



The Pet Plague

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This book is most respectfully dedicated to the memory of Robert A. Heinlein, and thanks to Mrs. Robert A. Heinlein for her most gracious reply concerning use of the name "Fuzzy Britches" in the manuscript.

CHAPTER 1

Jamie Da Cruz had suffered through a long, hot frustrating day where nothing at all seemed to have gone right. First, he discovered that a whole test plot of his new hambean strain had started growing



wildly irregular for no good reason. His boss hadn't believed him when he transferred pictures back to the main Genetic Engineering section office with a suggestion that there had been a foul up in the genevat mixing routine; he thought it more likely to be a mistake in the codes fed into the section's computer -- as if a computer would make a mistake like that. It would have rejected any error obvious enough to have produced such results, and probably added some remark about the fallibility of human memory as well.

The test plot occupied the far corner of a five acre experimental garden at the furthest distance from the center of the Houston Enclave. At the far corner of the test plot itself, Jamie encountered the next anomaly of the day. A small section of the hambeans, tiny and wrinkled as they were, seemed to have attracted the attention of a hungry invader. Several of the little tree-like bushes had been tipped over and the thumb sized hambeans stripped from them.

"Not rats again," he thought. "Damn, will we never get rid of the cursed things?" Rats were a continuing and seemingly insoluble problem in every Enclave, not to mention the wild country as well. They were far more intelligent than the original breeds, and still as elusively ineradicable as ever. Even the few kept as pets or research animals had never developed much of a rapport with man and had to be carefully watched. As for the feral ones -- Jamie shuddered and bent to check for tracks. Surprised, he straightened up again.

"A dog," he said aloud. "I will be damned!" But then a puzzled frown crept across the brown contours of his face.

No. Any dog would know better. Maybe a puppy, he thought hopefully for an instant, then discarded the idea -- the tracks were far too large. Besides, it was almost impossible to envisage so undisciplined a puppy. The enclave bitches knew their place far too well to ever allow their pups to run so wild, so near the enclave borders, and particularly not in the critically important agricultural section of the Enclave. That left only one possibility.

"I will be double-damned," he said aloud again. "A feral dog!" That could only mean a break in the barrier. Jamie bent again and followed the tracks in the soft earth to their source. Sure enough, where the test plot abutted a corner of the barrier he found a scattering of loose earth around a moderate sized hole that tunneled deeply beneath the plastiwire fence. Peering closely, he could see through the grid to where some recent rains had washed a gully beneath the corner embankment. The intruder had only needed to enlarge the opening to gain entrance. He could plainly see where the tracks led from the hole into the hambean plot, but could find none leading out.



"That's it, then," he muttered to himself, touching his holstered laser gun for assurance. A breach in the barrier was certainly not an unknown event, but mice or rats were the more usual culprits. Unless driven by hunger, the larger enhanced animals stayed clear of the Enclaves. Generations of experience had taught them that there was little chance of survival inside Enclave boundaries. When the rare one did intrude, it was almost always caught and killed within hours. The Enclave pets always gave an alarm at the first sight or scent of an intruder; they minded not a whit about snitching on their feral cousins. Their own status and responsibilities within the Enclaves were wholeheartedly oriented toward their human masters; feral animals must fend for themselves. Nevertheless, it had to be reported.

Jamie gave a command to his body computer, which had been surgically embedded in his left forearm once full growth had been reached. Only a slight swelling of musculature indicated it's presence. A brightly colored image materialized at a comfortable chest height two feet in front of him. At the same time he felt the tingle of his finger mouse coming on line. The mouse was a mostly useless relic, but he did use it occasionally.

"Office 112," he said. The holographic swirl of color dissolved and was replaced by an above the waist picture of a young, rather pretty dark haired woman. She looked up from some out of sight business. An inquisitive smile crossed her face, crinkling the edges of her liquid brown eyes.

"You again, Jamie?" she said. "What is it this time?"

"I've got a barrier break, Jeannie, in the same section where I called about the hambeans this morning. Probably a feral dog."

"Oh, My. You've already upset the boss once today. Are you sure?" Concern passed over her face like clouds obscuring the sun.

"I'm sure," Jamie said. "Go ahead and tell Carlos about it. At least he can't blame this on the computer."

"He'll be upset, anyway, but I'll let him know."

"Let him. He can't pin this one on me."

"I know. This just seems to be one of those days." She leaned forward. "Your mustache needs trimming. Want me to do it tonight? I'll throw in a back rub."



"Sounds good. Can I call you after I get in?"

"Seguro. Will you notify maintenance and security, or shall I?"

"I'll do it. You appease the boss. Don't let him take it out on someone's pet."

"Leave it to me. 'By."

"By", Jamie said to her dissolving image. The holographic display of his body computer reappeared in standard mode. He voiced the area maintenance code, then split the screen to show the foreman the map coordinates. He used his finger mouse to sketch in the precise location of the break in the barrier. The mouse really wasn't necessary; he could have used his voice just as effectively, but he liked it, in the same way a man might favor a straight razor and shaving cream in the age of depilators. Once that was done, he quickly notified the Enclave security section of the breach, then sat down to wait. He backed well away from the opening in the barrier and sat down cross-legged in front of it. He drew his laser gun and waited for the maintenance crew.

Earlier in the century, well before Jamie's birth, genetic manipulation of plants and animals had become the predominant growth industry of the world, including Moon City and the space stations. One of the products of that manipulation was genetically enhanced animals, many of them bred for the pet industry. Intelligent and semi-intelligent animals presented little problem in the controlled environments of the space stations and on the moon, but earth was a different matter entirely.

Once the human genome was resolved, that of other mammals presented relatively few problems. Inevitably, scientists began mixing human and animal genes, and sometimes whole chromosome segments. Human genes were inserted willy nilly into those of man's favored species in an orgy of experimentation. As the craft became increasingly simpler, control became more difficult, and considering the demand for altered and enhanced pets, well nigh impossible. For a while, the insertion of human genes into other animals was banned by most industrialized nations, but the simplicity of the process and the crying need of tattered third world countries for hard currency

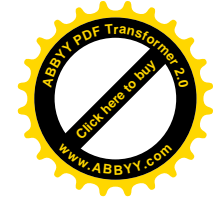


inevitably resulted in a huge clandestine trade in genetically enhanced pets and altered farm animals. There was no longer even a complete classification of the number and kind of new species. There were super-dogs and super-cats, imbued with the gene complexes for rational thought and language facility; intelligent rats and mice, originally used in research; semi-intelligent rabbits and ducks, once crafted as Easter presents for children; monkeys and orangutans; cows and horses; ferrets and wildcats; parrots and canaries; sheep and dolphins. For almost any breed of animal, there was a demand. The only common denominator was that almost all had at one time or another gotten outside the bonds of human control (where any was attempted) and begun to breed in the wilds. Interbreeding with the original stock was also rampant, sometimes successful, other times not. When it was successful, the new genes were expressed as dominant; the genetic engineers had planned it that way. By the time real problems began to develop, and solutions attempted, it was far too late to put the genie back in the bottle.

What happened in the United States over the next fifty years was only the forefront of the wave of disaster that swept over the other industrialized nations, and soon after, the third world countries as well. The United States did fare better than other nations initially in controlling the larger animals, simply because of the plethora of armed citizens. For the first time in history, the murder rate in that country actually declined as people began shooting cats and dogs and rats rather than each other -- that is, until the food supplies began to fail.

The genetic engineers had done their work too well. The same resistance to disease and the capacity for longer life which was now a genetic heritage of most humans was also an inbred constituent of the feral animals, and it served them well. Not only that, they now carried the capacity for rational thought that enabled them to avoid all attempts at extermination.

Intelligent mice and rats and rabbits turned up their noses at baited grain and ate the food crops. They tunneled underground and waited out the poison sprays until rain swept them away, then emerged to eat again. Newly concocted diseases didn't phase them, any more than they would have humans; the same resistance factors that humans now carried in their genes were also bred into the new animals. Induced plagues simply killed off the old species and left the new to breed explosively into empty ecological niches. Had it not been for the enhanced carnivores, those pests might have driven humanity completely off the planet. As it was, depletion of farm crops and attacks by starving packs of feral carnivores on any isolated dwelling gradually drove mankind into the present day Enclaves where they



thought an uneasy balance had finally been achieved. They were wrong, but for the present, humans controlled their Enclaves and gradually adapted to them, even retaining a residue of loyal, intelligent pets content to live with their masters. Outside the Enclaves, the enhanced animals warred on each other and on unaltered species without let or hindrance.

In the third world, the situation was even worse. A reverse migration of the enhanced animals back to their source, fueled by inexorable population pressure, was at it's peak. Less advanced technologically, these countries were rapidly devolving into anarchy and chaos as the reverse migration combined to breed with an already large population of enhanced animals. The only spots of stability were in areas being mined or drilled for vital resources. There, the more technologically sophisticated Enclaves offered their help in maintaining integrity in return for the raw materials of civilization, but even these sanctuaries would probably have to be abandoned before long. Moon City and the space stations hoped to get asteroid mining going by then to take up the slack, but that was by no means a certainty. They had their own problems.

Within the Enclaves (with a much reduced population), and in space, life and culture had stabilized for the time being, but it was only temporary. Ecology all over the world was in flux, with many new species contending for space and succor. Intelligent as the newly enhanced animals were, they had no understanding of how they were altering the environment, to their own detriment. Birds were becoming fewer; insects more numerous, deserts expanding. Eventually, a climax ecology would ensue, but what shape it would take, no one dared predict.

The population of the Enclaves tended to ignore what was happening outside. For the nonce, they were safe behind their barricades. Only their leaders worried, and they could see no good end to the pet plague which was overwhelming the earth. Within the Enclaves (with a much reduced population), and in space, the general population thought that life and culture was again on the upswing. In some ways it was. The rather drastic police state methods necessary for the formation of the Enclaves was now giving way in some of them to a more lenient form of government, albeit a much regulated and in some ways a more limited one. In particular, control of the land and sea outside the Enclaves was no longer a given. Dolphins, for instance, were adamantly opposed to deep sea fishing and had made it so prohibitively expensive that it had almost ceased. Also, cross country travel other than by air was dangerous and almost unheard of. Even air travel was limited mostly to vital cargo handling. The only regularly scheduled passenger service was to and from the major



Enclaves and from the east and west spaceports. As a result, each Enclave was gradually developing a unique culture of it's own.

The Houston Enclave, for instance, had a much more southern and Hispanic oriented culture than the relatively nearby Dallas sanctuary. Houston had gotten most of the surviving refugees from El Paso and the Golden Triangle when they had finally been abandoned, while Dallas drew it's expanded population from Oklahoma and the lower Midwest.

Genetic agriculture enabled the Enclaves to survive. It provided them with altered foodstuff of much higher yield than formerly, rich in protein and vitamins, and resistant to everything except harvesting robots. Genetic manipulation of food crops kept the Enclaves viable, even though the same sort of meddling was responsible for their necessity to begin with.

CHAPTER 2

Jamie Da Cruz worried not at all about the historical causes of his present problem. He simply waited impatiently for the maintenance crew to arrive. He was 36 years old, single, possessed of a 1A genome (and wonderfully grateful for the sexual implications thereof -- he didn't have to go looking; they came to him), and employed at a job he loved. He was the director of the agricultural experimentation section of the genetic engineering department, and the only fly in his ointment was his boss, Carlos Alvarez, who was behind the times and running scared. Not only that, Alvarez detested enhanced pets in general and Jamie's pets in particular. If he had his way, every enhanced animal in the enclave would be banished to the wilds -- or worse. Fortunately for Jamie and his pets, his viewpoint was in the minority. Other, more liberal leaders still saw the need for enhanced animals, especially the dogs and cats which not only kept the rodent population of the enclave down to almost nothing, but also were companions of the ranger security force which patrolled the peripheries of the enclave.

Jamie did worry about the day to day temperament of his boss.



Carlos Alvarez was overdue for retirement, but he kept hanging on, reluctant to turn the reins over to a younger person. Jamie was in line for the job but doubted that he would get it if Alvarez had anything to say about the matter. Jamie's pets, Fuzzy Britches the cat and Woggly the dog were as well behaved as any other enclave animal, but they did reflect his own personality to a certain extent. On several occasions they had voiced sentiments in Alvarez's presence that Jamie would have kept quiet about. At an apartment party once, Fuzzy Britches had ventured the opinion that only pet owners should be in charge of human affairs so that they could benefit from the wise advice of enhanced animals. While Jamie agreed, to a certain extent, the remark hadn't helped his career prospects much.

"Hola! Que Paso?"

Startled, Jamie turned from his hypnotic fixation on the broached barrier and saw two Hispanic repairmen, accompanied by an excavation robot just settling on it's treads. As usual, his black hair and brown complexion had been mistaken for an accompanying facility in Spanish. Actually, he spoke only a smattering of the language; his looks derived from his Hispanic mother rather than his Anglo father, and she had decreed that her household would be a unilingual one. Politely, though, he searched his mind for an answering phrase in Spanish, but soon gave it up.

"Here," he said inadequately, and left them. The robot would perform all the work and make most of the decisions anyway, he thought wryly. Robots were almost as intelligent as humans, in a limited fashion, and when interfaced with the main Enclave computers could use their biomanipulators to perform almost any task assigned them.

Jamie was tired enough to skip going to the office to check on the status of the feral dog; he could do it almost as well from home anyway. He was ready for a long, tall drink and the promised back rub; he knew his mustache really didn't need trimming.

He left the agricultural plots through a gate in the secondary barrier and was pleased to have to wait only a few moments for a passenger sled. Commuter service had been cut twice in the last few years. Each time the "temporary" cutbacks proved permanent. He wondered idly why that was so, but didn't really give it much thought.

"B-36," he told the sled as he boarded, scanning for a seat. There were none, but he lived only half a mile from the test plots and seldom sat down anyway.



He stepped off the conveyance a little later, giving not a thought to the efficient way the sled had recorded his destination, scooted off over super conducting rails and deposited him and two other passengers at a point designed to cause the least average walking distance for the three of them.

Jamie's position enabled him to afford a fairly expensive apartment near the outskirts of the Enclave. He could barely see the central towers from there. His complex sported rather rare buildings of only two stories, containing twenty or so units each. There was an expanse of food growing areas interspersed within them; the Enclaves supported fewer and fewer purely decorative plants as time went on. Food production was more important.

A short walk brought him inside the complex to his own ground floor apartment, situated strategically with the door facing out toward the common swimming pool. He waved to a bare breasted young woman of somewhat more than casual acquaintance as he passed and noted with a slight frown the slick furred body of a black otter descending the slide. He really preferred for the pool to be reserved for humans during the day unless, of course, Woggly wanted to go for a swim. In that case it was different; Woggly was almost human.

The door opened automatically as he neared, recognizing the signal from his body computer.

"Greetings, kind master," Woggly said, wagging his tail.

"The mighty human has returned," Fuzzy Britches purred from his favorite perch atop the back of the lounge. He stretched languidly, then settled back again. His whiskers twitched, as if sensing a mouse in the pocket of Jamie's coveralls.

"You've been practicing," Jamie accused. He directed a stare toward the curly haired cat. His fur was a mix of multiple colors all tangled together, as if a rainbow had been run through a blender and poured over him. Both animals looked much the same as their ancestors except for larger, high domed heads and heavier necks and forequarters to support the added weight.

"Not so," Fuzzy Britches answered, jumping down from his perch. Jamie wondered idly why they didn't have the holo on. They spent a good deal of their time watching it while he was out, when not occupied with patrolling the complex for stray rodents.

"You can go to hell for lying, Fuzz. Have you eaten?"



"Only a little," Woggly said, advancing to lick Jamie's hand.

"You can, too, Wog," Jamie said. He scratched the dog's ears, then sniffed. An odor of wet fur assailed his nostrils. "Say, what's that smell? Have you guys been swimming?"

Fuzzy Britches didn't consider the question worth answering. He would as soon have made friends with a feral rat as taken a swim. Woggly nodded a firm no, but continued nuzzling and licking Jamie's hand as if his denial carried a caveat with it.

"What's that smell, then?" Jamie sniffed again, then headed toward the bed room.

"Wait!" Woggly barked. Jamie turned and stared at the shaggy brown dog. What was going on?

"Strange dog in there," Fuzzy Britches said, coming over and rubbing against Jamie's shins. He looked up smugly, dangling imaginary feathers from his mouth.

"A strange dog? Whose is it? Who let it in?"

"Woggly did," Fuzzy Britches said, disclaiming any responsibility.

"Woggly?"

Woggly rolled over on the floor in an exaggerated surrender reflex, tail tucked between his legs and front paws akimbo.

"Oh get up, Wog, and stop acting silly," Jamie said. "Why did you let it in? You know you're not supposed to have guests while I'm gone. Whose dog is it, anyway?"

"Feral dog," Fuzzy Britches announced from a neutral position. He licked a paw and rubbed it lazily over his ears, as if suggesting that a feral dog in the house was nothing out of the ordinary.

"Dios y Santos!" Jamie exclaimed, borrowing one of his late father's favorite expressions. "And you let it in here? Why didn't you give an alarm?" He could hardly believe it.

"Wog said not to," Fuzzy Britches demurred, absolving himself of any responsibility.

"That's no excuse. Since when have you started listening to Wog, anyhow? Damn, that must have been the one that broke in this



morning. And you let it in here? What in hell do you think Alvarez will say if he finds out? He'll want both your hides for rugs, not to mention my own. Damn, damn, damn."

Woggly nuzzled Jamie's hand again then backed off when he saw that Jamie was having no part of it. He lowered his haunches to the floor and tried to look contrite. "He has a message, boss."

"Don't give me that 'boss' routine. I know who the real bosses are around here. Just what is this ever-loving message that made you let a damn feral dog hole up in my own bed room? I warn you, Wog, this better be good."

"He says message is from feral human."

That gave Jamie pause. It was a well know but seldom discussed fact that there was a scattering of humans still living in the wilds, protected from harm by their own coterie of enhanced animals, but not as masters; rather, they owed their existence to the usefulness of their hands to their pawed cohorts and to the inventiveness of their human minds, something that the genetic engineers had had little success in transferring to other species. He couldn't imagine any sort of message from a feral human important enough for his pets to let a fugitive dog hide out in their own home. Nevertheless, he trusted Woggly's judgment enough to at least listen to what the strange dog had to say before sentencing it to it's death in a general alert, or from his own laser gun. The fact that Fuzzy Britches had not raised a hue and cry influenced him even more. The cat was the more intelligent of the two animals.

"Bring him in here, Woggly," Jamie ordered. He patted the gun holstered at his side for reassurance.

Woggly barked at the bed room door. It opened and he scurried inside. Jamie heard a muted conversation interspersed with non-threatening growls and whines. Enhanced animals had their own conversational shortcuts when talking among themselves. A moment later Woggly returned, leading a short haired dog of in determinant breed, somewhat larger than his own moderate size. It (or rather, he, Jamie noticed) was rather less bedraggled than he had expected, although he still smelled of wet fur. Jamie suspected that Woggly had coerced him into cleaning himself up and standing under the flea-killer for a moment before being presented.

"This is Conan," Woggly announced hopefully.

The feral dog approached Jamie and raised a paw. He bent over to



shake it before realizing what he was doing. "My God," he thought. "I'm shaking hands with a feral dog in my own living room!"

"All right, Conan," he said. "My name is Jamie Da Cruz. You wait right here, right here, understand, while I get a drink, then you have ten minutes to explain yourself." He retreated to the kitchen and poured a shot of bourbon over ice, hesitated, then added another shot, wincing at how much that depleted the bottle. Branded spirits were very scarce in the Enclave, and he had no idea when he would be able to replenish his store, if ever. He fingered his still holstered laser gun and checked the time by pressing his thumb and forefinger together. The numerals glowed through his thumbnail -- he would have to call the office soon; both Jeannie and Alvarez were waiting to hear from him, he was sure.

Back in the living area he took his usual place in the big lounge but kept it in an upright position. Both dogs sprawled side by side on the carpet, forepaws out. Conan sniffed at the sculptured shag, puzzled at the faint life scent he detected. Fuzzy Britches jumped up to his usual perch atop the back of the lounge, ears cocked forward. Jamie touched a spot on his forearm to induce his body computer to transfer a permanent recording to the home archives, then took a long pull from his glass. "OK, Conan, it's your show," he said.

The dog spoke in a low guttural voice, in broken, badly accented English. "Human live with pack, mine, say come with him, her, say talk with Great Being, say talk fast .. quick .. ." He seemed to be searching for a word.

Woggly interrupted. "He says message is urgent."

Jamie took another sip of bourbon. That the message was urgent, he had no doubt; nothing else would have prevented Fuzzy Britches from setting off an alarm, not to mention letting a strange dog into his home. However, what was urgent to the cat was not necessarily so for him, nor for the Enclave in general.

"What 'Great Being' are you talking about? Do you mean one of your humans? Or is it an animal?"

The fugitive dog turned and spoke to Woggly, mixing whining noises with barely understandable English phrases. Apparently, the feral dog had only a limited speaking vocabulary, although he seemed to have no trouble understanding conversation addressed to him. Again Woggly interpreted. "He say Great Being not human, not animal, doesn't know what. He say look at his neck thing."



For the first time, Jamie noticed the crude leather collar around Conan's neck. Depending from it was a small blue-green disk, hardly more than coin size. He bent closer to inspect it, but it offered no other distinguishing features.

"Use hand," Conan said, sitting up and approaching Jamie's lounge. Tentatively he closed his hand around the disk. Immediately, images exploded in his mind, blurry and disconnected, like dreams run in fast motion. He saw a planet as it appeared from space, brown and blue and streaked white; what appeared to be a spaceship, but unlike any ever built by man; a cluster of beings, orange colored with six writhing appendages and large head-like protuberances; a whirling kaleidoscope of other scenes with no human reference, ineludible. A sense of urgency, coupled with impending doom pervaded the flashing images at the end. He dropped the disk abruptly, as if it had grown too hot to hold. Instantly, the images vanished from his mind.

Jamie shook his head. "What in hell was that?"

"Message from Great Being," Conan said.

"That's a message? Let me try it again." Again, the storm of strange images assaulted his mind. Prepared this time, he held onto the disk, but he learned little more. The same fast action scenes repeated, then repeated again, a closed loop. Shaken, he sat back in the lounge. He finished his drink in two long gulps and tried to make sense of what had happened.

"Wog, Fuzz, did you guys try it?"

The pets barked and meowed assent.

"What did you see?"

"Cartoons," Fuzzy Britches said.

"Funny pictures," Woggly agreed.

Jamie nodded. It was about what he would have expected of the pets. Intelligent as they were, concepts such as space beyond earth was beyond their grasp, but both were smart enough to have realized that the feral dog carried something important enough to await a human decision before sounding an alert. He wasn't certain himself that the images contained in the disk related to anything in the real world, but that didn't matter. Of immediate importance was the technology implied. He knew of nothing resembling the technique in



the Houston Enclave or any other. It was time to call Security Section and report the presence of Conan.

CHAPTER 3

Security, however, was already aware of Conan, by sight if not by name. Shortly after Jeannie had left the office to go home and change, Carlos Alvarez had received a message from one of Jamie's neighbors, an erstwhile girl friend who had not taken kindly to being dropped in favor of his newest bed mate. The fact that she had a 1A genome equal to Jamie's, and that Jeannie was of a lesser classification had only whetted her anger. Now she saw a chance to pay him back and took swift advantage of it. As soon as she saw that the strange dog entering Jamie's apartment was not wearing the standard Enclave collar she called the Genetic Engineering department. Alvarez, recognizing her as one of Jamie's former lovers took the call himself. Being somewhat voyeuristic, he even listened patiently to the girl's theories concerning miscegenation of genome types. Immediately afterward, he called Security Section.

Jamie's impression of Alvarez as an incompetent, pompous data shuffler was somewhat less than accurate. Alvarez might not have kept up with the latest methods in genetic engineering, but he was a shrewd judge of who had, and he had become more than a little fearful of Jamie's competence. His dislike of Jamie's pets, and pets in general, gave him no little satisfaction as he talked to John Whitmire, chief of Enclave security. "That's right," he said. "Da Cruz reported a feral dog intrusion at one of the test plots where he's screwed up some new protein flora, and just now I've gotten a report that a strange dog was seen entering his apartment. Yes, it was wearing a collar, but it didn't appear to be a standard one, and we've received no other information on the intrusion. I think this one must be it. No, John, I have no idea why he would try to conceal a feral dog; I'm just giving you what was reported to me. Yes, John, I would appreciate it if you would check it out. Let me know, please. Thank you." He cut the link to Whitmire and began closing the office for the day. At first he



intended to catch a sled for the old Galleria area and relieve some tension, but on second thought decided it would be more fun to head directly to Jamie's apartment complex and be present for the confrontation. That was a boss' prerogative, after all.

John Whitmire was less enthusiastic about Alvarez's report. He knew the man from department head meetings and was not impressed, especially in view of his well known prejudices concerning enhanced animals. Nevertheless, he couldn't simply ignore the call. A possible breach of the Enclave's defenses was too serious a matter; it would have to be investigated.

He scanned his monitor to see who might be available for the duty. There was precious little choice. The infrequency of breaks in the Enclave barriers lately had caused him to assign most of his agents not on duty outside to liaison and intelligence gathering of off world activities. Moon City and the space stations were still theoretically part of earth, but that was only theory. In practice, they were not only independent, but increasingly hostile and disdainful of the mother world. With the failure of national governments, they had taken over the means of space travel and extracted a huge price for weather forecasting, rare moon minerals, and exotic materials which could only be manufactured in the weightless environment of space. Whitmire thought that if the space colonies were not still dependent on earth for some of their own requirements, they would break all contact with earth and go their own way, unencumbered with the disastrous ecological consequences of the pet plague. He found it incumbent to keep many of his agents involved in space matters, especially in light of the deteriorating conditions on earth. Besides, it did no harm to know what the other fellow was thinking.

He finally decided on a ranger to follow up on Alvarez's report. Rangers were agents especially trained for assignments in the wilds, their specialty being to keep watch on territory outside the Enclave and to report on any threatening developments among the enhanced feral animals. There was a ranger available, he saw: Kristi Carson, currently near the end of a well earned leave from exploring the vast piney woods of east Texas.

His monitor picked her up in a rough section north of the old loop. He winced at the area she was in, and winced even more when she appeared in full holographic splendor on his screen. She was totally naked, her back propped against a large pillow. A sizable dog lay beside her on the bed, eyes open and alert. Her right arm was curled around a female body which he recognized as another of his rangers. She was obviously enjoying herself and made no attempt to blank out any part of the hologram. Kristi was not one to worry about other



people's opinions.

"What do you want, John? I'm on leave," she said, emphasizing the point by pulling the other woman's head down to her breasts.

"Sorry," Whitmire said, trying his best to ignore her activities. "I'm recalling you, but maybe just for this evening. There's been a break-in, and you're about the only agent available on such short notice."

Kristi shook her blond hair and disengaged herself from her companion. "Ah, well, I'm about ready to get back to work. Where is this alleged break-in?" She stood up and began pulling on her clothes, underpants and the standard Enclave coveralls. Whitmire admired her figure as she dressed. Not only was she one of his best agents, she was one of his most attractive ones. Her long blond hair contrasted nicely with the oddly tanned parts of her body, a blend of cream and brown. Her breasts were perfectly formed, with small pink nipples, and just large enough to set off her small waist and moderately flared hips. Her figure was a reflection of more than two generations of genetic selection by women of the enclaves. In her age group, there were very few sagging breasts or over padded flesh. She had high Swedish cheekbones and long tapered legs. Looking at her, Whitmire wished he were forty years younger.

"The break was in the experimental ag section, but the report I got suggests that a feral dog may be holed up in the apartment of one Jamie Da Cruz. Take a sled to B-36, then you can find him at building 9, apartment 3. Use your own judgment from there."

"On my way," Kristi said, relief in her voice. She really was tired of playing. A little work would be a welcome change, picayunish as this appeared to be.

Carlos Alvarez closed his own office, but in the reverie of his old mind he was still picturing the delightful aspect of Jamie Da Cruz being caught in the company of a feral dog and failed to clear his conversation with Whitmire from the section computer. After he left, his assistant saw an opportunity and called it back up. His assistant's goals were a little more long range. Don Cadena reported not only to Alvarez, but to the government of Moon City as well. His dark past had caused him to be recruited by the government there years ago. In this case, he doubted that anything of importance had taken place, but decided to keep abreast of the case of the feral dog anyway. It was good practice, and you never knew -- sometimes the most insignificant incidents could turn out to have great consequences.



Jamie's call to security turned up only the night watch. He initiated a tracer on Whitmire, hoping it would not be diverted into data storage for later retrieval, but suspected it would be, since he was not willing to disclose any of the current events to an underling. Then he suddenly remembered that he hadn't called his own office to report that he had gone home. A call there elicited only the robot caretaker; Cadena had finished listening to Alvarez's conversation and left as well.

Frustrated on both counts, he called Jeannie to put off their meeting. All he got was a recording of her pretty face. Jeannie had just finished changing when the call came and declined to answer. She thought it better to just go on over to his apartment and surprise him. She knew he couldn't resist a back-rub, and what would inevitably follow. Even if she didn't have a genome to match his, she was confident that he would eventually succumb to her not inconsiderable charms. After all, he had dropped a good looking 1A genome type for her. And, she admitted to herself, she really did love him. Maybe tonight, after what she intended to do with him, he would make a commitment. She could hope, anyway. Jamie's pets liked her, and she knew that meant a lot to him. Eagerly, she boarded the outskirts sled and settled down into a happy fantasy while it carried her toward his apartment.

CHAPTER 4

Jamie finished the last of his drink and began searching the cooler for something to eat. A hopeful woof from Woggly reminded him that it was time for the pets to eat as well. He pulled out dog food and cat food and set it in the warmer to cycle to Woggley's and Fuzzy Britches' preferred temperature. He thoughtfully added an extra portion of dog food for his guest, then began fixing a meal for himself. Before his own food was ready, but while the animals were already gulping down



the last of theirs, he was interrupted by the home computer chime, announcing someone at the door.

"Show me," he ordered.

The ornate door became transparent, revealing a tall blond female, pleasantly pretty, with high cheekbones and a nicely curved figure. He liked her looks immediately, but was somewhat taken aback at her dress. She wore faded green coveralls and boots. A wide belt adorned with a heavy duty laser gun and a knife sufficient to carve roasts from a mammoth emphasized her slim waist. Her hand rested casually over the open holster of the laser gun, not threatening, but obviously ready for whatever might occur once she gained entrance. "A Ranger," he muttered to himself. Damn, that was quick service.

"Open," he told the door. The woman stepped cautiously inside, her training showing. She scanned the room, noting that both of Jamie's pets wore the standard enclave collars; Conan had retreated back to the bed room at the sound of the chime. She relaxed the tiniest bit.

"My name is Kristi Carson," she said. "I am here on official business, concerning reports of a feral dog on the premises. Do you require an I.D.?"

"No, of course not. I called you, remember? Or at least I left a tracer for Director Whitmire." A frown crossed Jamie's brow. "Come to think of it, all I did do was leave a tracer. How did he know what I wanted?"

Kristi in turn looked puzzled. "I was told to check out a report of a feral dog hiding out here. Isn't that what you called about?" She eyed Jamie suspiciously, then relaxed. His bewilderment was obviously sincere.

"I did call about a feral dog," Jamie began, "but --".

The door chimed again. He ordered it to reveal the next visitor. The squat figure of Carlos Alvarez appeared, imaginary feathers drooping from his fat lips.

"Open," Jamie said reluctantly, wondering what had brought his boss to his home.

He introduced him. "This is Mr. Alvarez, the Director of Genetic Engineering." He offered nothing else, hoping that Alvarez had come on some innocuous errand, but suspecting that he, too, already knew



of Conan's presence.

Alvarez noted Kristi's attire with one glance and beamed with pleasure. "A ranger. Good. Now where's that dog you're hiding, Da Cruz. I know it's here."

"Mr. Alvarez, I can handle this," Kristi said, trying to take charge. She was interrupted by another door chime.

"Oh, hell, 'open'," Jamie said, not bothering to see who it was this time.

Jeannie stepped inside, dressed provocatively in shorts and translucent blouse. "Why, Mr. Alvarez, what are you doing here?" she exclaimed, not looking at him but at the other woman in the room.

"I'm here on business," Alvarez said brusquely. "Are you involved in this?" He stared through the translucent blouse. "No, I can see you're not. Maybe you had better leave."

"Let her stay," Kristi said. "This is getting interesting."

"Who are you?" Jeannie asked, staring daggers at the other woman. She wasn't overly familiar with rangers and didn't recognize her as an official, though Kristi's weapons and dress should have told her that much. She was simply irritated that her plans for Jamie were being interrupted.

"I'm Kristi Carson, Security. Are you involved with the fugitive?" Kristi had caught the withering stare from the other woman. She was amused, and just a bit titillated by it.

"Fugitive? Jamie, are you in trouble. Is this woman after you?" She asked the question as if she thought Kristi might be intending to take Jamie off and rape him somewhere.

"He damn sure is in trouble if we find a feral dog here," Alvarez interjected.

"Mr. Alvarez, what is your position in this matter?" Kristi asked.

"I'm the person who reported the fugitive," Alvarez said importantly.

"You reported what fugitive?" Jamie broke in. "I'm the one who reported it!" The whole situation was getting ridiculous.



"You reported yourself? Oh, Jamie, what have you done?" Jeannie threw herself into his arms, fearing the worst. Jamie a fugitive?

Jamie disentangled himself, conscious of Kristi's amused expression. "I haven't done anything," he said. "In fact, I can explain -"

The door chimed again.

"Meow," Fuzzy Britches said, using his own code to open the door. He loved confusion, so long as he wasn't the object of it, and this was getting good.

John Whitmire took one step inside and stopped, taken aback by the confounded expressions on the other four faces. He tried not to let it show, though. He was considerably older than anyone else in the room other than Alvarez, and his dress was unimposing. Only the security badge pinned to the chest of his coveralls denoted his status and his craggy, lined face could have been taken for any Enclave citizen who had never benefited from long life selection. His elderly appearance was a help at times, though. It helped to conceal his thoughts.

"Mr. Whitmire, what are you doing here?" Kristi asked, plainly vexed. Only the presence of strangers induced her to use the honorific and his last name. "Didn't you think I could handle a simple feral dog?"

"I had an urgent tracer put on me from Mr. Da Cruz," Whitmire explained. "I thought I had better come by and see what was happening."

"What is happening? Jeannie asked belligerently. She appeared almost ready to fight. Her nipples were erect, limned against the thin film of her blouse. Kristi noted them and felt a quickening of her pulse.

"Woof!" Woggly barked, deciding that it was time to add his voice to the melee'.

"I can explain," Jamie said again. For a change, there was no door chime to interrupt him.

"Perhaps you should, Mr. Da Cruz," Whitmire said. He had trouble concealing a grin. Regardless of the seriousness of the situation, this was the most fun the old man had had in a long while.



"It better be good, Da Cruz," Alvarez warned.

"Perhaps we should all sit down while we sort things out," Kristi suggested.

"Good idea," Jamie said, plopping sown on the large lounge. Kristi promptly seated herself beside him, drawing more daggers from Jeannie. Kristi ignored them. She was having fun, too.

Jeannie placed herself on the other side of Jamie before anyone else had time to move. Woggly lay down by Jamie's feet, looking alert. Fuzzy Britches jumped up onto a corner table. He was greatly interested in the events, but wanted a safe haven should a fray occur.

Whitmire took the small lounge, the dominant position in the room, leaving Alvarez to fit his bulk into an uncomfortably cushioned chair off to one side.

"Now, then," Whitmire said, leaning back and clasping his hands together over his belly. "Mr. Da Cruz, since you appear to be the focus of all this confusion, suppose you lead off. Mr. Alvarez seems to think that you are harboring a feral dog in your home. Is that a correct assumption?"

"Yes, it is, but it's not just any feral dog --"

"So, you admit it!" Alvarez interrupted, showing immense satisfaction. "Let me tell you --"

"Please, Mr. Alvarez, let him continue," Whitmire said.

"Jamie, you couldn't --", Jeannie began.

"You, too, Miss...?"

"Bostick. Jeannie Bostick. And I know Jamie wouldn't--"

"Please Miss Bostick, let him continue. Or is it Mrs. Bostick?" Whitmire was aware that the terms Miss and Mrs. meant little any more, but he was old fashioned. Besides, he wanted to get her relationship with Jamie Da Cruz categorized without being too obvious about it.

"It's, uh, Miss, but --"

"Continue, Mr. Da Cruz." Subconsciously, Whitmire discarded Jeannie from any important influence on Jamie's status, something



he would later regret.

Jamie hesitated as he took in the expectant faces, then did his best. "There is a feral dog here," he admitted. "His name is Conan. I don't think he is fully enhanced, but he can talk, after a fashion. He is the same dog who broke through the barrier last night, but it was just chance that he came to my doorstep. My dog --" he nodded toward Woggly. "And cat --" he indicated the alert Fuzzy Britches, who was alternating his attention between Jeannie and Kristi. He sensed something, but wasn't sure what, yet.

"--talked with the dog and decided that I should speak with him also. I did, and what he told me, or showed me, I should say, is unbelievable."

"It better not be," Alvarez said.

"I believe him," Jeannie said protectively.

Kristi winked at Jeannie, causing her to let flies in her mouth had any been present, then turned to Jamie. "Where is this dog? Is he still here?"

"Go get him, Wog," Jamie said, knowing how much Woggly liked to bark the door open. Fuzzy Britches, on the other hand, preferred to have doors opened for him, a not unusual inclination in cats, enhanced or not.

Woggly woofed at the door and scampered inside when it opened. Conan followed him cautiously back into the room, tail low, ears alert.

"Not much of a dog," Kristi commented when she saw him. Most rangers used enhanced German shepherds as their companions. She loosened the top of her coveralls, exposing the top of her breasts. "It's hot in here," she added.

"Yes, isn't it," Jeannie agreed, crossing her legs to display them more advantageously.

"Conan, show this man that disk you're wearing," Jamie said, completely missing the display of feminine enticement going on around him.

Conan whined at Woggly, who interpreted for him. "Neck thing," he said.

Conan trotted over to Whitmire and lifted his head to display the



disk. Whitmire reached out a hand to take it, then jerked it away almost immediately, as if he had been shocked. "Goddamn!" He exclaimed loudly.

"It won't hurt you," Jamie assured him. "Try it again."

Whitmire did so. His blocky face flickered in consternation. "That's the damndest thing I have ever experienced," he said.

"Cartoons," Fuzzy Britches said.

"Funny pictures," Woggly agreed.

"What is it?" Jeannie asked.

"Let me see," Kristi demanded, getting up and kneeling down by Conan. Jeannie immediately scrunched Jamie over to the edge of the lounge so that no one else could sit by him.

"All of you try it," Whitmire suggested.

Kristi took hold of the disk. To her credit, she held it through several cycles before giving up her turn. Jeannie got up and tried it. Kristi sat back down by Jamie.

Jeannie got off another volley of daggers, then sat down next to her imagined rival. Alvarez tried it. While he was occupied, Fuzzy Britches saw an opportunity and jumped from the table to Alvarez's seat, leaving him standing. He knew Jamie would make him move, but couldn't resist the opportunity to prick Alvarez's balloon of self importance.

It took several throat clearings by Alvarez to get Jamie's attention. "Be nice, Fuzz. This is important." Fuzzy Britches stretched and yawned, making a production out of moving. He padded over to the large lounge and meowed up at Kristi. She patted a well formed thigh. Fuzzy Britches jumped into her lap and began to purr. Jamie gave him a hard look. That was exactly how his romance with Jeannie had begun.

Whitmire had waited quietly until everyone was settled again, then turned to Jamie. "Mr. Da Cruz, the instrument your dog has here is quite astounding. I don't understand exactly what it means, but we must get it in the hands of some competent scientists for study. Also, you mentioned a message?"

"That is the message, or at least I think so. Conan says he received



the disk from a 'great being', and that some humans sent him here with it."

"What Enclave are the humans from? And why send it by a dog?"

"Feral humans sent it, not from any Enclave. Apparently, they want to talk to someone from an Enclave, though. Conan thinks the message is even more urgent than the disk indicates."

Whitmire frowned. "I'm having trouble understanding who this message is really from. You mentioned a 'great being' that Conan got the disk from. Who, or what might that be? Surely not from that apparition I sensed from the disk just then?"

Jamie shrugged. "Maybe it is from one of those six legged creatures in the disk, whatever they are. Maybe from one of the feral humans. Hell, maybe even an altered human."

There was a collective intake of breaths. While selecting genes and chromosomes for prospective offspring had become almost a universal practice, the insertion of animal genes into human embryos was a different matter entirely. It was strictly banned by every still functioning government on earth.

Jamie's pets, on the other hand, saw nothing upsetting in the idea - they thought many humans would probably be improved by a few judicious additions from the rest of the animal kingdom. Jamie had cautioned them not to talk about it in public, though. That one time with Alvarez had caused him enough trouble. At the mention of altered humans, Fuzzy Britches jumped down from Kristi's lap and led Conan and Woggly into a corner where they began a low conversation.

Whitmire shifted his eyes only long enough to be sure Conan was not attempting to leave, then began questioning Jamie again. "Where does this dog --"

"His name is Conan," Jamie said, somewhat shortly.

"Sorry. Where did Conan come from. What part of the country?"

"He hasn't said. Why don't you ask him?"

"I will. Conan!"

The feral dog looked up from where he had one ear cocked toward Woggly while Fuzzy Britches whispered in the other.



"Where do you come from. Where is your home?"

"Man-cave. Good home."

"No, no. I mean where is it located. How far from here?"

Conan turned to Woggly. The two dogs spoke back and forth in dog language, then Woggly answered. " 'Ten day journey' he says. He wants to leave now. Take Jamie back to see great being before it dies."

"Take me back?" Jamie exclaimed, thunderstruck.

"Take Jamie back?" Jeannie cried, unbelieving.

"Hmm," Kristi said, eyeing Jamie speculatively.

"I can't spare him," Alvarez answered pompously, forgetting his earlier attempt to undermine him.

"Go soon," Conan insisted.

Whitmire rubbed his chin, thinking. His appearance denied to the suggestible his considerable intelligence, even though he was too old to have benefited much from gene selection for that trait. "This would mean sending out a ranger expedition, at the very least. Plus scientists, I suppose."

"Not me," Jamie said. "If I go anywhere, which I'm not planning on, it will be by air."

"Perhaps your presence won't be necessary," Whitmire said, already thinking to himself that it probably would be. He knew animals, and had already caught the drift of Conan's intentions, not to mention Jamie's own pets.

"Conan says you will go," Woggly affirmed.

"But why? He doesn't need me!"

"He likes you," Fuzzy Britches said. "Good vibes."



CHAPTER 5

Jamie scrutinized Conan. "Just what I need. Another pet."

"Two more," Fuzzy Britches said. "Extra dog, must have extra cat. I know a nice little Persian female."

"You know a lot of females, judging by the hours you keep," Jamie said.

"You should talk," Jeannie told him. "Where were you last night when I called?"

"Let's get back to the subject," Whitmire said. "Mr. Da Cruz, it appears Conan is going to insist on your presence should we attempt an expedition to the source of his remarkable device."

"I said it once, I'll say it again. Anytime I go outside this enclave, I want to fly -- not that I want to go anywhere. What would Woggly and Fuzzy Britches do without me?"

"We're going, too," Fuzzy Britches said.

Flies could have found room in Jamie's mouth this time. He would never have thought that either pet would seriously consider leaving the easy life of the enclave for a trek in the wilderness. What had Conan been telling them?

Whitmire didn't comment on the remark; he had already anticipated it. He knew that the rangers' pets, especially their dogs, liked nothing better than to get outside and saw no reason why Jamie's animals wouldn't either. There was still an atavistic streak in even the most intelligent enhanced animals. There was another factor that Jamie hadn't thought of, either.

"Mr. Da Cruz --"



"Please call me Jamie."

"As you wish. Jamie, have you considered how you would expect Conan to lead you to his point of origin by air?"

Jamie gave him a quizzical look. "Just put him in a floater and let him tell you which way to go. How else?"

"Without having ever been in the air? Not even knowing what a forest looks like from above? Not knowing how fast floaters fly, nor how high?"

"Oh, I see your point. Did you say forest?" Jamie had never been away from the enclave, and imagined the outside world as something dark and primeval, filled with ferocious, super intelligent carnivores lurking behind every tree.

"Don't worry, Jamie. I'll take care of you," Kristi said.

"I'll just bet you would," Jeannie sniffed, getting out her daggers again. She was still young enough to be possessive in sexual matters, although most adults of her age soon outgrew it.

"She's telling the truth," Whitmire asserted. "My rangers are trained to survive in the wilds. They will make every effort to assure your well being, and that of your pets, should they accompany you." Privately, he worried more about the enhanced animals' survival than he did Jamie's. Although he was impressed with their intelligence, he doubted if they really comprehended conditions outside the Enclave.

"I still don't want to go," Jamie said.

Whitmire leaned back and crossed his hands over his belly again, choosing his words carefully. "Jamie, before I was advanced to my present position, I was an electronics specialist in communications. I can tell you categorically that the technology embodied in that little disk Conan is wearing is far beyond anything we have, even in the research stage. Think. An instrument less than an inch in diameter, without any interface other than skin contact, produces mental images, images that are duplicated regardless of what individual touches it. Even Conan and your pets seem to get the same pictures. This suggests the possibility of other, even more advanced science, possibly from beyond our own solar system. Suppose that technology, if we could duplicate it, turned up a method to control the plague of enhanced animals outside the Enclaves? Without breaking security, I can tell you that things are very bad outside, and promise to get worse.



"I think you have a duty to help in any way you can. In any case, I intend to spend the rest of the night and tomorrow getting together the personnel and supplies for an expedition to the outside. Your name will be on the list. In the meantime, all of you are to treat this as a security matter; that is, it is not to be discussed with anyone outside this room. Also, there will be a security detachment placed here to see that Conan does not leave. As for the instrument itself, I want to turn it over to the research department."

"No," Conan said, backing away from the group. He addressed Woggly in a rapid burst of dog language. Jamie and Whitmire immediately raised their estimate of the dog's intelligence. Apparently, he understood more English than he spoke.

"Disk thing come from great being. Conan says he keep it always," Woggly interpreted.

"I was afraid of something like that. Are you sure?"

"Certain," Woggly said.

Whitmire made a grimace of assent. He didn't know whether to fully believe the dogs, but was unwilling to risk the loss of his only information source. "All right, then, since that's settled, let's wrap it up for the night. Lieutenant Carson, would you remain on guard outside until the security detachment shows up? And Jamie, I will send Carson back here in the morning to escort you to the security building, where you will be outfitted. Please leave your weapon here; you will be furnished with another."

"If you say so," Jamie agreed reluctantly. It seemed he had little choice in the matter, not even the type weapon he would carry. He glanced longingly down at the little laser gun holstered at his waist. He knew it was not suitable for anything larger than a medium sized dog, but he was fond of it, and prided himself on being a good shot. Most anti-personnel weapons since the pet plague began had been consolidated into the standard laser gun type. It fired an aiming beam at the first pull of the trigger. A little more pressure sent out a laser beam at full power, and a final increase fired an explosive bullet, which was further speeded on it's way by a minute rocket charge. With practice, the whole process could be completed in a tenth of a second. Jamie used the laser portion of his weapon most of the time; it was sufficient for the rats, mice and rabbits which were his usual concern. He supposed he would be furnished with a heavier duty version of the same weapon.



Whitmire stood up, followed by Kristi and Alvarez. "Have a pleasant evening," he said, glancing at Jeannie, who appeared ready to commit either homicide, femicide, or canicide; her intentions were held in check only by the uncertainty of which would be the most effective.

The three unexpected visitors left together, leaving Jamie and Jeannie alone with the animals. She came into his arms and began crying. "Jamie, I don't want you to go. You'll get hurt, I just know you will."

Jamie patted her shoulder, uncertain of how to answer. He had become very fond of her in the last month or two, even though he hadn't been seeing her exclusively. Now, with a lengthy and almost certainly dangerous trip ahead of him, he thought sentimentally of the time they had spent together and how nice she would be to come back to -- or stay with. He trusted Whitmire's assurances of well being about as much as he did Fuzzy Britches' ability to pass up a Persian in heat.

"I guess there's no help for it," he said glumly. He kissed her cheek, and used a forefinger to wipe away a tear. She turned her face toward him and pulled his lips down to hers. He kissed her, gently at first, but she was having none of that. Her lips parted and her tongue began making little swirling motions against his own. He cupped her breast and squeezed gently, then broke the kiss to admire the fullness of it cradled in his hand, nipple peeking over the edge of his palm and making a little tent behind the thin film of her blouse. He moved his hand up, loving the feel of the erect nipple sliding against the palm of his hand. He moved his hand in a slow circle to the rhythm of her long, drawn out breaths.

"Not here," she said. Not having pets of her own, she was reticent about sex in the presence of self aware animals. Jamie still found it somewhat odd of her, but passed it off as a consequence of youth and inexperience. Besides, Woggly and Fuzzy Britches were almost certainly more interested in watching holovision than them.

"Do you want to eat first?"

"I don't want food, I want you." She glanced around self-consciously to see if the animals were listening. "Come on, let's go to the bed room."

They departed, leaving Woggly and Fuzzy Britches to argue over which program to watch. Conan was neutral, having never seen holovision before. Woggly won the argument and all three animals



settled to the carpeted floor. Woggly woofed a staccato burst of commands. The projection flickered rapidly through several selections, then settled into an old educational segment featuring prehistoric animals. It had not been produced for pets, but they loved to watch the life- like animation of mammoths, dire wolves and saber tooth tigers. Fuzzy Britches, especially, liked the great tigers as they stalked their prey. He wondered what it would be like to have teeth that long, and prey to use them on.

Jamie slept poorly that night, bothered by dreams of dark tangled forests inhabited by red eyed amorphous shapes lurking in the background, never taking on complete form. He eased out of bed shortly before dawn and spoke softly to brighten the night light enough to feel his way around. He left the window darkened and the alarm set so that Jeannie could sleep a while longer, then remembered that it wouldn't matter anyway. Whitmire's busybodies would surely be arriving to fetch him back to their boss before too long.

He showered, shaved, and decided that his mustache still didn't need trimming. He smiled to himself, remembering that he had never gotten the promised back rub, either. He moved quietly out of the bed room, pausing before closing the door to admire Jeannie's shadowed form, sleeping half turned on her side with the sheet covering only her hips, leaving her breasts and most of her long legs exposed. Maybe -- he glanced at the luminous numbers on his thumbnail; no. He firmly closed the door.

He emerged into the already brightly lit living area. Conan was staring raptly at a scrolling news report on the holo, certainly not understanding it, but fascinated by the moving lines and brightly lit back ground. Woggly and Fuzzy Britches were each munching a food bar in their eating area.

"Morning, guys," he greeted them. "Couldn't you wait for breakfast? You'll get fat if you don't leave that dispenser alone and eat regular meals."

"Energy for the trip," Fuzzy Britches explained, licking his chops.

"You have more energy than you need already. Have you been outside, yet?"

"Man by the door won't let us. Had to go in here," Fuzzy Britches complained. Enclave animals had specially designated areas in the garden plots for elimination, but many of the newer apartments had been designed with facilities for animals. Woggly cared not at all



which place he used, but the cat distrusted the inside fixture and used it only if forced by dire necessity. Many instinctive functions in the pets had been eliminated to make room in their still small (by human standards) skulls, but many remained, though as in man, they were attenuated by intelligence. The cat still retained remnants of the cover up instinct and resented the inside facility because of it's lack of soil.

Conan had turned his attention from the holo when Jamie entered the room. He came over and sniffed Jamie's hand.

"Good morning, man," he said, enunciating the words clearly as he wagged his tail.

Jamie suspected that was his usual greeting to whatever feral humans lived with his pack, but nevertheless, was pleased by the courtesy.

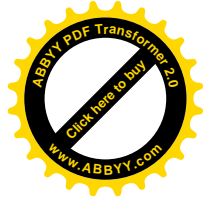
"Good morning to you, Conan," he said. "Did you sleep well? Are you hungry?" The dog appeared confused by the simultaneous questions, but finally sorted them out. "Sleep, yes. Eat, yes. Go man-cave now?"

"Tomorrow."

The dog nodded that he understood. Jamie reflected again that perhaps he had underestimated his intelligence. At any rate, he was beginning to like him and certainly admired the determination which had led him on a long journey into surroundings which must appear utterly alien to him. He wondered not for the first time since the previous evening what lay at the end of the return journey.

He took out more food for the three animals, knowing they would eat again, then began fixing breakfast for himself and Jeannie. Food preparation was as simple or complex as he cared to make it. This morning, he decided to start from scratch instead of heating a prepared meal. He took out strips of processed vegetable matter made up to resemble bacon, several real (and rare) real eggs, slices of butter bread, milk substitute, and more or less real orange juice. Not many citizens could afford the orange juice or eggs, but Jamie's position allowed him to enjoy the luxuries as often as not.

No Enclave functioned exactly like the others; geography, climate, political history, and many other factors dictated the economic structure and living conditions. The Houston Enclave was favored by climate, access to the sea, and a previous base of high technology. Most large facilities (such as the hydrogen fusion plant) were government owned, but there was still considerable room for free



enterprise in a population of over fifteen million, even after the drastic restructuring which had been necessary during it's formation. There was trade between the Enclaves of the northern hemisphere, and still some world trade, but both were limited by necessity to really vital items. Jamie had never tasted real coffee; what he prepared for them was a synthetic/organic substitute, although he called it coffee and thought of it as such.

He heard sounds coming from the bed room and hurried his preparations. He told the dinette to unfold from the ceiling and quickly laid out trays for them. He was just pouring the juice when Jeannie entered the room. He was momentarily surprised to see her dressed in becoming yellow coveralls, opened low in front in the conventional design. She had hand decorated the vertical front closure and embroidered cursive patterns on the wide side pockets. The sleeves were rolled crisply above her elbows as a concession to the humid spring weather. He remembered then that she had brought a few changes of clothing over a couple of weeks before at his own urging so that he could enjoy her company on the mornings after she stayed over, rather than having to go home to change. Damn, he could have gown back to bed, after all.

"Mmm. You're going to spoil me," Jeannie said, sniffing the breakfast aromas. She kissed him soundly, the tickle of his mustache sending a little shiver up her spine. "Hi guys!" She waved at the animals and sat down to eat.

While Jamie and Jeannie were enjoying their breakfast, Carlos Alvarez had made a point of arriving at the office early that morning so that he could record in detail the odd happenings of the night before. A prudent man, he would never have considered breaking Whitmire's injunction against talking to other persons, but his bureaucratic mind saw no harm in making a record of the events. Perhaps it would come in handy later. In fact, it would, but not in the way he imagined, and the unprotected file would eventually embroil the Enclave in conflict and death.



CHAPTER 6

Jamie and Jeannie were just finishing their coffee when the door chimed. He told it to open without bothering to look; he already knew who it would be, but surprised himself by the little throb in his middle at the anticipation.

"Good morning," Kristi said, including both humans and animals in the greeting. Jamie stared. Kristi was no longer wearing ranger dress. The coveralls had been replaced by powder blue slacks and a white blouse and her blond hair was pulled back in a simple ponytail. She no longer looked ready to fight wildcats, and seemed to have shrunk several sizes as well. She still retained her weapons, however, holstered neatly at her waist. He admired the waist.

"Good morning," Jeannie answered for all of them in a pleasant voice, unconsciously less possessive after her night with Jamie.

"I'm holding the sled whenever you're ready," Kristi said.

"I guess I'm as ready as I'll ever be," Jamie said. "Hold the fort, guys. Take care of Conan." He led the way outside, threading his way amongst the contingent of a half dozen rangers and two internal security agents. He stopped before boarding the sled and turned to Jeannie.

Kristi spoke before he could. "Can we drop you somewhere, Jeannie? We'll be glad to, if it's not too far out of the way."

"I think the GE building is pretty much on the route if you're going toward the city," Jeannie said, feeling no threat in the offer.

"We are. Come on." She led Jeannie to a seat at the back of the sled and sat down beside her, leaving Jamie to share the company of the two security agents. He was a little non-plussed that Jeannie chose to share the ride with Kristi rather than him. He even wondered mildly



how they were getting along; he had caught some of the nuances between the two women the night before. He would have been amazed had he heard their conversation as he was riding serenely along.

Just to make small talk, Jeannie asked after they were seated, "How could I go about getting into ranger training if I wanted to?"

Kristi smiled. "Before considering it, you might want to think about how you would feel about going days on end being dirty, sweaty, exhausted, and threatened. That's the usual routine on the outside."

"Oh," Jeannie said. Her romanticized version of ranger life hadn't included such factors.

"What do you do now?" Kristi asked.

"I run the computer at Jamie's office. That's where I met him. You don't think I'd like being a ranger?"

"No, I don't," Kristi said honestly. "You strike me as someone who would rather stay inside the barriers. I feel the same way about Jamie, by the way. I don't think he's an outside person, either."

Jeannie saw her chance and took it. "Is that all you think about him?"

Kristi turned and smiled. "Are you worried about what might happen when Jamie and I get off into the wilds together? Don't. Oh, there might be some sexual attraction -- Jamie is an interesting man, and his pets surely think well of him; that counts for a lot with me. Relax, though; I'm no threat, not in the long run."

"I'm glad," Jeannie confessed.

"No need to be that glad. I really prefer women over men. In fact, if anyone should worry, Jamie should."

"Why do you say that?" Jeannie asked, puzzled.

"Because, if push comes to shove, I'd rather have you in my bed." Kristi patted Jeannie's thigh and grinned beatifically. "Here's your stop."

Blushing furiously, Jeannie got up. She avoided eye contact with Jamie as she gave him a brief kiss and stepped off the sled. As it trailed off into the distance, her thoughts went with it, as confused as if she had just dived into a pool of Jell-O instead of water. She had a



right to be; Kristi hadn't been completely honest. Jamie attracted her more than she had admitted, more so than any man she had met for some time. And he was involved with Jeannie. She liked her, too. This proposed expedition was getting more interesting all the time.

The two security agents sharing Jamie's seat could have been twins, or brothers. Both wore identical tan coveralls and had brown hair and brown eyes. They both wore holstered laser guns and had identical badges affixed to the lapels of their suits. Like Jamie, they wore their suits with sleeves rolled above the elbows, ready to be rolled down if need be; at this time of year, the weather could change suddenly. All purpose coveralls, shorts, slacks, and simple pullovers or shirts and blouses were all the enclave offered. There was no spare capacity for fashion designers or a wide variety of clothing. Most men took them as they came, but many women decorated the basic wardrobe to give an illusion of variety.

The conversation of the security agents was as conservative as their dress. Other than giving names, which Jamie promptly forgot, they made no conversational gambits of their own, merely answering questions with the least possible use of words. Jamie soon gave up and gazed out toward the center of the enclave as they rode. When they came to Jeannie's stop, he noticed that her face was slightly red. He wondered why, but decided not to ask. Instead, he invited her back to spend the night again. She accented, kissed him briefly, and was gone.

Once she had been let off, the sled began passing through territory he seldom frequented. It was an older section of what had once been the inner suburbs of north Houston. It harbored small businesses located in elderly buildings, interspersed with newer electronics installations and food processing plants. Almost all of the older homes had been replaced with standardized prefabricated apartments for middle and lower income residents. Housing was still at a premium after the influx of refugees from previous years. He saw few people and even fewer animals; most inhabitants of this section of the Enclave still held a distinct dislike for the enhanced animals which had displaced their forebears from the countryside. Further on, the buildings grew larger and pedestrians more numerous and prosperous looking, and a few enhanced dogs and cats appeared; those two animals were by far the most numerous pets allowed in the



Enclave. The newer buildings wore a just washed appearance, having never been subjected to the smog of pre-Enclave days.

The sled stopped just short of the high rise center near a shopping mall adjacent to the security building and warehouse. From there, they had to walk; sled rails were still being laid from that point to their destination. Jamie noticed that there was no work in progress. It might be a long time before they were finished; the metal and other materials necessary to produce the rails all had to be imported and were in very short supply. Jamie remembered Whitmire's words of last night about how bad it was getting outside the walls and wondered if the rail lines would ever be completed.

The two security agents closed to either side of Jamie as they passed among the night shift workers doing their morning shopping. They drew a few curious glances, but nothing more; most people tended to mind their own business. The ones who did scrutinize him and his escorts tended to look away quickly, probably thinking he was a candidate for the ultimate penalty Enclave authorities could impose: expulsion into the wilds, where life expectancy could be gauged in days, weeks, or possibly months, rarely longer. He saw many couples and threesomes, and not a few double couples, all shopping together. Whenever possible, families worked the same shift. Entertainment tented to center on the versatile holo programs, inside apartments or in clubrooms of the complexes. Restaurants and night clubs had almost disappeared and liquor was in very short supply; grain was needed for food. Many people used mood altering drugs, but there was no addiction problem; not only had the addictive factors been designed out of the drugs, the younger portion of the population had been selected to eliminate the addictiveness inherent in some of their parents' genes.

Jamie paid little attention to the numerous threesomes he saw. It was a natural phenomena to him, although he had never been involved in one. So many males had died during the formation of the Enclaves that bonding of two females with a single male had become common. The practice had continued even after the population became more nearly balanced, although now the reverse of two males with one female was almost as common. There was a lot to be said for three (or four) adults per household once the cultural inhibitions against the practice faded.

Few of the morning shoppers were armed, although there was no restrictions at all on the possession and bearing of weapons. This far into the Enclave, there was simply little need for them; feral animals rarely managed to penetrate this far. Weapons were hardly even necessary for self-defense; the brutal methods necessary to establish



a safe haven for humans and their selected pets had given short shrift to the violent criminal class, and gene selection had reduced the propensity even further. There were few of them left. Most crime was of the theft or burglar variety, and most of them were caught eventually, especially the burglars. Most upscale citizens like Jamie had protective systems in their homes, so individualized that it was almost impossible to figure them out in advance. What crime there was carried punishments of extra work or reduced salaries for a first offense; for the second, heavier penalties, and a third offense was penalized by expulsion into the wilds, with no appeal allowed. Family violence was dealt with as circumstances dictated, but there was little of that either. The threat of banishment to the wilds was always present, making for a well behaved, if slightly hungry citizenry.

A slight rain began to fall as they left the shoppers behind. They hurried to the protection of a covered walkway for the last portion of their journey. Just inside the entrance of the security building they were halted until Jamie's body computer could have an entrance code programmed into it. He looked around curiously during the couple of minutes it took, but could find nothing in the decor of the alcove to differentiate the security building from any other government office.

One of the twins departed on some errand of his own while the other escorted him to an elevator and rode with him to another floor. There, he was led through a short hallway and into a small room which Jamie immediately recognized. Without being asked, he peeled off his coveralls and sat down in the single seat in the room, a massively cushioned, tentacled travesty of a chair, known even before it's invention as an autodoc.

For the next fifteen minutes the autodoc poked and prodded, withdrew and analyzed blood, urine, saliva, and other body fluids. It snipped off a tiny lock of his hair and a piece of fingernail. It attached and withdrew electrodes, shined various colored lights in his eyes and hooted in his ear. Jamie was quiet and compliant throughout the process, but he thought dark thoughts at the impersonal AI conducting the exam, while at the same time wishing that it would find some medical reason to exclude him from the pending expedition. The autodoc found nothing wrong other than a slight slackness of muscle tone. It recommended more exercise in a pleasant bass voice, sat him upright and released him from it's tentacled grasp.

The security agent, whose first name Jamie finally remembered was Carl, had remained in the room the whole while. He favored Jamie with a slight smile. "You'll get all the exercise you need after tomorrow. Outfitting next. This way."



A supply robot in a second room required him to strip again before measuring him for ranger coveralls and boots. It queried the agent briefly. "What class outfitting?"

"Basic survival. Medium handgun. Minimal field rations for one cat and two dogs, size 2B and 3A. Standard human trail rations."

The robot put a momentary hold on the request for cat rations, leading Jamie to believe that cats seldom accompanied rangers into the field, but apparently there was a stock on hand, for it approved the request, then said, "Thank you. Good luck. You may retrieve the items from the stockroom anytime within the next twenty four hours. Please enter your code now."

Jamie touched his arm, waited for the beep, then turned to Carl for further instructions.

"A pretty heavy load," Carl said, "but it will get lighter as you go along. Target practice next." Jamie thought that Carl was becoming downright loquacious compared to his earlier self. He wondered whether the increasing verbosity had anything to do with the fact that it was he, rather than the security agent who was being outfitted for survival outside the Enclave.

He spent the next two hours in a basement firing range being instructed in the basics of his new weapon, most of which he felt he could have done without; it was almost identical to his own, smaller weapon. He was provided with a holster, five extra clips of ammunition, and two spare power packs for the laser portion of the handgun. Each of them carried the admonition DO NOT DISCARD. RETURN FOR RECHARGING. Another shortage, Jamie thought. Very few items were disposable; raw materials were scarce and likely to get more so, according to Whitmire. Jamie was just beginning to get a hint of the paucity of resupply. His work in agriculture had insulated him from most such considerations, other than his own needs.

There was a break for lunch, with Carl ever in attendance, then he was lead to a large room with twenty or so comfortable seats equipped with basic computer and holo display workstations. A group of a dozen or so rangers were already seated.

"Ah. Right on time. Very good." Jamie recognized Whitmire's British accented voice coming from behind him. He turned and saw that he was shepherding two men and a woman into the room. He held them up for introductions.



"Jamie, I want you to meet some people you will be working with. This is Maria Martinez, a physicist, and her husband -- um, companion, that is, Donald Martinez. He is an electronicist. Also Bryan Drewson, zoologist. This is Jamie Da Cruz, genetic engineer. You all have five minutes before classes begin to get acquainted. I will see you again, later. Whitmire looked harassed and sleepy eyed, and his thatch of gray hair was trying to take off in several directions at once. Jamie thought he must have worked all night, as he had said he would.

"Are we really going to try to find an alien being?" Drewson, the zoologist asked. He was a tall dark man with a full beard and piercing eyes. His voice held tones of wonder.

"I'm not really certain," Jamie said truthfully. "I'll let you decide after you meet the messenger."

"Wouldn't that be wonderful?" Maria Martinez said. She was stereotypically Hispanic, with black hair and eyes, dark complexion, rose red lips and full, almost buxom figure. Her companion, Donald, was also darkly colored, but appeared to be more of the Italian/European extraction. He said nothing, seemingly lost in thought.

"I've heard of you," Drewson said. "You invented the hambeans, didn't you?"

"My department developed them, yes," Jamie acknowledged, deferring complete credit.

"Good job. I like them. About time we got some pork back into the ecology."

"Thanks," Jamie said. "What sort of work are you doing now?"

"Taxonomy, mostly. Trying to keep up with all the new classifications of mammals the rangers keep bringing me. I'm beginning to think those old Brazilian labs altered or enhanced every animal from the Amazon north, then deliberately turned them all loose here."

"Really?"

"No, it just seems like it sometimes," Drewson amended.

"Please take your seats."



Jamie turned to see a small balding man at the front of the room, already seated at the main console which controlled the tutoring desks. He and the other three scientists took their places in a group next to the rangers. He glanced at them as he was seating himself. He recognized one face immediately. Kristi winked solemnly at him, then turned her attention back to her station.

"Please interface with your stations now and let's get started," the instructor said. There was a rustle of movement as they complied, then a momentary silence.

Holographic images appeared around each station, giving instructions and explaining the use of equipment which would be carried, flora and fauna to be expected, safety precautions, and interminable other items necessary for comfort and survival in the wilds. Jamie found it fascinating despite his reluctance to undertake the trip, but it was easy to see that it was a hurried presentation. He thought correctly that their monitor was interfacing with the main computer as they went along, deleting all but the barest essentials of what was probably a weeks long course of instruction. That didn't make him feel at all comfortable.

During the frequent minute long breaks, he noticed that the rangers appeared to be bored. No doubt they had been through the material numerous times and were there more to see what information was being skipped than being given so that they would know what to watch for. Again, he wondered at the hurried preparation, but as the presentation continued, it began to generate an interest, if not outright enthusiasm for the expedition. Some of the flora was interesting and a few he didn't recognize at all. It was too bad that it was spring rather than fall. He would have liked to collect some seeds. He made a note to include some preservative vials in his pack; he could always clone any interesting specimens later. During the heyday of undisciplined, clandestine genetic engineering of animals, many plants had been altered as well. This fact was generally unknown, though not any sort of secret; it was just that the animals had gotten all the publicity.

John Whitmire appeared at the end of the classes several hours later. He had entered unnoticed while the students were each still surrounded by the instructional images and had taken the spot vacated by the monitor.

"I wish to thank all of you for being here," he began, running a hand through his hair, further disarranging it. He settled his blocky body more comfortably in position, then continued. "Your government is entrusting to you a most crucially important mission; I



beg to doubt that many of you realize yet just how important. Let me state that the continued existence of this and other Enclaves may very well depend on your success. It is becoming harder and harder to maintain our supply lines; many raw materials are becoming almost unobtainable; food production has reached a plateau barely sufficient for our needs. This is all general knowledge, of course, although it is not well publicized, and most citizens assume that somehow the problems will be solved in time. What is not generally known is that increased population pressure of altered and enhanced animals in the wilds is beginning to make significant changes in the biological ecosphere. For instance, the bird population has decreased dramatically, which in turn has led to an increase in the number of insects. I am told that this trend alone, if unchecked, could in time denude the earth of vegetation. You can imagine any other circumstances you wish. Suffice to say the Enclaves are simply a holding action, not a long term solution.

"Our best hope for the future of our civilization lies in the development of some radically new technology. While we may develop something ourselves, there is certainly no guarantee and, realistically, not much prospect of it within the projected time frame which we calculate the Enclaves can remain viable. It is fortunate that another way may be open to us. Less than two days ago we received a unique message, in a rather unique way. For those of you who have yet to examine the message and it's bearer, let me say that you will be given the opportunity soon enough. For now, please take my word for it that the technology involved in the message suggests that it is not of earth. Furthermore, there are hints of accompanying knowledge even more important. We are not certain of all this, of course. There are those within my own department, and in other departments as well, who believe the whole thing to be a hoax, perpetrated by some mad genius, or alternatively, that I have lost my mind." He smiled grimly. "I do not believe either, and I have staked my reputation on that belief. Even if the technology is not from the stars, it is still of inestimable value.

"The expedition will be linked to my headquarters. I will be following you every step of the way, and when you have reached your goal a larger and better supplied airlift will be organized and dispatched.

"I know that some of you have questions, many of them, but please forgo them for now. You will have many of them answered when you listen to the message yourself." He smiled at the puzzlement on the faces of those who had not yet had the opportunity to handle Conan's disk, then continued. "Please be dressed and ready to leave by daylight tomorrow morning. A sled will arrive at each of your homes



at that time to bring you all to your departure point, which will be at the home of Jamie Da Cruz. I suggest that you have a last meal before you leave." He was interrupted by gusts of laughter, then realized the implication of his last remark. A final meal was always granted to exiles before expulsion from the Enclave. "Sorry," he continued after the laughter had died. "I meant your last meal at home for a while. "Godspeed to you all".

CHAPTER 7

Jamie was heartened by the thought that a relief expedition would take place once they reached their goal. From the looks of all his supplies, he hoped it wasn't far away. Carl politely helped him carry the load to the sled stop. Jamie appreciated the help; all the gear was still in containers and quite bulky. They were joined there by Carl's erstwhile companion, and with his appearance, Carl again lapsed into silence. Jamie didn't mind. He was beginning to anticipate seeing Jeannie again that night, even perhaps asking her for some sort of long term commitment upon his return. Maybe it would be the start of a threesome or foursome if he and Jeannie really did settle down. An image of Kristi flicked momentarily into his mind, then just as quickly faded. He doubted seriously that a rough and tough ranger would be interested in a quietly studious genetic engineer, even if he was inclined.

Jeannie might have something to say about a threesome, anyway. Perhaps she wouldn't go for the idea just yet, as young as she was, although there was certainly no bias in Enclave society against such arrangements. Religious and moral scruples concerning sex and organized worship had declined almost to the point of meaninglessness during the formation of the Enclaves. Threats of eternal damnation and inducement of guilt by religious authorities had little sway on citizens any longer. For the majority who failed to reach the safety of the Enclaves, hell had already arrived; for the



remainder, the disruptions of the formation days had brought a rise in hedonism and loyalty to temporal protectors, and this attitude had been passed on to their descendants. Multiple marriages were more common than not, and with the genetically induced resistance to venereal diseases, promiscuity had again become common, if not yet universal.

Jamie was certainly not monogamously inclined, and had no intentions of becoming that way in the future, but he was selective; female bodies as simple sexual objects held no attraction for him. He preferred the intimacy and interplay of personality in his sexual encounters and soon lost interest in women who sought sexual gratification alone. Nevertheless, he had always stopped short of long term commitments for one reason or another. Now, he was surprising himself by considering the idea. He wondered how Jeannie would react. Maybe she would want to gain some more experience first; she was just barely in her twenties, after all. Anyway, it would be best to wait until this business with Conan was finished. There might be ramifications he was as yet unaware of, and he cared too much for her to want her involved any more than she already was in a project which could end in several ways, not all of them good. There was also Woggly and Fuzzy Britches to consider. He was too close to his pets to want to cause them any distress and he wasn't yet sure that they were ready to accept Jeannie on a permanent basis.

He needn't have worried about his pets. Unknown to him, they had already conferred and agreed that Jeannie was someone they wanted added to the household. They liked her shyness and had already sensed something that Jamie was just becoming aware of: he was content in her presence. They intended to make sure he realized it fully at an opportune time. The introduction of Conan into their lives had only delayed the process.

Fuzzy britches was also thinking about Kristi, in the deliberate, aloof way of his species. He sensed something about her that was new and interesting, but couldn't yet put a paw on it. He would wait, and think about it some more.

It already approaching twilight when they left the security building, and the sun was well down when Jamie was let off at his apartment complex. The rain had stopped, but the sky was still threatening; not a good omen for the beginning of a trek into unexplored wilderness, at least to his mind. He hoped they wouldn't have to march in the rain the next day, but held out little hope for it. He was consoled by the powered coveralls he had been issued. They could be converted from ventilating to waterproof to heat retaining after being interfaced with his body computer, and had a hood and



rain shield attached. He was particularly pleased with his new thermosmotic boots. The thermosmotic material was difficult to manufacture, expensive and very scarce; it was usually reserved for rangers. Nevertheless, at the moment he would have traded them for a bright sunshiny day to start the expedition.

The two security agents accompanied him past the ranger guards who were still present at his front door, which opened before he was even within range. Jeannie was already there and had been waiting impatiently for him to return. She was wearing the same clothes as the night before, freshly laundered, and was just as appealing as when he had left.

"Just drop the stuff here, and thanks for the help," he told the agents as he relieved himself of his own load. They complied, shook hands and left with simultaneous "good luck" farewells. Before they were even out the door, Jeannie had her arms around him. She hugged him tightly, then stepped back.

"What on earth is all this stuff?"

"This is what I'm going to have to carry." He noted her disbelieving expression and explained. "I haven't unpacked it or sorted it yet." He turned to his pets. "You guys should feel honored. I'm carrying your rations as well as mine. Yours too, Conan."

"Good master."

"Nice master."

"Oh shush. I didn't have a choice. Jeannie, have these characters been giving you a hard time?"

"Of course not. They have been perfect gentlemen, haven't you, guys?"

"Jeannie is nice person," Woggly said.

"Nice body, too, for a human," Fuzzy Britches added.

Jeannie blushed, but it was clear that she appreciated the compliment. "Do you have to unpack now, or do you want to eat first?"

"Let's eat, but how about a drink first? I've had a long day, and besides, we may as well use the bourbon up. I don't know when I'll be able to get any more."



"Sit down. I'll fix them," Jeannie said. She moved off to the kitchen area while he stretched himself out in the big lounge. Fuzzy Britches jumped into his lap and began to purr. Conan came over to sniff his hand and gave it a lick. He patted his head and ruffled his ears. The cat rolled over in his lap and demanded a belly rub. Jamie stroked the cat until Jeannie returned with his drink. She sat down on the carpet by the side of the lounge and pulled an arm down to her shoulder, then placed his hand on a breast and covered it with her own. "So when do you leave?"

"First thing in the morning."

"I wish I could go with you." She rubbed the hand covering her breast.

Jamie started. "No you don't. I want you right here, waiting for me when I get back. This isn't going to be a picnic in the park. It's dangerous out there."

"I'd rather be with you. I don't care about the dangers. Besides, Kristi said she would watch out for you."

"Is that what you were talking about on the sled this morning?"

"We talked about a lot of things," Jeannie evaded, "but she said that last night, remember? You know, she's kind of nice after you get to know her. I even asked her about going into ranger training, but she said I wouldn't like it."

"Neither would I," Jamie said. He couldn't imagine Jeannie as a ranger, but then he remembered Kristi's appearance in civilian attire. She hadn't looked like a ranger then, either.

"Don't worry, I'm not tempted any longer. Finish your drink and let's eat; I'm hungry." Jeannie was purposely avoiding any more questions about her conversation with Kristi. She wasn't sure how Jamie would take it if he knew that Kristi had sort of off-handedly propositioned her. In fact, she still wasn't sure how to take it herself.

Jamie took the last sip of his bourbon and got up to inspect the kitchen cabinet. He found a steak he had been saving for a special occasion, took out two cheese potatoes and added a premixed salad of lettuce and carnegies. He made them both another small drink to go with the meal, using the last of the bourbon, then asked the pets for their preference. "Speak up. After tonight, it's field rations so you better chow down now."



"Liverleaf," Fuzzy Britches said.

"We want beefplant," Woggly said, including Conan in the request.

Jamie took out those items, cycled them for the animals, and had them munching away before their own meal was ready.

"Let's eat in the bedroom," he said, when their own meal was hot. He carried the trays into the bedroom, leaving the door open, and held them while Jeannie instructed the bed to provide them with back rests and lap trays. As they ate, Jeannie talked to the entertainment program, finally settling on a space documentary, depicting life in Moon City. It was almost totally lifelike as it played out against the backdrop of the wall opposite the headboard, but neither of them could get really interested. It seemed far removed from the immediate context of Jamie's impending journey into the wilds. As soon as they were finished eating, he changed the setting to a general relaxing background featuring soft music and nymphs and satyrs which he knew Jeannie liked. He told the lap trays to go away and eased the backrests to a more comfortable position, then slid his arm beneath Jeannie's shoulders. She turned into his arms and began kneading his neck.

He kissed her lips and the hollow of her throat with gentle pecks, then slid open her blouse and began fondling her breasts. He kissed them, too, then moved his hand down to her waist and began rubbing her belly with the same motions he had used earlier on Fuzzy Britches. "How about a shower?" he asked, nuzzling her neck again.

"Only if you undress me the rest of the way. But what about your unpacking?"

"I can do that later." He helped her out of what few garments she still had on, then undressed himself and let her lead him by the hand to the shower, thinking how good she looked along the way. She had a neat, compact body, so well proportioned that each part blended into the others with almost mathematical exactness: her breasts were exactly the right size for the constriction of her waist and swell of hips, and her buttocks and back blended into a curvaceous whole that swiveled with just the right motion as she stepped into the shower stall.

They bathed each other with a minimal of groping, just enough to keep them aroused, then toweled each other dry. Jamie tossed the towels into the recycler, then led her back to the bed and drew her into a hard embrace. Jeannie returned it eagerly, moving her hands



over his body in tempo with his own caresses until she could stand the waiting no longer. She shifted her body and drew him over her, gasping with pent up pleasure as he entered her and his weight settled between her legs and pressed down on the length of her body. She remembered little more, other than waves of an excruciating intense orgasm.

Jamie shifted his weight and turned his upper body partially away, leaving her sweated torso free. Jeannie relaxed and closed her eyes, completely spent but still reveling in the after throes. Suddenly she became aware of a fuzzy presence nuzzling along her side. A raspy tongue began licking the slope of her breast. She curled an arm to enclose the furry creature and it's tongue moved to her nipple. It felt like an ever so soft file, sending ripples of shivering sensation that spread from her breast down over her body. Without opening her eyes, she knew it must be Fuzzy Britches. She hugged him to her breast, running her fingers through his wiry fur, absorbed in the sensation of still being intimately connected with Jamie while the cat aroused a new sensation in her.

When she could stand it no longer, she released Fuzzy Britches from her embrace and rolled over on top of Jamie. Within seconds, she forgot all about the cat. She straddled Jamie and began moving to another climax. While she was engaged, Fuzzy Britches moved cat-silent from the room, goal accomplished. He saw his role in the sexual endeavors of Jamie as one of bringing closer the females he liked, and he definitely liked Jeannie; she just needed a little teaching. As far as the sex act between the humans, he was not really interested; he preferred Persians, or in a pinch, any female cat. He retired well satisfied, but he couldn't help wondering at how long humans took to finish, and they always wanted to sleep afterwards. It seemed strange to him, but then humans weren't cats. They did lots of strange things.

A little later Jamie roused himself and tickled Jeannie into wakefulness. "I have to get my gear sorted," he said. "Do you want to help?"

Jeannie stretched, flattening her breasts against her body, then she buried her face against his chest. "I'll be embarrassed to go back out there. I've never had a cat lick my nipples before."

Jamie grinned. "Fuzzy Britches likes you. That's why he came in here."

"I know he likes me. I like him, too, but I'm still embarrassed."

"Don't be. Fuzz and Wog aren't interested in sex with humans, but



they do like to let me know when they approve of someone. Take it as a compliment. Besides, it felt good, didn't it?"

Jeannie giggled. "It did. Maybe he'll try it again sometime. Does Woggly ever do anything like that?"

"He might watch sometimes, but not much else. He finds other ways to let you know when he approves."

"I've noticed lately. He's always wanting to jump up on the lounge with me when I'm here without you, putting his head in my lap and so on."

"Yeah, like that. Fuzzy is a cat, though; sometimes he gets a little more intimate."

"So I noticed. Jamie -- have you ever heard of --"

"Human and animal sex? Yes it happens, but I think it's a perversion. Anyone who practices that sort of thing is slightly balmy, I think, and their pets, too. Look, I need to get my gear unpacked. Are you coming?"

"Let me get a robe on."

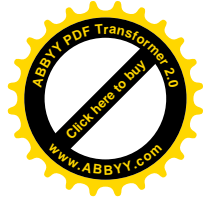
"The pets won't care, and I sure won't."

"I know, Jamie, but this is still new to me. I've never gone with anyone who owned pets before. I guess Kristi does, though, doesn't she? Don't rangers have dogs that patrol with them?"

"I think so, but I'm not sure. Is that what you and Kristi talked about?"

Jeannie blushed and refused to answer, leaving Jamie to wonder some more. However, she did get out of bed and shrug into a robe, which considering the transparency, she could have just as well left off. Jamie declined to dress, knowing that he would be back in bed before long.

He went into the living area and began unwrapping his supplies. Jeannie followed and sat down to watch him. Her projected embarrassment seemed not to be in evidence as Fuzzy Britches plopped into her lap and Woggly nuzzled at her feet. They carried on a low conversation as Jamie unwrapped and sorted his supplies. Once they were separated from their wrappings and placed in his pack according to the instructions he had received, the bulk was



considerably reduced, although still quite heavy. He hefted the newly issued laser gun then re-holstered it and placed it beside the coveralls he would wear the next day. Holding the heavier weapon had given him thought. After some consideration, he took his own smaller weapon and devised a boot holster which could be covered by the leg of the coveralls and strapped it onto the side of his newly issued boots. He felt somewhat foolish in doing so, but he had a fondness for his own weapon and felt no guilt about carrying it along.

Once he had all the supplies distributed in the pack and the coveralls laid out ready to put on the next morning, he and Jeannie returned to the bedroom. Jamie pretended not to notice that Jeannie failed to close the door behind her as she normally did. He smiled to himself. Fuzzy Britches and Woggly usually got their own way, sooner or later.

Jeannie shrugged off her robe and activated the holo before getting into bed. She chose the same motif as he had earlier, nymphs and satyrs, but even before he joined her she added a sub-routine which included lovable pets interacting on the periphery of the scenes. She grinned impishly as he slid into bed beside her and the holo was soon forgotten as they made love once more.

Sometime during the night, Jamie awakened momentarily and discovered Woggly curled up at the foot of the bed and Fuzzy Britches snuggled firmly between Jeannie's ample breasts, purring contentedly. He went back to sleep, content with the world, at least for the time being.

CHAPTER 8

Jamie failed to wake up the next morning until the alarm called



him. As usual, the pets were already up and had removed themselves from the bed room. Jeannie blinked her eyes sleepily and inquired silently whether he wanted to make love once more before getting up.

"It's too late," he said, answering her unasked question. "Save it till I get back. In fact, save lots of it. I'll probably need it then." He rolled from the bed and began his morning ablutions. Jeannie waited until he was finished, then took over the bathroom while he went out to start breakfast and feed the three animals. He pulled out a double portion of everything, remembering Whitmire's admonition about a last meal and began warming the animals' food. For he and Jeannie, he selected eggs again, the last of his natural orange juice, the standard butterbread, and four strips of simulated bacon made from his own hambeans. He began cycling the food, then let Jeannie take over the rest of the preparations once she had dressed and come out. While she was finishing, he put on his new coveralls and boots and settled the new weapon and holster about his waist. It seemed heavy at first, compared to his own little gun, but he soon grew used to the extra weight. He got his body computer interfaced with the new coveralls and boots and placed the spare clips and powerpacks for the handgun in pockets of his waist belt, then helped Jeannie with the last of the breakfast.

They ate silently, both of them uneasily reluctant to begin a conversation; everything to be said had already been gone over. The three animals were also unusually silent. They finished their own food quickly, then waited impatiently by the door. They were more than ready to go, not being used to the confinement of the last couple of days.

"Go ahead," Jeannie said, as soon as they were finished. "I'll clean up after you leave. No, forget that; I'll come back after work. I want to go now. There's no point in me waiting to see you off. It would just depress me."

Jamie agreed with her sentiments. Now that the morning of departure had arrived, he was impatient to be off, and he really did dislike good-bys. Jeannie's attitude fitted his own perfectly. He walked her to the door, kissed her long and lovingly, ignoring the contingent of rangers already present, then let her go, doing his best not to notice her gathering tears. He gave her a final hug, then stepped back inside. His pets, and Conan as well, congregated around his feet while he sat down to await the other members of the expedition.



At the same time, Don Cadena was winding up a long night of hacking; he had tried for hours to crack Alvarez's entrance code to his personal files before discovering that his last entry was freely available due to Alvarez's oversight. Now he hastily copied the contents. He was amazed at what the file contained, and disbelieved the most part of it, but he took no chances. Later that morning, he surreptitiously melded a coded dispatch to his masters in Moon City in with the normal traffic. He was back at his own station, ostensibly at work, by the time Alvarez and Jeannie arrived, along with the rest of the staff.

Jeannie noticed nothing wrong when she interfaced with the computer that morning, but then, she had no reason to look for anything, especially not in Alvarez's personal files. He was still grumpy and she had no desire to unsettle him any more than he already was.

Amazingly, Jamie went back to sleep in the lounge while he was waiting. He was awakened by the simultaneous chime of the door and the plop of Fuzzy Britches landing in his lap.

"Oof! Don't do that, Fuzz!"

"Time to go," Fuzzy Britches said, ignoring the admonition. Both dogs woofed eagerly, glad of an excuse to bark rather than talk.

Jamie made one last check of the apartment, set the homecomp to record, picked up his pack and left his home. Woggly and Conan bounded out ahead of him, eager to meet the other dogs they had sensed. Fuzzy Britches followed at a more sedate pace. Some of his best friends were dogs, but he always tried to uphold the cat reputation for aloofness and superiority in the presence of strange animals.



Each of the twelve rangers was accompanied by a large dog, though it was impossible to sort out which belonged to whom at the moment. Most of them seemed to have at least some German Shepherd in their ancestry, though generations of genetic changes made it hard to tell sometimes.

Fuzzy Britches waited until the orgy of barks, woofs, broken English, and nose and crotch sniffing among the dogs was over, then let the dogs come to him for an introductory nose sniff which he accepted with the calm demeanor he felt was fitting for a single cat among so many dogs. He had groomed himself while Jamie slept until his pelt glowed; the intermingled colors sparkled in the early morning sunlight as if he were covered with fireflies.

While the animals were getting acquainted, Jamie made his way to the other three scientists, still carrying his pack rather than wearing it. They shook hands then stood together in a little isolated group, uncomfortably aware of their neophyte status in the presence of a dozen competent, confident rangers. The rangers were the nearest thing to a military force that the Enclave supported. They began their apprenticeship as perimeter guards and gradually progressed through training and experience to full ranger status, able to travel and survive in the wilds, talents other citizens felt no necessity for and desired even less. Nevertheless, the rangers had such a mystique and reputation for toughness that the romanticism of youth enabled them to keep their ranks full; they were able to recruit from an overabundance of volunteers.

A familiar figure broke from the ranks of the rangers and came towards them. Kristi seemed to have regained a couple of sizes in her more familiar gear. She carried a small bundle in her arms. Jamie noticed then that Fuzzy Britches was tagging at her heels.

Kristi stroked the bundle, which proved to be a beautiful gray Persian cat. "I wanted you to meet Princess. When she heard that another cat was coming with us, she insisted on going, too.

"Hello, Princess," Jamie said, admiring the chest the cat was cuddled against. He picked up Fuzzy Britches and let the cats sniff noses.

"This is Fuzzy Britches," he said to Kristi's pet, noting with amusement that Fuzzy Britches had already begun purring. He always did prefer Persians.

Kristi deposited Princess on the ground and Fuzzy Britches



squirmed out of Jamie's embrace and hopped down to join her. His purring changed to a low rumble as he preened and displayed his multi-hued coat. Princess seemed to approve and they padded off side by side.

"Are you all set?" Kristi spoke to Jamie but included the other scientists with a glance. "We'll be leaving in a few minutes."

"I guess we are," Jamie said, speaking for all of them.

"Good. Jamie, I'll see you later." Kristi rejoined the other rangers and spoke briefly to a small, lean darkly tanned man with completely white hair. He separated himself from the other rangers and came over to where the scientists were standing.

He spoke in a pleasant, baritone voice while his startling ocean blue eyes roved over the group like a mother hen counting her chicks. "I am Captain Troy Masters, commander of this expedition. If you're ready now, we will march from here to the Agsection gate and pass through it. We'll stop a moment there for you to make any necessary adjustments to your packs and footgear. Also, each of you will be inspected there by Lieutenant Carson or Sergeants Mathews and Costa." He pointed to Kristi and the two sergeants. Each of the sergeants was as deeply tanned as their captain, with weathered faces and crinkled eyes. Jamie was surprised to hear Kristi named as a Lieutenant; he didn't think she was that old. On the other hand, he admitted to himself that he knew nothing of the promotional criteria within the ranger force.

Captain Masters continued, "While your gear is being looked over and for a short while after that, I will have some other information to pass on to you, and you will have a chance then to get acquainted with the rest of our force. For now, though, let's get started."

They moved out in a column of twos, a ranger unobtrusively edging in to walk beside each scientist. Jamie found himself moving along with a female ranger almost as tall as himself. She had short brown hair and a face that would never be called pretty, even after all the years of genetic selection, but she did have long lashed dark brown eyes that gave her face character, and her slim form was curved enough in the right places, as near as he could tell under all her gear. She introduced herself as Corporal Judy Neilson. Jamie told her his name.

"I thought that must be who you were. You have a beautiful cat. I've never seen one quite like it. We've never gone out with cats before, and here we have two of them with us. Isn't Lt. Carson nice?"



She said she had already met you. She's real good in the wilds, too. Of course, no one is better than Captain Masters. He's been going out for years, and he always comes back. He said we would all get a chance to meet that dog with the strange message. Is he the large one or the small one that came out with you?" Judy chatted on, not seeming to notice that she hardly ever gave him a chance to answer her questions or enter into the conversation. After a few minutes, Jamie only half listened while he concentrated on settling his pack into a comfortable position and adjusting his pace to that of the rest of the column. Directly in front of him, Donald Martinez seemed to be struggling with a larger than normal load, constantly running his hands under the straps and even stumbling once or twice. He maintained the pace, however, and they soon arrived at the barrier gate.

As they passed through, some of the rangers moved out in a protective semi-circle while others held back, then brought up the rear after the gate closed. Masters led the column over some rough ground, then up onto a stretch of old concrete highway slabs, tilted into odd positions by weather and time. Only when they were out of both sight and hearing of the gate guards did he call a halt for the promised inspection. Jamie looked around curiously, but there really wasn't much to see; a morning fog limited visibility to no more than a few score yards.

Captain Masters propped himself on the rust-streaked hood of an old abandoned ground vehicle while Kristi and the two sergeants began the promised inspection of the scientists' packs and boots. Kristi helped Jamie make some minor adjustments to his shoulder straps and waist belt and inspected his laser gun. She admonished him for not having a round chambered and fixed it for him while he blushed, then reset the safety and let him re-holster it. Donald was made to open his bulking pack. He displayed some instruments which he had obviously felt were necessary but had not been authorized. They caused Sgt. Costa to frown and run over to consult with Masters, causing some of the load to be redistributed between two of the huskier rangers. Jamie was glad that his own small collection vials hadn't caused the same problem; he noted that the rangers assigned to carry the instruments didn't appear to be very happy about it.

Masters waited patiently until the inspection was complete and the gear was as comfortably arranged as it ever would be, then spoke to the group as a whole. "I want each of us who has not yet had an opportunity to experience the message which you've all heard of to do so now. It is the only reason for this expedition, so we may as well begin with it. Conan, come!"

Conan trotted up to the captain and sat back on his haunches.



Masters sprang lightly from the hood of the old vehicle and grasped Conan's neck disk tentatively in his hand. The familiar surprised look flickered across the lines of his face, but like Kristi, he didn't flinch, nor did he speak again until the rest of the rangers and scientists had repeated the process, ignoring the bursts of excited exclamations. He reseated himself on his perch and scanned the open area around them. He moved a couple of rangers with his eyes into more protective positions until he was satisfied with the security, then began addressing them in a conversational, yet commanding voice. Jamie couldn't place his accent and finally decided that it must be simply a result of his age. His white hair certainly indicated that he must be older than anyone else present.

"I am told that Conan, the dog, traveled about two weeks in order to arrive here. If we include his hunting time, and the fact that he was traveling through unknown territory, I think we can expect to take approximately the same amount of time on the return journey. Wolfgang --" he pointed to a large black German shepherd "-- has already talked with Conan. He says we will be traveling in a generally northeasterly direction, along the route of what used to be old highway 59. This route will involve several river crossings, according to him, although no large ones, and some of the bridges are still intact.

"We rangers and dogs are present solely to provide security for you scientists, and Conan in particular. The order of march will reflect that. Conan, you will always travel at the center of the column, as will you scientists. We are expendable; you aren't. Sergeants Matthews and Costa will arrange the forward and rear guard, and of course, the dogs will be ranging out on all sides as well as ahead and behind. Wolfgang will coordinate their duties.

"Now, as to conditions; we are more or less familiar with the area within a radius of twenty or thirty miles of the Enclave, and we don't expect any real surprises the first couple of days. After that, though, it's anybody's guess. Let me warn you, though: even this close, always be wary of the unexpected -- this is not our territory."

Speaking now to the scientists, he continued. "I know that you've heard all kinds of stories about conditions on the outside, so let me disillusion you on a couple of them: there are not wild packs of ravening dogs just itching to tear you apart beyond every bend of the trail. You needn't expect to be eaten alive by swarms of rats, either, at least so long as you obey instructions and don't aggravate them or get separated from the group. You may see packs of dogs and you may see gangs of rats out hunting, but for the most part, these will be territorial groups; so long as they know we're only passing through,



they will generally let us alone. It's only when humans try to settle down or start hunting out here that the animals get agitated. There are big cats in the area and they may attack, especially if you let yourselves get separated from the group and vulnerable. They might attack anyway if they are new to the area and have never run across armed humans in their lifetimes. Even though they pass word among themselves about how dangerous humans can be, some of the young ones don't always believe it, and some of the old ones might attack, regardless, if they get hungry enough.

"The feral animals will range in intelligence from near human to that of the original stock, and you can expect to see that range in almost any species you can name, especially the larger ones." He gestured toward the dogs and the two cats. "What I'm saying is that dogs and cats and rats aren't the only enhanced animals out here, and the further we get away from the Enclave, the less likely we are to know what to expect. In the direction we're heading, it's a long, long way to the next Enclave, and the territory hasn't been explored for years.

"One more note, and I'll repeat: don't let yourselves get separated from the group for any reason, not even to relieve yourself. If you have to go, let one of the rangers know, but try to do it in groups so we don't waste time. We'll have a morning meal starting tomorrow, a mid-day break if possible, and an evening meal. Guard duty at night will be in four shifts of three rangers and one scientist. Lt. Carson will arrange your shifts. We don't expect people new to the outside to be effective guards, but we want you to get familiar with the duties in case we lose someone and you have to fill in. Keep your weapons by you when you sleep, and we prefer that you not sleep alone. You can make your own arrangements, or we'll do it for you."

For the first time, Jamie noticed that the contingent of rangers was almost equally divided between males and females. He wondered if that were a standard practice, or whether Whitmire and Masters had arranged it that way. He suspected it was probably a little of both. He wondered who he would be sleeping with, but left the question for later.

"Any questions?" Masters asked. There were none.

"OK, let's move out."

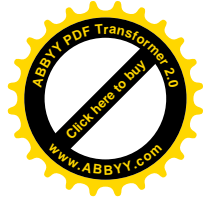


CHAPTER 9

In the underground warrens of Moon City a meeting was taking place, chaired by mayor Roscoe Bascombe. He was attended by Rob Passing, chief of the Moon City police and security forces; Selene Brown, resources allocation director; and Randall Craig, commander of space transportation. Each position had originally been an elected office, but as the deteriorating situation on earth cut into critical supplies the space environs were still unable to manufacture or locate, their tenure had advanced to the status of permanency. Elections had already been postponed many times, and now their firm grip on the reins of power in Moon City and the space stations made elections in the future even more unlikely. Just as had happened so many times before in the history of the race, adversity had bred in the human heart a yearning for the man on a white horse, a problem solver, one who would uplift the downtrodden, smite the wicked, and lead them on to an idealized utopia where intractable problems were as easily solved as a child figuring out the mechanism of a cookie jar. The citizens of Moon City were neither worse nor any better than others in the past who had given over their participation in government in return for an assured stability, and compared to some despots of history, their present rulers would be considered as benign as Sunday school teachers. Nevertheless, they were meeting with the intention of exercising their powers in whatever manner necessary for the benefit of Moon City. Cooperation with the Enclaves of earth was not even under consideration in this instance. Moon City was their home, their power base, and they intended to see that it survived, no matter the cost to earth.

Mayor Bascombe queried Rob Passing, who had just finished explaining the import of Cadena's coded message. "Then you think this intelligence you've received is really important enough, and believable enough, for us to mount an expedition ourselves?"

"Whitmire, the Houston security chief, evidently thought so, and he had to have more information than we do. The fact that he is sending a ranger expedition out into unexplored territory so quickly substantiates it," Passing replied in a crisp, matter of fact voice. He



appreciated the mayor's hesitation. Any prolonged operation on earth would of necessity have to draw upon already scarce transport facilities and personnel, they being the only ones able to tolerate gravity six times that of the moon. Perhaps he could entice Randall into going, he thought, then recruit mercenaries there. If the expedition should fail, that would put him one step closer to the Mayor's chair, and if not, he wouldn't be any worse off. He sat slumped in the thinly padded rock chair. The slump was habitual because of his height; he was taller than even most third generation inhabitants of the warrens and always felt as if his head was scraping the ceilings, especially in the older sections of the warrens which had been constructed on the basis of normal height.

"We have some information I doubt they have," Craig Randall said. He still carried the heavy musculature of his days as a pilot, and was constantly flexing and pulling at fixtures in an attempt to retain his strength. "I remembered the circumstance after Rob talked to me this morning. When he mentioned the possibility of spaceships, I pulled it from the datanet to be sure. About a month ago, one of our landing control satellites picked up an anomalous object which was at first thought to be an uncharted meteor or some old debris in a long orbit. This was subsequently questioned when it slowed as it entered earth's atmosphere but failed to burn. It was tracked to a point about 200 miles northeast of the Houston Enclave, but by the time control realized it wasn't acting exactly like a meteorite, it was already down. It showed a deceleration pattern somewhat like our own craft, but much faster. As a matter of routine, we checked the transponders on all our craft, both inbound and outbound, and of course, they were all accounted for. We never came to a decision on what the object was."

"Didn't you get any pictures?" Bascombe asked.

"Yeah, but nothing definitive. The area includes the ruins of an old city, split by a river. Maybe it went down in it, or is concealed under the forest or is sitting right by some old structure of similar metal that masks it. Who knows? All I can give you is the approximate spot where the object landed."

"Could it have belonged to one of the Enclaves?"

Selene Brown answered this time. "What Enclave on earth would be foolish enough to put resources into building a spacecraft when there's no place to go? We control immigration to Moon City and the satellites and they know how strict we are. Whatever it was, it didn't come from earth." She was as emphatic with her statement as she would have been in denying a childless couple an extra room for their hutch. She was younger than the three men, but no less competent.



She was sure enough of her own talents and confident enough in her own position to even forego the semi-nude dress conventions of most women her age, more a paucity of material rather than a cultural style. She wore a tailored sleeveless tunic over thigh length shorts and kept her straight brown hair at a longer length than the customary cap-close cut. She was handsome, rather than pretty, which she felt befitted her position nicely.

"Well, let's grant the possibility of an unknown spacecraft, anyway," Bascombe said. "But suppose we can't recover it? Is there anything else worth the expense and risk of an earth mission?"

"For my money, there is," Passing said, looking down at his notes. "Our contact reports some sort of a message from the area carried by a feral dog. According to him, it's from a possible alien, and the technology implied by the means it came by is nothing short of phenomenal." His long face tensed with expected skepticism.

"This contact of yours, Don Cadena isn't it? How reliable is he? A feral dog carrying a message from some sort of alien being sounds more like a hallucination than an intelligence report." The mayor splayed his hands out on the polished rock surface of his desk. His conscious mind was trying to deny the possibility of an alien excursion into the solar system, while at a lower level, he was already considering committing resources that Moon City could ill afford to lose.

"I count him reliable enough, since we're promising him that we'll trade Houston some imports in return for them allowing him to emigrate when the time comes. The excuse is, we need his talents.

"Do we really?"

Passing raised a cynical black eyebrow. "No, we don't even want him here, let alone need him; that just keeps him in line. Besides, it's not his believability I'm basing my assumptions on, it's Whitmire's reaction that convinced me." That statement got their attention. The old Englishman was well known to their intelligence branch. He had stymied many of their activities over the years.

"Have you confirmed that he's actually sent an expedition out to investigate? Are you tracking it?"

Randall answered Bascombe's question with an emphatic nod. "It's confirmed. We're already picking up traffic between the Enclave and the expedition. It's scanty, though; they're not talking much, and as soon as they got into the forest, we lost any real chance of following



them visually from space. We just don't have satellites any more with that kind of resolution."

The mayor leaned as far back as his hard chair would permit. "I'm still not totally convinced. The whole thing sounds just too fantastic, but I suppose we have to act as if it's all true, given our present circumstances. Any advanced technology which might help improve conditions here simply can't be passed up."

Selene Brown shifted her gaze from her notes to the rest of the council members, considering whether to release the results of a months long analysis now, or wait for the final refinements. The grim look on Bascombe's face decided the question. "If there's the remotest chance of gaining access to any sort of advanced technology, we have no choice but to act. I have been preparing and running projections of future resources for months. None of the projections are good. Based on the most reasonably optimistic assumptions, we still come up with no better than one chance in three of Moon City and the satellites becoming self-sufficient before a total collapse of earth's economy and possibly even the complete environment. The Enclaves just can't maintain enough commerce between them to ensure an exchange of vital components which one might have and the other lack. I don't think they realize themselves how bad their situation is becoming. Our imaging satellites continue to show how the massive population of enhanced animals is changing the environment for the worse. The Houston Enclave is better off than most, but I don't give them more than another twenty to thirty years, barring some unexpected development like a universal animal parasite or some method to limit breeding of the animals. Neither they nor we have had any success at either in the past, and there is nothing I see now to suggest a solution in the future."

The mayor's pale face blanched even whiter than usual. He could not have been unaware of the decreasing volume of necessary imports from earth, but to have the consequences of the shortages placed so squarely in his face buckled a little of his spine.

"Do you two go along with Selene's analysis?" He asked the other two men. They both nodded reluctantly.

"All right, then, let's try to beat them to the prize and hope the expense is worth it. Have you thought about methods yet?"

"I have a number of contacts in the Dallas Enclave," Passing said. "I understand from them that the situation there is going rapidly downhill. I think we might be able to convince their authorities to help us if we could get a landing craft down."



"They do have a large airfield there, although it's really only designed for atmospheric craft like their floaters. I think I could manage a small lander, though, if we could get them to clear the field when we come in," Randall said.

"We?"

"Yeah. I'm going. Someone from up here has to make sure we get what we're after. You can't trust earthers."

Bascombe smiled. "Don't worry about having to operate on trust. I have a few contacts there, myself. I assure you, the governor of the Dallas Enclave and most of his staff will do anything I ask them to, including outfitting an expedition for us. All I have to do is promise them space on the return flight. Things are very bad there. However, I agree: One of us should lead whatever force we raise, and you're the only candidate here."

Randall frowned. "That wouldn't leave much room for return cargo if we're thinking of bringing back immigrants. Suppose we need the lift capacity promised to passengers?"

"No problem, just promise another ferry flight. Take my word for it, they'll cooperate." Bascombe glanced at his thumbnail. "Let's move on. Craig, you take care of getting the craft ready and alerting the personnel you want. Selene will see to it that you have top priority on any supplies you need. Rob and I will get in touch with our friends and lay the groundwork for getting your lander down and a force of reliable troops put together. OK so far?"

The other three nodded agreement.

"Fine, that's settled. Now let's consider some other questions. I assume that once you're on the ground you will head directly for that suspected landing site. How close do you have it pin-pointed?"

Randall looked pained. "There's a problem there," he admitted. "We haven't been able to locate it precisely, although we're sure that it's in or near the ruins of what was once Shreveport/Bossier City, and it might be on either side of the river, or possibly even in the river. We've gotten nothing from satellite photos, like I said, nor any clues from what sensing devices the satellites carry."

"Then how do you find it? Or more important, how do you find it before the Houston force does?" Selene asked.



"We'll monitor their communications. Once they get there, I'll have a satellite ready to suppress any further contact so they won't be able to call for reinforcements. A search party from Houston could find them, of course, but before they can, we hope to have our own party there."

Selene started, sitting bolt upright. "You hope! Is there a chance you can't?"

"It will be close," Randall admitted reluctantly. "They have already started, while we're just getting organized. Remember, though, their expedition is moving on foot. We'll be able to do most of it by floater, at least to the general vicinity."

"Why aren't they going by air?" The mayor asked, plainly puzzled.

"The dog which brought the message apparently isn't too bright. He has to stay on the ground to find his way back. I'm sure they will use floaters to keep in contact, though, and for re-supply, and you can bet that if they do find something, they're planning on sending a relief expedition by air."

"And we need to be there and take control before the relief arrives," Bascombe concluded. "Let's get cracking then. We can fine out the details along the way." He dismissed the others by disappearing into the holobubble of his desk console as they filed out the door. He trusted them to carry out their assignments, especially Randall Craig. Randall was no stranger to violence.

CHAPTER 10

Jamie had thought he was in good physical condition. He exercised



on a somewhat irregular basis and swam a lot during his time off, but neither had given him much preparation for an extended hike over rough ground while carrying a thirty pound pack.

Their march had begun along the ruins of old Highway 59 north, but there were frequent detours because of broken concrete slabs and rusting piles of old ground cars, twisted and jammed in groups like the petrified remains of extinct animals. The rangers had evidently traveled the same route before because there was no hesitation when they left the old highway and routed the group into the dense woods of oak and pine and sweetgum bordering the ruined road. The median strip was far gone in unhampered growth and bushes and small trees had taken root in every crack and crevice of the broken pavement.

Jamie was extremely observant and curious during the first part of the march, half expecting to see feral animals abounding on all sides and strange, unfamiliar flora, but the landscape remained depressingly familiar and his attention soon waned. He did see insects in abundance and became intimately acquainted with more mosquitoes and gnats than he ever desired to know. The further from the Enclave they traveled, the worse they got, swarming around his face and hands like a thick black mist until he was forced to pull the head net of his coveralls from it's pocket in the thrown back hood to protect his face, and to smear some repellent over his hands. No sooner had that problem been solved when his attention became diverted by his packstraps, which seemed to have turned into piano wires rather than the nicely padded straps he had started with. They dug into his shoulders and pulled at his neck like some fiendish torture instrument.

Judy Neilson remained as his marching partner, walking beside him except when the trail narrowed enough to force them into single file. He noticed that her chatter stopped whenever they left an open space and detoured into the forest. Then, her eyes ranged left, right, up and down in a repetitive pattern like that of the Enclave sentry robots, and she spoke not at all. He wondered what she was looking for and began imitating her, hoping that would detract some of his attention away from his aching back and the pack straps cutting into his shoulders.

Eventually, the route led up an access ramp onto an intact overpass. There, vegetation grew in cracks and along the guard rails where earth had blown and gathered, but it was thin and stunted. At the top of the ramp, Masters called a halt. Jamie gratefully shed his pack. He flexed his neck and shoulder muscles and looked around.

A forest of pine and oak and sweetgum stretched below as far as



the eye could see, but near the ramp he could discern the block-like patterns of old streets, overgrown with brush, but still much shorter than the encroaching forest. Occasional buildings showed partial roofs and faces through the growth; some appeared to still be in relatively good condition while others were crumbling into ruins.

While he was still stretching and looking around, Kristi separated herself from the group she had been marching with and walked over. Judy's face brightened as she approached, then fell as she spoke to Jamie rather than her.

"Hi, Jamie. Are you making it all right so far?"

"Fine, except for this thing," he said, touching a toe to his pack. "I haven't added anything to it, but somehow it's weight has doubled since this morning."

Kristi laughed. "You'll get used to it in a few days. Would you like to see something interesting?"

"Sure. Show me."

Kristi fished a small monocular from a pocket of her coveralls and placed it briefly to her eye, then handed it to him. "Focus in on that big brown building that doesn't have much growing in front of it. Watch the door and the area in front of it for a ways." She stood close behind him and pointed over his shoulder as he closed one eye and put the monocular to the other. The front of the building sprang into focus as if it were only twenty yards away.

At first, he could see nothing unusual, mainly because most of his attention was distracted by the warm pressure of Kristi's breasts flattening softly against his back and the tickling of her breath in his ear., but presently he spotted the movement of small animals traveling to and fro from the open entrance. He adjusted the focus the tiniest bit and the scene became even clearer.

"Rats! Is that a rat town?"

"That's what it is. Look some more, up and around." She backed a step away from him and withdrew her arm, but left a hand resting lightly on his shoulder. He moved the view up and found the second story balconies of the building thick with rats, enjoying the sunlight which had finally broken through the fog. Young rats moved among the adults, playing or tussling. Some gnawed on bits of food. Below and in front of the building covering what had once been a paved parking area was an expanse of small and scanty vegetation, mostly



weeds. There, lines of rats were moving along several narrow trails, appearing and disappearing from sight as they wound their way through and among the bits of growth. Individual rats also scurried here and there on errands of their own.

He watched one line for a moment, then exclaimed, "Why, they're carrying packs of some kind!" As near as he could tell from the distance, many of the rats were burdened with pannier type baskets slung from each side of their back. He thought they were made from woven grass, but couldn't be certain.

"They are bringing in food and other supplies. Can you see the guards?"

He could. They wore sharp pointed sticks slung on their backs for easy access. Every few moments, in a pattern not immediately obvious, one of the guard rats would unsling it's spear and sit upright on it's back legs, peer around, then reharness the tiny spear and continue on it's way.

"I see them," Jamie said. "I'll bet the other rats envy them, not having to carry packs."

"Are you sore?" Kristi bought up her other free hand and began kneading his back and shoulder muscles.

"Yeah. That feels good."

"I'll give you a good back rub tonight. You'll really be hurting by then, but right now I think we're about ready to move on." She left off the massage and turned to Judy, who had been watching. Her long lashes were damp. Kristi put an arm around her shoulder and led her off a few paces, talking to her in a low voice, then rejoined her own marching companions as Masters called for them to resume the trek.

As Jamie re-shouldered his pack, he wondered about the coming night and promised back rub. Did she mean for them to sleep together or was she talking about activities beforehand? He had heard no discussion about sleeping arrangements so far, other than Master's admonition not to sleep alone. He had been assuming, perhaps incorrectly, that since Judy had been staying near him that they would be sleeping in the same tent. He wasn't thinking of the assumed arrangement as automatically implying a sexual union, but was considering it as more of a safety measure as outlined by the ranger captain. In any case, the way his back felt, rest would be preferable over sex anyway. Oh, well, he thought, in his usual easy manner, it will sort itself out soon enough. He began concentrating again on the



scenery and trying not to think about the shooting pains in his neck.

After the overpass had disappeared from sight behind them, the route detoured a mile or two back into the forest, then emerged again onto sparsely overgrown pavement. Judy stopped her silent, alert searching and began to talk.

"I think Lt. Carson likes you," she said abruptly, without preamble.

"I like her, too. She must really know her business to be a lieutenant so young," Jamie said.

"What I meant is that I think she's attracted to you." She hesitated, then added, "It's unusual for her to feel that way about a man."

"Oh," Jamie muttered, feeling mildly complimented. He had completely missed the disconcerted expression on Judy's face at their break, when Kristi focused her attention on him rather than her. Same gender sexual preference was certainly no novelty within the Enclave, so he would have felt sympathetic toward her in any case, but he was still at a loss for an appropriate response. To change the subject, he asked, "How long has that rat town been there?"

"Several years that I know of. Why?"

"Couldn't we come back and wipe it out when this business is over with?" Like most Enclave inhabitants, Jamie had an abiding loathing for rats, derived from horror stories handed down from refugees of the past disorders during the formation days.

Judy looked surprised. "Why would we want to do that? There's a million more just like it in the country. Besides, we've been noticing an increase in the cat population in this area lately. They will keep the numbers down, not that it matters that much. Cats can be worse than rats, in some cases, or dogs, or any of the other smart animals. What we're really worried about is the birds. The more exotic species that were enhanced are doing OK; they are smart enough for most of them to get along, but there never was much work done on the everyday variety like sparrows and robins and wrens and so forth. They seem to be dying out, and that's why you see so many insects these days. There just aren't enough birds to keep them in check."

Before Jamie could fully consider the implications of that remark, he spotted Fuzzy Britches and Princess waiting by the side of the trail. They had been traveling with Kristi while Woggly and Conan had been accompanying him and Judy. The dogs woofed a greeting to him and the cats, then ran on ahead, presumably to join up with Kristi and



leave the cats back with them, under some arrangement of their own.

"Hi, Fuzz, Princess. Are you guys doing OK?" He asked as they began padding along beside them.

"Not guy. Girl." Princess corrected him with the first words he had heard her speak.

"Nice girl, too," Fuzzy Britches purred, stopping to nuzzle her neck and lick a stray bit of debris from her face, then running a few paces with her to catch back up.

"Sorry," Jamie apologized. "Just a manner of speaking, and I agree with Fuzz. You are a nice girl. And pretty, too."

"Like Kristi," Fuzzy Britches said.

"She's pretty, too," Jamie agreed.

"Woods coming up," Judy interrupted, and the conversation died. During this interval, Jamie finally discovered one of the reasons for Judy's constant alertness. Without warning, a rock whizzed by his head, traveling with a force that could easily have broken his skull had it hit him. He ducked instinctively after the missile had already spent its force against a tree trunk. Judy whipped out her sidearm and aimed it up at the trees but didn't get off a shot.

"Come on," she urged, poking Jamie in the back to get him moving again. "It's already gone."

"What was it?", he asked.

"Tell you in a minute. Don't talk now." Very shortly, they followed the trail back up onto pavement. "That was a monkey of some sort; maybe a chimp. They don't care much for humans. Can't say I blame them much if what I've heard in history classes about all the experiments we used to do on them is right. Anyhow, there are quite a few in this area, and you always have to watch for them. They've learned ways to conceal their scent from the dogs, so it's we who have to spot them. Dogs are mostly colorblind, you know, so they have a hard time seeing them, especially from below."

Jamie was bone weary by late afternoon, when the rangers finally



called a halt for the day, again choosing the top of an old overpass as a stopping point. He dropped his pack with a grateful sigh.

He wanted mightily to sit down and rest but refrained when he saw that none of the rangers were doing so. They were moving about with silent efficiency, feeding their dogs and erecting their transparent shelters. One of them was talking over some sort of communications device, apparently contacting headquarters to let them know where they were. Captain Masters was engrossed in a conversation with Wolfgang, his dog, presumably giving him instructions for the night watch.

Jamie passed out food to his own animals. His own appetite began stirring once he had gotten rid of his pack, but before he could do anything about it, Kristi came over, bringing Judy and another ranger he hadn't met yet.

"This is Dick Forsyth. Jamie Da Cruz," she said by way of introduction. "Let's get our shelters up." She motioned to Jamie's pack and he dug it out, again not noticing the unhappy expression on Judy's face as she began combining her shelter half with Forsyth's.

The shelters were of a thin, transparent material weighing hardly anything, but which could assume several rigid shapes, depending on the programmed instructions, then collapse back into the original folded packet when not in use. As it unfolded, it sucked in enough air to provide a thin mattress, then expelled it automatically during the re-folding process. It would retain as much or as little of the heat given off by the human body as desired through the thermosmotic fabric. Jamie had seen only a brief holographic demonstration of it's workings and Kristi had to show him how to program his half to unfold and meld with hers. Together, they made a comfortable fifty square foot sleeping area, and when occupied, the body weight of the inhabitants provided an anchorage from the wind.

"We have the first watch, Jamie," Kristi announced, once the shelter was up and she had attached a temporary tie-down to keep it from moving until it was occupied. "Is anyone else hungry?"

Jamie was. His appetite had grown by leaps and bounds in the last few minutes. He thought wistfully of the last meal he and Jeannie had eaten as he pulled out a ration pack, but very shortly, he found that he had consumed it all and was wishing for more.

"Not bad," he commented, licking his fingers and unstrapping his canteen for a drink. The food had made him forget about the hard, uncomfortable concrete he was sitting on.



"Tell me again how good that stuff is after you've eaten a few hundred of them," Kristi said. "And go easy on the water," she warned. "It will be tomorrow morning sometime before we get to any worth purifying."

"If some animals haven't occupied the drinking place since the last time we were there," Judy interjected from where she and her tent-mate were finishing their own meal.

"Couldn't we drive then off?" Jamie asked.

Forsyth answered that question. "We could, but it wouldn't be a good idea. We survive out here mostly by leaving the animals alone, if we can. So long as they know we're only passing through, they usually won't cause much trouble, but if we started fighting or killing them for no good reason, they would retaliate, just as we would if the roles were reversed. Not only that, most of the smart animals can communicate after a fashion with other species, and they would pass the word on ahead of us. Then we'd really have trouble. Remember, most animals are territorial, especially out here in the wilds. If they think their territory is threatened, they will fight back, and they have the numbers on their side, while we have only so many shots in a gun. How would you like to try killing a thousand rats, or a hundred dogs, all at once?"

"I see your point," Jamie said. "They could wipe us out any time they really wanted to, couldn't they?"

"They could, but there is one nice thing about them being intelligent. They have an awareness of death, now. They won't risk their lives unless it's for a good reason."

"Like ours, on this expedition?"

"That's right, like ours," Forsyth concluded with a wry grin.



CHAPTER 11

"We want a mouse," Fuzzy Britches announced from where he and Princess were rubbing against Kristi's thigh as she sat cross-legged while finishing her ration.

"You had better watch out for the mice here, Fuzz," Jamie said. "They might be bigger than you are."

"Please mighty master."

"If you don't stop that 'mighty master' nonsense, I'm going to feed you to the dogs and get me a cat that will show some respect. Kristi, would it be all right?"

"I don't see why not, if they can find one up here. It's relatively clear and the dogs will let us know if anything comes up." She whistled softly and her dog trotted over, tail wagging. It was a large bitch with thick, mostly white fur, but sporting several small brown and black patches.

"This is Lady," she said, rubbing behind the dog's ears while it nuzzled the thigh not already occupied by cats.

"Hello, Lady," Jamie said, wondering if Kristi was addicted to trite names for her pets.

"Meow," Fuzzy Britches said, politely.

"Hunt, Lady. Mouse. Guard," Kristi told the dog, pointing to the two cats. Fuzzy Britches and Princess scampered off into the weeds and brush beyond the camp area, followed by Lady and a disinterested but willing Woggly.

As darkness descended, Kristi led Jamie to a position beyond the group of shelters. He could see shadowy movements within the shelters they passed as couples began settling in. He wondered how early they would be starting the next day if they were preparing for bed this early. "Sit down here," she instructed him. We can lean back against each other and face in opposite directions. Get comfortable; I'll be back as soon as I check on Judy and Dick."



Jamie sat down, glad to be off his feet, but found it impossible to turn concrete into anything resembling a comfortable seat. He finally detached the hood from his coveralls and used it like a thin pillow. Kristi returned shortly and sat facing away from him. He leaned back tentatively until their shoulders met and settled against each other. The hard surface didn't seem to bother Kristi, or at least she used no padding. But then, he thought, females are endowed with natural padding they carry with them.

"It's OK to talk while we're out here, just keep it low," Kristi said after they had sat for a little while.

"What are we supposed to be watching for?" Jamie asked.

"You never know. Even though we are reasonably familiar with this territory, we can't possibly cover it all, or even a very large part of it. All of the wild country is still in a state of flux. It may take the rest of our lifetime before a stable ecology forms, if it ever does, and it almost certainly won't be anything like we would wish for."

"All that I've seen so far is that rat town, except that I got a rock thrown at me."

Kristi gave a low chuckle. "So I heard. It's not likely to happen again, though. They don't try things like that very often. >From what we've observed in the last few years, this is turning into cat and rat country. It's not likely that you'll see many cats, though. They keep pretty much out of sight. The main thing we have to be wary of is groups of animals migrating into the area from another place where food supplies have been depleted. They might not know much about humans, and be hungry besides. That is the time when we tend to take casualties. A couple of years ago we lost a whole squad out to the west of the Enclave."

"What happened?"

"Someone got careless."

Jamie decided she didn't want to talk about it.

After the sun had come out that day, it had warmed up, but with darkness, a chill wind began to blow, numbing Jamie's cheeks and ears. "Can I move enough to put my hood back on?"

Kristi laughed. "I wondered how long it would take before you asked that. Sure, go ahead. We're out here mainly as a back-up for the dogs and to provide some firepower should they need it."



Jamie quickly fastened his hood back in place and settled back again. "Why do we sit in one spot like this?"

"It gives us an edge, just in case. Always make your enemy come to you, if you can. Also, we don't want to confuse the dogs we're downwind from. Jamie, we have learned the hard way that caution pays. You can get away with being careless for a long time, maybe, but if you go to the well often enough, eventually you'll run out of water. Look. The moon is coming up. The cats should be able to find some mice, if there's any up here."

"I don't know about Fuzz. He doesn't get to hunt much."

"Neither does Princess, but they'll manage. The hunting instinct was left alone in most of the enhanced animals, mores the pity"

The hunting had been poor, but at last Fuzzy Britches crouched low in a clump of stunted weeds, trying to keep the stub of his tail from twitching and giving him away. His slit pupils widened, gathering in all the light the moon furnished. He sensed movement, a furtive scuttling somewhere near. He tensed his back legs, ready to leap. Beside him, Princess waited, her gray fur blending with the shadows, making her nearly invisible in the wan light. The scuttling noise came closer and now he could see, not one mouse but two, foraging together. He leaped. His claws hooked the mouse and bore it to the ground. He gripped it in his mouth, ignoring the tiny squeals of terror. The mouse was intelligent enough to know that it was doomed. Princess leaped a second late and her prey escaped. Fuzzy Britches bit deeply into the mouse's neck to still it's cries; he had no desire to play with it or listen to more of it's terror-stricken squeaks. He salivated as blood ran into his mouth, but he was not ready to eat yet; first he wanted to show Jamie his kill. He headed back to camp with Princess nuzzling at his neck.



The moon hung above the horizon, almost full. It disappeared from time to time, obscured by wind-chased clouds. The stars shined with a hard bright light where no clouds blocked them out.

"It's pretty out here without the city lights, but I could enjoy it more if it weren't so cold," Jamie said. He shivered.

"It will be better once we get inside. Have you known Jeannie long?"

Jamie was surprised at the turn in conversation. "Just a few months, since she came to work for our section. She's a whiz with the computer."

"I like her. She's refreshing."

"I like her, too," Jamie said. "A lot."

"Good. Hang on to her. You two go well together."

"I intend to. How about you?"

"I like you both," Kristi said, deliberately misunderstanding his question. "Judy is kind of upset with me, but she'll get over it. There was nothing permanent involved."

That was Jamie's second inkling that Kristi was more orientated toward women than men, making him wonder even more why she had decided to share shelters. Then he thought that Kristi might be trying to use him as a conduit to Jeannie's affections, but quickly decided that was wrong. If she wanted Jeannie, she wouldn't go at it indirectly; she was much too open and direct for that. He wondered what Jeannie's reaction would be if she did. He was fairly certain that she had never been sexually involved with a woman, though given the current mores of the Enclave it was safe to assume she had been approached more than once. For that matter, he didn't think there had been all that many men in her life before he came along. He had found her to be relatively inexperienced, but never reluctant to experiment.

"Did I say something wrong?"

Jamie was startled out of his reverie. "Oh, no. I was just thinking."

Kristi reached back and patted his leg. "Don't think too much. You might reach some wrong conclusions."



He wondered what that meant. Considering his earlier conversation with Judy, and the direction the present one had gone up until then, he had been anticipating what might happen at the end of their stint of guard duty. Now he wasn't sure. Did she want him, or not? In his usual fashion, he decided to put the subject out of his mind, at least for the next thirty minutes, and see what developed later. If she wanted him, he was certain she would let him know.

When their relief did come, he found to his embarrassment that he couldn't remember which of the half dozen shadowy shelters belonged to them, and was forced to let Kristi lead him to it by hand. The wind had dispersed most of the mosquitoes and only a couple managed to whine inside with them.

Kristi unstrapped her gunbelt and carefully laid the weapon to one side of the central pad, then sat down to pull off her boots. Jamie was pulling his own off when he realized something was awry.

"Where are the animals?" He was suddenly concerned by their absence.

"Mice must be scarce around here. Don't worry, Lady will take care of them, and she can show them how to get inside when they're ready to come in." Kristi stood up and began stripping off her coveralls. Underneath, she wore a brief halter and underpants, dark colored like her suit so that the uncovered portions of her body seemed disconnected in the pale moonlight shining into the shelter. She unfastened the band holding her hair and shook it out.

"It's cool in here without any cover," Jamie said as he pulled off his own suit. He lay down and wrapped his arms around himself, then stretched luxuriously. He wiggled his toes and feet and sighed as his head felt out the pillow portion of the air pad.

Kristi lay on her side, facing him, propped on an elbow with her chin cupped in her hand. "Are you tired?"

"You know it. I just thought I was in good shape until today." He hugged himself again. "How long does this thing take to warm up, anyway?"

"Not long with two of us in here. Want that back rub now?"

He did. Just the thought of having his sore muscles eased gave him an almost irresistible urge to roll over on his stomach, but his mouth was leading a life of it's own. He turned on his side to face her. Her blond hair flowed down over her shoulders, reflecting bits of



moonlight when she moved. "Kristi, why did you want to bunk with me?"

"I thought I had made it obvious, but perhaps I didn't. Do you want to change?"

"Of course not. But why me? I'm nothing special and you --" He hesitated, unsure of how to continue, or even what he was trying to say.

She felt for his hand in the darkness and clasped it in her own. "Don't put yourself down. Let me decide whether you're special or not. I think you are, and so do Princess and Lady."

Jamie laughed, thinking of how Fuzzy Britches and Woggly always let him know whether or not they approved of his women. "Sometimes I think our pets have more to do with running our personal lives than we do."

"Why not? They can sense emotions and attitudes far better than we can." Jamie didn't answer and after a moment she continued. "Does it bother you that I like women? Don't worry, I like men, too. Sometimes. Like now." She released his hand and began tracing little circles along his thigh with her fingers. He shivered, more from the tickling than from cold. Their body heat was already warming the air inside the shelter. He slid an undemanding arm around her waist.

"I like you a lot, too, Kristi, but Jeannie --"

She touched his lips with her fingers. "Jeannie is a sweet girl. I'm attracted to her as well as you. Do you mind?"

Jamie avoided the question. He didn't know whether he did or not. "I don't know if she feels that way."

"I'm not certain myself, and it would be foolish of you not to worry about her. She does care for you, I know that. But why not let it lie? These sort of situations have a way of sorting themselves out."

Jamie agreed, and he thought Jeannie would also. Despite her youth and inexperience, she was a remarkably well adjusted young woman. He mentally tabled the subject and drew Kristi to him in a sudden surge of desire, sore muscles forgotten. Kristi cooperated. The full softness of her lips pressed against his own then parted at the first quest of his tongue. She moved one leg over his, bringing the full softness of her body into contact.



Jamie slid his hand up the smooth plane of her back until the warm flow of flesh against his palms was interrupted by her halter strap. With no more than the usual male clumsiness he fumbled the closure loose. He scratched gently at the little crease marks left behind on her back and the ones on the underslope of her breasts. He cupped the full firmness of them in his hands. He slid his hands down over the curve of her hips and beneath her last scrap of clothing, not forgetting to scratch the crease lines there, too, as he peeled it away. He quickly removed his shorts and drew her close again, marveling at the supple firmness of her sleekly muscled body and the softness of her skin. He stroked her slowly, wishing it were lighter so that he could admire her visually as well as by touch.

Kristi tugged at him, and he followed her urging, moving over her. She spread her thighs and pulled him into her. He moved slowly at first, letting her set the rhythm, then faster as she wrapped him with her legs and dug her nails into his back. She strained rigidly beneath him and bit at his neck to keep from crying out as she reached her climax, and seconds later he spent himself in the locked embrace of their bodies.

Long minutes later he was finally able to raise up a little and take some of his weight from her. She ran her hands over his back, feeling out the indentations her nails had left. "Did I hurt you? I'm sorry, I never realize I'm doing that until it's over."

He kissed her, a little peck on the nose and lips. "I didn't realize it either, or if I did, it felt good at the time." He let out a long, tired, satisfied sigh and let the full weight of his body settle on her again. He stayed there for a moment, then gently disengaged. His abused muscles were in command of his body again.

They lay for a while in the darkness until their breathing returned to normal.

"How about that back rub now?" Kristi asked in a soft voice.

"Jamie?"

There was no answer. Jamie was fast asleep.



CHAPTER 12

The next thing Jamie was aware of was Kristi shaking him awake. "Time to get up, sleepyhead. Come on, it's almost daylight."

He started to sit up and fell back with a startled yelp. He tried again, more slowly this time, but fared not much better. His whole body felt as if it had been hung from meat hooks overnight. He was sore from his feet to his head and every movement was a study in the avoidance of pain. "Ouch! I hurt. I don't know if I can get up or not."

Kristi smiled, the whiteness of her teeth barely visible in the diffused light of earliest dawn. "You should have stayed awake for your backrub, lazy. Come on, if you wait much longer you'll be dressing in the full sight of eight women."

"They may have to help me dress," he moaned, pulling himself painfully to an upright position.

"If I told on you, they would be more likely to help you undress. Don't worry, you'll work the kinks out as the day goes by." She was not quite truthful, knowing that it would be several days before his body became accustomed to the weight of his pack and the long hours of walking, but saw no reason to discourage him.

"I certainly hope so." He slid painfully into his coveralls, then sat back down again to pull on his boots. Suddenly the impact of her previous remark struck him. "Kristi, I'm sorry I fell asleep on you so soon. I didn't intend to."

"You almost fell asleep on me, literally," she chuckled. "I don't think you lasted five minutes after we finished, but I forgive you this time. You wouldn't even wake up to admire Fuzzy Britches' mouse. He was proud of it, and quite put out with you when he couldn't get you up to admire it."



"I'll apologize to him, too. Where are they all, anyway?"

"They got up when I did. In fact, you were practically covered with animals when I woke up. Lady must like you; she hardly ever sleeps next to anyone but me, but there she was, covering you like a rug. Look, I have to go; Troy will be looking for me in a minute. Let's get the shelters packed."

"Troy? -- oh, Captain Masters. I had forgotten his first name. Let me get this other boot on." He managed it, barely, then strapped on his gunbelt and bent painfully to pick up his pack. He carried it outside then watched curiously as their shelters re-folded, making hissing noises as they expelled air. Each step in the process seemed logical of itself, but the whole thing smacked of magic; each fold seemed to push the previous one into another dimension. By the time that was finished, he was feeling merely awful rather than ready for burial. Kristi kissed him briefly then moved off in the direction where Masters was talking to several other rangers.

Fuzzy Britches and the two dogs appeared from around a collapsing shelter.

"Greetings, lazy human," the cat said, getting in the first word.

"Our master wakes at last," Woggly said.

"Jamie lazy," Conan grinned, tongue lolling and tail wagging. He had obviously been cued by the two pets.

"Don't listen to these two guys, Conan. They tell lies. Fuzz is the lazy one, and Woggly is almost as bad." He began handing out food bars.

"Fuzzy good. Woggly good," Conan said.

"I'm sure they told you so. Fuzz, I hear you caught a mouse last night. Are you still hungry?"

"Hungry for more mice. Not this." He sniffed disdainfully at the food bar, but began nibbling at it nevertheless. Jamie wondered if the cat and dog were as sore as he was, but decided not to ask. One or the other would be sure to tell him not to spend so much time in bed.

Judy put in an appearance as he was finishing the last of his own ration. He thought he could detect a little puffiness in her eyes, but she seemed cheerful enough, so perhaps he was only imagining it. Just as she was greeting him, he noted with amusement that Maria



Martinez was standing in the company of a male ranger while their shelters were re-folding. The ranger mystique strikes again, he thought.

"Good morning," Judy said. "Did you sleep well?"

Jamie examined the statement and decided there was no recrimination in it. "Like a cat in the sun," he said. "Is it time to go?"

"Almost."

"Do I have time to brush my teeth?"

"Why don't you wait? We should stop at a safe watering place this morning, but if it's not accessible, you'll need the water for drinking. The floater won't be in until this evening."

"I'll wait, but my mouth won't like it," Jamie said, wondering why the floater didn't contact them more often but not wanting to ask.

A short time later they were again on the move. There was no fog that morning but the wind had taken a turn and was blowing from the north. Before the sun was well up it became obscured by clouds. It began to drizzle, then to rain, and as the morning wore on the temperature began to drop. The March Northerly was unexpected; the expedition had been so hurriedly organized there had been no time to negotiate a weather forecast from the space controlled satellites.

Jamie was glad he was wearing the ranger coveralls, even though the hood half blinded him and he was constantly having to balance the suit controls between shedding water and leaving it's thermosmotic properties intact. The colder weather had driven the insects back to shelter, though, and he was grateful for that.

The march slowed as they neared the promised watering place. The trail led off the old highway for the first time that day, then across a shaky railroad trestle which the dogs checked carefully before allowing humans onto it. They crossed cautiously, then wound their way down toward the water beneath. They passed through a dense stand of water oak and vine-entangled shorter trees which Jamie didn't recognize but soon came to dislike for their propensity of slapping wet branches across his face, causing drops of cold water to drip into the neck of his suit. They emerged finally onto a thin sand bank fronting a small river. The sand extended no more than ten yards back from the bank and scarcely more along it. A tangle of willows surrounded the exposed sand. The water was brown with silt from erosion further upstream, but the small filters built into each



canteen soon gave more than enough potable water. The animals drank directly from the stream, unconcerned with contamination. Fuzzy Britches actually relished the taste of the water, claiming it had more flavor than that of the Enclave.

The stop was a short one; Masters seemed determined to put miles behind them despite the adverse weather, which only grew worse. The old highway was also impassable for the next few miles, necessitating travel through dense woods and scrub, with potholes and puddles and soggy mud not always visible. Jamie encountered a knee-deep, water covered depression and filled a boot despite the snugness of the shin closures. Thereafter he squished as he walked until the boot expelled the water and dried his foot, but not soon enough to keep him from developing a painful blister.

The noon break was hardly worth the stop. There was no convenient shelter and the rain continued to pour down, making eating difficult, especially for the animals. Masters led them on after only fifteen minutes, promising a longer stop when the rain quit, which he prophesized it would. As the weary afternoon wore on, his prognostication proved correct. The clouds turned from stormy black to a sulky gray and the rain dwindled down to no more than a drizzle. At about the same time, the path led back onto the littered concrete again. He sent word back down the line to the tired scientists that a sheltered stopping place would soon be reached; Jamie and the other neophytes picked up their pace in anticipation of a rest.

Jamie was simply enduring and trying to keep up with the others when several sharp barks from ahead interrupted his misery. Woggly and Conan, who were walking with him, perked up their ears but showed no real sign of alarm, and the column continued to move.

"What is it?" Jamie asked.

"Nothing serious. We'll see in a minute," Judy replied, unconcerned. As they progressed, he heard more barks, each one closer, until Conan turned his head at an angle and gave a woof of his own. Below a growth of young pines in the median strip crouched a large bobcat, protecting the remains of a rabbit between it's paws. The cat gave off a continuing low growl, but made no threatening moves. Jamie could see by it's large head that it was of enhanced ancestry.

"Just a cat," Judy remarked. "The dogs are telling it that we're just passing through and not looking for trouble. It's a male, see?"

"I see. He's a big one, isn't he?"



"Uh huh. I wonder if that was an enhanced rabbit he's eating? Hard to tell with it's head missing. Rabbits are getting scarce around here -- or at least we're not seeing many these days. They may just be concealing themselves better, though, since the cats have gotten so numerous. It's hard to tell sometime what's going on with the smart animals."

"I wonder how it will all come out in the end?" Jamie asked idly.

"So do I. Do you know, before we started on this trip, I requested a new pair of boots and couldn't get them? Something to do with a shortage of the material they use to fabricate the osmolayer."

"The same kind of thing happens in my department," Jamie said. "I've had a new micromanipulator on order for over a year. My old one can hardly tell a gene from a geranium. If we could trade with the other Enclaves by ground as well as by air, it sure would help the supply situation. I wonder why they ever let the highways fall apart like this?" He waved a hand at the cracked and overgrown pavement they were traveling on.

"I don't know. What history I've studied didn't go into the reasons that much. Maybe they just fell into disrepair when the small towns and cities got to be uninhabitable because of the animals."

"I guess that must be part of the reason. And then maybe when the economy got so bad there wasn't enough money to pay for repairs. Still, I don't think they were in that bad of shape before parts for floaters started getting scarce."

"It's not really my field," Judy admitted, "but if you go back far enough, all our troubles started when so many enhanced animals got loose and started to breed. That's where it all began."

"I understand that, but still --" His voice trailed off.

Judy shrugged. "It's all ancient history so far as I'm concerned. Look, yonder's the off ramp. We'll be taking a break down below."

"I'm ready."

Perversely, even the drizzle stopped once they had wound their way down and around to the shelter of a half collapsed overpass, but Jamie and the other scientists were grateful for the break regardless, if for no other reason than to shed their packs for awhile. Fuzzy Britches and Princess appeared, changing positions with the dogs again in some sort of rotation system of their own.



Captain Masters came over to the scientists while they were stretching stiff, sore bodies. He still wore his pack, as oblivious to the extra weight as if it were filled with air. "Are you people doing OK?" He grinned sympathetically, remembering his own military training as a youth.

"Pads sore," Fuzzy Britches complained before any human had a chance to speak. He rolled over onto his back and waved all four paws in the air. Masters bent to examine them, then turned to Jamie.

"Check with Kristi; if I know her, she brought something along for Princess. Maybe she has enough to spare." He looked down at Fuzzy Britches, still lying upended. "Little cats like you have a hard time if they're not used to walking this much."

"Us little people have a hard time, too," Maria Martinez said sharply.

"I know you do, but my orders are plain: we must travel as fast as possible." He spoke in a reasonable, soothing tone of voice.

"Why couldn't we have just waited and come by floater?" Drewson asked, rubbing at his shoulders.

Masters stroked his chin, where a thin white stubble was beginning to show. "You could have if there was any certainty about where we are going and if we could totally depend on our communications, but we don't and we can't. Our gear is old and worn out; we haven't had any replacements in years. Besides that, we can't depend on the satellites for relay because we really don't care to let the space folk know what we're after just yet. And finally, we have to keep you close because we may need your expertise desperately before this is over."

"Oh, all right, if we have to," Maria said wearily. "How much further today?"

"Not too far," Masters answered amiably. "We have to allow time to contact the floater and let it get here before dark. They are mapping the route by air."

"One more question," Maria prompted, glancing down at her pack with undisguised hostility.

"Sure, but make it short."

"Are you conducting a search in the general vicinity of our



destination, just in case there is something we can identify by air?"

"John Whitmire tells me we are, but so far, no results; at least as of last night when I talked to him. In any case, an air search has to be carried out with caution. It may be that a floater would be welcomed with open arms -- or paws -- or tentacles, but then again, it might not; it could scare the very parties we're hunting for into hiding. We just don't know enough to be sure. Furthermore, based on the time it took Conan to reach here, we're talking about a circle with a radius of fifty miles or more as our probable goal. You see the difficulties?"

"I do now. It still doesn't make that pack any lighter, but I can make it, I guess."

"Then let's be on our way."

The ranger captain's "not too far" proved to be six or seven more weary miles, but fortunately, most of it was easy, keeping to the ruined highway rather than having to beat their way through woods and brush. Even so, Jamie and Fuzzy Britches were both limping and struggling to keep up by the time they finally halted.

CHAPTER 13

Jamie spotted the floater as a speck in the distance and watched from a comfortable seat on a recently fallen tree as it slowly approached. It descended rapidly once the group was located, obviously trying to conserve power. With the landing skids down, it looked somewhat like a streamlined bathtub with a bubble canopy, bulging large at the front, like a wingless four-legged beetle, with the power gathering antennas extending forward like feelers. In came in close to camp and he felt his hair stand on end as he was brushed with a backwash of magnetic flux. The floater carried a re-chargeable power cell, augmented by solar panels. In flight, those power sources



were supplemented by conversion of ambient magnetism, but that only served to extend it's range; the conversion process was simple and not efficient enough to power the craft alone. Floaters were the workhorses of air transport between the Enclaves, but like so many other items, materials to manufacture and repair them were scarce. All but unnoticed by most citizens, their numbers had dwindled over the last decade, with a subsequent decline in commerce.

Fuzzy Britches was lying on his side, in obvious pain from his sore pads. They were abraded, but there were no obvious cuts or wounds. Jamie was soothing him with petting and chin scratching while Woggly tried to help by licking his feet. Fuzzy Britches doubted if that was of any benefit other than temporary relief, but appreciated the dog's efforts. Kristi was with Masters and one of the sergeants, conferring with the two man floater crew and Jamie didn't want to interrupt her to ask about medicine for the cat.

Judy saw what he was doing and snapped her fingers. She dug into her pocket and brought out a small tube of ointment. "Sorry, I forgot; Kristi said to give you this."

"Thanks." Jamie examined the label listing the ingredients and found himself no wiser, but the directions were clear. He applied the ointment to all four of Fuzzy Britches' pads, then took his boot off and examined the blister on his own heel.

Judy squatted down and peered at it. "Hold your foot out and I'll fix it for you." There was a brief stab of pain which made him wince, then she applied a medicated stickpad and slapped his leg. "All done. You'll have a callous there by morning. Isn't science wonderful?"

"Wonderful," Fuzzy Britches agreed, rolling to his feet.

"Take it easy, Fuzz. No mouse hunting tonight," Jamie warned.

"Maybe get a rabbit. It smelled good," the cat said, referring to the bobcat they had passed.

"You better leave the rabbits to Wog. From what I saw, the ones around here are as big as you are."

"Not smart like us," Fuzzy Britches said.

"If we're so smart, what are we doing here?"

The cat couldn't find a ready answer for that one. He was still enjoying the trek, but like Jamie, he realized now that his previous



assumptions about life in the wilds were far removed from the reality.

Jamie was stretched out on the ground, nearly asleep, by the time Kristi finished her consultations and returned. "Did you get the ointment I sent over for Fuzz?" She asked, picking up his shelter half and melding it with hers.

"Yes, feels good," Fuzzy Britches opened his eyes long enough to answer, then immediately went back to sleep. Woggly woke him again by snuffling in his face, then he and Lady pushed into the readied shelter, carefully wiping their paws at the entrance. Conan followed, imitating their actions. Fuzzy Britches yawned and stretched, then he and Princess trailed Jamie and Kristi inside. A wet animal smell permeated the air but soon disappeared.

While they were removing their boots, Jamie asked, "What was the consultation about? Anything new?"

"No, we were just checking coordinates and putting them into the computers. Here, I brought you a present." She passed over a small chocolate bar.

"My God!" Jamie exclaimed. "Where did you get this? Thanks." He broke off small pieces for the pets to sample and popped the rest of the bar into his mouth.

Kristi smiled at his thoughtfulness in sharing with the animals. His rapport with his pets, as well as those of others, was one of his traits which attracted her. She loved her own pets and treated them as equals other than in the military guise as commanding officer, but had about decided years ago that her attitude was generally an attribute of women rather than men. She thought most men tended toward a master complex and it pleased her that she saw no signs of it in Jamie. "One of the floater pilots is a friend of mine. She got the candy from a South American sailor last week when his ship was docked. Enjoy it; you may never see any more."

"Is it that bad down south?"

"Bad enough. Chocolate production has been discontinued every where now, she thinks. Contact with the Bogota Enclave has been lost.



I guess the food rioting got out of hand."

"Good news from everywhere."

"Yeah. Damn, if those lab boys had just been content to work on the animals' intelligence and left their longevity and resistance to disease alone, we could get control back with a plague of some sort."

"Sure, but who would have bought a pet that might up and die on them? Besides, 'if onlys' are only good for historians. They don't help the present at all."

"You're right, Jamie. I shouldn't let it bother me. What's done is done." She glanced at her thumbnail. "No sense in getting undressed. We go on guard duty in a couple of hours. Second shift tonight."

"That sounds good now, but I'll sure hate to get up later."

"I'll roust you out, never fear. Right now, let's try to get a nap." She lay down and snuggled her back up to him, spoon fashion. He put an arm around her, placed an undemanding hand over her breast and fell quickly asleep.

It felt as if he had hardly closed his eyes when he had to open them again. Kristi's shaking interrupted a dream in which he and Jeannie and Kristi were being chased through the corridors of a giant spaceship by huge bobcats, keeping ahead of the pursuing animals only by throwing them bloody rabbits which they stopped to devour. He came sleepily from the dream state to reality, blinking several times to assure himself that no bobcats were in the shelter with them.

Lady and Conan were already outside. Woggly yawned and got to his feet, deciding to accompany his friends even though he had no specific duties. The cats slept on, undisturbed.

The stretch of guard duty passed slowly enough to cause Jamie to doubt the accuracy of his thumbnail watch, and the sleepless hours were compounded by a cold wind whipping at the hood of his coveralls. It was still blowing from the north, though not so fiercely.

"I hope Fuzz and Princess keep the shelter warm," Jamie said at length. "I'm not getting undressed until it is."

"After tonight, we sleep dressed anyway. This is our last stop before we enter unknown territory, and we have to be ready to react at a moment's notice to dangers we haven't encountered before. That's why the shelters are transparent," she added.



"You mean we have to wear these suits constantly from now on? We'll get kind of rank, won't we?"

She reached back and patted his leg. "Not all the time, but certainly while we're sleeping. Remember how much trouble I've had waking you up?"

"No, but I'll take your word for it."

"Troy will tell Wolfgang to try to find us a stopping place every day or so safe enough to let us get cleaned up, but it's not guaranteed. I remember times when we've been out that I would have made a pact with the devil to be able to sleep upwind of myself. And remember, we're concentrating on speed, so don't expect us to go out of the way for unimportant things like taking a bath. Besides, just think about how good it will feel when we can get clean again. I'll let you scrub my back."

It was something to think about. After only two days on the trail his hair already felt greasy and his skin itched with the need for water. He hated to contemplate what it would feel like after a few more days.

There came a loud bark in the night, followed by a pregnant silence; then an eerie yowl shattered the stillness, like the death knell of a banshee, washing over them from nearby like a sudden tsunami. It brought them both to their feet, weapons drawn. An instant cacophony of barks and growls echoed from the guard dogs. Jamie thought he recognized Woggly's voice in the melange and cursed inwardly. Damn it, Woggly was a city dog, no match for whatever monster could make a sound like that. He had no business getting mixed up with the ranger dogs. Immediately, he began to worry.

The noise came again, high and shrill this time, but with a rasping, grating undertone that vibrated in his ears, blurring direction. Jamie waved his weapon nervously. He could feel his heart thudding in his chest, jolted by enough adrenalin to make a sloth do acrobatics. More barks and growls assaulted his ears, then died away. Brush rattled off to his left. He turned, weapon up and ready.

Kristi's hand met his forearm, forcing the laser gun down. "That's a dog coming in. Relax. Whatever it was, it's leaving now." The accuracy of her reply was proven by a third cry, undeniably more distant.

"What in hell was it? -- and Woggly! I thought I heard him bark. If anything happened to him --" He broke off, unable to continue.



"It didn't sound like any of the dogs got hurt, but I'm not sure what it was. Some kind of big cat, probably. Maybe a tiger. A lot of those were enhanced in the old days. Every zoo and circus had them. But be quiet, now. It's just barely possible that it was a diversion to let another one sneak in and drag off a kill."

Jamie shivered, wondering whether she was referring to humans or pets in terms of a kill.

A white blur broke into the open and loped toward them. Kristi hunkered down and took Lady's head in her hands, ruffling her thick fur. The dog whined and growled in a low voice before speaking. "Cat. Big cat. Gone now."

"Good girl. Tell Woggly to come."

The command was unnecessary, as Woggly arrived even as Lady was turning to fetch him. Jamie hugged his dog, digging his hands into his shaggy hair. His throat constricted, preventing him from speaking even had Kristi already not admonished him to silence. He had loved Woggly since he was a clumsy fat puppy, but his love was usually expressed in casual banter and friendly insults. Just now he realized how deep his affection for the pet went. "Go stay with Conan," he whispered, patting his rump. Conan was restricted by the edict of his importance from straying far from the confines of the camp area. He should be safe with him.

After an interval, Kristi said, "I guess it's safe to talk now. Just keep it low."

"Are there many of those things out here? Damned if I want to meet one by myself, if it's as big as it sounded."

"There are more of them than there used to be. Like I told you before, this is getting to be cat country. I'm at a loss to know what they live on, though. There aren't many deer left, nor wild cattle, either. There never was much of a call for enhancing their intelligence, and without that, they can't survive long among the smart carnivores."

"So far as that goes, humans aren't doing such a damn fine job of surviving, either."

Kristi had no answer for that comment.



CHAPTER 14

Five full days had passed since Jamie's departure and Jeannie was feeling lonely and bored. She missed him, more than she ever thought she would. Of late, he had been occupying more and more of her attention. She found her thoughts turning to him at odd times during the day, and especially at night when they were not together. His going had left a void inside, like an unfulfilled promise. She imagined he and Kristi making love out in the wilds, but those thoughts were more in response to the desires of her own body rather than any sense of jealousy; Kristi had put those fears to rest. Her present attitude was a healthy reflection of the prevalent mores of Enclave society. She had had no expectations of remaining his only sexual partner. Neither did she seriously think he would be her last lover, either, although she had no current interest in any other man right now, nor did she expect to develop one in the near future so long as she continued to feel so strongly bound to him. She knew also, with the age-old intuition of women, that he had begun to care deeply about her, notwithstanding the typical male response to Kristi's overt sexuality.

She worried incessantly about Jamie's safety, imagining all kinds of horrors and disasters overcoming him in the wild country outside the Enclave. She had never lived anywhere else, of course, and was as subject as anyone else to believe the more exaggerated versions of conditions on the outside. She called Whitmire's office every evening to inquire about him, feeling foolish for doing so, but unable to resist the temptation. John Whitmire, being a kindly man, took the calls himself, assuring her gently that he was indeed safe and that the expedition was progressing satisfactorily. Also, being somewhat Victorian minded by present standards, he made no mention of Kristi, having noticed the obvious signs of her interest in Jamie. He suspected with good cause that the interest had been fairly consummated by now. Jeannie wouldn't have reacted adversely in any



case. During the very short time she had known the older woman, she had begun to like and admire her, despite the initial juvenile possessiveness she had shown.

On this day, Jeannie was feeling a sort of directionless ennui as she left the agsection offices and walked reluctantly toward her sled stop, dreading the prospect of another night alone. On a sudden impulse, she reversed her steps and headed back to the office, thinking she might pull some of Jamie's progress notes on his latest project from the computer and use her home terminal to tidy them up for him. It was not really necessary work, but she thought that it might allay a little of the loneliness she felt in his absence. As she neared the front entrance, she saw a man entering and recognized him as Don Cadena, Alvarez's administrative assistant. His small frame and the incipient bald spot showing through his thinning hair was unmistakable. She was surprised to see him; he had left the office earlier, claiming a headache, and had stated specifically that he was leaving for the day. Curious, she lagged behind and followed him into the building.

As with most newer office buildings, there were few inside doors. During the day, opaque projections protected the privacy of the occupants when desirable and were keyed to individual body computers to allow selective entrance. Most of them were kept in the non-functional mode at night or when the offices were unoccupied; access to private or confidential data was usually protected by the individually coded body computers. Jeannie saw immediately that Alvarez's office was occupied and presumed that Cadena's headache had abated and he had returned to complete some unfinished work. She passed it by and entered her own small office, not bothering to activate the entrance barrier. She quickly transferred the data she wanted into her body computer, then decided it would be polite to visit with Cadena for a moment. She liked him even less than she did her boss. There was something about the man which repelled her, like an aura which had lost its color, but she was naturally friendly and made it a point to try to get along with him. The privascreen Cadena had erected recognized the entrance code from her body computer, and she stepped silently through the projection. Had she not been authorized entrance, a mild tingle would have warned her off.

Cadena's back was turned; he was concentrating intensely on a projection in front of him. Jeannie recognized the format immediately as belonging to Alvarez's personal files; she was frequently given access to them long enough to record or delete data, or more usually, straighten the files so that they could be used more efficiently. She opened her mouth to say something, then closed it without speaking. Was Cadena authorized to look into his superior's private notes? She wasn't sure. He might have been given permission



without her knowledge. Alvarez might have called and sent him over to look up some data, but that didn't seem likely; he could just as easily have accessed it from home, given his rank. Uncertain of Cadena's motives, she silently withdrew, still unnoticed, and hurried quickly from the building.

On the way home, she thought some more on Cadena's unexpected presence in the office and decided that the next morning she would advance the normal computer maintenance schedule by a few days. Soon after taking over it's management, she had installed a silent monitoring program which stored a record of all accesses. It was no real secret: she had noted it's installment and access code in the maintenance file, but she doubted that anyone else had paid attention to it. It was not designed to prevent entry into the computer memory, being merely a tool to help with debugging if necessary. It would be interesting to see which of Alvarez's personal files Cadena had been after.

Cadena departed not long after Jeannie, brows puckered in a frown. He was irritated that he had found nothing new in Alvarez's files; after his initial fortuitous involvement with the feral dog, he was now obviously out of the loop. He could not reasonably expect to find out anything else from that source. He felt frustrated, as he had much of his adult life, ever since failing to pass Moon City's stringent immigration requirements. He had not been told that the psych tests had eliminated him from consideration even had he passed the others. He had a mean little soul, no bigger than his slight body, and an ambition which far outweighed his talents. An analysis by Moon City of the psychological profiles of applicants had turned up his name, and a space shipping coordinator passing through the enclave had recruited him with a promise of eventual transport to the moon in return for clandestine activities. That the promise had so far failed to materialize he blamed on the lack of sufficiently important intelligence to pass on, and it preyed on his mind. However lacking in talent (other than for cracking computer codes), his perspicacity was acute; he could visualize the Houston Enclave falling in his lifetime, and he desperately wanted out. He had a deadly fear of the wilds and hated all animals impartially. Now, with the startling events of the last few days, he thought he might earn a chance to leave, but nothing other than the one description he had gleaned from Alvarez's files, and a single overheard conversation between Jeannie and Whitmire



which told him nothing useful, had so far become available. He needed more information, and so far, he wasn't getting it.

There was one more possible avenue open to him, but he hated to try it. Going into Alvarez's files had scared him silly, but getting caught there risked only his job and privileges; breaking into a private home constituted burglary -- he could be exiled for that. On the other hand, there was certainly no possibility that Da Cruz would catch him in the act if he risked it, not when he was scores of miles away in the wilds! He came to a decision.

Several miles away, Jeannie also came to a decision. Just perusing files with Jamie's name on them failed to satisfy the empty feeling within her. What little work actually needed to be done on them, she finished quickly, then was at a loss for any other mind diverting activity. She ate a desultory meal. All the news on the holo was bad, and the entertainment was worse. Annoyed with herself, she decided to go for a walk; maybe she just needed some exercise. Once outside and walking in the evening air, she felt her spirits rise, especially as the weather had turned better after the brief norther. Warm enough for swimming even, she thought. That's better exercise than walking, and I can get into Jamie's apartment to dry off. Maybe I'll even sleep there. Considerably buoyed by the thought, she re-traced part of her path back to the familiar sled stop.

It was already well past dark by the time she arrived at Jamie's complex. There were only two swimmers in the lighted pool, both male, neither of them more than vaguely familiar. She decided to go in immediately, then carry her clothes into Jamie's apartment and dry off there. She stripped and dove in, ignoring the admiring glances from the two men. She lapped the pool back and forth, pausing occasionally at one end or the other to rest. She fended off polite advances from each of the men in turn, although she couldn't help but feel a little quiver inside at the thought of sex. Celibacy wasn't one of her strong suits, but it was Jamie she wanted, not some other man.

Satisfied with the swim, she slithered out of the water and bent to pick up her discarded apparel, wishing it were Jamie admiring the naked wetness of her body rather than the two strangers. She waved casually to them and left the pool area, carrying her bundle of clothes. There was no problem in entering Jamie's apartment. Just as the pool



had read the access code Jamie had entered into her body computer, so did his apartment door. He had shared them with her several weeks ago, as well as some of the inside amenities. Not really happy, but feeling much refreshed, she stepped through the entrance.

"Oh, God Damn! What are you doing here?" Cadena jumped up from Jamie's computer alcove with a cry of rage at being discovered.

Startled almost out of her wits, Jeannie gasped and brought both hands up to her face, clothes falling unnoticed to the floor. Before she could react, Cadena moved swiftly to block the entrance. He might possibly have bluffed away his presence in Jamie's home by claiming he had been granted access and at least gained a day or two to find a hiding place in the small Enclave underworld, but he reacted badly, thoughts of exile hammering in his skull. He drew his laser gun and pointed it at her still dripping figure. He grabbed her arm and threw her forcefully across the room onto the big lounge. Jeannie's teeth clicked painfully together at the impact.

"Don't yell or I'll burn you. Goddamn nosy bitch, you would have to show up here!"

"Mr. Cadena, what are you doing?" Jeannie implored. She was as innocent of political intrigue as a goldfish.

"Shut up, damn it." Cadena breathed heavily, striving for control. Now how in hell was he going to get out of this situation? He could tie her up or knock her out and gain time to get away and hide, but that still left the possibility of discovery and certain exile into the wilds. Or he could kill.

Cadena had committed murder once in his youth when passion had overcome restraint. The girl's face still haunted him sometimes, not in the guilty sense, but at how close he had come to getting caught.

"Please, Mr. Cadena, tell me what is going on. Is Jamie in trouble? Is he hurt?" Her mind was whirling, knowing abstractly that Cadena was doing something terribly wrong, but her concern for Jamie and the conviction that whatever Cadena was up to somehow involved him overrode any other consideration. The fact that she was lying completely naked while a desperate man pointed a lethal weapon at her really didn't hit her until he spoke again.

Cadena licked his thin lips and eyed her nakedness. "They can't hang me any higher," he muttered to himself. He pressed one hand along the closure of his suit and waved his laser gun at Jeannie with the other. "Get up. Go into the bed room. Walk slow, I'll be right



behind you."

Jeannie realized then that the man was desperate and that her life was in imminent danger. But she knew something that Cadena didn't. Or at least she hoped he didn't. How long had he been here, and how much of Jamie's computer data had he seen? Not enough, she hoped. In fact, that was her only hope.

CHAPTER 15

Just before being prodded into the bedroom by the unsuspecting Cadena, Jeannie screamed out the defensive code Jamie had entered in her body computer. She cringed as she cried out, fearing that he would shoot her in the back, but hoping desperately that he would hesitate before firing. The scream alone might have been enough to activate the defensive system, but she couldn't be sure she had gotten enough emotional overtones into her voice at the time she and Jamie had laughingly practiced against a possible intruder. It worked, though, just as Jamie had designed it to.

Like a striking rattler, clusters of biomanipulators shot out from both sides of the room, differentiating Jeannie and the miscreant instantly. Cadena's weapon was struck from his hand by one tentacle, and other constricting coils whipped around his body and swept him from his feet. He gagged and struggled as a coil tightened around his neck, cutting off his breath. His struggles caused the others entangling his body to tighten even further. Maddened with fear and rage, he ceased fighting only when he was totally unconscious.

Jeannie drew in several long, lung-expanding breaths, trying to moderate the adrenalin surge which had left her shaken and weak. Finally regaining her calm, she stepped over and around the biomanipulators holding Cadena tight from both walls and recovered her clothing. She pulled it on, keeping an eye on the entangled man, even though she knew there was no chance he could escape. She went over to the computer alcove, intending to call Whitmire's office for help. She stopped as an idea struck her. Her lips parted at the audacity of the thought. She stepped back long enough to draw a glass of water to leaven her dry throat, then sat down to wait until Cadena recovered enough to talk. She saw the coils covering his body begin to



relax slightly, even though they still held him tight. When she saw him open his eyes and blink, she spoke to him.

"Now you will tell me what in hell you think you're up to, mister. Start talking. It better be good."

"I was just kidding," Cadena said in a raw voice. "Jamie gave me access here. Now let me go." He tried to exude some bravado, but it was a weak attempt, completely unconvincing.

Jeannie laughed. "I don't believe that for a minute. I saw you in Alvarez's office earlier this evening when you were supposed to be home with a headache. You're after something, and it has to be something to do with Jamie. You can either tell me, or I can call John Whitmire and let you tell him."

Cadena's whole body slumped, as much as it was able to in the restrictive coils. There was no way he wanted the security chief to intervene. His only hope lay with the girl. "If I tell you, will you let me go? Just give me a chance to get away, that's all I ask." The fear of exile caused him to begin shivering, like the girl he had killed so long ago, just before he snuffed out her life.

Jeannie considered the best way to carry out her plan. She had no intention of letting the man go. She fully intended to call Whitmire and turn Cadena over to him, but not before she got her pound of flesh. "Start talking. If I like what I hear, I'll give you twelve hours grace to get to wherever you think you want to go. Don't try lying to me, though. Whitmire can be here in half an hour if I call him."

Cadena began to talk, fear pressing at his mind. He told her only what he thought she already knew, but Jeannie wouldn't be satisfied. She wanted it all, now that she had a plan. She didn't let up on him until she had wormed out the complete story of his recruitment by Moon City, how he passed his information, and the nature of each stolen file. She took her time, knowing there was no way he could escape.

As time passed, Cadena found the telling easier. He wanted to get it over with, and his mind was already skipping ahead to possible hiding places in the Enclave.

Jeannie summed it up. "So, you've been passing on any information you think valuable to the Moon City people all these years. I don't know why you would have wanted to, but let that go. What I can't understand is why they would want anything from us? They sit up there safe and sound, not threatened at all, while we're



down here holed up in the Enclaves."

"I don't know for sure," Cadena answered honestly. "I guess maybe they still depend on earth for some materials and products and use the information for planning and deciding which Enclaves to trade with. They were always after me to get them any kind of new technology that we were holding back in hopes of getting better deals with them."

"And now they know that we're after something which might alter the balance, thanks to you. You are a despicable man."

"You promised to let me go!" Canena's voice was shrill with apprehension.

"If you believed that, you probably believe in fairies, too."

Cadena began to plead incoherently until she shut him up with a threat of tightening his bonds. We withdrew into a sullen silence but continued to watch her. She instructed the defender to hold him captive with no time limit.

"Where are you going? You can't just leave me here like this," he pleaded.

"Just hide and watch, buster."

He tried one more gambit. "At least let me up long enough to go to the bathroom. I promise not to cause any trouble, but I've got to go."

Jeannie thought of her narrow escape from rape and murder. "Piss in your pants, you bastard." She turned on her heel and left.

She caught the sled leading to her apartment and planned some more as she rode, wondering all the time if she was doing the right thing, and wondering even more if she could pull it off. Never mind. I'm going to try, she thought. If Candena's treachery had increased the danger to Jamie in any way, then she was determined to be there to share it. It was a romantic notion, of course, but then Jeannie was a romantic girl, and she was emboldened to try the gambit and see how Whitmire reacted.

Whitmire took her call almost immediately, the image appearing to show him at his desk console. He looked tired, but spoke kindly. "Yes, Jeannie, what can I do for you?"

"I've caught a spy," she said, getting to the subject matter



immediately.

Whitmire furrowed his brows, wondering if he had heard her right. He had been expecting another inquiry about Jamie Da Cruz. Spies shouldn't even be in her lexicon. "A spy, you say? And you caught one? Child, am I hearing you right?"

"You heard right Mr. Whitmire. He tried to kill me," Jeannie reiterated.

Concern crossed his face. "Are you hurt?"

"No, but it wasn't for lack of trying. Look, let me tell you about it."

"Perhaps we should go over the matter in person, if it can wait an hour or so." He was much more aware of political intrigue than Jeannie or most other citizens were. There was competition and undercover operations occurring continuously between the Enclaves and space, and even between the individual Enclaves. If Jeannie had indeed uncovered some espionage, and in her words, 'caught a spy', there might be need to keep the events discrete for the time being.

"I guess it could wait for a little while if it has to, but please, not long."

"Are you calling from home?" He asked, more for reassurance than need to know; he suspected she was, judging from the background displayed with her image, that of a simple one room apartment.

"Yes, I'm home."

"Then may I suggest you wait there and let me come to you? Give me the location, and I'll be there very shortly."

Jeannie gave him her number and location, then waited in frustration for his arrival. She had been primed to negotiate when she called and wasn't sure she could go through with it in person. The waiting only made it worse.

Whitmire greeted her warmly when she let him in. He looked around the room and saw no spy in sight, although he admitted to himself that she still looked just as distraught as when she had called. Her room was decorated in fresh pink and pale green pastels, with growing plants in every nook and cranny. He took the seat she offered and crossed his legs. "Now, Jeannie, begin at the start and let's see what we have."



Jeannie told her story as well as she could, omitting only the name of the man and where he was being held. Whitmire noticed the omission, of course, but refrained from interrupting until she was finished. "Now, you say you have this man trussed up where he can't escape. Good. Tell me where he is and I'll send a security detachment to bring him in."

Jeannie took a deep breath. "There is something I want, first. Before I hand him over, I want a promise from you."

"And what might that be? There may be no time to spare, Jeannie. If Moon City is really onto the nature of our expedition they may try to reach the area before we do, somehow."

"I want to be with Jamie. I know you send floaters out to meet them at night. You could let me go on one." She met his startled gaze with her lips drawn into a tight line.

"Jeannie, you know nothing of the wilds, and this expedition is important, more so than you might guess."

"Jamie doesn't know anything about the wilds, either, and he went."

"True," Whitmire countered, "but his presence was necessary, and yours isn't."

"It is now, if you want to know anything else about the spy. I'm serious, Mr. Whitmire. If Jamie is in danger, I want to share it." Her voice, in control until then, trembled with the last words. She felt the beginning of a sob trying to form and fought to hold it back.

John Whitmire was a dedicated man, and a harsh one when circumstances dictated. He uncrossed his legs and stood up to pace, a narrow three steps in each direction, while he considered. He would have to send reinforcements to the expedition now, simply as a matter of expedience, but he couldn't see where one inexperienced girl would be that much of an additional problem. After all, the scientists were laboring under the same handicap. He suspected, rightly, that he could determine the whereabouts of Jeannie's captive fairly easily, but it might take a day or so if she remained as stubbornly silent as she was now. He stopped pacing and sat back down.

"All right, Jeannie, I'll let you go. It may be a day or two, though. I'm going to have to send some reinforcements out before I can make room for you, and I won't risk telling the expedition anything about this other than by personal contact; the satellites might pick up the



transmission. I'll have to have a courier go with the next floater out, then bring one of the rangers back for a briefing. If one space agent is involved, there may be others, and their pipeline normally runs through floater pilots. I don't dare even trust the courier; my own headquarters may be penetrated, but there are a few rangers I know I can trust. So give me a couple of days, OK?"

Jeannie did cry then, from relief rather than any other emotion, but she soon calmed down. Then, under Whitmire's gentle urging, she filled in the rest of the story.

"You will have to come with me us if we want to release Mr. Cadena without tearing up Jamie's defender. It would be a shame after the good job it did. You were very lucky, I hope you know that."

"I guess so. I'm here, and a couple of hours ago I didn't know if I would be or not. If I couldn't have accessed the defender --"

"You would very likely be dead, perhaps after some very unpleasant preliminaries. Let me use your terminal and we'll be on our way."

Two security agents were waiting when they arrived at Jamie's apartment. She opened the door for them, but let them go in first, not quite trusting Cadena to still be trussed up. Seconds later, they beckoned her inside, then took custody of Cadena after she loosed the Bios. They hustled him away, head hung, thinking only of his bleak future.

Whitmire turned to Jeannie. "It will be in the morning before I can get a floater out, and likely another day or so before I get the reinforcements sent in. I can let you go after that, if you are still so determined, but I insist you take the little training course that Jamie did. You can join him the day after. Report to the security building in the morning; I'll have it set up for you."

"Thank you. I'll be there. Do you think the space people will really try to interfere with the expedition?"

"Knowing how venal and covetous they are, it is a distinct possibility, but being prepared is half the battle. We can manage that now, thanks to you." Whitmire smiled down at Jeannie's small, pretty face, thinking how vulnerable she looked. He hoped Jamie would treat her right.

"Go home, now, and get a good night's sleep. I'll see you in the morning if I can." Impulsively, he leaned over and kissed her on the



forehead, then cursed himself silently for being a sentimental old fool. _

Pet Plague (continued)

CHAPTER 16

It was near noon before Whitmire could arrange for additional rangers and get them ready to go. There were few enough available on such short notice. That wasn't his main worry, however. He was treading a fine line by sending additional troops to join the original party. Too few might not be enough to meet the contingencies suggested by Cadena's revelations, and too many risked not only provoking the animals as they passed through their territory, but compounded the supply difficulties. Hunting for food was out of the question; nothing was more certain to arouse the enhanced animals than poaching on their food supply. While a large force could probably hold their own for a while, they could not be expected to hunt and fight and make any kind of speed toward their destination while doing so. He balanced the various factors in his mind and finally decided that an additional two dozen would be a suitable compromise. It was well that he got them off when he did; by the time they arrived, their help was sorely needed.

Jamie heard the first alarm as a startled yelp from one of the guard dogs in the rear. It was cut off in mid-bark, but was followed quickly by more barks and fighting snarls. The attack had been well planned, coming from down wind and catching the column as it was strung out single file in dense woods. He had no idea what was happening, but as the noise came closer he had his weapon out and ready, dropping to one knee in a firing position.

A human scream joined the snarling voices of the angry dogs. Yells and whoops sounded out like a flock of angry loons, then came a deep



bass woofling sound, like an erratic motor trying to fire, and the next second the fight engulfed him. His first sight of the enemy almost caused a fatal hesitation in getting a shot off. Expecting an animal, he saw the figure of a skin-clad human dart from behind a tree. Dirty long hair streamed back from his head as he raised an arm. Jamie ducked and fired at the same time, throwing off his aim. The laser beam struck the tree inches from the wild man's head, with the slug following microseconds later. It exploded into the tree trunk, filling the savage's face with splinters. A short, metal-tipped spear sped past Jamie's shoulder as he fell backward. Judy killed the man with a single shot as she came up behind him, crouched low.

Jamie staggered to his feet just as a huge lumbering form burst into sight, behung with a dog at its throat and another clinging to its flank. The creature hardly seemed to notice, making incredible speed for so large an animal. It reared as it came upon them from the right. Jamie's shot was true, but not immediately effective. The beam and slug staggered the animal, but did not fell it. Belly armor! Jamie thought as a huge paw swung for his head. He was trying to raise his aim when the paw struck his arm, crushing it against the side of his body and flinging him against the trunk of a tree. He watched, dazed, as Judy felled it with another shot when it dropped back down to a four footed stance. He was unable to make his body work; he saw the action as if it were a slow motion dream. Judy grappled desperately with another savage who flung himself onto her back before she could turn. A white whirlwind leaped into the fray, running from the forward part of the column. Lady, Jamie thought dreamily, as the dog toppled both figures with her attack, giving Judy a chance to get her knife loose and into the savage's body. He groaned and rolled onto his back, spurting blood. Jamie got drunkenly to his feet. Lady whirled and dashed off to find another foe.

"This way!" Judy screamed, pulling him away from the bodies. He saw her hand become streaked with red and thought at first that she was hurt. He tried to help her and found that he couldn't move his right arm. He looked down and saw it jutting from his body at an impossible angle, blood running through a tear in his suit sleeve. He had lost his sidearm when struck, and thought of the little laser gun strapped to his boot, but it was miles away from his grasp. He drew his knife with his left hand, thinking crazily through the melee of human and animal screams that he must protect his pets. He couldn't see Fuzzy Britches, but Woggly was suddenly beside him, fangs bared.

From ahead, he heard the commanding voice of Captain Masters, giving orders in a tone as calm as if he were conducting a guided tour rather than in the midst of a life and death struggle. They followed the voice, backing and turning until they found him directing the defense



from the smallest of clearings, Conan at his side. He ordered two dogs who had come back at the sounds of fighting to move forward again and find a better spot for defense, counted the group around him with a swift glance, then gestured to a ranger coming up from behind them. He conferred in a low voice with the man, then said loudly, "Move forward, everyone forward! Protect the scientists! Conan, stay with me." Conan crouched low, then raised up and woofed joyfully as he spotted Jamie.

Jamie passed the next quarter hour in a nightmare of pain and worry and fear. The numbness wore off from his broken arm and was replaced by a throbbing fire that came and went with every pulse of his heart. There was no time nor place to stop for treatment, nor could he look for Fuzzy Britches, except as a side effect of watching out for more of the monsters he heard someone describe as bears. The skin-clad men had to be feral humans, perhaps even altered humans, working in concert with their animals. They pressed the attack with intelligence and determination, never showing themselves unnecessarily. Jamie knew of their presence only as sounds and shots coming from the rear. His vision became blurred with pain, causing him to stumble and stagger, but he kept grimly to his feet, fighting to shake the cobwebs from his mind. At last they stumbled through a water-filled drainage ditch and out of the forest onto a stretch of pavement where the rangers drew up a protective circle among humps of weather-broken concrete.

Jamie collapsed immediately, unable to stand or even look for shelter once he stopped moving. "Fuzz," he murmured. "Where is Fuzzy Britches?" Woggly licked at his arm, whining.

"He's right here," came a voice from his side. He felt the sting of a medicinal ampoule just as he recognized his pet. He saw Kristi's face hovering over him. "Fuzzy Britches," he said weakly, and lost consciousness.

With a clear field of fire, Masters no longer worried about their immediate ability to hold off the attackers, but he cast an anxious glance at the sky, fearing an overcast, moonless night, where their situation might become desperate indeed. As he looked, he spotted a group of floaters and sighed with relief. They had evidently been attracted by the smoke from laser beams torching wet wood and followed it to the source. As glad as he was to see them, he wondered why they had appeared so early and why there was four of them rather than one, but he put that puzzlement aside, knowing he would find out soon enough. He began seeing to the wounded and counting the missing.



Jamie came back to consciousness a little later as the short lived soporific effects of the pain killer wore off. He found his arm encased in splints, with bandages showing beneath. The side of his face felt raw; he touched it and felt the stiffness of another bandage there. Woggly and Fuzzy Britches were hovering nearby. He hugged them both. Judy was standing by his side, apparently no longer worried by the possibility of more fighting. He got to his feet, feeling preternaturally alert from the analgesic and healing medications coursing through his bloodstream.

"Take it easy," Judy said. "You'll be all right, but don't try to move too fast; you'll fall on your face. We can take the splints off tomorrow and you'll be carrying a pack again the day after."

Jamie grinned foolishly. It was almost worth getting hurt to be rid of the hated pack for a couple of days. "Where's Kristi? Is she all right?"

"Here she comes, now," Judy said, pointing.

Kristi had a peculiar look on her face, as if she had just read some directions on a container which made no sense. "No back rub tonight," she said as she came up.

"I'm beginning to think I'll never get one. What happened? Why were we attacked? Did we lose anyone?"

She held up a hand. "One question at a time. It was bears and feral humans, probably the remnants of an old circus group that stayed together when things went bad. It takes a lot of food to feed a group of animals that size. The humans probably talked them into an attack in hopes of capturing some weapons to make hunting easier."

"Did they get any? I lost my own."

"Probably. We have three missing. There's not much hope for them. Look, Jamie, I have to go. Troy is sending me back for a new briefing. For some reason, they don't want to send it through an open channel on the radio. I just wanted to ask you to let Lady and Princess stay with you while I'm gone."

"Sure," he agreed. "When will you be back?"

"By tomorrow, I hope. Forsyth is missing. Why don't you and Judy team up for tonight?"

"I'll watch him," Judy told her.



Kristi gave Jamie a quick hug and ran back in the direction of the floaters. A few minutes later they climbed into the sky. Masters marshaled the new men, gave them their assignments and moved the column forward once again. The bears and their feral humans had broken off the fight with the arrival of reinforcements.

One of the floaters carrying Kristi sheared off from the others as they neared the enclave and dropped her at the nearest landing spot by the security building. She walked the rest of the way, still wearing her gear and pack. She drew some curious stares, but no comments.

Whitmire was waiting and immediately began filling her in on Jeannie's adventures. He looked very tired, but his voice was as strong as ever. "I hope you see now why I wanted to bring you back to relay the information. Tell no one but Captain Masters the whole story, but have him let the rest of the troops in on enough of it that they will know what to expect. Be prepared to go out in the morning as soon as the fog has had time to lift. I'll send the best pilot available to follow the projected route and try to locate them; if not, you'll have to wait for Masters to call in.

"Got it. Anything else?"

"As a matter of fact, there is. Why don't you try to contact Jeannie this evening and see if you can talk her out of joining the expedition? Not that I think you'll have much success."

"Let me call from here. I'll see if I can get her to come to my place. She will want to know about Jamie anyway."

"I know," Whitmire said wearily. "She's been calling every day asking about him. She's such a sweet, refreshing girl that I can't bring myself to refuse her calls, even when I'm swamped with other things."

"She is sweet. I'll talk to her."

Whitmire raised a cynical eyebrow. "Just talk?"

"Mind your own business," Kristi said.

"I don't want to see her get hurt."

"You don't know women near as well as you think you do, John. Let me make that call. I'm tired."



Kristi contacted Jeannie and made arrangements for her to come to her own apartment, putting off her questions with difficulty. She shouldered her pack and left, wishing John Whitmire didn't know her so well. On the other hand, maybe he didn't. She had changed a little in the last week or so.

CHAPTER 17

Kristi barely had time to get to her place and set out drinks with half a liter of vodka and juice before the door meowed at her in Princess' voice (which she had recorded in preference to the conventional chime). She let Jeannie in, noticing her tight face and lack of the minimal makeup that most Enclave women wore. She was dressed in the conventional coveralls with sleeves rolled up, and her dark hair appeared faintly damp, as if she had just recently showered.

"Hi!" Kristi greeted her. "I hear you've been having as many adventures as we have."

"I don't think I want to talk about that anymore. It's only by luck that I'm still here. Why are you back? Is Jamie all right?"

"He's fine now. Here, sit down and drink this and I'll tell you." She poured a generous dollops of the vodka into the waiting juice, stirred and handed it to her.

Jeannie took two sips of the drink before the implication of the remark struck her. She turned her face inquiringly. "What do you mean, 'now'? Has he been hurt?"

"He was injured in a fight we had, but it was nothing serious, just a broken arm and a few scrapes."

"Nothing but a broken arm! Oh, I just knew he'd get hurt! Are you sure he's OK? Are Fuzzy Britches and Woggly all right?"



Kristi thought the more of her for including the pets in her concern. and more of Jamie by implication. "They didn't even get a scratch." She carefully made no mention of the deaths and other casualties, seeing how upset the young woman already was.

"Thank goodness. Oh, I wish I had been there. Maybe I could have helped. I'm going to join him, you know."

"Yes, John Whitmire told me how you held him up. But Jeannie, please think about it. It's not safe out there. The fight we had with those feral humans and bears wasn't usual, or even expected, but that's why we patrol away from the enclave: to find the unusual before it finds us, and try to cope with it."

Jeannie began crying, unable to help herself. "I don't care, I'm still going. If it's all that dangerous, I want to be with him." She wiped her face, leaving wet streaks across her cheeks.

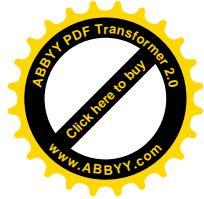
Kristi put a comforting arm around her until the emotional spasm passed, then encouraged her to finish her drink. She poured another for her, not quite so strong this time. "Jeannie, would you mind sitting here for a little while and let me get cleaned up a bit? I haven't had a real bath in a week."

"Go ahead -- or should I go on home? You must be tired." She examined the ranger woman as she stood up. Her coveralls were streaked with dirt and other matter, and her blond hair hung in unwashed strands.

"Stay here. I'll enjoy the company. Relax and drink your drink. I won't be long."

A few minutes later Kristi came out of the shower, unselfconsciously nude, her hair straight and still dark with water. She opened a closet and pulled on a thin short robe and wrapped it around her, tying the belt loosely, careless of the considerable cleavage it displayed. She sat down by Jeannie on the lounge and refilled their glasses again, leaving only a little of the liquor in the bottle. She eyed the remains, knowing how long it might be before it could be replaced.

Jeannie sipped at her third drink, still upset, but beginning to relax under the warming influence of the alcohol. She glanced around at the small apartment, thinking how well it suited Kristi's personality and profession. It was larger than her own one-room abode, and touches had been added which made it seem more virile, less feminine, but homey and comfortable all the same. The back rest of



the large lounge they sat on was draped with a beautifully tanned deer hide and a spotted wildcat skin graced the smaller one across the room. A large skin she didn't recognize spread over the carpeted floor. Her spare laser rifle was racked on animal horns set into the wall, with the belt holding her sidearm and knife dangling from a prong. A peaceful forest scene was being imaged across the room from them. As she watched, a young woman as bereft of clothes as any new born babe wandered into view, followed by several scampering kittens. The woman lay down upon a green expanse of moss and began playing with the kittens, giving out little tinkling laughs as they crawled and tumbled over her breasts and belly.

Jeannie smiled at the antics of the kittens. "I'm sorry I got so upset. I feel better now."

"You had a right to be upset, almost being raped and murdered along with worrying about Jamie, but you can relax, now. I promise you he's fine, and so are the pets."

"You're sure? What if something else happens before I get there?"

Kristi turned and put a hand on the back of Jeannie's neck. "I wouldn't tell you they are safe if I didn't think so. I'm watching out for him, and I do care about him, too, you know, even if you are his first love."

She kneaded Jeannie's neck with her fingers. She kept them in place as Jeannie reached forward to pick up her glass. Jeannie finished the last of it, hoping that Kristi was telling the truth, in both senses of the word. As she leaned back, Kristi's arm curled around her shoulders. She accepted the comforting embrace, dropping her head to rest against the warm shoulder and closing her eyes.

Kristi used her other hand to stroke Jeannie's back, feeling out the tensely ridged muscles with her fingers and kneading them into smoothness.

"Mmm. That feels good," Jeannie murmured, eyes still closed. The unaccustomed alcohol and the deftness of Kristi's strong fingers playing along her spine and under her shoulder blades and on the back of her neck made her feel drowsy and languid and safe again. Her recent experience with Cadena receded as if it were nothing more than a bad dream. She cuddled closer into Kristi's strong arms, enjoying the petting.

Kristi gently kissed her earlobe and the side of her neck and moved to the downy softness of her cheek. Jeannie turned her face in a



natural reaction to the touch and felt the feathery softness of Kristi's lips touching hers, tentatively at first, then the pressure increased. As if it belonged to another person, Jeannie felt her hand raise and run up along Kristi's upper arm, then curl around her neck to tighten the embrace. She shifted her body to move closer, aware of what was happening now, but with no will nor desire to resist. She parted her lips obediently in response to Kristi's questing tongue, allowing the warm moistness to enter and explore at will. Kristi whispered a commanding phrase to the lounge and the back rest descended, carrying them with it until they lay stretched out together. She moved her hand down along the contour of Jeannie's waist and over the curve of her hip then back up again to pause at her breasts. Her fingers lingered there, feeling out the seam of the suit. She ran her fingers along it, parting the fabric, then slid her hand inside.

Jeannie shivered at the touch. She let herself be undressed, then lay back while Kristi shrugged off her wrap. She accepted another lingering kiss, the lips sweet and close against her own, tasting faintly of mint, and softer, more resilient than a man's. There was a dichotomy to her thoughts as she moved her hands over Kristi's back and met the liquid dance of her tongue with her own. She was enjoying the comfort and the increasing arousal of her body, but she couldn't help but make comparisons; her experience and orientation had been entirely heterosexual other than a few girlish experiments years ago. When Kristi's hand slid under the slope of her breast and curled to enclose it, her palm and fingers felt as soft as her own might be in places, but callused in others like a man's. Kristi's back was sleekly muscled, but her skin was soft and smooth to the touch.

Kristi's lips moved down to nuzzle in the hollow of her neck, then shifted again. Jeannie gave a small delightful gasp as Kristi enveloped a breast with her mouth. The nipple came instantly erect as Kristi swirled her tongue around it. A warm, tingling sensation spread from her breasts, flowing down across her belly and coming to rest between her thighs. She passed her hands back and forth over Kristi's back, lost now in the urgent necessity for release, differences forgotten. She pulled the other woman over her, parting her legs to let her settle between them, feeling her breasts flatten under the weight. Kristi moved to nurse at her breasts until they glistened with moisture, then trailed her lips downward. Jeannie felt the first, exquisite touch of her tongue, then remembered little else as the heat of her body rose and exploded inside her in a long, continuous burst of fire and flame.

Jeannie slowly came back to awareness with the feel of Kristi holding her in a loose embrace, an arm under her neck and her hand resting like a warm pad on her stomach, fingers playing idly in a light



scratching motion. She sighed pleasantly, but didn't quite trust her voice yet, nor know exactly what to say if she did. The experience had been enjoyable and the release certainly satisfying, but she felt a vague uneasiness at having been made love to outside Jamie's orbit, and by another woman at that, but perhaps the odd emotion was simply a reflection of the fact that the other woman had almost certainly made love with Jamie since she had.

"You're awfully quiet," Kristi said, tickling with her fingers.

Jeannie covered the hand resting on her body with her own. "I feel funny," she admitted.

"It was your first time with a woman, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but that's not really it. I expected to try it someday--it just came sooner than I expected."

"You liked it though, didn't you?"

Jeannie squeezed her hand. "Yes, I did. It was different, but it felt good."

Kristi moved her hand to Jeannie's breast. "I'm glad. You're a sweet girl; I could fall in love with you as easily as not."

"I like you," Jeannie said, "but I'm already in love with Jamie. I can't wait to see him again."

"I know that, sweetheart. Jamie is a wonderful guy, one of the few men I really like. He's so unpretentious that it's almost unbelievable, and a considerate lover as well. That's rare in a man. If he weren't already in love with you, he would tempt me to change my luck permanently."

Jeannie turned to face her. "I thought you two would get together. His last girl friend was a blonde, too."

Kristi laughed. "You're still just a tad jealous, aren't you? Don't be. He still thinks of you first, and I suspect he will for a long time to come, but that doesn't mean we can't all stay friendly, or more than friendly, for that matter."

Somehow, Jeannie thought they would. In little more than a week, their lives had already become entangled to a degree she would not have thought possible only a few short days ago. She stretched, reveling at the release of tension she felt, then a thought occurred to



her. "Did you--" She lost her voice and felt a blush suffuse her face and neck.

Kristi chuckled and hugged her fondly. "No, I was concentrating on your reactions, but don't worry about it; it was pleasant enough for me."

"Would you like me to--" Jeannie's voice failed her again, and the blush renewed itself, more furious than before.

"Let's turn the question around. Would you like to? That's the only way I could enjoy it."

Jeannie buried her face against Kristi's body, unable to answer, but the softness of the hollow of her neck against her lips made her decide to act. She sought Kristi's lips and ran her tongue into her mouth. She pulled her close, feeling their breasts rub silkily together as their bodies merged. She held Kristi in the embrace for a moment, then shifted just enough to bring her hand to Kristi's breast. She held and caressed it as she liked her own to be touched, then tentatively moved to take it into her mouth. She admired the small pink nipple, so different from her own brown ones. She moved her lips over and around the pebbled softness. A thought entered her mind and she stopped, trying to stifle a giggle.

"Is something the matter," Kristi asked, puzzled.

"No. I just happened to think, it's sort of like going down on a man, except that it's softer and there's more of it."

Kristi laughed. "It's not all soft. Try it again and see."

Jeannie closed her mouth over the breast again, using her tongue this time, and felt the pebbly softness of the nipple grow larger and become slickly erect. After an interlude which seemed both short and deliciously long, her lips moved down along Kristi's smoothly muscled belly and past the little well of her navel. She felt out the widening expanse of her hips, then her mouth was tickled by the first brush of blonde nestled curls. Delicately, she parted them with her tongue. The upwards surge of Kristi's body and firm pressure of her hands on the back of her neck guided her to the point she was seeking, then the sounds and movements of the other woman's body dictated her actions afterwards.

Jeannie slept very soundly that night, snuggled in Kristi's strong arms, fears forgotten.



CHAPTER 18

The expedition ran into an unexpected bit of luck. Conan reported that he recognized a new stretch of highway which he had traveled on for four days. Masters immediately made plans for an airlift along that stretch, calculating the minimum distance Conan might have traveled so as not to overrun his memory. When the floater dropped out of the sky bringing Kristi back with her news, he immediately sent back a request for enough floaters to jump them forward a full sixty miles, bringing them to within striking distance of the old city of Shreveport, near where he estimated Conan must have begun his journey.

The move was barely accomplished by dusk, and camp was set up hastily beneath an overpass to the east of the ruins of the small city of Carthage. Masters and Wolfgang conferred with Conan, trying to figure the remaining distance.

"Woods, much woods, then river," Conan said.

"How many days?"

"One day, one day, rabbit town." He licked his lips hungrily.

"Wolfgang?" Masters asked for an interpretation.

Wolfgang talked in dog language to Conan, interspersed with some English. Enhanced animals of the same species conversed easily between themselves but some concepts of necessity had to be rendered in words. The conversation was prolonged though, mostly due to the long decades of separation between the feral animals and the human pets, during which language and concepts had diverged.



Finally, the big German shepherd turned back to Masters. "Two days, hard travel. Old city, then river. Conan says not to fly again or lose way."

"I guess we should be glad we were able to jump this far," Masters said to Kristi. "Well, two days then, probably more like three. I sure as hell hope we find what we're looking for and that it is worth while when we do. Three good men gone." His lined face softened in remembrance and sorrow.

"How about bears, Conan? Any more bears between here and there?" Kristi asked.

"No bears. Never see before. Beavers, rats, rabbits." He salivated again. Apparently they were to pass through country heavily populated with rodents. This was not really what Kristi wanted to hear. Rats, and especially rabbits always drew carnivores, seeking to feed their own growing population, and rat swarms could be dangerous of themselves, especially if they were of the enhanced species, which they almost certainly would be.

Nevertheless, Kristi asked, "Are they enhanced?"

"Smart. Hard to catch," Conan confirmed.

Masters brushed the news aside. He figured they had enough reinforcements now not to have to worry with feral animals, at least in the short term, which was all the time he hoped to have to spend in the area. His concern about Cadena's spying was another matter, lending urgency to his desire to get the mission over with. "OK, I guess that's all for now. Let's all try to get some sleep and move out early tomorrow morning. I want to make as much distance as we can, as fast as we can."

Kristi returned to the shelter she shared with Jamie. "How's the arm?" She asked as she entered.

"Not bad. One more day and I guess I can start carrying that damned pack again," Jamie said.

"Speaking of which." She rummaged in her own pack and withdrew a laser gun. "A shiny new toy, just for you. Try not to lose this one."

"I'll use glue this time. Damn, I hope we don't run into anything like those bears again. I thought I was a goner when that one swatted me."



"I'm pretty sure we won't see those particular ones again. They are a long way behind us, and they got the worst of it. That's not to say we won't run into anything just as bad, though. By the way, I haven't had a chance to tell you before now, but Jeannie is going to be joining us.

"What! No she isn't, either. Damn it, she doesn't realize how dangerous it is out here. Whose bright idea was this, anyway?" Jamie still retained, like most men, a residual protectiveness towards women, a holdover from the horrible slaughter during the withdrawal of humans into their protective sanctuaries. He couldn't think of any reason on earth why Whitmire would allow Jeannie to join them.

"Jeannie decided on it herself. And speaking of danger, she hasn't been leading an exactly sedate life herself."

"She hasn't? Have you seen her? Is she all right?"

"I saw her yesterday. Let me tell you what's been happening. You must have been wondering about the reinforcements."

"Not really," Jamie admitted. "I just assumed Masters called for them after we were attacked. Wasn't that it?"

"Not by a long shot." Kristi related Jeannie's tale again, having it practically memorized by now. She omitted any mention of their tryst, thinking it best to leave that subject to come up naturally.

Jamie was astounded. His apolitical mind had a hard time imagining Cadena as a secret agent, and an even harder time thinking of what useful information the genetic engineering department had worth stealing, but that was the least of it. Trying to picture Jeannie first as a captress then as a captor and manipulator of Whitmire really strained his mental picture of her. Just thinking of it left him in a cold sweat and made him realize anew just how much he cared for her. What if there were another agent around? She might not be so lucky the next time. Maybe she would be better off with him. Then the image of the huge bear rearing up to strike, chest smoking from his shot, intervened. No, let her stay. "The whole story sounds like something out of an old detective movie from the archives. Is there any way I can contact her? Would Masters let me make a call?"

"No way. We're not sending messages under any circumstances. Too easy to triangulate on from space. Besides, I wasn't quite finished. Jeannie was ready to come out today, but I talked Whitmire into stalling her, hopefully until we reach Conan's home base. We'll establish a camp there that can be easily defended, at least for a while.



Don't count on him holding her for very long, though. She's determined to come."

"I wouldn't mind, if we wind up somewhere safe."

"I wouldn't either." Kristi smiled enigmatically, to Jamie at any rate.

The next two days were a nightmare of tangled vine and brush-obstructed forest, aggravated by small streams and wet, bogey ground. Almost all the distance had to be covered through the dense growth as Conan had not traveled on the old highways during that phase of his journey. At last, near the end of the second day, they began encountering clusters of ruined homes and small factories, some deteriorated to tumbled ruins, others serving as shelters and warrens for rats and rabbits. Conan was sorely disappointed at not being allowed to go rabbit hunting, but Masters was adamant. Without Conan, the whole expedition might come to naught.

They camped that night on the outskirts of the ruins of Shreveport, on an open stretch of the old Interstate highway. From there, Conan informed Masters that one more day would see them to his home and contact with the "Great Being".

The weather had turned much warmer and increased humidity brought insects out in swarms. The pets suffered more than the humans, refusing to use the pungent repellent because of the interference with their sense of smell. The dogs depended on scents in their scouting, though not nearly so much as their ancestors might have; enhanced intelligence of necessity required the elimination or reduction of other facilities.

With the reinforced ranger contingent the scientists, as well as Captain Masters and his Lieutenant, had been relieved of guard duty. Kristi and Jamie lay in their shelter with their pets, closed off from the ferocious mosquitoes. Jamie relaxed with his hands behind his head, tired again from his first day back with his pack, though not nearly so much as before. Perhaps he was getting used to it. "Too bad we can't sleep outside," he remarked. "It is a pretty night. I like looking at the stars away from the city. They are so bright."

"Good for mice," Fuzzy Britches said, showing his canines.

"Rabbits," Woggly disagreed.

"Another food bar, and I might want to try one," Jamie said.



"Broiled rabbit is good," Kristi said. "I've had it before."

"I'll take your word for it." Jamie's diet had never included rabbit, although they were available in very limited quantity in the Enclave. Most protein came from altered vegetables, however, many of them of his own design, so that he was naturally prejudiced. He reached to Conan in an idle gesture, rubbing his neck fur then let his hand trail down to the enigmatic disk dangling below on it's leather cord. As always, the images flashed through his mind with lightning rapidity at the first touch, undiminished in intensity no matter how many times they were accessed. He wondered anew what they would find on the morrow.

Kristi sensed the idle thought. "No use wondering, hon. We'll know soon enough."

"I know. Or at least I hope we will. This sort of adventure isn't really in my line of work, you know. It still seems like I'm involved in an adventure story on the Holo sometimes, with me as one of the actors, and now it's building up to the climax."

"Let's try to have it come out with the good guys winning. OK?"

"Good guys win," Woggly said.

"Good cats, too," Fuzzy Britches added, bouncing onto Jamie's chest.

"Oof! Fuzz, don't do that."

"Bear attack," Fuzzy Britches explained, tapping Jamie's cheek with a paw, claws retracted. He licked one of the numerous whelps decorating his face, stigmata from the swarming mosquitoes.

"Yeah, and where were you when the bears attacked? I didn't see you until it was all over."

"Up a tree. Cats don't play fair," Woggly grinned.

"Play safe," Fuzzy Britches said, undisturbed at the canard.

"Our cats, too," Conan said.

"You have cats at your home?" Jamie asked, surprised.

"Cats, dogs, humans. Now Great Being."



Princess, silent as usual, began licking the other side of Jamie's face. Lady lay with her head across Kristi's thighs, seemingly lost in thought.

"I guess you will be glad to get back home, Conan," Jamie said.

"Yes. Good home. Funny pictures on wall. Good dogs, cats."

Jamie sat up, gathering a double armful of cats and depositing them about Kristi's body. "Here, bother someone else for a while. He turned to Conan. "Did I understand you right? You want to come back home with me?"

"Yes," Conan said, then added a happy woof. "Jamie good. Kristi good. Woggly, Fuzzy, good. Lady, Princess good."

"Fuzzy Britches and Princess meowed in unison. Conan cocked an ear at them. "Good cats. Not scratch."

"The epitome of goodness, for cats," Kristi said, untangling herself.

Jamie rolled over on his stomach and propped his chin on an elbow. "You would be welcome, Conan. I hope we do go home soon. I want to get back to a normal life."

"There's no such thing," Kristi said. "Whatever happens is 'normal' in the ultimate sense."

"You know what I mean. Normal for me. This roaming around out in the wilds playing Tarzan isn't what I'm used to. Not that I haven't enjoyed some of it," he hastily amended, "but fighting bears and feral humans and marching through jungles looking for some hypothetical alien so we can save the world isn't what I really want out of life."

"And what do you want?" Kristi asked, a whimsical look on her face.

"Oh, I guess I like what I have been doing. Research. It would be nice if Alvarez would ever retire so I could have a shot at his job, but that would just be icing. When this is over I think I'd even like to settle down a bit." He paused for thought. "But if Conan should come back with me, I would be getting cramped for space. I'd probably have to register for co-habitation to get a larger place."

"Get a big place. Keep Jeannie and Kristi," Fuzzy Britches advised.

"Woof!" Woggly agreed.



"You guys can't take care of your own love life, let alone mine," Jamie said darkly. "Why this sudden desire for more company?"

"Easy. Make you happy," Fuzzy Britches said smugly.

"Just like that, huh? You haven't thought it out, Fuzz. If Kristi came, so would Princess. What would you do with that little white Persian you've been seeing?" Jamie didn't look at Kristi when he spoke. The conversation was getting out of hand so far as he was concerned.

Kristi burst out laughing. "They're trying to box you in. What's worse, they didn't even consult me first."

"They talk to me and Princess," Lady said, one of her rare complete sentences. Now Kristi was wrong-footed. Her laugh died in place.

"By God, I think they're serious. What do you do with them when they get like this?" She asked.

"If I want any peace in the house, I usually just do what they want. In this case, though, I think the best thing to do is change the subject. Or do something else. Any ideas?"

Kristi wiped at a smudge on her face. "If you can stand me, I think something can be worked out."

"I'm dirtier than you are," Jamie observed, looking down at his soiled coveralls.

"In that case, let's see if some of it will rub off on me, then we'll be equal."

"Dirty humans," Fuzzy Britches said, grooming himself with his tongue. "Need to lick, like this."

Both humans burst out laughing in the middle of undressing. Fuzzy Britches tried to look offended at the reaction to his unintended humor, but made a bad job of it. He returned to his demonstration, but by then neither of the humans were watching.



CHAPTER 19

Travel the next day was easy and fast. The expedition moved through the ruins of Shreveport on the old interstate highway, which was in surprisingly good condition. Weeds and brush had not been able to gain much of a foothold on the long stretches where it was elevated above the overgrown homes and factories, and the footing was good. Nevertheless, it was late evening before they came abreast of the still intact towers of mid city. Conan led the column down an off-ramp into the center of town, where the square shaped buildings of a previous era rusted in beds of fallen rubble, then further on to what must have once been the newest section of the city. Here, the buildings were lower but in far better condition, still sporting gay colors and undamaged facades. Only the ever present weeds, clustered in pockets of drifted soil, marred the streets. There were a few abandoned ground cars but little rubbish.

A bark came from the front of the column and was echoed by others. Conan broke free from the bunch and raced ahead, woofing joyfully. He skidded around the corner of a large, warehouse-like building and disappeared from view, still barking. The lead dogs followed, hurrying to catch up. From his position in the column Jamie could not see much of what was happening, but he felt his pulse stirring as he turned the same corner. What he saw surprised him. Expecting more buildings, he was greeted by a long slope of low bushes shot with narrow trails. The slope ended in an expanse of water, bordered by massive piers and backed with a long stretch of low, one and two story buildings leading off to the left, then disappearing behind clumps of small trees. In the distance, he could see another shore where an encroaching forest all but obscured more old buildings. From flotsam moving on the water, he deduced that he was looking at a narrow stretch of river rather than a lake as he had first thought.

The head of the column had stopped after turning left, and he could see Masters' slight form striding purposefully forward. A contingent of strange dogs was clustered around Conan and others were sniffing noses and crotches with their own dogs.



"I think this might be it," Jamie said to Judy, standing by his side, hand near her sidearm, wary as ever.

"It must be. Look, there's a human." Jamie's glance followed her pointing finger. Emerging from between the pier and the adjoining building was a solitary man, unarmed. As he came nearer, Jamie noticed the contrast between him and the other feral humans they had fought. He was dressed in tanned leather rather than hides, and his hair and skin were clean looking. Apparently, whatever group of humans he represented fared better with their animal cohorts than the ones who ran with the bears.

The man stopped where Conan was still greeting old friends and spoke briefly with him. He knelt and fondled the alien disk hanging from the dog's neck, appeared satisfied, then came on.

Masters stepped forward to meet him. They conversed a short time, then Masters cupped his hands to his mouth and called, "Da Cruz, front and center!"

Jamie trotted forward, wondering at first why he was being honored, then remembered that Conan had designated him as the prime recipient of the disk message.

"Welcome," the man said courteously as Jamie approached, holding out his hand. He was short and stocky, with shoulder length black hair held back from his forehead by a band of leather. A full beard, neatly trimmed, covered his face. His eyes were a deep, commanding black, set wide apart above a straight nose.

"Hello," Jamie said, taking the proffered hand. He thought that seemed inadequate, but could think of nothing else to add. He wished suddenly for the presence of John Whitmire, or anyone else versed in diplomatic technique.

"I am named Cortman, companion to Whitetooth," the man said.

"I'm Jamie Da Cruz."

Courtman seemed puzzled. "Your companion is Da Cruz?"

"No, that's my last name."

The puzzled look grew. "You changed your name? What happened to the first one. Was it not suitable?" The man's accent sounded strange but was easily understandable.



Jamie felt completely out of his depth, but gamely, he tried again. "I have two names, Jamie and Da Cruz. Please call me Jamie."

"Ah. Two names. Then you have no companion?" The puzzlement was replaced by a faintly disapproving expression.

Jamie finally got the drift of the conversation. He whistled and his pets broke free of the still milling pack of dogs and cats. Fuzzy Britches appeared somewhat mussed, the etiquette of greeting strange dogs a little rougher than what he was used to.

"These are my companions. Woggly and Fuzzy Britches." He pointed to each as he named them.

"Welcome, companions of Jamie Da Cruz," Courtman said. He pronounced each name as a separate entity. "The mouse catcher is most unusual. We have none like him here."

"There's none like him anywhere else, either," Jamie said, tongue in cheek.

"We are happy to see Conan return. Of all the bearers of summons from the Great Being, he is as yet the only one to return. We fear for the others, bereft of companions though they be, as is Conan."

Jamie started to ask what the man meant by that remark, then remembered Conan's anticipation of returning to the Enclave with him. He suspected that the breeding rate of the dogs was such that only a limited number of them could have "companions". He started to ask if that were so, then was distracted by a disk similar to Conan's dangling from a cord about Cortman's neck. He wondered what images it produced, if any, and more importantly, where was the producer? With the simplicity of the non-diplomat, he asked, "Can we see this 'Great Being'? We've come a long way."

"He sleeps now. We must wait until he awakens. Until then, I ask you to bring your followers. You and they will be cared for while we wait."

That remark suited Jamie. He was already getting tired of the stilted formalities. "Lead on, we'll follow," he said.

Masters, who had been standing within hearing distance, closed up to walk with Jamie as they followed Cortman. "It looks as if I've been replaced as leader of this little party," he said, an amused expression brightening his weathered face.



"Don't blame me. Conan is your culprit," Jamie said, somewhat shortly.

"I'm not. Hey, looks like we're about here." They passed behind the huge pier, where Jamie could see crude canoes anchored below, and around to the entrance of the adjoining building. The dogs all trotted ahead while the rest of the group trailed behind, the rangers nervous and scanning the area continuously. The rows of rectangular buildings lined the river for several hundred yards, well up from the banks, but it was apparent that only a few of them were occupied.

Cortman led the way inside one of them. There was a long narrow open space lined with glass fronted shops, some still displaying useless dusty goods; others apparently being used as rodent proof food storage areas. They trailed him along the gloomy walkway to a gazebo area where light shone through an opening from above and an exit led back outside. The shops were interrupted on either side, creating a large area dividing the building roughly into half. Cortman stopped there, waving his hand at weather-streaked chairs and benches. A small fire burned in the center of the arbor, smoke trailing upward in a thin plume.

Masters directed several rangers to the exit to stand guard, then spoke to Jamie. "I hate to do it, but I'm going to have to call the Enclave. They'll never find us here otherwise. Tell the bossman there that some floaters will be arriving tomorrow."

Jamie turned to Cortman, who was standing patiently by, wondering how he was to put over the concept of floaters to this primitive. It was surprisingly easy. The man seemed to have more knowledge of the Enclave technology than his leather clad image would indicate.

"The Great Being will be pleased when it awakes. It desires to disk-talk with men from the great cities. Tell them to come," Cortman said. He seemed unable to speak other than in polite, formal tones.

"When will the Great Being wake up?" Jamie asked.

Cortman looked up at the waning light falling into the arbor. "Soon after the light goes, I should think. We will eat and have a ceremony before then. I will go now, and bring my people. Your followers and their companions may stay here."

"I'll go and get the antenna set up," Masters said. I really hate to call, but I suppose if the space folks intend to bother us, they've probably been following the floaters back and forth by satellite



anyway." He left, taking two men with him outside.

Jamie sat down on one of the low benches with Kristi. "I wonder what sort of ceremony that guy is talking about?" He asked.

"Why wonder? We'll know soon enough. Did you spot the landing site?"

"No. You mean you did? Is it really a spaceship?"

"Troy thinks it must be. He pointed to where he thinks it must have landed as we came in. The third building down. It looks as if something rather large plowed into it recently and is buried inside. The tears show fresh metal and there is a gouged out furrow upslope from the river leading to it. Actually, it looks as if it were more of a crash than a planned landing."

Jamie decided that he must not be very observant if he had missed seeing such an obvious phenomena, then that thought was lost as another struck him. "That might explain a lot of things."

"Uh huh. Like why the thing didn't come down directly at an Enclave in the first place. If it crashed, that would explain why it needed to use feral humans and dogs to get a message out."

"Well, I'm ready to see what sort of creature it is and get this thing over with. When I get back, I don't want to leave the Enclave again for the rest of my life."

"Not even for a short patrol with me?"

"How about just killing the proverbial fatted calf and have it ready when you come in?"

"What would Jeannie think of that?"

"Ask Fuzz and Wog. They're my social directors. Look, here comes Masters."

The ranger captain came over and sat down beside them. "John will be sending some floaters out to locate us in the morning, along with some more scientists." He smiled at Jamie. "You may be having company."

"So I've heard, but maybe I won't be here that long. As soon as my part is finished, I want a ride back on the first floater out."



The conversation broke off as Cortman returned, leading a small contingent of humans, dressed in leather as he was. There were two other men, three women, and several children, ranging in age from adolescence to a babe in arms. They were trailed by a larger number of dogs of well mixed breeds and several cats. He proceeded to introduce the humans one at a time, not excluding even the infant, as 'companion of', then naming a dog. The cats were not mentioned, and Jamie never did learn what role they played in the strange society.

Masters introduced the rangers and scientists, not failing to mention each ranger's dog. The lack of a named companion for the scientists seemed to puzzle the feral humans' leader, but he accepted with the grace of a chieftain deferring to the ways of strangers.

"Is this all of your people?" Jamie asked. It didn't seem to him that so few humans could maintain a viable society, although he admitted to himself that he was no expert in the matter.

"When the pack splits, we also must divide. It is the way."

"Makes sense," Masters commented in an aside. "It's typical of dog or wolf packs to split up when the population gets too high to support them in one area. The humans must maintain contact, though. These we see are too few to maintain a viable gene pool otherwise."

"It is so," Cortman said, looking at Masters but still deferring to Jamie. Masters was surprised. The man's hearing must be acute. While he didn't think Cortman's tribe could possibly have maintained the theoretical knowledge of such terms as 'gene pool', apparently their leader had discerned the gist of his comment.

"Food has been brought," Cortman continued. "We will eat, then perform the ceremony of bonding with our companions. Perhaps the Great Being will awaken by then." He motioned to the three women, who began depositing and opening small bundles each had been carrying. They contained dried meat and unidentified dried vegetables. Masters whispered to the ranger next to him and word was passed among them to share out their food bars.

Jamie found the dried meat to be palatable, but he considered the vegetables inedible, although he noticed that some of the rangers managed to consume most of theirs, albeit with no great appetite. He noted with amusement that the feral humans seemed to be having the same trouble with the ranger field rations. Fuzzy Britches, hanging close to his side in the presence of so many strange dogs, accepted a little of the hard jerky, but made his main meal from his own rations. Woggly and Conan gnawed at the hard meat and seemed to enjoy it,



while the feral dogs sampled the food bars and apparently were glad of the exchange. There was little talk during the meal, and Jamie had yet to hear any of the three adult females speak. He supposed that in the wilds, the physical inequality of the sexes had again placed women in a subdominant role.

Cortman rose to make an announcement, speaking to his own people, but including the expedition members as well. "Our ceremony of bonding will begin. With it, we reaffirm the companionship of dog and man, each dependent on the other. Where dog is, there is man. Where man is, there is dog. He clapped his hands lightly. One of the females stood up and began to remove her garments, as did one of the men. Naked, they walked from the shadows into the flickering light cast by the small central fire. Two dogs, also of opposite sex, appeared from the other side of the flame and joined them. Jamie began to get an inkling of what was happening, but even so, he was taken aback as the two humans dropped to hands and knees. The dogs moved to them, one mounting the woman, the other backing up to the man.

A muttering of shocked disapproval came from the circle of rangers and scientists, but was stopped quickly by Masters' low, commanding voice. "Easy," he said. "Don't make a scene. These people don't think the same as we do."

The muttering died, though not the disapproval. Sex between animal and human was not unheard of in the Enclave; many permitted and even encouraged their pets to participate, but only as an adjunct to the couplings of humans, where the pets could show their approval and affection while humans consummated the act. Direct coupling with an animal was considered a perversion, although for the act to be considered so, it must by definition take place occasionally, as Jamie knew it did. It was seldom admitted, though. He was embarrassed, as if he were watching his parents have sex, and felt certain that the other expedition members were as well. He noticed that their own animals were looking on curiously, as if they were watching an interesting Holo, but one beyond their understanding. Fortunately, the ceremony did not take up much time or it might have led to altercations despite Masters' admonition.

When it was over, the two humans casually donned their garments again, as if they had only taken them off for a quick swim or some other innocuous activity. Masters was still trying to think of some unobtrusive comment to break the tension he felt all around him when he was saved the trouble. A young man came running in from the outside, breathing heavily. "The Great Being awakes!" He shouted loudly, obviously pleased to be the bearer of such good news.



Cortman stood up and beckoned to Jamie. "Come. The Great Being will see you now."

CHAPTER 20

As Masters had suspected, there had indeed been a crash of some sort of craft into one of the buildings lining the riverfront. Jamie, Masters and the other three scientists were led through moon-lit darkness to the ragged hole, and on past torn masonry and twisted metal into the interior of the structure. The craft, apparently not overly large, had plowed on across the inside walkway and buried itself in the interior of a one time shop.

A faint glow came from within, barely giving them light to see. Cortman halted the group there and beckoned to Jamie. He led him between the crumpled edges of the craft and wall to where an opening irised out. A brighter orange light shone from within. Cortman stepped over the edge of the circular opening, motioning for Jamie to follow.

The interior was not large, and most of it was taken up by the alien. What he presumed to be the head and torso of the thing faced him over a cabinet-like structure vaguely resembling a computer work station. It's body was colored a pale pink over the visible area, fading into ivory where three protuberances like short, fat radishes sprang from the bulbous head. It had a single compound eye, oval shaped, which reflected back tiny images from many facets. There was a slash of a mouth, lipless, which opened and closed regularly as if it were breathing. From the central torso, four appendages played over the cabinet like writhing snakes. A harsh acrid odor saturated the air.

Jamie stood speechless, wondering what to do next. Cortman



demonstrated. He placed his hands on the edge of the cabinet and from within, the being drew out one of the small familiar disks and slid it across to him. Cortman grasped it for a few seconds then turned it loose. The alien curled three worm-like appendages around it and returned it to the hidden area beneath the cabinet, then slid another disk into sight. "Take it," Cortman told Jamie. "Think of what you would say and the Great Being will understand. I have told him you are from one of the cities."

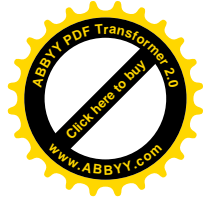
Feeling somewhat foolish, Jamie picked up the disk, fumbling momentarily as his gaze strayed to the apparition before him. As soon as he had the disk firmly in his grasp, his body stiffened, not from pain, but surprise. It was as if thoughts were being pulled from his mind, one after the other, as soon as they entered his surface consciousness. He tried to give his thoughts some order, a sensible pattern for the alien to follow, but it was difficult at first. He was just beginning to get the feel of letting his thoughts flow in sequence when the experiment ended. Shaken, he stood motionless and speechless, still holding the now inert disk in his hand.

"Give it back to the Great Being. He will then know your thoughts and return his own. I will leave you now, until he sleeps again." Cortman retreated from the cramped quarters.

Jamie hardly noticed his departure, or anything else for the next two hours while data was exchanged with the alien being. There seemed to be only so much information that could be contained on a disk, but as time passed he found that with intense concentration he was able to convey a large amount of information in a very short period of time.

The disks passed to him from the alien were far more ordered. Jamie became fascinated as it's story emerged. He learned that the alien had been a crew member of a huge generation ship that had left it's planet decades ago, intending to transfer a remnant of their race from a system which was slowly becoming uninhabitable. Their sun, in it's normal revolution about the center of the galaxy, had fallen into the path of an interstellar dust cloud which was slowly obscuring the light from their sun. Ultimately, the race would perish from that lack, even if the dust did not strip the atmosphere from their planet.

During the long voyage their thinkers had conceived a theory which they felt would result in a method of faster than light travel, but the resources of a planetary technology would be needed for the construction of such a ship. As they neared the solar system, hope grew, for earth appeared to be a planet suitable for colonization, where there might still be time to construct a faster than light ship



and return to their own planet before the final blackout and save more of their race. At that point, disaster struck. An unknown disease appeared and spread through the confines of the ship, resisting all efforts at quarantine. Most of them perished, just as their hopes had risen the highest. Before their death, the navigation crew managed to get the ship into orbit around Saturn; there was no time to try for earth, nor means to signal to the inhabitants they had deduced to be living there even had they possessed compatible communications, which they did not.

As the healthiest remaining member of the crew, the alien was selected to pilot a landing craft to one of the night-lit cities of earth which they had observed through powerful telescopes, and ask the inhabitants there for help. Unfortunately, as the pilot neared earth, it's sickness deepened. A miscalculation occurred, causing it to crash land far from any Enclave. Fortunately, though, it did crash almost into the center of Cortman's dog/human community and fortunately again, Cortman was more interested than frightened. He managed to begin communications. Desperate and now clearly dying, the alien managed to process a number of thought-disks with a message designed to attract technologically oriented humans to where he lay immobile. Dogs were chosen over humans to deliver the messages, but of all the ones sent out, only Conan had returned.

With the exchange of information, the being now proposed to bestow on Jamie a larger thought-disk, of a different type, containing detailed engineering information for construction of a faster than light spaceship. In return, it asked that the first trip be made back to it's home system in hopes that it's race might yet be saved. The accompanying technology would be freely given, as well as the parameters of the mother ship orbiting about Saturn. For reasons that Jamie never fully understood, the larger thought disk would be attuned to his mind alone. He could share the information, but only his mind would be able to unlock it. He got the notion finally that the difference was somewhat akin to casual conversation and intense teaching; the small disks were used only to convey general ideas and were used by the aliens to instruct domestic animals on their own world; the larger ones must be used for detailed information and were a common teaching method on the home world. The alien slid the large disk across the surface of the cabinet. It had the same blue-green color but was the size of a kitchen saucer. Jamie took it in hand and all surface thought disappeared in a bewildering kaleidoscopic rush of data. He put it down, then picked it up again, ready this time. The information came slower on the second try, entering his mind as he willed it. So long as he held the disk he understood most of what was being conveyed (or at least felt he could pass the concepts on to other scientists), but once turned loose, most of the data was lost to



him, incomprehensible. He thought though, after repeated tries, that the more times he accessed the disk, the more information he would retain and the more able he would be to interpret the concepts to others, particularly engineers and physicists. He was astounded at the wealth of information contained in the innocuous little saucer of blue-green metal, and sobered at the thought that he was the sole recipient of it.

Following that thought, he used a small disk to ask if some of the other scientists could be brought in to have similar information disks constructed for them as well; he thought it would be a good idea to have some spares, people as well as disks. The answer came back negative. The large disk had been crafted while the alien was still in relatively good health. It was dying now, unable to convey more than surface thoughts, barely able to get Jamie attuned to them. There would be no more. It only expected to live another day or two. Not only would there be no more information of a technical nature passed on, but when it died, the disk manufacturing device and all the intricate workings of the landing craft would die as well; they were all attuned to the alien mind alone.

Jamie was becoming very tired by this time. It was late and the alien was reaching the limits of its fading strength as well. Its eye facets were beginning to glaze over and its tentacles drooped noticeably. Before he could even say good-night or good-by or whatever farewell he could think of, it was too late. The alien slumped into a stupor. He wondered if it would ever wake up again. During the last few exchanges he had caught nuances of unutterable weariness, a wish to sleep and not wake up again now that its last mission had been accomplished. He felt a sorrow for the strange being, and for its race, trapped in a blighted solar system, resources for only one great ship now spent, and all hope of racial survival now residing in the mind of a single human being.

Jamie retreated back the way he had come, mind numbed with weariness, to where Masters and the other scientists were still patiently waiting. They clustered around him, all talking at once. He held up a restraining hand. "There's nothing else here for the moment. Let's get back to camp and I'll tell you how it came out, if I can stay awake that long."

The others were disappointed at first that they would be unable to meet with the alien and receive their own thought-disks, but their feelings were helped considerably by Jamie's disclosure of the wealth of data he had received. Masters in particular was pleased; it meant that he could see the successful conclusion of his mission, and the knowledge that his three rangers had not died in vain.



"Well, Da Cruz, it looks like you're the man of the hour now. My only problem is whether to send you back on the first floater available and settle for what we have or to try for more. What do you think?"

"I'll let you decide," Jamie told Masters, past caring. He headed in the direction of the shelters set up along the covered walkway, then found that he had no idea which one Kristi was in. Masters pointed him to the correct location, then left to consult with his lieutenants, except for Kristi, whom he left sleeping. Jamie found Kristi and all the pets in a heap, sleeping as peacefully as if they were back inside the safety of the Enclave. He threw himself down and wormed into a comfortable position among the bodies and was almost instantly asleep.

The sun was shining at a slant down through the arbor and into the shelter when he woke up the next morning. His skin itched and his mouth felt greasy from unbrushed teeth. He dressed quickly and went outside to find Kristi and all the pets near the entrance waiting on him. Kristi looked freshly bathed and cleaned; Woggly was still dripping.

"Good morning," he said. "It looks as if y'all have had a bath this morning."

"We have," Kristi confirmed. "There's a place upstream they use. Want to go?"

"You bet. Has Masters decided whether to send me home today or not?"

"I don't know. He said last night that he would make up his mind this morning after he talked to you again, but I guess you have time for a bath. It's a little early for the floater yet." Kristi turned to Lady. "Fetch the captain, Lady. We'll be down by the river." Her pet scampered off, barking happily with an errand to run.

Jamie fingered the large data disk through the pocket of his coveralls as they walked, remembering the events of the preceding night. "Did Masters tell you the whole story this morning?"

"About the alien, you mean? Yes, he did. That's why we were waiting on you. He told me not to let you out of my sight, and if you'll look behind you, there are four more of us he told the same thing to."

Jamie turned and saw Judy and three other rangers trailing them. "Drat. I don't want to be tailed around like a baby. Is this what it's



going to be like when we get back home, too?"

"Quien sabe? Right now you may be the most important man on the planet. I may have to move in with you just to keep your admirers under control." She grinned at him.

"Meow," said Fuzzy Britches.

"Woof," said Woggly. Lady was silent as usual and Conan was not in evidence.

"If you could keep these guys under control, that would be a big first step," Jamie said, returning the grin.

The bathing area was upstream, where a grove of trees had taken root and advanced up the slope for a long stretch, growing clear to the entrances of some of the waterfront buildings. There was no one else present, except for the on looking rangers. Jamie ignored them. He set his pack down and rummaged in it for his toothbrush. He cleaned his teeth, then stripped and bathed in the cold silty water, thinking all the while that if he were to return to the Enclave today he could get a far better bath, but he was unable to endure being dirty any longer. Masters arrived just as he was pulling his clothes back on.

"Jamie, I've decided to send you back with the floater as soon as it locates us," he said without preliminary. "You're too valuable to risk. I wish I dared call in and have them send in another squad of rangers and the other scientists with the first floater but I don't want to take the chance of them not locating us and having to go all the way back. They will be heavily loaded as it is. Besides, the fewer contacts with the Enclave the better until I can get this area defended. I'll just send word back. In the meantime, if that space creature wakes up again I'll see if someone else can get more information from it."

"Sounds good to me," Jamie said. He looked up from where he was pulling on his boots. "Say, there comes the floater now." From between the trunks of the trees and over the top of the low brush he spied the floater pass, then curve back toward the piers for a landing. Another followed in it's path, and behind it, yet more. "Why are there so many of them?" He asked. "I thought there was only one coming out this morning."

Captain Masters took one look and burst into action. "Those aren't our floaters! Kristi, get Jamie out of here! The rest of you follow me! We'll try to lead them away from you!" Jamie stood stupefied, then a rattling of shots broke out along the riverfront. "Move!" Masters snarled. "Get out of here!"



Kristi grabbed Jamie's arm and they began to run, away from the increasing volume of gunfire.

CHAPTER 21

Jeannie had become most impatient with John Whitmire. He had been putting her off from day to day, pleading one exigency or the other and she was having no more of it. "You promised," she said, leaning on his desk with both hands, small, dark and angry. She had arrived at his office before daylight, dressed in ranger coveralls and carrying her pack, not intending to take no for an answer.

Whitmire looked up at her, more tired than ever. He had been practically living in his office ever since the night he had gone to Jamie's apartment. He ran his fingers through uncombed hair, wishing for a cup of the strong Indian tea he had enjoyed in his youth. Instead, he sipped at cold coffee. "Jeannie, please, will you wait--"

"No! I'm not waiting any longer! You can either send me out today or I start talking to everyone I know about Cadena, and about everything else I know, for that matter. I've waited long enough!" She straightened up and crossed her arms over her breasts, staring him down.

Whitmire capitulated. After all, he thought, the expedition had arrived at their destination the night before. There would be no more travel, which had been his main concern. He smiled faintly. "OK, Jeannie, you've been patient with me. I'll let you leave, and I'm sorry for the delay."

"I can go today, this morning?"



"You can go. Get yourself on down to the landing field. I'll call the pilot and tell him he has a passenger."

"Jeannie Bostick?"

"That's me."

"I'm Charlie Nhu. Ready to go?" The short, slim pilot had met her in the tiny passenger's departure lounge. He was wearing standard ranger coveralls with a laser gun holstered across his chest. He led her out onto the tarmac where the floater was waiting. His co-pilot had earphones to his head and was already conversing with the tower computer about departure instructions.

The pilot handed her into the floater with an apology for the spartan seating arrangements, which were simply webbed seats with backrests and straps. Jeannie didn't complain. She could already feel her pulse elevating at the thought of not only her first floater flight, but her first time to ever leave the Enclave, and into the wilds at that. She hoped Jamie would be glad to see her; no, damn it, he had better be glad to see her. She felt a rush of affection for him and his pets. She was surprised at the depth of her emotion. Only a few short months before, she had still been in computer school, not even considering settling down, and now it seemed as if nothing else would do. Her night with Kristi had only reinforced the feeling, in a way she wasn't quite sure of. She wondered how all that would come out. She let the remembrance grow into a resolve that if she ever got Jamie back to the Enclave she would tell him immediately, then follow his decision on whether to continue the relationship. She smiled to herself. He might even like the idea. She knew from talking to some of her girlfriends that one of the reasons threesomes remained popular was that many men enjoyed watching and participating as women made love with each other, even though the necessity for their formation was now only a historical footnote. She didn't really understand why just yet, but accepted it as fact. Of course the opposite type of threesome, two men and a woman, was also popular, but she had no desire for any other man than Jamie, at least for now.

The co-pilot received his final bits of data and entered them into the flight computer, along with instructions to follow the previously



logged coordinates of the expedition's progress. Nhu spoke a command and the floater rose silently and gently into the air and headed northwest, gaining altitude as it went.

Jeannie was avidly curious and within minutes, her questions resulted in a traveling monologue by Nhu, describing the area they were passing over. The great barrier surrounding the Enclave appeared as a dark line from high in the air, miles and miles long, stretching back in both directions in a curve discernible only from a height. Beyond it, covering an area as far as the eye could see, lay the forest, appearing as a vast green carpet. It was broken here and there by bits and pieces of pavement not yet overgrown and streaked with scribbles of streams and splotches of lakes. The lakes appeared blue from the air but the streams were a muddy brown, imbued with the color of soil from far upstream, carried down from where some ecological disaster was causing violent erosion. Occasionally she could make out the ruins of towns and small cities abloom with encroaching green growth.

"Can we see any animals from up here?" She asked once.

"Not usually. The vegetation is too thick down there. Sometimes you can further west, where the country is more open, or so I hear. I don't go that way very often."

Like all Enclave citizens, Jeannie was aware that the overwhelming scourge of enhanced animals was the very reason for the Enclaves, and the thought of them held a fascinating grip on her mind under the present circumstances. Seeing the countryside below with bits and pieces of abandoned living areas was like traveling back in time. She tried to picture the world as it had once been and was unable to visualize such freedom to live and travel anywhere on the continent.

"Last coordinate coming up," the co-pilot announced.

"Ok, get ready to track and enter. We follow this old highway into the city then come down along the river and start looking. They will be watching for us. It shouldn't take long."

The floater began a long glide, losing altitude. Jeannie could see the towers of the old city over Nhu's shoulder. Almost there! She thought, excited and happy.

As the floater dropped over the towers and toward the river, a brilliant flare of light assaulted their eyes. A cloud of purple smoke boiled up from near the river, shot through with ascending pieces of debris. A couple of seconds later came the sound of the explosion,



muffled down to a dull flat boom by the floater's canopy.

"What in hell--"

Nhu grasped the controls away from his assistant and pulled up in a tight turn as he suddenly saw that other floaters were on the scene. One had been flipped into the river by the explosion and was rapidly sinking, but two others rose from the ground and headed toward them. Even as Nhu completed his turn, he saw streaks of laser fire cutting past them.

"My God, they're firing at us!" Jeannie shrieked, ducking her head reflexively.

"They sure as hell are! Mike, try to give some return fire, then let's get the hell out of here!" Nhu yelled. The co-pilot popped open a portion of the canopy and began looking for targets, but the angle was against him. The two pursuing floaters were behind them and floaters had never been designed for aerial warfare. The only war in recent memory was the one still going on, the fight to hold a place on the planet for humanity in the face of millions of enhanced animals.

Jeannie screamed as the canopy bubble shattered from the impact of a high velocity explosive slug, flinging shards of hard plastic through the cockpit. The co-pilot slumped in his harness, spraying goblets of blood backward into the sudden wind. It splattered against Jeannie's face and shoulders. She screamed again.

"Be quiet," Nhu said in a strangled voice. Blood was running from his shoulder and the side of his neck where a wound gaped open.

Jeannie gasped and held her breath. Nhu began talking rapidly and urgently. She heard him describe the attack and begin reading off coordinates. He coughed and strangled, struggling to get the words out. Another slug hit the craft somewhere to the rear and smoke immediately began pouring into the broken canopy and was whipped away by rushing air. Nhu suddenly had both hands on the controls, trying valiantly to maintain altitude.

"We're going down," he said, voice weaker, still coughing. He wiped at his neck and his hand came away smeared with blood. The craft slowed, tilted, then regained a precarious equilibrium but continued to fall. "Magnetics gone, fuel cell gone, solar cells can't keep up. Brace yourselves, it's going to be rough," he intoned, struggling to talk. "Can't make the highway. We'll be north of it, east of the city. Hold on--"



Jeannie saw a rush of green blot out the horizon. She ducked forward, covering her head with her hands just before the wall of green smashed into the floater. She heard the bare beginnings of the tearing crash then a pressure wave of pain exploded through her body. The seat straps tore loose and she was catapulted forward, striking the back of Nhu's seat. The breath was crushed from her body as she hit with stunning force and she spiraled down into a black whirlpool of unconsciousness.

At first, Jeannie was aware only of the pain, coming to her through the blackness like a shroud, enfolding her body and touching it with sharp corners and folds of searing fire. She struggled to orient herself. Her eyes were closed tight against the enveloping pain. She struggled to open them and found herself wedged half under the pilot's seat, covered with branches and leaves and shreds of plastic from the shattered canopy. It hurt horribly to move, but gradually she scrunched out from under the seat, shaking off litter as she did. She found her pack still secured behind where she had been sitting and dug into it, searching for the medicine packet with the single-mindedness of an addict after his next fix. Just as she thought she might black out from the pain she located an analgesic ampoule and pressed it against her forearm. It was a difficult operation. One arm and shoulder didn't want to work and every breath was a sharp, searing agony in her side. She slumped to the floor of the floater, hoping desperately that she had remembered the instructions right.

After a few minutes, the pain-killer began to work. She struggled to her knees and peered forward. A closer look showed what she had feared. Both men were dead. The co-pilot's head hung at an angle, nearly decapitated. Nhu was slumped in his seat, bled dry from his wounds.

Jeannie's mind began to work a little better. She examined herself as well as she was able, avoiding looking at the two dead men. Her shoulder and the side of her neck and face were terribly bruised, but she thought it was only that; careful touches failed to find any broken bones. The pain in her side was a different matter. It hurt to breathe, or even to move. She explored along her ribcage and felt at least two broken ribs grating together. Painfully, she dug into her pack again and located a bone healing ampoule. She pressed it against her forearm, despairing that it would take many hours to heal her ribs,



but here was nothing to do that would hurry it. She considered another analgesic but decided to forego it for the moment. Only then did she begin to consider her situation. She was down in the wilds, alone, hurt, and unable to travel for at least a day or two, even if she knew where she was, which she didn't. Only then did she remember the explosion by the river and the enemy floaters.

"Jamie," she whispered. Tears began running down her face, wetting the dried blood still covering it.

CHAPTER 22

Craig Randall stared down at the stark landscape below him. >From his seat in the lead floater of his small fleet he could see ahead of him as well, and it was no better. The countryside around the Dallas Enclave was almost as devastated as the surface of the moon. A plague of locusts had for two successive years denuded the land of any hint of greenery. The wash of unchecked rains had cut gullies and paths and ditches through the bare earth until it looked as if some mad scientist had created a giant maze, then populated it with millions of rodents. Through field glasses he could make out the scurrying figures of thousands of rats madly searching for sustenance. An occasional cat or dog was visible but never in the vicinity of a very large concentration of the starving rats; they were predators, but they could become prey as well. He had been told that the rats must have survived and multiplied by feeding on the innumerable insect carcasses, but by now the last of them must have been eaten. Before long, they would be driven by starvation to swarm into the Enclave, taking their losses rather than perish in the bare desert the land had become.

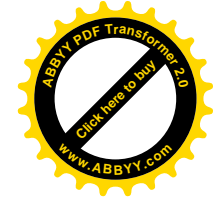


Randall had had no problem in recruiting a force of mercenaries. The population as he had seen them at the landing field wore the pinched faces and thin bodies of long standing malnourishment. In his contacts with the authorities of the besieged Enclave, the appearance was not so noticeable, but their faces were haunted with the knowledge that the spacecraft from Moon City might be their last hope for escape before the Enclave fell, as they almost unanimously expected it to. The merest hint of passage to the moon was sufficient inducement for as many recruits as he could use. His only real problem had been that of secrecy; he feared that if very many of the starving population knew of the bargain he was offering, his landing craft would be overrun.

Randall took the glasses from his eyes and leaned back in the uncomfortable webbed seat. He was tired from the inexorable weight of earth's gravity, six times what he was used to. It had been too long since his piloting days to bear it comfortably, regardless of the almost religious intensity he paid to exercise. Somewhere along the way, his body had aged more than he thought it had. The relentless weight enervated him, making it hard to concentrate.

He had finally decided on a contingent of fifty men carried in a half dozen floaters. He had managed to find one heavy laser gun, a relic of the old army and a novice crew to man it, but he had little confidence in their ability. There were no armed floaters to be had; with the decline of internecine warfare among humans had come a similar decline in the instruments of warfare. Only police floaters carried even nominal built-in armaments and none of them had the range to go with him. He had had to content himself with an impromptu arrangement where the canopies of the floaters were hurriedly reworked to allow two heavy laserifles to be fired from them by his troops.

Randall thought most of the troops would be dependable. They were all from the Enclave security forces and already used to exercising brutal authority to keep the population in line. The Dallas Enclave had become little more than a police state after food supplies began to fail. Rats might be kept at bay for a while yet, but there had been no defense against the locust swarms, a legacy of the declining bird population. He was worried, though the hard contours of his face didn't show it. After the briefing and tentative assignment of objectives, he had been called back to his landing craft. A message from Moon City over their secure circuit confirmed that the Houston Enclave expedition had reached their objective and signaled back, breaking their week-long silence. A floater would even now be searching out the landmarks that had been given, and no doubt other



floaters were being made ready to reinforce once they were found.

Word had also come while he was still in space of Cadena's apprehension, by Da Cruz's girl friend, of all people. It had been a blow, but not a fatal one, merely requiring them to depend on satellite observation of the coming and goings of floaters supporting the expedition to pinpoint their location, rather than direct input from Cadena. It was almost a certainty now that the Houston Enclave authorities suspected Moon City had fielded an expeditionary force as well as they. It was now simply a race to see who got there first.

The delays inherent in organizing a mercenary force so quickly, so far from his normal habitat, and having to work in relative secrecy had been extremely frustrating, but now Randall thought there was a good chance of success. His force was certainly sufficient to overwhelm the one opposing him; the last remaining problem was to force a battle before they could be reinforced.

The broken landscape below began showing specks of green as time passed, and eventually a forest appeared, stretching out from each side of the old Interstate they were following. Some stretches were hidden by overgrowth but enough of it remained to keep them on target. The fleet passed over the ruins of a moderate sized city, split by a wide river. Randall's pilot noted the location on his display and said, "About sixty miles now. Another forty minutes."

"Good. Just remember how we planned it. Follow this old highway right through the city to the river. Land us in the first spot where we see any humans. Don't signal until you actually see someone. We don't want to give any warning at all."

"Right," the pilot said. Randall checked his weapons again.

"There!" Randall said loudly, pointing at an angle to the right of the rapidly descending floater. A cluster of dogs and humans were grouped in front of one of a line of rectangular buildings along the waterfront. Just to the left was a good enough landing site, clear of large trees.

"Contact!" Randall yelled, excitement shooting through his body. He pointed. "Land to the left there." He keyed the mike. "Randall



here. We're going in. Follow at intervals. Disperse to plan and assault. Take prisoners!"

The floater landed halfway up the slope from the river, followed quickly by three others. The other two hovered in reserve. Randall stayed inside his floater as the rear canopy popped and a squad of men jumped to the ground and began running up the slope.

There was little chance of taking many captives. The ranger force reacted quickly, firing into Randall's approaching force almost immediately. At the same time, orders were shouted to the dogs and they loped through the low brush to the attack, almost unseen until they were upon their quarry. Randall caught a glimpse of running figures to the right of the developing skirmish line and shouted a warning, but it was ineffective; he could not be heard over the rattle of laser gun fire. It would have been too late in any case. His troops that had poured from the grounded floaters were already heavily engaged. Laserbeams and explosive slugs were pouring in lancing fire from in front and inside the line of buildings.

The running figures Randall had spotted were Masters and his four rangers. They advanced in spread formation, stopping to fire then running forward again, downing a number of the enemy before they noticed the enfilading fire from their flank.

Randall ducked reflexively as a beam smoked along the canopy of his floater. The slug whanged off into the distance, not hitting with enough force to explode. As he looked back up, he saw another floater drop over the towers of the city, descending from the southwest. He recognized instantly that it must be from the Houston Enclave. "Craft five and six, floater above you! Get it, don't let it get away!" His reserve floaters rose in pursuit. As he turned to watch them he saw his heavy laser gun crew get off a round from their weapon. The shot went wide left of where they were aiming, directly through the entrance and into the ruined shop housing the alien being. A tremendous explosion rent the air a second later, blowing out the rest of the already damaged interior and scattering men and dogs like tenpins. The inadvertent shot had set off something in the constituent of the alien spacecraft.

Masters was bowled over by the force of the explosion. He rose back to his knees, groping for his laserifle, then saw that the blast had come from the last berthing place of the alien. The entrance had blown out and the roof as well, puncturing men, dogs and enemy indiscriminately in a cone of destruction. Masters made an immediate decision. There could be nothing left from such destruction. With the alien and it's landing craft destroyed, there was nothing left for them



here. Besides, he was outnumbered and outgunned. "Pull out, pull out!" He yelled as loud as he could over the momentary quiet, hoping his people could hear. His ears were still ringing from the tremendous thunderclap of the explosion. He paused to fire twice, then grabbed the arm of a wounded ranger near him and began to retreat.

The withdrawal turned into a long running firefight as Masters tried to separate his remaining force from the hastily re-organized and pursuing enemy, weaving through and around the old buildings of the central city. He had caught a glimpse of the two enemy floaters chasing and firing at another which he presumed was his own from Houston. He hoped it got away, but there was no time to worry about it, as shortly the two were back, harassing his dwindling force from the air. After several misses, he finally got a shot into the canopy of one of them. It veered off and went down beyond the rooftops. The other pulled back out of range and he was at last able to shake off the pursuit.

Masters looked around at what was left of his force. They had gone to ground in a heavily overgrown portion of the old city, still near the interstate but at ground level rather than atop the still intact elevated portion. Judy was nearby, breathing heavily and supported by Sgt. Costa who hardly seemed winded at all. Only three other rangers were still with him and two of them had been wounded, although not badly. They could still walk. Of dogs, only three remained; most of them had been in the cone of the blast set off by the heavy laser gun. Wolfgang was still alive, but he had seen Conan go down almost immediately, torn by an exploding slug. As bad off as he was, though, he knew that the invading force had been badly hurt too, first from the ferocity and speed of their attacking dogs which had unnerved them, then by the explosion which tore apart men from both sides with indiscriminate violence. Now, he had to decide on a further course of action.

Masters had instinctively led his rangers back in the direction from which they had come. He felt fairly certain that Jamie and Kristi had gotten away. Kristi would have led Jamie upriver, the only avenue open to her, and then inland into concealing brush and trees. From there, he calculated she would try to work back to the vicinity of the interstate and try to follow it out of the city and then cut south towards the Carthage ruins. His decision now was whether to hold tight and hope for reinforcements, to try to make a forced march back to the Enclave, or to try and follow Kristi and Jamie's presumed route in order to link up and protect them. It didn't take long to make up his mind. The vital nature of the information Jamie carried dictated his actions.



"Wolfgang." His pet nuzzled his hand. "Scout, Wolf. That way. Find Kristi." He pointed in the direction which he hoped would intersect the route of Kristi and Jamie's flight. If they had gotten away. If they survived long enough for him to find them. Two humans alone in the wilds had little chance of living more than a few days.

Randall looked out over the recent battlefield as he talked with his lieutenants, the two who had survived. It was a near disaster. He had lost two thirds of his force and half of his floaters. He had failed to anticipate the ferocity of the attacking dogs which had held many of his troops in place, right in the path of the explosion set off by the heavy laser gun crew. Damn them. It would be a rainy day on the moon before they ever got passage there, even if they were still alive, which he sincerely hoped they weren't. Their errant fire had left nothing to salvage from the alien or it's craft. The building which had held it was a burned out shell. Only one of the scientists from the Houston Enclave had survived, and she was being questioned now. If anything was to be learned, she was his last hope right now. Thoughtfully, he had brought along the proper drugs for that.

"Get on the horn to Dallas," he said to one of his subordinates. "Tell them we need at least four more squads and tell them we need some armed floaters. Rig them up somehow, but get them armed. Stay here and keep the connection open until I can check on our prisoners." He motioned to the other man to follow into an undamaged building where the few captives they had taken were being confined.

Maria Martinez was sitting on a bench, eyes glassy from the drug she had been given, unaware of the questions she had answered. Two ranger prisoners and a single survivor of Cortman's tribe were slumped beside her, but they were being ignored. Nothing useful had been gained from them.

The interrogator turned to Randall as he came up. "Commander, I think we got something from this one." He pointed at Maria.

"Don't keep me in suspense."

The man blinked. He was a trusted confidant, but it was easy to see that Randall was in a foul mood. He said hurriedly, "One of their



scientists by the name of Da Cruz got all the information out of that space critter. No one else had time before we got here."

Da Cruz! "Did we get him?"

"I don't know. This is all the prisoners we have, except for a couple too badly wounded to question."

"Well, Goddamnit, let's find out. Bring her along and see if she can identify him from the bodies."

"Yes, sir." He pulled Maria to her feet. He quickly checked her reflexes, then added a booster to the dose of drug she had already received. Maria wavered on her feet but came along when urged, completely unresisting.

An hour later, Randall was relatively certain that Da Cruz was not among the dead. He must be with the remains of the defeated ranger force. Randall quickly gathered what men were available and told them in no uncertain terms what their status was. "You men were recruited with the promise of transportation to Moon City once we completed our mission. Let me tell you right now that it is not over. The one man we have to have has apparently escaped. We must go after him now, without delay, with whatever we have. I'm calling in reinforcements and more floaters to help, but for now you're it. The man we want has straight dark hair, mustache, medium build, medium weight, moderately dark complexion. He travels with a tan shaggy dog and a vari-colored cat. This man must be taken alive. I'll personally shoot any man who kills him. Unless he is captured, our mission is a failure and none of you will allowed to immigrate. Now get going."

The mercenaries obeyed with alacrity. Randall hurried back to the floater where his other lieutenant was waiting. "Get back to Dallas and tell them to rig a couple of the floaters they're sending with IR gear." He stifled the beginning of a protest. "Yes, I know floaters aren't normally equipped with IR, but now they must be. See to it. Hurry, speed is essential. If we let the survivors escape into wild country, we'll never catch them." As he climbed into the lead floater to begin the chase, Randall thought, Damn, if we don't get Da Cruz, Bascome may not let me back into Moon City, never mind anyone else. The concept was depressing, even more so than the constant, implacable pull of excessive gravity on his tired body, but he was a professional. He straightened his shoulders and began scanning the ground as soon as the floater became airborne.



CHAPTER 23

While Jamie was still gathering his wits and Kristi was urging him away from the battle scene, they were both staggered by the terrible explosion from along the waterfront buildings. It was far enough away that it failed to knock them off their feet as Masters had been, but it halted them in their tracks.

"What the hell was that," Jamie asked, pausing from their headlong flight. He turned to look, but Kristi grabbed him again.

"Never mind. Run! Lady, scout! Cover!" She urged him along again, breaking into a run as soon as he began moving. Jamie hurried to keep pace, beginning to pant. Woggly and Fuzzy Britches and Princess ran at their side.

Lady led them most of a mile down river until it began curving back northwest, then Kristi took over, turning them south. "This way. Through the city now. Hurry." They trotted through ruins of an old residential district where half the houses had fallen and most of the rest were crumbling. The whole district was thick with trees and underbrush. Kristi kept them under cover, never crossing an open space before scanning the skies in all directions.

"I have to rest," Jamie finally said, gasping for breath. A sharp pain stitched his side at every step.

"Just a little further. Let me find a good place to stop."

Jamie struggled on, legs turning to water, the pain in his side becoming fiercer. Only when the sound of battle had died completely away did Kristi allow a rest, under a grove of trees surrounded by a thick secondary growth. He fell to the earth immediately. Fuzzy



Britches plopped down beside him, tongue lolling like a dog and panting even heavier than he was. Cats are not made for prolonged speed.

When he finally had some of his breath back, Jamie asked, "Now what?"

A troubled look settled over Kristi's face. "Jamie, I don't think I have to tell you that we're in trouble. Troy said to get you away and I've done that, but as you say, 'now what'? You have that disk with everything we came for, but it won't do a damn bit of good unless we get you back to the Enclave. That's the problem."

"Do you think Masters is dead?" It was hard for Jamie to picture. The ranger captain was such a vital man that it was hard to imagine him gone. It was as if the force of several personalities had been packed into his one small tough body.

Kristi had the same problem. She had known Masters almost as long as she could remember and to her he seemed like an elemental force, indomitable and unchanging. "I don't know, and for our purposes, it might be better if he is, hard as that is to imagine."

"Why on earth do you say that?" Jamie was stricken with the idea.

"Suppose he has been taken captive? You know as well as I that no one can resist interrogation under seronal. If that's the case, those bastards will be after us with everything they can scrape together. They will know we got away, and they will have our description."

"So, I guess we better get moving again." Jamie got to his feet, though he still felt weak and shaky from their prolonged run.

"Sit down a minute. We're safe here for a little while." Kristi wanted to think. She considered the previous route to Conan's home, their flight from the battle, their present position, and most importantly, the best way to get them back to the safety of the Enclave. She knew that Jamie had no realistic idea of how to gauge direction; she would have to lead and try to keep them alive. Although Jamie had become marginally competent in the wilds, she held no illusions about his chances of making it all the way back to the Enclave by himself, and his pets wouldn't be that much help. She finally decided that they should cut through the old city at an angle then follow the interstate on a parallel route until they were west of the city. From there, she would head them south across the highway and back toward the Enclave. She gave him a quick glance and noted his trusting face.



No sense telling him how slim our chances are of making it. Two humans, two dogs and two cats, and only her and Lady with experience in eluding the enhanced animals. Rats and dogs and wolves. Large hunting cats and chimps. Even bears, now. Kristi shuddered inwardly at the thought of their slim company meeting bears again, especially if they were accompanied by their feral human cohorts. It wouldn't be a fight, it would be a slaughter, plain and simple. Yet somehow, she had to get them home again, not only because Jamie was one of the most endearing men she had known for a long time, but because of his vast importance now. She vowed to herself that she would succeed if there were any way possible. She doubted that there was, but no need to let him know that. She got to her feet.

"Let's move on. We've got a long way to go."

"I guess," Jamie said. "We walked here; we can walk back if we have to."

Let him keep his optimism, Kristi thought. Hell, who knows? We may even make it. "OK, let's go. We'll stay under cover whenever possible and try to work our way back and across the interstate, then head south. Lady, you scout. Keep to cover. Don't bark unless it's necessary. Quiet, understand?"

"Yes," Lady said. She moved off through the brush in the direction Kristi pointed out to her.

"Woggly, why don't you bring up the rear?" Kristi suggested as they moved off. "Warn us if anyone is following. Or anything else, for that matter. OK?"

"OK," Woggly agreed, foregoing his usual assertive woof. He thoroughly understood the gravity of their present situation.

"You cats better stay close, now," Kristi added. "No mouse hunting." Neither of the cats answered. Both had been almost scared out of their wits by the sudden attack and the violence of the explosion in their rear and had no desire to stray far from their humans. Princess was especially subdued. Fuzzy Britches was also, but he carried an undertone of resentment. He was aggravated that strange humans had tried to hurt them and wished that he had had a chance to get in a couple of swipes at them before fleeing.

"What was that explosion, do you think?" Jamie asked as they wound through brush and overgrown dwellings at a slower pace.



"It puzzles me," Kristi said. "I suspect that the gang which attacked us was recruited from the Dallas Enclave, but I can't imagine what they thought they were accomplishing by blowing up everything. They must want the same information we were after, but that wasn't a very intelligent way to go after it."

"Maybe it was an accident of some kind," Jamie said.

"Could be. Maybe we'll find out someday. Hold up, I see floaters in the distance."

Janie could see them too, far to their rear, flying in low circles as if they were searching for something. They were no danger to them, though, being as well concealed as they were, but they made him nervous anyway. He waited until Kristi gave the signal, then they moved on, always keeping to the brush and trees, or hugging the other side of ruined buildings to keep out of sight of the distant floaters. After a while, they were no longer visible and Kristi quickened the pace.

They entered an area of lower ground, still boggy with the spring rains and struggled through it, followed by clouds of insects. Kristi sent Lady back over their trail once during the day to be sure that they weren't being followed. After that they went on, now and then having to climb upslope, cautiously, as cover thinned out.

Late that afternoon Kristi halted them again. "I think we had better find a place to stop before it gets dark," she said. "I'm beginning to notice lots of rat signs."

Jamie, of course, had not noticed any spoor, but he halted with alacrity. "Do you think there might be a rat town nearby?"

"It's beginning to look like it, and if there is, I want us to pass it in the morning, not this late in the day. We might have to run for it and I don't want us crashing around in the dark if we do," Kristi said. She scouted ahead cautiously, then stopped and shook her head. "Let's go back a bit. I think we just passed a place that might do."

Kristi led them back to the shell of a former service station, constructed of cinderblock, with all but one window still intact. The metal door was closed but Jamie was able to force it open after some effort. Birds and possibly bats had inhabited it in the past but there were no signs of them now. They swept out one corner with their feet to make room to stretch out. Jamie started to close the door but Kristi insisted that it be left open. "It's too easy to get trapped in here with



the door closed. We'll sleep in our clothes as well and not set up the tent so we can move out fast if we have to."

The two humans sat facing the entrance, with the dogs just outside and the cats inside with them. Kristi took out rations for herself and her pets. Jamie started to do the same, but she stopped him. "No, we may as well go on half rations now. I'll share with you and your pets tonight, then we'll use your supplies in the morning. No floater to replenish us on the way back, remember?"

Jamie accepted half of her food bar. "Whitmire will send floaters out to look for though, won't he?"

"I'm sure he will, but that doesn't mean anything, considering how many of the enemy floaters we saw. They would have the devil's own time finding us, anyway. We'll have to stay under cover, and that means off the highways for the most part. It's not going to be easy. Half rations may look good before it's over with."

Jamie chewed thoughtfully, mentally counting the remaining rations in his pack. When he compared this figure to the least amount of time it might take them to walk all the way back to the Enclave, he came up with a sum so negative that he did the calculation over again. It still didn't compute.

"Don't look so dismayed," Kristi said. "Look at me; I'm not complaining. It will be good for my figure to go hungry for a few days."

Jamie forced a grin. "I am looking. I like your figure the way it is."

"Why, thanks. Such a compliment will ease my conscience while I'm gorging myself when we get back." She poked him in the ribs. "I think you like full figures, especially the parts you're staring at."

"Mother told me I was a greedy baby."

"You haven't changed since, so far as I can tell. You can feast to your heart's content once we're home." Kristi took a deep breath. "But not until then. Isolated as we are, we can't take the chance of getting caught with our pants down, literally."

Jamie was trying hard to help with the banter. He knew Kristi was trying to under play their predicament. "So much the better when we can take them down, then. I'll bet Jeannie would even help." He had intended to ease into the idea of forming a threesome with Jeannie and Kristi, but suddenly he remembered. "Oh no! Jeannie was



supposed to fly out to join us today. Do you think the floater might have turned back?"

"There's no way of telling," Kristi said, damning herself for letting Jamie bring the subject up. She had been worried, too.

Jamie's whole body slumped. How could he have forgotten?

"Take it easy," Kristi said. "Chances are, she never made it here."

"I'm still worried."

Kristi reached over to hug him. "I guess I am too, but there's nothing to do about it now. Tell you what. Woggly and I will take the first shift while you get some sleep, then Lady will stay with you while I rest. Cheer up, we'll all come out of this somehow, Jeannie included."

Jamie nodded agreement. Kristi was putting an experienced human or dog on each shift and as she said, there was nothing at all he could do for Jeannie right now, worry as he might.

"Two hours each?"

"Yes, let's try that as long as we can. For a couple of days anyhow, until I'm sure we're not being followed. When we just have to rest longer, I'll find us a good spot to hole up in and we'll let the cats stand guard."

"Sounds good." Jamie wormed over to the corner they had cleared of rubbish and stretched out, though he doubted that he could sleep with the events of the last two days still occupying his mind. He thought of Captain Masters, Conan, Judy and all the others he had traveled with. He wondered if they were still alive and perhaps struggling through the wilderness as he and Kristi were doing. His last thoughts were of Jeannie, then his mind quieted and he did sleep.

He awoke with a hand over his mouth. Startled, he began to grapple until he realized his hands were touching female flesh. He relaxed and the hand left his mouth. It was almost pitch dark.

"Kristi?"

"You were dreaming." Her voice came to him as a whisper.

"Is anything wrong?"



"No, you were just making too much noise. Besides, it's your turn for guard."

"Oh. All right. They changed places in the dark."

At first Jamie started at every little night sound, but gradually he calmed. Lady moved around occasionally, circling the building, a pale wraith in the near total darkness. After a bit, Fuzzy Britches crawled into his lap and began purring softly. He thought how lucky he and Kristi had been to have their pets near when the attack came. Even luckier that the enemy force had apparently not brought dogs or they would have almost certainly been tracked down by now. He scratched affectionately at the base of Fuzzy Britches' ears. For all the trouble enhanced animals had caused, there was compensation. His pets had brought a wealth of love and companionship into his life. And really, once the techniques of genetic engineering became so simple, he thought it inevitable that the present situation should develop. Besides, the pet plague had solved a lot of other problems along the way. War, overpopulation, the nagging, insoluble poverty of the third world, even industrial pollution. Perhaps it would be a good thing in the end, even if man couldn't hold a place on the planet. We can leave now and let the animals have the planet! If I get back, that is.

Jamie shifted his position to ease his cramped back, causing Fuzzy Britches to interrupt his purring for a moment, then roll over in Jamie's lap to have his belly rubbed, his favorite form of petting. Jamie scratched at the wiry fur, pausing occasionally to strip off a grass burr. Two weeks. Two weeks and we can be back. Jeannie. I wonder how she will react when I tell her I want to keep Kristi in my life as well as her. Or does she already know?

The night passed.

CHAPTER 24



It was night. Randall Craig was back at the original assault site, in the same building where the prisoners were being held. A faint miasma of death hung in the air from still exposed bodies from both sides. He had allowed no time for burial, nor would he the next day. He intended to simply move their camp forward, nearer to the area where he still had troops searching for survivors of the force from the Houston Enclave. He had had no success in finding the fleeing remnants that day and he cursed himself for ever allowing contact to be broken, even though it had seemed like a good idea at the time. He also realized he had made a mistake in not bringing dogs along, and was trying to rectify that situation now. With dogs, he could track them down, but apparently dogs were hard to come by. There were very few left in the Dallas Enclave; feelings were running high against enhanced animals there.

Randall spoke forcefully to his contact back in the Enclave. "Pay anything you like. Promise anything you like--just get me some tracking dogs," he ordered.

"I'll try, commander, but I can't guarantee it," the voice came back.

"How about the new men and floaters? When can I expect them?"

"They should be ready to leave in the morning. Give me your grid coordinates so they can locate you."

Craig entered the numbers into the computer and sent them on. He was just about to break contact when he was interrupted.

"Coded message for you, Commander. It's from Moon City."

"OK, patch me through."

"Randall Craig?"

Randall recognized the voice almost immediately, even through the decoder. Mayor Roscoe Bascombe. This wouldn't be much fun.

"Here." Randall described the events of the last twenty four hours in meticulous detail. There was little value in trying to gloss over his



failure. Even if he lied, he knew he would be found out, even before returning to the moon.

"Let me sum it up, Randall. The success of your mission is highly doubtful. Your only chance of succeeding is to capture this Da Cruz fellow, and so far, you haven't been able to locate him. You've called for reinforcements, tracking dogs and more floaters, armed and carrying IR gear. You will resume the hunt in the morning. Does that cover everything?" The mayor's voice was flat and neutral, as if he were speaking to a computer rather than one of his council members.

"That's it, Mayor. I'll stay with it right to the end. Just use all the pressure you can on your end to get me the help I need."

"I will. Now here is an item of information for you. We recorded a signal from the floater you said you shot down. It was definitely received in Houston, so you can expect them to be reinforcing, too. Watch for them and try your damndest. They can get more stuff in the air than we can manage, I think. If you haven't found Da Cruz by the time they arrive, it's unlikely that you will. Understand me?"

"Yes, sir." Randall understood perfectly. Find Da Cruz. Bring him with you to Moon City. Or don't bother coming back.

John Whitmire had spent another almost sleepless night. It seemed lately that any sleep he managed to get was at his office, where he had moved in a couch. He had been told of the signal from the downed floater the morning before and had cursed himself for ever allowing Jeannie to bully him into allowing her to leave the Enclave with it, but it was too late for second thoughts now. He tried to put the fate of the girl from his mind while he organized another expedition. This one would go entirely by air and would leave at dawn.

There had been no opposition from the previously doubtful council members this time. The fact that his first expedition had been ambushed and perhaps destroyed testified to the importance of the second. Even now, technicians were frantically outfitting floaters with heavy laser guns which could be fired by the pilots, while the Enclave ranger commander was just as frantically scouring the barrier patrols



for more troops to send into battle.

Whitmire had no way of knowing, of course, that the point of rivalry had shifted from the now dead alien and it's destroyed craft to the sole person of Jamie Da Cruz. He conferred with the commander of the new force as dawn approached. They sat side by side, engulfed in a holo image, split between pictures Masters had sent the day before and the grid coordinates of his last position.

"This is the approximate location where our floater went down," Whitmire said, tracing through the image with his finger. "Send one floater crew to look for them as soon as you can. There might be survivors. Send more when and if you can, but your first priority must be re-capturing the alien and it's spacecraft." He winced inwardly as the young, determined image of Jeannie's face as he had last seen her flitted through his mind, almost as if it represented all the young lives he had seen cut short in his lost England.

"I'm giving you complete freedom of action," he continued. "Use your force in the way you think best, even if you have to delay looking for that floater. Your command craft will have a decoder we've rigged up, but tell the other pilots that if they lose contact with you to forget about security. Maintaining contact with me has priority. I don't want to be out of touch again until this thing is over, one way or another."

"Yes, sir. Anything else?"

"No. Go on and get started. Godspeed."

The commander left. Whitmire sat for a moment, debating with himself between breakfast or sleep. He needed both and didn't have time for either.

Jeannie stayed in the grounded floater all that day, waiting for the healing medicine to alleviate the pain from her broken ribs. She found some cargo blankets among the gear and used them to cover the bodies of the pilots. Later in the day, when movement became not quite so painful, she thought of trying to signal the Enclave. She uncovered the body of the co-pilot, averting her eyes from the bloody remains. An 'on line' message glowed from the control board, but the computer refused to recognize her voice. Apparently it was tuned to



the pilots and no others. Probably it wouldn't have mattered. Even as she spoke, the glowing message dimmed and went out, telling her as plainly as words could have that the last trace of power was gone. She gave up and covered the body again, then moved back into her little alcove in the rear of the floater.

The daylight hours were not too bad, but she grew increasingly fretful as the sun waned. The inherent horror most citizens felt about the wilds began to creep into her soul. Images of the huge bears and bearded, skin-clad feral humans Kristi had told her about assaulted her mind. Before night fell, she crawled back into the rear of the floater where the protective canopy was still intact and piled gear into a makeshift barricade. She checked her laser gun repeatedly, afraid that it might not work if she needed it.

Twilight came, then faded into darkness, a dark Jeannie had never experienced before. Every little night sound sent her pulse racing, thinking of huge intelligent rats and bears and dogs creeping up on her in the night. She resolved not to sleep lest she be surprised and eaten, not thinking that she would surely have to sleep sometime, and the relative safety of the wrecked floater might be the best place to do it in. She thought of rigging an alarm of some sort where the shattered front canopy provided easy access, but it was already too dark to see. She moaned to herself for not thinking of it earlier. Between starts of alarm she thought of Jamie and cried silently to herself at the thought that he might be dead. The enemy craft had certainly shown no mercy in attacking Nhu's craft; she could only presume that they had been equally determined on the ground. She wondered where Kristi might be and wept some more at the thought of how safe she had felt that night she had slept with her. Always, though, her thoughts turned back to Jamie. Surely, surely, he could not be dead.

When not thinking of Jamie or taking alarm at noises in the night, she tried to plan ahead. She couldn't stay where she was, that was for certain. There was no way she could endure another day trapped in the wreckage of the floater with decomposing bodies. But what to do? She had only a vague idea of how far away the Enclave might be, and she was even more uncertain of the direction, knowing only that it lay somewhere to the southwest. Would it be possible to walk that far alone, through the wilds, armed only with a light laser gun and knife, and survive the trip? She doubted it, and doubted her ability to find the Enclave even if she should live that long. Suppose she tried to make it back to their original destination and surrender to the unknown enemy who had shot them down? That didn't seem like a very good idea either. The attacking floaters had been too murderously intent on their destruction. But wouldn't they accept the surrender of a single scared young girl? She just didn't know. The idea



of warring factions of humans was so alien to her that for all she knew they might shoot her on sight.

Surrender really didn't appeal to Jeannie as an alternative, anyway, even assuming that it would be accepted. It went against the grain somehow, disturbingly deep. She didn't like to think about it. Wait! She suddenly remembered the dying pilot's words, giving their approximate location through the froth of his bloody lips. Had that signal gotten through? It would be wonderful if it had. Rescue might be only hours away! Whitmire had told her he would be sending another contingent of scientists and rangers out as soon as the floater returned. When it didn't, surely he would order a search, whether the message had gotten through or not. That possibility seemed to offer the best hope. She decided that as soon as it was light, she would move some distance away from the wreckage, but stay in the immediate vicinity for awhile and hope for rescue.

Having arrived at a decision, she began to settle down a little, but not nearly enough to sleep. The long night drug on, the longest of her young life.

The large gray rat was having to scout farther and farther to locate sufficient food. The nearby rat town to which it belonged was gravid with unrestrained population, almost to the point of being driven by hunger to burst forth and flow over the land like a living flood, intent on food and nothing else, but not yet, not yet. The scout raised it's oversized head and sniffed the air. Yes, there, where freshly snapped branches were still oozing sap was the scent of food. It could detect the odor of human mixed with the smell, but it was faint, and overriding it came the smell of ripening meat, meat in quantity.

Cautiously, the rat crept closer, wanting to make sure. Yes, the human smell was there, but the odor told it that they had been dead for many hours. Now it must hurry and gather it's brothers, before other scavengers arrived. A feast such as this must not go to waste. It broke reluctantly away from the delicious odor and began scurrying back the way it had come. As it ran, it began salivating, thinking of the food which would soon fill it's belly.



CHAPTER 25

Jeannie had finally slipped into a restless sleep. The morning sun shining in through the transparent canopy at the back of the floater touched her dark curls but failed to wake her. It was only when rustling, squeaking noises penetrated her consciousness that she opened her eyes. She sat up and peeked over the barrier she had erected the previous evening. Her first wild thought was that the bodies she had so carefully covered had become animated during the night, a surreal horror right out of her darkest nightmares. Then the rats came into focus and it was worse than any nightmare. She shrank back and screamed loudly, piercingly, then again and again until her throat was raw.

The rats had come during the night and began dismantling the bodies. The odor from the bodies had masked her own presence. Jeannie's loud screams startled the rats almost as much as they had her. The gray squirming mass exploded like jumping fleas, squealing their high shrieks of surprise and fear. Several of them dashed over Jeannie's barricade in random flight, coming directly toward her. She batted at them ineffectively before even thinking of her weapons. "Get away, get away!" She screamed.

Had the rats realized that she was alone they might have overwhelmed her right then, but they were as frightened as she. By the time they recovered, she remembered that she was armed. She drew her laser gun and sprayed lances of fire and slugs in all directions, setting fire to the cargo carpets and other combustibles. The rear canopy shattered and fell around her head and onto the few rats still near her. The rest fled, pursued by laser fire as she wasted power prodigiously.

Once the rats were gone she tossed the burning carpets over the side and stamped out the other fires, although in truth, at that



moment she would rather have burned to death than abandon the twice wrecked floater and face the rats on the ground.

The rats didn't move far. Once on the ground and away from the wild laser fire the more intelligent leaders halted the flight and evaluated the situation. They were too hungry to give up so soon, and before long they realized that only a single human stood between themselves and their meal, and a thoroughly frightened one at that. Given a little time to reorganize, they would make a meal of her, too.

Jamie and Kristi were working their way through heavy brush and trees when they heard the screams. They halted and looked at each other. There was something in the frightened sounds which nudged both of their brows into puzzled frowns. Woggly rushed past them, almost bowling over Lady, who was coming back from her scouting duties for instructions. He woofed a single word as he passed them. "Jeannie!"

"Jeannie!" Lady repeated and took off after Woggly.

"Come on!" Kristi shouted as she began running. What in hell was Jeannie doing out here?

Jamie was thinking the same thing, but he didn't let it slow him down. He overtook Kristi almost immediately and plowed on ahead through the brush, ignoring thorns, brush and anything larger than a small tree. From ahead, Woggly gave a startled yelp, followed quickly by Lady's voice. In their haste, they had run right into the midst of the re-marshaled rat pack.

More screams and a burst of rapid shots rose over the fighting growls of the two dogs. Jamie broke through a newly made swath of torn and flattened vegetation and onto a scene of horror. Jeannie's head and shoulders were visible above the shards of a canopy floater, firing her laser gun as fast as she could with one hand and batting at rats swarming up over the edges of the destroyed canopy with the other.

The rats were coming from all sides, trying to overwhelm her with numbers. They were taking their losses with the sure knowledge that she couldn't stop them for more than a few minutes.



The dogs upset the rats' plan. Woggly and Lady swirled like dervishes as they entered the melee on each side of the craft, biting and rolling, killing rats with their teeth and crushing others with their body weight. Fuzzy Britches streaked into action, swiping with clawed forepaws. His shrill fighting scream added to the squeaking, growling din of mortal combat.

Jamie would forever hold a picture in his mind of Jeannie's desperate screams as the laser powerpack and ammunition clip of her laser gun ran out at the same time. Rats were climbing her body, trying to reach her throat while she clubbed at them with her empty weapon and pulled at the ones clinging to her body with the other hand. He rushed toward her, crushing rats underfoot. He bounded into the craft with one leap and clawed away the rats covering her lower body, then swirled and began spraying laser beams in a half circle around them. Kristi arrived and added the fire from her heavier weapon. She was just in time.

"Behind you!" She yelled, seeing a swarm of rats coming from the other direction, but unable to direct her fire there; she was close to being inundated with the swarming rats herself.

Jamie turned and began pouring fire into that menace, mindful of Fuzzy Britches and the dogs who had also seen the new threat and were trying to stem the advance. He switched powerpacks faster than he had ever thought possible, not stopping to change clips in his gun. He fired the laser again and again until at last the swarming rats broke and ran. Meeting unexpected resistance, they reluctantly retreated, but they were not yet willing to leave the scene. They had found meat and they would have it, one way or another.

With the rats temporarily out of sight, Jeannie dropped her useless weapon and flung herself into Jamie's arms. "Oh, God, they were going to eat me alive," she sobbed incoherently, clinging so tightly to him that it sent a twinge of pain through her still healing ribs.

Jamie held her close, but still kept his eyes open, watching for more rats. Kristi scanned the underbrush in the other direction, climbing up into the downed floater with them for a better view.

"Kristi! Oh, I must be dreaming. Are you really here, too?"

Kristi patted Jeannie's shoulder. "It's all right now. Rangers to the rescue. But what are you doing way out here? Whitmire told me he wasn't going to let you come out until we were settled in. Oh! This must be the floater we saw get shot down. I can't imagine why John let



you come with it."

Jeannie was calming down somewhat, although she was still trembling and shivering at the close call. "It's my own fault, I guess," she said. "Mr. Whitmire kept putting me off. I finally just forced him to send me. Jamie, I wanted to see you so bad, especially after Kristi told me you had been hurt. I just couldn't stand it." She felt a warm furry body nuzzling her legs. "Fuzzy Britches!" She disentangled herself from Jamie and reached down to smooth the cat's fur, which was still ruffed out in a rainbow of colors. He purred under the petting, then assured that Jeannie and the other humans were unhurt, he moved away and began gnawing at the body of a rat, completely pleased with the outcome of the fight. What tales he would have to tell back in the Enclave! He would be the envy of every tom there, and wouldn't he be able to cut a swath through the female cats now? Princess came over and licked at a wound on his ear, then began daintily eating a rat herself. Well, perhaps she might have something to say about that aspect of things, but what the hell, as humans might put it, you can't have everything.

Jeannie raised up and hugged Kristi then, not saying anything, just holding the other woman in a fierce embrace. In truth, she was still nearly speechless. Three times now, death had brushed too near for comfort and it was still lurking, ready to try again.

Woggly and Lady barked almost simultaneously from opposite directions. Seconds later, they came rushing back and hopped up into the floater with the humans. "Rats still here," Lady said. She and Lady wrinkled their noses and snarled, eyeing the underbrush.

"Kids, we may not be out of the woods yet," Kristi said, trying to penetrate the dense woods with her eyes. I don't think the rats have left yet."

"Oh, no," Jeannie said despairingly. "I don't think I can face them again."

"Can we run for it?" Jamie asked, looking around apprehensively.

"Many rats, all around," Woggly said, licking at a wounded paw.

Jamie noticed Woggly's wounds and thought of how the rats had been climbing Jeannie's body as they arrived. Damn, he had been so busy hugging her, he hadn't even checked to see where she had been hurt. He took out his medkit and began wiping at the many superficial bites she had suffered.



"Hurry, Jamie," Kristi urged. "Jeannie, pick up your weapon and get it loaded again. You too, Jamie. Your powerpack's on red.

Both dogs suddenly began growling and the cats fluffed out their fur to twice their normal size.

"Here they come again!" Kristi was already firing.

Captain Masters didn't know why the attacking enemy had broken off contact the day before, long enough for him and his few survivors to elude pursuit, but he had taken full advantage of the opportunity, putting several miles between them and the last place where fighting had occurred. He had brought his few remaining troops to ground in an old building with a crumbled entrance, but with roof still intact, shielding them from the air. They holed up there for the night, then the next day he resumed the cautious withdrawal.

Judy walked beside him as they set out in the morning, still keeping carefully to cover. Masters sent Wolfgang on ahead in hope that he might intersect Jamie and Kristi's trail if they had indeed gotten away. He still had no idea if they had or not, but the possibility was worth trying for. He was also trying to think of some unobtrusive way to get a signal back to the Enclave, or to a floater; he was sure that Whitmire would be sending them out in force today, not knowing how badly things had gone wrong.

"Not exactly the way we planned for things to go, huh?" Judy said, her eyes constantly ranging around in a half circle in front of their path.

"We're not done yet," Masters said emphatically. "Those crazy bastards blew up the spacecraft, but I have a gut feeling that Da Cruz and Kristi got away. If we can find them, we still might make something out of this shebang."

"Do you really think Kristi made it with him?" Judy's voice was plaintive.

Masters smiled to himself. He was well aware of Kristi's sudden change of affection from the plain faced corporal to Jamie Da Cruz. He was a little surprised at the switch; Kristi wasn't normally



attracted to men. Nevertheless, he felt as much sympathy for Judy as his attention could spare at the moment, but he wasn't worried about her emotional recovery. In his long life, he had seen bonds between men and women change and change again, especially during the turmoil of the Enclave formation when so many mores had been shaken loose. He patted Judy's shoulder. "If anyone makes it, Kristi will."

"She really likes Jamie, doesn't she?" Judy said, unable to let the subject die.

"Almost everyone does, or so I hear. He's an easy man to like, even though I haven't had much time to spend with him. I guess I won't in the future, either, assuming we find him. He'll be an important man if we ever get him back to the Enclave."

"I suppose, but--Captain! Gunfire ahead! And I thought I heard a scream."

Masters halted and listened carefully. He had not heard anything, but he knew that the younger woman's hearing was more acute than his. Then he did hear the sounds. Screams and gunshots came faintly to his ears from the distance, barely discernible. Wolfgang came running out of the brush to his side. "Rats attack humans!" He yelped, dancing around, eager for action.

Masters reacted immediately. "Wolfgang, Lady! Go help! We'll follow. Hurry!" Could it be? There was no time to wonder. "Let's go, gang!" Masters shouted at his rangers. "Be careful, it could be the bad guys!"

Lady woofed eagerly and bounded away, followed by Wolfgang. The rangers hurried forward as fast as possible. More screams and gunfire sounded in the distance, becoming louder as they beat their way through the dense vegetation, not trying to find an easy route, only the quickest one. As they floundered through the brush, Masters wondered if they would arrive in time to help whoever it was.



CHAPTER 26

The rats swarmed to the attack again, driven by hunger and a raging desire for revenge. They were just intelligent enough to know they had been thwarted right on the verge of victory and now they came back with a vengeance. Jamie had set his spare power packs and ammunition clips beside him in easy reach. Now, as the rats attacked again, he fired in a sweeping arc, using only the laserbeam of his gun for the most part. Where he saw a concentration of rats, he pulled the trigger all the way back to send exploding slugs into their midst.

Jeannie's hysteria had passed by now, calmed by the presence of Kristi and Jamie and their pets. The rats still horrified and disgusted her, but she had seen that they could be easily killed and went about the task industrially, wasting power but causing destruction in the pack of attacking rats. She caught a momentary glimpse of the dogs as they fought. They never stopped in one place long enough for the rats to overwhelm and hamstring them.

The cats were out of sight. They were too small and too intelligent to jump into the middle of the fray. Instead, they ranged the periphery, contributing more to the defense with their yowling voices than with the number of their kills. The shrill wailing snarls made the rats shudder with a hereditary fear of their chief predators. It made them crouch and shiver, despite their intelligence, hitting them below the level of consciousness and holding them in place until they could shake off the paralysis.

Kristi was as busy as a woman trying to nurse quadruplets. She directed her fire to where she thought it would do the most good, helped Jeannie to reload, shouted encouragement to them both and all the while tried to spot the rat leaders and pick them off. As the fight went on, she saw that it was not going well. There were simply too many rats, and they were pressing the humans with a ferocity born of imminent starvation and a frustration at being twice denied their prey.

"I think we're going to have to run for it!" Kristi yelled over the fray. "Get ready, I'll point the way when it's time!" She began



concentrating her fire in the direction of the fewest rats, trying to clear an escape route. She was just gathering her breath to call for the cats and dogs to break off and follow her lead when Wolfgang burst into sight, scattering rats in all directions, growling in delight at a chance to fight.

Masters was panting hard by the time he spotted the first rats, but he didn't stop; the firing was still coming from in front of him. He waded through the disorganized pack, sweeping a path before him with laserbeams and slugs. Seconds later he broke into the swath of mangled brush where the floater had come down and spotted the three besieged humans. He shouted in triumph at seeing them alive, even though they were still being sorely pressed by the attacking hordes. He shouted, "Kristi! Take the other side. We're coming!" Even as he yelled, Judy and the other rangers burst onto the scene, adding their firepower to the carnage.

It was too much for the rats. For the third time, they had been denied, and now they had had enough. With squeaks and squeals, they began to retreat.

Kristi and Jamie jumped down from the wrecked floater, leaving Jeannie safely within it. "My God, we're glad to see you!" Kristi breathed, reloading her weapon.

"Are the rats gone for good now," Jeannie asked from her perch, looking around anxiously.

"I think so," Masters said, still gasping for breath. "You can come down now, Jeannie. It is you, isn't it?" He had only met her briefly, back on the morning the Expedition had left the Enclave. "Whitmire told me you were coming out with Nhu. Where is he?"

Jeannie pointed silently to the covered bodies as she climbed down into Jamie's arms. Masters grimaced. More casualties, and yet, here was Da Cruz, apparently unharmed, though he looked a little white around the gills.

"Damn, I didn't know there were that many rats in the whole world," Jamie said, trying to still his shaking hands. Adrenalin was still coursing through his body, even though the battle was over.

"Rats are the least of our problems right now," Masters said, looking around at the heaps of gray bodies. They lay everywhere. The pets moved among them, dispatching the wounded. The dogs killed in the typical canine manner, grasping a rat and shaking it in their jaws with sufficient force to break it's neck or back. The cats made more of



a sport of it, tossing the squeaking rodents into the air, then batting them away. They were having great fun until Masters called them back to the group.

Several small fires ignited by laser beams were burning, creating columns of dense smoke. Masters glanced anxiously at the sky, looking for enemy floaters. He hoped the smoke wouldn't be seen, but was almost certain that it would. "Folks, we've left too much evidence here to stick around. Let's get a move on before we're spotted. Is everyone able to travel? Jeannie?" He eyed her in particular, noting the mangled remains of the floater. She had been very lucky to survive the crash.

"I'm fine, Captain. Thank-you. You sure picked the right time to show up."

Masters allowed a small smile for her. "We rangers specialize in that sort of thing, but let's not push our luck. Let's move out."

"Which way?" Kristi asked.

"We'll head east and southeast until we get clear of the city, then try to find some cover where we can cross that old highway. Once we're back in that jungle between there and those old ruins of Carthage, I doubt that any floater can spot us from the air. The dogs can scout around and watch our flanks. If we're lucky, we'll be fairly safe by tomorrow. Now let's move."

Masters assigned Kristi and Judy both to walk with Jamie and guard him from harm. If he could get him safely back to the Enclave, his mission would be a success, regardless of the many casualties he had suffered.

Jeannie walked beside Jamie. She stumbled repeatedly the first few yards, unable to keep her eyes off him. It still seemed like a miracle to her, going from the nightmarish interval spent with the bodies of the pilots, then to almost being eaten alive by rats, and now trudging peacefully along beside the man she loved. And his pets! They were safe, too, moving right along with them. Fuzzy Britches was trying to keep up and rub against her ankles at the same time, causing her to miss a step occasionally, but she didn't mind at all.

Fuzzy Britches and Woggly were quite intelligent enough to know how close they had come to losing their humans, and perhaps their own lives as well, but in typical animal fashion they were able to put it out of their minds and concentrate on the present. Fuzzy Britches liked the present. Princess walked sedately by his side and he was



again in the presence of Jeannie, whom he had decided was the right mate for his master. And there was Kristi, too. He ran ahead a few paces and tangled himself in her legs, long enough to let her know that she was included in his plans, although he didn't say so. He didn't think it was really necessary, and she would find out soon enough, in any case.

"Are your bites feeling better?" Jamie asked Jeannie.

"They don't hurt any more. My ribs are still bothering me, though. I broke some of them when we crashed." She rubbed her side reflexively.

"Jeannie, why did you insist on coming out here? You know I wanted you to stay in the Enclave until I got back. Now look at the fix you're in." Jamie tried to look stern, but wasn't noticeably successful. Regardless of the near disaster of her flight out, and the horror of the attack by the rats, he admitted to himself that he was glad to see her. He just hoped nothing else happened on the way back.

Jeannie took his hand in hers. "At least I'm with you. I just couldn't stand it back at the Enclave. It was so lonely, and then Cadena--did you hear about him?"

"Yeah. Maybe I should have brought you with me to start with. It looks as if you can't stay out of trouble regardless of where you are. What else happened while I was gone?"

Jamie noticed a reddening of her face as she answered. "Um, just some other things. I'll tell you about them when we get back. I wasn't in any danger, though."

He saw her shift her glance to Kristi and smiled to himself, suspecting what the "other things" had been. Perhaps there wouldn't be any problem with Kristi when they got back. If they got back, that is. That was still problematical.

"There!" Randall pointed over the shoulder of his pilot to plumes of smoke rising from the forest. "Circle around slow and let's see what



it is. Be careful, I don't want to run into an ambush."

The pilot swung the floater in a wide circle, then dropped cautiously lower. Randall put Field glasses to his eyes and the scene leaped out at him. It could only be the Houston Enclave's floater which they had downed, but the heaps of dead rats and smoking vegetation told of a recent fight. There must have been survivors.

"Take us down," Randall said. The floater dropped gently to the earth, settling down near the wreck. Troopers deployed over the side, weapons ready. Randall hopped down behind them and examined the scene. Soon, satisfied that the decomposing bodies of the pilots could not possibly have been involved in the carnage, he ordered the floater into the air again. Somewhere near, there must be at least several survivors from the battle along the river, perhaps even Da Cruz himself. Optimism surged through him as he ordered the floater into the air again.

"All right, now. Use the IR. Take it in slow circles and let's see what we pick up."

The pilot complied while Randall watched the screen. "Contact, by damn!" He said loudly a few minutes later. The computer identified the images on the screen as human within seconds.

"Call in the other floaters," Randall ordered. "Let's bracket these sons-of-bitches before they get away!" His spirits rose as if suddenly freed from earth's dragging gravity. Now if that was only Da Cruz down there. By God, I might get home yet!

"Floaters!" Judy exclaimed. "Floaters overhead!"

Jamie looked up but saw nothing through the thick overhead branches. Masters came up at a run. "How many?"

"I saw two, at least," Judy said. "They were cruising slow."

"All right, let's not panic. We've got good cover here. Keep moving and maybe they won't spot us. We got away yesterday, we can do it again. Kristi, you stick with Jamie. If they do spot us, you get him away, understand?"



"Right."

Jamie was acutely uncomfortable at being the object of so much protectiveness, but there wasn't anything he knew to do about it. He followed along with Kristi and tried to keep Jeannie close.

It soon became apparent that the enemy floaters were marking their progress regardless of cover. Masters directed them off at different angles, but at least one floater could always be spotted, hovering above them, just out of range of their laser guns.

"Damn it, they must have some type of detection gear. Hold up for a minute and let me think." Masters didn't like his thoughts, but search his mind as he would, he could devise no other alternative.

Kristi said it for him. "We're going to have to split up."

"Yeah, I don't see anything else to do. Maybe they can't follow us all. I'll take Costa and the men. Kristi, you and Judy go with Jamie and Jeannie. We'll all head southwest, but at an angle from each other. Let's go!"

The two groups divided. Kristi led her command away, still trying to remain hidden under the trees. At least they prevented the floaters from landing easily. Soon though, the vegetation began to thin out. The trees became smaller and it became harder and harder to remain concealed, then finally almost impossible. A hovering floater continued to dog them, searching for a decent landing spot. Kristi finally halted them at the edge of some low bushes. From there, she spied an overpass of the old highway only fifty yards away, with thick forest on the other side. Unfortunately, a scattering of weeds and stunted bushes was all that had managed to take root on what had once been a huge parking lot of some kind, stretching off in both directions.

"Damn!" Kristi exclaimed. "I was afraid of this. Well, we can't just sit here until they decide to land. We'll have to try to make it to that overpass then into the woods. This isn't going to be fun, folks."

"What if they shoot at us while we're getting there?" Jeannie asked. She began trembling.

"No help for it. When I give the word, go. Don't bunch up. We'll meet under the overpass and try to get some shots in if they land. All we need is just a few minutes, then maybe we can get into the woods on the other side. Ready?"



"I guess," Jamie said. He eyed the stretch of open ground apprehensively.

Kristi squeezed each of their hands. "Good luck. Now go!" They began to run.

CHAPTER 27

Randall spotted several figures streaking from the brush, heading across an open area toward an overpass of the old highway. He put the glasses to his eyes and focused in on them. There! A running man, dark complexioned, with a prominent mustache. It had to be Da Cruz! Just as he thought his fortunes had finally changed, a heavy laserbeam streaked down, smoking a patch of weeds near one of the running figures. "Don't shoot yet, you fools!" He exploded over the command circuit.

The next thing Randall saw was a floater tumbling from the sky and he suddenly realized that the fire had not come from his men. The shot had been an errant beam aimed at his own floaters. He flagged the radar display which had been turned off to accommodate the hastily installed IR gear. A flotilla of dots shaped like the vee of migrating geese appeared on the screen. The leaders had already broken formation to engage his force. He saw immediately that they were heavily outnumbered. He sagged in his seat, trying to think. Another laserbeam crossed horrifyingly close to the canopy. Even through the insulating screen he heard the shrill hum of the following slug. A floater passed beneath his craft, trailing smoke and fire. It crashed headlong into the ground and exploded.

Randall saw that his only chance now was to get Da Cruz in his



hands. With him as a captive, negotiation might be possible; without him, he might just as well be dead. Randall wrested control from his pilot. "I'm taking us down. We're going to land right on top of that group down there. Kill the women if you have to, but I want that man alive, you hear?" He spoke over his shoulder to the eight troopers in the rear seats as he streaked down to the overpass where the running figures had taken shelter, then dropped precipitously just before they would have hit it. The floater landed with a jarring thud. "Out!" He yelled.

In hindsight, Masters saw that he had made an error in separating his small force. In a few more moments, the skies would have been cleared of enemy floaters by the Houston Enclave fleet he had just spotted and they would all have been safe. All he could do now was try to link up again with Kristi and hope that Jamie hadn't been hurt. He pointed in the direction which he hoped would intersect with her group, and waved for his men to hurry, no longer worried by an overhead enemy. As they ran in that direction, he accessed the broadbeam channel of his body computer. It had only limited range but he thought a passing floater should pick up his signal. "Houston, Houston, Captain Masters here. We need assistance." He gave his coordinates, then left the channel open, hoping someone would hear. As he continued to run, he thought how ironic it would be if His or Kristi's group were seen from the air and mistaken for enemy troops. They might be attacked by friendly fire before they could be identified!

Masters and his few tired rangers emerged from the heavier growth just as Randall's floater dropped down to the overpass, and just as he spotted Kristi and her group going to ground there. He saw the four figures turn to fight, unable now to make it into the woods on the other side. They had been brought to bay. Troopers leaped from the downed floater and spread away from it. He saw one go down and others begin to shoot back. "Get 'em!" He shouted at his own men, thinking it was already too late. No assistance had yet come from the Houston Enclave floaters. In fact, he didn't know if his urgent signal had even been heard. The air battle still raged overhead, floaters from both sides maneuvering in patterns not seen on earth since the old dogfights of WWI. He paused to aim and fire at one of the enemy troopers. The slug exploded into the enemy's spine a microsecond after the laserbeam hit, spraying bone and flesh and a fountain of



blood. Two of the troopers turned and began a return fire, driving his men to cover. The others disappeared from view, screened by the grounded floater.

The floater appeared like magic before Jamie's eyes, just as he thought they might escape. One second it was not there, the next it was on the ground, disgorging troops. Instinctively, he pushed Jeannie to the ground, forgetting that she could have helped. Her weapon skittered from her hand, leaving her defenseless. He yelled at his pets. "Fuzz! Wog! Get away!" There was no way they could fight armed men. His own weapon was already in his hand. He fired, saw a man go down and took aim again. To his side, Kristi fell, a gaping wound opening in her side. He screamed in anger and grief, pulling the trigger of his laser gun again and again until it was empty.

Randall saw a blonde haired ranger fall, mortally wounded. Da Cruz had pushed another to the ground, and he saw a third drop from the concussion of a slug exploding into the concrete near her head. She fell to the ground. Behind him, Randall heard more shots, too many for his few troopers to account for as he suddenly realized that only one of eight who had emerged with him was still on his feet. He saw Da Cruz standing upright, firing with rage in his eyes. He took aim himself, just as his last trooper fell. Carefully, he sent a laserbeam into Jamie's arm, holding back on the trigger to avoid letting a slug follow.

Jamie screamed and dropped his weapon, slapping at the smoking wound. Randall spurted forward before he had time to recover and whipped the butt of his weapon against his head, stunning him. He twisted Jamie's good arm behind his back and stuck the muzzle of his laser gun against his spine. "Move," he ordered roughly, pushing him back toward the floater, using his body for cover.



Jamie's senses were blurred. He had seen both Kristi and Judy fall and thought them both dead. Jeannie was still on the ground where he had pushed her, just now regaining her senses, but helpless without a weapon. His pets had disappeared. He shook his head, still in Randall's grasp. He was shoved roughly up into the floater and sprawled on the deck. He tried to think clearly, but visions of the last two weeks overcame rationality. After all this, to be ignominiously captured, the two women he loved either dead or left behind to perish with his pets in the wilds was almost too much to bear. He thought suddenly of the little laser gun still strapped to his boot, but there was no way to get to it now, not in the face of Randall's weapon pointed confidently at his chest. His arm hurt terribly from the laserburn. His coverall sleeve was still smoldering. I have to try, he thought foggily. The worst that can happen is that he'll kill me.

Randall kept Jamie covered as he took the pilot's seat. He didn't bother to close the canopy. He had no intention of taking off and probably being shot back down, not now, when he had the prize. He turned halfway around in the seat so that he could signal while still keeping watch on his prisoner. He had to get the Houston Enclave forces to back off, and with Da Cruz captive, that should be no problem. From there, he could negotiate from strength. He began instructing the floater's computer while Jamie gritted his teeth against the fire in his arm and tried to think of a way to distract his captor.

Randall had just begun to broadcast an ultimatum when a multi-colored ball of flashing claws and teeth jumped into the opened compartment and landed on his head, coming in from his blind side. "Arrghh!" He screamed as a claw hooked into his eye, blinding him. He pawed frantically at the animal, completely forgetting his weapon. He grabbed a handful of fur and skin and tore at the animal, trying to get it loose.

Jamie felt time slow down to a molasses crawl. Fuzzy Britches seemed to hang in the air forever as Randall tore him loose and flung him away, clutching at his blinded eye. The little laser gun strapped to his boot some untold ages ago came loose from its holster and into his hand, but slowly, as if it were reluctant to move. A wave of pain bit even deeper into his arm as he grasped it and flexed his wrist. Randall's own weapon swung slowly back toward him as bright spots danced in front of his eyes, blurring his vision. Then, as suddenly as time had slowed down, it speeded forward like a runaway sled and everything seemed to happen at once. He fired upward from his unsteady position on the deck, once, twice, three times.

The first slug took Randall in the shoulder, cratering the joint and



flinging his body into the computer screen. The other two shots missed, shattering the upraised canopy to bits, but it didn't matter. Randall's weapon popped from his hand the instant he was hit, leaving him helpless, blinded in one eye and staggered into shock from his ruined shoulder.

Jamie picked up Randall's weapon with his bad arm and flung it away, then had to endure more pain in order to hold off Fuzzy Britches who had bounced off a wall, been stunned momentarily, and was now trying his best to get at Randall's other eye, snarling like a wildcat. "Enough, Fuzz. You did good," he said. Outside, he heard Woggly growl. He drug the weakly resisting Randall to the cockpit door. As he tumbled him out onto the ground, he saw that Woggly was just finishing ripping out the throat of one of Randall's wounded men. The dog had been unable to make it up into the floater to help Fuzzy Britches, having no claws to help him aboard, but he had prevented the wounded man from intervening. Jamie began climbing out of the floater, trying to look in all directions and at the same time searching for Jeannie.

Jamie was very nearly killed by Masters as he stumbled out of the floater, going down to his knees, but Masters held his fire at the last moment as he recognized who it was. He ran over to Jamie and bent over him. The lone survivor of his force ran up behind him, holding a bloody arm. Jamie got back to his feet and staggered toward where he had left the others. "Jeannie, Kristi," he moaned.

"Are there any more of these bastards in the floater?" Masters demanded, trying to see how badly Jamie was wounded as he followed, and searching for more enemies at the same time.

"No, he was the only one. Jeannie!" He gasped thankfully as she ran up to him, completely unhurt.

Just then Masters spotted Kristi's prone form, covered with blood. He blanched at the thought that she was dead, then saw frothy pink bubbles spew from her mouth as she tried to breath. "You two get in that floater," he commanded, motioning them away. "I'll take care of her." He ran to where she lay bleeding. He ripped out his medkit and began trying to staunch the gaping wound. Judy rose shakily to her feet from she had been knocked unconscious by the near miss which had exploded into a concrete pillar supporting the overpass. She ran to help her captain. "Take over here," he told her. "I've got to get a signal out." He ran for the floater, hoping that it's computer was still functional.

Inside, Jeannie was trying to treat Jamie's wound based on the



slight knowledge she had gained from her brief training course. She had gotten some pain killer into him and was beginning to cut off his coverall sleeve with her knife. She was sickened at the way the fabric had melted into his flesh.

Masters saw that Jamie was in no immediate danger and left her to it. The floater's computer was still on line and miraculously unhit from Jamie's wild shots. He gave it the proper channel to broadcast on and began calling immediately. "Houston, Houston! Come in! This is Captain Troy Masters. We have survivors in a captured floater." While waiting for an answer, he glanced at the power gauge and did a hasty calculation. If Kristi were to be saved, he needed to start back immediately, and even then, he doubted there was time. Her wound was just too huge. First though, he had to make sure that they would not be shot down by their own forces, or any of the enemy still in the air.

"Houston Enclave Commander here. Give your status."

"We have wounded, in bad shape. I intend to lift off immediately and fly directly back to the Enclave. Can you cover me?"

"No need, captain, at least for the moment. We've cleared the air of enemy."

Masters turned to Jeannie. "Leave Jamie alone for now. He'll live. Get outside and tell Judy and Costa to get Kristi in here. Call the pets. Hurry!" He began readying the craft to lift, wondering how long Kristi could live with such a wound. It was bad, about as bad as it could get and still leave her breathing.

Judy, Jeannie and the wounded ranger carried Kristi aboard, then boosted Woggly and the other dogs up inside. Masters lifted off immediately. As soon as he had them airborne, he spoke to the commander of the friendly force who he knew must have communications back to the Enclave. "Call ahead and have an ER autodoc standing by at the landing field. We're going to need help as soon as we arrive."

"Will do," the anonymous voice answered.

Masters raised the captured floater above treetop level and headed out. An escort formed around him. He added speed and wind began whistling through the broken canopy. Behind him, Lady lay beside the deathly white form of Kristi, whimpering softly.



Randall opened his eyes and tried to move. An awful pain in his side threw him back to the ground. He gasped in agony and tried it again, moving inches at a time until he managed to gain his knees. The pain was so bad that he bit his lip, then cried out anyway. Around him lay the bodies of several of his men, all dead. The floater was gone, and with it Da Cruz, his only hope of ever returning to Moon City. Or even living at all. From behind him, he heard a squeaking noise. He turned painfully. A rat crouched a few feet away, eyes gleaming with intelligence. Two more came into view, moving cautiously at first, then more confidently as they saw how helpless the human was. Randall stared into the black depths of the hungry eyes. "Oh, God," he said.

The rats crept closer and were joined by others. This prey, at least, would not escape.

CHAPTER 28

The pain killer had begun to work on Jamie. As the hurt in his arm eased he was able to pay more attention to the other occupants of the floater. Jeannie sat beside him, looking worriedly at Kristi, who was stretched out in the aisle between the seats. Judy was tending to her with the limited supplies in the medkits, but they had never been designed for such a massive wound. Lady kept up an anxious whimpering all the time, nuzzling close to her mistress. Every few seconds Judy had to push her gently aside in order to work. Jamie twisted in his seat to get a better look. Judy's eyes met his. They held



little hope, but he felt compelled to ask, "How is she?"

"Not good." A tear trickled down her cheek, twisting a path through the bloody bits of concrete chips still embedded in her face from the near miss.

Lady's whimper became louder. She nosed forward and licked Kristi's face, then lay beside her with her muzzle touching her neck.

"Can we do anything?" Jeannie asked through her own tears.

Judy shrugged helplessly. "All we can do is try to keep her alive until we can get her hooked up to an autodoc. If she makes it till then, she's got a chance."

Lady licked Kristi's face again. Kristi blinked her eyes open for a moment. "I'll make it. I can't die now." Her voice was a whisper, barely audible. Her eyes closed again. Fuzzy Britches came up on the other side of her body and began helping Lady comfort her. He meowed very low and began licking the other side of her face. Presently Princess joined him.

It was a relatively short flight back to the Enclave in distance, particularly as Masters was pushing the craft to it's limits, but it was a very long one in terms of continuing apprehension. Judy continued her ministrations, calling on everything she had ever learned about field medicine to keep Kristi alive, but as they neared the Enclave, she let out a long bubbling sigh and stopped breathing. Judy immediately began CPR, shoving the pets roughly aside. Masters heard her cry of despair. He looked back over his shoulder, saw what was happening and put the floater into an all out, engine-ruining burst of speed. The power indicator blinked from amber warning to flashing red, and the craft's computer began telling him to slow down. He ignored the advice and began a long whistling descent that left no margin at all for error. Wind whipped tears from his eyes all the way down. He brushed them aside repeatedly in order to make out the gauges of the computer screen and the tarmac of the landing field, rushing up at him like a brick wall. At the last possible second he applied braking power. The floater's skids collapsed, the floater bounced hard, then came back down in a thudding crash, but it landed upright and almost on top of the waiting ambulance sled.



"Get her out, quick!" Masters said, jumping to help. He and Judy manhandled Kristi out of the floater, not wasting time trying to be gentle. The ambulance attendants threw her onto the sled and began frantically helping the autodoc attach it's tentacles to her. She gasped and jerked when the autodoc jolted her heart with a surge of current, then drew a bubbling breath.

Jamie bowed his head as the ambulance sled raced away. Masters put an arm over his shoulders. "Nothing more we can do now, son. Come on, let's get on over to security. We'll fix up your arm there."

Whitmire's waiting security team surrounded them and attempted to lead Jamie away. He balked. "I'm not going anywhere without Jeannie and the pets. We need to stay together." He supposed he sounded unreasonable, but it mattered little to him. He realized just then that he needed his family with him, even if it had not yet been formally declared, and that included Kristi's pets, and Kristi, if she lived. He hoped desperately that she would.

Masters backed him up. It had been many years since he had been encumbered with family, but he remembered the comfort they could provide in times of crisis. "Let them come," he told the security men. "I'll be responsible. Let's go, all of you." The chief of the security detail began to object until he saw the flinty expression in the ranger captain's eyes. He decided quickly that he would rather face Whitmire's admonition rather than argue with Masters. They left together.

John Whitmire was waiting. He startled Jamie by going immediately to Jeannie and hugging her, brushing aside the security chief's attempted explanations of why a coterie of pets and humans were accompanying Masters and the other man they had been detailed to fetch.

Whitmire spoke to Jeannie briefly in a low voice that was inaudible to the others, hugged her again, then led them all into his office. He chased out his secretary, then called for enough seats to accommodate everyone, arranging them to make room for the pets as well. They had come in as if by right and he did not try to deny their presence. As they were being seated, Judy huddled with Masters for a



second, then asked to be excused so that she could go sit with Kristi, if she were still living. Whitmire gently dismissed her, asking her to call as soon as she had any news.

Masters had one question immediately. "Have you found any more of my people?"

"We have, Captain. Maria Martinez and one of your rangers, Sammy Terrence. They still aren't very coherent; apparently they were questioned under a very high dose of veronal, but they should recover. In fact, they should be arriving at the dispensary right about now."

Masters lowered his head and brushed at his eyes. Only seven survivors out of over three dozen, not including any losses among the floaters. Yet it still had to counted as a victory.

Whitmire continued. "The losses are regrettable, especially as it seems they have gone for nothing. I have a team scouring that site now, but there doesn't seem to be much left of the alien and it's spacecraft. Some sort of explosion, I understand."

"Yes, I saw that myself," Masters said. He turned to Jamie. "But it wasn't for nothing. We got what we went for, according to Mr. Da Cruz, here."

Whitmire seemed to slough off ten years and grow two inches taller in his chair. "Do you mean that? Jamie, please enlighten me. This has not been one of my better days. I have been preparing to submit my resignation in view of the heavy loss of life and the failure to gain anything of value from them."

Jamie pulled the disk from the pocket of his coveralls and his mind was immediately assailed with the familiar kaleidoscopic images. He returned it quickly, wondering how such an insignificant little object could hold such promise, then looked up at Whitmire who was waiting anxiously for a reply. "It's all in here. Everything we need to build faster than light spaceships, and all the associated technology that goes with it. Also, I know the location of the alien mothership now. It's orbiting Saturn, but it's unmanned. All the aliens are dead. There's other stuff too, but I can't remember much of it right offhand."

Whitmire's lips parted in a beatific grin. He pointed to Jamie's pocket. "If I heard you correctly, then you have done well, indeed. Perhaps you should let me take it. I can get a team to work almost immediately."



Jamie made no move to retrieve it, drawing a frown of disapproval from Whitmire. "There's a catch. No one but me can access it, and I can't access much of the data unless I'm holding it with the intention of learning."

Whitmire's frown grew deeper. "Jamie, are you telling me that only you will be able to work with the data? Son, you can't build a spaceship by yourself, it would take a lifetime."

"Oh, no. That's not what I mean. I can use the disk, and in turn teach others what's contained in it. But there's just so much. It will take months and months. Maybe years. I don't know when I'll ever be able to get back to my own research."

"I dare say this is more important," Whitmire smiled.

"I suppose so, but no matter how important, it can wait for a while. I want to see how Kristi is. I want to have Jeannie looked at by an autodoc." He glanced down at his burned arm. "For that matter, I think I had better see an autodoc myself, before this pain killer wears off."

"Of course. I apologize for not seeing to it sooner, but other things seemed more important. We'll get you attended to immediately." He turned to speak to his office computer, but it flashed a message signal before he could give voice. He glanced at it, then looked back up. The relief was apparent on his face even as he spoke. "Lt. Carson is out of danger. She should recover."

The other three humans in the room breathed sighs of relief. Lady let out a joyful woof, followed by Woggly. Both cats began purring loudly.

Jamie retained the thought disk on his person, but he was not allowed to leave the security building. He was escorted to a treatment room and spent several hours attached to an autodoc, then returned to a small room where Jeannie and his pets were waiting. In the meantime, Masters had escorted Lady and Princess to where Kristi was still undergoing treatment. She would be attached to her autodoc for several days yet.



Security agents had followed Jamie at every step and they repeated the process when he and Jeannie asked for something to eat. They cordoned off a section of the cafeteria while they ate a huge meal, then dogged their steps back to another door, which proved to be a small apartment. Jamie became a little irritated at such close scrutiny, but soon forgot it as they did condescend to remain outside the apartment rather than inside with them.

Neither of them spoke much once they were closed in. Both of them knew exactly what they wanted to do, first thing--take a shower. The facilities were small but adequate. They both managed to fit into the stall together. Hot water and suds and soft towels later, they stretched out on the bed together, tired, but not yet ready for sleep. Jamie's mind was still whirling from excitement and the residual effects of medicinal drugs and even Jeannie's naked body curled beside him could not quite distract his thoughts.

"Jamie?"

"Hmm?"

"What's going to happen now?"

He turned and kissed her on the lips. "What do you think?"

Jeannie pinched his ribs. "Not that, silly. I mean, are we going to have to stay here from now on, with security men following us everywhere? Can't we go back to your place?"

"Tonight?"

She pinched him again, then snuggled closer. She ran her hands over the new pink skin of his arm, shivering at the thought of how close they had both come to death. "I'm not letting you out of this bed tonight now that we're finally here. But what about tomorrow, and all the other tomorrows?"

Jamie had already been thinking about that, but so far he had not arrived at any conclusion or decision. After a bit, he decided, as was his usual inclination, that the best thing to do was to wait for a while and see what happened. Right now, he wanted sleep and he wanted Jeannie. He pulled her even closer and presently they began making slow, tender love.

"Meow," said Fuzzy Britches from the foot of the bed, thoroughly approving.



CHAPTER 29

A week passed and Jamie began to get irritable, a state he was unused to. Whitmire had brought in a huge gang of experts, scouring the various departments for their very best men. As such, they were also the most demanding, caring little for food or sleep or anything else while in the throes of scientific revelation. Jamie recognized the syndrome; he had suffered under it himself on occasion, but there were other factors involved. He was spending every day and well into the night ensconced in a huge computer room, doing his level best to pass on the information contained in the disk accurately and faithfully. It was hard work as he didn't understand much of the data himself, but he put all he had into it. Gradually, he discovered the best way of accessing the disk with his mind but it was still time consuming and difficult. He finished each day dead tired and mentally exhausted.

Jeannie remained in the security building with him, but he saw little of her; she was usually asleep by the time he fell into bed. The pets were sometimes awake when he came in, but they were becoming restless. Being confined day after day to a few small rooms was not to their liking.

On the morning of the seventh day after returning to the Enclave, he finally called a halt, refusing to divulge any more information until he met with the security director. He listened to the exhortations of the scientists quietly, then told them firmly: No more for now. His ploy worked, but it was still nearly noon before he was finally escorted in to see Whitmire.

The old Englishman looked well rested for a change. His lips were



creased in the faintest of amused smiles, as if he held a secret thought just waiting for the right moment to come forth. "What can I do for you, Jamie?" He asked. "Are you having problems?"

"You know damn well I am," Jamie said, wondering why Whitmire was smiling when he should be frowning. "I don't mind working with you and your people, but it's getting to be a bit too much. I want to go back to my own apartment. I want Jeannie to go with me. I want to see Kristi. Jeannie has already been to see her and I haven't been able to. I want to play with my pets. Hell, I just want to get this over with and get back to my own job." He paused for breath.

Whitmire's smile grew larger. "That's quite a package, Jamie, but let's take first things first. Don't plan on going back to your old job, at least not in the Enclave, and not in the immediate future."

Jamie was wrong footed. "Why in hell not? Once I finish passing all this information on to the experts, I'm finished with it. I'm not an engineer, nor a physicist, either."

"I know that, but be patient and listen. I spoke to some of the key men you've been working with just yesterday. They tell me they may be consulting with you for years, or as long as that thought disk of yours keeps functioning. But that's actually not the point. You can't go back to your old job because I want you to begin space training just as soon as the scientists can spare you."

"Space training! Not on your life!" Jamie couldn't imagine himself as a spaceman, nor understand Whitmire's reasoning in suggesting it. It was the same reaction he had felt when told he was going off with an expedition into the wilds.

"Bear with me. I said I had talked with some of the key people. Jamie, as valuable as all that data you've been giving them, it seems to be mostly involved with engineering and spaceships and electronics. Most of it is very exotic and far beyond my comprehension; my training is too far in the past. What I'm getting at, though, is that so far as I can understand, you have brought back nothing that we comprehend so far that can help us in overcoming the problem of the enhanced animals."

Jamie still didn't understand the reasoning. He said so.

Whitmire lost his smile. A sad expression settled over his craggy face. "Jamie, the Enclaves here are failing, just as London was overrun back when I was your age. You must be aware of that fact, at least subconsciously. I think most citizens are; they just don't care to



think about it. Some of the Enclaves may last my lifetime, but they certainly won't last yours."

A light began to dawn. "I get it. You think everyone will have to leave earth on the spaceships we're going to build?"

"Not everyone. That is a physical impossibility. All we can do is hold out the hope that some people can leave. We'll build as many as we can, of course, as fast as possible, but only a very small proportion of our population will ever leave earth. The rest will die, quite violently, I'm afraid. As for the others, we're negotiating now with Mayor Bascombe in Moon City on a cooperative venture between our two cultures. They know more about conditions in space than we do. It should work out. We'll all be space folk, eventually, the ones who survive."

Jamie thought immediately of the murderous attack by the mercenaries of Moon City. "You're telling me this, even after all the trouble they caused? They almost killed me, and Jeannie and Kristi as well. What's to keep them from just dropping a couple of asteroids on us?"

"Believe me, that won't happen. They are in just as much trouble as we are. They still depend on earth for too many critical supplies. They will have to do as we tell them, and we will make certain that it is done our way."

"I see, I guess. But what will happen here on earth? Will we just leave it to the animals? That doesn't seem right, somehow."

Whitmire leaned back and clasped his hands behind his neck. He reflected a moment then relaxed again to his normal repose. "It's not quite that bad. There will always be humans on earth. There are feral bands out in the wilds now, living with animals, as you well know. There will be more of them as the Enclaves fall. What I see happening eventually, and this is simply my own opinion, by the way, is that eventually earth's ecology will reach a more stable balance. Food supplies and population of enhanced animals and feral humans will attain an equilibrium. This will take many years, of course, but the ultimate end will be the disappearance of most of human technology and a drastic decline of the human population. Eventually, I expect a renaissance of a machine culture, but that will be in the far future, long after it ceases to concern you and I. For a long while, the earth will belong mostly to the enhanced animals and humans will have little to say about it."

Whitmire's deductions sounded logical to Jamie, but right now he



was concerned with more immediate problems, like shorter working hours and getting out of that damned little claustrophobic apartment. However, his curiosity had been aroused. Space training?

"Just what would this space training entail? Not that it matters if I have to leave Jeannie and my pets. I won't do it."

"Be at ease. I think we can reasonably extend the training to include any person or animal you want to take with you. Also, don't think of it as a change of profession; you'll take your profession with you. The training will simply enable you to practice it in space."

That made Jamie feel somewhat better. In a way, the idea was appealing. Perhaps his recent adventures had changed him in ways he didn't yet comprehend, despite his initial disclaimer. He grinned inwardly, trying to imagine the pets' reaction to space flight and all that would entail. It would probably just give them more leeway to get into mischief. Whitmire might have second thoughts about the idea before it was over! There were still other matters to consider, though.

"All right, I'll think about the space deal, so long as Jeannie and uh, perhaps another person agrees to go along. But not just yet. I still want to go back to my own home at night, and I still want to see Kristi. Do you know when she will be discharged?"

The secretive look crept back onto Whitmire's face. He glanced down at an image on his computer screen, then back up to Jamie. "As a matter of fact, I do know. She is fully recovered and was released from the dispensary last night."

"Damn it, someone should have told me! I want to see her." Inwardly, he wondered why Kristi had made no attempt to see him. Had their liaison during the expedition been simply another passing fancy for her? He found that hard to believe, but was still hurt that he had not heard from her.

"I've already made arrangements for you to get together but first, let's take up the idea of you moving back into your old apartment. The answer is no. I can't allow it; even if I did, I would be overruled. Until we wring every last bit of data from that disk of yours, you will not be allowed to leave this building." Whitmire sat back and waited for Jamie's reaction.

It came, swiftly. Jamie could out-stubborn a cat if he put his mind to it, although he rarely found it necessary; he could almost always find a reasonable compromise to conflicting opinions. On this matter, though, he dug in his heels. "No. Either I get to go home or I don't



work. You can keep all the security men you want outside my door, but I am not going to stay one more day in that little two by four apartment you've got us in."

"Give me a little credit, Jamie. I never intended for you to stay there permanently. I've arranged for other quarters. Why don't you take the rest of the day off and look them over?"

"No. I want my own home, not something arranged for me. Besides, my pets need to get out into the open once in a while. They need some exercise and fresh air. For that matter, so do I." Jamie was prepared to be really stubborn here.

"Please, Jamie, indulge an old man. Go and look at the place."

"No."

Whitmire didn't seem at all put off by Jamie's refusal. "All right, let me put it this way. At least do me the favor of inspecting these new quarters. I've gone to considerable trouble to provide them for you. Look them over, then if you're not satisfied we'll talk some more."

It was a reasonable offer. Jamie didn't see how he could refuse without making himself appear as a spoiled prima donna, a trait he detested in others and had no desire to see himself as. "All right," he agreed, "but no promises."

"Good. I have an escort waiting for you. Go along with them; they know the location. Right now I need to get back in touch with my superiors. They are conferring with Mayor Bascombe and his cohorts in Moon City. They seem to be coming around, but need a little more convincing yet. I think the information we've pulled out of you in the last couple of days will help considerably in making them see the light."

Jamie thanked Whitmire half sincerely and left with his omnipresent escort, but the secretive little smile Whitmire left him with still nudged a suspicion that he was somehow being tricked. He wondered what the man was up to.

Roscoe Bascombe concluded his conversation with the



administrator of the Houston Enclave. The agreement they had reached depressed him, but he saw no alternative. He turned a glum face to Selene Brown and Rob Passing. "That's it, then. We give them all the help they ask for in building their spaceships, whatever they need. In return, we get a representation in the crews in proportion to our population."

"And that's all?" Passing asked angrily. Damned if that's so! He made a visible effort to hold back his anger. Best to say nothing now. He would talk to Bascombe later. It would be months, perhaps a year or so before the first ship could be completed. In the meantime he would see what he could do to improve their prospects.

"That's all," Bascombe said. "Actually, I suppose we should consider ourselves lucky to get that much, considering Randall's fiasco on earth. We might have been better off negotiating in the first place."

Selene pulled out a copy of the latest extrapolations on the viability of Moon City. She pointed them out in order to emphasize her words. "Actually, I don't think it would have made much difference. We kid ourselves sometimes about how naive the earthers are, but their computers are as good as ours. They must know our situation as well as we do. Even if we had negotiated, they would have insisted on more or less the same terms." She sighed, knowing that from now on, her power and prestige would count for less than that of earth's leaders.

"So where does that leave us in the long run?" Bascombe asked.

"Ultimately, it means that our culture will be subjugated and absorbed by theirs. The population disparity will guarantee that, if nothing else."

"And we can do nothing to stop it?"

"Nothing," Selene answered. "We can live, though, and some of our people will survive. If we choose carefully, perhaps our best people will gain enough influence to save some parts of our heritage. It's the most we can hope for, considering any other alternative."

"All right, then," Bascombe said sadly. "We'll do what we can and hope for the best. I wonder what we'll find out there in the Galaxy?"

"Whatever we find, I doubt that it will be any stranger than the situation we leave behind us on earth," Passing said. He rose from his chair and left the conference room, leaving the other two reflecting on his comment. Selene followed him moments later. Bascombe



remained in his office. He knew that Passing would not be content with what dregs they had salvaged in the agreement with earth. Well, wait and see. Perhaps he would come up with something. In the meantime, there was work to be done.

The usual security detail surrounded Jamie and his pets, whom he had insisted on bringing with him to see the living quarters Whitmire had arranged for them. He had intended to take Jeannie as well, but she was off on some excursion of her own. They led him down to the ground floor of the security building then through a complex of corridors he hadn't seen before. They halted at an entrance and the head man gestured for him to enter. He did. The door dilated to the silent command of his body computer, just as Whitmire had assured him it would. He was surprised that the security detail didn't follow him inside but was pleased that they hadn't. He stepped into a spacious living area, tastefully decorated, with a kitchen alcove much larger than he had ever enjoyed. The wall opposite the living area sported a wide window which looked out into a lawn and garden the size of two tennis courts, with a central swimming pool. He gave it only a cursory glance however. His attention was all on Lady and Princess, who were sprawled abreast on the carpet, watching an adventure skit on the holo.

They got up and came over to greet him and his pets and for a moment he was bemused with dogs and cats in a tangle around his legs. He roughed Lady's ears and stroked Princess' arched back, then suddenly was struck by the fact that these were Kristi's pets. "Hey! Is Kristi here?" He asked excitedly.

"In the bedroom," Lady said, and went back to stretch out in front of the holo. The other pets followed. Jamie strode hurriedly toward the partially opened bedroom door, then stopped as he became aware that he had been hearing subdued giggles from within ever since entering the living room. It didn't sound like just one woman. Who did Kristi have in there with her? Maybe he shouldn't interrupt. Oh, hell, he thought, Whitmire told me to look the place over. Besides, I want to see her. He was bemused with conflicting emotions, thinking perhaps Kristi had taken a new lover. But why would she have her here? He pulled the door open and peeked in.

Jeannie and Kristi were lying naked on a triple wide bed, hands



entwined. He raised an eyebrow. "Can I come in, or is this a private party?"

Jeannie's face turned pink, but Kristi just smiled. "Come on, we've been waiting for you."

Jamie didn't need a second invitation. He undressed and made a place between them, an arm around each. "Now I know why Whitmire was grinning like a Cheshire Cat when he sent me here."

"He brought us both over this morning as soon as you left for work. Wasn't that nice of him?" Jeannie tickled his stomach.

"He knows how to get a man's attention, that's for sure. Maybe he isn't as old as I thought he was. I take it he intends for both of you to live here?" He tightened his hold on both women.

"Actually, it was Fuzzy Britches who insisted on the arrangements and he just went along with it," Kristi said. "Don't you like it?"

Jamie grinned to himself. Fuzzy Britches! That scamp was always a step ahead of him. "Oh, I like it fine. In fact, I can think of only one thing I need right now that would make it perfect."

Jeannie quit tickling and began caressing him in rhythm with Kristi. "And what might that be, Mr. Da Cruz?" She asked softly.

"A back rub," he said, and turned over, laughing at their indignant protests.

Jamie got his back rub and much, much more. Later, lying propped on a pillow with his head turned, he watched as Jeannie and Kristi made love to each other. He was in that curious state halfway between arousal and satiation and was wondering whether he could possibly perform again.

Fifteen pounds of rainbow colored cat landed solidly on his stomach.

"Oof!" Fuzz, don't do that!"

Fuzzy Britches spread himself out on Jamie's chest and began to purr, content with his people.

THE END



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