you tomorrow night."

Arte nodded. "By the way, you never got a call from me. I'll make it disappear. And I never met you here tonight."

Patience made a noise Rath took for disgust. Rath forced a grin. "Why would I meet you? I've got nothing to report."

Arte quirked a smile, then slipped away into the night.

Rath turned to his companion. "You report to the Elders," he said. "I'm going to try to get

through to some off-world agencies.”

Patience nodded. As Rath turned to go, the Parsan laid a hand on his arm. The back of the hand was smooth and bare now, like its arms and legs. Only its fur-fringed face and pelted back marked it as Parsan. “I did not want this task the Elders gave me. I did not know why they let you come out of the Zone.” It withdrew its hand. “Now I know.” Then, like Arte, it melted into the night.

Rath made his way by a shadowed and circuitous route to the Admin building and let himself in a back door. He knew his access would be logged, but unless Matisse had flagged him, it would simply be another data point in a file somewhere. Approaching his office quietly, he waited a few minutes to be sure other officers weren’t going to descend on the place. Ten minutes of silence reassured him, and he went inside.

Pushing his trepidation aside, he entered his codes on his workstation and brought up his account. The first thing he checked was his phone logs, and he smiled in amusement as he watched the record of Arte’s call to him disappear. Maybe the supe was on the level. Still, no reason to trust him just yet. Instead, Rath considered how and to whom he should pass along his information. Shotgun approach, he decided. The first communique was a personal note to his father-in-law in Odessa. “I have evidence of human intrusion outside the Terran Zone and use of illegal drones. I suspect illegal prospecting involving the Company’s administrator, Cassidy Matisse. Please backdoor this to the Contract Compliance Office.” He attached a copy of the video clip containing the drone, the conversation, and the jet pack.

The next message went directly to the AIM’s Contract Compliance Office, followed by one to the Offices for the Compact for Native Rights, and another to the Interstellar Trading Regulatory Commission. Finally he accessed his log and deleted all the sent copies. In the morning he would ask Arte, who had a higher security clearance, to delete any trace of the activity. Then he shut down his workstation and headed for the door.

He nearly ran into Winky. “Oh! Officer van Dorn!” it exclaimed. “It’s you!”

Rath recovered quickly. “Who else would it be?”

“Only I heard someone, and I did not know you were back.”

“Just . . . dropped by to pick up something before I go home. Why are you here this late?”

“Oh. I—” It backed up a pace into the hallway. “I was wrapping up loose conclusions.”

Rath blinked, then translated. “Loose ends. What kind of loose ends need wrapping at this time of night?”

Winky blinked rapidly. “Administrator Cassidy is very demanding . . .”

Rath nodded. “Did she ask you to get something out of my office?”

The Parsan squeaked. “No! No. But I heard a noise and—I did not know who it was.”

Suddenly Rath was very, very tired. He was seeing bogeymen everywhere. In Winky, for heaven’s sake. “Well, it’s just me,” he said. “And I’m going home now.” He pulled the office door shut behind him. “Good night, Winky.” He started for the rear exit.

“Officer van Dorn?”

Rath turned back.

“Perhaps . . . the west side door is closer.”

The side door—And then Rath understood. It wasn’t Cassidy who had sent the office-kin to check on him but Patience. Now Winky—timid, obsequious Winky—was trying to tell him the back door might be unsafe. Rath drew a deep breath, nodded again, and left by the side door.

* * *

Myrna jumped up, startled, as he came through the kitchen door. “You’re back!” She wore a night dress that reached down to shapely calves, and her nicely formed breasts lifted the soft material fetchingly. Rath tried to quell the stirring in his loins.

“It was pointless,” he said, dropping his pack by the door with a thud. “There was no trace of Lakshmi.”

“Oh.” She folded her arms across her bosom, doing her best to conceal it. “I am sorry.”

“How is Nissa?”

“Fretful.” Myrna shuffled uncomfortably. “But a tooth has poked through now, so she should

be better soon.”

“That’s great!” Pride and pleasure surged up in him, as though his daughter had accomplished some great feat. “Her first tooth! I’ll have to check it out. In the morning.” Fatigue was catching up to him. “I’ll just look in on her now.”

In the nursery, Nissa lay in her bassinet, tiny fists curled near her dark head. A warm moist smell emanated from her, a baby smell, and Rath inhaled carefully, savoring it. For a moment he stood just looking down at her; then he realized he was swaying on his feet. He returned to the kitchen where Myrna had collected a cup and plate from the table and was headed for the sink. “I’m beat,” he said. “I’m going to turn in early.”

“I will be quiet,” she promised. “Shall I prepare breakfast for you in the morning?”

He felt a pang, remembering how Lakshmi had cooked breakfast for him every day. “Please don’t bother, I can get my own.” Then, seeing the disappointment on her face, “You’re not here to wait on me, just to take care of Nissa. And—” He sighed. “Just till I go back to work.” *Or leave this planet. Because even if Osminog doesn’t get shut down over this, it’s no place for a whistle-blower.*

He double-secured the doors then. Until he knew who he could trust, he could trust no one. Finally he said good night to a worried-looking Myrna and fell into bed. He was asleep almost before his head hit the pillow.

In the morning, Myrna was gone. And so was Nissa.

* * *

Rath called Arte Brown, still not sure he could trust the man but knowing he had no choice. “Arte, Nissa’s gone, and the nanny with her.”

“What?”

Rath paced through the empty house: living room, kitchen, nursery—“I woke up and they’re gone. Just gone. No sign of a struggle.”

“Okay, slow down. You’re sure she didn’t just take the baby out for a stroll?”

Rath stopped, uncertain now. He checked the front closet, found the stroller still there. He told Arte.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions just yet,” Arte insisted. “I don’t suppose this nanny-kin carries a comm link of some kind?”

“Of course not!” She’d shown no more interest in Terran technology than other Parsans. “And she wouldn’t take Nissa out without my permission. She’ll hardly do anything without my permission!”

“Okay, okay, calm down. I’ll put out a lost-child alert, and I’ll send someone over there. You stay put, you hear me?”

“Hell no!” Rath was moving again, headed for the front door. “I’m going to the Parsan encampment. Maybe they can track them somehow. By smell or something.” If he’d known how sensitive a Parsan’s sense of smell was, he might have called one in as soon as Lakshmi went missing.

“You don’t want to do that,” Arte warned, but Rath just cut the connection and raced out.

When he reached the encampment, Lexitus was waiting outside its office. “Officer van Dorn. Soft breezes and clear—”

“Where is she?”

Lexitus drew back. “I—She—Do you mean your wife?”

“I mean the nanny, Myrna! And my daughter!”

It blinked rapidly. “The . . . nanny did not arrive?”

“The nanny left! She was there last night, and this morning she’s gone—and so is my daughter.” Rath clenched his fists to keep from seizing the liaison and shaking it.

Lexitus’ eyes widened. “Oh! Oh, dear! Oh—please wait here, Officer van Dorn. I will—I will—” Its face darkened perceptibly, along with its hair. “I will begin a search.” Then it bolted across to the main entrance and disappeared through the perimeter hedge.

Rath wasted only a few moments pacing before he, too, crossed to the entrance and stepped into the encampment. Here and there a Parsan squatted in the shelter of a tree, eating

vegetables or speaking to a comrade. He saw no one he recognized. Teeth gritted, he set off around the border, poking under shrubs, peering behind tangles of vines. In moments Patience appeared. “Officer van Dorn.”

“Where is she?” he demanded.

Patience shook its head. “I do not know where your child is. We are searching.”

“So am I!”

Patience took a breath as if to speak, then sighed instead. Finally, “I will help you,” it said.

They combed the grounds of the encampment but found no trace of Myrna or Nissa. Finally Lexitus appeared. It had returned to a normal color, but one cheek rippled spasmodically. “Officer van Dorn.” It sounded breathless. “We find nothing here. We suggest you call your Security and have them search elsewhere.”

“You bet your ass I’ll have them search!”

“We will search outside the Zone.” It nodded at Patience, who left at a run. “Have you—have you considered that the—the ones you saw in the river canyon—”

“You think Matisse took her?” Was this her way of warning him not to dig into her affairs? Would he get home to find an anonymous message, warning him to keep silent if he wanted to see his daughter again? Would Matisse stoop that low? And yet, Lakshmi had disappeared. Something had happened to her.

And what about Myrna? Was she really capable of absconding with Nissa? Or had she merely gotten in the way of kidnappers? That seemed more likely. With millions in fines and the Osminog contract at stake—Rath clutched his head, digging his fingers through his wiry hair and into his scalp.

“Find her!” he hissed at the liaison. “Because if you don’t, I will tear this whole planet apart until I do!”

* * *

Arte Brown tried to send Rath home, but this time Rath refused. “I’ve got quadrant Alpha Nine,” he said, studying the search map on his workstation.

Standing in the doorway of Rath’s office, Arte sighed. “Not Alpha Nine, those mining engineers are likely to take offense at your attitude.” He crossed to look at the map with Rath. “Take Gamma Twelve, it’s residential, mostly medtechs and data processors. And take an office-kin with you. House-kins and nanny-kins are more likely to talk to one of their own.”

Rath got up, stepped into the hallway, and looked around. “Winky! You’re with me.”

The Parsan jumped. It had been loitering not far from the door—listening, no doubt. No wonder they knew everything that went on. Now it seemed to shrink an inch. “Where are we going?”

“Hunting kidnappers.”

Winky expanded again, though a ripple ran through its auburn hair. “With pleasure, Officer van Dorn.”

They were still hunting two days later when the diplomatic ship arrived in orbit.

* * *

The first Rath knew of it was when an office-kin showed up in the Lambda Four quadrant, panting, with a message from Arte Brown. “Supervisor Brown wishes you to return immediately.”

Rath’s heart stuttered, his hand frozen in the act of ringing another rowhouse bell. “Have you found her?” *Alive, please god, alive—*

“No, no, I am sorry. It’s just—” It blinked rapidly. “Officials from the Contract Compliance office of the AIM have arrived, and one from the OCNR. They’ve locked down our computer and communication systems. So Supervisor Brown sent me to get you.”

Rath checked his wristband and found it disconnected from the network. “Contract Compliance. Where are they now, do you know?”

It hesitated, still trying to catch its breath. “I believe they went to Administrator Matisse’s office.”

So his message had gotten their attention! But a flash of exultation morphed into a wave of

panic. What if seeing Matisse was just a formality, and they were really after someone else? What if they were looking for him? Maybe Arte, instead of deleting the log entries of his messages, had altered them and made Rath look like a conspirator. Or made it look as though he'd violated the Compact by searching for Lakshmi outside the Zone. But the Council of Elders had approved it, and surely they would verify his story. . . .

To hell with it. He'd already lost his wife and his daughter, what more could they do to him? He turned to Winky. "Let's go."

But Winky did not move. "I believe the summons was for you, not me," it said. "I believe I am needed elsewhere." It grimaced, then nodded at the other office-kin, and the two of them hurried away.

Rath sagged. After all he'd endured, why did the desertion of a simple office-kin weigh like an anvil? Two nights ago, he'd been sure Patience had sent Winky to watch his back. What a fool! Parsans were timid by nature, and at the first sign of trouble, Winky had folded and vanished. Rath squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them and squared his shoulders. He had to think positive. He had to believe the officials had come to arrest Cassidy Matisse, and in their investigation they would find Lakshmi and Nissa both. That was the real goal here, to find his wife and child. With that in mind, he turned his steps toward the Admin building.

* * *

Winky found Patience lingering outside the Council bower. Its fur was growing back nicely, and Winky suppressed a sigh. Constant exposure to humans had left Winky furless for so long, it wondered if it would ever grow a lush coat again. Well, these sacrifices needed to be made. "Grekhekh," it greeted in Parsan. "Gentle nights and calm days to you."

Patience's eyes looked haunted. "Sweet flowers and smooth walking. Has the child been found?"

Winky ignored the question. The young were so impatient. "I thought you would like to know the information you brought us some days ago has borne fruit. Inspectors from the AIM have arrived to put a stop to the infractions."

"Good! That is very good." It waited expectantly, but Winky turned to go. "And the child? Has the child been found?"

Winky turned back. "The child was never lost."

Patience's eyes widened. "Never—" Understanding dawned on its face, followed closely by anger. "The Council knew of this? The one called Myrna brought the child out—and the Council knew?" It growled and spat. "And Officer van Dorn's bosom companion—Does the Council also know where that one is?"

Winky sighed. "This is Council business."

"But you said you did not have that one!"

"And so we do not. We do not have it, we did not take it. It left of its own volition."

"And the Council gave it shelter?" Patience's jaw worked. "Officer Van Dorn should have been told."

"It did not desire that we tell van Dorn."

Patience opened its mouth to object, but Winky held up a hand to forestall it. "These are Council matters, Grekhekh. Trust that the Council will see to them."

Patience turned on its heel. Winky called after it. "It may be the Council has a task for you. Please wait here." Then Winky went back into the Council bower.

* * *

Arte was waiting in his office, staring at the blank display of his workstation. Rath knocked softly on the open door, and Arte motioned him in. "So the office-kin told you who's here." His voice was flat, tired.

"Yeah." Rath waited, but Arte offered nothing further. "Did they go for Matisse?"

"Marched in this morning, went straight to her office and took her into custody. That was—" He glanced at his wristband. "Two hours ago. They shut down all the systems: computers, communications, excavations, processing—we're dead in the water. I've been staring at this—" He indicated the vacant monitor. "Ever since. Amazing how little you can get done without

access to information.”

Rath stepped inside and slid into a chair across the desk from his supe. “What does the grapevine say?”

The corner of Arte’s mouth twitched in a smile. “The grapevine says Matisse brought assay samples from outside the Zone into our facilities, asked for them to be analyzed on the QT. Paid off the techs. The grapevine also says she’s now singing like a bird, giving up everyone up and down the line.”

Rath let go a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. “They’ve got her, then.”

But Arte sighed. “They’ve got *us*. She’s the face of the Company, and if the Company is involved, then this whole operation is going to be shut down. That means Halstaadt Security loses its contract, and you and I, my boy, are out of work.”

Rath had always known it might end like this. No good deed goes unpunished: Osminog would lose its contract, he’d lose his job, and it was back to Earth for everyone—except Lakshmi and Nissa, who were still missing. “She say anything about Lakshmi?”

Arte shook his head. “Not that I know of. But there’s something else.” He tapped the controls on his wristband. “This came in just before the shutdown, so I’ve got it in device memory—”

A sharp knock at the door interrupted him. A tall woman with high cheekbones and dark skin stood there, an official-looking badge jutting from the pocket of her dress coverall. “Supervisor Brown?” She looked at Rath. “And Officer van Dorn, I believe?”

Both men nodded.

She tapped a control on her sleeve cuff. “I’m Afua Jelani, Contract Compliance Office of AIM, and I’m recording this conversation. I understand both of you have filed reports detailing your concerns about possible contract infractions here on Parsa.”

Rath turned to his supervisor in surprise. Arte only shrugged. “Messages were being erased, logs altered. I knew something was up, I just didn’t know what.”

“We’ll need to interview both of you, but it may be a little while,” Jelani said. “We are still gathering evidence and apprehending suspects. We would appreciate your cooperation in not leaving the building.” She handed each of them a tag. “Wear these, please, so we can locate you easily.”

“With pleasure.” Rath slapped the tag onto his uniform. Arte donned his more reluctantly. “Was I right? Is it an illegal prospecting operation?”

Jelani hesitated. “I’m not at liberty to discuss that at this time. Rest assured we will advise you when and if formal charges are made.”

“What about my wife? She’s been missing for weeks. Lakshmi van Dorn. Is she caught up in this somehow?”

Jelani cocked an eyebrow. “This is the first I’ve heard of a missing person.”

“Ask them,” Rath pleaded. “Your suspects. Ask them if they have Lakshmi. And while you’re at it, ask if they know what happened to my daughter and her nanny. She’s been missing for two days now.”

Jelani drew back. “How old is she?”

“Six months. We were searching for her when you—” He indicated the silent workstation. “—interrupted our systems.”

“Ah.” Jelani nodded. “We’ll try to get Security back online as soon as possible. And we’ll delay the evacuation while you search for her.”

“Evacuation?” Rath’s chest tightened. “Already?” He had thought there would be more time before such a decision was reached.

Jelani shot him a look. “Of course. This whole operation is being shut down immediately. Litigation will follow, but all humans on Parsa will have to withdraw pending its outcome.” She tapped her cuff controls again. “Gentlemen, thank you again for your cooperation.”

When she had gone, Arte blew out a breath. “At least we’re not suspects.”

“Is it just me,” Rath asked, “or did she not seem very concerned about Lakshmi and Nissa?”

Arte touched his wristband again. “About that—” Rath shot him a dark look and the supervisor sighed. “Remember those bones I told you about? The ones found in a back garden tree?”

Panic gripped Rath. “You said they were old!”

“And they are.” Arte bounced an image from his wristband to his workstation screen. “Fifteen or twenty years old. And they belong to a female approximately eight to ten years old.”

“Then it’s not Lakshmi.”

Arte bit his lip. “That’s the thing. The DNA positively identifies her as Lakshmi Bhatt. And the house where she was found used to be occupied by Lakshmi’s parents.”

Rath stared at his supervisor in disbelief. “That’s impossible.”

“I don’t know who you were married to, Rath, but it wasn’t Lakshmi Bhatt.”

Rath turned away, mind reeling. An imposter? Why in the world—How in the world—

“It looks like the child’s neck was broken. The current householder says when they started cutting the tree down, they found the remnants of a tree house in the branches. Looked like someone had taken an axe to it. I’m no forensic scientist, but it’s not hard to imagine a child falling, and a distraught parent going after the tree house . . .”

Rath heard what Arte was saying, but it echoed like a sound from a distant world. Lakshmi wasn’t Lakshmi? Then who was she?

“Rath?”

Rath stirred. “Who is she?” he asked. “If not—”

A timid knock drew their eyes. Lexitus stood in the open doorway, head inclined. “Good morning, Supervisor Brown. Officer van Dorn. Soft breezes and plentiful waters.”

Arte cleared his throat. “This is not a good time—”

But Rath waved him off. “Clear skies and fresh fruit,” he said. “Lexitus, do you have news of my daughter?”

The liaison stepped into the room. “We do, Officer van Dorn. We have located the one who took your child, and Nissa is being brought to you.”

Rath slumped back in his chair, hands covering his face. “Oh, thank God.”

“And the nanny-kin?” Arte demanded. “What happens to her?”

Lexitus blinked. “Unfortunately, the Council of Elders found no fault in that one. It behaved in what it thought was the child’s best interest.”

“Best interest?” Rath came up out of his chair. “How can it be in a child’s best interest not to be with her father?” *Especially if that’s the only parent she has left.*

“The Council agreed with you, Officer van Dorn, and so we are returning the child to you.”

“See here,” said Arte, also rising to his feet. “That nanny-kin stole the baby, and I don’t care what her reasoning was, she ought to be punished!”

Just then Patience appeared in the doorway, Nissa cradled awkwardly in its arms. “Sunlight and happy news,” it said softly, handing the baby to Rath. “Elder Winky allowed me to bring your child to you.”

Arte gaped at Patience. “Elder Winky?”

Something like a smirk tugged at Lexitus’ lips. “The one called Winky is our chief Elder.”

“And he worked *here*? As an—*an office-kin*?”

Lexitus shifted its feet. “The post served us well. Much information is available to an office-kin.”

“I’ll bet,” Arte muttered.

“Thank you,” Rath managed, his voice hoarse. “Thank you for bringing Nissa back to me.”

Patience growled deep in its throat. “Ask the liaison about your wife.”

Rath’s eyes shot to Lexitus, who still lingered in the doorway. It hunched its shoulders, and its mouth quivered. “We did not take your wife,” it said. “Khinshee came to us freely, wishing no more to dwell among humans. She had kept human form for many years, seeking to be a child to replace one that died, doing her best to fill that role. But being a wife—that become too painful. Meeting such expectations was too much for Khinshee. And though it suffered to leave the child behind, it thought that best. Myrna knew nothing of this when she brought the child to the Elders.”

Rath stared numbly at the Parsan, unable to think, let alone speak.

“I also knew nothing of this,” Patience declared. “Believe me. I knew nothing of your wife, or

the child.”

“It was necessary to keep such knowledge from this one,” Lexitus said. “Until its mission was complete. And now it is necessary to return the child to you. In time, when it has matured, it may wish to visit us, and we will allow that. But until we see how its form . . . settles—We cannot have it here.”

And finally Rath understood. He stared down at his daughter as a ripple flickered through her dark hair.