

# **Space Pets**

All rights reserved © 2002 Darrell Bain

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, or by any information storage or retrieval system, without the permission in writing from Double Dragon Publishing.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Deron Douglas

ISBN: 1-894841-93-X

First Edition eBook Publication October 10, 2002

## **SPACE PETS**

By

Darrell Bain

### **Chapter One**

Jamie Da Cruz woke up and looked around his bedroom. Even after six months, he still wasn't used to the opulence. Even the bed was large and luxurious, spacious enough for four or five persons to sleep comfortably--or do other things on it. Of course his previous apartment wouldn't have been large enough for himself, Jeannie, Kristi, and their four pets, even if John Whitmire of the Houston Enclave Security Section had allowed him to stay there, which he hadn't. Since Jamie had become so important, Whitmire was insistent that he stay within the confines of the security building to prevent a possible abduction by Moon City agents and, Jamie had to admit, the apartment Whitmire had furnished went a long way toward keeping him happy.

The bedroom was furnished with state of the art holovision fixtures keyed to his body computer and the adjoining comfort room contained facilities sufficient to bathe and refresh a bull walrus and all his family. It was more than enough for he and his consorts and anyone else they might want to invite over for a party.

The large living room was decorated with an assortment of Kristi's beautifully tanned hides, ranging from deer to rabbit and bobcat. On one wall Kristi's spare laserifle was racked on animal horns, and her extra handgun and knife dangled below on a belt and shoulder harness arrangement. The one large and several small loungers scattered around the room gave it, together with the hides and weapons, a casual, lived-in look. One wall was blank, although it contained a barely discernible door. It was used for the holovision projections. An unobtrusive accessory computer console was tucked in one corner, and another door led to a large autokitchen and dining area. To one side of the bed, another door opened out into the privacy of a large fenced yard, complete with a small pool and varied food shrubs and other nutritive plants.

Jamie removed himself from the bed and into the comfort room. Trimming his mustache, he reflected that Conan, the feral dog who had been the courier of the original alien message on a thought disk would never have been able to contact his pets--and him--had he been living here then rather than closer to the edge of the barriers. But in that case, he wouldn't have met Kristi, nor possibly have gotten so involved with Jeannie. Even so, he sometimes missed the simplicity of his life as it had been before Conan appeared. Then, his biggest worry had been aberrations in the hambean line of plants he had developed, and the foibles of his boss, the chief of the Genetic Engineering Section of the Houston Enclave.

Jamie heard soft footsteps behind him and knew that Jeannie had arrived home from her job with the almost completed spacecraft's computer system. The door had allowed her to enter silently, alerted by the code from her body computer. A pair of slim hands stole around his eyes.

"Hi, Jeannie. You're late"

"How did you know it was me and not Kristi?" Jeannie asked, puzzled.

"I checked with John before I left work. He said their patrol ran into some problems and were going to be late."

"She's not hurt is she?" Jeannie asked. Alarm crept into her voice.

"He didn't say, but I'd guess not. He didn't look worried."

"Good," Jeannie said. She circled his waist with an arm and drew him into the living room, pushing him down onto the big lounger. Fuzzy Britches, the vari-hued enhanced cat made a run for Jamie's lap, but Jeannie beat him to it. Fuzzy Britches didn't complain; he simply held up for a moment, then hopped up into Jeannie's lap in turn.

Jeannie was a small, dark, pretty girl, revealing a Hispanic legacy similar to Jamie's own brown countenance. She wore the standard Enclave coveralls, sleeves rolled above the elbows and the front closure open almost to her navel. A filmy underthing showed the swell of her breasts, large for her small frame.

Jamie helped himself, running a hand inside the lapel of the coveralls and giving her an affectionate squeeze.

"Mmm," Jeannie responded. "Now, or shall we wait for Kristi?"

"Let's wait. Are you hungry?"

"Not yet." Jeannie tried unsuccessfully to smooth down Fuzzy Britches' thick wiry pelt and got a soft purr as a reward.

"How's the work going?"

Jeanie's face brightened, as it always did when talk turned to computers or sex. "Oh, good. I've about finished the basic programming of the ship's computer, and that's all I can do until we install it. When will that be?"

"It shouldn't be much longer. Everything is basically finished, or as near as I can tell the engineers from that Alien thought disk." Jamie fingered the thin, saucer-sized disk the alien had crafted and tuned to his mind alone just before it died and thought of all the changes that had occurred since Conan brought the original message to him from the alien on an even smaller, general purpose disk dangling from his crude collar. Of all the dogs sent out by the band of feral humans after the alien's lander crashed in their vicinity, only Conan had been able to contact a human from one of the Enclaves--and apparently met his death in the subsequent fighting between the rival Dallas and Houston Enclaves over access to the alien technology.

"Where's Princess?" Jeannine asked Fuzzy Britches as she smoothed down his springy hair, only to have it bounce up again. Princess was Kristi's white-haired enhanced cat and Fuzzy Britches' paramour whenever she was in heat.

"Asleep," Woggly the dog said, coming into the room. "Cats always sleeping."

Woggly was large, brown, and shaggy haired. He was enhanced as well, but not quite as intelligent as Fuzzy Britches, though it would take someone who knew them both to be able to tell the difference. Both of Jamie's pets were loyal and protective, and both had been with him on his excursion into the wild country beyond the Houston Enclave. It had been a horrific experience for Jamie (and Jeannie), but the pets had enjoyed it (other than when their humans were in danger), and had been agitating for another adventure. Life inside the Enclave seemed tame to them anymore. Jamie had been telling them that he was soon to go on the first test flight of the new spaceship and they both wanted to accompany him. Jamie had tried to explain the differences between an earth and a space environment.

"In space, you wouldn't weigh anything, Fuzz. You'd float."

"Like birds?" Fuzzy Britches asked, licking his lips. "Birds don't play fair. They fly away when I chase them."

"Cats climb trees," Woggly said, pointing out that he had his problems as well.

"Not the same," Fuzzy Britches said. "Us friends. Birds food."

"Never mind that," Jamie said. "There aren't any birds in space anyway, and damn few on earth anymore, for that matter. And there are no bad cats to chase, either, Woggly."

The animals were aware in a way that environments different from their own existed elsewhere, mainly from watching holovision. The Houston Enclave was widely separated from the two coastal spaceports, which were still functional, so they had no live reference to spaceships, only pictures. The animals liked watching holovision, but had a hard time separating fact from fiction.

Fuzzy Britches considered the conversation then settled the issue in his own mind. "Take Kristi," He said. "Have fun. Fight. Catch mice. Have lots of fun."

Jamie shrugged and gave up trying to explain further. Since Kristi had come into their lives six months ago, they would henceforth associate her with adventure. Kristi was a Ranger, going out frequently with others of her profession into the wilds around the Enclave, observing and cataloging the ever changing mix of feral, intelligently enhanced animals, the descendents of genetically altered pets and laboratory animals.

One experience had been enough for Jamie. He was a genetic engineer himself, or had been until his encounter with the alien in its crashed landing craft, but his specialty had been in agriculture, using his craft to help satisfy a hungry population confined to limited area. He had little interest in adventure, unlike Kristi Carson, who seemed to thrive on it. He had been more or less forced into that one expedition, but he had to admit that it had been worth it. If he had not gone on that expedition, he would probably never have met Kristi, nor would Kristi have met Jeannie, and the three of them formed a household. It was strange, but not nearly as strange as the situation the earth was in now.

\*\*\*

Near the end of the last century, the earth was in turmoil. Back in the early part of the century, well before Jamie's birth, genetic manipulation and its by-products had become the predominant growth industry of the world, including Moon City and the space stations. One of the products was mentally enhanced animals, many of them bred for the pet industry. Intelligent and semi-intelligent animals presented little problem in the controlled environment of space, but earth was a different matter entirely.

Once the human genome had been resolved, that of other mammals presented little additional problem. Inevitably, scientists began mixing human and animal genes and sometime whole chromosome segments. These were inserted back into man's favored species. As the craft became increasingly simpler, control became more difficult, especially given the demand for enhanced or altered pets. At first the insertion of human genes into other animals was banned by most nations, but the simplicity of the process and the urgent need of bankrupt third world economies for hard currency created a huge clandestine trade in genetically enhanced pets, farm animals and laboratory specimens which became impossible to stop. 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 bred for use in research; semi-intelligent rabbits and ducks, crafted for the Easter trade; 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 control (where any was attempted) and begun to breed. Back-breeding with the original stock also occurred, sometimes successful, other times not, but eventually the gene pool of many, many species was unalterably changed. By the time real problems developed, it was far too late to stop the process.

North America was the prime market for enhanced animals, especially pets, and what happened there over the next fifty years was only the forefront of the wave of disasters that swept over the industrialized world, and soon after, the less affluent countries. The United States did fare better than other countries initially in controlling the larger animals, simply by reason of the plethora of armed citizens in that nation. For the first time in its history, the murder rate in that country actually dropped as people began shooting cats and rats and dogs and rabbits, as well as other, more fearsome beasts, rather than each other--at least they did until the food supplies began to fail.

Intelligent mice and rats and rabbits became too smart to be taken in by baited grain and ate the food crops with a devilish ability at avoiding traps. They tunneled underground and waited out the poison sprays until rains washed them away, then came out to feast again. Had it not been for the more intelligent dogs, cats, and other carnivores, they might well have driven humanity completely off the planet. As it

was, depletion of the fields and attacks by starving packs of feral animals on any isolated dwelling gradually drove men into the huge present day Enclaves where an uneasy balance was finally achieved, although the ultimate future of the Enclaves was by no means certain.

However, humans did control their Enclaves, at least for the present, and gradually adapted to them, even retaining a residue of loyal, intelligent pets content to live with their masters and provide no little help in maintaining their integrity. But outside the barriers, the enhanced and altered animals warred on each other and on unaltered species without let or hindrance.

In the third world countries, however, there was no such security. A reverse migration of the animals back to their source, fueled by inexorable population pressure was at its peak. Less advanced technologically, these countries were rapidly devolving into chaos and anarchy as the reverse migration of enhanced animals swept back to their source, haunting their originators with barren fields and ecological nightmares. The only spots of relative stability were in areas being mined or drilled for vital resources. There, the few remaining nations still technologically sophisticated offered help in maintaining areas of integrity in return for the vital resources and raw materials of civilization.

Within the Enclaves (with a much-reduced population), life and culture began a temporary upswing. The rather drastic police methods necessary for the formation of the Enclaves was now giving way to a more relaxed form of government, albeit a much regulated and in some ways a more limited one.

There were still problems, of course. Dolphins, for instance, were adamantly against deep-sea fishing, especially the use of drift nets, and deep-sea mining was becoming so prohibitively expensive that it was gradually dying out. Also, any cross country movement other than air travel had become so dangerous that it was almost unheard of, and the air travel was limited mostly to vital cargo handling by the ubiquitous floaters powered by solarmagnetic engines and fuel cells. The only regularly scheduled passenger traffic was to and from the major Enclaves, and from the east and west spaceports, and even that traffic was gradually lessening. As a result, the Enclaves were beginning to develop diverging cultures.

The Houston Enclave, for instance, displayed a predominately southern and Hispanic identity, present to a degree originally, then reinforced by the influx of surviving refugees from other large southern and coastal cities when those areas had been abandoned, while the Dallas Enclave drew most of its expanded population from Oklahoma City and the lower mid west.

Genetic agriculture was the saving force for the Enclaves. It enabled them to grow altered foodstuff of very high yield, protein-rich and resistant to almost all blights and diseases. Genetic manipulation of crop fruits and vegetables enabled the Enclaves to survive, for the time being at least, even though that same sort of meddling was responsible for the Enclaves to begin with.

Inside the barricades, life went on, punctuated with a curious dichotomy. On the one hand, survival required a high educational level and a technologically orientated work force to maintain the infrastructure of the Enclaves, as well as innovative and hard working technicians to keep the economy functioning while trying to cope with the increasing paucity of spare parts and raw materials. On the other, the resolution of the human genome had eliminated almost all sickness and diseases, including sexually transmitted ones, and that led in turn to a hedonistic, sexually liberated life style manifested in extravagant home and group entertainment, group families such as Jamie, Jeannie, and Kristi had formed, and an almost total lack of organized religious beliefs or observances. Crime, other than petty theft was almost unknown, for there was only one punishment for anything more serious: banishment to the wilds, where survival could be gauged in days, weeks, or a month at best.

It was a curious life by some historical standards, but like citizens throughout history, they accepted

their circumstances as though they would go on forever and ever. Even their increased life spans were not sufficient to make them realize that change rather than stability is the permanent state of human affairs.

## CHAPTER TWO

Jamie nuzzled Jeannie's neck, wondering how much longer it would be before Kristi returned, worrying a little despite John Whitmire's assurances. Besides, Jeannie was stroking his neck and back in a familiar manner, letting him know that she was ready despite her previous disclaimer about waiting for Kristi. It never took much to get Jeannie going, although getting her to stop was sometimes a more difficult proposition. However, Kristi had solved that problem neatly when she moved in. She was the first female Jeannie had ever been with, and it was still an enjoyable novelty to her.

That was fine with Kristi as well. She was more orientated to women than men anyway, Jamie being one of the rare exceptions. He still wondered sometimes why she liked him so much, but then Jamie was an unusually modest and unpretentious character, and more tolerant than any human had a right to be. Kristi was attracted to him because of those traits, as well as his stubborn acceptance of unwanted danger and hardship when he had been forced to accompany the expedition trying to recover the stranded alien and its landing craft down in the wilds two hundred miles north of the Houston Enclave.

That expedition had been organized in hopes of learning new technology, which might help the Enclave survive. It had been only partially successful. Jamie had indeed met the alien, trapped in the wreck of its craft, and was given a thought disk by which the alien communicated, but there was nothing there which promised any real help for the beleaguered earth. There was, however, detailed engineering instructions for a faster than light spacecraft, given by the alien in hopes that humans would travel back to its home system and try to save some representatives of its race where an encroaching dust cloud was gradually rendering its planet uninhabitable. The thought disk was keyed to Jamie alone, and he still had nightmares about the battle with the Moon City mercenaries also trying to recover the craft, as well as the wild battles with enhanced animals and feral humans on the way there and back. His prospective trip into space seemed tame by comparison.

Jeannie shifted her body in his lap and began tugging at his coverall closure. Jamie quit his nuzzling and began kissing her in earnest. Fuzzy Britches, knowing what was coming, jumped down from her lap and joined Woggly on the floor. The two animals touched noses, communicating silently their amusement at the sexual antics of humans.

The humans continued what they were doing. Jamie had never given much thought to having sex in the presence of self-aware animals. His pets certainly didn't mind, and sometimes even entered the fray, not as participants, but rather as family observers, amusing their masters as well as themselves by their antics. One of Fuzzy Britches' favorite antics was licking Jeannie's nipples, which still embarrassed her to an extent, much to the cat's amusement.

Jeannie had never owned pets of her own, but in the last half year she had become enchanted with those of Jamie and Kristi.

Jeannie took herself from Jamie's lap and stood up, somewhat rumpled, cheeks already flushing in

anticipation. Jamie snugged an arm around her waist and began leading her toward the bedroom under the amused gaze of the two pets. Before they took more than a few steps forward, the door to the outside dilated and Kristi Carson entered the room.

Kristi was dirty; her blonde hair was unwashed and tangled and the high cheekbones of her Nordic ancestors smudged, but her pretty blue eyes were bright and cheerful and she held her body straight, even after a week in the wilds. She was taller than Jeannie but curved just as amply, or perhaps more so, but her figure was mostly concealed by thermosmotic coveralls and boots, along with belt and shoulder harnesses holding her laserifle and pistol, various pouches and a knife which might rival the swords carried by her Viking forefathers.

"Kristi!" Jamie and Jeannie shouted at once and ran toward her. Kristi dropped the pack from her back and hugged them both, unmindful of the smudges she transferred to them in the process. Lady, her white-haired dog, woofed a greeting at the humans, then plopped herself down between Fuzzy Britches and Woggly, who immediately began pestering her to tell of her adventures in the wilds. Princess, her equally white Persian, heard the commotion and bounded into the room. She rubbed at Kristi's feet, then joined the other animals, just as eager to hear some new stories as Jamie's pets were.

"Why were you late?" Jamie began almost at once. "Are you okay? Did anyone get hurt? What's happening outside?"

Kristi laughed and stilled his questions with a kiss, then kissed Jeannie as well. "Let's save the questions until I get cleaned up, okay? I stopped to see John when we got in. He has some news for us, and I have some too, but I want to wash and change first."

"I'll start a bath," Jeannie said eagerly, but didn't hurry off. Jamie put an arm around them both and led them toward the bath. Behind his head, they winked at each other and entwined their hands. It had been a week since they had seen one another, after all, and while Jamie might be anxious for Kristi's company, the two women were even more ready for a re-union. Jamie could wait and watch, and be all the better for it, they thought.

The sybaritic bath was warm and refreshing. Jamie and Jeannie vied for the pleasure of scrubbing off the week's worth of wild country debris from Kristi's oddly tanned body. She relaxed and enjoyed the lathering of her body, especially the contrast of a soft, feminine hand rubbing one breast and the strong larger male one on the other. The same sensations excited her more as they worked down around her waist and along her thighs.

The warm water re-cycled, carrying away the grime, then she stretched under their toweling with movements, which would have done justice to Fuzzy Britches' best efforts after waking from a nap.

Once in bed, Jamie was content to wait his turn. The stimulation of just watching while Jeannie and Kristi renewed their desire was enough to heighten his own performance even beyond his usual competent level. He thought he might even manage another time before the evening was over, but for now he was content. He leaned back against the soft headboard of the bed and remembered to ask, "You said you had some news for us?"

"Oh," Kristi exclaimed. "So I did." She reached across Jamie's body to caress Jeannie's breasts, admiring her light brown nipples as she did so. "Well, the first thing is that we found Conan."

"Conan? You mean he's alive?" Jamie could hardly believe it. The last sight he had had of the feral dog was of him falling under the laser gun fire of the attacking Moon City mercenaries from the Dallas Enclave. His own escape had taken him in another direction and he had assumed since then that Conan had certainly been killed.

"He's alive," Kristi said. "He spent months recovering from his wounds, and since then he's been working his way back here again. He made it as far as the barricades, but couldn't find a way in this time without getting shot. He's just been out there waiting and hoping that someone in a Ranger patrol would recognize him."

"That's almost like a miracle," Jamie said. "Where is he now? The pets will want to know that he's back."

"He's being taken care of at the medical section. He's still not in very good shape, but they told me he could be released in a couple of days. John Whitmire made the vet assign the pet autodoc to him and discharge all the other pets it was treating."

"Great," Jamie said enthusiastically. Conan had been the original courier from the feral human and dog town where the alien craft had crashed, and had led the expedition back to the site. Most of his human and canine clan had perished in the attack from the rival expedition from the Dallas Enclave.

Jamie had had melancholy thoughts ever since then, remembering the dog's bravery in traversing two hundred miles of wilderness, and even more difficult, finding a way into the Houston Enclave, bringing that strange message imbedded in the alien thought disk, making contact with his pets and convincing them to hide him rather than alarming the Enclave security forces that a feral dog was loose inside, and then dying under the guns of a surprise attack. Jamie was overjoyed that he had survived.

"I'm so glad," Jeannie said, speaking to Jamie. "I didn't like him at first because I thought he was going to get you killed or hurt out there in the wilds, but it all worked out, didn't it?"

Kristi reached up to touch Jeannie's cheek. "You were worried about him? What about your own self? It's just a miracle that you managed to get back alive."

Jeannie shuddered. "I don't want to think about that."

It was no wonder. Jeannie had been irate that Jamie was going off into the wilds without her, and at the time was jealous of Kristi. When by the wildest of chance she had captured a Moon City spy, she had used his capture to blackmail Whitmire into allowing her to join the expedition with Jamie and Kristi, but on the way to the site of the alien crash site, her floater had been shot down by the Dallas floaters and she had spent a horrifying two days being stranded and attacked by an enhanced rat pack, then being chased with Kristi and Jamie by the Dallas mercenaries.

She rubbed her head on Jamie's chest, trying to get the images out of her mind, and reached over to run her hand along Kristi's slim waist.

"Well, forget about that," Kristi said. "There's something else you need to know. We were all planning on going on the first flight of the spaceship when it's completed, but when I talked to John, he told me that of us three, only Jamie is going to be allowed to go."

Jamie had been of two minds about that since the spacecraft began nearing completion. He knew that Kristi was adamant about accompanying him and the contingent of scientists, and that Jeannie certainly didn't want to be left behind, but she had been strangely reticent about the arrangements. Jamie wasn't worried about Kristi's ability to take care of herself, but Jeannie and the pets had been causing him considerable worry. He was glad in a way about Kristi's revelation, but on the other hand he wasn't really enthusiastic about going into space without his family, regardless of the possible dangers.

Jeannie giggled and drew Kristi's hand back down to her breasts.

"What's funny?" Jamie asked. Her reaction wasn't at all what he had expected. A puzzled



expression also crossed Kristi's face.

Jeannie grinned beatifically. "You can all stop worrying," she said, "It doesn't matter what Mr. Whitmire wants. That spaceship will never leave orbit unless I'm on it. I've bolluxed the computer!"

Jeannie was more than ten years younger than either of the others and much more emotionally oriented. Hardly anyone knowing her gave her credit for a very active brain, regardless of her expertise with computer programming. A person looking at Jeannie Bostick was much more likely to notice her overt sexuality and lush body, and never even think that a considerable intelligence might be lurking within. Until the return of them all from the expedition in the wilds, she had worked in Jamie's own Genetic Engineering section, and since then, she had been promoted to chief programmer of the computer, which would control the spacecraft. Evidently she had done some of her own programming, separate from the regular engineering specifications.

Jamie was speechless, but not Kristi. She drew Jeannie over Jamie's reclining body and began kissing and hugging her, laughing all the while. "Oh, Jeannie did you really? I can't wait to tell John. This is even better than when you used that nasty Cadena to make him let you come out and join us that other time! He'll have a litter of kittens, he'll be so upset! Hey, I bet we could finagle him into letting Troy come along, too. When I talked to him, he said they wanted someone younger, but there's no one better than Troy Masters for running a Ranger company."

"Wait a minute!" Jamie exclaimed. "No one has consulted me about this yet. Don't you realize this could be dangerous? We'll be going to that derelict orbiting Saturn first, then maybe further on out. I don't think --"

"I do!" Kristi said. "Oh, Jeannie, you're a doll. I just love you." She crawled across Jamie's chest and forced Jeannie into a reclining position, laughing and kissing her lips and neck and breasts. Presently, the kisses grew into caresses and from there into another round of enthusiastic lovemaking. Jamie relaxed and succumbed to the inevitable. Their last excursion had turned out all right in the end, and maybe this one would as well. Besides, he really didn't want to go into space alone.

\*\*\*

Jamie and Kristi lazed around the next morning while Jeannie went to beard John Whitmire in his den. Jamie had no doubt that Jeannie would pull off her blackmail. He didn't even bother going into work, where a contingent of scientists had spent the last six months using his verbalization of the data contained in the alien thought disk to construct the FTL spacecraft, knowing that before long John Whitmire would be calling for him, demanding that he make Jeannie change her mind. He already knew that it wouldn't work. John Whitmire was a much older man, with a mind-set firmed long, long ago, when men could still dominate a woman's actions. He still became embarrassed at homosexual activity, though he tried to avoid showing it. He was an extremely intelligent man, his mind unwithered by age and he had been instrumental in organizing the expedition that Jamie had reluctantly gone out with. He also controlled the selection of the small Moon City contingent that was being allowed to make up part of the crew of the first exploratory voyage of the spacecraft, but he was being extremely cautious. The Enclave needed help from Moon City and the space stations with spacecraft engineering problems, and he was forced to use them, even after their deadly attempt to block the Houston Enclave expedition with so much loss of life. He might be old fashioned, but he certainly wasn't dumb.

\*\*\*

"Jeannie, you'll be the death of me," Whitmire said. He was agitated, and his white-haired, blocky body showed it. Jeannie had blackmailed him before, and here she was in his office again, making even

more unreasonable demands.

"It worked out before, didn't it?" Jeannie asked, not unreasonably. She crossed her arms over her chest.

"No thanks to you," the old man said. "You almost lost your life then."

"Yes, but just think, if that poor pilot who was ferrying me out there hadn't gotten a message off, everything might have been lost. As it was, everything turned out fine. And it doesn't make any difference anyway. Either Kristi and I go with Jamie on the spaceship, or it doesn't go."

"I could put you to sleep and get your codes," Whitmire said, wondering to himself whether he would really do such a thing--and whether it would work if he tried it. From the set of Jeannie's body and face, he rather doubted it.

Jeannie smiled, confirming his suspicions. "No you couldn't. If I don't speak in a perfectly normal tone of voice to the computer, it will freeze up. Once we're in space, that program will drop off the net, but until then, there's no one else who can control it."

"I see," Whitmire said. "All right, on your head be it. Now go away, and let me decide whom I have to drop from the crew to allow you and Kristi to replace them."

"And the pets," Jeannie mentioned.

Whitmire looked pained. "Yes, of course, the pets. Is there anyone else you want to take? Please say no."

Jeannie suppressed another smile. "No, I can't think of anyone else."

"Good."

"Kristi can, though."

Whitmire looked to the heavens. "And who might that be? Has she taken another lover all of a sudden?"

"If she does, she won't go," Jeannie said darkly. "No, she just thinks that Captain Masters should command the Rangers. She trusts him."

"Well, so far as that goes, so do I," Whitmire said. "I just thought he was too old, but all right, Troy will command the Rangers. Now, please, Jeannie, don't ask for anything else."

"Oh, I wouldn't think of it, Mr. Whitmire. All I really wanted in the first place was to go with Jamie."

"Yes, I'm sure," Whitmire said. He rubbed a hand through his thinning white hair as Jeannie left his office, and smiled inside. He thought wistfully that it would be nice to have a daughter like Jeannie. Or Kristi. They both made him proud.

Jamie was called to Whitmire's office later in the day. Since it was in the same building, he was able to appear there in minutes. Whitmire's receptionist ushered him into the office. His desk was piled high with computer printouts, engineering layouts, personnel rosters and other minutiae of his position as Director of Enclave Security. Incongruously, he retained printed books on shelves of antique oak, a mix of reference and fiction, all of them very old and battered. Jeannie always thought they smacked of museum pieces rather than something to be actually used.

Jamie was prepared for a dressing down from Jeannie's computer shenanigans, but John Whitmire had other objectives in mind. The only reference he made to Jeannie's command of the spacecraft computer was to get reassurance that should anything happen to her before it was launched, it would still be serviceable. Jamie, being a conscientious person, had already gotten assurances on that matter from Jeannie. She had already programmed in his and Kristi's voices as alternate command modes. He said so.

Mollified, Whitmire went on to other matters. "Jamie, I don't really like what Jeannie has done, but let's let that lay for a moment. There are other concerns. As you know, we had to have help on the spacecraft from Moon City, even after they tried so hard to steal the technology. We just don't have their expertise in space, not to mention that earth will always be subject to blackmail from them. They have gravity on their side, and there isn't a thing we can do about it. Anytime they take a notion, they can bombard us from space and there is nothing we could do to prevent it.

"After I talked to Jeannie, I had second thoughts. Letting the pets go into space with you doesn't seem like a bad idea. They have senses that we don't, especially Conan. You've heard that he was found?"

"Yes, I heard. When can I see him?"

"Talk to Captain Masters. He'll be around to see you today. As I was saying, the pets can sense emotions far better than humans, and Conan should be better at it than the Enclave pets. Remember that he grew up in the wilds, and he had to depend on those senses for survival. I think we'll send him along as well."

"Is Captain Masters going, too?" Jamie asked innocently--or at least tried to.

"Yes, he's agreed," Whitmire said. "The ship is certainly big enough. The space people didn't stint there. Of course, that allows them to send more people as well, since we had already agreed on the proportions of crew from each society." He looked at Jamie over the expanse of his desk as if that should convey some sort of information.

"Oh," Jamie said, suddenly understanding the path of Whitmire's thoughts. "Are you thinking they might try to seize the ship or something? Don't you think they got a bellyful of fighting us the last time?"

"I sincerely hope so," Whitmire said, "but they are having as many problems as we are, although of a somewhat different nature. They still depend on us for too many materials, and we're having trouble supplying them, given the state of our own ecology and economy. Suppose they decided it might be simpler to seize the ship, produce more of them, and just forget about earth?"

"Could they really copy it, do you think? Without me, that is?" Jamie fingered the thought disk in his coverall pocket; the one attuned to his mind alone.

Whitmire shrugged. "Once they ferry up the computers and generators and we install them, I'm told they probably could. And if they had you, they certainly could--that is, if they could control the main computer. That's why I'm not really too upset with Jeannie. In retrospect, she may have done us a service. However, I see no need to tell anyone else about this, do you? Actually, the only reason you're going on the initial trip is that you're still the only person in the world who can use that damned thought disk the alien gave you. Why couldn't it have made it a general one like Conan brought, rather than specifically tuning it to your mind?"

The question was rhetorical. As theory had it, anything more than superficial communication with the thought disks had to be from one constructed in the presence of the recipient and attuned only to him -

and the only beings who could do that were light years away, unless by chance some still survived in the ship still circling Saturn. Jamie understood that much. Even after months of exhausting work, he was still having to relay data from the disk to Scientists, much of it incomprehensible to them both. Without him, it was possible the ship would never return. Even with him it was problematical. The theory behind the technology had never been tested, even by the aliens who conceived it during their sunlight voyage to the solar system. However, Jamie was one of those rare persons able to relax to the inevitable, and to enjoy it, once committed. He had only one more question.

"When will we be leaving? Or have you set a date yet?"

Whitmire smiled, a rare occurrence with him over the last half year. "How does next week suit you?"

Jamie wasn't quite prepared for that answer. "That soon?"

"The ship is complete, except for installing the stress field generators and the main computer components. That shouldn't take more than a week or so. Jeannie will have to go up with the computer, so you may as well all go at the same time. That will give you all a little time to get acquainted with the rest of the crew before you take off."

"And how soon will that be?" Jamie asked.

Whitmire gave his customary shrug. "That will depend on Captain Hawkins. Whenever he decides he's ready."

When Jamie returned to their apartment, Captain Masters and Conan had arrived. The shorthaired brown dog broke away from the menagerie of pets he was getting re-acquainted with and bounded with hardly a limp towards Jamie. His paws reached almost to Jamie's shoulders as he hugged the erstwhile feral dog. He had never expected to see him again after watching him go down with a horrible wound when the Dallas mercenaries made their surprise attack.

"Conan, boy! How are you?"

"Feel good," the dog said in a rasping voice. His vocabulary was not nearly as extensive as the other pets, nor was he quite so intelligent, his enhanced genes having probably been intermixed with normal dogs, but he had a keen sense of the rightness of humans, and Jamie was his favorite person. After the greetings were complete, and Jamie and Captain Masters were seated, he stretched out by Jamie's feet with his head resting on front paws, staring up at him in a worshipful gaze, for all the world like a dog with his master in the previous century. Fuzzy Britches, of course, promptly appropriated Jamie's lap, considering it his primary domain place when available.

Captain Masters smiled, making his lined face seem almost boyish, even though he was completely white haired and much older than Jamie. He was a smallish man, but lean and wiry from his years roaming the wilds surrounding the Enclave.

"Where's the rest of the family, Jamie?"

"Jeannie's at the computer center, and Kristi is asleep. She's still sort of tired from your last patrol."

"Well, tell Jeannie I want to thank her for talking John into getting me included in the spaceship crew. He said she was the one who convinced him." Masters' eyes twinkled as if he knew a secret.

"I'll be sure and tell her," Jamie said, remembering Whitmire's admonishment to keep silent about Jeannie's methods--though if he had to bet, he would put money on the ranger already knowing how his selection came about.

"Thanks." Masters elevated one eyebrow ever so slightly; all but confirming Jamie's suspicions that Masters had a pretty good idea of his own about how the convincing took place.

"Have you met Captain Hawkins before?" Jamie thought to ask. The name was unfamiliar to him.

"I know him. He's a good man. He was one of the floater pilots who came to our rescue when we were in so much trouble. Jeremy Hawkins, his name is. He's about the only person in the Enclave who has any knowledge at all of astronomy anymore. It's been a hobby of his for years, even though he hasn't had much of a telescope to work with. Mostly, he's engrossed himself in the old files still lying around in computer banks."

Jamie had a thought. "Don't any of the space people study astronomy anymore?"

Masters rubbed his chin, where a faint white bristle was beginning to show. "Just from talking to Jerry, I think not, at least not past the amateur stage. Their resources are spent about like ours are; trying to keep things going. Of course, I guess they still have a few of the old 'scopes on the moon, if they haven't cannibalized them for something more urgent." His face broke into another smile. "It would be nice to know how to get to where we want to go, wouldn't it?"

"If we get there at all," Jamie remarked, remembering they were going to use the test flight as an exploration, first of the derelict craft in orbit about Saturn, then on to the star system of the aliens origin.

"Be an optimist, Jamie. The worst that can happen is death, and that comes to all of us, sooner or later. Kristi and I take our lives in hand every time we go outside the boundaries of the Enclave, and it's getting worse all the time. This is getting to be cat country around here, but even so, the rats and mice are increasing faster. We need a break of some kind and this trip may provide it."

"Mice. Yum!" Fuzzy Britches contributed to the conversation. Normal rats and mice were no match for the enhanced intelligence of the Enclave pets, and the enhanced ones were smart enough to stay clear of Enclaves, except under unbearable population pressure such as was happening around the Dallas Enclave now. The high point of the brightly colored cat's life had been his one excursion with Jamie into the wilds where he had been able to stalk the most natural food of small felines. He hadn't minded the danger at all; in fact, he had enjoyed it, other than the times his humans had been hurt.

Masters reached over and rubbed Fuzzy Britches' ears. "No mice in space, Fuzz."

Fuzzy Britches yawned, purred, and closed his eyes again. He was sure in his own way that the Ranger Captain would provide him some excitement in space, mice or no mice.

\*\*\*

Kristi Carson yawned and stirred, vaguely aware of the conversation leaking through the holographic opaqueness of the bedroom entrance. She stretched, luxuriating in the feel of clean linen and a satiated body. Returning was the best part of any patrol outside the Enclave, even though her restless nature would soon begin demanding another excursion. She had to admit, though, that since joining with Jamie and Jeannie in a family, the demands seemed not so urgent as they used to be. Coming back to a family was much nicer than entering into a casual liaison, soon forgotten. She suddenly recognized that one of the voices she was hearing from the other room belonged to Captain Masters. The recognition propelled her from bed. She swept a brush through her hair, threw on a robe, and walked unhesitating through the silvery holodoor.

Masters looked up from where he was pleasantly reclined. "Hi, Kristi. Are you about rested up?"

Kristi stretched her arms behind her, limning her nipples against the thin cloth of the robe, then relaxed the tension. "Troy, if I were any more rested, you'd have to find a new Lieutenant. How about you?" She went to Jamie and displaced Fuzzy Britches from Jamie's lap and appropriated his spot.

Masters made a place for him in his own lap as he answered. "As well as an old man can be. I'm like Fuzz, here. Anytime I get a chance I take a break."

Kristi grinned around Jamie's shoulder. "Who's lap do *you* take your breaks in?"

"I'm not so old that I need a lap, Kristi," Masters said, but volunteered no other information. He had grown up during the formation of the Enclave, when times were much harder, conditions much more strict and the rather hedonistic lifestyle of the Enclave not yet in vogue. Like John Whitmire and most others of his age group, he was more reticent about sexual matters than the younger people, though certainly not repressed in any way. Kristi, being more orientated towards females than males (other than Jamie and a few other rare exceptions), had never made any sort of overture toward him, but after her association with Jamie the last several months, she now found herself suddenly curious about what he would be like in bed. For all his age he was still an attractive man, and in many ways, she suddenly realized, he reminded her of Jamie. Not in looks, but attitude. Like Jamie, he was not even faintly patronizing toward women, and also like Jamie, he was unpretentious almost to a fault. She kept these thoughts to herself, however. *Later, though? It might be a nice experience.*

Jamie was perceptive enough to sense Kristi's feelings but sensible enough to keep his thoughts to himself, as he usually did, content to wait and see how a situation played out rather than trying to influence it. It was an interesting idea; however, he found it hard to concentrate on it as Kristi began nuzzling his ear. Captain Masters, catching the intent of Kristi's intentions, took his leave.

## CHAPTER THREE

In the underground warrens of Moon City, another conversation was taking place, chaired by Roscoe Bascombe, the "Mayor" of Moon City. In fact, no elections had taken place for years, and the four people in the smoothed rock council chamber dictated the affairs of not only Moon City, but the several space satellites as well. Bascombe was short by moon standards, which was unsurprising, since he was only one generation removed from Earth, and also the oldest of the council members. He shifted his pale, squat body on the thin foam cushion of the rock slab chair behind his desk, getting his thoughts in order. He had a tight, intelligent mind, but it was almost entirely politically orientated. He depended on the other members for actual implementation of policy, and policy and implementation both had suffered the last six months. After the defeat of his mercenaries from the Dallas Enclave, and loss of the alien technology to the Houston Enclave, he had barely kept his position as head of the council. The loss had forced him into a compromise with Earth, which he cared not a whit about. They could all perish, so far as he was concerned, so long as Moon City survived. Now, matters were again coming to a focal point and he was determined to come out ahead this time.

Selene Brown, the director of supply allocation for Moon City and the satellites, was prepared as usual for the council meeting, armed with the latest projections of critical supplies derived from earth,

those available on the moon, population curves, and other data, all spiraling down toward a point some indeterminable time in the future, but certainly within her lifetime, where the viability of their economy would probably reach a breaking point.

"Let's get started," Bascombe said abruptly. "For your information, I've just received word from John Whitmire on Earth that a week from now, they'll be ready for us to ferry up the rest of their crew, along with the main computer and stress generator controls. He informed me that he's decided to send the whole Da Cruz family along, pets and all."

"Oh, damn." Rob Passing exclaimed. "His family? You mean those two females he consorts with? Now what's *that* going to do to my plans?"

"That's not all," Bascombe continued. "He's also sending Captain Troy Masters."

"Masters! You mean that Goddamned ranger is coming along? He's the son of a bitch who killed Craig Randall, right when he had Da Cruz in hand!" Passing, as chief of Moon City Police, had organized the elements of the Dallas mercenary force that had failed to reach the downed alien landing craft in time. He, too, had barely survived in power, and he still seethed at Craig Randall's failure.

"Actually, it was Da Cruz who killed Randall with a concealed handgun," Barley Trask said quietly. He was the newly appointed space transportation director, taking over Craig Randall's old seat after he died on Earth. He was wrong as well. Jamie had not killed Randall, but only wounded him. However, he had tossed him out of the floater and left him to be consumed by rats, which amounted to the same thing.

"Da Cruz is a son of a bitch, too! Him and his pets. They aren't trying to bump any of our crew are they?"

"As a matter of fact, no," Bascombe said. "Whitmire even said we could take one more person if we wanted to."

"Good. I already have Della Worley lined up to try Da Cruz on for size. Now I need a male to go after his women."

Selene Brown eyed the tall, balding figure of Rob Passing with distaste. His ideas were too bluntly cynical for her to care for him, but she was too concerned with her bleak projections of the future to voice any objections, and under the circumstances, she had no better ideas than his of trying to gain control of the FTL technology through Jamie Da Cruz or his family, just as Passing wanted. A name and a face suddenly popped into her mind like a holoprojection suddenly materializing unexpectedly in front of her.

"I think I might know someone," she said. *Sean Johnson! By God! Have I still got him on my mind? Beautiful body. Blondly handsome, with a personality so overtly sexual as to be almost irresistible. And a mind to match. He's the best young engineer we have in the city. But would Rob use him? Yes. He would be perfect. But would he be controllable? Well, let Rob Passing worry about that.*

"Who are you thinking of?" Passing asked, distrust in his voice. He preferred to pick his own agents.

Selene didn't answer for a moment, still remembering. She was middle aged, and handsome rather than pretty, with short dark hair and a slim body that the Moon's gentle gravity had been kind to. Several years ago she had spent the night with Sean, and it had been a most disconcerting experience. His love making had made her forget completely her own importance in the affairs of Moon City, so much that she

would have gladly thrown off all trappings of her office simply to feast again and again on the wild sexuality she had felt that one night, but he had never returned to her bed. Apparently the feelings had been a one way affair. He had been unfailingly polite to her ever since, but his gentle refusals of further overtures had finally made her understand that there would be no repetitions. She never had understood that he had seen to her very core that one night and understood that for all of her intelligent, decisive mind, she carried a flaw that she was not even aware of.

Selene thought in her own mind that all her work of balancing the limited resources of the space colonies was directed toward the ultimate survival of the trans-earth population, when in fact, it was her own personal survival she was concerned with. A dark part of her mind saw her own death tied up with the projected failure of the space ecology and that, she could not accept.

"Sean Johnson," she finally said.

Passing grinned evilly. "Damn right. What woman could resist him? Selene, you're a genius."

Selene accepted the praise, but something inside told her she might be making a mistake.

"If that's settled, let's move on," Bascombe said. "There's something else that might be important. You all have heard by now that the alien craft came to our solar system because an interstellar dust cloud was destroying their home system. That's what we were told by the earth authorities, anyway."

Barley Trask sat up straighter. As the newest member of the council, he was usually deferential and unassuming, even in his dress. While Bascombe and Passing typically wore light semi-military tunics, and Selene usually covered her breasts in opposition to the semi-nudity that was the female norm, Barley wore shorts and a simple pullover like most of the male population of Moon City. "Is that information not true?" He asked.

"No, it's not," Bascombe said emphatically. "Whitmire has been relatively open with us about most information, and that's one of the things he told us. But it's wrong!"

"How do you know?" Trask asked.

"We still have a couple of old telescopes, and all the astronomical theory is still in the data banks from when the moon was still a research station. I took the liberty of pulling a physicist from other duties, gave him an AI to work with, and had him check the figures we were given. According to Da Cruz's information, the aliens came here from a star called Altair, about seventeen light years away. We put such telescopes as we still have on it, used the AI to contrast and compare what we should have seen if a dust cloud were there, and found nothing. It's as clear as a bell."

Barley Trask's forehead wrinkled below his short brown hair. "What does it mean? Do we have some wrong information somewhere?"

Given his police and military orientation, Passing was the first off the mark. "It means the aliens lied. Which in turn means they were concealing something. Have you told anyone on earth about this?"

Bascombe looked smugly around the room. "No-o, he said slowly. I couldn't see any reason to share that information. It might give us an edge later on."

"Good," Passing said, his face a tight, satisfied mask. "Anything we can conceal from those earth bastards, we should. There's no telling what this might mean, and there's no telling how it might help us."

"Could this possibly endanger the spaceship?" Trask asked.



"I don't see how," Passing said, "and it might be important. Say nothing,"

Trask refrained from further comment, but reserved his own opinions about the whole process. While his loyalty lay with Moon City and the satellites, he thought to himself that perhaps more might be gained by whole-hearted cooperation with earth than by attempts to steal their technology, but he was a minority and was by no means certain that he was right anyway. There was no denying that both earth and space ecologies were in dire danger of ultimate collapse, and perhaps the whole human race was heading for extinction. It made for some hard thought, which he felt was best kept to himself for the time being.

Bascombe took control of the conversation again. "Let's try to wind this up for now. We're agreed that for the time being we will say nothing of the fact that this Altairian alien apparently lied about a dust cloud destroying its solar system, and we agree to Rob Passing placing his agents on the spacecraft in the hope that they can subvert Da Cruz or some of his family. Both these stratagems are problematical, but there is one more possibility. My chief engineer tells me that from what he's seen and been given access to through satellite relay that we may be able to duplicate the FTL technology."

"Are you serious?" Selene asked, a sudden vision of a fleet of craft ferrying their population to new worlds, or being able to exploit the asteroid belt to sustain their culture in the solar system.

"There's a catch," Bascombe warned. "They can duplicate everything, even the main computer, but control of that computer's specs is another matter. The Houston people have kept tight wraps on that."

Passing straightened out his tall body, tired of sitting. "Leave that to Della Worley. She's a computer expert, and what she can't do with sex hasn't been done. Once Da Cruz gets involved with her, she'll pick his brain like a robot cracking rocks for water."

Passing may have had some room for optimism. Della Worley was bright, young, and sexually lush. He had used her once before with good results, even though he had had to lean rather heavily on her to do it, using a youthful indiscretion as leverage. But he had never met Jamie, and he had already conveniently forgotten how miserably the last agent he had placed such confidence in, one Cadena of earth, had failed him.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Jamie was feeling a mixture of nostalgia, excitement, and just an unavoidable little tinge of worry on this, the last evening before being ferried by floater to the East Coast spaceport located in the Florida Enclave. Part of his worry was because of Whitmire's ruling that one of the three members of this family must ride separately from the others in case of accident, but he couldn't really complain since it was Jeannie who had programmed the main computer to their three voices alone, but he still didn't like it. It made him just as apprehensive as he always felt when Kristi was out on a ranger patrol. He wasn't the type to ever try to compel Kristi to stick closer to home. He knew her restless nature demanded action and probably always would. Unless.. *Will she ever want to get pregnant? Raise a family?* The unexpected thought startled him. Kristi had never so much as hinted at such a desire. Maybe it's just the thought of never coming back; a desire below the level of reason to leave his genes behind. How many soldiers in the old days left pregnant wives behind? Jamie didn't know. The ever-growing pet plague on earth had

effectively eliminated internecine warfare, that is until the clash six months ago with the mercenaries from Moon City. That was all the war Jamie ever wanted to see. He still had occasional nightmares of Kristi falling with a gaping hole in her side, himself wounded, his pets scattered, and Craig Randall apparently triumphant, with himself the prize captive. Only his little personal lasergun concealed in a boot holster had enabled him to save himself, Jeannie and Kristi, and Kristi had survived by only the barest of margins.

Fifteen pounds cat of landed in his lap from a standing jump.

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

Fuzzy Britches ignored the admonition. He circled in Jamie's lap, then pushed his head against Jamie's hand, demanding an ear rub. He complied, watching Kristi sitting cross-legged on the carpet across the room, still sorting personal gear. Jamie and Jeannie had had little packing to do. They still retained the outfits they had been supplied with on their one excursion into the wilds, and needed to add little else. They sat together on the large lounge, waiting on Kristi to finish.

She looked up when Fuzzy Britches made his move and drew the exclamation from Jamie. "Are you all packed, Fuzz?"

"No mice to pack," Fuzzy Britches said, drawing a laughs from the three humans. The cat looked offended then closed his eyes. Even enhanced cats had little sense of humor and he wondered what the laugh was about.

Woggly raised his head from his paws. "Mice no good. Rabbits better." Woggly wasn't quite as bright as the cat, but he knew what was good to eat. Since catching a rabbit or two on the expedition, his doggy dreams included them sometimes. He salivated at the thought, thinking that maybe there would be rabbits in space, where ever that was. Princess and Lady, the brown Persian and mostly white German Shepherd belonging to Kristi, as usual, contributed little to the conversation for all that they could talk when they wanted to. Jamie often wondered, but had never asked, why Kristi had picked such trite names for her pets. His own parents and grandparents had always loved pets, even after the enhanced ones caused such devastation on earth, and they used literary references to name them. Jamie assumed that "Fuzzy Britches" and "Woggly" were derived from an old book, but since his parents' death, he had no real way of knowing. He had simply carried on an old tradition of naming the favorite family cat and dog Fuzzy Britches and Woggly.

"You two better not set your sights too high," Jamie said. "You may not see anything at all to catch."

"Kristi will find some," Fuzzy Britches opened his eyes to say.

"He has an abiding faith in me, doesn't he?" Kristi said. "There. I think I'm finished. Who wants a drink?"

"Drink? You mean like ethanol?" Jeannie asked, hoping it was true, but not really believing it. Liquor had become a rare commodity in the Enclaves in recent years; there was little grain to spare for the fermenting.

"Blackberry and peach brandy, three bottles of it, if you don't care that it's fifty years old."

Jamie stood up, dumping Fuzzy Britches from his lap and onto the back of Conan lying at his feet. "Who cares how old it is? Lead me to it. Where in hell did you come across something like that?"

"We found an isolated old liquor store on that last patrol, all overgrown with brush. This was my share. I saved it just for a special occasion and I think this is it." She winked in Jeannie's direction, then

turned to accept Jamie's hug and pat on her behind. The pat turned into a caress, easily felt through her thin robe.

She took his hand and led him into the autokitchen, large by Enclave standards, and reached far back into a little-used cabinet. The bottles were still dusty, but appeared intact and well sealed. It should be good.

Jamie took out three glasses, added ice and let Kristi pour. She filled each six-ounce glass half full with the dark thick beverage. He looked inquiringly at what seemed him to be a paltry amount.

"That's plenty to start. I know, I've had it once before. It will sneak up on you."

While they were making the drinks, Jeannie had spoken to her body computer and caused a small section of the carpeted floor to raise up a foot or so, and the warp to flatten into a smooth surface. She arranged several of Kristi's deer hide-covered floor pillows around the newly formed platform, knowing that Kristi liked to lounge stretched out, being used to it from patrols.

"Mmm. That's good," Jeannie said, draining half her glass.

"Take it easy, sweet, or Jamie and I will leave you sprawled out here on the floor when we activate the bedroom."

"Fuzz will take care of me, won't you Fuzz?"

"Lick your nipples? Woggly lick your feet? Humans strange. Always breeding, but never any kittens. When will you have kittens?"

"Babies, Fuzz. Not kittens. Babies. Little humans." Jamie corrected, avoiding eye contact with either of the women. How did this conversation get started?

"He's just bragging," Kristi said. "Princess is pregnant."

"She is? Oh, that's wonderful," Jeannie exclaimed, "but how did you get a permit?"

"I got John to arrange it after I found out we were going to get to go into space. The timing was just right. Princess came into heat a few days ago. Old Fuzz, here, took care of the job while you were working."

Jeannie looked dewy eyed. "That's so grand. Won't it be fun to have some kittens around the house? Oh--we're going to be on the spaceship. I keep forgetting. It doesn't seem real yet."

Princess, hearing her name mentioned had come over to be petted, Kristi stroked her long silky hair, thinking it would be nice to have a litter of kittens to entertain her on what (she thought) would be long periods of boredom on the spaceship. The pet population within the Enclave was rigidly controlled, being maintained at just the level needed to control the rodents, and other occasional feral animal, which, for all the precautions, still entered the Enclave occasionally. These pets were generally assigned to residents living near the barricades, and rarely, if ever, were Jamie's own pets called on to help with the job. Only Jamie and Kristi's position in the hierarchy of the Enclave enabled them to keep pets at all. Jeannie had never owned one, and was still enthralled by their presence in their household.

Jamie rose to refill glasses. Bringing them back, he asked, "does anyone want the Holo on?"

All five pets meowed and barked in unison, vying to let theirs be the voice that activated the Holo. It was impossible to say which won, but a swirling kaleidoscope of lights in depth formed against one wall.

The cacophony of barks and meows continued as each tried to bring up their favorite program, confusing the poor home computer until one of them finally dominated. An ancient Tom and Jerry cartoon began unraveling, no longer two-dimensional but displayed in full holographic splendor. Fuzzy Britches' ears twitched happily and the other animals quieted, resigned to waiting their turn to pick a program.

"That wasn't quite what I had in mind," Jamie said. "Let's go to the bedroom and see if we can't do better." At least the subject of babies had dissipated. He wasn't sure whether he was glad or sorry.

One corner of the bedroom was stacked with Jamie and Jeannie's already packed gear, with their coveralls and thermosmotic boots laid out for use the next day. Since their excursion into the wilds, both of them had become accustomed to the comfort of the soft, pliable boots, but they wore them sparingly. Like many other things, the material for making the boots was in very short supply, and reserved almost exclusively for the rangers. Once worn out, neither of them was likely to get replacements. Seeing his boots sitting there, the hand-devised holster attached to the right-footed one empty, Jamie suddenly realized what one part of the nagging worry he had been feeling was about. He pulled out a drawer from the wall and picked up his little personal lasergun. He looked at it fondly. Before becoming involved in the various adventures and change of habits involved by the crash of the alien landing craft on earth, he had used the little gun fairly often. As an agricultural genetic engineer, he frequently worked in experimental fields near the barricades, and had used the gun to kill encroaching rodents. It was also the same gun that had saved their lives once. He checked the charge and load then slipped it into the holster. At once, part of his worry dissipated. He knew intellectually that there was very little chance of the gun ever being so useful again, but he felt all the better knowing it would be handy.

Kristi didn't protest, even though a ruling had been made that only rangers would be allowed personal weapons on the spacecraft for fear of inexperienced hands damaging the craft. She had more reason than anyone to be glad that Jamie had carried it once before, and it was just possible that it might be useful again.

While Jamie was doing this, Jeannie had already told the homecomp to turn off the wide expanse of the usually opaque bathroom door, leaving the bedroom holowall visible.

Gurgling water sounded, filling the sybaritic sunken bath, a luxury only the highest ranking executives of the Enclave were entitled to. John Whitmire's penchant for Jamie's security had placed them in this security building apartment. It was luxurious, but Jamie still felt that he would be glad when he was out from under Whitmire's scrutiny for a change. He turned from securing the lasergun in its holster to see Kristi disappearing into the bath, stripping her robe off as she entered. Jamie followed, discarding the old pair of coveralls he would leave behind, and slid into the bath, where Kristi and Jeannie were already immersed. He wormed his way between them on the sunken steps, sinking in to his waist.

"Spoilsport," Kristi laughed, smearing lather covered hands over his chest and into his hair. She had been soaping Jeannie's firm brown breasts.

"Don'tbe a hog. Leave at least one for me."

Jeannie opened her eyes, which had been closed under the slick soothing of Kristi's hands. "How many do you think I have, anyway?"

"Enough for both," Jamie said, taking over where Kristi had left off. If there was any contention in the family, it was over which of them could arouse Jeannie the most and soonest. Jeannie never minded which one won, knowing that the other, or both, would soon enter into the game. She relaxed until Jamie was finished with her top, then helped him lather Kristi. Jamie was as fascinated as always with the way their bodies contrasted; Jeannie, small and brown with toast colored nipples, Kristi, tall and blonde, various parts of her body oddly tanned, the rest an alabaster hue, with large pink-nippled breasts, lush

and virginal. He felt a surge in his groin, gathered them both around the waist, and plunged headfirst into the deeper part of the tub.

He came up sputtering, and was immediately dunked by a firm female hand on each shoulder. Another dunk, and he shouted, "Peace! I give up." Water streamed from his hair, into his eyes and cascaded over his shoulders.

Kristi's strong arms surrounded him, threatening to dunk him again.

"Peace!" I said! Pax! I give up. Cease and desist! I'll never do it again!"

Kristi let him loose.

"Until next time!" He streaked to the edge of the bath and levitated up to sit on the edge.

Kristi gathered Jeannie by the waist and followed him out, laughing. They recovered glasses and retired to the bed.

"NP 22" Jamie said, calling up his favorite program.

A nymph and satyr materialized across the room and was joined by others soon after. The homecomp was able to generate an infinite variety of antics, none of them ever quite the same. If there was one thing the Enclave didn't lack, it was computing capacity.

While they cuddled and caressed, the program changed, and changed again. Presently Kristi called up another program, this one of a lone woman, reclining on a moss-covered stream bank while two half-grown kittens tumbled and romped back and forth over her bare breasts and belly and played with long streamers of loose brown hair.

Presently another woman appeared, and was joined by more kittens. They began making love, laughing at the hampering, helpful kittens that kept getting in the way, but by this time none of them were watching.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Sometime during the night Jeannie woke up, feeling a soft, furry weight on her chest. While she was still feeling her way to awareness, a soft, raspy tongue, like the gentlest of furry files tickled a nipple, bringing her fully awake. Both of her breasts tingled and her nipples sprang erect. She curved an arm up around the springy fur of Fuzzy Britches, petting him gently as his tongue did amazing things to her body. The cat purred, knowing how much Jeannie liked his attentions, even though they still embarrassed her.

"Did you make a kitten?" He asked, using grammatically correct English for a change, then returned his attentions to her breasts.

"Shh," Jeannie cautioned. "I don't know. And it's baby, not kitten."

The bedroom was almost totally dark, the cat on her chest only a vague presence. "Night-light," she whispered, and the room brightened marginally.

"You need a kitten," Fuzzy Britches said, voice low as purrs intermixed with the words. He licked some more. Jeannie felt a movement beside her. A slim feminine hand stole across her lower belly, resting there.

"I heard that," Kristi's voice came in a whisper in the almost total darkness of the room. "Did you?"

Jeannie stifled a giggle. "I don't know. How about your own self?"

Kristi brought her lips next to Jeannie's ear and said in the softest of whispers. "I already have."

"Oh!" Jeannie had to muffle her voice. There was time enough to tell Jamie that she was trying, having gained special permission from Whitmire, and that Kristi had already succeeded after they were into space. She knew that men became overly protective of pregnant women and that he might start making noises about the two of them staying home if he found out too soon. Protection was fine, but not yet.

Kristi's hand moved lower and Jeannie had to hold her breath in again. She moved into the other woman's arms while Fuzzy Britches disengaged himself. He had found out what he wanted to know and was content to leave them alone for the present.

Jeannie was fully awake now, and the knowledge that Kristi had conceived aroused her even more than Fuzzy Britches' ministrations had. Her breasts rubbed, then flattened against Kristi's body. Kristi's lips covered her own. Her tongue slid into her mouth with a warm liquid wetness. Kristi's legs moved insistently against her, pressing her back. Urgently, she pulled Kristi over her, spreading her thighs to the weight of her body, shuddering at the sensation of bodies melding together, then surrendering utterly to the sensation of Kristi's roving lips and hands atop her, moving, moving lower and finally reaching her core. She bit her lips to keep from crying out and waking Jamie --who was listening and smiling in the dark.

\*\*\*

Whitmire's ubiquitous security men were waiting the next morning at the exit of the security building, as they always were whenever Jamie had reason to venture outside. The pets were almost hysterical, eager and anxious for the new adventure. There were two sleds waiting. Even though there would have been plenty of room for all of them on one, Jamie saw Whitmire's fine hand in the arrangement. Even in the Enclave, he was taking no chances. Jamie, Jeannie, and his pets would ride in one sled while Kristi and her pets would go in another. Captain Masters was already ensconced in the lead sled, which he would share with Kristi. His white hair was unmistakable, almost glowing as Jamie spotted it through one of the windows.

The two security men loaded their baggage and escorted them onto the sled, eyes alert. Even the lead sled carrying Kristi and Masters had its own contingent of security guards. Whitmire was taking no chances. Unconsciously, Jamie touched the small saucer-sized thought disk in his pocket.

The spaceship, except for the main computer and generator controls was complete, but there still might be need of the disk, and since Jamie was going, the disk would go along with him. No one else could use it, and there was still unresolved information contained on it, for all of his six months work.

All the pets had ridden on sleds before, which slid along on super conducting rails, so that was no

novelty to them. They went quietly aboard, followed by Jamie, Jeannie and the security men, and the conveyance moved smoothly away, toward the floater landing field.

Jamie and Jeannie sat quietly, holding hands with fingers intertwined. As the sled picked up speed, they both began unconsciously taking in the passing sights almost as if recording them. This might very well be their last look at the huge sprawling Enclave, and it was the only home they had ever known. Most of the old city of the previous century had been replaced, but there was still a scattering of single homes not yet razed and steel and concrete office buildings which had been converted to housing. With the collapse of most of earth's economy, there was no longer a need for them. In residential areas, people were out, either coming home from a night shift of going to their day jobs. All traveled by the ubiquitous little sleds, or walked. Other than floaters, there was no other transportation available. Many of the pedestrians leaving for work traveled in little groups of three or four, representing families.

Once the human genome had been resolved, it was a relatively easy matter to cure most diseases, including the venereal ones. The present-day casual sexuality was a reflection of that, plus the almost complete break-up of any organized religions. For most of the world's population, hell had already arrived on earth, and the Enclaves represented the only heaven available.

The floater landing field was located at the site of the old intercontinental field but there was only memories remaining of its once busy skies and giant aircraft. Floaters were the workhorses of such intercontinental trade as remained. They were powered by an efficient combination of solar magnetic energy and rechargeable fuel cells. If there was one thing not lacking in the Enclave, it was power. The city had been providentially lucky in getting a fusion plant completed before the breakdown of commerce, and it supplied all the power the Enclave would ever need.

Paradoxically, machinery to use that power was scarce, and getting more so. Overland transportation was no longer possible, and the floaters could not keep up with the demand for raw materials, even when they could be obtained.

The sled pulled to a stop at the edge of the field where two floaters were already waiting. The pilots were standing together engaged in conversation while they waited for the sleds. As the sled unloaded its contingent of passengers, they glanced up and did a double take at the plethora of pets emerging with the humans. Pets were one of the few items they almost never transported. They recovered quickly, however, and the smaller man, almost pure Asian by looks, acted as spokesman.

"I reckon y'all must be the group we're waiting' for. I'm Manny Kim, and this feller here is Buddy Wilson. If y'all gents and ladies and, um, other passengers will step up here a little closer, I'll give y'all a quick brief." For all his looks, his accent was pure Texan, as if it were popping out from a hidden time machine fixed in the previous century. Jamie smiled reminiscently. His father had talked like that.

"We'll be making two stops along the way," Kim told them. "One at the little Mobile Enclave and the other at Disney. I want to caution y'all now: The Disney Enclave is having some problems. There's fighting going on, against both feral animals and rioters. We'll be down just long enough to switch batteries, so don't wander off. Stay close to the craft."

"What kind of animals?" Masters asked, his professional curiosity aroused.

"Swamp rabbits." The pilot spread his hands disgustedly. "Who woulda thought? Rabbits, for Chrissake!"

All three dogs immediately began salivating. Jamie noticed and spoke sharply. "Stop it, you three. No hunting. You stay with us, understand?" He held their eyes to show them he meant it.

"They understand English?"

Jamie nodded, hoping that the pets did understand Kim's brand of English.

"Awright. You furry people stay close, too. We won't be down long, and anybody missing when we're ready to leave gets left. Grab your baggage and load up." He looked up at the sky, grateful for the fair weather. Floaters flew low, and the more scenery his passengers had to look at, the fewer questions they were likely to bother him with.

Jamie and Jeannie each gave Kristi a quick kiss and hug, and the pilots helped them into their seats. Kristi carried Princess in her arms, but Fuzzy Britches elected to jump into the craft on his own. He loved cuddling from any of his humans, but in the presence of strangers, he preferred to maintain what he thought of as the superior dignity of cats.

Fuzzy Britches was allowed to reside in Jamie's lap, where his claws would enable him to maintain a grip on the seat--or on Jamie--if the need arose, but the dogs were relegated to the near-empty cargo section, where Kim quickly rigged a cage of netting to protect them. The floater was nearly stripped to allow more range.

"All set? Control, ready to go." The coordinates were already loaded into the craft's computer, and the AI controlling traffic answered almost immediately. "Cleared for takeoff. Autopilot will command for next ten minutes, mark." A digital readout on the pilot's board began blinking, and the floater rose into the air.

\*\*\*

The vast Houston Galveston Enclave spread out beneath them as the floater gained altitude. As it leveled off and headed east, Jamie could see the curve of the barricades stretching for miles in either direction, so large that the broken oval shape adjoining the gulf appeared as a straight Line from ground level. From the air, the streams and bayous flowing into the gulf were a muddy brown, the result of erosion from far upstream where a plague of grasshoppers had stripped many square miles of vegetation from central Texas.

Directly beyond the barriers in all directions except the gulf, tangled vegetation had almost completely covered the ruins of towns, cities, and hamlets. From the air it gave the appearance of a vast carpet of varicolored green, streaked with occasional ovals of lakes and brown strings of running water. As they flew farther east, the streams cleared and turned a brighter hue, glistening in the clear sunshine. Jamie thought it fascinating, but sad. Once man had tamed most of this vast land, broken to his service like a team of oxen. Now nature was reclaiming--had reclaimed--her own. The thick woods and undergrowth seemed to stretch forever, peopled now by denizens far fiercer and far more intelligent than had ever met the first pioneers on their journey west.

"Ruins of New Orleans," the pilot announced presently.

Jamie peered past Jeannie's face, which was pressed in utter fascination against the bubble canopy of the passenger's area. Broken, ravaged buildings stood forlornly in lakes of water, like headstones in a mirrored graveyard. The mighty Mississippi, thwarted for a century and a half by human engineers from the birth of a new river bed, had at last broken through the dikes and found a new equilibrium. The city had not been in the path of the river, but nevertheless, the inundation of vast areas east of it had broken the back of the city's defenses. What remained of New Orleans was ruled by feuding swarms of feral animals, driven by population pressure to exploit the newly released lands and hunt down and kill for food what humans had survived the floods.



Gazing out over the vast area of destruction, Jamie reflected on the consequences of his own profession. *Such great expectations, such hope and dreams the old genetic engineers had had! Better crops, disease cures, intelligent animals designed to help and serve their human designers. And now look. In another century, there might be no humans left on earth, other than those few tolerated by packs of animals for their limited usefulness, hands for tool making and a still slightly superior brain.* He turned his gaze away, uttering a futile oath under his breath.

"Did you say something, Jamie?"

"No," Jamie said quietly. "I didn't say anything."

## CHAPTER SIX

In the other craft, Kristi and Masters were not nearly so curious about the outside world. As rangers, they had already seen all they ever needed to of the ravaged countryside. Gazing at overgrown ruins or silt-laden rivers could tell them nothing they didn't already know.

Princess was curled contentedly in Kristi's lap, and Lady and Wolfgang, Masters' large brown and black German Shepherd were resting in the cargo area beneath safety netting. Kristi idly stroked her cat's long silky hair, thinking of the previous night. Jamie was such a dear, for a man, and for the first time in her life, she thought she had found a woman she would not tire of. And she was pregnant. *Jamie's baby for certain, and to hell with Enclave population allotments. Jamie's 1A genome would remove some of the onus of an unauthorized pregnancy, and besides, how could the birthrate agency control conception light-years from earth?* She smiled to herself at the thought.

"You've changed, Kristi," Masters remarked from her side. Kristi was his most trusted Lieutenant, and at one time he had been concerned with her lack of emotional stability.

"I suppose I have. Jamie has been good for Jeannie and me as well. I never thought I would be such a settled old lady, and--"

"And?"

"And pregnant." *Damn. Now why did I tell him that?*

Masters' weathered brown wrinkles turned into his boyish grin. "Jamie's, I hope?"

Kristi grinned back at him. "Why do you care, you old false alarm?"

"I always care, Kristi, more than you might imagine. But do you think this is wise? This isn't a simple patrol we're going on."

"Maybe that's the reason." She lifted her hand from the smooth fur of Princess' flank and took one of the Captain's calloused hands in both of hers. "Do you think the Birthrate Agency will give me problems?"

Masters laughed. "I don't see how. I think we'll be a little out of their jurisdiction for a while." The grin lines faded from his face. "I just hope we get back before you slow down. I have a sneaking suspicion that we're going to be needed."

Kristi squeezed his hand with a sudden gentleness. "Troy, you're always needed. If it hadn't been for you..."

"Now, Kristi, use your common sense. Everyone had a hand to play on that expedition. I did no more than you or anyone else. And if you don't turn loose of my hand you may find yourself giving an old man ideas he can't live up to." He grinned to show he was kidding.

Kristi wasn't so sure. "That will be the day. Any time you can't live up to what you imagine is the day I'm finding a new Captain."

"Well, don't start looking yet. I guess I'm not that decrepit."

"You don't even seem old to me." And he doesn't really, Kristi thought. *He's still strong and quick, and he's one of the finest men I've ever known. And there go my thoughts, running wild again. Is this what being pregnant is like?*

"Well, let's leave that alone. Does Jamie know yet?"

"No and I'm not going to tell him. I want to see how long it will take him to notice."

Masters smiled again. "Don't sell Jamie short. He notices a lot more than you might imagine. He just doesn't say much."

"I know. He's like you in that respect. That's one of his main appeals."

"Am I a Father image now?" Masters asked, grinning some more.

"Never!" Kristi said emphatically, then turned away, embarrassed for the first time since she was fourteen.

\*\*\*

In Moon City a less pleasant conversation was taking place. Rob Passing possessed one of the larger offices in the warren, including a little alcove containing a couch and chair behind his desk and computer alcove.

Della Worley was sitting in the only other chair in the office, hands clasped tightly together in her lap, face taunt and fearful. Under more favorable circumstances, Della could have been a model for an antique Barbi Doll. She was tall and slim. Her small breasts peeked through the curled strands of flowing blonde hair, decorated with only the slightest bit of make-up. She wore a pair of tight shorts, riding high on lightly curved hips and cut in a V to below her navel. Her only other clothing consisted of a pair of slippers and two small red ribbons restraining tiny ear curls.

"You understand what your assignment is?" Passing asked. His voice was pleasantly mellow, but to Della it seemed to be tinged with a bit of cruel apprehension, like a bad tempered child getting all set to squash a frog.

"Tell me again," Della said. *Oh, God. Why did I ever try to fake a genomic profile for Timmy? We could have been happy without it. I should have known I would get caught, and now he'll never let me go.*

Passing observed her critically, noting the almost palpable fear and hatred enveloping her like a black shroud but giving it only his clinical attention. Her feelings were the least of his concern; only her usefulness mattered to him. "Jamie Da Cruz holds the key to the spaceship computer. We want that knowledge, and we want you to worm it out of him. All of the intelligence on him we have shows that he's an easy mark for a pretty, sexy woman. That's your key. Of the two women he's involved with now, one likes to swing the other way, and the other is a little kid, as empty headed as a blank chip. If you can't break up that combination then your looks far outweigh your talents."

"I understand," Della said.

"I don't think you do, quite yet. I let you off easy before, when you tried that little stunt with the computer genetic ratings. Fail this time, and you know what the penalties are."

"I know." *Sterilization. Short rations. Unending work in the mines, under the harshest of circumstances. If there was a way to live under earth gravity, I swear I'd defect, if there was a way to do it safely--but there isn't. And never a chance of a baby. Never a marriage and a home.*

"Good. And just to be sure, we're going to test your talents." Passing grinned cruelly. He stood up and made the door to his little alcove go away, displaying the couch.

*I can endure it*, Della thought. *I can endure it, and sooner or later you'll make a mistake. Then, you sorry son of a deranged robot, you'll pay for this*. She entered the little room with him, concealing her reluctance as best she could.

Semi-nudity in Moon City didn't have the same meaning as it might have on earth. Harsher conditions in the warren dictated a more tightly controlled sexuality. Passing was conducting a rape, pure and simple. Had he understood the earth culture better, he might have acted differently, leading Della gently into his proposed seduction of Jamie, but perhaps not. Police state methods were never very gentle, and there were always individuals such as he willing to take advantage of positions of power.

Della was not really as experienced in sex as her looks might indicate, and Passing could not have made a worse mistake if he had tried. His actions would come back to haunt him.

\*\*\*

From the air, Jamie could see swarms of rabbits beating against the barriers of the Disney Enclave, almost like waves from the ocean so great was the population pressure and desire of the long-eared enhanced rodents for the greenery inside, the only sign of vegetation for miles around. He had no idea why they should be exploding in such numbers in this particular area or why predators had not kept their population under control, and he would probably never know. All of earth was ecologically unbalanced by the swarms of enhanced animals, and it might be centuries before a balance was reached, if it ever was, and all of earth might be turned into a desert before that happened. A pall of smoke obscured the northern edge of the enclave where there was either rioting or where flame was being used to control the rodents. As their floater touched down on the landing field, he could hear intermittent gunfire in the distance.

He need not have worried about the pets wanting to chase rabbits. The sounds of guns and explosions and the waft of singed fur hanging in the air was enough to keep them close. Armed men and women scurried about the landing field while armed floaters landed and descended in rotation. Jamie thought he could detect looks of envy from the technicians changing their batteries, as if they would like nothing better than to abandon their tasks and get out of the besieged city. He was more than glad when Kim hustled them back into the craft and they were once again airborne.

Jeannie was scared and breathless, her face horror stricken. She leaned against him from the adjoining seat burying her face against his shoulder. Presently he felt wetness there from her tears. When she spoke, her voice quavered. "Oh, God, Jamie, I'm glad we're going into space. The earth is dying, isn't it?"

"It's bad, all right," Jamie said, "but don't give up hope. We'll live, somehow, and so will our kids."

"Our kids? Jamie, do you know?"

"I know. You're a brave girl, you and Kristi both. Somehow, some way, we'll survive. Maybe here, maybe on another world, but we'll live. Believe me, we will." Jamie put all his heart into that assurance, trying very hard to convince Jeannie--and himself--of the truthfulness of his statements.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Sean Johnson laughed as his pet raccoon, Bandit, lost his footing on the slick surface of the glazed rock table and floated slowly to the floor, front legs akimbo but clutching nothing but air as the gentle gravity of the moon drew him slowly downward. The male and female rats he had been tussling with squeaked happily. It was a rare day when they won a contest with the enhanced raccoon. Like it, their heads were larger than those of their ancestors, with neck and shoulders more heavily muscled for support. Sean had named them Randy and Pandi, for some obscure reason, and of course, what else could the only raccoon in Moon City be named but Bandit?

In years past, there had been many enhanced pets in the underground city, but as supplies and crucial components grew scarcer, most of the pet population had been eliminated. Stories filtering up about the havoc being wrecked on earth by enhanced animals had hurried the process along. Bandit's mate had died in an accident a few months before, and he was just now regaining some of his happy-go-lucky inquisitiveness and playfulness. The two white rats were refugees from one of his girl friends' biology lab, one of a latest line bred for dietary experiments. Fortunately for them, a small gene deviation had been discovered before the experiments began and he had agreed to take the animals before they could be euthanized. Only through his position as the pre-eminent electronics engineer in Moon City was he allowed to keep the animals, and that had been becoming more problematical all the time.

Sean reached out to let Bandit catch his hand just before he hit the floor then lifted him back up to the table.

"Thanks, man."

"No problem," Sean said. He leaned against the hard back of his chair and began watching the animals resume their game. The rats couldn't talk, of course. Even their larger than normal skulls didn't have enough room for language facility, but they understood a good deal of English nevertheless. He was worried, but hadn't let his pets know what the problem was. Several days ago, Rob Passing, the Moon City security chief had approached him with a proposition. He could go on the impending exploration mission in the earth-controlled spacecraft. In return, he had to attempt the seduction and subversion of one or both of the female companions one Jamie Da Cruz, and through them, try to obtain enough information to make seizing control of the spacecraft possible.

Sean's worry was that he didn't have enough information to judge the worthiness of the mission. To hear Passing tell it, Da Cruz was the devil incarnate, but he wasn't so sure himself. Despite rigid censorship, some details of the battle for control of the alien technology had filtered back up to the general population, carried first by floater pilots on earth, and from there by shuttle pilots at either spaceport. It sounded to him like the powers that be had made a hash of the whole episode. Nevertheless, he knew what the stakes were, and his sympathies lay with his own people.

The signal light of the holodoor blinked and announced a visitor.

"Come on in," Sean said.

Rob Passing came into the room. Sean could almost see him licking cream from his chin and wondered what the council member had been up to.

Passing settled lazily under the light gravity into the only other chair in the room. He eyed the rats and raccoons distastefully. Sensing his displeasure, they scampered back into the bedroom.

"I fail to see what makes you want to keep those animals around, Sean. They're the cause of all our trouble."

"They have their uses," Sean said quietly.

"Maybe once. Not now. We can't afford them any more."

Sean flinched inwardly. What was on his mind?

"Anyway, I'm not here to talk about those damn pests. You leave tomorrow for the spaceship. Let's review your assignment again". Passing knew it wasn't really necessary, but he was uneasy. He had no real hold on Sean as he did on the Worley girl and it bothered him. His only recourse was an appeal to his loyalty, and being what he was, he had little faith in that string. It wouldn't hurt to try, though.

"We've been over it already."

"Let's go over it again. You remember what I told you about Selene's projections? The situation on earth is getting worse. Actually, I think her projections are optimistic. Unless something drastic happens, our whole economy is going to crash in not too many more years. We'll all be dead in fifty years if something isn't done. Our only chance is to gain control of the workings of that spaceship. If we can't, and we have to go hunting for another planet to live on, the earthers have told us flatly that they will take only a ratio of our population to theirs. And they will do the choosing."

"Why isn't that fair? They would leave most of their population to their fate, the same as for us."

"You still don't understand. Even with all the deaths on earth, they still outnumber us a thousand to one. How would you like to be one of only, say, ten spacemen in a population of a thousand earthmen? Think of the friends you'd leave behind. Think of *you* being left behind." The words came unexpectedly

but Passing saw that they had hit home and tried to conceal his glee. How much did Sean Johnson love life? Maybe this was the key to his cooperation, if not his total loyalty.

Sean flexed the muscles in his arms. Like most of the later generation of Moon City inhabitants, he was tall, but rigorous exercise kept him from being quite so slender as most other men and women his age.

"Is that what you're saying? That if I don't get what you want, I won't be picked for the immigration, if it occurs?"

"That, my boy, is it. Your name will be erased from the population files before those earth bastards ever get a chance to scan them. On the other hand, do your best for us and I'll do my best to see that you're one of the ones picked--if worst comes to worst.

Passing rose happily from the chair, bouncing a little and prepared to leave but paused at the edge of the holodoor. "And take those damn animals with you when you go. Maybe if we're lucky that coon will kill the whole bunch of those fucking earth pets. He disappeared through the opaque projection, leaving Sean still sitting quietly with his thoughts. He disliked Passing but he had to feel a little grateful that the problem of what to do with Bandit and Randy and Pandy was solved. *Did he plan on me being grateful? No. I don't believe that. He just doesn't like pets.*

\*\*\*

The floater Jamie and Jeannie were in began approaching the Florida Enclave. From the air, Jamie could see that it was fully as large as the Houston Enclave, although perhaps not so heavily populated. Its main function was the transfer of vital cargo back and forth from earth to space. The shuttles were all controlled by Moon City Pilots, specially trained to withstand the six times heavier gravity of earth, at least for short periods. Earth had not been allowed a presence in space since the breakdown of its economy, although Moon City and the Satellites still accepted a very limited number of immigrants, those possessing vital skills only. The satellites traded weather and landsat data to earth, but only at exorbitant prices in trade goods. The two cultures were becoming more and more divergent, and in recent years, only their mutual needs kept trade and contact going. It was an unstable situation, and becoming more so. Twice in the last decade, the Houston Enclave had been left bereft of hurricane tracking information until the last hours before landfall because of the high prices demanded for weather information.

Jeannie was once again looking out through the passenger bubble, wide-eyed at the unaccustomed sights, and grateful to be far away from the chaos enveloping the Disney Enclave. She spotted a landing shuttle on the tarmac in the distance, and pointed it out to Jamie. It squatted like a bird of prey, wings already extended in readiness to become airborne. Tiny figures scurried in apparent slow motion from the distance, readying the craft for the return to its natural habitat. Both of them studied it intensely, as if they could penetrate its innards just from staring. Fuzzy Britches purred unconcerned in Jamie's lap. From the air, most things looked the same to him, and he had soon lost interest in the vast vistas of uncontrolled countryside.

The floater settled gently to earth, less than a hundred feet from the shuttle. A single woman detached herself from the crew and came to meet them. She walked slowly, as if wading through molasses, and Jamie deduced that she was either the pilot or an attendant. As it turned out, she was a copilot, detached temporarily from her ship in order to shepherd passengers rather than cargo, and was not really happy about it. She made short shrift of herding them onto the loading platform and into the

bowels of the craft, where Masters, Kristi, and their pets were already aboard. This time, even the cats were relegated to cargo, much to their disgust, but the humans were assigned seats. For the first time, Jamie saw the other four rangers besides Masters and Kristi being assigned to the spaceship. It seemed to him to be an awfully small contingent, but he understood that on this trip, scientists, engineers, and other specialists would have priority. He was pleased to see that Judy Neilson was one of the rangers, and doubly pleased to see that she was wearing new Sergeant stripes on her arm. Judy had saved his life on at least one occasion when he was with her in the wilds, and probably more than once. She was one of Kristi's former lovers before He and Jeannie entered the picture but she seemed to be holding no grudges, for they were seated side by side, chatting amicably. Judy was not all that pretty, but she was slim and had a nice figure. She wore her brownish hair cut short. She smiled briefly at him when he waved. There was no time to talk, even to Kristi, for the captain was evidently in a hurry.

"Liftoff in three minutes. Settle back. Be sure your belts are tight," the co-pilot said, the tone of her voice indicating that she could care less whether they were strapped in or not. Jamie hoped she had secured their pets, but he wouldn't have bet the farm on it. She waded through the (to her) thick gravity field and secured the pilot's compartment. Engines revved, and the shuttle began to move.

Before Jamie had a chance to become properly used to the motion, the shuttle screamed into the atmosphere, pressing him hard against the backrest of his seat. The last thing he noticed before the acceleration became really uncomfortable was how heavily armed the rangers were. Their weapons belts took up a spare seat beside each of them, menacing in their lethality, but a comforting sight all the same. Whitmire was still taking no chances.

\*\*\*

*Weightlessness, and stars, stars in multitudes such as he had never imagined, brilliant pinprick white against blackness so fathomless that it had no beginning and no end.* Jamie floated against the restraining straps, peering out of the view port in astounded wonder. It was a sight such as he had never imagined, nor been able to imagine. He lost himself in the wonder of it until suddenly his stomach decided it wanted to return to earth and the comforting pull of gravity. He gulped air and his stomach roiled uneasily, but he didn't quite vomit. Beside him, Jeannie seemed not to be having any trouble. *And she's Probably Regnant!* By sheer force of will he kept his last meal where it belonged and looked around the passenger compartment. Judy Neilson was bending her face over a bag, trying to contain little globules of matter drifting from her mouth, but everyone else appeared to be stable, if not serene. He wondered how the pets were doing.

He needn't have worried. Fuzzy Britches and Woggly were playing patty-cake, bouncing each other against the restraining safety nets where they were confined. Wolfgang and Conan were uttering soft barks and whines in dog language, intermixed with occasional words which had no canine equivalent. Only Princess looked like she might be in some distress. She kept her claws securely fastened to the netting, not quite understanding why she couldn't feel weight pulling at her from where (to her) she hung upside down above the other pets. The comments of the other pets reassured her, however, and presently she hung quietly, as was her usual wont.

The frowning attendant cracked the pilot compartment hatch, checked swiftly, and re-secured it, as if she were checking for dead bodies, and finding none, was satisfied. Her voice came over a speaker. "We match with your spaceship in one hour. Stay secured," and that was all she had to say.

"Alvarez could use her as a receptionist," Jeannie remarked, referring to the retired chief of the Houston Genetic Engineering Section whom they had once worked for. His animosity toward Jamie and his pets, and laxity in his security arrangements of his personal files in the office had almost cost them their lives at one time. Jamie had once aspired to his job, but that was far in the past now. For the present, he was Jamie Da Cruz, sole proprietor of the alien thought disk, and now reluctant space explorer, albeit a happily married one, insofar as marriage had any meaning any more, and a prospective father at that. It could have turned out far worse, he thought.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The spaceship was huge, much larger than the shuttle they were in. Two smaller landing craft hugged opposite sides of the vessel, tiny in comparison. Jamie was just beginning to realize how large the great cylindrical machine was when his vision was obscured by a maneuvering rotation by the shuttle's pilot. He (or she) must have been good, for he felt only the faintest of bumps. There had been no hesitation by the combined Moon City and Earth Engineers in crafting a ship that might be used not only for exploration but also for immigration of humans from the solar system should that prove necessary. Metal was no problem, nor silicates, nor oxygen; it was hydrogen and nitrates and rare earths that the trans-earth population was perennially short of.

Jamie felt his ears pop as the pressure adjusted between the mated airlocks. He unfastened the restraining straps, then helped Jeannie with hers. They still had to wait, hanging weightless while the rangers off-loaded first, then had to wait again while he was detailed to the baggage compartment to shepherd the pets. It was no easy task. All of them except Princess wanted to play tag once they were freed from the safety nets. For twenty minutes, he was as busy as a mother trying to corral three-year-old quadruplets. The task was compounded by his own lack of experience in free fall, but at last he got the animals past the spaceship airlock and into the ship proper. There, he drifted helplessly, surrounded by furry creatures bumping into him from all directions until finally he was rescued by a large black man with kinky gray hair, wearing the standard Enclave coveralls, but adorned with bright silver stars on matching shoulder epaulets.

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Da Cruz. I'm Captain Hawkins. Could you use some help, here?"

Jamie shook the outstretched hand, grateful for the intervention. "I sure could. All these guys want to do is play." He released the Captain's hand and plucked Fuzzy Britches from his hair.

"Girl," Princess corrected from where she was attached to the seat of his coveralls. Lady didn't bother. She figured the large dark man should be able to tell the difference, and if he couldn't, he would be no friend of hers.

"I'll apologize if you'll let go of my pants," Jamie told her. Princess just clung tighter, and Jamie decided to let her be. At least it would be one less pet he would have to keep up with.

"Come on, I'll show you your quarters. Just take it easy. Push off gently. As soon as we get away from the hub, we'll have a little gravity, although not much. We're gradually taking the spin off." Hawkins



demonstrated the proper way to move in the near weightless environment, and as promised, a little weight soon returned. Jamie's stomach did a flip-flop, and suddenly there were walls, ceiling and floor again.

Jamie was soon completely lost, but the animals could have re-traced the route. A good portion of their sense of smell had been replaced by their greater intelligence and language facility, but it and their directional sense was still much better than any human's.

Jamie's family had been assigned one large compartment and two smaller ones, with one bath common to all. Hawkins demonstrated the facilities to him and the pets then opened the door to the larger room. Jeannie was already seated in front of a computer terminal, exploring the controls. There was little, of course, that she did not already know, having worked with the designers almost from the start. Every living compartment naturally would have access to most of the files of the main computer when it was installed, and be able to interface with the ubiquitous body computers, but for the time being, only she, Jamie and Kristi could activate that part of it controlling the ship itself.

Jeannie turned away from the holoscreen as she heard the door slide back in its tracks. "Hi," she said brightly.

"Hello," Captain Hawkins said. He peered at her closely. "Unless I'm mistaken, you're the young lady who is holding my ship for ransom. What do I have to do to get it back?"

Perfectly serious, Jeannie said "Get us away from earth. John Whitmire is a dear man, but I'm not at all sure he wouldn't have me returned to earth if he could."

"Well, I'm willing to get away as soon as we can. We're uncrating the mainframe now. Are you ready to get to work?"

"I am working," Jeannie smiled. "I've already run the checks on the terminal connections. As soon as they plug Big Boy in, I'll check all the interfaces, and I can do that from here. Nothing to it."

"Big Boy?"

"That's what I call the main computer."

"Oh. Well, can you access the bridge from here?"

"Bridge?"

"Control room. On a ship, we call it a bridge."

"Oh. Sure. And I fixed it where you and your vice- captain can do the same from your quarters, but nowhere else."

"Hm. All right, sounds as if you're as efficient with computers as I've heard. I'll leave you with it, and see what we're doing with the gravity generators. That's the only thing left."

"How long will that take?" Jamie asked as Hawkins' body computer slid the door open for him.

"Only a day or so, then another day to check everything out and we'll be ready to leave. Oh--" He turned. "There's a ship's guide in one of the files. It will show where the mess is, and how to get around the ship. Let me--"

"I've already found it," Jeannie said.

Captain Hawkins had a rather peculiar expression on his face as he took his leave, as if he had opened a birthday present and a gremlin jumped out of it.

\*\*\*

While Jeannie worked with the computer, Jamie and the pets explored their new home. There wasn't much to it. One side of the large compartment was taken up with a triple bed in addition to the computer alcove, and the opposite wall contained barely visible storage drawers, leaving it essentially blank as a background for holoprojections. The smaller compartment was partially blanketed for the pets to sleep on (the designers not aware that the cats, at least, preferred to sleep on people), and the rest of the room was taken up with a storage closet for clothes and other personal belongings, and a very small food and drink storage area, sufficient only for snacks. Apparently they would be eating most of their meals in the ship's mess.

While they were still exploring, Kristi returned, bouncing lightly under the pull of less than a tenth gravity. The other two occupants bounded forward to give her the hugs and kisses delayed since leaving the Houston Enclave. Both of them forgot to compensate and had to push back off the ceiling.

"Where's Troy?" Jamie asked as soon as he could free his mouth.

"He's with Terrili."

"Terry Lee?"

"Terrili Perkins. Female. She's the Vice-captain. Seems like a pretty nice person. She's still showing him around the ship. He won't rest until he knows every passageway and compartment in it."

"Where's he going to be staying?" Jeannie asked. She was still touching Kristi in various places as if to make sure she was really there.

Kristi grinned impishly. "He's got the stateroom next to ours. This is officer country we're in."

"All right," Jamie said, looking about. "How does the other half live?"

"About the same. Is anyone hungry?"

Jamie's salivation would have done justice to Woggly confronted with roast rabbit after a two day fast. "Lead on. Can the pets come? They must be hungry, too."

Kristi smiled mysteriously at the eager pets. "Of course. Maybe they'll meet some new friends there."

Jamie assumed she was referring to the four dogs belonging to the other rangers, forgetting that they must have already met in the cargo compartment. He hadn't seen them, as they had left with Masters and Kristi as soon as they had docked.

\*\*\*

All the ship's personnel would eat in the same room, but there was a small space sectioned off for VIP's, such as the Captain, his deputy, astrologer and chief engineer. Jamie assumed they would belong there as well after Kristi's reference to their quarters as "officer's country", but he really couldn't have cared less. He was nonchalant about such structuring, and would associate as quickly with a common laborer as an Enclave governor, or spaceship captain, for that matter.

Just to the right of the long rectangular room was a small area reserved for feeding the few enhanced pets aboard, since their culinary requirements and table manners differed somewhat from their humans. There, he saw the "new friends" their pets were to meet: Sean Johnson's raccoon and the two white rats. At first glance and sniff, both dogs and cats went into fighting stance.

"Stop!" Jamie commanded just as quickly, recognizing that the animals must be pets or they would certainly not be there. "Can't you see their collars?" The owner of the new animals had quickly emulated the earth fashion of requiring all Enclave pets to wear distinctive collars to distinguish them from the occasional feral animal that managed entrance to the Enclave.

"Pet mice?" Fuzzy britches asked unbelieving, looking up at Jamie as if he had lost his mind.

"Rats," Woggly corrected. "Pet rats." His fur had already reassumed its unruffled state, as much as that was possible for his shaggy hide.

"All the same. Varmints." Fuzzy Britches said disgustedly.

"Calm down, Fuzz," Kristi said. "They're nice. Randy and Pandy, and the raccoon is named Bandit." As if human, Bandit reached up to shake each of the humans hands, then the dogs', and finally patted the cats condescendingly on the head. Fuzzy Britches hardly noticed. He kept his eye on the two rats clinging to the raccoon's back until Kristi took some food bars out of a cabinet, then he immediately lost interest in them, at least for the time being.

"Be good," Jamie emphasized, directing his voice more at Fuzzy Britches than the others. Kristi led them on to the people area where they obtained food trays and squeeze beverage containers, although they really weren't needed now that some spin had been placed on the ship. The food was about half-and-half synthetic and natural, about the same fare they were used to in the Enclave. They had the area to themselves at the moment and were so hungry that conversation lagged, punctuated occasionally by a laugh when someone forgot the low gravity and spattered himself or herself.

Later, back in their quarters, the pull of gravity became less and less. Just before it ceased completely, Jeannie displayed a message for Jamie from the computer terminal. She had already been at work personalizing the interfaces from the ship's computer to their own body computers, not even giving Jamie a chance for input. A holo appeared, that of a soft haired pretty female with exaggerated bare breasts. "Message for Jamie," the projection smiled enticingly, as if she would love to whisper it in his ear rather than announce it publicly.

Jamie smiled to himself. Jeannie was always innovative with computers. "Go ahead," He said.

The mammalian apparition disappeared and was replaced with the visage of a large, blond-haired man. The subtle play of musculature as he moved slightly to adjust to Jamie's image identified him as a space citizen, even to Jamie's untrained eyes.

Sean Johnson's image stared with frank interest at Jamie, the first time he had seen the bugbear of the Moon City mercenaries. To Sean, he seemed to be quite ordinary: dark hair, olive complexion, a simple unpretentious mustache, and a well exercised body with just a tinge of softness beginning to show from hard mental work but almost a complete lack of exercise over the last half year.

"I'm Sean Johnson. I understand that your pets met mine in the mess hall just recently."

"Is there a problem?" Jamie asked worriedly, wondering what kind of mischief Fuzzy Britches and Woggly might have been up to while he wasn't watching.

"Not really," Sean explained. "It's just that they want to come over and play with your gang. Would that be all right?"

"Sure. Would you like to come over with them? We'd like to meet you."

"Sorry, I'm tied up now getting the gravity generators in place. Just as soon as we're under way though, I'd like to meet you all."

Jamie acquiesced, not even thinking of how Sean might have known and be thinking of Jeannie and Kristi. When it came to interpersonal relationships, he always assumed the best of a person.

By the time Sean's pets arrived, apparently having been told how to get to their quarters, Jeannie had just completed her installation of the Big Boy, and left it with a program running to check out all the interfaces with instructions to call if there were any problems. She stretched and began removing her coveralls.

"Captain Hawkins just made an announcement. Gravity from the spin will be gone completely in another hour. If we want to get washed, we'd better do it now."

\*\*\*

Sex in free fall was strange and wonderful. With three people participating, it was even stranger, and even more wonderful. The lack of gravity allowed juxtaposition of bodies that would have been impossible in other circumstances.

"Whoops, I lost you," Jeannie laughed. Jamie had trouble commenting because he was occupied with Kristi's breast filling his mouth, but it didn't matter. Seconds later, he again felt her slim fingers sliding over his buttocks and the moist warm tunnel of her mouth enclosing him.

And later, holding his hand lightly on first one, then another curved hip, he kept Jeannie and Kristi more or less oriented towards the triple bed as they explored each other in free-fall.

A rising cacophony of voices erupted from the pets' compartment, a chorus of meows, woofs, rasping raccoon guttural s and excited rat squeaks. Kristi raised her head from between Jeannie's thighs, but her partner, on the verge of orgasm, pressed her firmly back into position, not caring what the pets were doing.

Jamie propelled himself away from the bodies he had been holding and shot into the next compartment.

Kristi again looked up as he returned. Jamie grinned expansively. "Go back to what you were doing."

Jeannie already was, but Kristi was curious. Excited squeaking and other sounds were still erupting from the pets' room.

"It's nothing," he said, still grinning, "Just Fuzz and Wog telling Bandit and Randy and Pandi horror stories about the wilds."

Jeannie never heard a thing.

## CHAPTER 10

Jamie awoke to complete free fall the next morning. He considered himself lucky that he was apparently not prone to motion sickness in the absence of gravity as many first time space travelers were, especially those without his genomic resistance. He was disoriented momentarily, however, since neither he nor either of the women had thought to use the restraining straps attached to the bed before falling asleep. He had drifted to one corner of the compartment, and Jeannie to another. Kristi was not present, apparently having woken early and gone off on some errand of her own.

Jamie became aware of bumping noises from the adjoining compartment, accompanied by cat and dog noises he took for laughter. Increased intelligence past a certain level always led to a sense of humor in the higher animals, although it was not always apparent to casual observers. Neither dogs nor cats expressed amusement in the vocal range of humans were able to hear; they had their own sounds used to express amusement but they were too high pitched for humans to notice, other than by instruments. What he was hearing was the vocal language sounds of their pets, already awake and playing tag again.

Jamie pushed off from the wall, aiming in the general direction of Jeannie. He caught a foot, and drew her up to him. She opened her eyes and clutched him in momentary panic at the absence of support, then relaxed in his arms.

"How did we get over here?"

"You zigged when you should have zagged," Jamie said.

"That's not what you said last night," she accused.

"That was then. You zagged perfectly before we went to sleep. After that you zigged."

"Oh. Do you want to zag again?" She nuzzled his ear.

Jamie considered. His IA genome included the gene complex associated with a strong sex drive. Jeannie's did also, though she lacked some other attributes. Her ancestors had been one generation behind Jamie's in the opportunity to select for some factors deemed desirable. Her sex drive was certainly not among those. Jamie sometimes thought her gene complex had combined with some other factor in her personality to drive it to heights beyond what was considered theoretically feasible. Reluctantly, he detached himself from her embrace.

"I guess we better see what's going on. Kristi has already left, and the pets are trying to make a new air lock next door."

As if on cue, Fuzzy Britches shot through the entrance and thudded solidly against Jamie's chest.

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

"Lazy humans," the cat said, ignoring the admonition. He knew that Jamie didn't really mind.

Jamie plucked Fuzzy Britches from his chest and tossed him gently back through the open entrance. He began to dress, and Jeannie followed suit. Just as they were finishing, an apparition materialized in mid air: an oversize, hugely muscled male with wavy blond hair long enough to brush his shoulders spoke to them.

"Good morning, Jeannie. Good morning, Jamie," he said in a deep bass voice.

"Oh!" Jeannie exclaimed. "Big Boy! Are you on line now?"

"I have completed interfacing, and am ready to begin testing the gravity generators," the computer apparition said.

"Go ahead, whenever Captain Hawkins is ready," Jeannie told it. She grinned impishly at Jamie. The image vanished.

"Is that the computer image we'll be talking to?" Jamie asked, bemused as usual at how Jeannie always managed to personify computers with just the right touch of appropriateness salted with humor.

"That's him. Big Boy in person."

"He makes me look like a wimp."

Jeannie patted his cheek. "Any time he does, just think of that lovely I created to answer to you. She makes me feel under-developed."

As if she had been listening, the lovely appeared, smiling brightly. "Hello, Jamie. Captain Hawkins would like to see you on the bridge. He suggests that you bring your pets."

"Can Jeannie come, too?"

Large bare breasts swayed provocatively as she shrugged. "As you wish."

"See what I mean?" Jeannie said. "You go ahead. I want to talk to Big Boy a little more. Call me when you're ready for breakfast."

\*\*\*

Jamie sensed an animosity as soon as he gingerly propelled himself into the bridge area. Captain Hawkins was floating with arms behind his back, one hand attached to a retainer ring. He retained no trace of the amiable expression Jamie had noted in their previous meeting. Facing him was a tall, half-bald man with a hawk nose whom Jamie immediately classified as a spacer. The tall, spare body and relaxed, ready-to-fall stance was unmistakable. He raised his brows slightly in the direction of the captain, still wondering why he had been summoned.

"Hello, Jamie. Thanks for coming. I'd like you to meet Rob Passing, the Security Chief of Moon City." He indicated the tall man with a gesture.

"Jamie recognized the name, if not the face. This was the man who bore much of the responsibility for the deaths and fighting over the Altair technology. Though they were at peace now, Jamie doubted that he would ever feel much liking for the man. He shook hands perfunctorily, then turned to introduce his pets. That endeavor was about as successful as trying to introduce Fuzzy Britches to a feral dog in the

act of stealing his food.

Fuzzy Britches, ordinarily at least mildly curious in the presence of a strange human, had retreated as far from Passing as he could get (which happened to be the lap of a female assistant astrogator he had met in the mess hall), and was ignoring the proceedings entirely, much preferring to have his ears scratched to having to talk to a human he had taken an immediate disliking to.

Woggly was even less polite. He crouched down and tucked his tail over his privates when Passing turned his glance toward him. Conan raised, in the wilds, respected humans only on an individual basis, and very few at that. His manners weren't that great, either. He began a low, rumbling growl to show his displeasure. Jamie quickly touched his head to quiet him and gave up all thoughts of introductions.

"Do these animals have the run of your ship, Captain?" Passing asked, clearly annoyed at their presence.

"These are not 'animals', Mr. Passing. They are pets, and friends and companions. They are also quite intelligent. In fact, had it not been for them, it is very likely that we would not be together here on this ship."

*Damn right we wouldn't be, Passing thought. Moon City would have the prize and you earth bastards and your fucking animals would go on to hell without us.*

Conan gave another low growl, almost as if he was reading Passing's thoughts, and perhaps he could, a little. There was no doubt that intelligence-enhanced animals retained an evolved respect for the prowess of the human species, and with increased intelligence, were usually able to sort out almost immediately the attitudes of humans toward them, either pro, con or neutral. Jamie had long since learned to trust the instincts of his own pets. He knew they were better at it than he would ever be, and in his usual fashion, he acknowledged the fact, recognizing his own limitations. One of the few things that ever irritated him was the knowledge that most humans seemed to have a constitutional inhibition against recognizing their own faults. He was ready to leave now, having deduced the reason Captain Hawking had called for him. The Captain obviously had extensive experience with enhanced pets and had simply wanted to have Jamie's pets give him an unvoiced opinion on Mr. Rob Passing.

"Is there anything else you need me for, Captain?" Jamie asked.

Captain Hawkins smiled enigmatically. "I had intended for you and your friends to come along with us while Mr. Passing inspected the rest of the ship, but perhaps you have other duties more pressing?"

It was both a perfunctory question and a dismissal. Jamie quickly took the hint. Fuzzy Britches reluctantly vacated the lap where he had been having his ears scratched. He levitated his forequarters up to the woman's shoulders and licked her chin in thanks. Then he hopped down and followed Jamie and the dogs from the bridge, skirting Rob Passing by the widest possible margin.

As Jamie's entourage left, Passing engaged Captain Hawkins with questions concerning the operations of the huge, untested ship they were on. He hated the fact that every critical position was filled by an earthman, but there was nothing he could do about it. After all, the Houston Enclave had defeated his forces in the fight for the Altair technology. He was already familiar with the general structure of the ship, its complement, and the general organization of the personnel who would be manning it, simply as a result of the compromise of Moon City providing the construction in return for eventual access to the Altair technology. As it was, though, neither he nor any other spacer knew the basics of the FTL technology yet, and until the Houston Enclave directors were certain of absolute control of numerous ships in case out-emigration proved necessary, they were not even considering releasing critical information.

Captain Hawkins had little more liking or trust for Passing than did Jamie, but as Captain of the ship, he was obligated to be diplomatic. He resolved this dilemma by accessing Big Boy, the main frame AI which Jeannie had just checked, interfaced, conversed with, and finally pressed the last key which gave the AI free reign.

Big Boy came up and ready, like a puberty driven male with his first erection.

"Big Boy on line, sir." The holographic image burst into being, that of a stern-visaged military officer in the uniform of the previous century. It resembled Captain Hawkins' father more than a little, though he was unaware of the fact.

Captain Hawkins addressed the image. "Big Boy, this gentleman is from Moon City. He is in charge of all security for the city and satellites. He is also inspecting the ship and has some questions for you."

"Moon City" was a code word. Spoken by the captain, or any other of the officers having access to Big Boy, it told the AI that it should answer generally, rather than specifically.

Cultures differ. Moon City and the satellites seldom personified their AI's, while on earth the practice was pervasive. Passing tried to assume a proprietary air with Big Boy, but he was put off by having to speak to the perfectly realized image of the military officer. "Big Boy. Is that your recognition code?"

"It is my name, Mr. Passing. I am a fully realized artificial intelligence. Jeannie Bostick will give you specifics concerning the initiation of my awareness should you desire them."

Passing blinked. He glanced at Captain Hawkins, wondering if he was being played with. His glance met only a bland countenance. He turned back to the computer. "Big Boy, I have some questions for you,"

"Proceed, sir."

Passing hesitated a moment then bulled ahead. "I understand that the gravity generators have been installed and will be functional shortly. Is that correct?"

"It is."

"How do they work? That is, are they necessary for faster than light travel?"

"Not per se, sir. However, they are necessary in order to maintain the integrity of the ship while in FTL mode."

"I think I see: they are necessary for humans to endure FTL travel."

"Essentially, yes, but the generators will also be convenient when not in flight, at a much-reduced level, of course."

The statement confirmed Passing's suspicions: not only was the FTL technology necessary, but the secret of the gravity generators would also have to be stolen, if not the ship itself.

"What makes you think they will work?" He asked. "As I understand it, the Altairians developed the concept during their voyage here, but lacked the necessary materials to construct them."

"The gravity generators are not solely an Altairian development, sir. Early in this century, some of the theoretical aspects were discovered during research with the largest particle collider on earth. As you



may be aware, only one of its type was ever built, and its operation was abandoned during the consolidation of earth's population into the present day Enclaves. The research records were kept, however, and perusal of those records has provided us with a solid theoretical support for the Altairian engineering specifications provided by Mr. Da Cruz. They will work."

"Hm. Given that that is true, I still have problems understanding how a material object can pass the speed of light."

Big Boy's image captured the ghost of a smile. "It can't"

Passing frowned, forehead wrinkles emphasizing his over-large nose. "Explain, then. You can't have it both ways!"

"Simply put, sir, without reference to the very obscure mathematical language required for true understanding, the ship will not exceed the speed of light; rather, we will slow the rest of the universe down."

Passing blinked in confusion. "That really doesn't tell me much. Can you relate the mathematical theory in equation form forme? Perhaps some of my cohorts may understand them."

"That is not yet possible. The mathematical theory, or equations as you put it, is inherent in the engineering specifications for the time stress generators given to Mr. Da Cruz. Until we actually test the ship from another reference point in the Galaxy, the math cannot be discussed sensibly."

"Then how do you know they will work?"

"I have already run numerous simulations, from points within the solar system, our own galaxy, and even from other galaxies. The simulations agree with the specifications."

Passing recognized a stall when he saw one, but he concealed his exasperation. It had been worth a try. He turned to Captain Hawkins. "I think that's all I need to see here. Let's get on with the rest of the tour."

"Big Boy can provide accurate simulations right here, if you wish," Hawkins said.

"No doubt, but I prefer to see everything with my own eyes,"

"As you wish. Thank you, Big Boy."

"You're welcome, Captain, Big Boy on standby."

\*\*\*

Hawkins' dark face and kinky gray hair materialized in Jeannie's computer alcove. "Attention, all personnel. Gravity generator test will begin in five minutes. I intend to test at 20% earth normal. Secure all loose objects, and stand by. Take-off will follow in three hours."

"He doesn't leave any room for doubt, does he?" Jamie said, disengaging himself from Kristi. Why couldn't he have waited a few minutes?"

"We'll still have three hours," Jeannie reminded him. "Twenty percent G should be almost as much

fun as zero G."

"If we don't just disappear," Jamie said. He felt his heartbeat increase, knowing that if anything went wrong, it could probably be traced to his own mistakes in transferring knowledge from the Altairian thought disk.

A deep humming noise swept through the ship, as if a hive of bees had taken up residence somewhere within, and he felt a slight tug of gravity. It increased rapidly then held steady. The humming noise faded, then ceased completely. His feet met the floor comfortably as the image of the Captain appeared again.

"Gravity generators are now functioning normally. We will maintain the present settings throughout our voyage. Our first destination will be to the orbit of Saturn, where we propose to explore the Altairian ship. Estimated time of arrival is approximately twenty hours from take-off. Exploration party will consist of personnel selected by Captain Masters. You will be notified shortly. Take-off in two hours, fifty-five minutes. Engineers and astrogators remain at stations. All other personnel please remain in your compartments until we are under way. Thank you."

The ship moved out exactly on schedule. The passengers felt nothing unusual. For Jamie, Jeannie and Kristi, the time passed without them even noticing. They were occupied.

\*\*\*

Jamie had just finished getting back into his clothes when Masters announced his presence from his adjoining stateroom. He told the door to let him enter after waiting a moment for the women to finish dressing. They seemed in no hurry. He shrugged as the ranger captain entered while they were still clad only in the barest of briefs. Masters didn't seem to care either. He settled into one of the cushioned chairs while Jeannie was still pulling on her coveralls. Kristi left hers alone, for reasons known only to her. "So who's going?" She asked, adjusting her brief halter to accommodate her large, firm breasts. It covered her nipples, but just barely, leaving the tops of the areoles visible.

Masters raised an eyebrow at her, then grinned, turning his lined face into boyish crinkles. "You know you're going, of course. Our dogs. Smith and Corsair, and their dogs. And Jamie. "

"Jamie!" Jeannie exclaimed. "Why him? He's not a ranger!"

Masters grinned inwardly. Jeannie was less adventuresome than any of them. Also, she had the idea that Jamie couldn't take care of himself when he was absent from her. It had almost gotten her killed before, but she had already conveniently forgotten the result of her last episode of trying to protect him.

"Sorry, but I want Jamie along. That thought disk he carries might be useful. It has the only real knowledge we have about the Altairians, even if most of it is engineering specifications."

"He'll get hurt, just like last time," Jeannie said darkly.

"No," Woggly and Conan said at the same time. "We protect him, keep the varmints away."

"Just eat the varmints," Fuzzy Britches suggested.

"Let's see what we find, first, Fuzz," Masters said, amused. Fuzzy Britches had a unique mind, in his opinion. He was certainly one of the smartest enhanced animal he knew of. "And you're not going Woggly, or Conan, either. Only Ranger dogs."

"What am I supposed to do?" Jamie asked. He wasn't the adventuresome type, although it seemed to him that he was constantly getting involved in escapades that he would as soon have skipped, this one included. It wasn't fear; he didn't think he could ever be scared as badly as he had been on the expedition into the wilds from the Houston Enclave. It was more a sense of still just wanting to do research without being constantly called upon to interrupt it for higher callings as he had been for the last year.

Kristi patted his thigh. "Just follow along, dear, and watch out for boogers. I can't imagine anything worse than those rats we fought with on earth."

"I can't either," Jamie said, privately imagining all kinds of monsters laying in wait for them in the alien ship.

\*\*\*

One of the Landers had been modified for interspace operations. The pilot was the assistant astrogator whom Fuzzy Britches had befriended. She was short, plump and competent, and insisted on being called Iris, rather than Irene, her given name. She and Masters conferred as they approached the alien ship.

"Damn, I thought our ship was big, but look at this baby." She said. The Altairian ship had apparently been constructed from the shell of a large asteroid. It was unevenly lumpy in places, indicating possible airlocks or entrances. She and Masters agreed on a point as it revolved slowly before them and she maneuvered the modified lander into juxtaposition.

The raised lump did prove to be an airlock. Iris donned a spacesuit, since she was the only one aboard familiar with EVA, and attempted to open it. Several hours later, she returned and doffed her helmet.

"Nogo, Captain, but we were prepared for the possibility. I'm going to have to rig a block to hold the air then set off an implosion charge to open her up."

"Go ahead," Masters told her. "We'll get into our suits and be ready."

Jamie struggled with the unfamiliar garment, a modified spacesuit designed only to protect from contamination and very brief exposure to vacuum. He wasn't at all enthusiastic about any part of the operation. The dogs waited in reserve, back of the Lander's airlock. No garments had been designed to fit them.

The explosion reverberated through the lander, and Jamie held his breath apprehensively, expecting any moment to feel the whoosh of escaping air, but it didn't come. Iris had fitted the explosive device well.

"OK, let's go," Masters said. "Smith and me first, to test the air, then Kristi, Corsair and the dogs next. Jamie you wait til I tell you it's OK."

"I'll wait," Jamie said enthusiastically.

\*\*\*

Masters had expected the air to be breathable, since the Altairians had survived for some weeks on earth, although he knew that the reverse was not necessarily true. He checked his suit gauge carefully before breaking the seal of his suit. A stench assaulted his nostrils, as if rotten broccoli and mildewed leather had been festering for weeks in the passageway. He coughed, and quickly inserted nose filters to block out the worst of the smell, then cautiously passed from the blasted inner door into the bowels of the alien ship. The other rangers followed, then the dogs, wrinkling their noses in disgust. Jamie brought up the rear.

Lights were on within the ship, reddish and dim, illuminating a short passage that became larger as they progressed. The slowly spinning ship provided only a minimum of centrifugal gravity as they bounced slowly and cautiously forward. The passage split, opening into two larger compartments. A reddish green scum clung to the walls. There was movement within it, tiny skittering life forms with faceted eyes and clinging tentacles that burrowed into the scum as they passed.

Masters arbitrarily chose the passage running to the right and it in turn enlarged, burgeoning into a huge dome. Here, growth hung from the ceiling in strands. The smell became worse, as if they were entering a huge garbage dump. A strange chittering sound arose, then died out, from a source not readily apparent. Masters stopped their progress when he detected movement at the opposite end of the cavern, where the dome descended and closed off further progress. Strands of vegetation were visible around an entrance that had closed over it automatically when Iris' explosion went off. His years in the wilds were warning him to be cautious. An eerie silence pervaded the cavern, hanging heavily on his senses, like the stillness before a Kansas tornado. Again, a chittering noise broke the stillness, then died out as before. He waited, then led his troops forward a few more steps.

The barely discerned movement at the far end of the dome had distracted him. Jamie, tagging along at the rear was the one who caught the movement overhead. "Captain! Watch out!" He shouted.

A myriad of short-legged monsters descended from the ceiling, propelled by tufts of gas. His warning was almost too late. One of the apparitions landed on Masters' arm; another missed but clutched at his feet with short, clawed legs. Faceted eyes gleamed in the reddish hazy light as they tore at his suit. Kristi whirled, knife in hand, and stabbed at the animal ripping at his arm. Masters kicked at another one digging at his legs with insane fury. It clung until he stooped and peeled it off, crushing it with a booted foot. Others dropped among the rangers and dogs. Three of the creatures pulled Smith down to the floor. His dog tore furiously at them, growling in rage.

"Back!" Masters shouted. He fired his lasergun at point-blank range, splattering another of the ravaging animals into pieces, then bent to help Smith to his feet. Smith's dog was buried under clawed bodies, where they had turned to meet his attack. Kristi and Corsair fired discretely, unable to use their guns effectively at such close range. They swatted at more of the monsters, trying to retreat.

Jamie was horrified, but he was in the best position to help. From the rear, he picked off enough of the swarm to break the others free, then retreated with them. Smith's dog was dead, and the ranger was crying in anguish, unable to use any weapon in revenge. Both his arms had been mangled while trying to save his pet and it was all he could do to move.

They finally fought free at the rear of the dome where the narrowed passage tunnel gave them room to enfilade their fire, but it was only a temporary reprieve. The chittering had grown to a nerve chilling cacophony of screams, and now it was coming from behind them as well.

"Run!" Masters screamed. "Get back to the air lock!"

They ran, pausing to fire behind them for only the briefest of moments. Where the first passage had split, they were overrun again. This time, it was Kristi who went down under the onslaught. Lady tore into her attackers with no thought of her own safety, and Jamie bulled Masters aside without even thinking, using his knife and gun recklessly, intent only on rescuing her. Green gore spattered him from his laser and rocket assisted slugs tearing apart the alien animals. He yanked Kristi to her feet and into the final passage back to the airlock. Wolfgang tore into the last of the alien demons as Masters assisted him, firing coolly now that their back was protected. Corsair was the last to break free, one arm mangled, and then it was over. All that was left to do was make certain that the new lock was sealed behind them.

Blood spilled from Masters' hair, bright against the whiteness of his locks. He rubbed it from his eyes, gun still in his hand. Everyone except Jamie was wounded to some extent, but Smith's dog was the only casualty. He was still sobbing over his death, but gradually getting himself under control. Corsair was cursing in a continuous monotone.

"Close the lock," Masters commanded. "Let's get out of here. There's nothing we can do with this ship. It's all gone to hell. It would take a major expedition to explore it now."

Jamie barely heard him. He was still shaking with reaction and trying to examine Kristi's wounds. They were minor, but he wasn't expert enough to judge. Kristi knew she wasn't hurt badly, and she was more concerned with the blood still pouring from Masters' scalp. The lock opened behind them, and Terrili, the darkly pretty oriental vice-captain opened her eyes wide in amazement. She wasn't used to blood or violence. Masters calmed her quickly.

"Let's get these people to an autodoc," he said. "We'll talk later."

*We sure will ,* Jamie thought.*Just as soon as I get my voice back.*

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

After sending Jamie back to reassure Jeannie that neither he nor Kristi had been seriously hurt, Masters called the captain from where they were both being attended by adjoining Autodocs.

"There's nothing more we can do there, Captain," he told Hawkins. "According to Jamie's thought disks, and from what we saw, there can't be any Altairians left alive there. It looks as if the life support systems of the ship have just exploded into chaos after all the Altairians died, and the only way I know of to explore the ship would be a complete sterilization. I doubt that any of our scientists would go along with that, at least not yet, anyway. I recommend that we abandon any further attempt for now and try for the Altairian system to see what's left there from the dust cloud."

Captain Hawkins surprised him with his answer. "I think we will make that our next destination, but we may be surprised. Some of the Moon City scientists brought a couple of the old telescopes back on line, and they cannot see any evidence of a dust cloud there."

"No? I thought that's what Jamie's original thought disk said was going on. Did he misinterpret it?"

"We don't think so," Captain Hawkins said. "There's something amiss, though, and the only way is to go see. Once out of the solar system, it won't take long, anyway, and after all, the prime reason the Altairians sent their lander to earth was supposedly so that we would try to rescue whatever population remains there. Besides, it's as good a destination as any, since you say we can't do anything with their ship now."

"OK," Masters agreed. Anything was better than trying to suppress an ecology gone wild in a huge ship with only six rangers and five dogs. He did wonder, though, why Moon city scientists with their telescopes hadn't picked up on that bit of information. Or had they? He decided it might be wise to stay alert while the spacemen were aboard.

"So," Kristi said from the adjoining Autodoc. "On to new frontiers."

"So it seems," Masters said. His autodoc beeped and disconnected then gave him some unwanted advice about taking it easy for a few hours.

"Wait for me," Kristi said. Masters did so, and she was also finished a few moments later. They walked under the easy gravity back towards the staterooms together. The entrance to Masters' stateroom opened at his presence, keyed by his body computer. He turned to tell Kristi that he would see her later, but she was already past him, and into his room.

Kristi immediately shucked herself out of her coveralls and began taking off her briefs. She turned, prettily naked. "The autodoc does a good cure," she said, "but they don't get you clean. Come wash my back for me."

Masters started to ask what Jamie or Jeannie would think, but Kristi had already disappeared into the shower. He shrugged and undressed, then followed the sounds of running water.

Kristi's back was a pleasure to wash. Her front was even more so. The water flowed over her full breasts and dripped languidly downward under the low gravity. He didn't know at first if her intentions were really sexual or simply friendly; they had been so closely associated for years without any sexual innuendo between them that it was hard to figure. Not only that, for most of the time he had known her, she had been associated sexually almost exclusively with women. Kristi quickly disillusioned him. She enticed him to dry her, then pulled him down on his own bed and stretched languidly against him, curling her arms around his neck. It was impossible not to respond. He traced the lines of her body and found that he really wanted her, age notwithstanding. Kristi's hands roved, and found surprises. Masters' body was firm and toned like a much younger man. His skin was free of wrinkles other than his face and hands where years of exposure to wind and sun had formed seams and wrinkles. She felt the hardness of him against her belly and the ridged muscles of his back as she pulled him over her and guided him into her, then there was only the feel of his body on hers and in her and the lock of her legs around him as he thrust into her.

Later, rubbing her lips over the hard muscles of his chest, she began adding up what should have been obvious long ago: the youthful body concealed beneath Enclave coveralls, the endurance on long patrols in the wilds, the mind that showed no signs of age. "Damn you, Troy Masters. You've been fooling every goddamned body in the Enclave Do you dye your fucking hair, or what?"

Troy Masters chuckled, running his hands along Kristi's flanks. "I guess my white hair is what fools most people. I am old, you know, but remember how long ago it was that the longevity genes were discovered. My folks were one of the first to volunteer for that selection. That's about all I've got, though. My white hair is hereditary. Everyone in my family turns white before they're forty. I've just never seen any reason to tell anyone that it has nothing to do with my age. "

"You could have told me," Kristi said petulantly.

"Why? So far as I could see over the years, you were much more interested in women than men."

Kristi nuzzled at his chest. "That's just because until Jamie--and you, I never met any men that really interested me. And now two of you, all in one year."

"Speaking of which. " Masters said. "How are you going to explain this to Jamie and Jeannie?"

Kristi raised up and looked down at the ranger captain. Her breasts brushed his chest, raising goose pimples.

"Simple enough, you old-fashioned curmudgeon. I'll just tell them that we're short a man. Join the family. That is, if Fuzzy Britches approves."

Masters laughed. It was humorous to him. In his younger days, it would never have occurred to him that he would need the approval of a cat to join a family, not to mention his own pets.

"Don't laugh. Fuzzy Britches has a better sense of propriety than most humans. But don't worry either. Unless I'm totally wrong, he'll welcome you with open arms, or paws, in this case."

"I'm shy. You'll have to tell Jamie and Jeannie."

"Old fashioned, but I love you anyway," Kristi said. "Besides, I told Jeannie to have Big Boy record everything from the time we left the autodocs and play it into their compartment. They already know."

Masters was old enough to blush, but he need not have. Later that night, Jamie's three-person bed made room enough for four. And Fuzzy Britches did approve.

\*\*\*

The Altairian system was a twelve-day trip using the time stress generators. In the nature of the propulsion system, the further the destination, the quicker the relative time to arrive there. As an example, from earth to Saturn had taken less than hours, but the incredibly further trip to the Altairian system would take considerably less time, relatively. Should they go on to further points of the galaxy, the dilation would become even more evident.

During the first few days of the trip, Troy Masters, Jamie, Jeannie And Kristi explored their expanded relationship, then planning for the landing on the planet began to take up the time of Kristi and Troy. That left Jamie and Jeannie with time on their hands. The pets amused themselves. The relationship of the raccoon and rats with their dogs and cats expanded until Sean's pets were spending much of the time in their compartment. Fuzzy Britches decided that tame rats could be fun, especially since he was so much more intelligent than they were. He could talk to them after a fashion, and regaled them with stories of earth, always emphasizing the fact that in other circumstances he might well have them for dinner but after a while the rats realized he was teasing them and ignored the more gory part of his stories.

Jeannie spent a lot of her time interfaced with Big Boy, exploring the limits of its intelligence and guiding it in paths she wanted it to go. This left Jamie at somewhat of loose ends and he began spending time exploring the labyrinthine corridors of the ship. This gave Della Worley an opportunity to begin to carry out her assignment.

Jamie was never loath to spend time in the presence of an attractive woman, especially one from such a different culture. He thought nothing of the fact that their paths crossed frequently, never considering that it might be deliberate on her part. He found himself attracted to the slender, blond woman. Della, for her part, discovered that she liked Jamie. He was completely unpretentious, willing to talk about any subject she brought up, including his prominent role in securing the Altairian technology for earth, although he consistently gave most credit to the rangers and pets for the success. Three days out from Altair, she caught him alone in the mess hall, eating by himself.

"Hi Jamie. Can I join you?"

"Sure. Sit down." Jamie was at loose ends and welcomed the company. He was finding that space travel could be boring as well as exciting.

"Are you getting excited yet?" Della asked brightly.

"About what?"

"Why, the landing on Altair, of course."

"You mean the planet? I haven't heard that we're actually landing. And really, going into that derelict ship of theirs was all the excitement I want for a long time."

"I guess so. Was it really that terrible?"

"Bad enough," Jamie said. "I guess what bothers me is that if conditions are so horrible on the ship with all the Altairians dead, what will it be like on their planet?"

"You mean you think we may not land at all?"

"Really, I have no idea," Jamie said honestly. He finished the last of what purported to be "natural protein patties" and leaned back.

Della left it at that, for the time being. Passing had instructed her to gain possession of Jamie's thought disk, thinking that she might thereby gain control of the ship. She was torn by the instructions. She found herself genuinely liking Jamie and his family as well, but the alternative seemed worse to her. She was comforted by the thought that there might be no landing on the Altairian planet, and thus no opportunity to do anything while the majority of the rangers were out of the ship. She felt especially guilty when Jamie brought her around to his compartment and made her feel comfortable there, even in the presence of the two earth females. They were friendly as well, which made her feel even worse. Only the thought of banishment to the mines kept her from abandoning the whole idea of treachery.

Two days later the whole matter came to a head. Della had invited Jamie into her small compartment. Jamie was, as usual, completely uninhibited and unembarrassed to be found there by Masters. The apparition created by Jeannie popped into being. "Jamie, Captain Masters wants to talk to you," it said, taking a deep breath.

"Put him on," Jamie said, amused at Della's reaction to the over-endowed image. Masters' image swam into being. "Hi Jamie," He said. "Sorry to bother you, but Kristi insisted. Captain Hawkins just gave us the word. We've got some good telescopic observations of the Altairian planet and Captain Hawkins has approved a landing party." "Oh. I guess I better start getting ready, then."

"No," Masters disclaimed. "That's why Kristi wanted me to call. Hawkins has decided that he's not going to risk you again. You won't be going this time."



This news struck Jamie wrong. While he wasn't fond of risking his life, he didn't like being excluded just because of his special status, either, especially when Kristi would be subject to danger.

"Thanks," He said, then to Della. "Sorry, but I'd better go. I want to have some time with Kristi before she leaves. "

"Certainly," Della said. She wished she had someone so devoted. She also wished there had been no decision to land. Now all she needed was to isolate Jamie from Jeannie while the rangers were busy off ship, and she might be able to pull off a coup. The thought was not enhancing, but there was one positive note about it: she might be able to complete the whole undesired assignment and be done with it. It was a fatalistic approach, but she was tired of pretending, and she really didn't care much whether she succeeded or failed.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Kristi was ready to leave. The ship was already in a circular orbit around the Altairian planet the astrogator had deemed the only one possible the aliens could have lived on, and the lander was ready for departure. She was carrying her various weapons and gear, some of it to be attached to the outside of environmental suits, the rest to be worn once the atmosphere proved to be as compatible as the analysis from space promised.

"Take care," she said, hugging Jamie's neck.

"You're the one who needs to be careful," Jamie said; still annoyed that he was being left behind.

"Don't worry. We have an insight now, after exploring that ship. We'll be careful."

"I'll stay close to Jeannie. We'll be waiting."

"Do that. Spend a little time with Della, too. I think she's lonely and she seems like a nice person to be with." Kristi kissed him and left.

Jamie was nonplused. Was Kristi becoming enamored again with another woman other than Jeannie? She had shown no inclination so far as he could see, but Kristi seldom wore her emotions openly--only her actions were plain to all. Certainly she had noticed his attraction toward the Moon city woman, but that didn't mean anything. He was reminded of how Kristi had seduced Jeannie while he was in the wilds, and wondered if she were planning a similar conquest upon her return. Not that he would mind; he entertained similar thoughts about Della himself in his spare time, in a sort of desultory fashion.

\*\*\*

The lander took off. Jamie watched the departure by relay to the room computer in their

compartment while Jeannie held him tightly. She had a much more emotional personality than he or Kristi. Jamie simply took things as they came--or tried to.

Big Boy monitored the proceedings, and eventually Jeannie became so tied up with her protégé that Jamie wandered off. Remembering Kristi's admonition, he headed toward Della's compartment. She was in, and welcomed him, although he thought there was a hesitance to her invitation. She had to assure him twice before he was certain that she really wanted him there.

A long time later, in a fashion he wasn't really certain of, he found that they were both undressed, stretched out together on her narrow bed. He found himself fascinated by her slim body and small breasts, so unlike the voluptuous bodies of Kristi and Jeannie. She seemed distracted; however, as if another, malign presence was in the room with them. That induced him to go slow and careful. He stroked her body until he was sure she was ready, then made slow, careful love to her, absorbed in making sure she was satisfied.

Della responded despite herself. It was impossible for her not to, given the careful consideration that Jamie paid to her. It made what she planned even harder, but the thought of what Passing had in mind for her if she failed burgeoned out and almost overwhelmed her. And now was the most opportune time she was likely to get, with the rangers out of the ship.

In the after throes, she began talking to him. "Jamie, you're so important that I feel like a little girl making love to her Father. Why doesn't anyone else treat you like that?"

"I've been a victim of circumstances." Jamie said honestly. "I just happened to be the first person contacted with that damned thought disk, then the dog that brought it got attached to me--and you know the rest. It could have happened to anyone."

"I've heard a lot about those thought disks. They were what made this ship possible, weren't they?"

"Sure," Jamie said, completely unsuspecting of what Della was getting at. He stroked her slim body, making her shiver.

"I've never seen a thought disk," she said quickly, before Jamie's hands moving on her body distracted her from what she intended.

Jamie raised up. "Would you like to see one?" He asked, wanting to please her. It meant little to him, and seemed important to her.

"Let's get dressed, first," Della said. She slipped into her ship's coveralls, carefully concealing the firearm that Passing had given her during his inspection tour.

Jamie pulled on his coveralls, thinking that he would go see Jeannie and tell her that Della was a lovely woman and that he might bring her to their bed sometime soon. The Altairian thought disk was in the side pocket of his coveralls, as usual. He pulled it out and turned to Della, intending to show it to her, although there was little of apparent interest to see. It was simply a thin saucer-sized disk of blue-green color, metallic appearing, but lightweight. He found himself facing Della with a small handgun pointing in his direction.

"Give it to me," Della ordered. Her gun hand shook almost as badly as her voice.

Jamie was too startled to speak, let alone act. He simply stood silent, unbelieving that he could have misjudged her so badly.

"Give it here, Jamie. I don't want to hurt you, but I will if you make me."

"It won't do you any good. No one but me can use it." *Didn't she know that?*

"I'll be the judge of that. Hand it over."

Jamie shrugged, then tossed the disk toward her with a quick motion. "Catch," He said, hoping to distract her enough so that he could take her weapon.

The ploy might have worked, except that he had forgotten the low gravity. The disk sailed up in a slow arc and floated down gently into Della's waiting hand. She tucked it into a pocket of her coveralls.

"Now what?" Jamie asked the lithe blond. He couldn't imagine what she was thinking. There was no possible way she could use the disk. She could not even hold it for ransom. While there might still be useful information in it, Jamie had already wrested the most important data from it in the building of the ship they were on.

"Now we go to the bridge. When we get there, you and the captain are going to call the Moon City contingent to the bridge. Then we're going home."

"But -" Jamie tried to tell her that her scheme wouldn't work. Or at least he didn't think it would.

"No buts. Go. I'll follow you."

Jamie entered the corridor with Della trailing behind. Her hand was still shaking almost uncontrollably. *Why does he have to be so nice? They all are, not like that bastard Passing told me.* She shifted her thoughts back to immediate concerns. Would the few Moon City crewmembers of the ship support her? Surely they would, or at least the majority would. Passing was bound to have other agents aboard. And the rangers were gone, that was the most important thing.

The door to the bridge dilated as Jamie approached, obedient to the silent command of his body computer, then quickly closed behind him, cutting off Della. She stared stupidly at the closed door.

Inside, Terrili Perkins, the vice -captain began to smile at Jamie, then broke it off as she saw his expression. "Secure the bridge, now!" Jamie shouted at her. At the same time he used a command to his body computer to bring his version of Big Boy into interface.

The small dark vice-captain was quick on her feet. Without even turning around she gave an order to secure the airtight seals of the bridge which automatically locked them in. They snapped shut with a thud, just as he heard the shattering rebound of a shot from the other side.

\*\*\*

The lander burned to a stop just outside the confines of a ruined city. It bore a surprising resemblance to the familiar enclaves of Earth, or at least it must have at one time. Now all the short squat buildings were buried under a riot of vegetation. Here and there bits of metallic-looking walls and roofs poked through, as if struggling to shake off the confining vegetative growth.

*If that's what it is,* Masters thought. Aloud, he commented, "Nasty weather patterns, huh?"

Truman Thieu, their pilot, ran his hands through his shock of thick black hair. "Yeah. It reminds me of the way Earth is getting nowadays."

"Do you think the situations are related?"

"Could be. The environment on earth has certainly gotten messed up since the pets got loose. This could be a result of the same thing."

Masters eyed the ruins in the distance. The lack of a dust cloud in the Altairian system as had been claimed on that first thought disk Jamie had come in contact with had been a surprise to everyone. He had subconsciously been expecting somehow to find a viable civilization here, but that had not happened. Only ruins could be seen from space, and little of them. Along with Captain Hawkins, he had selected this former city as one of the least damaged, but on close-up view he held little hope.

"What does the brain say?" Masters asked, nodding at the instrument panel.

Thieu knew what he meant. "The atmosphere here is about the same as on their ship: breathable, but enough volatiles in the air to make it borderlinish in the long term."

"OK. Let's get unloaded, then and take a look. Kristi, I'll check the floater while you look around outside. Truman, I'm going to leave you and two of my men here with the lander while we're gone. Don't leave it for any reason."

"What if you get in trouble?"

"That's what we're here for. The captain can spare us; he can't spare you or the lander."

Masters thought to over fly the ruined city with the floater before landing and exploring, but they began running into trouble even as they approached. A cluster of black dots became visible, floating up from the edge of the ruins. They rapidly became more apparent through the transparent canopy. Masters put a scope to his eye and saw that the entities were bubble shaped and trailed clawed tentacles. He dropped the floater to a lower altitude, intending to fly under them, but they lost height in turn, getting in his way. Two of them managed to impact the floater, clinging first to the skids, then inching their way up toward the body of the little ship. The others trailed behind, following as if they were being signaled.

"What the hell!" One of the rangers exclaimed, jerking his head back. A black tentacle crept into view, plastered flatly against the canopy.

"Easy," Masters said. "Let's see what it does, but swing back toward the lander. I don't like this already."

Several more of the black tentacles snaked into view, clinging tenaciously in the windblast from the floater's speed. The first one began oozing an oily green fluid. Smoke boiled away from it and whipped away in the wind.

"Goddamn. That's an acid of some kind. Get your speed up! Kristi! Laser it if it breaks through. Lander, report!"

"Lander here."

"Thieu, we've got problems already. Give me Jake."

"Here, Captain."

"Jake, get outside. We're coming in. We've got varmints of some sort clinging to the floater. Shoot them off as we land, but be careful. Don't let any of them get near you." He glanced away from the threatening breach of the floater. Behind them, the remainder of the pack was losing ground, but still

trailing.

Kristi leveled her handgun at where she thought the tentacles were. It was becoming hard to tell. As the oily liquid secreted by the tentacles was spread by the windblast, the canopy quickly became opaque beneath it, as if a murky dusk was falling.

Masters screamed the floater in to a landing beside the floater. He heard the hiss of Kristi's laser behind him as he landed, but paid no attention to it, trusting her to protect him while he grounded. A chip of flaming canopy landed on his arm. He threw it off, ignoring the searing pain. A sulfurous odor assaulted his nostrils, coming in through the break in the canopy. From outside, thunder sounded the roar of Jake and his companion firing.

"Outside," Masters snapped. "Don't let the others get close." He popped the canopy and added his own fire to that of his companions. The trailing pack of denizens wheeled up and away. Several of them dropped under the concentrated fire. They bucked and writhed on the ground, coiling and jerking. Wisps of smoke trailed upward and were blown away by the wind. The firing died down and Masters looked around, checking for wounds or damage. Inside the floater Wolfgang and the other dogs growled, irritated at being denied an opportunity to fight.

"Just like it was on the ship," Kristi said. "It's like we're sending out some sort of antagonistic signal. Is their whole world going to be this way?"

The question became rhetorical, for just then Thieu spoke over his body computer. "Captain Masters, the ship wants you."

He quickly interfaced with the ship's computer. "Masters here."

Terrili's face swam into being. "Captain, bring the lander back as soon as you can. We have a possible mutiny here. Captain Hawkins is off the bridge and we have at least one of the Moon City personnel armed and firing outside."

"Try to hold out. We're on our way." He turned to Kristi who was still scanning in all directions. "Load 'em up, Kristi, then let's get this floater inside. Thieu, takeoff quickly as we're secured. Fastest possible orbit back to the ship. Let's move."

\*\*\*

"Was that a shot?" Terrili asked.

"It damn sure was," Jamie assured her. "Will the door hold?"

"It should, but what's going on here?"

"Della Worley pulled a gun on me. She's trying to instigate a mutiny!"

Terrili immediately accessed Captain Hawkins' cabin and woke him from a sound sleep. He listened intently to Jamie. His face fell and wrinkles creased his dark forehead beneath the wiry white hair. "Armed, you say? Damn, I haven't even a handgun here, and the rangers are all out of the ship. Recommendations?"

Terrili was perplexed. "Captain, I can't think of a thing, except to hold out here until the rangers get back."

"And in the meantime, let her instigate a mutiny on my ship? I'll have to try to stop her."

Jamie wondered how the captain intended to stop an armed and determined woman with his bare hands. He thought rapidly. "Captain, wait! I have an idea."

Hawkins stopped in mid air, turning too rapidly in the light gravity. He caught his balance against the side of his desk. He gestured pointedly at Jamie's empty holster, wishing he had armed everyone from earth and not just the rangers and Jamie. But they were supposed to be at peace!

"I know," Jamie said, interpreting the gesture, "but Della isn't really familiar with our pets. She might not think of them as a threat. Let them try first, before you risk yourself." He felt a knot in his chest at the thought of Fuzzy Britches or Woggly getting hurt, but he knew his idea was valid.

Hawkins hesitated, then nodded. It was a better chance than anything he could do. His only thought had been to gather enough men and women to surround and confront Della before she could recruit followers, if she hadn't already, then overwhelm her, taking casualties as necessary.

Jamie called his compartment. He had to repeat the call before a yawning Fuzzy Britches holographed into being. He rapidly explained to the intelligent cat what the circumstances were. Fuzzy Britches caught on immediately, but he had to be reassured twice that Della Worley was really a threat.

\*\*\*

Della felt confused and sick. When the door to the bridge closed abruptly in front of her, cutting her off from Jamie, it was like a curtain falling over her life, shutting her off from any chance of ever finding a place in the world. She fired at the door and shrieked at the thunderous explosion of the jet-assisted slug exploding in close quarters. A gaping wound appeared in the exterior door, but behind it there still remained a solid bulkhead. She fired again and flinched as chips of hot matter splattered backward. The bulkhead remained, solid as ever. As a last hope of salvaging something, she gripped her weapon in one hand and Jamie's thought disk in the other, and began retracing her route. The only thing she could think of now was to make contact with the few other Moon City crew aboard and hope they would support her. She started as she saw Jamie's cat and dog approaching her from the opposite direction in the corridor but as they didn't appear threatening, she simply moved to one side, intending to allow them to pass.

"Hello," Fuzzy Britches said. He wound himself around Della's legs, almost snakelike in the low gravity, and purred as if he wanted a petting.

"I'm busy, now," Della said, trying to disentangle herself. She dropped her gun hand. Fuzzy Britches hooked up a lightning paw, catching the fabric of her sleeve with his claws. His weight pulled her arm down. Just as she bent to remove the cat, a solid weight slammed into her back and she went down. Before she quite knew what was happening, the cat's needle-sharp teeth bit into her forearm. As she tried to draw away and regain her feet at the same time, her hand loosened its grip on the gun. It fell lazily and Fuzzy Britches batted it away.

Woggly bounced off the adjoining wall and hit her again, and she was down and helpless. Woggly growled gently through the fabric at her chest and she collapsed in despair and began to cry.

"Silly human," Fuzzy Britches said. "Stay here with Woggly. He won't hurt you."

Della had trouble believing the admonition with the dog's teeth clenched at the throat of her coveralls, but she held still, sobbing uncontrollably now. Fuzzy Britches turned and ran back toward their compartment where Jeannie was waiting apprehensively. She had tried to make the pets let her come with them but Fuzzy Britches had told her emphatically, "No."

She had been too surprised at the cat giving orders to argue, and by the time she had second thoughts, it was all over. All that remained was to pick up the weapon Fuzzy Britches had skittered away and hold it on the sobbing Moon City woman while she contacted the bridge. Moments later, Jamie and the Captain appeared from opposite directions.

"Why did you do this, Della?" Jamie asked plaintively. He was having trouble believing she was still the same woman he had made love to not long before.

"She's sorry," Fuzzy Britches said. He moved forward and licked Della's face. She turned away. *Let them kill me. There's nothing to live for now.*

"She sorry," the cat repeated, still licking her face.

"Is that right, Della?" Jamie asked.

"Yes! Yes! Oh, God, I'm sorry. Please, just kill me. I don't want to live."

"Captain, can't I--"

"She'll have to be confined," Hawkins said. "I'm sorry, Jamie, but I can't risk the ship. She may be sorry now, but we have a long way to go yet." He gently pried loose the weapon from Jeannie's hand and drew the distraught woman to her feet. "Thank you, friends," he said to the pets. "You did well."

"She sorry," Fuzzy Britches said once again. "She won't do again."

"I know," Hawkins said. "She won't have another chance to. You people get back to your duties. Terrili, I'll be at the bridge shortly." He led Della off, leaving Jamie, Jeannie and the pets in a little circle where Jamie was trying to explain to Jeannie how he had been deceived. He was not notably successful.

\*\*\*

Jamie was no more successful a day later when Masters questioned him. The ranger Captain wanted to know every particular and soon wormed the basic facts from him.

"Don't feel bad, Jamie," he said. "You're not the first person who has ever been swayed by sex, and you won't be the last."

"It wasn't just sex," Jamie protested. "I don't think she really wanted to do what she did."

"You'll have trouble convincing me of that." Masters responded.

"Fuzzy Britches doesn't either."

"Hm. I don't know the woman that well. He really doesn't?"

"He says she's sorry. I don't think she would be a threat any more."

"It doesn't matter what you think, or me either for that matter. Captain Hawkins says she's to be

confined for the rest of the trip."

"Yes. Well, could I see her for a moment?"

Masters considered for a moment and finally relented. He could see no harm in a visit. "I'll go with you."

Della's tears had dried, but she was uncommunicative. In response to Jamie's question of "why", she turned her head.

"I had my reasons."

"Fuzzy Britches says you're sorry," Jamie told her, while Masters leaned against the compartment door, saying nothing, but keenly observant.

"I'm sorry I ever let that bastard Passing talk me into coming along. I should have just gone on to the mines and let my life be ended there."

Neither of the men understood, and Della would say no more. It remained for Kristi to finally draw her out, under the urging of Fuzzy Britches. The cat was perfectly willing to let bygones be bygones. Kristi, however, kept her own counsel, never letting anyone else know that she sympathized with Della once she heard her story. She could wait.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jamie looked around curiously. Next to the mess facilities, the "study room" was the largest compartment on the ship. It contained computer facilities for accessing the total ship's library and files, a number of rather flimsy looking chairs and desks bolted to the floor and sported some unimaginative holo displays along two walls. It was obvious that Jeannie had had nothing to do with the displays here.

Captain Hawkins, Captain Masters, Jamie, and most of the senior scientists were present, including one whom Jamie hadn't met yet who was from Moon City, a geneticist like himself, he had heard. Apparently the captain had decided to give the rest of the sparse Moon City contingent the benefit of the doubt concerning their loyalty, although it was common knowledge that had Della been given time, she would have tried to recruit them to her cause. The only pet present was Fuzzy Britches. Invitations had been extended to Woggly and Wolfgang, Masters' dog, but they had declined. Long-winded discussions usually didn't interest them unless they were concerned with fighting in Wolfgang's case, or adventure in Woggly's. Fuzzy Britches was always interested in a gathering. He liked to listen to humans talk among themselves, always marveling at the number of words they needed before any action could be taken.

Captain Hawkins opened the discussion. "Twice now," he said, "we have entered an Altairian environment and have immediately been attacked by some sort of animals. I have in mind abandoning any farther attempt to contact any Altairians who might still exist and move on to exploration of other worlds. Let's hear first from Captain Masters then I'll open the floor to discussion."



"I'm perfectly willing to move on," Masters said. "We've been very lucky that we've had only one casualty so far but I think I might know why we were attacked so readily. Maybe their fauna is all-telepathic like the Altairians apparently are themselves."

Jessie Wilham, a biologist spoke up, ignoring Masters' primary statement. "That could be it."

Masters continued. "Maybe our thoughts are just plain antagonistic to them. What do you think Jamie? You have more experience with them than anyone else."

Jamie was slow in answering. He had given some thought to the matter, but had not reached any definite conclusions. "You may be right, Troy, but I just don't know. Just because the Altairians have to use some sort of mechanical thought transmitter to communicate with us doesn't necessarily mean that they are telepathic. It could be just the only way of communicating with what, to them, is a totally alien race. Remember, if they ever tried to signal us from their ship before they all died, we never heard it."

"Actually, the whole matter is rather academic," someone said. Jamie turned to see who it was, and found a tall, ascetic looking man with cropped brown hair standing. It was Byron Westly, the physicist from the Houston Enclave.

"Why do you say that?" Captain Hawkins asked.

"Simple enough," Westly replied. "I've had opportunity to study the atmospheric analysis from both the Altairian ship and planet. There are minor differences, which could be expected, but the central fact is that neither atmosphere is suitable for Humans over the long term. As much as I would like to explore this system, or the ship, for that matter, I can't see any future in it."

"There is another matter to consider," Masters said. His clear blue eyes ranged the room. "I think you all have studied the data from our long-range surveys of this planet, as well as what we brought back from our brief landing. Has anyone noticed how much the ruins of their cities resemble our Enclaves?"

"What are you implying?" Wilham, the Moon City geneticist asked. Unlike most inhabitants of the Moon, she wasn't very tall, suggesting that she had emigrated to the Moon rather than been born there. She wore her bright red hair in two pigtails.

"In the ship a single species of animal attacked us. On the planet a single--but different--species of animal attacked us. Compare that to the rats at the Dallas Enclave and swamp rabbits at the Disney Enclave, just to mention two recent examples. The ruins of their cities are walled, barricaded just like ours. They lied about a dust cloud making their planet uninhabitable. On the original thought disk, and also on the one given to Jamie, they were adamant in wanting us to come to their rescue. I think what they had was the same problem we have: uncontrolled genetic experiments that got out of hand. We fought a battle with Moon City for access to their technology, hoping it would help us solve our problems. I think the aliens came here hoping we could solve theirs." He grinned wryly. "We seem to be a little late, even if we could have helped, which I doubt."

A total silence met his remarks. It was the last thing any member of the expedition had expected to hear. It was an anthropocentric notion of course, expecting the problems of one species to be unique, but nevertheless, it was disheartening. Everyone knew what was at stake. The environment on earth was becoming increasingly hostile, and in space and on the moon, matters were even worse. A declining trade with earth was gradually strangling their means of survival, which was the prime cause of the battle on earth for access to the Altairian technology. Now, it seemed, the type of ship they were in, and possibly a little knowledge from the ecological madhouse of the Altairian generation ship was all they would ever get.

"Then it's hopeless!" Jessie Wilham exclaimed.

"Nothing is hopeless," Hawkins said strongly. That's why I called this meeting. We have two choices: return to earth with the knowledge we have now, or try further--and farther explorations. This isn't the only planet in the galaxy. We have supplies to last a while longer."

"But suppose we don't return. Then everything will be lost." Jamie didn't notice who made that remark.

Fuzzy Britches interrupted. "Not all. Pets still on earth. We take care of humans." Hollow laughter greeted this remark, mostly from the humans who had little knowledge or experience with intelligent pets. Hearing the reaction, Fuzzy Britches flicked his tail and jumped down from an alcove where he had been resting. If the humans weren't ready to listen to him yet, he could wait. He wrapped his dignity around him with his tail and stalked from the room.

"Now what was that all about?" Byron Westly asked.

Jamie ignored the physicist and looked to the ranger. Masters winked quickly at him. They both knew animals, and both knew that Fuzzy Britches wouldn't have spoken out of turn idly--certainly not at a serious human meeting.

"Never mind, Hawkins said. "Let's get on with it. Do we return, or do we go on?"

"We should go on," Jessie said, fingering her pigtails nervously. "We have to. Maybe we can find a planet we can emigrate to."

That seemed to be the consensus. Hawkins polled the assemblage then dismissed them. He asked Jamie and Masters to remain. Once they were alone he spoke privately to them. He smiled mirthlessly. "I was planning to go on regardless but I did want to see what the scientists thought."

"It seems a shame to just write off the Altairians after all their troubles," Jamie said but then realized he was indulging in wistful thinking. So far they had not met a surviving Altairian and now it didn't look as if they would. Also, he was intrigued with Masters' reasoning. Had the Altairians really come to grief in the same fashion as earth?"

"I don't see that we have a choice," Hawkins said.

"Not really," Masters agreed. " Jamie?"

"I guess so, Captain. Where next?"

"I'll get together with Westly and some of the others later today. We'll map out a run at the nearer G type stars and just see what we find. In the meantime there's this other matter of Della Worley."

Jamie felt immediately guilty, then on quick reflection, absolved himself. He couldn't see that he would have acted any different in other circumstances. Unless a person proved otherwise, as Della had, he was always willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. He still believed the woman must have been under some unbearable pressure to have acted as she had, especially in light of Fuzzy Britches' remarks. He was surprised when Masters spoke up.

"Captain, I know you can't let her go free after what she did, but I think we have to look not at her, but what pressures induced her to try what she did. She doesn't strike me as a fanatic."

"Me either," Jamie added quickly.

"What you both are saying, then, is that she had ulterior motives."

"Exactly, " Masters said. "Look to her superiors. That's where we can expect trouble if we do have any more."

"Here, or back home?"

"Back home. I think we should be very careful when we return, especially if we don't bring back anything worthwhile." "I'll bear that in mind. One more thing. Jamie, your pet cat. What did he mean when he spoke out at the meeting?" "I'm not sure, yet, Captain. You have to realize, that for all their intelligence, our pets don't really think like we do. I trust him, though. He is utterly loyal--and he has more of a sense of how humans think than we do of how enhanced animals do."

"After the way he took care of Worley, I'm sure of that. Well, let's let that be for now. She didn't have a chance to try to recruit any of the other spacers on board, and, so far, none of them have given me any reason to suspect them. I'm willing to leave it at that, for the time being but I'll be awfully damn careful when we return."

\*\*\*

"Troy, I don't know what he meant," Jamie said in response to Masters' questioning as they walked back toward their quarters. He intended to ask Fuzzy Britches when opportunity presented, but he wasn't at all certain the cat would be in the mood until he had had a chance to forget the laughter which had greeted his unexpected remark.

"Just asking," the ranger said. "I trust our pets a hell of a lot more than I do a lot of people."

"Me, too," Jamie agreed. "Look. I'll talk to him after a while, once he's gotten over being laughed at. Cats hate that." He stopped at the entrance to his compartment. "Do you want to come in for awhile?"

"Later. I need to think about a few things. If we're going to be exploring other planets. I want to rearrange our priorities. I don't think I want to have all the rangers out of the ship at one time again."

"I'll go along with that!" Jamie said.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The holographic projection being displayed against the opposite wall from the huge bed was entirely Jeannie's work, although the motif originated with Jamie. He always liked to watch the intermingling of pets with humans, and especially liked the way Jeannie's imagination in programming displayed the reactions. A large bobcat, speckled with darker dots against an orange background crept into view. Intelligent, amber colored eyes watched interestedly while a nude woman reached from where she was submerged to the waist in a moss-banked pool to tickle her kittens under the chin. Their heads were large in comparison to their small bodies, and as young as they were, they had trouble supporting them,

just as human babies did. The woman pulled herself half out of the water as he watched, displaying a body that made him think of peaches and cream. He watched idly as the bobcat crept closer, wondering how it would play out this time, the story repeating itself in infinite variety. The program was designed to sooth as much as entertain.

He stroked Fuzzy Britches' back as the program played, watching the multi-colored fur spring back from his trailing hand as if it were made of softly coiled springs, smiling to himself at how the cat watched avidly as the bobcat crept further from the brush, nearer to the unsuspecting woman. Thoughts turned lazily in his mind, trying to form a pattern, while he discovered what other space travelers had before him: a passenger on a space ship really doesn't have much to do. Fuzzy Britches' remark that the pets would take care of humans had gotten him to thinking of earth, and the implications for it of this trip. Suppose they found nothing to help with the pet plague out here in the galaxy. What then? Some of the Enclaves on earth might survive almost indefinitely, Houston being one of them, but only if some sort of climax ecology finally settled over the pet-plagued land. And even so, that was no real long-term solution. A static civilization would inevitably decay and finally fall. That had been proven over and over again, throughout history.

Moon City and the Space habitats were in even worse shape. Given another few decades of heavy trade with earth and they might become a viable, expanding culture, but trade with earth was shrinking, not growing. There was no alternative for them; they must go in another direction, whatever the cost. The Altairian technology gave them small hope, controlled as it was by earth. They had lost that fight. Or had they? Della Worley had attempted to take the ship, and there might be other plots still not revealed.

Another thought occurred to him. Suppose they did find another world, compatible with life and suitable for colonization--what then? Most of the space people still would be left wanting. Only those trained from childhood could live in a gravity field of a planet. Surely the whole adult population was not planning on sacrificing themselves so that their children could live. But perhaps they were. Jamie liked to think well of people, given the chance. Perhaps that was what had been in Della's mind: steal the ship for the benefit of their descendents. If it had, she had certainly been premature in her actions. A new inhabitable planet had yet to be found. Their first two stops after Altair had found planets circling the stars in abundance, but none of them were suitable for habitation, although one of them had contained life forms. A second showed the ruins of a civilization baking in a planet-wide desert, like broken pottery in a runaway kiln. They were on their way to yet another star.

As the flights repeated, Big Boy had refined the mechanics of the time stress fields and gravity generators to significantly decrease the duration of hops from star to star, increasing the likelihood of finding a compatible planet, though by no means was that guaranteed, and Jamie doubted that he would be allowed off the ship again until they returned, at least not until a landing party certified a planet as safe.

Fuzzy Britches worked his claws in the fabric of his coveralls, purring in rhythm to the kneading. Were the enhanced pets to be the ultimate inheritors of earth? Some of the scientists seemed to think so. Well, one thing was certain: the genie couldn't be put back in the bottle. And speaking of--or rather thinking of--

"Ouch! That hurts, Fuzz," Jamie exclaimed as the cat's claws inadvertently touched his skin.

"Sorry," Fuzzy Britches said, retracting his claws. "You should grow fur. Or strong skin."

"Sure. And strong muscles and good looks, too. How about some claws as well?" Jamie scratched behind Fuzzy Britches' ears.

"Okay. Grow me muscles, too. Then I beat up Woggly."

It was possible. His own disease resistant body and longevity were the results of tinkering with human germ plasm. There were really no limits to what could be done, but by law and custom, and fear of altering the basic humanness of the species, all improvements in the human form had come from recombination of original genes, unlike the pets, who were the result of endowing them with many of the human genes for intelligence. Earlier in the century, before the formation of the Enclaves, there had been many clandestine experiments on humans, but during the madness which swept earth after the pets got loose, the altered humans had been either killed by mobs or taken refuge in the wilds, living on the sufferance of those animals who would protect them. Feral humans especially altered feral humans were the bugbears of present human culture.

Across the room, the life-like bobcat crouched, in plain view, now. It's stubby tail twitched. A tinkle of laughter came from the woman, still playing with the kittens. Maybe that was the answer. Muscles for..."

The bobcat sprang, landing in the middle of the pool with a huge splash. Jamie flinched involuntarily as globs of water arced toward him. He looked around guiltily as the water disappeared when it reached the limits of the holo projection to see if Jeannie had noticed his reaction. She was still asleep. Fuzzy Britches had scurried away, then turned back. He sat at the edge of the bed, using a paw to wipe imaginary water from his ears. The bobcat bared its fangs in feline laughter. It climbed from the pool and shook itself vigorously, then picked up a kitten and bounded into the brush.

"Where are the dogs?" Jamie asked Fuzzy Britches.

"Playing with Bandit and rats. These Rats nice. Not for dinner."

"Of course not."

"Pandy have kittens soon," Fuzzy Britches announced.

"Pups," Jamie corrected.

"Whatever." The cat stretched and padded off of Jamie's chest onto Jeannie's, settling his head between her breasts. Jeannie murmured in her sleep and curled an arm around him.

"I'm going for a walk," Jamie announced. "If Jeannie wakes up before I get back, tell her I'll be back shortly."

"Okay," Fuzzy Britches said.

\*\*\*

Jamie wasn't sure whom he wanted to see or what he wanted to do. His walk through the corridors of the huge ship eventually brought him past the entrance to the gymnasium. He hesitated, then decided that maybe a little exercise might help alleviate the boredom. At least it might keep the autodoc from chastising him about an increase in the fat content of his body. He couldn't see any difference, but the medically intelligent machine was never fooled.

Troy masters and Kristi looked up as he entered. They were both wrapped in the coils of exercise machines, sweating profusely as it worked their muscles in a program designed by the ship's autodoc. He waved for them to continue and let another machine get him started on his own program. He groaned as

it started, then gradually narrowed his concentration as the machine instructed him. He was soon totally involved, and the instructions faded as he responded automatically to the manipulations of the tentacles.

Later, sitting nude in the steamy sauna, he was struck by the lean musculature of the ranger captain sitting across from him. Only his hands and face reflected his age; the rest of his body compared favorably with a much younger man. Jamie thought that he must have to spend long hours on the machines to maintain such a youthful appearance, but politely, he didn't comment on it. Instead, he winked at Kristi sitting catty-cornered between the two. He always enjoyed the sight of her body. It was sleek and firm, without an ounce of excess tissue. He knew that, like himself, her 1A genome was partly responsible, but she took nothing for granted.

Kristi winked back at him and briefly cupped her breasts, a private signal that she wouldn't mind some attention as soon as they were alone. Jamie was entirely willing, but he was still thoughtful.

"When is our next stop?" He asked, directing the question at Masters.

"Tomorrow, I think. Two days there, then onward and inward."

"Inward?"

"In towards the thicker part of the spiral arm," Masters explained. "Hawkins has us scheduled for ten more stops, then back to earth."

"Why ten?"

"Just a matter of logistics, love," Kristi explained. "The ship isn't really self-supporting, yet. Maybe the next time out it

will be but there just wasn't time to include all the necessities this trip."

*Another trip?* "I don't want to go out again," Jamie said.

Surprisingly, Masters agreed. "I don't either."

Jamie was startled. He would have thought that exploring strange planets would suit the ranger.

"Why not?"

Masters considered before he answered. "You forget that I'm an old man, Jamie. Old men get set in their ways.

Besides I'm more interested in the happenings on earth. There's so much change going on there that we need to try to keep

ahead of it. Then there is the old story about going to the well once too often."

"What's a well? And why go to it?"

Masters smiled gently. "Just an old saying. What it means is don't push your luck. I'm glad I came on this trip, and I

hope we can finish it without too much trouble, but that's it."

Kristi spoke up. "What he means is that if we keep on exploring strange places, sooner or later something is going to

bite us, and badly. "

"Right. Back when the rangers were first formed, we had horrendous casualties right on earth until we learned how to cope. This is like tackling a new earth every few days."

Jamie's heart jumped. His gaze strayed to Kristi's belly, still flat and slim, but nevertheless concealing a new life, a part of him as well as her. Suddenly he wanted the voyage to be over, to be back on earth, in the familiar confines of the Houston Enclave.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Della Worley felt the by now familiar disorientation of the ship making another transition back into normal space, then hours later, the thump of a lander separating from the ship. Another planet. One step closer to the long voyage back to Moon City. Or earth. She didn't know what would be done with her. Would they simply give her back to Rob Passing with a 'thanks, but no thanks'? Or turn her over to earth authorities? At this point, she didn't much care. Whatever happened, she realized now that it had been a mistake from the start to listen to Passing. Better to have let him send her on to the mines and be done with it. She had been surprised that nothing had been done to her after her abortive attempt to capture the ship other than to isolate her. She was fed regularly, she still had access as much as any other crewman to the ship's computer for news, games and entertainment, and the harsh questioning such as she would have expected from Moon City authorities had never come. Once, Captain Hawkins and the white haired earth ranger had come to her cabin to question her, but she had refused to talk to them. Since then, she had had no visitors. A block had been put on communication with other crewmembers, but otherwise she had not been bothered. It seemed strange to her, not at all what she might have expected.

The entrance to her small compartment chimed. She had no way of allowing entrance from her side, but she said "come in", anyway, after hurriedly slipping a cover over her upper body, thinking (wrongly) that an earthman might be bothered by her semi-nudity. Other than Moon City authorities and the earth lander pilots, there had for years been little contact between the two cultures.

Jamie Da Cruz slid into the room, accompanied by his pet dog and cat. She shrank back from them as the door re-locked the image of her capture by the pets fresh in her mind.

"Relax," Jamie said. "Fuzzy Britches or Woggly won't hurt you."

As if to assure her, Fuzzy Britches approached. He rubbed against her legs and purred. The feel of the cat's curly fur against her skin was strangely relaxing, but she was still apprehensive.

" 'Relax,' " I said. "Sit back down. I want to talk to you."

Della stared at the pets, then sat down, slowly. The strange cat immediately hopped up onto the lounge beside her and appropriated her lap. Jamie grinned as she first shrank from the contact, then lay a tentative hand on the furry body. Fuzzy Britches immediately began purring, inducing her to stroke his back. The purr grew louder, bringing a puzzled smile to her face.

"May I sit down?"

Della dropped her eyes, but made room for him. Woggly stretched out in front of them, head on paws, eyes fixed upwards from his huge head.

"What do you want?"

"I want to know why, Della. I like you, and just as important, Fuzzy Britches and Woggly like you. They would like to know why as well."

*Could this really be true?* She could hardly imagine anyone liking her after what she had done, especially this man. She fought a losing battle with the idea that he was attempting to use her like Passing had.

"How could you possibly like me? Or your pets either?" That didn't work for her, though, not with the cat purring comfortably in her lap. Just as for myriads of humans in the past, the slow, rumbling purr induced trust.

"Della, you must have had a reason. Were you forced in some way?"

"What does it matter, now? I'm sorry, if that makes any difference."

"That's what Fuzzy Britches said, and that's what I believe. I still want to know why."

"I had my reasons; you're right about that. I still say it doesn't matter."

"I think it might, if you'll just be honest. Look at it this way: you can't be any worse off, and it might help in what happens to you when we get back."

"Did Captain Hawkins and that ranger send you here?"

"Captain Hawkins gave me permission to talk to you, that's all. If you like, anything you tell me won't go any further. I just want to know."

Della stared at Jamie, at his honest brown face and funny little mustache. All at once a catharsis bubbled up from inside and she found herself telling him everything. Jamie listened quietly as she talked, thinking how different the two cultures were. On earth, miscreants were simply tossed out of the Enclaves into the wilds, to survive or not as they could, usually not. In Moon City, the mines were apparently the answer; a slower death, but one just as sure. When Della told him of how Passing had not only manipulated her because of a youthful indiscretion, but raped her before assigning her to the ship, he was amazed. He couldn't imagine anything like that happening in the Houston Enclave. As her story ended, he found himself comforting her, and from there, her slim warm body slipped under him as if it belonged there.



Much later, he opened the door to let the pets slip away, amused that Della had not even thought about their presence while they were making love. She still thought of them as animals, pets, rather than intelligent beings. He turned back to the slim MoonCity woman, traces of cathartic tears still making streaks on her face, and wondered what his next move might be. He broached the subject delicately.

"Della, I promised I wouldn't repeat anything you said without permission, but Captain Hawkins really needs to know about this."

"Della buried her face on Jamie's chest. "Tell him if you want to. I don't care any more. This has been like a nightmare

to me. I wish Passing were dead."

Jamie could sympathize, but that wouldn't help Della. Suddenly he recalled a conversation with Fuzzy Britches.

Something about skin, or claws, or muscles... muscles?

"Della, would you like to go back to earth with me?"

"Earth? Jamie, you know I can't. We have to be trained from childhood for that, and I wasn't. Why ask the

impossible?"

Jamie gripped her shoulders. "It might be possible. Fuzzy Britches gave me the thought. Back in the old days lots of

humans were altered with gene insertions. It's not done nowadays, but the procedures should still be on file somewhere. I could

try to look them up."

Della stared back at him with rising hope. Was it really Possible?

"Jamie, could you? Oh God, that would be wonderful!"

"Don't get your hopes up, but I think so. All we would need is permission to try it; that is, if I can re-locate the methods." He didn't tell Della how hard that permission might be to get. Gene selection for humans was almost universally practiced; gene alterations, especially of adults, were almost unheard of and illegal in every Enclave so far as he knew. And apparently, the same onus applied to the space people, otherwise why have to train from childhood to be able to become lander pilots when gene insertion would be simpler--or relatively so. However...he fingered the thought disk in his coverall pocket, wondering if it still carried enough weight to swing something like this?

Della sighed. A huge weight, one she had not even known was there, seemed to rise from her body, like a balloon suddenly dropping its ballast. Only one thing still bothered her and it suddenly damped her newly rising spirits.

"What would Jeannie and Kristi think of all this? Don't they care?"

Jamie laughed silently to himself. He had already seen signs that Kristi was more than a little taken with Della, and judging from Kristi's past history she was more than overdue to become interested in another woman. He knew that she had intended to talk with Della, and if possible, do more than talk. He had simply got there first. He grinned to himself. Kristi would be more than surprised when she did finally get Della alone--that is, if she didn't find out beforehand.

"Certainly they care," He said, still grinning inwardly. "You may be surprised at how much they care. But remember, now--no promises about the genetic stuff. It's sort of prohibited on earth."

"It is on the moon, too, but I don't care if it would get me away from Passing. He is an evil man."

\*\*\*

Later that time period, Jamie relaxed in his own compartment with Jeannie, following the landing on the new planet. This time, Hawkins, in consultation with Jeannie, had gotten Big Boy interfaced with the landing craft so that the ship could follow with holoprojections rather than just a radio link. Two of Masters' rangers had been replaced with scientists, over the ranger's objections. He was in agreement on leaving part of the ranger contingent aboard, but had protested to no avail about the scientists accompanying the landing. Untrained as they were in survival techniques, he didn't think he could protect them while exploring a strange environment, and in that he was right.

The landing and exploration went fine at first. The planet promised a little more than those previously explored. The atmosphere was compatible with that of earth, and there were no signs from space of any previous civilization. The lander put down in a little valley, and Masters quickly established a defensible perimeter with his few rangers, then let the scientists off the craft to sample the strange life forms. He should have waited.

Strange creatures began approaching the perimeter soon afterward. The two scientists were ecstatic when they saw that the furred octopeds carried crude tools and weapons, but Masters was not so enthusiastic. He noticed that some of the implements seemed to be composed of a conglomeration of shiny metal and crude sticks and leather fastenings. That only excited the scientists, but Masters remained alert. He was still watching suspiciously when, with no warning whatsoever, and with a swiftness bordering on the supernatural, one of the furred aliens drove a metal tipped spear into the belly of one of the men. The other was grabbed and hustled into the underbrush before he could react. It was so sudden, and so completely and unexpected that he could do nothing at all. By the time he got his rangers back into the floater, the forest was still, concealing he knew not what. He felt sick and utterly responsible.

\*\*\*

A search from the air revealed nothing. The forest was almost continuous, a murky greenish-gray tangle. An hour or two later he set the floater down at another site, where a thinning of the jungle revealed heaps of broken masonry, something they had not seen from the orbiting ship. A quick and very

cautious scout told him what he wanted to know. The masonry was almost certainly the remains of a wall, or barricade perhaps, not all that dissimilar from the protective walls of the Enclaves. There was nothing at all which could tell him whether the homicidal furred beings were the remnants of the previous population or, as on earth, an enhanced animal gone wild.

Even as he was giving the order to withdraw inside the confines of the floater, another type of creature made an appearance. It was also an octoped, but its first four appendages were clawed rather than manipulative. It scooted along like a stubby caterpillar, and showed no fear at all. It was joined by another of the beasts, somewhat smaller, but once the floater canopy was closed, they both lost interest, as if they sensed that the floater was a refuge of some sort. While they watched, the larger creature turned on the smaller, chasing it back out of sight. Again, Masters had no way of judging the origins of the animals, but he had already made his decision. If the original builders on this planet had been unable to maintain a viable technology, there was little chance that they would be able to, not this far from home, and possibly not under any circumstances. He consulted briefly with Hawkins, then gave the order for the lander to return. This planet would be rated as habitable, but unsuited for colonization.

\*\*\*

Kristi entered the compartment where Jamie and Jeannie were waiting. She looked drawn and tired. Lady, her white haired dog, accepted a pat from Jamie, then immediately padded off to talk with Woggly. She was almost as distressed as Kristi, having had no occasion to fight; the rangers had kept the dogs close at hand. They were too likely to judge alien fauna in terms of what was familiar on earth.

Kristi accepted a hug from Jeannie and Jamie, then disappeared to wash and change. Jeannie followed her. Jamie had told Jeannie, as well as Hawkins, about his latest tryst with Della Worley, so he suspected what the out of sight conversation would entail. He was proved right a few moments later. Both women reappeared, displaying enigmatic feminine smiles.

"Jamie, you're a scoundrel," Kristi said, toweling her still wet hair.

"Me? What have I done now? Don't believe anything the pets tell you. They exaggerate."

"Is Jeannie a pet, now?"

"Well, she purrs when we pet her. Does that qualify?"

"Don't answer that," Jeannie said. She slipped an arm around Kristi.

"Okay, I won't."

"You're still a scoundrel. Don't you feel bad about depriving us of a chance to get to know Della, too?"

"Oh. Should I ask Captain Hawkins if you two could come next time?"

"Oho," Jeannie said. "There's going to be a next time, is there?"

"If there is, why not let me be the one?" Kristi asked.

"Why just you?" Jeannie said. "I think I might enjoy her company, too."

"Experience, dear. If we really want to draw her into our little group, let an expert take care of it. Besides, all three of

us at once might overwhelm the poor girl. Groups aren't nearly as common in Moon City as they are on earth, or so I hear."

Jeannie pouted, but acquiesced. Kristi was probably the one to broach the subject. After all, she had seduced her and

Jamie as well. Nevertheless, she already felt the tingle of anticipation. Kristi was the only woman she had ever been with and

she was ready to expand her knowledge. It would be hard to wait.

"You two have fun while I'm gone," Kristi said, smiling sweetly. She pulled on her coveralls, patted Jamie's mustache,

kissed Jeannie's cheek and scurried toward the door.

"Wait!" Jamie called. "Don't you want me to call Captain Hawkins for permission to see her?"

"Troy is taking care of it. 'by."

"Meow." Fuzzy Britches said from across the room.

"Are you in on this, too, Fuzz?" Jeannie asked, raising an eyebrow at the cat. Jamie hadn't bothered. Where family, or even potential family was concerned, Fuzzy Britches was always involved, and usually far ahead of his humans.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Jeannie lifted her weight to her forearms, feeling her breasts rub against Della's small firm mounds. She leaned down to kiss her, thinking that Kristi had been right, if the past hour was any indication. Della had accepted her entrance into her small compartment with only the slightest of reservations, and showed no reluctance when Jeannie guided them into the narrow bed and between lingering kisses and slow caresses disrobed her.

Her small, firm breasts and slim body was new and exciting, just as Kristi had been long months previously. There was something about being close and making love to a woman that went deeper than just sex; it was almost like bonding with a twin of her own self. She felt sorry that it was something exclusively feminine, an experience that she didn't think could ever apply to men and Jamie in particular,

but that was just the way it was.

"Am I heavy?" She asked, remembering that Della was accustomed to a lower gravity than she was.

"A little," Della admitted. She unlocked her legs from around Jeannie's and accepted another kiss.

Jeannie rolled onto her side, still holding Della in her embrace. She slid down to where Della's breasts could meet her lips and enclosed a nipple in her mouth, teasing it with her tongue, feeling it become erect. She caressed Della's slim flanks and slid lower, becoming excited all over again. She ran her fingers through Della's wide blonde triangle of tight curls and traced the swell of her slim buttocks. Della moaned, shifted, and Jeannie's tongue met her entrance again, seeking it hungrily.

\*\*\*

"Do you really think it's safe?" Captain Hawkins asked.

Troy Masters shrugged. "Jamie says it is. Kristi and Jeannie say it is. The pets say it is. Who am I to argue?"

Captain Hawkins thought of his own wife back on earth and his co-husband. He hoped Merry and Jonathon were thinking of him, just as he was of them. They had been a threesome for more years than he cared to remember. Their children were grown now, his son a fusion physicist and his daughter involved with police matters. He thought of the first time his daughter had come home after having to make a decision to expel a repeat offender from the Enclave into the wilds to almost certain death.

"Dad," she said, "I made the decision, and I would do it again, but God, he was so young and I just know he could have been salvaged if we only had the resources to try."

Hawkins had been gently commiserative. "There are no resources. We walk a fine line here. There is no room now for the old ways, where the sociologists and psychologists spent so much time and energy for so little result."

"I know, Dad. I'll get over this, and I'll do it again if I have to. Do you think the old psychologists would have ever made human behavior into a science?"

"We'll never know. If we can't cure them the first time now with chemical treatment, we have no resources to waste on them. Maybe some day, but not now."

These memories entered into his decision, along with how stabilizing he knew a multiple family could be. If Jamie's extended family and the ranger and the pets all agreed that Della could be released, he would go along with it. There was another motive to his decision: when the other Moon City crewmen saw that Della had been accepted back into the ship's society, that might prevent a similar occurrence of mutiny.

"All right, you have my permission, on one condition: I'm going to have her locked up again as we return to earth. Explain to her that in good conscience I can't do anything else."

"Good enough," Masters said and turned to go.

"One more thing."

"Yes?"

"You might explore your own motives in this matter. Are you really that disinterested an observer?"

"Where Kristi is concerned, I'm not sure," Masters admitted. "It will be all right though."

"See that it is, Captain. See that it is."

\*\*\*

Fuzzy Britches explained to the dogs and princess, using that strange mixture of broken English and animal talk that humans could never understand. He paused, twitching his ears to indicate to the other animals that they should listen to the happy sounds coming from the other room.

"See?" He said. "Our humans like the Moon woman. The family grows. When all the kittens come, we need another home. This big box no good. Need another man-human, too. Protect the kittens." He turned his attention to Princess, who was gravid with the impending birth of her litter.

"White hair?" Woggly asked.

"Maybe," Fuzzy Britches said. "Kristi can tell. But not here. On earth. Wait."

"Big city no good," Conan said.

"Little city?" Woggly asked.

"Maybe. Wait. Humans are funny people. This big box no good for kittens. No place to play, chase mice."

"No varmints," Woggly agreed, salivating.

Fuzzy Britches was the natural leader of the pets because of his extremely high intelligence, but even he was vague about where they were and when they would return to the familiar earth, but he had no doubt that they would.

\*\*\*

The voyage continued, in larger and larger incremental steps, working farther into the spiral arm to which earth belonged. Going inward was the choice that Hawkins had made on the suggestion of a majority of the scientists. Their theory was that since older suns would be located closer to the center of the galaxy, the chances of finding an advanced civilization would be better in that direction. They were right to a point, but wrong in the particulars.

Civilizations were found, and earth type planets, but in every case where intelligent life had risen, it had also fallen. In most cases, such planets were barren, desert-like worlds, with the remnants of old

habitations baking in the sun or buried in wildly growing vegetation rampant with antagonistic life. On one world, only insect-like creatures remained, virulent in all their forms. Masters lost a ranger on that world, prey to a swarm of flying monsters that stripped him to bones in seconds.

The pattern that Masters had first noticed became clearer, and finally left no room for doubt. Wherever intelligent life emerged, either war or the nemesis of genetic change in other species (or sometimes both) caused its downfall, to the detriment of the ecology. They found no exceptions. It was as if, when a race gained sufficient technology to manipulate life, it inevitably did so, regardless of the dangers. Also, they found no evidence of space flight anywhere, as though the biological sciences always caused disaster before life in space could be sustained off the home world, just as on earth and the Altairian planet.

The farther the ship traveled toward the center of the galaxy, the more barren, desolate and ravaged the planets became, until Hawkins finally called a halt.

\*\*\*

"We're getting nowhere," He told Jamie, Masters and Byron Westly, all assembled in his quarters. "We could make a few more hops, I suppose, but I don't see much point in it. Conditions on habitable planets are only getting worse, not better. Or previously habitable planets, I should say. Westly, what are your thoughts on the subject?"

The tall thin physicist brushed at his hair and looked pained. "I'd really like to go on, but that's just my profession talking, not my heart. This voyage has certainly rearranged a lot of concepts."

"Such as?"

"Well, let's take the question of life in the universe first. Most knowledgeable scientists have always assumed that there is nothing unique about earth. That is, we expected to find life on other planets, though we never dared assume that we would find so many. What we didn't expect to find was so many signs of intelligent life. And what we would have never thought, in our wildest dreams, was the pattern that we have seen. Intelligence evolving from lower forms, just as it did on earth, a rising technology, then before that technology is sufficient to permit a viable presence off the planet, either war or experimentations in biology that cause the destruction of the technology that gave rise to them in the first place.

"Next, we have always theorized that toward the center of the galaxy we would find much older civilizations, far in advance of ours, simply by the fact that the nearer the center we get, the older the stars, and thus the more time they would have had to develop. That has proven true in one sense: some of the ruins we've seen lately have been old, very old, but the advances never happened. If our samples are accurate, and I believe they are, the root cause has almost always been runaway genetic manipulation of lower species.

"The Altairians developed space travel," Jamie said. "So have we, for that matter."

"The Altairians just barely made it, and even they didn't develop a self-sustaining space technology. What resources they had, they put into their generation ship. I feel like we were extremely fortunate that on their long voyage they were able to concentrate on pure research into the theoretical physics that enabled us to build the ship we're on. Now take these considerations a step farther: Altair and earth are rather far out on the spiral arm, and comparatively close together. We both developed technological civilizations at about the same time. Towards the center, this happened millions of years ago. Perhaps we've been going in the wrong direction. Perhaps back the other way, where the stars are a little

younger, we might find planets still in the development stage."

"Where we might be able to colonize," Masters said.

"Yes, possibly. But even where life for us might be possible, I think you've found that strange planets are incredibly dangerous. Do you think that even with the remaining resources of earth and the space habitats, we could establish a foothold for a colony?" Masters didn't even have to consider his answer; he had been thinking along the same lines. "It would be possible, but only if we threw so many resources into it that it would mean abandoning earth and Moon City. I don't think the authorities would go along with that under any circumstances; certainly not when we consider that only a small percentage of our population would be able to emigrate. The rest would have to be left behind."

"My thoughts exactly," Hawkins said. "Which brings us back to my original question. Do we return now, or try a few more stops?"

"I can't see where going on would be advantageous at all. I suppose there's a chance that we might find a civilization somewhere which beat the odds, but it's a huge universe. We could spend lifetimes looking and still never find them, even if they exist."

A wistful look appeared in Westly's eyes, as if he were abandoning a dream held since childhood.

"And our time is limited," Hawkins concluded. "Conditions back home have to be resolved, one way or another."

Neither Masters nor Jamie was optimistic concerning such resolution, at least along conventional lines, but each had been considering ideas that would have startled some of the authorities back home.

\*\*\*

The return to earth would take only a few days, using the stress fields that slowed the passing of time in the rest of the universe while the ship sped back in the direction from which it had come.

Sean spent that time in a mode that was still indecisive. The dearth of results from the trip inclined him in some ways to opt for siding with Moon City, but the gentle treatment of Della after her mutiny swayed him in the other direction. He talked with her on occasion, while his pets were playing with those of Jamie's family, but she refused to discuss anything having to do with her mutiny with him. He did find himself drawn more and more into a genuine liking for that family, but in direct contravention of Passing's orders, he made no attempt to try subverting any of the women. He would wait, and see what happened.

The day before they were due to break out into space near earth, Captain Hawkins again had Della confined to her quarters. He really didn't think she posed a threat now, but he was taking no chances. When the Moon City authorities found that the voyage had been futile, Rob Passing might try something else, and he wanted to leave as many of his options open as possible.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Back in Moon City! Rob Passing's plans were completed, should the ship ever return. He had watched from space as flames rose from the Dallas Enclave where the population there was fighting over their dwindling food supplies. Selene had watched with him, her sharp incisive mind writing off one more population center and subtracting another small increment from trade with earth. She was convinced now that the only hope for Moon City was in co-operation with earth, using the vacant ship, and the one other still building for either immigration to another planet or for asteroid mining or movement of a portion of their city to Mars, or some other place in the solar system where critical supplies would be easier to come by.

Passing had already dismissed her as a factor in his plans, as well as the other members of the Moon City council. He envisioned a complete coup', not only taking over the earth-controlled ship upon its return, but using that as a means of assuming the reins of government as well. After that, earth could go to hell in it's own fashion, as it surely would, given their, to him, continued association with their damnable animals.

What he would do with the ship was still only vaguely envisioned. He only knew that it would have to serve his purposes better than it ever could for earth, and he was determined to have it. His men were ready, selected from his own security forces that he had screened carefully for men and women of similar bent. If Della or Sean had not already taken the ship, he was ready to do so on his own, with perhaps a little help from them once entrance was gained.

He knew, of course, that the ship contained only a few rangers, the only force aboard trained for fighting. He could match them and more, but only up to a point. He had no illusions that Captain Hawkins would allow more than one shuttle to match orbits with the ship if, and when it returned, and therein lay the crux: he could certainly gain entrance with his men, but the ship was so huge, with so many still empty compartments, that there was a good possibility that when striking from the airlock in the direction of the control room he could be taken from behind.

Selene had objected when he drew technicians from other tasks to refine an old invention once used on earth in a limited fashion. Back in the previous century, Stephen Harris at Stanford University had hit upon a laser phenomenon which, using the concept of three energy levels in atoms, and preventing the absorption at one wave level, induced transparency in a gas or vapor. From there, other researchers had eventually been able to apply the method to solids.

A crude version of the concept, using multiple beams applicable to solids of varying constituencies, had been used in the earlier days in Moon City for mining and exploration. Passing, a consummate policeman, had seen to the upgrading of the technology. Using his knowledge of the materials used in construction of the ship, and in particular, the materials from which compartment doors had been constructed, now possessed several hand-held devices which could peer through the door of any compartment in an instant, telling him whether they were empty or inhabited. There would be no wasted time securing compartments as they advanced on the control room now and he thought that would be all

the margin he required. All that was left now was for the ship to return, or failing that, to strike for the other one still being built.

Passing thought of himself as a savior, and in that, he was no better nor worse than any other of his counterparts throughout history. The thought that he might be consigning millions of people on earth to death took a very small second place to his own sense of destiny. When the ship did return, and eased into an orbit around the moon, he alerted his troops.

\*\*\*

Captain Hawkins was cautious, considering what Della had attempted. He had Masters assign two rangers to the airlock as the Moon City shuttle approached, and held Masters himself and the remainder of his small troop in reserve. He over-ruled the ranger Captain when Masters wanted to take that detail himself. He was reluctant to risk him at the outset, having come to rely heavily on his quiet competence and common sense. Besides, communications from the shuttle indicated that some personages from earth were present, allaying some of his caution. He had no way of knowing that Passing had already confronted the earthmen with drawn gun and confined them under guard. He concealed his own presence on the shuttle, using one of his trusted underlings for communication.

The fight at the airlock was brief, furious, and deadly. The two rangers were overwhelmed, but one of them did get a message off before he died, alerting Hawkins and Masters in the control room. As the Moon City force spread along the corridors, Masters moved out to meet them, leaving Hawkins to contact personnel in the various compartments that were inhabited.

Passing moved with his transparency device-equipped troops, spraying each compartment they passed with the multiple beamed ray only long enough to see whether it was occupied or not. Where they were, he paused only long enough to grenade the door and blast the inhabitants inside. He met little resistance; very few of the crewmen or scientists were armed.

Masters was at a disadvantage, having to travel a long distance through the corridors before he could force a confrontation. Big Boy did guide his path, though, and he saw with growing apprehension that as the Moon City forces moved through the ship, they were going to encounter Jamie's compartment before he could reach them. It was like a replay of the fight with the Moon City mercenaries in the wilds of earth, where he had had to make a snap decision to concentrate on an immediate threat and leave Jamie to survive on his own. To add to his apprehension, they would also reach Della's compartment even before Jamie's, and he couldn't guess what that would entail.

Passing was excited and pleased with the way it was going. They were meeting little resistance and killing where they did. Already, they were in the living quarters, having taken over the back half of the ship completely. He swept the next compartment in line with his transparency ray, and was startled to see the six-inch wide beam pass over and identify the face of Della Worley behind the door.

He held the hand of the man who was getting ready to grenade open the compartment, and instead thumbed the speaker tab on the door.

"Della!"

Inside, Della had no idea of what was happening. All she had heard in the last half-hour was Captain Hawkins announcing that the ship was under attack. The voice shouting at her sounded familiar, but she couldn't sort out whom it might belong to.

"I can't get out. I'm locked up!" She said. She couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Take cover!" The voice commanded, and she retreated out of range. Shortly, an explosion blew the door in, and she was horrified to see Passing grinning at her through the smoke.

"Here," He said, passing her a spare hand weapon, one of several his forces had brought to arm the Moon City crewmen. He was grinning evilly, completely within his element.

She took the weapon as if in a trance, and Passing shoved her out into the corridor among his other troops. She followed them blindly through the smoke, disorientated. Passing scanned two unoccupied compartments, then shouted in triumph at the next, as the beam passed over Jamie's tautly expectant face.

"Don't kill them!" He shouted as the shaped grenade placed by one of his men exploded against the door. Inside, Jamie had no idea of what was waiting outside. The door blew inward, flinging him against a wall.

Conan, growling furiously, charged the opening and went down with a wound. Jamie recovered and fell on Woggly, preventing him from meeting the same fate.

"Hold it! Don't move!" Passing ordered, moving into the room, triumph suffusing his face. Three of his men followed, guns ready, carrying Della with them. Jamie met her eyes and his heart sank. How could he have been so wrong?

Della stared back at him; then, with an utter lack of compassion and complete disregard of the other Moon City fighters, shot Passing squarely in the back. He turned, a look of utter disbelief on his face and she shot him again. The rocket-assisted slug hit him squarely in the chest, spraying blood everywhere.

Jamie dived at another of the men, completely forgetting that he had one weapon at his waist and another strapped to his boot. The shot missed him and tore into Della's shoulder, spattering more blood and bits of flesh into the room. Jeannie screamed from somewhere in the background. Woggly, released from Jamie's embrace, knocked another man to the floor and bit with savage glee at his gun arm. The other two men retreated, firing blindly, barely missing Fuzzy Britches who had jumped up onto a high shelf. He wasn't averse to fighting, but preferred to do it from an advantageous site. It was all over before he had a chance to join the fray.

Jamie was torn between rendering aid to Della or the faithful Conan, wounded again in his service. He grabbed linen from the bed and pressed it to Della's wound, noting with relief that Jeannie had gotten over her hysteria and was trying to staunch the flow of blood from Conan's body.

Out in the corridor, he heard more firing as Masters and his rangers arrived and entered the fight. The Moon City agents retreated, directionless now with Passing's death, and Masters followed relentlessly, willing himself not to think of whether Jamie and his family still survived. He finally drove the remainder of the Moon City force to ground where the corridor branched into a dead end ell. Masters held up knowing there was no where the opposing force could escape to. Leaving his men to keep watch, he entered the nearest compartment and contacted Big boy and in turn with Captain Hawkins.

"Are you okay?" Hawkins asked immediately.

"I'm fine. Captain," Masters said. "We have them cornered, now. I can take them, but if they fight, I'll almost certainly take more casualties. Can you patch me to Jamie?"

"Sorry. Communication to his compartment is out. However, I can tell you that he's alive and

Jeannie as well. Della and Conan are wounded. I have a mobile Autodoc on the way."

Beside him, Masters heard Kristi draw a deep breath. Had Jamie or Jeannie been hurt, he knew that he would not have been able to restrain her but now he had a little leeway.

"Fine. Give me a little time and maybe I can figure out how to corral the last of these varmints without getting hurt."

A voice came back to him, not Hawkins. "Captain Masters, can I try?"

Masters recognized Sean's voice. He didn't know the man that well, but he was willing to take a chance.

In the control room, Sean met Captain Hawkins' gaze unwaveringly. He had made his decision. For better or for worse, his lot would now fall with the earthmen. Hawkins considered, then nodded assent. If this man could stop further slaughter, he was all for it.

The surrender was anti-climactic. Sean was pressed by Masters to talk with the remaining Moon City holdouts, and within a very few moments they threw out their weapons and came around the corridor, hands high.

Masters scanned them bleakly. Again, he was victorious, but at what cost! Besides himself and Kristi, he had only one ranger still standing. Wolfgang was alive but three other of the rangers' dogs were dead. His remaining force was little more than a captain's guard. He made a vow then. At the first opportunity, he would retire from the rangers. During the last year he had seen too many of his compatriots die, and it seemed to him that, with the failure of the much-vaunted exploration in the alien inspired ship, they had died in vain. Neither earth nor the space people were any better off than they had been.

## **CHAPTER EIGHTEEN**

The small contingent of personnel from earth, consisting mainly of delegates from the Houston Enclave had been freed. Again, Sean had been instrumental as an emissary into the shuttle, accepting the surrender there of the pilot and guard which Passing had left behind. Hawkins sent the delegates in the shuttle on to Moon City to settle once and for all the future direction of relationships between earth and the space environments. The ship's Lander, he sent back to earth with a full complement of passengers, including Jamie and his family, most of the scientific personnel, and the few remaining rangers. He kept Della aboard, although released again from confinement. Sean was assigned as an emissary to Moon City, but left his pets in Della's care, not trusting their safety in Moon City. Jamie was, as usual, plegmatic about what results, if any, which had been gained, while the pets were wildly enthusiastic about being returned to earth. They had not cared at all for the close confinement aboard ship.

Except for Jamie, the humans were all depressed to various degrees. Jeannie and Kristi missed Della, while Kristi and Masters were still grieving at the loss of two thirds of the rangers they had started with, not to mention all but one of their dogs.

The returning earthmen had been apportioned seats on various cargo floaters. Jamie rode in a floater with Masters, Wolfgang, and Fuzzy Britches, crowded in among boxes and crates. Both men were typically silent most of the time, preferring to peer out through the back edge of the canopy as they traveled. The scenery was new to both of them.

"Look," Masters said.

Jamie craned his neck to see what he was pointing at. All he could see was a peculiar colored cloud, which they were slowly passing. "Insects?"

"Yeah. Just like in the panhandle and central Texas. There just aren't enough birds left to control the population. I don't like it, not a bit."

"Me either," Jamie admitted.

"Well, not much we can do about it, except hope that earth doesn't go the way of that one planet we landed on." Masters shuddered, remembering the way one of his rangers had died.

"Cats catch birds," Fuzzy Britches remarked, interested in the conversation after the long periods of silence.

"They need to stop, Fuzz. Birds eat insects"

"Not catch birds?"

"Concentrate on rats and mice. They're almost as bad as insects."

"They help keep the insects down," Jamie reminded him.

"Yeah, so they do. Damn, it's all so interrelated, but I think the insects are a more direct threat right now."

"Like mice. Maybe I go talk to feral cats. Tell them not to catch birds. Catch mice and rats now."

"Those big cats in the wilds would have you for breakfast if you went out by yourself, Fuzz."

"Not so. Next time you and Kristi go see cats, take me. I talk to them."

Masters looked at the cat strangely, as did Jamie, but where the ranger thought in terms of the uniqueness of the request. Jamie added it to the catalog of ideas slowly forming into an inter-locked complex in his mind. He didn't like the direction they were going, not at all but he found it impossible to stop the process.

\*\*\*

The stop at the Denver Enclave was brief, only long enough to unload cargo and replace their fuel cells. Some extras were added to give them the range for the long flight to the Houston Enclave. Even then, the trip would have been impossible without clear weather for much of the way so that the solar panels could absorb energy to complement the fuel cells and magnetic absorbers. Jamie wondered if the dearth of replacement supplies he had noted over the last few years had worsened while they were gone, and thought they probably had. He wouldn't be surprised if in the next few years the West Coast became

completely isolated from the rest of the country, just as the continents had been for a long time.

Australia was a barren desert now, South America's few remaining Enclaves were foundering, and Europe was struggling, except for England, which was long gone. No one knew what was happening in Asia anymore, except for second-hand reports from Moon City space pilots.

In the air again, Jamie's thoughts continued to tumble around like autumn leaves caught in a breeze, going up and down, back and forth, but never coming completely to a secure rest. It was frustrating, and unlike him to brood. He forced his thoughts into another line, that of researching some of the old genetic experiments on humans. That might help Della, at least, if no one else.

\*\*\*

In a trailing floater, Kristi and Jeannie were squeezed together with Princess, Woggly, Lady, and Conan. The animals were all napping, not being interested in the scenery.

Jeannie leaned against Kristi's shoulder, her thoughts in as much of a muddle as Jamie's. "Poor Della. I just hated to have to leave her there on the ship."

Kristi squeezed Jeannie's hand, which was entwined with hers. One reason that she had avoided permanent attachments before meeting Jamie and Jeannie was the very fact that she hated to lose someone she cared for, either by death or by separation. Even after all this time she still wasn't sure how she had become so entangled with Jeannie, but she wasn't sorry.

"Della turned out to be a sweet girl, once she started to trust us, that is. I wonder what she'll do now? Moon City evidently doesn't think highly of non-procreative or group sex."

"She didn't seem to mind that much, Jeannie said, "once she got the idea. You did good." She giggled, remembering a particularly randy gathering of the three of them.

"Most women don't mind if you go about it the right way. It's different with men; they have to be born with the proclivity."

"Jamie sure wasn't. He likes women. Period."

"That's for sure. He wasn't happy about leaving Della, either. Well, we do what we have to do. I don't worry about Jamie. He takes things as they come, regardless. I do worry about Troy, though. He's feeling really depressed now. Too many of our friends are gone."

"What can we do about it?"

"Probably nothing." Kristi said. "Remember, he's an old man. He was taking out patrols before I was born."

"He doesn't seem that old when you're talking to him. Except for all that white hair, of course." Jeannie said.

"Yes, but remember, he grew up in a different era than we did. Why, back in his day, he still had to worry about catching diseases from simple intercourse. Can you imagine that?"

Jeannie couldn't. Sex to her was as natural as wings were to a bird, even to letting herself get

pregnant. That brought on a thought. "I just remembered. Neither of us has gotten permission for a baby. What do you think the population control board will say?"

"Leave that to Jamie. He's still the fair-haired boy in the Enclave, for now at least."

Jeannie felt a sudden surge of fear. "Do you think they'll make him go out again?"

"They can't, unless he wants to, and I don't think he does. He's got something else bothering him, but he won't say what it is."

"I know," Jeannie admitted. "Well, we'll just have to love him more, won't we?"

"That we will. It won't be hard, will it?"

"Not at all. He's an easy man to love." Kristi stroked princess, asleep in her lap, thinking of the life growing in her. Jamie was indeed an easy man to love.

\*\*\*

The familiar sight of the Houston Enclave around him was like a tonic to Jamie. He hadn't realized how much he had missed it. Masters brightened up as well. The pets bounded ahead of them onto the waiting sled as if they were going hunting, rather than back to their apartment in the security building. Fuzzy Britches appropriated Jamie's lap, leaving the dogs to find their own seats. The dogs appeared puzzled. Usually, when they rode sleds, which was not all that often, they were relegated to a place in the aisle.

Jamie used his body computer to check ahead, telling John Whitmire in no uncertain terms that he intended to take the rest of the day off before checking in. Masters, having no other pressing business continued on up in the elevator to make his report.

While Jamie impatiently waited on Jeannie and Kristi, he initiated a search program with the main Enclave computer. No security clearances were required. The data he sought was so old that all barriers to access it had been lifted long ago. That done, all he had to do was wait.

\*\*\*

"Where's Kristi? Jamie asked, as soon as he saw that Jeannie was alone.

"She went on up to check with Whitmire. Troy is already there.

"Well, damn. I was ready for both of you." He kissed her thoroughly. It had been several days since they had made love.

"She said she'd be long in a little while. We don't have to wait, do we?"

Jamie kissed her nose. "No, we don't. It's just always more fun with three."

"You'll just have to suffer," Jeannie said, leading him to the bedroom.

Princess looked up from the middle of the bed where she was nursing two new kittens. Fuzzy Britches occupied the edge of the bed, looking on curiously, but for once he was speechless.

Jamie eyed the scenario. "It appears the bed has been appropriated. I guess we'll have to find another spot."

Jeannie wasn't listening. Her mood had changed abruptly. She began petting Princess and talking nonsense to her while Jamie and Fuzzy Britches stole from the room.

\*\*\*

John Whitmire's old, blocky face had added some wrinkles, Kristi noted. They deepened as she and Masters made their report. It was no more to Whitmire than a confirmation of what he had already heard from Hawkins. Essentially, the longspace voyage had been a failure. Nothing had been brought back that might save earth from the pet plague, and nothing to relieve the diminishing prospects of Moon City. The threat of the collapse of technology in both cultures was not eminent, but the decline was no less sure, and he was at a loss to know what to do about it. He had recommendations to make, and he had no idea what they might be at this stage. He was tired, almost tired to death, from years of juggling personnel and resources, and for the last year even more of a burden had descended on him. What was worse, his success in recovering the Altairian technology had propelled him into the highest councils of Enclave government, and they were depending on him for solutions. At this point, he didn't think he had any.

"All right," He finally said. "Go on back home. Take a couple of days off, then you had better plan on a patrol outside. Since you've been gone, we haven't had a whole lot of intelligence from the wilds."

"Why not?" Masters asked.

"We've been losing too many people. I finally curtailed what rangers we have left, until you can get some more trained."

Masters wondered what was happening outside the confines of the Enclave now. When he had last gone out, the bigcats had been active. Had they become that much of a menace? He found himself anxious to find out. The wilds of earth would be a relief after what he had gone through on the voyage into space. Masters and Kristi left together.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Jamie was armed for bear the next day when he took the elevator up to see Whitmire. The research program he had initiated had indeed brought results. Coupled with his own knowledge, and that of some



biologists he knew, he had little doubt now that there was a program which could enhance Della's muscles, and indeed any of Moon City's citizens who wished to take their chances on earth. Not only that, he had had a long conversation with Fuzzy Britches, Masters, and Kristi. He still wasn't completely sure where his thoughts were leading, but he knew for certain what he wanted to do in the meantime.

"Let me get this straight," Whitmire said. "First, you want me to pressure the population control board to allow Jeannie and Kristi both to have their babies. Next, you want your pets to go on the next patrol with Masters and Kristi. And finally, you want to initiate experimentation with humans that has been forbidden for decades. What else do you want? Perhaps command of the floater fleet?"

"I still have the thought disk," Jamie said, fingering the disk in a wide pocket of his coveralls.

"Which we both know is about used up."

"No one else can judge that, can they?"

"True, but I've been keeping that in reserve. It's one way of controlling some of the council here. Give me another reason. "

"I can't do that yet. Can't you just trust me?"

Whitmire thought about it. He was juggling a number of conflicting interests. Some of the council wanted to use the ship that Jamie had made possible for further exploration; others wanted to use it to completely subjugate Moon City into their way of thinking. All of them still thought that there was more information to be gained from Jamie's thought disk. Whitmire was concerned with the survival of earth more than anything else, and so far, Jamie had come closer to solving that enigma than anyone, even if his efforts had met with less than complete success. He made his decision.

"One condition," he said.

"What's that?"

"You stay here."

Jamie had to think that one over. Let Woggly and Fuzzy Britches go out into the wilds again? They had been very lucky the last time and he knew it, although the pets had simply thought of it as a period of fun and adventure. Well, the ranger pets would be along to help take care of them, and if anyone could bring them back, it was Masters.

"Done," he said.

\*\*\*

Kristi had been late returning to the apartment the evening before and had seemed more animated than usual, though Jamie couldn't figure out why. Kristi offered no explanations. Time enough for that if they returned from this patrol. Jamie and Jeannie said their good-bys as she and the pets boarded the sled that would take them to the outskirts of the Enclave, then he returned to the security building. This time though, he refused to work with the waiting engineers and physicists. Instead, using Whitmire's

authority, he called in a team of biologists and geneticists and outlined what he wanted done. Two of them refused to participate after seeing the direction he was going. There was still a horror of altered humans prevalent in the culture, even so many years after the last of them had been killed or driven into the wilds. It wasn't a rational fear, simply a reflection of normal human emotions striking out at a convenient scapegoat when times were hard. The idea of an altered human bothered Jamie no more than a paraplegic of the old days would have. So far as he was concerned, if an alteration could help a person, he was all for it. As he began work, he smiled to himself. According to Fuzzy Britches, a few cat gene insertions would improve the whole human race. It was almost tempting. Della seemed to be part cat anyway.

\*\*\*

Two days later, and miles into the wild country surrounding the Enclave, Fuzzy Britches was scared but confident. He crouched on the outermost branches of a large white oak tree and carefully noted the tangle of Muscadine vines he could use to escape to the next tree if it proved necessary. It hadn't been all that hard to convince the humans to let he and Woggly go out, himself alone and Woggly in the company of Lady. White Hair, as he called Masters, and Kristi had spent the first night out in their tent together almost totally involved with each other, to the total exclusion of the pets. Fuzzy Britches often wondered where humans found the energy for their couplings, but he had long since stopped worrying about it. At least it kept them happy.

A sleepy chirp sounded from nearby. One of the rare bird nests he had found. The adults had fluttered and swooped at him when he first took his position, but finally settled down after they decided that he presented no threat. He settled himself comfortably, prepared to wait as long as necessary, although he thought it would be sooner rather than later. The dogs had told him that they smelled bobcat before they left on their own mission.

Just before dawn, the larger cat made its appearance. It was a clear night, and peering down at the base of the tree, Fuzzy Britches could see that it was indeed an enhanced animal, as he had hoped. The large head was unmistakable. Besides, unenhanced animals were becoming rarer and rarer, unable to compete with their more intelligent counterparts.

Fuzzy Britches hissed gently. The larger cat snarled up at him. It had been drawn by his scent, and was irritated at the intrusion into its territory.

"Come here," Fuzzy Britches called again, speaking in the patois peculiar to the cat species.

The bobcat bounded up the trunk of the tree and out onto the branch where Fuzzy Britches rested.

"Go away, little cat. This territory mine!"

"Yours," Fuzzy Britches agreed, eyeing the larger animal carefully.

"Why you here?"

"Talk to you. You talk to other cats." He bounced on his branch, upsetting the birds into chirping again, fearfully this time. The bobcat flicked its ears toward the sound.

"My food. You go away."

"No. Leave birds alone. They eat bugs. Help the forest."

The feral cat could make no sense of this, but Fuzzy Britches was patient. He talked earnestly, explaining his ideas to the wildcat. Finally, at mid-morning, they left together.

\*\*\*

Masters' hand went automatically to the weapon belted at his waist, but he took no other action other than to calm Conan who had bared his teeth. The dog calmed, especially when he noticed Fuzzy Britches standing unconcernedly by the larger cat.

"Friend," Fuzzy Britches said. "I tell him to come see humans and dogs. Give him Enclave collar. No fleas then and he not eat birds anymore. I tell him we come back again, make it where his mate not have so many kittens. Tell him he help humans, we help him."

Conan advanced and cautiously sniffed noses with the cat, then returned to Masters' side. He had seen stranger things in the wilds during his lifetime.

Masters removed his hand from the butt of his weapon, and the big cat lowered his ears. He walked warily around the camp, sniffing at the tents, then accepted a food bar from the ranger. It had long since been ranger policy not to bother the feral animals unless threatened, and never to stay in one place long. Enhanced animals were still just as territorial as their forebears. Anytime humans camped too long in one place they could expect retribution. He was amazed that Jamie's pet had talked the wildcat into coming into camp. He called the Enclave to have their supporting floater make a special trip. He had to repeat his request twice when he asked for Enclave collars to be brought out. When they arrived, he used his body computer to modify them so that they could not be used to gain entrance to the Enclave, but otherwise left their properties intact.

Later that day, Kristi and her patrol returned to camp, bringing two feral dogs with them, accompanied by Woggly and Lady. The dogs were large, as most feral dogs were, representing a cross between dogs, wolves, and coyotes, essentially a new species. They, too accepted a collar, and were told of a bobcat in the area who would

be wearing one.

Woggly cavorted happily with them, glad that he had gotten Fuzzy Britches' instructions right.

"We're returning to the Enclave tomorrow," Masters told his rangers that night.

"This is something new. In all the years I've spent in the wilds, I've never seen this happen before. Feral animals have never accepted friendship from us; at best, we've just avoided each other. And I've never seen canines and felines making friends in the wild." He shook his head, wondering what else could possibly happen in the presence of Jamie and Fuzzy Britches. By now, he wouldn't be surprised to see Tiger becoming vegetarians or some other equally ridiculous phenomena.

"Maybe we never had our own pets try to work out a truce," Kristi said.

"It has been tried, but never succeeded, at least not for long. There was just too much antagonism between the feral animals and humans. Sooner or later some dumb, prejudiced human would spoil the rapprochement."

Kristi stretched out and propped her head in Masters' lap. Fuzzy Britches jumped onto her belly and stretched out to his full length, purring happily while chin-bumping her breasts. "Maybe they just never had a cat around like Fuzzy Britches."

"Fuzzy Britches smart," Woggly said. "Still a cat, though. Cats not play fair. Climb trees."

\*\*\*

Kristi ushered Masters into the apartment after they had made their report to Whitmire. Jamie and Jeannie rushed to hug her. She kept an arm around the ranger captain's waist as she accepted the hugs, then pushed him forward. "Look what I brought home with me," She said smugly, eyeing Jeannie. "A brand new play-pretty."

Masters was old enough and Jeannie young enough that they both managed to blush. Jeannie recovered first. "If we're going to play," She said, "You better go get washed first. Don't forget to do behind your ears."

Masters wondered what he had let himself in for, but he was not unhappy about it. It had been a long time since he had taken on a family. His only question now was whether he could hold up his end of it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

"Fuzzy Britches was the key to the whole thing," Jamie explained to Whitmire two weeks later. He had asked Masters to come with him, to lend support to his arguments. "Some of his remarks that didn't make sense out of context started sounding better once I started thinking about them. He kept mentioning that 'the pets would take care of humans' and that he wanted to talk to some feral animals. Well, Troy has told you all about that." He glanced at the white haired man sitting beside him. Having Masters in the family would make his plan safer, even if he still didn't like what he was proposing.

"So he has. Troy, are you for it?"

"I think it's worth a try," the ranger said.

"Certainly, nothing else is working. The outside ecology just keeps getting worse. At the very least, returning some humans and their pets to the wilds, and trying to draw the feral animals into cooperation with us will provide a base for our continued existence, even if the Enclaves ultimately fail."

"That's what I think, too," Jamie said. "Not that I'm going to like the idea of living in the wilds, but I don't see anything else working. At the least, we can start small, and go on from there. We can help the

feral animals control their population in our own area and work from there. If they cooperate, maybe some of the other Enclaves will try it. Jeannie and Kristi are willing. Our kids will grow up with the feral animals. If we treat them as equals, like we do our pets, maybe someday we can get the ecology balanced again, and go from there. They might even help us if we want to go into space again, but that's for a long time in the future."

"Maybe not so long," Whitmire said. "We've reached a compromise with Moon City. We'll retain the ship that's already built, and let them have the one still under construction. They can use it to sterilize and re-equip the Altairian generation ship. It's big enough to take most of their population, or if they don't want to try that, they can use it for more exploration. In the meantime, they will build us several other ships to use. Who knows, somewhere we may find a planet to our liking. They have also taken up your idea of enhancing the musculature of any of the space people who would rather settle on earth than go exploring or wait to see whether their ecology can survive. And who knows? Maybe it will, now."

"Did Della get our message?"

Whitmire smiled. "She did. She's already undergoing the treatments. By the time we get organized to support your colony, she should be able to come down. She's bringing Sean's pets with her, by the way."

"How about Sean? I told Della in my message that we'd like to have him along as well."

"You haven't heard?"

"Heard what?"

Sean is now the number two man in Moon City, right behind that woman, Selene. He's the one who finally convinced the space folks to agree to all our proposals. I don't think he'll be coming any time soon. He can't be spared, even if he wanted to."

Well, Jamie thought, two men and three women. That was a start, and he felt sure that Masters would convince some of his rangers to join them. Anyway, it would be the pets that would make the enterprise a viable project, if it succeeded at all. He was just a player, and he would go along with whatever happened.

\*\*\*

The floater drifted down, bringing Della to join the others already living in the wilds. The prefabricated huts formed a circle in a little valley, a lonely outpost in a pet-plagued world, but there was hope, now. Somehow, the feral animals and humans would learn to live together.

Fuzzy Britches scampered out to meet her as the floater landed, another addition to his brave new world. If anyone could make it work, it would be Fuzzy Britches.

THE END