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## **Savage Survival**

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## CHAPTER ONE

Her parents were scared; horribly scared. Eleven year old Lyda Brightner could tell that much by how white and strained their faces were, by the way they tried to keep her away from the viewscreen in the den where they had been practically living for the last few days. They would only leave for short breaks and even then, wear the earpieces so they could follow what was happening. It was a war, an invasion; she was pretty sure of that from the little snippets of news she had heard when peeking into the den, and from conversations with the few friends she had been able to talk to. Mostly, the phone lines were always either busy or made strange crackling sounds like bacon grease popping in a hot skillet. It must be bad from the way Mom and Dad are acting, she thought. And there had been no school this morning; that was the real signal, because always before, there was an explanation, like a tornado or storms or a terrorist threat. This time, nothing had been said except she was to stay home and do her lessons in her room. She had done that, and now she was bored with the rest of the day stretching out before her like a deserted playground. Not even a new book to read on her computer or on the phone.

Lyda stood by the doorless entrance to the den, trying to turn herself into a small, quiet animal that wouldn't be noticed. A rabbit, like in *Watership Down*, she thought. No one notices a rabbit. She closed her eyes and envisioned herself huddled down in the grass, a little white bunny with ears laid flat so they wouldn't peek out and give her away. It seemed to be working because for a while, she stood and watched and listened, her presence undetected.

At first, she didn't understand what she was seeing; she thought Mom and Dad must be watching a monster movie. Bright silvery spiderlike constructs crawled on multiple legs across a landscape of loose rubble and debris while little ant beings scurried to get out of their way. Then it popped into perspective. The rubble was the ruins of buildings; the ants were people trying to avoid ... being eaten? That was what it looked like at first, but then she realized the people were being herded, with the spider things acting like cowboys on horses, or sheepdogs working a flock. The silvery spiders were nothing to fool with; she could see that. Anyone who tried to fight or run the wrong way was killed gruesomely by mandiblelike appendages that pierced bodies like giant needles stitching clothes on puppets.

Periodically, a long broad tongue of blue fire would lash out from an opening among the multiple sets of mandibles adorning the front of the spiders and sweep a path through the crowds of people running frantically over the debris-strewn streets. Whenever the band of energy touched a person, bluish lightning flared and the figures would go limp for a moment, crash to the ground, then get up and run even faster than before—if they were able. Some weren't and were ignored or stepped on and crushed by the multiple-jointed appendages supporting the spiders. In a few moments, out would come the tongue of energy again, touching more people with its blue lightning and hurrying them along like an extra powerful cattle prod. But where were they going? Why were they being chased and harassed like gangs of vermin?

The mandibles of the creature moved constantly, opening and closing as if seeking something to bite, though nothing except humans who chose to fight ever came within their grasp. Other appendages waved in a roving pattern below the mandibles, touching the ground, dead bodies, ruined vehicles, poking into

shattered doorways. Whiskers, she thought. They're like the whiskers of a cat, telling it what's near.

The whole scene was awesomely frightening, but so fascinating, she couldn't look away. Lyda thought it must be real, not only because of the way her parents were staring so fearfully, but because the colors weren't as bright as animations and the movements of the spidery beings and the humans were too smooth and natural looking. But if it were real...

"Lyda! What are you doing here?"

Lyda jumped guiltily. Mom and Dad were both staring at her like she had done something bad. "I only wanted to watch."

"This is nothing someone your age should see," Dad said sternly. He cut off the sound and picture, leaving only the earpiece to provide him a feed.

"Your dad is right, honey," Mom said. "It isn't necessary for you to see such ... such..."

"It's real, isn't it?" Lyda asked, already knowing it was. She loved her parents. Sometimes they were even cool, but they still tried to treat her like a little girl and she wasn't that little anymore. She was eleven now, going on twelve.

Mom and Dad looked at each other from where they were seated side by side on the big leather couch.

Dad sighed, as if releasing a terrible burden from inside his body. "Yes, sweetie, it is real, but we're not in any danger yet. Maybe the military will..." His voice trailed off.

Lyda thought if the military was going to do something, it ought to get started—if that scene she had been looking at was any indication. She took a few hesitant steps into the den, the toes of her bare feet curling into the carpet. "What are those spider thingys? Are they aliens from outer space?"

Abruptly, Mom burst into tears. Dad put his arm around her and patted her shoulder. From around the tangle of Mom's bright red curls, the exact same shade as her own, Dad said, "I guess so. Yes, they must be. But, Lyda..."

"Daddy, I should watch with you. How else will I know what to do if they come here?"

Mom raised her head. "They won't come here. Will they, Bruce? Why doesn't the military bomb them or something?"

"I don't know. Maybe too many of our people are being held captive. Anyway, they already have. It didn't work."

"It looked like those spider things were eating people," Lyda said, taking another step inside. She hadn't actually seen anyone being eaten, and wasn't sure she wanted to in any case, but she had seen a few people being skewered by the thin silvery mandibles before Dad cut off the program.

"No, we don't think anyone is being eaten, Lyda baby." Dad tried to chuckle but it didn't come out like that; it was a gurgling sound Lyda had never heard him make before.

"Then what are they doing with them?"

Again her parents looked at each other rather than at her. Was there something more terrible than being killed, or maybe eaten later, happening to the people she had seen? What could be worse than that?

"Lyda..."

Dad sighed again. "Elaine, she may as well stay with us. We can always cut the picture if it gets too gruesome. And we need to tell her."

"Tell me what?" Curiosity was replacing her fright now. She felt her heart beat faster. Mom and Dad always tried to answer her questions and be honest with her, unlike the parents of some of her friends; they just didn't want her to be exposed to graphic violence or sex yet. They thought she was too young.

Lyda always felt guilty when the subject came up. She had already seen plenty; little flash drives and printouts from books passed around from kid to kid; images on her cell phone; movies at her friends' homes she wasn't allowed to watch in her own; graphic color prints that were sometimes freaky and gross but interesting all the same. She suspected that Dad, at least, knew she sometimes had access to things he would rather her not see, but he pretended she didn't.

"The people you saw the spiders chasing aren't going to be eaten. They're being transferred to big camps out west. We've seen images from space."

Lyda took the last few steps to the couch and wormed her way in between the elder Brightners. She drew a grudging smile from both of them and this time, it was Lyda who sighed. Finally, she was going to find out exactly what was happening!

\* \* \* \*

Bruce Brightner thought about how much he should tell Lyda. He realized that both he and Elaine were perhaps a bit overprotective of their only child, but it was perfectly natural. She was a prodigy, absorbing knowledge almost effortlessly. Even so, she was still an eleven year old girl, emotionally immature as yet, he thought, even though she had more sense than most girls her age. The other reason he kept a close watch on her was because she was beautiful; at least he thought so. Her startlingly red hair fell in natural wavy curls to below her shoulders. She was bereft of the freckles her mother was prone to, leaving her with an even-featured elfin face that would become regal and extremely attractive as she changed from a girl to a young woman.

"Sweetheart, all of earth has been invaded by beings from somewhere else. I guess from outer space is as good a description as any. We don't think those spider things are the actual aliens; they're simply mechanical constructs being used to round up humans and perhaps for other purposes we don't know as of yet."

"Did the spiders ruin all those buildings, or did the aliens do it?" Lyda wanted to know.

"It wasn't them; we were the ones who caused most of the damage. We tried bombing them, but bombs don't seem to harm them at all. They don't seem to care what we do, unless we oppose them. It appears that it's live humans they want."

"Bruce..." Elaine warned.

"Well, it's the truth. That's all they've done so far, simply used their mechanicals to round up enormous numbers of people from all over earth. Lyda, they herd them into cul-de-sacs like you just saw, then force them into flying machines. After that, they're transported to other locations in bigger flying things. You'll see that soon if we keep watching."

"What happens then, Daddy?"

"She surely doesn't need to know any more right now, Bruce. Let it be."

"Well..."

"Besides, we don't really know much else, do we?"

"Actually, no. We can't see much of what's happening in the camps. So how about putting some frozen pizza on for supper? We can eat here."

"All right. You be careful now. Lyda doesn't need to see some of that stuff." Mrs. Brightner left the den.

Lyda cuddled closer to her dad. "Can we watch some more, Daddy?"

Mr. Brightner zapped the picture and sound back on. The same vista was still being broadcast. This time, she did see one of the flyers. It was simply a rounded, oblong shape with an oval entrance that irised open for shrieking men, women and children, then closed with a blink when it was full or wanted to go elsewhere.

"Where is this happening, Daddy? Have they said?"

"This is Atlanta, I believe, but it really doesn't matter, baby. It's happening just like this everywhere in the world."

"Even in the country?"

Mister Brightner realized he had said more than he intended to. "Well, yes, but not around here. Not yet, anyway. Let's not tell Mom I said that, okay?" Bruce Brightner knew that armies of the mechanicals were roaming almost every part of earth by now, always seeking out humans. What he hadn't told Lyda was that in many places, huge numbers of bodies were turning up from people simply being killed after capture. No one knew why. What he did know was that he intended to protect his wife and daughter if he could.

Lyda smiled and nodded at Dad, barely hearing. Her eyes were tracking the scenes on the big screen with a fascination usually reserved for special programs on the learning channel, ones that dealt with how things worked or astronomy and space flight. Already she had aspirations to become an astronaut; not a pilot, but a science specialist. Her parents thought it might be a hero worship thing but Lyda knew it wasn't. Someday, she would go into space and study the stars. Or she had intended to before this happened.

On the screen, the view changed to the president. Lyda thought he was handsome, but kind of dumb. Dad said most politicians were dumb and even if they weren't, they had to act that way to get elected. She didn't understand that, but she had little interest in politics. Nevertheless, Lyda remained quiet while the president was speaking because Dad appeared to be very interested in what he was saying at first. Soon though, his expression became disgusted.

"He's lying," Lyda's father said. "We're not in contact with the damn things. They don't want to negotiate." He switched to a local channel.

"Why is he lying, Daddy?" Lyda asked. She didn't understand that either. Shouldn't the president always tell the truth?

"He's trying to reassure people I guess, but that's not the way to do it."

The newswoman on the local channel looked very distraught. She was reading from a list rather than a teleprompter and it showed. "...supplies of food in the cities of Lufkin and Nacogdoches are to be rationed beginning Tuesday morning. Governor Prester has..."

"Shouldn't we be seeing about some extra food supplies?" Mom asked as she came back into the den, wiping her hands on a dishtowel. "We really don't have much here."

"You're probably right. I should have done that earlier. I'll go as soon as we finish eating."

Lyda looked to her Dad, her eyes pleading for permission to go along. Her unasked question became moot as the screen altered the view once again. It showed an oblong, dirigible looking shape stretched across both sides of the freeway separating Lufkin from Nacogdoches and spilling into the woods on each side. It was huge. Emerging spider mechs looked like tiny bugs next to it. As they watched, several smaller flyers like the one she had seen earlier touched down along the sides of the big one and appeared to merge into it.

The local anchor began talking extemporaneously, and was doing a bad job of it. Her hands were visibly shaking. "...just in. One of the alien's larger transport craft has landed along Highway 59 between Lufkin and Nacogdoches. Many of the mechanical spiders of different sizes, like in ... they have emerged and are marching ... going in different ways, uh, directions, but most of them appear to be trying, I mean heading, toward the cities, Lufkin and Nacogdoches, that is. They ... littler flyers are uh, being absorbed, uh landing ... on..."

The picture burst into static and tiny squares of distorted color, then the screen went blank. A window appeared, announcing the satellite link had failed.

Lyda sat very still, pretending to be a rabbit again, hoping not to be ordered from the den while her father searched frantically among other channels for more information. Their home was located on a county road only a few miles off the corridor between the two east Texas cities. Many other channels were broadcasting the same signal, satellite link failure. Finally, he gave up, grew thoughtful and found an old radio on one of the bookshelves. It wouldn't work; the batteries were dead. He used some words Lyda had very seldom heard him utter. "I'm going to find some batteries," he said. "Stay here, hon."

Mom had sat down. She was staring at the big screen as if her intense gaze could repair the satellite link. It didn't.

"How long will it take the spiders to get here?" Lyda asked.

Her mother didn't answer. She simply stared. Lyda wondered if she had gone into shock.

From the bedroom next to the den, there came a noise Lyda had heard before, the unmistakable *slack-slack* of a round being chambered in Dad's shotgun he used for duck hunting every year. Lyda didn't think a shotgun would be of much use if bombs didn't work, but she didn't tell Dad that when he returned to the den, bearing the weapon in a tight-knuckled grip.

"Daddy, how long until the spiders get here?" Lyda repeated her question. Her mother still hadn't

answered.

He shook his head as he began opening up the radio. "Maybe they won't come here," was all he said.

Lyda thought of that huge craft, obviously the kind Dad had been talking about. She remembered that it had only been three days since the invasion began and already many humans had been transported to the desert camps. The spiders probably moved fast, she thought. *And they were coming here!*

The spiderlike constructs did move quickly. Lyda had finished her share of the pizza, brushed her teeth and was waiting hopefully near the door as Dad picked his car keys off the hallway table, apparently deciding he needed to run an errand after all, probably over to the little store on the highway intersection. Lyda quickly shrugged into her windbreaker and flip-flops, but before she could even begin to ask him to go along, a noise from outside distracted him. He hurried to the entrance and opened the door.

Lyda could see past her father, out into the front yard. At the edge of her vision before the doorjamb blocked it, she saw the leglike appendages of one of the spider things. Then the whole thing moved into view. It was much larger up close than it had looked on the screen, even when there had been humans visible for comparison. It glinted in the late morning sun like the outside paneling of the new building in downtown Lufkin, featureless and simply reflecting the light.

Dad slammed the door and saw her still standing behind him. "Go to your room!" He shouted. "Hide under the bed!"

Reluctantly, Lyda hurried away while Dad ran toward the den. She knew he was going for his shotgun. Before he even got there, the door crashed inward with a resounding noise like someone had dropped a tray full of dishes at a restaurant. Lyda whirled and saw something she recognized, the tips of two of the mandibles from one of the big spiders. It hooked in under the top of the doorframe and pulled up. A part of the front of the house peeled away with a loud ripping noise.

"Run!" Dad shouted at her. He had found his shotgun and was rushing toward the entrance; the weapon already pointed and ready to fire.

Lyda couldn't make herself move. She watched, mesmerized, as a bluish band of light sought out her father and engulfed him. He sparkled, like a cartoon character being electrocuted, then suddenly, he was flung against the wall. His body spattered through the sheetrock and broke the two by four studs in the wall into jagged splinters. One of them gouged a hole in his throat that immediately began gushing bright red blood. Lyda never heard the shotgun fire, nor did she have time to think about it. She felt her mother's arms go around her in an attempt to drag her away just as she saw a smaller spider fill the entrance. A blue universe of pain engulfed her and tore at her senses like a ravenous virus. She tried to shout a cry of defiance and that was the last thing she remembered until she woke up in the desert.

## CHAPTER TWO

Lyda opened her eyes. She stood on wobbly legs and looked around, squinting through frighteningly strong sunlight at a surreal scene of horror. In the distance, mountains grew from a brown landscape, solid and timeless, but nearby were two mutilated bodies. She quickly averted her eyes from them. One of them had been a young woman. She was naked. Blood seeped from between her thighs. The other body was that of a man, sprawled out in an awkward position. His skull had been crushed and caved in above one of his eyes. The eye lay on his cheek like an obscene colored ball on a thick white string.



Beyond the bodies, men and women milled around, some gathered in throngs, some alone. Most of them wore dazed, frightened expressions, like the ones she had seen on some of the dogs when her class toured an animal shelter. Just like some of the dogs, a few were defiant and their faces and attitudes promised savage reprisal should a chance come their way. She saw a man dressed in dirty jeans squatting by a cactus. He had hacked off one of the flat pancake-like outgrowths and was trying to scrape the needles off it with the little file on a fingernail clipper, cursing as he did. Was he trying to get water from it, or planning on eating it?

Lyda thought of her parents. *Where was Mom?* She couldn't remember anything after she saw Dad being flung and crushed against the wall and that blue light engulfed her. *Was Mom here? Or dead, like Dad?* She was sure Dad was dead; she had seen how his throat was torn open by the broken studs in the wall. But she didn't know about Mom, nor did she know anyone to ask. She began walking slowly, looking around, trying to define her situation and trying not to cry. The ground of the desert was hot and gritty under her bare feet, not at all like she had imagined a desert would be. She thought she remembered slipping into her flip-flops when she shrugged into her jacket, but if she had, they were lost now. Tiny stones gouged at the soles of her feet, bringing numerous little hurts. There wasn't much she could see, only the gritty dirt that passed as sand, larger rocks and even larger outcroppings of stone rising from the desert floor like old shelters, petrified by time. Occasionally, she passed tufts of greenish brown grass of some sort and more cacti, some very large and growing in clusters like flattened houses in a village. There were a few large bushes with spindly limbs and thin leaves, but no trees anywhere.

And people. There were people as far as she could see, standing, sitting, lying on the ground. She thought some of them must be dead, simply by the way they lay unmoving with limbs twisted under them or flung out in unnatural positions. There were other children among them, some being held by adults; others free to move about under the watchful eyes of their guardians. Quite a few of them looked to be as lost and vulnerable as herself. The people were dressed in everything from suits to borrowed shirts tied around the waist by some who must have been caught naked. Lyda was glad she had her clothes on. She spotted several men and women who wore no garments at all. They looked entirely different than the nude bodies she had seen in the material passed around by the kids at school, as if someone had hosed them down and washed part of their color away. She wondered why that was.

At first, Lyda wasn't really fearful; she was sorrowful about Dad and worried about Mom but beyond that, she was curious. How did she get here without remembering? How long had it taken? What was going to happen next? Was there water and food to be found? Why were the awful spider things bringing their captives here to this desolate waste? In the distance, she saw one of the giant transport craft descend and land as silently as clouds bumping together. She wondered how it was powered. It couldn't be a rocket, could it? There was no noise. As she walked, some men or women glanced at her, but most ignored her as if they had too many problems of their own to care about an eleven year old girl walking around by herself.

When Lyda grew thirsty, she decided to ask someone about water. She picked a gray-haired woman who resembled Grandma, though she wasn't dressed as nicely.

"Ma'am, do you know where I can find some water?" Lyda asked the old woman politely.

"Girl, you need a protector to get water around here. Where's your folks?"

"I ... I don't know," Lyda told her. She didn't want to tell anyone Dad was almost certainly dead and Mom ... well, she had been trying to protect her, too.



"Then you better find someone quick, lest you ... ah shit, leave me alone." The woman covered her face with her hands and began sobbing.

Lyda went closer, wanting to comfort the old woman but she was shrugged off. When she tried again, she was pushed forcefully away. Puzzled, Lyda left her alone and began wandering again. What was a protector? Well, probably someone like a parent, she thought. Where would she find one?

One found her, one who had watched and listened, a tall grungy man in his forties with a two day beard and a gleam of desperation in his eyes. He was wearing the remnants of a suit and had a sweat-stained tee shirt wound around and over his scalp to protect his bald head from the sun.

"Hey, girl!"

Lyda turned toward the voice. Before she could back away, she found herself being gripped by the upper arm.

"I can get you some water, girl. What's your name?"

Lyda didn't answer. She didn't like his looks. She glanced around, looking for help. The few nearby adults turned away. One man started toward them, but stopped when he saw the grungy man show a large pocket knife with the blade open. He turned away.

"Come on, girl. We'll both get some water."

"I don't want to go with you," Lyda said, trying to wrench her arm away. That only made the man grip her tighter.

"What's your name, girl?" he repeated, squeezing her arm so hard, it was painful.

"Lyda," she said reluctantly.

"Okay, Lyda. I'm Boris. Come on, let's go get some water. Maybe some food, too." He began walking, pulling her along by her arm. His long-legged stride forced her into a half walk, half run in order to keep up. His breath was heavy and gasping, with a wheeze to it like his throat was dry, the same as the gritty desert sand. He led her through and around small groups of people for what she thought was somewhere around a half mile and halted beside a large outcropping of rock that provided shade for a scruffy looking gang of men and women.

A big dark-haired man stepped forward, holding a sharp, pointed rock in his fist. He also wore a two, perhaps three day beard. "What we got here?" he asked. His question was asked in a pleasant tone of voice that contrasted with his feral appearance. He reminded Lyda of wolverines she had read about, only bigger.

"Something to trade," Boris said deferentially to the big man. Now he was holding Lyda by both arms, forcing her to stand in front of him.

Lyda began to grasp what was going on now. There was a pile of supplies being guarded by this group. Each man held either a rock or a pocket knife in his hand. Several of the women had armed themselves as well. She could see what looked like red bricks stacked in piles beside open tubs of water. The tubs were made of some gray material. While she stood there, a woman leaned over one of the tubs and cupped water in the palms of her hands and lifted it to her mouth. She did this several times, then stood

up. The woman was closely accompanied by a man wearing jeans and holding a rock in his hand. He grinned at the woman like she was a prize he had just won from the coin toss at a county fair. He reached out with his free hand and squeezed one of her breasts. The woman winced, but stood stoically. Then he led her around the stone outcropping, his hand already sliding down under the waistband of her slacks.

"She's too young," the big man said, still speaking pleasantly, looking at her, not the couple who had just left. Lyda detected an undertone to his voice, like the trill of a clear mountain stream that held poisonous algae beneath its surface.

"She's a virgin, Big Bill. Never been had. Ought to be worth something."

Lyda made a violent effort to wrench herself out of Boris' grip. She got one arm free. Before she could use her loose arm to try to claw or strike her captor, he had his forearm under her chin, pressing up so hard, she couldn't breathe.

The man named Big Bill laughed. "She's a feisty one. All right. One brick and all the water you can drink. Then go."

"But ... Big Bill..."

"That's all. I could just take her."

Boris relented. He shoved Lyda forward into Big Bill's arms and scurried for the water tubs. He drank thirstily, got tossed one of the red bricks and was told to leave. He was munching on it as he walked away, not looking back.

The red bricks are food, Lyda thought. So strange looking, they might be from the aliens. Like the water tubs. But the food and water both should be rationed. *This isn't fair!* Her mind swirled with conflicting desires; for water, for getting out of the grasp of this man's arms, for a sudden need to find someplace private to relieve herself. And what Boris had said about her being a virgin—did that mean...

"Come along," Big Bill said. "May as well get you broke in. There's one in the Rocky Mount gang likes 'em young. But me first. Ain't never tried one as young as you before."

Lyda couldn't avoid his meaning now. As he began pulling her toward the back of the rock where the other couple had gone, she reached around and bit down on one of his fingers and tried to yank herself free.

"Goddamn!" Big Bill shouted, but he kept his hold on her.

Retaliation was swift. The hand Lyda had bitten grabbed her by the front of her jacket. His other hand swung violently against her head with bruising force, even though he hadn't made a fist. For a moment, Lyda felt only a dizzy numbness. Then the pain hit, like three dentists pushing needles into her jaw all at once. She felt her lip and cheek on one side of her head begin to swell. She licked at the salty blood that began oozing from her mouth and felt tears coursing down her cheeks.

Big Bill shook her like a dachshund shaking a gopher he had just dug from the ground. "You do that again and I'll beat you so bad, nobody will pay you water, or food either. Hear?"

*Pay? What pay?* Lyda's mind swung from thoughts of water to the throbbing in her jaw, to a sudden urgent need to urinate.

"You hear?" Big Bill repeated.

Lyda nodded, unable to speak. She wouldn't bite again. *I'll wait*, she thought frantically as Big Bill nodded and began dragging her along by one arm while sucking on the finger she'd bitten. *I'll wait, then I'll hit him with a rock.*

The couple who had gone behind the outcropping was still there beside a pile of the woman's clothes. The man was on top of the woman between her legs, thrusting with his hips, and then there was no longer a way to deny what was going to happen to her.

Big Bill went about it methodically, stripping her clothes off while never letting her out of his grasp, slapping her twice more to make her obey. She was forced to the ground and then the big man was looming over her naked body, grinning down at her like the Joker with Batman trussed up and helpless before him.

Lyda didn't want to remember the rest of it, but she knew it would stick in her memory forever. It was so painful, she shrieked; so debasing, she wanted to run forever until no one else could see her shame.

Yet, through it all, she kept a part of herself rational. She knew she would live through it and that someday, she might have a chance to kill the man assaulting her. She hoped she would. At the end, she got another painful slap across the face when her bladder let loose and wet the top of Big Bill's pants and the bottom of his shirt.

He rolled off her and got to his feet. "Damn little bitch, I ought to not give you a fucking thing to eat or drink," Big Bill said, rubbing a dirty handkerchief over the wet spots on his clothing.

"I couldn't help it," Lyda mumbled between sobs. She was crying openly now, unable to help herself.

Maybe if I tried to talk to him, I could find a way out of this, she thought. Then she remembered something about another gang. It probably wouldn't help to talk. Painfully and bitterly, she got to her feet.

She turned her back and began pulling on her clothes, first using the bottom of the legs of her jeans to wipe at some of the blood and other matter stuck to her thighs. She stuck her panties in the pocket of her jeans, hoping she could wash them before putting them back on. All the while, she was trying to think of how she could get away. She didn't think she could stand for this to happen again, not unless they beat her unconscious first. At least she wouldn't have to know when it was happening that way.

Big Bill pushed her inside the circle of men and women around the food and water supplies so she couldn't run. Lyda didn't want to run, not right now. She wanted to drink; her mouth hurt and was still bleeding inside. Even though she had no appetite, she knew she should eat. She intended to escape from Big Bill's clutches as soon as she could and this might be her last chance for food and water for a while.

Lyda was made to drink from the tub of water one of the men told her was for hand washing. Then he guffawed as if something was funny when she bent to drink. The water had an odor like a pair of old gym shoes worn too long without socks. Nevertheless, she drank until she was pulled away from the tub. A woman handed her one of the red bricks while avoiding her gaze, as if she were afraid Lyda might plead for help she couldn't give.

The food ration was surprisingly good. It had a taste and texture somewhat like milk chocolate with other bits that burst when they were chewed and reminded her of the beef jerky she had eaten once on a camping trip with Mom and Dad. That memory brought tears to her eyes. She brushed them away and continued to eat. Already, she was thinking that the idea of a home with parents and police and a cozy bed was something she should put away in a safe place in her mind and not think about again until it was

safe to remember.

She ate half the brick of food, then surreptitiously tucked the rest into the other pocket of her windbreaker, not knowing whether they would take it back if she didn't eat it all.

Lyda found that she was allowed to walk around, but always inside the cordon of guards watching the food and water. Once when she tried to slip away, she was clouted by a stick being carved on by one of the men.

"You wait, girl. Big Bill is selling you," he snarled. He went back to working on the stick, a green limb taken from what she had heard was a mesquite tree. It looked as if he were trying to make a knife out of it, one bigger than the Swiss army knife he was using. Lyda eyed the knife—and the stick—but decided there was no way she was going to get either one of them. She circled around the site again and discovered the cess pit by its smell. There was only one guard there, a woman with bedraggled hair and wild eyes.

Lyda used the facilities, such as they were, nothing more than a simple hole in the ground. She took a handful of sand to try to clean herself by scrubbing away the dried remnants of the previous assault. It worked well enough that she tried it on the inside of her jeans, which were unavoidably soiled from wearing them. She got most of the blood and semen off them, but decided to keep her panties in her jacket pocket for now.

As nearly as she could tell, it had been noon when she woke up. Now it was nearing the end of the day and Lyda felt her face and hands stinging from sunburn. Fortunately, she had kept her jacket on to avoid someone stealing it. She had already seen several instances of roving gangs attacking smaller groups of people probably just arriving, and stripping them of everything down to the bare skin. As the shadows cast by the big outcroppings grew longer, Lyda kept quiet and observed. All through the afternoon, the shadow of another impending assault hovered over her and she could think of nothing to do to prevent it. She wasn't strong enough to resist, nor did she have a weapon of any kind.

I'll kick whoever tries it, she thought. She knew where boys were vulnerable from tittered conversations by girls at school. She thought men wouldn't be much different. But what then? Big Bill had talked about ... what? The Rocky Mount gang, that was what he had said. That implied enough members for protection against others—and to do what they pleased with her.

Lyda almost began crying again, but wiped at the forming tears with her hand. She told herself that crying wasn't going to help, not in this situation. As she walked in the same circular path she had already traversed several times, she stumbled over a piece of rock jutting from the sand and fell to the earth. It drew a laugh from some adults nearby, but she was close to the ground and saw what they hadn't: the rock was loose. She scuttled over to it and remained seated beside it. Carefully, she worked the rock completely loose from the crumbly soil. It was as almost as big as her fist and slightly longer. She tucked it away in the side pocket of her jeans. It might not be much, but it was better than nothing. That still left her problem, though.

Lyda drank some more water, this time, being allowed to dip her hands in a relatively clean tub. Just then, there came a warbling noise similar to the gobbling of a turkey she had heard once. She looked for the source of the sound, and she saw then where the food and water were coming from. An apparatus somewhat like a kitchen stove, only larger, was tucked into a recess in the outcropping and partially hidden behind the stack of food bricks. As she watched, a door opened, just like an oven. It was filled with the red food bricks. The inside of it tilted and they spilled out onto the ground. At the same time, a stream of water exited from a suddenly visible orifice and fell into a waiting tub. A woman and two men,

obviously the designated food gatherers, had rushed over as soon as they heard the noise. The woman began gathering the bricks of food, while the two men waited until the tub was full, then they picked it up, grunting with the effort, and moved it to where the others were being guarded. As soon as it was out of the way, the orifice began extruding a pasty gray substance that dropped down and began to take on the form of a water tub. It glistened as if wet for a moment, but once its shape had been attained, the sheen quickly vanished and it was the same dull gray color as the others. Finally, another door opened and a roll of some kind of green and brown colored cloth fell to the ground.

Now Lyda knew where the seats some of the gang sat on came from, and where what she had thought were mattresses had their origin; they were both upended tubs that apparently could be shaped somehow into different forms. And once she saw the bolt of cloth, she could look around and see it was being used here and there as windbreaks or coverings for the "mattresses". Food, water and shelter. The aliens were providing the necessities, but apparently leaving it up to the captives to sort out the distribution. It's like an open range zoo, she thought. Where the animals are fed and watered but the biggest and fiercest ones eat and drink first. At least that was what it looked like, but she knew there could be other reasons it was being done like this. Maybe in other areas of the desert, the allocation of supplies was controlled by more fair-minded individuals.

Had her situation not been so desperate, Lyda would have been fascinated with the process; as it was, she wondered how to go about getting possession of one of the empty tubs to sit on, or perhaps shape into something to lay on. As the sun dropped lower, a breeze sprang up and the temperature began dropping. It was beginning to look as if she was going to have to spend the night with this gang before her "sale" and all she had to protect her from the elements was the clothes she was wearing. She had a sudden flash of memory, something about deserts being colder at night because of drier air. She pulled her jacket tighter about herself, very glad now that she had put it on before being captured.

Lyda asked for, and was given, another food brick, albeit reluctantly. While no one was watching, she switched the new one to her pocket and began eating the remains of the old one. It still tasted fine. While she sat cross-legged in the sandy soil chewing on the food brick, she again turned her mind to the near future and the certain prospect of being ... raped. Yes, raped was the word. That was what Big Bill had done to her. She shifted her body in an attempt at getting into a more comfortable position and felt how sore she was now that the immediate pain had faded. How could she possibly suffer another assault like that? She fingered the rock in her jeans pocket. Maybe if I fight, it won't happen she thought. No, that hadn't helped with Big Bill; it had only made it worse. She touched her bruised and swollen face and lips.

But there must be *something* she could do, like one of her favorite heroes, Honor Harrington. Honor always managed to triumph over her adversaries—but it usually only happened at the end of the book.

Lyda suspected her trials were just beginning.

As if to prove the notion, the sudden noise of shuffling feet and the sound of voices raised in argument brought her to her feet. She listened for a moment, trying to see through the increasing darkness. Half a dozen men had come up to their camp and were talking with Big Bill. She heard words like "not enough" and "she's young and prime" and other phrases she would just as soon forget, except that she couldn't.

Her "sale" was obviously underway.

### CHAPTER THREE

Lyda tried to sneak away while most of Big Bill's gang members' attention was concentrated on the visiting supplicants, but it didn't work. A big lumbering man she had seen slapping a woman earlier in the day grabbed her and held onto the back of her jacket collar while the negotiations continued.

She never learned what her “price” was, nor whether it was paid before she made her move. All day she had been running escape scenarios through her mind; in fact, every time the memory of Big Bill stripping her clothes from her and images of the humiliating and painful debasement that followed entered her mind, she thought of flight. During the day, she watched as one of the giant transports came down and loosed more captives a mile or two away. She reasoned that where it landed must be the center of the confinement area, but where were the boundaries—or were there any? Surely there must be, she thought; otherwise, everyone would have left. Nevertheless, if she could get loose, she intended to run in the opposite direction from the transport and hope she could find a refuge. Or maybe a protector who wouldn't rape her in return for food and drink.

Lyda felt the big man's hands on the collar of her jacket. She shifted her shoulders, causing him to tighten his grip, but there was method to her movements. As she shrugged, she slid open the zipper of her windbreaker and at the same time, spoke to the big man to conceal any zipping noises.

"You're choking me! Let loose!"

The grip on her jacket eased. Lyda's pulse raced. She took a deep breath and lunged forward, slipping her arms from the jacket and leaving the man holding it instead of her. Immediately, she took off running into the night, lit only by stars. She darted around and under several sets of outstretched arms. Before most of the gang knew what had happened, she was racing away, free for the moment.

Lyda ran, praying she wouldn't trip, at least until she got well away. She was fortunate in that she knew the way she intended to go and thought there was nothing in the immediate area to hinder her, not even one of the big cacti towns. Shouts and yells of rage followed her, and the sound of pounding feet in pursuit gave wings to her flight. Her feet were being bruised and cut but she didn't slow down for anything, not until she was well into the surrounding desert. Even then, it took a bad tumble from a small mesquite bush she didn't see in time to slow her down. After her fall, she trotted, wary of any other persons and going slow enough to avoid other encampments like the one she had just escaped from.

When Lyda did finally stop long enough to catch her breath, she became aware of how cold the night air was on her sweaty body, especially without her jacket. Earlier in the day, after cleaning her thighs and her jeans one more time with sand, she had put her panties back on. Now she was glad she had; her groin was the only place on her body even halfway warm. She wrapped her arms around herself and went on, trying not to shiver. After what seemed like ages, the moon rose over the horizon, in half-full phase. Together with the myriad stars visible in the thinner air and away from city lights, the desert seemed to glow with a dim, surreal illumination.

It got colder the more she traveled, and people became fewer, the ones she could see anyway. She suspected she passed many who were huddled down for the night. She thought of her warm, cozy bed back home and shivered violently but never gave a thought to going back to Big Bill or risking capture again by asking one of the other groups for shelter. Better to freeze. The cold night wind made that seem like an increasingly likely proposition.

Finally, she slowed as she neared another of the rugged clusters of rocks thrusting up from the desert floor. She wondered if she could find a hideaway of some sort in the rocks, somewhere out of the wind.

Maybe even a cave or a cubby hole where her body heat wouldn't be blown away from her into the night. She approached cautiously, aware that it wasn't necessarily humans she had to fear. Earlier in the day, one of Big Bill's ruffians had killed a small rattler that lost its caution while slithering slowly toward a mouse busily feeding on a dead scorpion. And there had been the howl of coyotes as dusk approached. The desert wasn't lifeless. She pulled the rock from her jeans pocket and held it ready, thinking it was a



poor weapon to defend herself against an adult, much less a pack of coyotes, but she was too cold to care. She crept on.

She worked her way into the rocks and found some blessed relief from the cold wind. She was so intent on what might be in front of her, she failed to see the body on the ground until she stumbled on a soft obstruction and knew immediately it was something living. She kept her feet, just barely, and managed to swing her hand holding the rock in a hard arc, just as the figure said something unintelligible and rose from the ground. She connected solidly with its head and it fell.

"I give up, don't hit me again," a scared female voice said.

Lyda held the rock ready. "Be quiet." She looked around fearfully, hoping the noise hadn't awakened someone more dangerous.

"Who are you?" the voice asked in a whisper.

"I'm Lyda. Who are you? No, stay down or I'll hit you again!" Lyda ordered in the most authoritative voice she could manage while still trying to speak softly. She was trembling and scared.

There was silence for a moment while Lyda examined the woman the best she could in the darkness. She was a small person with short hair, but looked to be an adult. Lyda felt guilty for hitting her, then stifled the thought. So far, adults had proven to be worse enemies to her than the spider things or the aliens who ordered their movements.

"I'm ... why, you're just a child!"

"Well, I'm a mad child," Lyda said, threatening with her rock. "Who are you? Is there anybody else around here?"

"No, I'm alone. I've been hiding here with my baby."

Lyda hunkered down out of the wind, but still kept her rock handy, even though she wasn't quite as fearful as before. She wondered how the woman had survived, how she was getting supplies.

"Do you have any water? Or food?"

"There's a little seep back in the rocks. It's muddy, but drinkable. I had some food in my backpack when the ... the spiders herded us out of the park and into their spaceship."

"Park? Where were you?"

"On vacation. We were planning on going hiking in Oak Creek Canyon and picnicking at Slide Rock. That's the reason I had the backpack. My husband ... my husband was killed, I think." Her voice broke.

Lyda shivered again. It was very cold. She could see well enough to tell the woman was dressed much more warmly than herself. She wondered where the baby was the young woman was talking about.

"You didn't tell me your name."

"I'm sorry. It's Ginella. Ginella Sparks."

"Where's your baby?"

"Over there. She's been sick since we were brought here."

Lyda saw a small, unmoving bundle several feet beyond the woman. And for the first time, she noticed the smell, like a dead animal or some very ripe garbage.

On impulse, Lyda walked around the woman and toward the baby. The smell grew stronger.

"Don't wake her," Ginella said.

Lyda leaned down and touched flesh as cold and lifeless as a slab of roast left sitting in the refrigerator overnight. Abruptly, she knew there was no chance of waking this baby. It was dead. She looked back at the woman, who still sat with her arms around her knees. Lyda didn't know what to do. She had read of people who refused to accept reality, but this was her first experience with one. She started to leave, then changed her mind. This was probably a safe place to spend the rest of the night and she didn't think she could face the wind again. It was cold enough without it. She would deal with the woman in the morning, so long as she didn't cause trouble tonight.

"Do you have anything I can borrow to wear until morning?" Lyda asked.

Ginella fumbled in her backpack and handed her a flannel shirt. Lyda gratefully accepted it and pulled it on. It was too large, but that made it even better. The tail was long enough to sit on and give some added warmth. She leaned back against a rock and was surprised to find it still faintly warm. Of course! The rock still retained some heat from the daytime sun.

Ginella didn't seem inclined to talk and Lyda wasn't in much of a mood to either. After a while, the smell of the dead baby faded as her nostrils became accustomed to it. She gradually stopped shivering and finally dozed and didn't wake again until the first rays of the morning sun hit her face, rousing her from a nightmare of a dozen men closing in on her, their intentions horribly apparent. She shook her head and looked around. The woman and her baby were gone.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda stood up and gazed into the distance. She orientated herself by the sun and looked back the way she had come, or thought she had, the night before. In the remote distance, she could see part of one of the giant transports rising from the desert. It was either the same one she had seen the day before, or another bringing more people. She turned, and now she could see something new, a green shimmering band in the opposite direction. Curious, she started that way, then stopped when she felt her body beginning to tingle. She squinted her eyes and saw what looked like bodies scattered in a rough line along the periphery of the shimmer. She backed up and the tingling sensation stopped. This then, must be the limits of the desert prison. It looked like death waited for anyone who tried to force their way past. She turned back the way she had come.

With just a little searching, Lyda found the seep Ginella had talked about. It was right at the level where an uprising rock met a damp, sandy area that expanded for a few feet before narrowing again. Five yards from the rock, the ground was as dry as the rest of the desert. She saw signs of digging and handprints in the sand, along with tracks of small animals leading to little holes they had dug. She squatted and began digging with her hands. A satisfying amount of muddy water began to fill the hole. She drank first, then shed her clothes and washed the best she could, shivering in the shadowed alcove where the sun hadn't yet reached. Then she sat down and ate her other food brick and wondered what to do next.

\* \* \* \*

A little later that morning, Lyda began cautiously working her way back in the direction she had started from. After going only a few hundred yards, she stumbled over Ginella's body and the decaying corpse of her baby. She stared at the sight for long moments. The woman had used a sharp piece of rock to scrape ragged gashes across both wrists, then sat quietly and bled to death.

I guess she finally realized her baby was dead, Lyda thought. I will never do that, though. No matter what happens. Not even if the men catch me again. I'm going to live and someday, I'm going to fight the aliens for what they've done. And I hope I get a chance to kill Big Bill along the way. He's a bad man. She started to move on, then stopped. She stood and pondered for long moments, then hating herself, but knowing it was necessary, she stripped Ginella's jacket and shirt from her body, trying to avoid looking at her face with its dead glassy stare. She took her shoes, even though they were two or three sizes too large, then explored the backpack. It contained several packages of trail rations, a set of metal utensils to eat with and most importantly, a small revolver and a handful of loose cartridges. She wondered why the woman hadn't just used the gun on herself. It would have been much quicker and easier, but perhaps she hadn't wanted their bodies to be disturbed. Maybe Ginella was so deranged by then, she fixated on her wrists and had forgotten all about the gun. The whole thing was new and strange to Lyda, like all the other happenings. Strange and horrible and frightening.

That led to another thought. The seep hole was a source of water no one controlled and now, only she knew about. She thought about burying the bodies by scraping at the soil with her hands but finally decided if she left them where they lay, it might discourage others from coming close to the water source. It was a cold thought, and that was new to her, too. She'd never had to make decisions like this before and it was disconcerting. But I want to live, she thought. But not like those bad men and women that captured me and were going to sell me like a piece of meat. I won't ever be like that, she decided with fierce resolve. *Never, never, never!*

Lyda walked far enough away from the bodies to where she could no longer smell the baby's corpse and found a little round rock to sit on. There, she thought of what she had to do. Dad had always said thinking and working should be done by priorities, the most important things first. He taught her to do her homework like that and she found no fault with the system. Homework and this situation were far removed from each other, though. There was so much to think about—and there were things she must accomplish if she wanted to live and remain free of the gangs who had apparently taken over the source of supplies necessary to survive.

She fingered the revolver. That would probably help if she dared use it. She didn't know whether she could shoot anyone or not, except maybe Big Bill. Priorities. While thinking, she began fashioning a crude holster for the gun with the paring knife from the utensil set and the tail of one of her shirts. She fixed it so it was concealed, but where she could get to it quickly if it became necessary. While she was doing that, it occurred to her that all the men and women and especially the kids, couldn't be as bad as the ones she had first met. There had to be lots of good people here. The problem was finding them and deciding who to trust. Mom always said you should trust people until you found out otherwise, but Lyda didn't think that dogma applied here; trust the wrong man or woman, and she was likely to wind up behind a rock again, being stripped and raped or sold or forced into other unspeakable acts in order to eat and drink.

But how about kids? Surely they wouldn't be like that? Most of them, anyway. And even if a few of them were, she could cope with them a lot easier than adults. There were other kids like her around, without parents and probably being abused in some way, even if not quite so starkly as she had been. Others would have sought out adults to protect them. And she had seen some of them still wandering freely, like herself now. That would be even better. She could find them and maybe get them to band together for mutual protection until trustworthy adults could be found. She liked the idea and decided to

try it.

Lyda took a small sip from the half liter of bottled water she had found in the back pack. It had been unopened. She would save it for emergencies and come back to the seep at night to drink. There was something else she felt compelled to accomplish, too. Somewhere in this vast expanse of desert, Mom might be wandering around, just as she was. She needed to try and find her once she felt more secure, despite the suspicion deep down inside that she was probably dead, too.

And last, she and whatever kids or good adults she could find or recruit, had to have a source of food and a means of defense from adults like those she had encountered. Keep the seep hole a secret. Go back there at night and avoid being followed. Find a source of food and find other kids or adults to help. Figure out a way to defend themselves. Find Mom, if she were alive and here. She went back over the list of priorities in her mind until she was satisfied, then set out again, this time, not a senseless wandering, but a quiet and cautious reconnaissance with definite goals in mind. She felt better now, if not entirely optimistic or unafraid.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda almost stumbled over the family. She had been working her way closer to one of the big transport ships replacing one that took silently to the skies earlier. She had a vague thought in her mind that maybe new arrivals wouldn't be so mean and maybe there was one of the supply mechanisms nearby. She was getting hungry again.

The man and woman and what looked like twin boys about her age were all sitting in the shadow of a big stone formed like a misshapen teepee. As she came around it, she saw the man's legs stretched out in front of her at the last moment. She stopped just in time. The man heard her and scrambled to his feet. As she backed up, the rest of the family came into view as they stood up, too. They were all dressed in casual clothes, and all were wearing light jackets.

"You scared me," the man said with a weak grin. He was small and slim, hardly taller than his companion and not much bigger than the two boys.

Lyda didn't answer. She wanted to be friendly, but she was leery now. Big Bill and his gang. The Rocky Mount gang, whoever they were. The crazy woman with the dead baby. She was rapidly learning that some people no longer acted rational in stressful situations. She fingered the revolver in her pocket, wondering whether to show it or not.

It was the woman who impelled her to a decision.

"Harry, don't be absurd. She's just a child, and she's scared, too. I can tell." She took a step forward. Lyda backed up, then the woman got a good look at her face in full sunlight. She gasped.

"Child, what happened to you?"

"I got ... beat up by a man." Lyda didn't feel like telling the whole story, not to anyone.

The woman smiled tentatively. "I guess you got away, then. Is that how it works here?"

"I don't know for sure," Lyda admitted. "Just stay away from anyone named Big Bill."

"How long have you been here?"

"Just one day and night."

"Well, that's longer than us. We came in when that big carrier landed early this morning. We left that area because no one knows what to do. There's no ... no bathrooms or food or..."

"I know," Lyda said. "There's some sort of machines that give out food and water, but the only one I've seen so far is controlled by a bad gang. They won't share."

"What's your name?"

"Lyda Brightner," she said, still keeping her distance.

"Well, I'm Dorothy Shatner and this is my husband, Charlie. The two boys here are Patrick and Jacob. They got separated from their family when the invaders came to San Francisco. We met the boys on the ship and are taking care of them until we can locate their parents. Listen, sit down out of the sun; we won't hurt you."

Lyda decided to chance it but she picked a spot as far away from the others as possible while still getting some shade. It felt good.

"Where are those food machines? Do they give out water, too?" Charlie asked.

"Yes, they give food, water and some kind of cloth. I only know where one of them is and we can't go there," Lyda said. "I think there's another one, but it's controlled by a Rock gang of some kind. I don't know where it is, but I don't want to go there, either."

"Well, what do we do?"

Lyda felt a sliver of despair course through her, causing her to feel sick. She was only eleven years old and an adult was asking her what to do? She bit her lip, feeling the swollen flesh there. She recovered, thinking back to her session on the rock, assigning priorities. "We have to get together with enough people to control a food machine, if we can find one." She paused, then added, "And when we do, we're going to be fair about giving out food, water and the cloth."

"Can we go now? I'm thirsty," one of the boys said. Lyda had forgotten which one was which. They both looked exactly alike.

Lyda decided they might as well. She was thirsty, too, but she didn't want to show her water bottle yet. She would share, only if these people proved trustworthy. It wasn't necessary yet; if they came in this morning, they wouldn't die of thirst for a while, even as hot as it was. She got up. "I guess we may as well start looking."

"What do the food machines look like?" Dorothy asked.

"Sort of like big ovens. The one I saw was half hidden by one of these big rock formations. And they give off a kind of warbling sound like a turkey gobble when the food bricks and stuff are dispensed, but the noise isn't real loud. You have to be close to them to hear it."

"Which way?" Charlie asked. His voice had a whine to it, like a little child not wanting to be put to bed yet.

Lyda decided she didn't like Mister Charlie Shatner very much. He didn't seem to be either helpful or authoritative, unlike her father. Dad would have already done something, instead of just sit in the shade and wait on someone else to take charge. Shatner didn't act like he would be dangerous, though. That was one good thing. Lyda looked around the flat expanse of the landscape. As she tried to decide which way to go, she saw the transport, which had landed earlier, rise into the sky, but this time, none came down to replace it. She didn't know what that meant, if anything. Maybe the aliens had enough people here now for whatever they had planned.

She could see big crowds of people milling around near where the transport had been. They looked small in the distance. To the right of the crowd of refugees and a bit nearer, there were fewer people. In the distance, a roughly circular boulder sat by itself as if it were a ball thrown into a sandbox, then abandoned. It was a long way from them, but she could see few people in between. She pointed.

"Let's try that big rock. If there's nothing there, we can start looking at others."

"Why do we have to go so far? Why can't we go back to where the people are? Maybe someone has already found some food and water."

"Shut up, Charlie," his wife ordered. "I think she knows what she's doing."

Lyda wasn't so sure, but at least she was doing *something*, not just waiting for manna to fall from the sky. She let Dorothy Shatner and her husband take the lead while she hung back with the boys. Maybe they had some gumption.

\* \* \* \*

During the trek to the ball-shaped rock, they passed several other groups of people, ranging from couples to a dozen or so men, women and children. Lyda spoke to Mrs. Shatner as they approached the first group.

"Mrs. Shatner, I want to find a food machine before we start talking to any other people."

"Call me Dorothy," the woman said. She smiled and brushed sweaty blond hair away from her face. Her husband glanced at her, started to say something, then saw her face. It told him to keep quiet without her having to speak at all. They passed each group with watchful caution, not speaking.

Lyda tried talking to the boys. Jacob would answer questions and gradually began to open up, but Patrick spoke only in monosyllables, if at all. She wondered whether he was in shock, but had no way of telling for sure; she hadn't talked to any other children here. She did learn to tell them apart; Jake wore a red jacket; Patrick yellow.

Jake, as she learned he preferred to be called, was eleven years old. Almost twelve, he emphasized. He asked Lyda why she had gotten beaten up.

Lyda leaned close so the Shatners couldn't overhear. "Don't trust adults until you get to know them."

Jacob nodded. Patrick acted as if he hadn't heard, though Lyda thought he had.

They continued to walk. The landscape remained the same; swaths of grit and sand, small and medium rocks and here and there, larger stone formations growing up from the desert like oversized pottery shards. Occasional mesquite trees, creosote bushes bushes and patches of the tough grass filled in the rest. They grew closer to the big rock. At first, Lyda thought no one was there but then as they got close,



she noticed someone had beaten them to it. The figure resolved itself into a tall, bearded man with a partially bald head. The beard was poorly trimmed. His expansive forehead was blistered a bright red from too much sun. He had some of the alien cloth draped around his shoulders like a toga and was munching on one of the alien food bricks. He stared at them belligerently.

"Go away. I got here first."

"It doesn't belong to you," Dorothy said.

"Yes it does. Possession is the law. Go away."

Surprisingly, both Shatners looked toward her for direction. Lyda thought something must be wrong with them. With Charlie, anyway. Didn't they know she was only an eleven year old girl, in secondary school only through skipping a couple grades?

Lyda examined the balding man. His clothes were dirty, giving a good indication he had been taken captive at least a couple of days ago. He must have wandered here, found the machine and then stayed.

Lyda took a step forward and spotted the supply dispenser, like the other one set in an alcove of the rock. "You have to share. There's enough there for lots of people. You should be making friends so the gangs don't run you off."

"Go away, I said." The bearded man raised himself to his full height. "Leave me alone. I got here first."

Lyda saw there was no reasoning with him. She fingered the butt of the revolver in her pocket, but finally decided the man must have just gone a little crazy. A gun might make him worse. On the other hand, she didn't intend to leave, not even if she had to stay here and face him by herself. She glanced around and noticed there were some small stones broken off from the larger one. She bent down and picked one up in each hand.

"You're going to share, or we're going to fight you," Lyda said, trying to keep her voice from trembling.

Damn it, why did she have to be the one to take charge? Why didn't the adults do something?

The bearded man dropped the food brick to the ground, letting both his hands hang free. He took a step forward.

Lyda raised her arm as if getting ready to throw the rock at him. "Stop. You stop right where you are, or I'll ... I'll hit you."

Surprisingly, he halted his advance. "You're a mean kid. How come your parents let you be like that?"

"These aren't my parents. Now move away. We're going to get some food and water." She threatened with her rock again.

Pouting, he allowed the Shatners and the boys to pass.

"Let the boys go first," Lyda said when she saw Charlie bending over the single tub of water in sight.

Charlie continued to dip water with his cupped hands.

"Go make him stop, whatever your name is," Lyda said to the man in front of her.

Surprising her again, he did. He strode over to where Charlie was drinking and yanked him away by his collar. "Women and kids should go first. Don't you know that, mister?" He looked to Lyda for approval.

"You can call me Willy. My real name is Williard, but I don't like it."

Lyda decided he wasn't very bright, but that was all right. He appeared to be controllable; in fact, he was now acting as if he wanted someone in authority to tell him what to do. She watched as Dorothy and the twins drank, then each accepted a food brick from Willy. Charlie looked on resentfully.

"You can drink now, mister," Willy said to Charlie. "You can eat, too, but we have to share. Ain't that right, kid?"

"That's right, but my name isn't kid. It's Lyda Brightner. I'm from Texas."

Willy was impressed. He smiled ingratiatingly. "I bet that's why you're so mean."

"I'm not mean," Lyda said. "I just want everyone to be fair. We have to watch out for each other now." Charlie stepped past Willy and began dipping water to his mouth. I'll have to watch out for Charlie, she thought. Why does Dorothy let him act like that, I wonder. Why are so many people here so mean and crazy?

Lyda found no answer, not then. She had no experience to draw from in order to predict the actions of large numbers of people in a disaster situation, and especially one never before seen on earth. Another thing that struck her as strange was how she herself was acting, as if there had been a paradigm shift in her mentality, where abilities she hadn't known she possessed were surfacing. She had never thought of herself as a strong, forceful person; she was simply an intelligent, inquisitive child on the verge of becoming a young woman, and had been looking forward to the experience. Her breasts had started to grow several months ago but she hadn't begun menses yet. How was she supposed to know what to do in this kind of situation when even some of the adults were helpless? I guess I just have to learn how to cope with it, she told herself, like I've done so far. At least I'm not crazy or a thief or coward or a ... a rapist. I know right from wrong. I know how people are supposed to act, even if they've forgotten how. If I have to pretend like I'm already grown up, I'll try to do my best. And Big Bill better not try to stop me!

## CHAPTER FOUR

While the others were resting in the shade, Lyda drew Willy off to one side to talk to him. He came willingly, like a newly obedient puppy.

"Willie, how often does the oven open for the food and water and cloth?"

"Oven?"

"The machine the food and stuff comes out of. It looks like a big oven to me."

"Oh, yeah. I guess it does. Well, it gave me some before dark yesterday and then it did the same this morning. It made a noise when it came out."

Lyda didn't have a watch but by looking at the sun, she could tell it was getting late. "What else is there around here? Are there any bad people?"

"Not here by my rock—by our rock. We have to share, right? There's an old road over that way." Willy pointed. "Maybe the bad people live down it?"

"I'll go look," Lyda said. "You stay with the others and make sure they're good, okay?" She grinned and Willie returned it, displaying several missing teeth. He hurried back to the rock and the shade it provided from the evening sun.

Lyda found the old road a hundred yards out into the desert where there was nothing to see for miles, except an occasional small bush and rocks. There were relatively fresh tire tracks. She followed the road for fifteen minutes, then gave up. It could go on for miles. On her way back, she found a discarded plastic water bottle with the cap still on and picked it up. Once it was rinsed out, that would give her two, a reserve for emergencies. She was nearing the rock again when she heard the gobble of the supply dispenser. She quickened her pace, wanting to get a closer look at how it worked, but by the time she got there, it had already finished. Willy was dispensing food and water like a faithful parolee who had learned his place in society and was happy with it.

After eating, Lyda asked Dorothy what they should do about a place for a bathroom. She didn't know exactly what arrangements should be made, but she did know from reading that in disaster situations, illness from lack of sanitary facilities was a big problem. Even Big Bill had designated an area for waste, but she thought there was more to it than that. While Dorothy went over to talk with Charlie and Willy about it, she was able to examine a bolt of the alien cloth for the first time. It was slick on one side and absorbent on the other and came in rolls about three feet wide and a good many yards long. The material was too tough to tear. Lyda was able to use the paring knife to cut some of it in thin strips six inches long or so to use for toilet tissue and for washing and cleaning.

She showed Jacob what she was doing and he volunteered to help. She left him with it when the others came back toward her.

Dorothy saw what she had done with the cloth. "Oh, Lyda. You're a genius! That will be a big help, especially for us women. By the way, I marked off a couple of areas for ... bathrooms, but I think we need to dig holes or trenches, like the army does. How can we do that?"

They keep asking me, Lyda thought. Why don't they think of things themselves? I can't do everything. She didn't vocalize her thoughts, though. Instead, she suggested that Charlie and Willy carry one of the tubs of water Willy had secreted around to the "bathroom" area to be used for washing. That still left two full tubs of water. After that, she told them as soon as they emptied a tub, she would show them how to shape it into useful items. The first would be a big scoop to dig holes for waste.

"Why don't we just pour one of them out?" Charlie suggested.

Lyda thought of how thirsty she had been the day before. "No. We'll probably need it."

"What for? There's only six of us. There's plenty."

"Because tomorrow we're going to find some other good people to help us protect this place. They'll need water, too."

"Why should we share? Let them find their own place."

Lyda was disgusted. Didn't the man have any sense at all? "Because if there's not enough of us here,

sooner or later, a gang will take it from us," she explained patiently, like a teacher repeating a lesson to one of her students not as smart as the others. "Besides, I bet some people are going hungry and thirsty. We should help them if we can."

Charlie looked away, not convinced. He went over to where Jacob was still cutting pieces of cloth and squatted down by him. After a minute, Lyda heard him say, "Let me see that knife, boy."

Jacob started to hand Charlie the knife.

"No!" Lyda shouted. "Leave him alone. Besides, that's my knife."

Charlie snatched it from Jacob's hand and stood up. He grinned without a trace of humor.

"Charlie, give the boy back his knife!" Dorothy said sternly, a note of exasperation in her voice.

"Why? I can use it better than him. And I might need it to protect us."

Lyda thought it more likely he would use a knife to intimidate or hurt others before he would protect them. He was the kind of person who thought of himself first. She knew she had to get the knife back.

"Give Jacob the knife," she said, trying to keep her voice from trembling.

"No." He turned to Dorothy. "Why should we let that kid tell us what to do? I'm not going to take orders from her."

Lyda knew she could take out the revolver, but like the extra water she now carried in the dead woman's backpack, she wanted to save it for emergencies. Besides, anyone could give orders with a gun; she didn't want to start doing that. She stared at Charlie, hoping Dorothy would intervene. When she didn't, Lyda took a deep breath and felt a reservoir of confidence welling up inside her. She was competent. Some other adults must also be, but these weren't. It was up to her to handle this situation.

"You can either do what I say, or you can leave."

"You can't make me leave."

"Yes I can. I can even kill you if I have to, but I'm not going to yet. Me and Willy and Jacob can take that little knife away from you. But if we have to, then you're going to leave. Do you understand?" She continued staring at him after she finished speaking.

Charlie looked from her to Willy's big framed body and back to her. He gave her a sickly grin. "I was just kidding. Here, kid. Go ahead and cut some more cloth." He dropped the knife to the ground beside Jacob and went over to get a drink of water, trying to act nonchalant about the whole episode.

Lyda wasn't fooled. She knew she would have to watch him. She also knew she could make him leave, but apparently, there were lots of adults just like him around. She was just going to have to learn how to cope with them. What she couldn't figure out was why Dorothy was married to him. But then again, there were lots of things adults did that puzzled her.

Just at dusk, two children wandered up to their camp, a well-developed girl a few years older than herself and a boy about fourteen, she thought. They were very hungry and thirsty. Lyda showed them which tub to drink from and where the sanitary area was. They accepted her authority, apparently without much thought. They were probably glad to have someone take care of them, Lyda decided.

Dorothy was over on the other side of the rock with Charlie and had been for a while. She had heard their voices occasionally, sometimes becoming loud with argument. Lyda was introducing the new arrivals to Willy and the boys when they returned. She added them to the introduction. She gave first names only, deciding that was simpler. For reasons she didn't quite understand, she finished with both her first and last names. "And I'm Lyda Brightner."

The girl was named Maryanne and the boy, Bart. Both of them had been captured in El Paso, they said. They had been at a mall and had no idea whether their parents had been taken or not. Lyda noticed they were dressed for summer.

"Jacob, please cut enough cloth for them to wrap around themselves tonight so they won't get cold."

"Sure," Jacob said. His brother Patrick sat down beside him and held the cloth to make the cutting easier. Lyda saw that as a hopeful sign. Maybe Patrick was coming out of shock.

"I got cold last night. Can I have some?" Charlie asked.

Lyda looked at his light jacket. "All right," she said. A peace offering. If Charlie was going to be tractable, she would try to work with him. When Patrick was finished, she retrieved the knife.

During the night, Lyda woke to the sound of shots. Someone else had a gun—and was using it for something.

\* \* \* \*

Over the next few days, Lyda found herself growing into her leadership role. It became easier as the others accepted her authority, but she still had moments when she was alone and unsure of herself. There were times she wished her father—or someone like him—was with them; a strong man who could help her, or take over running the camp.

The morning after hearing the shots, Lyda sent Maryanne off with the two spare water bottles to where she said that she and Bart had passed several adults turned away from another group guarding a supply machine. Before leaving, Maryanne got her aside and whispered, "The woman told me not to go near them; the men were trying to trade food and water for sex. I'm glad we found you. I was getting so hungry and thirsty, I thought it might start sounding like a good idea before long."

It would never sound like a good idea to me, Lyda thought. Although I guess if I got thirsty enough, I'd have to. To Maryanne, she said, "No one here is going to be forced to do anything like that. Everyone has to help keep order, though." Privately, she hoped the adults would cooperate, including the new ones she sent Maryanne to rescue.

While Maryanne was gone, there came the sound of more gunshots in the distance, faint but definite, and she thought she could hear screams and yells mixed in, but she wasn't sure. Lyda didn't know what the sounds meant, though she suspected it was two groups fighting over supplies. She wondered why aliens would go to all the trouble of capturing humans and transporting them to the desert, then not provide enough food, water and shelter to keep them going. It was a puzzle that she had little time to think about because her group kept growing.

The adults Maryanne brought back later that day provided proof there was indeed fighting. The four men and five women were weak and badly dehydrated. Only with the aid of the two water bottles to revive them had they been able to make it to her camp at all. Curiously to her, the women appeared to

be in better shape than the men.

Once they had all slaked their thirst and begun to eat, they were recovered enough to tell their tales. They had all been taken from around Houston at the same time, soon after the invasion. All had been working in the ground floor of a small office building and were herded into a transport by the spider mechs when they ran outside to return to their homes. One man wearing a sports jacket and a necktie he was using as a headband spoke for all of them after Lyda asked them not to all talk at once. He had given his name as Gary Brooks.

"It's been bad," he said. "There are hordes of people west of here and not enough of those food and water machines to feed them all. Me and Jimmy here tried to set up some kind of rationing system and it worked the first day or two. After that, the bullies came, men and women both." He rubbed at his eye, blackened and badly swollen. "We tried to fight, but some of them had hammers, like maybe they had been on a building job somewhere. They took over. The first day, they handed out a little bit of food and water, so long as you did exactly what they said. When they saw there wasn't enough for everyone, they separated out the young women and ran the rest of us off. I wish to hell I had a gun."

"Someone has one. I've heard shots," Lyda said.

Gary nodded. "We did, too. That's why we came this way. We were hoping to find another one of those machines that give out the goodies but..." He shrugged and looked around at Lyda's group, still sitting separately from the newcomers. "By the way, thanks for sending Maryanne for us. We would have died otherwise. Who did that? Who's in charge here?"

"I am," Lyda said. "And I sent Maryanne after you."

"You?"

Lyda stood up and looked directly at him. "Yes. Does that bother you?"

Gary examined her curiously, but with no hostility. He appeared to be in his early thirties and had a pleasant face and short brown hair just long enough to part. Presently, he said, "Kid, you saved our lives. I won't argue with you."

"My name isn't kid. It's Lyda Brightner. I'm in charge because I've been through worse than you have and I hated it. No one is going to do that to me again. And here, we share and share alike, and if we have to, we're going to fight to keep it that way."

Gary grinned painfully. Lyda saw he had a split lip like hers. "That's fine with me, Miss Brightner. I don't mind taking orders from someone who knows what they're doing, even if they are young enough to be my daughter. And if we have to fight ... well, it's better than dying of thirst, I can tell you that."

And other things, Lyda thought. She made eye contact with everyone in Gary's group, remembering something from the past. Dad had told her once that it was important to look at someone directly when you talked to them, especially if you were telling them what to do. Most of the adults nodded agreement. Two or three looked unsure but not disagreeable. Lyda was satisfied and told them to rest for a while, then she would have something for them to do.

Lyda knew there might be problems later. In fact, she was almost certain of it. She didn't think many adults would like taking orders from a kid, not for long—unless she produced results to show them why they should. Late in the evening, refugees from the fighting she had heard in the distance began arriving



and she became very busy.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda found herself with more duties than she could handle. The new arrivals were surly and little more than a mob at first. She had to stand by the food and water with Gary on one side and Willy on the other, with all three of them shouting over and over again, "Women and children first, women and children first!" She thought for a moment she was going to have to show her gun to keep order, but a line finally formed.

"Maryanne! Come here!" Lyda shouted once she could take her eyes away from the additions to the group.

Maryanne came running. "As they finish drinking and get their food, show them to the sanitation area, will you?"

"Sure. I'll get Bart to help. Okay?"

"Great. Thanks." She turned to Gary. "They'll have to have some shelter. Some of them will get really cold tonight. Does anyone in your group have scissors or a knife to help Jacob and Patrick cut some more cloth?"

Gary called to one of the women who had arrived with him. Somehow, she had held onto her purse and miraculously, it contained scissors. Lyda put her to work.

As soon as the crowd cleared away from the the food machine, Gary motioned her to follow him. Lyda went with him until they were far enough away not to be overheard.

"Miss Brightner, you're doing fine, but maybe I can help more if you'll let me."

"Sure," Lyda said gratefully.

Gary rubbed at his black eye. "I haven't told you but I was in the military, the army. And I've seen how those water tubs can be pressed into different shapes. We have a couple of empties now. We should use them to dig slit trenches for the latrines."

Lyda nodded. "I had planned on digging holes. What's the purpose of the slit trench?"

"They just make it easier to, uh, use and easier to back-fill as they get full. I'll get a couple of guys to do that, if it's okay with you."

"Sure. What else?"

"Well, you're a smart girl but you just haven't lived long enough, nor have enough experience to know a lot of things, even though your instincts are right. You're doing fine, but you're going to need to delegate some things and not spread yourself too thin. That's standard technique in the army and the business world both."

Lyda was offended, but only for a moment because she knew he was right. "I guess that makes sense. Sort of like a teacher appointing kids to do different things in the classroom, huh?"

"Somewhat, but in this situation, you need to delegate authority, as well as responsibility. The two go

together. It won't help to put someone in charge of the water, for instance, unless you back them up and let everyone know that person has the authority—and that they're acting for you. See how it works?"

Lyda thought about it. What he said made sense—but could he be trusted? Well, it was obvious she would have to trust some people. Gary appeared to think like her father. Dad usually made good decisions, even when she didn't like them. "Uh huh. I don't know the people who came in with you very well yet. You'll have to help me choose."

"Talked myself right into that one, didn't I? All right, I do know most of these people and we need to get it set up soon. There's nothing worse than a mob."

"Willy is a good man, even if he isn't too smart. And he will do exactly like I tell him to."

"Fine. There's a couple of the guys and one of the women who won't mind taking some responsibility, too, if you ask them. The others will follow along, I think."

"Good. Let's go do it now. No, wait a minute. Priorities. What duties need to have someone in charge of them? There's no sense telling someone they're the sand monitor or in charge of the new shoes department."

Gary laughed. "See? I told you that you had the right instincts. Let's get together with your aides and the ones I mentioned and sort out what needs to be done. They may have some suggestions, too. Is that okay?"

"Uh huh. Thanks. I'm glad you're here, Gary."

"One more thing. I've been calling you Miss Brightner for a reason. Anyone in a position of authority needs a title. I'll get others to start doing it too. How's that?"

Lyda thought about it for a moment and nodded. As they went to gather up Maryanne and Jacob and the ones Gary thought would work out, Lyda reminded herself that just because she found herself in charge of a bunch of adults, that didn't mean she could order them around like servants. Adults wouldn't stand for it. Even kids would rebel if she got too big for her britches.

\* \* \* \*

There was another round of shots after dark. Lyda thought they sounded nearer but couldn't be sure. A wind had come up and the blowing dust made it hard to even tell what direction the noise came from. It made her think of something that had come to mind earlier, then got lost in the press of other duties. The first thing next morning, she asked Gary to get a couple of the other men who had nothing to do yet and start them breaking some of the bigger scrap rocks into fragments. Ones that came out pointed could be used as hand axes, like she had seen on a National Geographic program once. Others could be used as weapons by simply throwing them. She even took one of the sharp stones herself, despite the comforting feel of the pistol in her pocket.

Two other scared, tattered women stumbled into camp late that morning, pointed toward them by a man and woman Lyda had sent out to look for refugees not already belonging to one gang or another. Lyda gave the tired women water and a food brick and took them aside while they ate and drank ravenously. She had Maryanne listen with her. They told of fighting between several groups, one led by a monster they called Big Bill, who was making slaves of young women. Lyda wasn't surprised at that. The two women had run from one gang when Big Bill's minions attacked it, only to be captured and raped by men from another. They had managed to escape after dark and had been wandering all night.

Lyda assured them nothing like that would happen here, as long as she was in charge. After that, she found Gary and told him to start organizing for a fight, men and women both. She knew now that one would come sooner or later. Their camp was situated by a stone outcrop similar to ones where other supply ovens were found. The gangs would come to them once they controlled others in the vicinity. Or perhaps even before that. The next morning when she woke up, Gary came to tell her Charlie was missing from the morning roll call he had instituted. She had appropriated a spot away from the food machine but still in sight of it, a little alcove in the big rock she made into her "office". The others had named it for her and it was already a symbol of her leadership.

"What does Dorothy say? Have you talked to her?"

"I looked her up before I came to you. She says they had an argument and haven't been speaking since." Gary shrugged. "I guess she's right; I haven't seen them together the last day or so. No big loss, if you ask me."

Lyda wasn't so sure about that. "It depends on where he went. I had hoped we could keep this place to ourselves for the time being and bring others in gradually. If he goes to one of the gangs..."

Gary rubbed his whiskers. "There's that. Anyway, Dorothy told me she was getting ready to leave him before all this happened."

"That's more than she told me," Lyda said.

"Yeah. Lots of things adults talk about you don't hear. Not necessarily trying to keep secrets from you, but some of them still think of you as a child."

"*I am a child*," Lyda said, suddenly on the brink of tears. Angrily, she shook her head. "I hadn't even had a date yet, but damn it, no sooner was I was dumped out here when I got ... raped. And then ... then I was going to be traded like a piece of meat to a damn pervert of some kind, like the ones who kidnap little girls and kill them after doing all kinds of bad stuff to them. I'm having to grow up sooner than I thought I would."

"So that's how it was. Miss Brightner, all I can say is that I'm sorry as hell it happened to you. And listen—you are growing up fast. Kids have to in this sort of environment. Just try to remember that most people are okay if you give them a chance—but most people will also go whichever way the wind blows. You're the wind right now; most of the folks here will follow you because you're doing a good job regardless of your age. Stay with it."

"I intend to," Lyda said. "I'm not going to let anyone go through what I had to that first day, not if I can help it."

Gary was silent for a moment, thinking. "You know, it wouldn't hurt to let everyone know what happened to you—and that you managed to not only escape, but get this place organized and functioning like a group should. It would help enhance your status."

"I guess it's all right. It's not like I have to go to school tomorrow and face the titters and talk like one girl I knew did. Her folks finally moved away because of it." Lyda sighed. So many things to think about.

Gary made a motion to leave but Lyda stopped him. "I didn't get a chance to talk to the new people the scouts brought in after we got them settled down. What do you think of them? Are they good people?"

"Sorry, I should have informed you. Yeah, me and Jimmy talked to most of the men and Maryanne talked to the women. They're just regular folks for the most part, and a lot of them are still grieving for lost kids or wives or husbands or so on, like most of us."

Lyda suddenly felt small. She had been so absorbed in her own trauma and the pressing demands after her ascension to a leadership position that she hadn't had time to think much about her own lost parents—or to dwell on the fact that most of the people in her camp must have lost members of their own families. "I'm sorry, Gary. I should have thought of that."

"What?"

"That most everyone has had something bad happen to them, or to someone in their family. I'm not the only one, but I've been thinking like I was. That's wrong."

Gary nodded solemnly. "Maybe, but perfectly natural. And you've been acting to protect others, which shows what's been in your mind. Like I said at first; your instincts are right, even when you don't know why you're doing some things. I can tell you for a fact, that's rare. You're a good person; don't ever doubt it."

"Thanks, Gary. Mom and Dad always tried to teach me right from wrong, even when I didn't always listen very well."

"They did a good job. Listen, I need to get going. I'm going to break us up into squads today and run through some practice defensive measures. Why don't you give me an hour or so, then come watch and supervise?"

"You don't need supervision for that. You know a whole lot more about it than I do."

"The folks will like it if you're there. And you need to see what we're doing, if you don't mind me saying so. You'll learn a bit about how to organize units for fighting."

"You're right. Call me when you're ready. I'm going to talk to Dorothy and see if she has any idea about what Charlie was thinking when he left."

## CHAPTER FIVE

"He says he knows where there's another food machine, Big Bill. Do you want to see him?"

The man called Big Bill was sitting regally on an upturned tub shaped into a seat, surveying his domain. He still held a rock streaked with dried blood in one hand. He kept it in sight to let even his homeboys know he didn't mind using it. The fight with the Rocky Mount gang was over. They wouldn't be back, but neither did he want to pursue them. Let them have their little spot. He already had enough problems, what with deserters, recalcitrant women and a shortage of supplies. He needed to branch out, find easier pickings, get the losers organized, then maybe go back after the Rockies and take over their food and water source.

At first, this had seemed to be a drop made to order for a tough ex-con. The strong rule the weak, always, when no other authority is present. He figured a former con would have easy pickings but it

wasn't all a good ballin' layout like he thought it would be at first, despite the lack of porch monkeys like he had to live with inside, hatin' on you 'cause of your white skin. The food bricks were okay, but they only came in one flavor from each spot. To get variety, you either had to trade or conquer. Same as the women; variety came there the same way. He preferred to conquer if he could. He didn't give a damn right now what the aliens had in mind for them in the long run. He just wanted to spread his rule far enough so he wouldn't have to worry about other gangs. Big Bill had learned quickly, the first day after his capture. Control the food machines, control the people. That was the key here. The absolute key, and sharp rocks made good iron when that was all you had to work with.

"You want to see this dude or not, Big Bill?"

"Yeah, bring him here."

The man was weak-minded, but he had some interesting information. "There aren't many people there, sir, and the place is being run by a little girl."

"A little girl?"

"Yes, sir. A little girl name of Lyda. She's got a big dummie that's like retarded but he does what she says and there's another one or two she's got buffaloes. That's how come she's able to be in charge." That wasn't strictly true, of course, but how would this boss know?

"Lyda! You said her name is Lyda? How old is she? What does she look like?"

"She's uh, about eleven or twelve I guess. Long red hair."

Be damned, Big Bill thought. The goddamned kid that fought him so hard, then escaped before he could turn her over to John Rockner—after the Rockies had already paid for her. "Where is she?" he demanded.

"What do I get for it?" Charlie asked. He had seen Big Bill's reaction to his revelation. "It ought to be worth a lot."

"It'll be worth a goddamned mouth full of iron if you don't spit it out right now. I'll give you what you deserve after I hear you out."

Charlie flinched, sorry now he had left. Even if Dorothy quit him, the brat had at least kept him supplied with food and water. When Big Bill began to rise from his seat, his sharp rock grasped tightly in his fist, Charlie pointed hastily. "It's over that way. You can't see from here, but there's a big round-looking rock sticking up from the sand. That's them."

"How many men?"

"I—maybe four or five, I think. That's all." He didn't mention that men and women both were being organized for defense, nor that Lyda had been bringing more people into her camp every day. He wanted his news to be worth a good reward.

"Put him on ice, Bone. We'll take him with us. If he told us anything wrong, I'll personally crush his wimpy fucking skull."

The man called Bone led Charlie away. He had begun to tremble and wonder how to go about changing

his story without getting killed in the process.

\* \* \* \*

That night, after most of Lyda's Team, as it was called among her charges, had gone to sleep, she consulted with her leaders, the ones with the most responsibility. The council, as she thought of it in her mind, consisted of herself, Gary, Maryanne, Gary's friend Jimmy, the boy Jacob, Willy, and a married couple by the name of Amber and Shane, who had been selected by Gary. They had all eaten before coming over to see Lyda at the small alcove in the big rock others were already calling "Lyda's office".

After speaking with Dorothy, Lyda had reluctantly decided not to consider her for a position of real leadership, although Lyda figured Dorothy would do well as the water monitor, where she had been assigned. Earlier, she had asked Jacob to be present because she found him very adept at anything mechanical they had to work with.

Lyda had just discovered that a number of her team had retained their phones and several still had some battery power. She had immediately put the boy in charge of rationing the calls and gathering information, direct and relayed from all over, as well as having him ask around to see what other items were on hand that could be used to help them survive, a task she knew she should have thought of earlier.

Now Jacob was giving his report on news gathered from the phones. He was proud to be included in the group and trying very hard to act as solemnly as the adults.

"The spiders are still rounding up people from all over, but that's all. They're not actually hurting anyone or destroying anything unless they're attacked or the people resist. Someone in China that spoke English said they saw an Atomic Bomb go off. It almost blinded her and she didn't know what it did to the spiders.

"The president made a speech. He said God would protect America and that we should avoid the spiders as best we could and not fight back. He said the government was negotiating with them to find out what they wanted with humans. None of the people I talked to believed that part.

"I got a message from right here in the desert that was relayed through a couple of other people. We're in the Arizona and New Mexico dry country. There's a barrier that kills anyone who tries to leave. I was told that there had been some people living out here but all their homes were melted. If they were in them, they were killed, otherwise, they're still wandering around like us."

Lyda remembered seeing the barrier out beyond the seep hole she had discovered. They must be on the very edge of the concentration camp they were sequestered in, though she thought that wasn't the correct term. Ever since studying about how the American Japanese had been confined during a war back in the last century, she had always envisioned concentration camps as something like big jails. Or like the places the Jews she had read about in that same war were kept. She wasn't sure exactly what a Jew was, except the term had something to do with religion and Israel in the Middle East where the terrorists came from. Lyda suddenly realized how bereft of knowledge she really was, despite reading so much. The adults must know much more than she did. Some of them, anyway. Mom and Dad sure had.

"Have you heard anything about how many people are here?" Lyda asked.

"Naw, I mean no, except everyone I've talked to says it's thousands and thousands. I talked to someone in El Paso and he told me the mayor said there were thousands of people missing from there already and the spiders were still rounding up others. Oh yeah, the president said the government was negotiating to make sure the prisoners got humane treatment."



That drew a laugh from all the adults. Even Lyda had to smile grimly. If this was humane treatment, she didn't want to see what inhumane was like!

"Anything else, Jake?"

"Well, I've got a couple of hammers, a crowbar and a tire iron that I borrow during the day. I'm using them to make our hand axes better. I wish I had some glue to make the cloth stick to them, instead of just tying it on. It's real slow chipping them into a good grip and smoothing them out so they don't hurt your hand."

An idea popped into Lyda's head. "Do you think you could chip out some steps up the rock so someone could climb to the top?"

"Good idea," Gary said immediately.

"I think so."

"Okay, why don't you go get a good night's sleep and start early in the morning after you eat? Okay?"

"Sure, Lyda, I mean, Miss Brightner."

"Thanks, Jake. You're doing great. Get Patrick to help you."

"I will. He's getting better now." Jacob left, moonlight showing the beaming satisfaction on his face and in his bearing.

Lyda was pleased with herself. She was learning how to handle people, especially the younger ones.

"What about the training for fighting, Gary? Do we need more?"

"Yes, Miss Brightner. We should run through it every day and be sure everyone knows and recognizes the squad leaders and has the contingency signals I told you about memorized. We got new people today; we'll get more tomorrow, I'm sure. They all have to be integrated and sorted according to ability and ... willingness, I guess we can call it. Willingness to stand up to the gangs. Those who will fight like wildcats to avoid slavery. More slavery, I should say; we're already slaves of the aliens, even if they aren't giving us orders."

"Do what you think needs to be done, Gary. Just meet with me a couple times a day to keep me posted, and I'll be there with you at least once a day so I can keep everything memorized, too. At our morning team meeting tomorrow, I'm going to tell everyone you're the military commander and that you're in complete charge if we get attacked. Okay?"

"Sure. It's a good move. Use the training me and some others have. I'm also setting guards as of tonight and if Jacob can get us to the top of the rock, I'll have lookouts up there day and night."

"Good." Lyda munched on the remains of a food brick, reminding her of another item and also aggravating her because of the lack of paper and pen. There had been a few PDA's but with no way to keep them charged; they were mostly useless now. She was glad she had a good memory; it was just that she had never been so busy and handled so many tasks and so much responsibility, especially all at once. It was hard to keep track of all she had to remember and to do without having it displayed in writing somewhere.

"How's the food and water holding out?" Lyda asked Jimmy. He was taciturn but agreeable, and a willing administrator, quickly becoming a key person now that Gary was busy organizing for defense. She had asked him to become sort of general overseer of the camp, finding out what was needed by whom and where and seeing that it was dispensed fairly. Lyda had observed him from a distance and was especially pleased he made sure the young children were well taken care of and that he was gradually finding things for them to do; some helpful, some simply to keep them occupied. Lyda wondered if his special treatment of the kids meant he had lost one or more of his own children.

"We can handle a few more," Jimmy told her, "but pretty soon, we'll need to let our faces stay dirty. There won't be enough water for washing and drinking both."

Lyda had seen that coming. Well, she could show one of the women how she had used sand to clean herself and her clothing; there was certainly plenty of that to go around. That thought led to another: could sand be used as a weapon, maybe flung into the face of an attacker and blinding them? She would ask Gary. In the meantime—"Go ahead and start rationing it tomorrow, Jimmy. We need some reserve in case we get a sudden influx of people."

It was Maryanne who brought up a point everyone else had overlooked, including Lyda and Gary. "Has anyone else noticed that there's only white people around here? I wonder what that means?"

"Be damned," Gary said, his mouth twisting in a wry grin. "Maryanne, that's good. We should have noticed that sooner. There's no Blacks here, no Orientals nor obvious Hispanics. We're all Caucasian!"

"I saw Blacks and Mexicans—Hispanics, I mean—being herded along at the Mall, but they went to one ship and those I was with went to another."

"I didn't notice," Lyda said. "That blue light thing they used knocked me out, or maybe just caused me to lose my memory. Anyway, I ... I saw Dad being killed, then Mom tried to grab me and one of the little spiders lashed out at me with the blue thing. The next thing I remember, I woke up in the desert."

"I was conscious the whole time," Maryanne said positively. "There was nothing but white people on our ship."

"Same here," Gary said.

"I was knocked out, too," Jimmy announced, "Just like L—like Miss Brightner. I don't guess that really matters, though. The thing is, why are they segregating us?"

Gary rubbed at his itchy whiskers, not quite a beard yet. "I suspect we'll find out when we know what the aliens want with us in the first place."

"Jimmy's right," Lyda said. "It doesn't matter right now. Survival and keeping the bad gangs away from us are the first priorities. That and protecting the kids and women from the..." She couldn't think of a word bad enough to describe who she meant.

"Just call them the bad guys," Gary suggested, "Even though they're not all men. There's some amoral women with the bad guys, too."

"I saw," Lyda confirmed. "Mostly men, though. I heard someone say Big Bill was an ex-con. That means he's been in prison, right?"

"Right. And that's generally bad news."

"It's going to be bad news for Big Bill if I meet up with him face-to-face again," Lyda said, and called the meeting to an end.

Gary hung back after the others left her office. "You seem awfully confident you can handle Big Bill if you meet him. Are you talking about him, or his whole gang?"

"Him."

"Is there anything here I need to know?"

Lyda considered. Gary was trustworthy. Not only that, she knew she couldn't possibly run the team without him. Could he maybe find a better use for the gun than her own personal protection? She didn't think so, but it was a possibility, and besides that, he probably needed to know she possessed it in case something happened to her. Better for him to get it than one of the others. She looked around to be sure no one else was watching and pulled it just far enough out of her pocket to let him see it.

"Be damned. You've had that all the time and never showed it, not even to help cement your authority. My admiration for you just went up another notch."

Lyda gave a small shrug and nod. "I got it after I escaped. I'll tell you about that later, but I thought I better let you know in case something happens to me. I wouldn't want just anyone to get their hands on it."

"You're absolutely right. Keep it to yourself, but tell you what: if it comes to a fight with a gang and I think it might swing the balance, I'll ask you for it. Otherwise, you keep possession. Okay?"

"That's why I let you know. There's part of a box of ammunition in my backpack, too."

"Okay. G'night, now." He touched his hand to his forehead in a salute, not very military, but Lyda smiled, knowing for sure he respected her now. There hadn't been much question before, but it was nice to be certain.

## CHAPTER SIX

John Rockner could see across the green shimmering barrier keeping him from leaving this damnable place. Although, he thought, I never had such a good drop before. Now I don't have to risk going back to prison, being called a baby raper and winding up a punk for some big black porch monkey. He checked behind him to where two ten year old girls were following obediently. He had them well trained now, both to guard him and to service him when he wanted it. He looked out across the barrier at the throng of blacks in the distance, damn glad he was separated from them. In the slam, even though he was a big man, he had taken a lot of abuse from the fucking rugs. Not to mention the fucking sanctimonious crackers who didn't understand that girls needed to be broke in young.

Rockner turned away, deciding that perhaps it was for the best he couldn't get out. Some of the things he had done since taking control of that first food machine would get him an injection if the monsters ever left. In the meantime, best to get back to the gang and make sure no one was stirring up talk against him.

He patted the little automatic in his pocket, wishing he had more ammunition for it. He pretended he did, even though he was down to four shells of his only clip. He knew that without his gun, he would probably be deposed quickly, probably after some very unpleasant things happened to him. As it was, he had found others who would go along with whatever he said, so long as he kept them in food and water. And women.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda stood on top of the huge ball-shaped rock and stared into the distance. After using two empty water tubs to get started, Jacob and Patrick had worked all day to get steps cut into the rock. She had offered to find them some help but Jacob refused. He wanted to do the job himself, so Lyda let him, knowing he would be proud of the accomplishment.

She could see a long way in all directions. In the far distance to the west, some mountains were barely visible on the horizon. Between the mountains and her rock, she could make out two lines of shimmering green barriers cutting through the desert, separating parts of the concentration camp. She could make out many groups of people on the other side of the barriers, looking like tiny ants from so far away, but there was no way to tell what race they belonged to, or whether they were segregated at all. To the east, a river was visible, or at least a tree line indicating water. She felt saliva course into her mouth just thinking about it, but quickly stifled the thought. The water line was behind a barrier, the one she had seen up close earlier. To the north was a closer barrier, with clusters of people on either side of it and corpses of those who had come too close to it laying nearby. She thought the ones beyond the barrier looked darker than the ones close up; the live ones, anyway. The dead bodies had been darkened by sun and rot. Maybe that's where the blacks are, she thought, on the other side of that barrier. But why? And where were the Orientals and Hispanics? Inside some other prison camp?

She shrugged. No use thinking about it. Cope with what you understand and can do something about; that's what Dad always said. She wiped at a tear and turned to climb back down, nodding to the lookout Gary had posted. The woman smiled back at her.

Lyda was encouraged by the way people had accepted her as the leader of their Team. The few who objected were quickly silenced by the others. She thought the acceptance might be because most of the people here had come from other groups where conditions were worse, but that was only part of it. Inside her own mind, she was beginning to *feel* like a leader. Most of her thoughts now were of what was best for the Team. If it left few moments to reflect on her own life, she thought that might be a good thing. She didn't have time to feel sorry for herself.

There were other changes inside herself that Lyda was noticing. She felt physically stronger and mentally more alert than she ever had in her life, so much so, it was noticeable. This was something new, as if the red food bricks were imparting a vitality ordinary food didn't. She couldn't be sure. It might just be my regular growth, she thought, but she couldn't remember any older girls ever talking about anything like that. She looked around to check if anybody was watching, then reached up to touch her chest. Her breasts were growing more rapidly. She guessed she would get her first period soon. She had already asked Maryanne about it and taken some advice, mainly to keep some strips of the cloth in her backpack or pocket, ready for use when it happened.

\* \* \* \*

They were well prepared for the attack when it came. During the day, Gary had sent up a cloth covering for the lookouts, both as a disguise and to protect them from the sun. The afternoon lookout called down shortly before sunset that a large group of people were coming in their direction. Lyda heard his shout from her office. Before she could send her courier, a silent middle-aged woman still grieving for her husband and children, Gary was there.

"This is probably what we feared," he said. "I'm glad we prepared for it. If we can break and scatter this bunch, then word will spread and the rest of the bad guys should leave us alone."

"Are we sure these are the bad guys?"

"Has to be," Gary said succinctly. "No one else would travel at night like this group is doing. Or will be doing shortly. They'll probably stop, then come on and try to hit us when they think we'll all be sleeping. Bastards."

It happened exactly as Gary had predicted. He had his best and biggest squad ready to meet the attack head on, with two other squads on each side of the rock, ready to attack from the flank once the fighting started. He held his last squad in reserve, ready to help or get the children and non-combatants away to the water seep Lyda had told him about.

The moon hadn't come up yet and the night was brightened only by starlight. Lyda waited impatiently at the very rear of the main squad where Gary had placed her, so if the attack pushed that far, she could use her gun—or give it to him. He had also required that all of his troops tie white strips around each of their upper arms, using handkerchiefs, undershirts, bras and whatever else they could find. There would be no friendly casualties caused by lack of light if he could help it.

\* \* \* \*

The guttural shouting, screaming and yelling from the darkness, along with the drumming of feet running on the gritty sand and curses exploding from lips as attackers stumbled over unseen obstacles in the dark, heralded the start of Big Bill's attack. Had they not been expecting it, Lyda would have been frightened out of her wits. As it was, she felt her heart thundering in her chest. She was in a crouch, as were all the squads, making themselves both hard to see and subject to being mistaken for jumbles of large rocks. Earlier, Lyda had made the rounds with Gary, adding her voice and authority to his admonitions to be silent and wait for him to give the correct signals before reacting.

Gary's tactics worked perfectly. Big Bill, in the middle of his attacking gang, heard the high, screaming yell that was Gary's signal for his troops to rise up. Almost the entire first squad was made up of big men with lots of strength in their arms. They were all armed with two rocks of good throwing weight. The first line threw, threw again, then ducked down for the rank behind them to do the same.

"Up!" Gary yelled amid curses and screams of pain. Hand axes went into to play as the members of Big Bill's gang still on their feet crashed into the squad. A war whoop, unmistakable even amid the noise, came wailing into the night, the signal for the flanking squads to rush forward. Big Bill's gang had gathered so much momentum in their initial rush, that the flanking squads were able to take most of them from behind. The white armbands marked their own men. They were visible at close quarters, giving Gary's men a great advantage, especially coming in from the back, unseen for the most part. Almost every person they attacked was an enemy, while Big Bill's gang frequently grappled with their own partisans in the darkness.

Lyda was surprised by how quickly it all happened and even more amazed at how soon it was over. She kept her hand on her revolver, ready to draw, but it was never necessary. Some of Big Bill's men escaped back into the desert when they realized they were being defeated, but the majority of them fell, unconscious or so hurt and scared by the unexpected resistance that they quickly surrendered.

Gary and Lyda were even ready for that. The reserve squad brought thin strips of cloth forward and tied hands behind backs while the rest stood guard. By this time, Lyda's pulse had slowed somewhat. Once

the captives were all secured and sitting or laying along the edge of the rock, she walked among them. A great harvest moon was edging up over the horizon and soon, she could see well enough. She knew exactly who she was looking for and soon found a figure she thought she recognized. She kicked lightly at his bowed head, making him look up.

Big Bill squinted in the wan moonlight. He could only see out of one eye; the other was rapidly closing. Blood was still trickling down the side of his face from another wound somewhere on his scalp.

"This one is Big Bill," Lyda told Gary. "Make sure he's tied real tight. I'll deal with him in the morning. Have Jimmy separate out a few of the ones he thinks might talk and bring them to my office. Tell everyone I said they did great and I'll talk to them in the morning and let them know what we find out from these ... bastards."

Gary grinned behind his hand at Lyda's feeble epithet but then it disappeared. He didn't think he would want to be in Big Bill's shoes when the sun came up.

"You ducks. Letting a fucking little girl tell you what to do," Big Bill spat.

Lyda turned away, ignoring him. It was all she could do not to simply pull out her pistol and shoot him right then. An instinct, or some of that new vitality she was experiencing, told her that would be a mistake. His turn would come, but not yet. Instead, she asked Gary a question. "Did anybody get killed?"

"Surprisingly, no one from them or our people either, considering all the head knocking." He grinned. "There's sure lots of headaches amongst them, though."

\* \* \* \*

"My hands hurt. You gotta untie me!"

"I have to go. Please, I can't hold it much longer."

"Damn him, why did we ever try this?"

"I heard she's not but eleven years old!"

"I wonder..."

"I think he's dead."

"No, he..."

The voices of the prisoners echoed and rebounded from the rock facing like the sounds from kids in a theatre watching a scary movie. Lyda tried to ignore them and listen to the captives brought to her as they were questioned by Gary and Jimmy. Each of the men told much the same story, claiming to have been forced to do what Big Bill said or die of thirst.

"Could you have left if you wanted to?" Lyda asked each of them when their tales faltered.

Bowed heads were their only answer.

The woman who had been Big Bill's consort was easier to deal with, if harder to understand. She freely



admitted to taking part in whatever Big Bill ordered. "Kid, it looked to me like the only game in town, and Little Charlene takes care of herself. Whatever the fuck the aliens want with us, right now, the men are calling the shots. We women have to go along."

"No you don't. Not when you could have left."

The woman shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. Where else is there to go? Another gang? Girl, if you think Big Bill is bad, you don't want to meet Rockner. Big Bill sold all the kids we could corral to him, after he used the best ones himself first. That's bad, but I don't even want to think about what Rockner and his gang are doing to them. I heard he trades the little boys to another gang for their girls."

Lyda shivered. She felt crawl with disgust. The woman hadn't even recognized her, but Lyda remembered her face. She had willingly helped Big Bill when he beat and assaulted her. "Take her away," she said.

"What are you going to do with us?" the woman asked as Jimmy jerked her to her feet.

Lyda didn't answer. She began hearing the prisoners again, begging to be untied, or to relieve themselves, or to have their wounds treated. "Jimmy, go tell those people to quiet down and we'll take care of them at daylight when we can see what we're doing. It's too risky to fool with them tonight. Okay?"

"Sure. Do you want to talk to any more of them?"

"No, but you can. See if you can find out where that Rockner gang the woman was talking about is located."

"Will do."

"Thanks, Jimmy."

Lyda was left alone with Gary. "Do you have any idea about what we should do with them?"

"Well, we can't just keep them tied up here."

"I know, but we can't just turn them loose, either. Dad always told me that people were responsible for their actions. If you did something good, you should be rewarded, even if it's just the satisfaction of knowing you did the right thing. If you were bad, you should take your punishment and learn from it." Lyda gave Gary the ghost of a smile. "That's what Dad would say when he had to punish me. Or when he told me he was pleased with something I had done. I think he was right."

"Yes, I do, too."

"Let me think about it. You, too, and if you come up with any good ideas, tell me about them in the morning before the Team gets together."

"I'll do that. Good night, Miss Brightner."

"Good night, Gary. I'm glad you were around to show us how to take care of ourselves. Thanks."

He gave her his little salute and vanished into the night, leaving Lyda by herself again. She sat quietly

thinking. After a while, she nodded to herself. It will be all right, she thought, I can do it. As she made the decision, she felt another strange, but positive transformation settling into her body and mind, like a favored relative who had come to live permanently with her. She lay back on her pallet and closed her eyes, going over all the patterns of her essence that had grown and matured so swiftly since the aliens landed. Maybe in a normal environment, she would have wanted to enjoy being a little girl a bit longer, but here, she was glad she had managed to outgrow that part of her life. Satisfied, she tried to sleep. The next thing she knew, it was morning.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda glanced around at the council. "Are there any of you who disagree with me?"

No one objected.

Lyda took a deep breath. "Since the final decision rests with me, I'll take care of it myself. Gary, you stay a moment. The rest of you, please get the Team together where we're holding the prisoners. Drag Big Bill and Little Charlene out in front of the other ones and wait on us. We'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"There's no need to get your hands dirty, Miss Brightner," Gary said as soon as they were alone. He looked troubled. "Me and Jimmy can take care of them."

"No. All I want you to do is read off the charges, then when the time comes, speak to the other prisoners afterward. Let's do it like this."

Lyda told him.

Gary nodded. "That's all fine, except the last part. Do we really want to start a ... a war, I'd guess you'd call it."

"I think so. If we let Rockner continue with what he's doing when we have the means to stop it, then I think we assume part of the guilt. And, Gary, it's not just because of what happened to me. I've seen it at school with bullies. If no one does anything, it just goes on and on. Those kind of people need to be stopped now, and an example made of them. We may be here a long time and the longer it's allowed to go on, the easier it will be for us to not think about it."

"Okay. I guess you're right, but I don't have to like it. I've always been leery of good intentions."

"You mean like telling other people what's good for them?"

"That's okay. It's just that when one person or group starts forcing their ideas of good behavior on other people, they usually don't know where to stop. And all too often, their own ideas are at odds with ones that aren't actually hurting anyone; they're just offensive to the ones doing the forcing."

"That's not the case here. Dad told me a society has to protect the innocent and the weak."

"I agree. Let's just always remember the limits of our society, such as we have here, and not start up a jihad of some sort."

"All I want is for the abuse of kids and others who can't defend themselves to stop."

"I'm with you that far. Are you ready?"

"I guess so."

\* \* \* \*

"...murder, rape, rape of minor children, assault with intent to enslave, enslavement, trading and selling of human beings and sexual assault of females without their consent. In the case of Charlene Smith, willingly aiding and abetting William Gross in all the acts just described."

"This is a fucking kangaroo trial! You ain't got no legal authority here!" Big Bill screamed, sensing what was coming.

"You've both been sentenced to death," Gary said.

While the shocked expressions were still on their faces and before they could begin to struggle, Lyda drew her revolver and stepped forward. She looked out to make sure no one was in the line of fire, pointed it down at Big Bill and squeezed the trigger. She had practiced dry firing without bullets in the chamber already, so she was prepared for the hard pull of the trigger. The shot hit Big Bill just above the bridge of his nose. Immediately, she turned to Charlene. Killing the woman was harder. She hadn't actually assaulted her, but ... Lyda shot her before she could change her mind.

Most of her team was able to see that she was the one who carried out the executions. Lyda had planned it that way. She wanted them to know she was capable of not only making difficult decisions, but able to involve herself directly in the consequences of them. It was the same resolve that had allowed her to sleep peacefully the night before.

Lyda looked out over the mass of unsmiling faces. She knew some of them might not agree with death sentences but she was determined to keep them on her side. She began to speak, forcing her voice into a calm she didn't feel inside. They had stood silent while she performed the duty of executioner. Now, she had to convince them to go to war.

"I know some of you may not have agreed with what just happened. I'm sorry. If there had been a way to lock them up and make certain they could never harm anyone again, I might have been able to do persuade myself not to have them executed, but I sort of doubt it. You all just heard what they were guilty of. There's nothing worse in my mind than grown men and women who assault innocent children, for no other reason than that they're physically stronger and want to. They have no morals. I have my doubts they're even human.

"There's something even worse, though, and that's slavery, because it goes on and on. And worse than that is child slavery of a sexual nature, like we've discovered. The man who called himself Big Bill has sold every child he could get his hands on to the Rocky Mount gang. The woman who called herself Little Charlene was well aware of it and helped him. I believe we have to put a stop to it."

Lyda saw some nods among her followers, but no groundswell of enthusiasm. Nevertheless, she continued. "I won't force anyone to help me with this. I will ask for volunteers to form a task force, an army I guess you could call it, to attack and break up the Rocky Mount gang and then turn over their facilities to people who will share them fairly, as we've been doing here. I'm not calling for a war of extermination, or a crusade to bring the rest of this place under our rule, but just a simple fight to stop a horrible practice. I hope once Rockner loses his authority, there will be enough good people around to take care of him and his helpers."

Lyda had rehearsed the speech in her mind and was surprised she was able to remember it almost word for word.

"Anyone wanting to join the task force. please tell Jimmy. It's about a two day trip to Rockner's camp, near as we can tell. The task force will start tomorrow morning."

Lyda breathed deeply. So much for that. She had wanted to get all that business out of the way first. Now for the rest.

"I want to thank every one here for the absolutely wonderful way you performed your duties last night. You were magnificent. If I had medals to award, I'd give you all one. As it is, all I can say is th—thank ... thank you." For the first time, Lyda's voice broke with emotion.

While she waited to get herself under control, Gary leaned over and whispered, "I've already got some people to drag the bodies out away from here. You're doing fine. Keep on."

Lyda let her gaze roam over the rest of the prisoners. They avoided making eye contact with her. She knew what they must be thinking. *Am I next? What is she going do to us? Oh God, I'm scared! Damn Big Bill!* She could almost read their thoughts.

Lyda spoke loud enough so the assembled Team and prisoners both could hear her. "We're going to strip these people to their underwear, take them out into the desert and point them in a direction away from us." She looked directly at the prisoners, sitting with their hands tied, for the next part of her speech. "If any of you come back in this direction, or if we ever find any of you associating with people like Big Bill and Little Charlene again, you won't get a second chance." She pointed to the two bodies. "Take a good look at your leaders before you go. That's what's waiting for you if you go bad again."

Gary had men waiting. They got the remainder of Big Bill's gang together, stripped them, and marched them away, hands still tied. A long way off, two or three of them would have their restraints removed and they would be left there to untie their companions. As Lyda watched them recede into the distance, she wondered how many of the others the first ones to have their bonds cut would free. She thought there was a possibility that some of the really bad ones would be left as they were, to either free themselves if they could, or perish in the desert. The executions had been a very explicit example for them to remember.

Once the prisoners were gone and the morning meal began to be served, Lyda was relieved to see a lot of conversations spring up, accompanied by smiles and laughter here and there. She knew it was going to be all right now.

On the way back to her office, she stopped for a moment as a sudden little cramp passed through her lower belly. A few minutes later, she felt the first wetness between her thighs. As she hurried toward the sanitary area, she thought how fitting it was. At the moment of her triumph and the consolidation of her leadership, she became a fully functional woman.

\* \* \* \*

Gary was insistent she remain behind while he led the task force for the attack on the Rocky Mount Gang. "You can't leave. I know you'd like to be there, but much as the Team admires and likes you, this is still an unstable situation. You need to stay here and keep the place going."

Lyda didn't argue very hard against him. She knew he was right.

Just before the task force got under way the next morning, Lyda took Gary aside. She pulled her pistol from its pocket and handed it to him. "Just in case they're armed, too. Remember the shots we've heard."

She added the box of cartridges to the pistol. "Just bring it back, okay?"

"Will do. Have you replaced the shells you used?"

"Yes. It's fully loaded. Sorry, I should have told you."

"That's okay, I would have checked anyway. Never assume a gun has less than a full load. There are gremlins who go around putting shells back into guns you've just taken them out of."

"Dad always said there's no such thing as an unloaded gun."

"Smart man. You be good now." Unaccountably, he bent down and kissed her cheek while pretending to whisper in her ear, then stood up and gave her a salute that everyone could see.

"Be careful, Gary. We can't afford to lose you." She stood a lonely vigil, watching them until they were only a blot in the distance.

\* \* \* \*

"You're bullshitting, right?" Rockner stared at the two dehydrated, sunburned and very subdued men who had just been brought to him.

"No, no, it's true. A little girl. Her gang ambushed us, slick as a band of Indians." The man's voice was croaky from a swollen tongue.

"Tell me everything that happened."

"Water. We gotta have some water. Can't ... can't talk without water."

Begrudgingly, Rockner allowed them enough so they were able to tell their tale. As they talked, each interrupting the other from time to time to add details or fill in something the other had missed, the rest of his gang edged closer, listening as avidly as he was. The underage girls began to lose the dead expressions they regularly wore on their faces. Traces of hope began to animate their expressions. Some of the adults began to look fearful and stare warily into the distance, as if an attack by an avenging horde led by Supergirl was just over the horizon. Others simply looked thoughtful.

Within a few hours, the Rocky Mount gang was on the verge of rebellion. The situation became even more explosive when a dreadfully sunburned woman, wearing only her bra and panties, arrived and confirmed the tale, especially the part about Big Bill and his chief companion being executed by a girl not yet in her teens that Rockner had only half-believed. She told it more dramatically, making Lyda both younger and more aggressive than the truth justified, and warning them the young girl was on the way toward them at the head of a huge, avenging army.

The next morning, Rockner was dead, his skull crushed by one of his erstwhile assistants who took his gun and other possessions and vanished. The gang quickly broke into quarreling factions and soon afterwards, only anarchy ruled the area.

\* \* \* \*

"I appointed a few of our people I thought we could spare to get the place organized and operating like our Team before we came back," Gary told Lyda. He grinned at her with an expression almost resembling worship. "Just the thought that you might be heading in their direction was all it took to get the ball rolling. I have to apologize about being hesitant at first, Miss Brightner. It just goes to show what a

good example will do for people. Hell, maybe your influence will spread out and take in the whole shebang here!" He produced Lyda's pistol and the box of ammunition and handed them to her.

Lyda grinned happily back at him, awed at Gary's story of how her supposed prowess had instigated a revolt—and how her idea of fair treatment for everyone was spreading.

"Dad said ideas were the most powerful weapons on earth in the long run."

"I wish I could have met your dad. He..."

A swishing noise in the distance, along with a sudden cacophony of voices, interrupted whatever Gary intended to say.

Lyda looked all around, then followed the motion of Gary's pointing finger. An armada of the alien transport craft could be seen in the distance. As they watched, it began to disperse into individual units that went off in different directions, but all came lower, telegraphing their intentions. The whole concentration camp area was going to be covered. Lyda felt her spirits drop into an abyss of despair, like she had felt as she first realized she was never going to see Mom and Dad again.

*No! she thought desperately. I won't. Those monsters will never make a coward of me. I'll face them and let them do their damndest and someday, I'll find a way to beat them. I swear I will!* She stood defiantly with her fists clenched and eyes blazing with anger as the transport crafts landed and began disgorging hordes of spider mechs.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

This time, Lyda was conscious after being herded into the craft with most of her followers. She tried to stay alert and learn about the aliens while it was happening, but it was very difficult. The spidery mechanicals were still as scary as ever. A discordant thought raced through her mind as she looked over her shoulder at one of them while it herded her and some others toward one of the transport craft. Did the aliens purposely make their constructs look like the most feared of earthly insects? If so, why? She had no more time to reflect as the transport entrance loomed before her, a giant jaw spread out at ground level, devouring people like popcorn being poured into an open mouth.

Lyda ran inside, joining the yelling, screaming throngs already there. More bodies pushed inside from behind until the entrance was clear, then it snapped shut like a steel trap closing. Acceleration immediately flung her to the floor, pinning her there. Another body landed across her legs like a big log. She tried to squirm loose, but was unable to move enough. She could see little other than a few sprawled bodies in front of her. She felt the circulation below her waist being cut off. Her legs began to ache horribly and the backpack bit cruelly into her shoulders. Fortunately, that part of the trip didn't last long. The acceleration eased and she was able to get her legs loose and sit up.

Lyda looked around to see if any of her people were near. She saw a few, but none of the council, and there were others she didn't recognize at all. The transport had obviously gathered in others before landing near her camp. Her gaze strayed upward. The ceiling was only about ten feet above her head but receded into the distance until human figures and its bland color blended together. The thing was bigger inside than it had looked from the outside. She remembered from talking to others that none of their journeys after being captured had lasted more than a few minutes. She waited for this one to end but it went on and on. She hadn't been wearing a watch when captured, so she had no way of telling time until



she asked a woman near her.

"What does it matter?" the woman said despondently. "They'll just take us to someplace worse."

Lyda tried to cheer her up. "Maybe not. You didn't say how long it's been since we took off."

The woman looked at her watch, then shook her wrist. "It's stopped. Who cares anyway?" She put her arms across her knees and rested her head on them, hiding her face.

Lyda wondered if she dared get to her feet and try to move around. She decided to try. When she stood up, she discarded the idea. There was simply no room, and most everyone was either sitting or laying down, so it did give her a better vantage point. There were at least a thousand people in the bay with her, a mixture of adults and children of all ages—but again, all Caucasian.

Abruptly, she felt something different in her bones and managed to sit down again before another surge of heavy acceleration hit her. Or maybe it's just some kind of gravity, she thought. There's no way to tell in here. She heard voices saying something about this trip being different than the last one. Another said it was taking longer. Both voices were strained by the forces pressing on their chests.

The sense of increased weight wasn't as hard to bear this time; she had managed to turn upon her side before she was unable to move. After the first surge, she had thought about taking off the backpack and holding it, but she didn't want to take a chance on being separated from it. She felt grateful that if this had to happen, at least it came during daylight so she was wearing the pack and her light jacket; it held most of her worldly possessions—whatever world she was on now.

Another surge, a period of normal gravity, then another surge, longer this time. Wherever they were going, Lyda thought it must be a long way off. Off? As in off the earth completely? The idea crept into her mind and refused to go away, even after the stink of released body wastes began to distract her from other thoughts. The smell only enhanced an urge to relieve herself. It wasn't urgent yet, but couldn't be delayed forever, either.

A different kind of noise intruded on her senses, a rumble accompanied by a sudden jerk, as if the transport had landed somewhere. Lyda certainly hoped so. Wherever the aliens were taking them, she wanted the voyage to be over! While she was still occupied with this thought, the entrance they had come through irised open along its top and sides. At the same time, a pressure of some sort swept over the compartment, impelling everyone toward the opening.

Lyda felt it as a force pressing against her body and forcing her to her feet. The line of induced movement was irresistible. Screams, yells and curses erupted in the packed compartment. Lyda had to shuffle desperately in order to keep her feet; others didn't, and fell to be trampled underfoot. There was no possibility of order, and what little chance there might have been was quickly dispelled when the mass of humanity turned into a scared mob, struggling to make sense of their surroundings.

When Lyda was near the opening to what she thought was the outside, she saw it was merely a long, narrow alcove and that people were being separated and shoved by unseen forces into a series of smaller apertures. Each of these quickly took one person at a time, and shuttled them rapidly out of sight into dark, narrow tunnels lit only by reflected light from the transport bay.

Lyda didn't try to hold back when her turn came; she knew there was nothing to be gained by resisting. Instead, she tried to stay calm and see what she could learn. It was precious little. She couldn't see; all she could feel was the floor and a breeze blowing past her body. It's the floor that's moving now, she

thought. That calculation proved right a moment later when she was dumped out into a huge construct that looked as if it were trying to imitate a planet and doing a bad job of it. She stumbled forward several paces, then came to a halt. The wall next to her and the floor were made of a metallic looking pinkish brown substance with a slight give to it, like an indoor/outdoor carpet. She didn't know how large the room was, if indeed it was a room. It seemed to stretch off into the distance forever, broken up here and there by columns of green vegetable matter, she thought. There were also waist high trays containing other growing things that trailed tendrils over their edges. There were boxy obstacles of various sizes scattered throughout, looking more like storage huts than anything else. The roof was far overhead; she wasn't able to judge the distance. The green columns appeared to taper as they went higher but she couldn't tell immediately whether it was because they were smaller up there, or because the ceiling was so far away.

"Move it, girl," a voice said rudely from behind her. A big hand shoved at her back.

Rather than resist, Lyda ran forward a short distance before turning to look. She had learned; she had no intention of being taken captive by any man again. She saw people popping out of apertures that merged with the wall as far to the left and right as she could see. She thought she could discern a faint curvature to it in the distance, but couldn't be sure. All she knew was that the immediate space was becoming filled with humanity. And she knew none of them. She decided to get away from the people, quickly; there would be time to make friends later, if she could. Right now, knowledge about this new environment took precedence.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda wandered for hours, trying to keep track of which way she went but as soon as she lost sight of the wall, it became impossible. Once she found it again, she decided to keep it in sight as a reference point. She also thought most people she saw were gravitating toward what they thought might be the center. Lyda didn't want people just yet, not if she didn't already know them. She wanted to explore and find out what dangers might lurk unsuspectingly around the next greenery covered column or in the next tray or behind the next boxy thing. She had already been unpleasantly surprised once. Looking over the edge of one of the first of the ubiquitous long trays that always grew from the floor near the huge columns, she had seen that it was mostly empty space. It was waist high like all the rest would prove to be, but the bottom and inside walls were covered with short green tendrils. Longer tendrils waved upwards or grew over the sides in random patterns. She felt one of the flat, inch wide growths. It was as soft as refined cotton and almost as tough to tear.

Taking advantage of some momentary privacy, Lyda climbed into the tray and used it as a bathroom.

Just as she was finishing, a little six legged furry rodent nipped her foot, as if sampling her flesh for a possible future meal. Startled, Lyda almost yelled before she got control of herself. She used some of the torn tendrils to hurriedly wipe while she kept a wary eye out for more of the little animals. Or whatever it was. The green tendrils didn't appear to hurt her. She tore off some more and took them along.

There were still people about, but none that threatened. Several teenage boys tried to make conversation, but she rebuffed them politely. She felt the boys had probably been attracted by her looks as much as anything else with all the changes taking place in her body. She wasn't ready to associate with anyone yet, and especially not in a sexual manner. She might be growing up faster than she would have back in Texas—or is our sense of time being distorted? she suddenly wondered. No matter, she couldn't do anything about it, even if it were true. She noticed most people seemed to be more dazed than interested, and nowhere did she ever see anyone from the desert prison. She was on her own again.

Hours after she began her wandering, Lyda came upon two girls, both of them younger than herself. One of them had tear streaks on her dirty face; the other was bleeding from her scalp. She started to pass,

then their haunted faces stopped her.

"What happened to you?" Lyda asked.

"They ... there's some men back there who said we had to go with them. We didn't want to be with men like we were at the last place. A woman helped us run away. Do you know where there's something to eat?"

"No, but come with me. We'll try to find something." Responsibility already, she thought. Is this the same pattern as in the desert, where kids are left to fend for themselves and be abused and most adults don't seem to care? The girls had apparently gone through some unsettling experiences, making them leery here. She hoped this place wasn't going to be a repeat of the last one. In fact, it didn't seem possible. The world couldn't have functioned with that high a proportion of amoral adults. She must have landed in a camp where the people rounded up and dumped there had a lot of miscreants among their number. San Francisco? A prison? That might account for some of the men Big Bill had sold the boys to. And she had been told by several people that Big Bill, Little Charlene and Rockner had all been former convicts. Chance, or purpose? No way to find out, she thought. The girls will tell me more once they know they can trust me. And I have to hope this place has better people. If not ... she patted the comforting bulk of the pocket where her gun resided and the other where she carried the little hand ax Jacob had made for her. Then she remembered that all through the difficulties of her ascension to a leadership role and beyond, she had never once drawn the pistol. The only time she had used it at all was to execute Bill and Charlene. It was startling in a way to remember all she had accomplished and never once used a weapon, nor even issued a threat with one. She at least wanted that pattern to repeat.

Lyda led the girls away from where they had been, not going in any particular direction; just going, and keeping the wall in sight. The girls were named Sue and Betty and had met only hours before in the transport. Neither had been at the desert camp, but they had been together elsewhere.

"We were at a place where there were lots of mountains and rocks and funny little trees. The wind blew all the time and it was cold."

"How did you keep warm?" Lyda asked, eyeing their clothing. Some of their garments were probably what they had been wearing when captured; the rest were wrappings of the same kind of cloth Lyda had seen in the desert. Still, they didn't look like enough to have kept them warm in that kind of environment.

"There was a man there that showed people how to build shelters and fires. He was real nice."

"What happened to him?"

"Oh, another man got in a fight with him and hurt his head. He went to sleep and never woke up. I'm hungry."

"Me, too," her friend Betty echoed. "And thirsty, too."

Lyda gave them each a drink from one of her spare bottles, and let each have a few bites from a food brick. She had two of the bricks and a partially eaten third in her pack, saved from the days after the fight and killings when she had just about lost her appetite. She had already seen water, flowing away from the base of one of the giant columns along a channel that split into smaller rivulets which, in turn, fed the trays clustered around it. People were already congregating around the columns, she knew. When it came time for company, that's where she would go. And they were easy to find, appearing in numbers she was unable to easily count.

As for food, that proved surprisingly easy to come by once she discovered the trick. The columns were all huge but they varied in diameter. When they stopped by one of the smaller ones to rest, Lyda noticed a fragrance in the air. It smelled wonderful, making her mouth water. She followed her nose to its source.

Right before her eyes, the greenery that covered the column began growing bulges which quickly rounded into bulbous appendages dangling from short vines like ripe fruit. The smell was so inviting, it made Lyda cautious. She made the girls wait while she sampled several of them, taking very small bites.

They all tasted alike, sweet and with a meaty texture like very tender chicken or pork. When nothing happened to her, she allowed her charges to eat.

Waste disposal proved to be equally simple. As she walked, Lyda had discovered the floor was often altered by shallow depressions shaped like bathtubs, only not as deep. The bottom sloped toward one end. Since they provided a modicum of privacy, she suggested that Betty use one of them when she asked where to go. Her waste disappeared at the deep end as if being dissolved by magic. Lyda gave her some of the tendrils she had been carrying to clean with and noted with satisfaction that they hadn't dried out like earthly vegetation would have. They were still soft and supple. The boxy little extrusions from the floor remained an enigma. She examined one or two but could find no break in the surface, no way of telling what they were designed for, if anything. She thought they must have some function, though. She didn't think the aliens were stupid; there must be a purpose to their actions, if only she could figure it out.

By the second day, Lyda began to think they had been transferred to some kind of Lotus Land, where food and drink came so easily and was so plentiful, there was no need to struggle for the very necessities of life. That night after the two little girls had gone to sleep, cuddled together like Siamese twins attached at the chest, she turned her findings over in her mind again and again. She thought briefly that this habitat might have been given as a sort of reward for the hard struggle back on earth. When she could find no logical reason why that should be, she discarded the notion. She did have to admit that living would probably be much easier here. Perhaps too easy. What would people do once they ate and drank to repletion?

There was always romance, she thought. People spend lots of time on it, even young girls and boys. And adults had sex. She had been set straight on that point by Gary back at the office once when she had unintentionally interrupted some couples while they were engaged. After that, she had followed his suggestion and reserved a spot off from the others for couples. Some of the teenagers had taken advantage of it as well, but that was one aspect of her time in charge that she hadn't delved into very deeply. She wasn't interested in sex yet, especially after her experience with Big Bill. Okay, romance, sex, food, drink. How else could people keep themselves busy? No movies. No internet. No music. No books. They would need something to occupy their time. All she had to do now was figure out the what, where and how. She smiled to herself.

It made a nice puzzle to put herself to sleep, even though she didn't know exactly why it was going to be necessary. Leisure from work is an adult concept and learning to live with nothing to do might sound like paradise, but Lyda knew it wasn't that simple. Doing nothing would bore her silly, and she was almost certain it would most other people, too. The reasoning, which came from that same inner sense of vitality and satisfaction within herself that had developed in the desert told her that much. It was still there. She knew she wasn't Supergirl, but she also knew she wasn't an innocent little girl on the verge of adolescence anymore, either. A long while later, she thought she might have a handle on what should be done, if she could talk some adults into it. After that, she slept without a problem.

\* \* \* \*

The next day, Lyda took her charges and deliberately sought out company, after first finding an

unoccupied column and cleaning herself up as best she could. She made the girls wash, too, and shake out their clothes. She did the same herself, thankful her first period was over now. So she would know when the next one was due, she decided to use notches cut into a little piece of vine the food fruits grew on to try to keep track of when the next one was due. After they had all spruced up as much as possible, she told Betty and Sue they were going to find some other people to talk to.

"Will they be nice people?" Sue asked her apprehensively.

"If they aren't, we'll leave," Lyda assured her.

"Maybe they won't let us leave," Betty said, hanging back.

Lyda faced them both. "Listen, if we want to go anywhere, we can. I'll make sure of that, okay?"

"How can you make big men leave us alone?" Betty asked. She wasn't taking anything for granted.

Lyda smiled at her. "I was the big boss back in the desert. Everybody did what I said."

"Will they do it here?"

Good question! There certainly weren't any flies on this girl. "I don't know, but I can keep anyone from doing anything bad to us, so don't worry about that part."

Sue appeared happy with her assurances. Betty was still dubious, but came with her. Lyda headed toward the central environs. Betty's questions made her wary and she decided to seek out a group made up of at least half women with children, thinking that sort of grouping would probably contain the kind of people she was looking for.

During an hour of walking, they passed several groups congregated around columns, just as they had the day before, but she didn't stop nor speak, except in passing. One of them had too high a proportion of men; another had far too many women and children and too few men for safety. She couldn't help but think that group would run into difficulties soon. Finally, she called a halt near another gaggle that looked promising. There weren't as many of them as there had been at many of the places she had seen, and the mix of sexes and ages appeared to be close to what she was seeking.

While she was examining them from a distance with the girls standing behind her, a middle-aged woman detached herself from the throng and walked toward them. When she got closer, Lyda noticed she was tall, with an interesting, matronly looking face like her grandmother had. She had even let her graying hair show like Grandma did. No vanity here, Lyda thought. A nice looking woman. I hope she acts like she looks.

"Hello, girls," the woman said as she came up to them. "Are you looking for a place to stop?"

"Maybe," Lyda answered. "My name is Lyda Brightner. This is Sue and this is Betty. I found them by themselves and brought them along with me."

"Well, you'll be welcome here if you want to stay for a while."

"Are you in charge?" Lyda asked, shifting her feet. They were getting sore from all the walking.

"Well, no one is actually in charge. We've just been sort of getting acquainted so far. My name is Rayne

Austin, by the way. I have a granddaughter about your age somewhere. I was babysitting when the aliens came. We got separated and I don't know where she is now."

She's talking too much, Lyda thought. It was the same nervous mannerism she had noted in some of her Team when they were trying to impress her. But this woman had no reason to be nervous around her, or to impress her either. Why all the talk, revealing things right off the bat she should have kept to herself for a time?

"Were you in a desert before?"

Rayne frowned, her face no longer looking quite so grandmotherly. "No, I was at a place with lots of tough grass and not many trees. Some people I was with said it might not even be in America, but no one knew for sure. Why do you ask?"

"I was wondering if you had any trouble before."

"Well ... there was, but that's over with now. This place has lots of food and water. No one has to fight over it. You can relax here."

"We can't ever relax as long as the aliens have us," Lyda responded.

Rayne sighed, like someone after a hard day's shopping who gets home and finds the house still a mess. "We can't do anything about them. We just have to accept our situation and make the best of it. God will take care of us if we keep our faith in Him."

Lyda thought it was better to rely on their own abilities. There certainly hadn't been a lack of praying at her own desert camp, but there also hadn't been much indication that God was taking care of them, or if He was, He hadn't done much to help anyone. She didn't contradict Rayne, though. If her faith helped her survive, more power to her—up to a point.

"Well, I want to find out what the aliens intend to do with us. Right now, though, Betty and Sue need to rest and eat. They're tired."

"You look tired yourself. Come on and meet the rest of us."

Lyda decided to follow her and keep her guard up. After getting the girls settled down, she allowed Rayne to take her around and introduce her. Whether or not anyone was in charge, she apparently knew the names of every person in the group already. Lyda answered questions politely without giving much away and shook a lot of hands. There wasn't any single person there who really impressed her, but on the other hand, she could find nothing wrong with them, either. They reminded her of the times Mom had taken her to church and she had seen the gathering of disorganized acquaintances milling around after an uninspired sermon, some friendly, some just waiting on spouses or children so they could go home. If she stayed with them, she intended to see if she could make some changes if the situation didn't improve. If not, I can always move on, she thought, but she also wondered if she was the only person in the world, or wherever, who was inspired to try and improve her lot, as well as those around her. She had passed groups today that appeared to be organized, after a fashion, but none which seemed interested in the welfare of three young girls.

## CHAPTER EIGHT



Lyda spent the rest of the first day and all of the second simply wandering around and talking to the people Rayne had introduced her to. Eventually, Betty and Sue became brave enough to go off among the younger kids after Lyda told them where she intended to sleep, near one of the boxes somewhat removed from the column. She noticed some of the adults were making attempts to care for the children, especially the younger ones, at least to the extent of showing them how to get food and water and where to go to use the "bathroom". She also noticed the kids were much less rambunctious than a similar group would have been back on earth.

"I don't know what to do with them," a bewildered woman said. She was clad in jeans and a tee shirt, with a wrap of alien cloth draped around her shoulders.

"What's wrong?" Lyda asked. None of the children near them appeared to be in any difficulty, though the two year old the woman was holding was whimpering.

"They don't know what to do with themselves and I don't either. There's no television to occupy them, no movies or games and not even school."

"Why can't we start a school?" Lyda questioned, glad the woman had led into the very subject she was interested in.

"What's your name? Lyda, isn't it?"

"Lyda Brightner."

"Well, Miss Brightner, do you see anything around here to teach with? A schoolhouse, perhaps, or some books and computers?" Her tone, especially the 'Miss Brightner', was very sarcastic.

Lyda tried to ignore it. "I see a lot of things to teach with. They're just not being used."

"Oh? Do you mind sharing? Where are they?" Still sarcastic. She looked out over their habitat, mocking a search for the invisible teaching materials.

"They're sitting on the shoulders of all the adults and probably, most of the kids."

"What?"

"The teaching material is in our heads. Everyone must know something they can teach to the rest of us. Don't you?" Lyda deliberately challenged the woman, hoping it would impel her to think.

"How? We don't even have anything to write with!"

"Don't be a defeatist, Mrs. Martin. At first, we shouldn't need anything. And when we do, we can think of a way."

"Huh! Maybe you're smarter than I am, or maybe you've seen something here I haven't. I sure don't know how."

"Well, would you be willing to start anyway?" Lyda was exasperated but didn't let it show. She had already thought of two ways to write, in just that moment. Not good ones, but workable. She was rapidly finding out that just because adults might have grown in body, didn't necessarily mean they had in

mind. "It would give the kids something to do besides fuss and eat and sleep."

"Oh, I don't know. I guess." She rocked the child in her arms, trying to quiet it.

"Okay, I'll talk to you later. Think about what you'd like to teach. And not just to kids, either. I bet you know stuff other adults would be interested in." Lyda smiled as brightly as she could and moved on.

Behind her, Mrs. Martin followed her with her eyes. "What a strange girl," she murmured to the child in her arms. "She acts almost like an adult and she can't be more than thirteen, fourteen at the most." She would have been very surprised to learn that Lyda was only a few days past her twelfth birthday.

None of the watches were working. They had all stopped on the transport. And no night and day, either, Lyda thought. That's going to make it harder to have classes if no one knows what time it is. She went on, from person to person, talking to anyone who showed interest.

"What kind of work did you do?" Lyda asked Horace Cherbub when he said he knew nothing anyone else would want to learn.

He only shrugged, but Lyda was persistent. "What did you do before the aliens came?"

"I was a fireman. Not much need for firemen here! Nothing to burn, and nothing to make a fire with anyway."

"What else? You weren't a fireman twenty-four hours a day, were you?"

"I just watched television."

"What did you watch?"

"Oh, all kinds of stuff. Movies, news, sports, the History Channel, Animal Planet, oh gosh, others I don't remember right off-hand."

"The History Channel? I bet you remember a lot from it, don't you? I do. It was pretty interesting, and Dad said they tried to be accurate."

Horace shrugged again. "What difference does it make now? We're probably not even on earth. God knows if we'll ever get back, either."

"What parts did you like best?"

"On the History Channel? The military, I guess. Fat lot of good our military did us!"

"Were you ever in the army?"

"You're a barrel of questions!" But he laughed. "No, I was in the navy. Served twenty years, too. I was a signalman."

"I'd like to learn more about military life and what it was like," Lyda said.

"Really? What for, kid? That's all in the past."

"My name is Lyda Brightner, not kid. And maybe it isn't all in the past. At the last place I was at, I had a man on my council who had been in the army. He helped me train our group so when we were attacked, we beat them."

"He helped you?"

"Yes. I was in charge, but he knew lots more than me about fighting, so I got him to organize us. He did real well."

"You were in charge?" Horace laughed, then realized that she was quite serious. "Really?"

"Yes. There were lots of bad people in the desert. Someone had to do something."

"Hmm," he muttered, still looking dubious, but no longer laughing.

"Will you help? Teach, I mean?"

"I don't know..."

"What else are you going to do?"

"I'll think about it."

"Think about what the History Channel said about how small units operated, not big armies. Like the programs I saw about Mosby's Raiders and the Viet Cong."

"I'll think about it."

"Great. Thanks. I'll see you later."

It was hard to convince most of the adults, but Lyda had one thing in her favor; she knew what she wanted and no one else did. The last person she talked to was a man who was short, but distinguished looking, as if he carried something with him to trim his beard and cut his silver hair. He had been making sporadic attempts at organizing the group so the children would be taken care of. Very few of them were with their parents. Lyda remembered his name easily, Elijah Goldberg.

"What did you say your name was?"

"Lyda Brightner. I was in the desert camp in America back on earth."

"Back on earth? You think we're off earth?"

Lyda hesitated. "Until someone proves different, I think so. Don't you?"

"Hell, I guess so. Hardly anyone else here wants to admit it, though. They're so damn glad to be away from wherever they were before, that they really don't care where they are now, just so long as they get enough to eat and drink and aren't too cold or hot."

"Would you like to do some teaching, Mister Goldberg?"

He laughed, but not at her, which made Lyda Glad. "I heard you were going around trying to get some

classes organized. That's more than most people are doing. Sure, why not? What do you want me to teach?"

"Are you a Jew?" Lyda asked, putting the question to him with the innocent directness of youth.

"Yes, though I'm not orthodox."

"Orthodox. That means, like ... the same?"

"Close. Traditional. There aren't too many orthodox Jews now. What brought this up?"

"I'd like to learn. I don't know anything about Jews, except they were killed off back in one of the big wars."

"Hmm. Sometimes I think most people would be better off not knowing. A little knowledge being dangerous and that sort of thing. Tell you what, how about a history of religion? I know quite a bit along those lines and it doesn't upset people so much if you don't get specific."

"Why would they be upset? You mean like suicide bombers and stuff?"

"Well ... it's a complicated subject. Still..."

"Then you will?"

"All right, all right. But a history of belief, not a particular religion. Okay?"

Lyda beamed. "That's great! Maybe you could help me get it all organized and be in charge of some of it."

"Hey, wait, I didn't ... damn it, all right. Let me think about it overnight, okay?"

"Fine. I'll try to get everybody together after we've slept and eaten. We're all pretty much on the same cycle. There's a word for it that sounds like an insect."

"Circadian rhythm?"

"That's it. If we have classes at the same time every day, our circadian rhythms will stay the same."

"You're a smart girl, Miss Brightner. Someone told me you were the leader of your group on earth. I'm beginning to see why already."

"It was something I had to do from necessity," Lyda said. "Like now."

"You think having classes is necessary?"

"Yes, sir, I do. People have to have something to do or they'll start fighting. I don't want to see any more fighting, not ever."

"Don't count on it," Elijah said sadly, like a person repeatedly burned by the same stove, or who had lost a close relative in a war.

\* \* \* \*

As if Elijah's prophetic name was a harbinger of his words, Lyda became involved in a fight before her school idea was properly off the ground. The morning meeting had gone well enough, with enough volunteers to form five classes to start with, and both a beginning and general purpose school for children under ten. Elijah proved to be a genius with organization, setting aside areas near specific boxes for "classrooms", along with approximate times and curriculum. He was even more of a genius in managing to deflect most credit for his efforts toward Lyda. He referred to her enough times as "Miss Brightner" so others began doing the same. Lyda suspected he had spent some time spreading stories about her achievements in the desert as well. Betty and Sue were fans, too. The two of them told all the other kids and some of the adults that she had been a "Big Boss".

Lyda didn't mind. She already knew that a strong figurehead was much more likely to get things accomplished than someone who had to wheedle and plead. She didn't try to correct all the exaggerations, even if she could have.

The fight happened during the afternoon while she was examining one of the boxes that protruded from the ground at irregular intervals and sizes like square brown huts without doors. She had gone some distance away from their column and had no idea anyone was on the other side of the box until she heard a shrill cry.

"I said no! Stop it!" The voice sounded much like her own, that of a young girl.

"Come on, we can do whatever we want now. Who's to stop us?" A male voice, but a young one, Lyda thought.

"I said I don't want to. Now stop!"

There were more muffled voices, then the sound of a slap.

"Ow. Goddamn you!" A thud followed the expletive.

A scared cry was cut off by another thud before it really had a chance to get started. Lyda decided to have a look. She walked around the corner of the box, then heard the sounds of a struggle from behind the second corner, clearer now.

The girl was pleading. "Don't, John, please don't. I'm..."

Lyda turned the other corner and saw a husky young teenager holding down a girl much smaller than himself while he tore at her blouse and pulled at her bra. One of her small breasts was already exposed by the cup of the bra riding up over it. Blood was trickling from her nose and tears from her eyes, but Lyda still recognized her as a girl named Karen. Lyda couldn't think of her last name, but that didn't matter.

"Stop that!" Lyda said sharply. "Can't you see that she doesn't want you?"

"Who the hell—oh, you're that teacher girl. Get out of here. This ain't none of your business."

"Let her go," Lyda said.

Perhaps it was something in her unwavering stance and direct stare that made him get to his feet and loosen his hold on the young girl, who might have been a couple years on either side of fourteen. She

scrambled out of reach on her hands and knees.

Lyda recognized the boy, a muscular blond youth with a few hairs on his chin. But upright, she quickly saw the disparity in their sizes. He took a step toward her, then another, fists clenched. He looked around and noticed Karen was out of his reach now, though she had stopped and was trying to get her blouse and bra back in order. Lyda glanced in her direction, a mistake. The boy ran the last few steps and grappled with her, trying to throw her to the ground.

Lyda never found out what he intended. She twisted, feeling strength surge into her body. She got one arm free and jabbed her elbow savagely at his side, making him grunt. He was strong, but Lyda found that her own strength matched his, a surprise to both. She got a leg behind him and pushed forward with all her strength, toppling him to the ground with her above him. He hit flat on his back. She came down on top of him with her knee bent. It caught him below the belt and just above the groin, whooshing the breath from him. Using her momentary advantage, she balled her fist and popped him in each eye as hard as she could, then rolled free. She felt the adrenalin coursing through her body, giving her even more energy. As the boy raised up, she kicked him under the chin and the fight suddenly went out of him. She left him laying there, dazed and wondering what had happened. The struggle had lasted less than a minute.

Lyda went over to the girl. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. Thanks, thank you. God, what was I thinking, coming out here with him? He's already tried it with one girl."

"He won't bother you again, Karen," Lyda said confidently. "Come on, let's go back to the column and I'll help you wash the blood off your face."

"Am I bleeding?" Karen rubbed her hand across her face and saw that it came back red. "Damn him. This was my only blouse, too, and there's nothing here to fix it with."

"We'll think of something. Come on. I'm Lyda Brightner, in case you don't remember."

Lyda helped Karen get her face washed, then cut one of the vines and used it to loop through the holes in Karen's blouse. The vine held it together, if not very attractively. That made Lyda wonder if the flat tendril stuff could be cut into really thin strips and woven into a rough cloth. So far, the ones she had torn off in her first hours here and put in her backpack were holding their resiliency; the tears and cuts sealed over immediately and automatically. It was something to try when she got time, or better yet, get some others to work it out, those not interested in the classes being formed.

The entire time Lyda was helping Karen, she was remembering how strong she had been while struggling with the boy. His name escaped her but he was a young and husky male; she shouldn't have been able to overcome him so easily. Her muscular strength had fully matched his. What was happening to her?

"There, that's about the best I can do, Karen. Don't go off alone with anyone again unless you know you can trust them. No cops here, remember?"

"I will now. Uh, maybe you could get a self-defense class together, too? Show us girls how you did that?"

"I can try to arrange a class," Lyda said, but didn't comment further. She didn't think she could show what she had done. Karen was older and bigger than her. She had been unable to fight the boy, yet Lyda



had managed. She had changed, mind and body; Karen hadn't, or at least not as much as she had. Nevertheless, a self-defense class for women was a good idea. All she had to do was find someone to teach it. After her past experiences and the one just now, she thought she could benefit from knowing a few tricks herself; she couldn't always count on being lucky. She knew the boy could have taken her had he used his head and come at her slow, taking advantage of his height and reach. She patted Karen's shoulder.

"I have to go now. No telling what Sue and Betty have been up to while I've been busy. They're getting brave now."

"They're telling everyone you were a big boss at your last place."

"I was," Karen said without elaborating. She figured the two girls she had assumed responsibility for had built her up to resemble a cross between a warrior princess and a ninja adept by now. Betty and Sue were so glad to feel protected and safe that they thought she could do anything—and wait until Karen began talking about today! That would really build her up. A vagrant thought intruded on that image, one from back in school, where an older girl with a reputation for toughness and an inclination to bully younger girls had been beaten up and sent home crying by someone who didn't like her attitude, nor her reputation. That was something she decided to draw a lesson from. Don't abuse your status, she told herself sternly.

\* \* \* \*

A man came into their camp the next day claiming to have circumnavigated the prison they were in while counting and measuring his footsteps. He announced it was at least fifteen or twenty miles around the perimeter. If they were on a spaceship, it was large enough to carry thousands upon thousands of people, Lyda thought. And if the living space had multiple levels, thousands upon thousands more. Maybe millions. It was scary, thinking of being on a spacecraft that large, but from the gravity surges while being transported to this place, she decided they probably were—which brought up a thought even more frightening: where were they being taken?

Lyda tried not to worry about it and continued to concentrate on keeping people busy. The morning classes had gone off in fitful jerks and starts, but when they were over, she noticed the people were more animated than before, talking and even laughing on occasion. Betty and Sue were waiting for her at the box where she had been sleeping—and Rayne was with them.

"Hi," Lyda said. "Is everything all right?"

The girls looked to Rayne. "Oh, yes, we're all fine. It's just that Betty and Sue were wondering if it would be okay to sleep over with me. I've decided to take care of a couple more girls their age and they all get along together."

Lyda didn't hesitate. "Sure, so long as it's safe, and it should be. They're both smart enough to stay with people now. Huh, girls?"

They both nodded. Betty said, "Yes, Miss Brightner."

Lyda smiled. The honorific was catching on fast. "Okay. Have fun and I'll see you tomorrow."

"You heard her. Scoot, girls; I want to talk to Miss Brightner for a moment, then I'll be right along."

As soon as the girls were out of hearing, Rayne put her hands on her hips and tightened her lips. "Now,

would you mind telling me just who and what you are ... Miss Brightner?"

Lyda considered. There was more to Rayne than she had thought at first, and she didn't look as if she would be put off with a bland answer.

"Well?"

Lyda decided that rather than try and evade, the truth would be better. "I'm sorry, Rayne. It's not that I mind people knowing about me, but I don't really like to talk about some of it. However ... I was captured in East Texas, where my dad was killed and probably Mom, too. Then I was transported to the desert, in Arizona or New Mexico, I think. I was captured and ... raped the first day. Then I was going to be sold to a pedophile. I managed to escape, and while I was just trying to survive and keep that from happening again, I got to be sort of a leader. There were some good people who helped me, but I was in charge. Then we were attacked by a gang led by the same man who raped me that first day. I had already anticipated something like that and we defeated his gang completely and captured him and the woman who was his chief helper."

"Oh, you poor baby."

"Then I executed both of them."

Rayne's lips parted in surprise, like she had turned on the evening news and gotten a porn star instead of an anchor. "You killed them yourself?" she finally said.

"I did. After my council voted on it. Then I formed a volunteer task force and sent it to break up the gang buying children for food and water. That gang went to pieces when they heard we were coming for them. My military chief put some good people in charge of the remnants. After that, I had other plans, but the aliens came again."

"My God, I don't believe it. How old are you?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm old enough to know right from wrong and to know we can't just lay around and eat and drink and ... have sex. We have to keep busy and try to improve things where we can."

Rayne held her chin with her forefinger and thumb, rubbing her finger across her bottom lip. After a moment, she said, "All right, I'll support you. I'm getting to know most of the people here pretty well. Call on me if you need help with anyone in particular. And ... Miss Brightner, I should tell you that I was a high school counselor before the monsters came. If you need to talk about any of the things that happened to you, like the, uh, rape, or like that boy you tangled with yesterday, please come see me. Don't let yourself feel guilty or let a bad experience gnaw at you and turn you against the male sex. The vast majority are not like that, I promise. Just talking to someone else can help tremendously. Okay?"

"Thank you," Lyda said gravely. "I appreciate the offer. I might take you up on it."

"Any time. Although you may have already taken care of any residual guilt feelings with your, uh, unique response to the rape."

Lyda granted her a smile. Even she had to admit it was pretty rare for a girl who had been sexually assaulted to act as both judge and executioner of the man who raped her. "Thanks again. I don't feel any guilt over it, but I may want to ask you some other questions later that Mom can't answer now." She had to make a conscious effort to keep her voice from breaking when she mentioned Mom. Just before the

invasion, they had agreed to have a nice long talk about the changes in her body she was beginning to see and feel even then, along with her future as a woman. Lyda had been looking forward to it.

## CHAPTER NINE

Lyda curled up next to the box where she had elected to sleep, somewhat removed from the main group, but she was still awake. She was remembering her conversation with Rayne Austin. She still didn't feel much guilt over killing Bill and his female helper; they had both deserved what they got, probably many times over. But there was an association with the whole sequence of events that she was concerned about. Even before the invasion, when her breasts had just begun growing and she still hadn't reached menarche, she had been mildly interested in boys, a few who didn't act like idiots, anyway. She had reached the point of interest in sex, and was curious about how she would be involved in it within a few years—although from some of the pictures and movies she had gotten a look at, a lot of it had seemed rather weird and unappealing. Now—she didn't know if she would ever want to have sex, despite the way her body was developing so rapidly. She knew that wasn't natural. She also didn't think she was a potential lesbian; that kind of sex was as odd to her as some of the other things she had laughed at and vowed never to do.

Some of the older girls told her and her friends that they would feel differently in a few years, and from the way she had seen adults acting since the invasion, she supposed she might. But now? It didn't seem possible, even in the future. She turned the subject over in her mind again and again and finally berated herself into changing her line of thought. If Rayne was experienced in counseling, she would talk to her; not about the past, but the future. With Mom gone, she was probably the next best choice. That settled, she began planning on what else she could do in the days ahead that would make all their lives easier.

\* \* \* \*

Part of her plans had to be put on hold because of an immediate conflict. She had decided that, just like in the desert camp, a morning meeting with everyone attending would be a good thing. It would help bring them together, she thought. The previous afternoon shortly after their talk, she had asked Rayne to spread the word, and from the looks of the crowd gathered in front of their column, she had been successful.

Lyda climbed up on one of the waist high trays and stood on one corner of it, balancing easily. It put her head above the crowd so everyone could see her. Elijah stood to one side of her and Rayne the other. Elijah put his fingers to his lips and gave a piercing whistle. The talking ceased and Lyda took the cue.

She gave the gathering the most engaging smile she possibly could and was pleased to see it answered here and there in the crowd. "Thank you all for attending, especially those of you who like to sleep late."

That drew a laugh and she continued. "It's great that some of you volunteered to teach classes for the rest of us who don't know as much as you do." More chuckles. It's going good, she thought. "I know I'm going to attend all of the classes that don't overlap, because I sure don't know as much as I should.

Mister Goldberg has volunteered to remain in charge of the organization of the school and..."

A big man with a belligerent countenance stepped forward. "Who the hell are you to be telling adults what to do, kid? Who put you in charge of this place?"

Elijah opened his mouth to say something, but Lyda waved him to silence. This was something she would have to settle herself. She felt her heart begin beating faster. She put her hands behind her so no

one could see that she was clenching her fists to keep her hands from trembling.

"What's your name, Mister?"

"Huh? What does it matter? I asked who put you in charge?"

"It matters because you're acting like you should be the one up here instead of me. Would you like to take over?"

That appeared to deflate him to a degree, but he was still defiant. "No, I just don't like kids telling me what to do."

Lyda pegged him as the type she had seen among the kids at school, always willing to criticize, but never willing to take responsibility. They were hard to shut up. "Well, if you're not even willing to give your name, or do anything yourself, you're perfectly welcome to go somewhere else, while those of us who do want to make this place into something besides a bunch of lotus eaters can get on with the job."

"I don't have to go anywhere!"

"So you don't. But will you please let the rest of us get on with what we're doing?"

"I don't have to..."

"Oh shut up, Barney. Let her talk. I'd rather listen to her than you," Rayne said.

"Yeah, be quiet. I want to listen, too," someone from the crowd spoke out.

Assents from others drowned out whatever else Barney intended to say. A jumble of conversations began, then stopped as Goldberg whistled again.

"You're all fools," Barney said and pushed his way to the back of the gathering. Lyda followed him with her eyes and smiled to herself when she saw that he retreated, but stopped while he was still within hearing.

"No one who wants to live compatibly with others and who tries to learn new things is a fool," Lyda said. "There's lots of stuff we can do, both for amusement and education, just by finding out what everyone did before being captured. For instance, is there anyone here who knows how to play chess? If so, we can make pieces and anyone who wants to can learn. We could have tournaments and such. Same for checkers. I bet most of you know how to play checkers, and I promise, it's not just a kids' game. There's lots of strategy to it." She grinned. "Dad used to beat me regularly until I got on the internet and found out how much there is to it. He still beat me after that, but not so bad and not as often.

"I'll bet we can make cloth out of the tendrils here, too." She reached down and pulled one up to show. "They can be cut into real narrow strips and woven together."

A slow wave of positive nods passed over the crowd and Lyda took that as an indication that she could push a little harder. "Barney wasn't completely out of line, either. No one appointed me as leader here.

Maybe you'd rather see someone else have the job. If so, we could have an election. Why don't you think about that and talk about it for a couple days, then we can bring it up at our morning meeting in ... say, two days from now. Is that okay?"

Again, nods and words of assent. Lyda kept the rest of the meeting short, making only one more major suggestion. "I found out at the last place I was at that things worked better when someone was in charge of various duties, like helping the younger children, handing out food—except so far, there seems to be plenty of that—arranging for the ones most in need to get new clothing, and oh—all sorts of stuff. Why don't you think about that overnight and let's all listen in the morning to ideas about things we need to do, and who's the best qualified for different stuff and so forth. Okay?"

Assent again. Lyda decided to quit while she was ahead, but she found out that like a preacher after church or a lecturer after a talk, she couldn't just up and leave. Many wanted to stay and talk to her. She did the best she could, even when most of the questions asked of her had to do with her adventures in the desert. She answered, but downplayed her accomplishments, rather than trying to exaggerate them, taking her cue from advice Gary had given her. She wondered where Gary was now, along with the others she had led. She hoped each of them had escaped the second capture, but somehow doubted they had; the spider mechs had been numerous and thorough in herding humans aboard the transports.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda thought some more about the need for at least a minimal amount of writing. During the afternoon, she experimented with the tendrils and her little paring knife. It was losing its edge but it was the saw-tooth variety; it would cut for a long time yet. She laid out some tendrils and began carving letters of the alphabet from them, making the letters as small as she could. After some practice, it worked well, even if it was tedious.

"What are you doing?" Betty asked when she hunted Lyda up to ask a question.

"Making the alphabet. Want to help?"

"Sure, but I don't have a knife."

"Why don't you ask around and see who has one? If they won't loan it to you, ask them to come over here to me."

Lyda could understand not wanting to loan anyone something as precious as a knife, and most especially the multiple tooled ones like the Swiss Army Knife that a man turned up with. However, she had little trouble talking the owners into helping with the project and soon was able to leave it in good hands. The next thing would be finding a way to easily attach and detach the letters to cloth, either the alien stuff from earth, or that she wanted to see created here. It would be a cumbersome system and the letters were perforce, large. It was also time consuming but that didn't matter; they had plenty of time. The problem was putting it to productive use.

\* \* \* \*

Aaron Sperlock was disgusted. His handsome, smooth featured face was beginning to show the faintest of frown lines again and he certainly couldn't get another face-lift here! Nor dye his hair again, either. After all his work, too. Like thousands of others, he had been captured by the alien spider mechs and dumped in the sparsely populated areas west of Duckworth, Nevada. Fortunately for him, he recognized a few landmarks from that damnable four years he had spent there in a state prison camp and was able to pinpoint his location. Using that knowledge, as if he had a mind brilliant enough to figure it out, he had connived, bullied, cajoled and on occasions, killed, in order to put himself in charge there. Of course, once he gained control of enough of the slim resources given to the captives by the aliens, he no longer had to do his own killing. Others did it for him, a couple men and one woman he was able to pick out as having minds similar to his own. And sex? No problem there, either. He had the best and the youngest. He knew how females gravitated toward powerful males, those with either money or influence. He used

his charm first, of course; the charm that provided a veneer to conceal what lay beneath. Aaron Sperlock cared about other people only to the extent that they were useful to him. He felt no deep emotions, nor did he consider it a lack. Emotions like love and caring simply left people vulnerable, ready to be taken advantage of. He preyed on them like a fox among barnyard chickens.

Aaron used the grief, confusion and despair of his fellow captives in conjunction with his not inconsiderable charm and charisma to manipulate them into electing him leader of all he surveyed, right up to the alien boundary markers of his territory. While it wasn't the best life he could imagine, it sure beat that one prison stint or the times he had actually been forced to work for money rather than scamming the common herd out of it. He wondered occasionally what the aliens were up to, but he had confidence in his talents; he would come out on top, regardless. Maybe the aliens were looking for men like him to take charge on earth. If so, he would be more than glad to apply for the position. In the meantime, he was showing them just how easy it was to herd the marks, running them around to figurative slaughter like docile sheep.

In this new environment, Aaron had already succeeded with his charm and intimidation campaign on the people who gathered with him around one of the ubiquitous columns that grew food and produced water for them; food and water in abundance, unlike the last place. There would be no way to use it as reward and punishment here, but there were other methods. First, though, he wanted to establish leadership over other nearby groups, and from there, branch out to the rest of them within walking distance. It wasn't that Aaron had such an unquenchable drive for power; he simply wanted to secure the best position possible, and that meant dominating everyone within reach if he could, and eliminating every threat to his well-being while he was at it.

Aaron Sperlock's father had been a preacher and he found that his decision to pass himself off as an "All-faith" minister here was a good one. He laughed inside at the unquestioning acceptance of his assumed identity, and at the way most people were all too willing to follow his suggestions blindly, so long as he lathered them up with prayers and Biblical quotes remembered from childhood. He should have thought of this scam earlier!

Aaron had his chief cohorts here already, two couples who thought it was a good idea to organize all humans within the environs of what most people thought was a spaceship, and to bring the gospel to them—whether they desired it or not. He sent the couples out on scouting expeditions to nearby columns to see what was developing around him and to test the atmosphere. No sense risking his own valuable self when there were always others willing to take the risks for him.

Ervin and Mary, one of the couples that followed and agreed with him, had just returned.

"Reverend Sperlock, there's several groups near us that we think are ready for the gospel. We've told them that we would be back and that you would come with us to preach," Ervin said.

Aaron nodded appreciatively. Ervin spoke while Mary listened. His doctrine of male superiority was taking hold nicely here, just the way he wanted. He was already being served by several female acolytes who saw clearly that in the absence of laws and rules, police and courts; men would dominate simply on the basis of their strength. It didn't take much to convince the men, and the women who didn't like it soon departed. Aaron didn't mind; he would eventually get to them again. It was easy to motivate people in a vacuum of leadership like he had found, especially with the verbal enforcement of pious sounding quotes and his spurious mantle as a minister of the gospel.

"That's fine, Ervin. You've done well. You too, Mary. You're a fine helpmate to Ervin. What else have you found out?"



"We ran across another group that's being led by some little girl. They're pretty well organized but the Devil is loose there. Hardly anyone prays, or blesses the food the Lord has provided."

"What do they do?"

"Oh, she's got them making cloth from that greenery that grows in the trays, and attending classes she talked some of the professor types into teaching and..."

"What kind of classes?" Aaron was intrigued. A little girl as a leader? He wondered if he could use her to reinforce his own position. All through the southern tier of states where he was raised, there had been child preachers, like "Bible Betty", the ten year old and "Preacher Larry", the boy who got the call at six and went on to found a televangelist empire. Kids were naturals when they had the talent, and easy to control. This would bear looking into!

Ervin tried to remember. "Well, there's a storytelling class, where a lady goes on about books she's read, and a ... what do you call making clothes?"

"Tailoring," Mary supplied.

"Yeah, tailoring. They've got some people that own scissors or knives helping. One man is teaching algebra and..."

"How the hades is he doing that without books?"

"They carved alphabet letters and stuff out of the green things from the trays. Then there's the chess and checkers classes and they've got the little kids all going to a kind of kindergarten school. I didn't listen much to them. Oh yeah, there's one old dude teaching a history of religion, but it sure don't sound like it's from the Bible, does it, Mary?"

"No, I heard him saying religion came naturally to humans and didn't need divine inspiration. The day I was there, he started off with a review of what he had talked about earlier, then went on. He was into Jews that day and saying how he would show how the Jewish religion developed and helped Christianity grow."

"Jews! The ones who killed Christ!" Aaron fixed his face into its usual pious expression. "Such blasphemy when we need faith and prayer. I'll have to arrange a real old time revival at that place."

"Praise the Lord," Mary said, hiding her dislike of Aaron Sperlock and Ervin, the man she had chosen to protect her because he owned a large folding knife. He paid more attention to religion than to sex, which suited her fine. Sex was great with the right person, but she wanted to be the one to choose.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda had been elected as "Mayor" of the group, though not without opposition. To still any complaints, she asked her erstwhile opponents, two men and a woman, to help her and Elijah create a constitution.

"It's more like just some simple rules that we can all abide by instead of like the constitution we studied in school. I'll tell everyone what you're doing and they can make suggestions, but it's you three and Elijah and me who will have the final say."

"Isn't that kind of dictatorial?" Troy, one of the men asked. He had been a teacher before being

captured.

"No, because we'll have everyone vote on what we come up with, then once a month, say, or as near as we can judge, we'll have a general meeting where people can suggest changes. How does that sound?"

Troy nodded. He was having a hard time finding fault with Lyda's leadership, even though he had opposed her. "You always seem to be one step ahead of everyone else. That sounds good to me. How about you all?"

Marcia and George, the other two Lyda had selected, spoke together.

"Fine."

"Sounds good."

"Okay, get with Elijah and see when he has a spare time slot to go over it with you. And if you need to write things, Betty and Sue and their gang have carved out lots of letters. You can spread them out on the ground like words on a blackboard. In fact, that would help me, too. I'm having trouble getting everything done and seeing this in writing will keep what we agree on straight in my mind."

"May I make a suggestion ... Miss Brightner?" Troy asked.

"Sure."

"Don't try to do everything at once. You can't and no one else can, either. Spread your duties out a bit and leave a little time for relaxation."

"I guess you're right," Lyda admitted. "Mom and Dad used to make me quit reading and go play with the dog or my friends for at least an hour every evening."

"They sound like they were fine parents," Marcia said.

"They ... were." Lyda wiped at suddenly wet eyes and looked away. The others caught it though, and understood that their Mayor had depths beyond a talent for leadership. She could suffer, just as they had.

\* \* \* \*

"Hello, young lady. I'm Reverend Aaron Sperlock from a couple of columns over. I hear you're in charge here."

Lyda eyed the handsome, black-haired man with the big smile on his face who was extending a hand toward her. She took the hand out of politeness rather than enthusiasm, noting as she did that an inch or two of his hair next to the scalp was growing out with a lot of gray in it. Vanity, she thought, but she knew some adults dyed their hair. Not many men, though. In fact, none that she could think of.

"My name is Lyda Brightner. Most of the folks call me either Mayor or Miss Brightner. What kind of church are you a reverend in?" Lyda didn't smile.

"I'm a reverend of all faiths, young ... uh, Mayor. I believe that all are welcome in God's house. And, as a matter of fact, I'm sort of a mayor myself."

"What can I do for you, Reverend?" Lyda asked.

"I've come to spread the word of God to all who will listen, in the fashion of an old time revival. Don't you think our circumstances call for a return to the faith of our forefathers?"

"Frankly, I think hard work and organization are the first thing we should be concerned with. However, if anyone here wants to listen to you, they're perfectly welcome. You'll have to have your revival far enough away from here so that it doesn't interrupt classes or work, though."

Aaron's huge smile had gradually faded from his face. Where he thought to find a naïve little girl, he found himself facing a beautiful, still developing young woman; one who appeared to have her people well organized and busy. He could change that, though. Just give him time and he would have them praying instead of weaving—or praying while they weaved. Maybe even praying to me, he thought. Why not? That's how the Catholics do it, using priests as intermediaries to God.

"Well, whatever you say, Mayor, but I should think you would cancel other activities long enough for your people to listen to a man of God; to have someone lead prayers to God to return us to the free world—to earth, I mean," Sperlock said.

"I just told you that anyone who cares to can listen. They can skip classes as well. Just do your preaching far enough away so that those who aren't interested don't have to be bothered. Now if you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

Lyda left the preacher and headed directly to a spot by one of the small boxes where Elijah could usually be found. He looked up when he saw her coming.

"Hi, Mayor. I was just trying again to figure out what these damn boxy things are here for."

"Any luck?"

"Not so far, but the aliens must have put them here for a reason. I can hear little sounds coming from inside them occasionally, but I still don't have a clue as to their purpose. What's on your mind?"

Lyda sat down and crossed her legs. "There's a man here who claims to be a preacher. He says he wants to have a revival."

"What did you tell him?" Elijah asked, taking a seat beside her.

"I said fine, so long as he held it far enough away so that it didn't disturb the ones who weren't interested."

Elijah laughed, a big guffaw that died quickly. "Good for you. I saw him before you did; he stopped by here on the way to see you. Did he say what faith he was ordained in?"

"He said he was an all-faith minister, whatever that means."

"Right. A person calling himself an all-faith preacher is usually a fairly good indication that he hasn't been ordained by any recognized religion. Or her, as the case may be. Or perhaps even a defrocked minister. At any rate, let's be a bit leery, shall we?"

"I already am. Do many men dye their hair, Elijah?"

"You noticed, too, huh? Well, it's not necessarily a sign of chicanery, but I caught something else. He's had a face-lift, too."

"Really? How can you tell?"

Elijah shifted positions so he was leaning back against the projecting box. "His face doesn't match his hands. No lines or sags below the chin. And the gray hair growing out from where it was dyed. He's older than he looks. Miss Brightner, I'd watch him very closely. Any time there's a disaster situation or lack of an established authority, the charlatans come out of the woodwork. Sperlock may be okay, but..."

"But he may not, either. I don't want to tell people they can't have religion, though. Not if they want it."

"No you can't. Religion is part of what makes us human. It gives comfort to many people and is a necessity to others. However, religious zealots and proselytizers have caused untold grief in the world, too."

"Like the Muslim terrorists on earth?"

"Well, yes, but they are relatively harmless compared to some jihads in the past. Anyway, I sense this is going to be a problem for you."

"For us, Elijah. I couldn't run this place without you and a few others and you know it."

Elijah offered her a thin smile. "You do know your limitations, don't you? That's good. Many leaders in the history of our race didn't, and they caused untold deaths and destruction. What ideas do you have for dealing with this?"

"For now, I'm going to listen to what the man says the first time he preaches. If he asks people to continue cooperating and doing useful work, I won't interfere. But if he wants people to stop working and learning and spend their time praying and singing and listening to him instead of living under the rules we've instigated, then I'll put a stop to it."

Elijah gazed curiously at her. "Are you sure you can?"

Lyda had already begun thinking about it. A few of Sperlocks's mannerisms had bells ringing in her mind. "Uh huh. You'll have to help a little but it shouldn't take much. Make sure you're there when he preaches, but don't stay right by my side. Here's what we'll do if I think we need to upset his applecart." Lyda outlined her scheme to Elijah.

He slapped his knee in mirth. "Perfect. But what if it doesn't work?"

"You noticed the face-lift. I think there's something else about him that I caught and you didn't. I'll use it if I have to."

"Fine. Tell me."

Lyda did. Elijah nodded. "You could very well be right. Well, we'll see what develops. Do you know, I'm beginning to enjoy life here. I haven't been that enthusiastic over anything since I lost my wife, but just watching you and working with you has given me a new outlook. Others are finally deciding to live again, too. You can be proud of what you've accomplished."

"Thank you," Lyda said, very sincerely. As hard as she was trying, it was nice to know she was having a positive effect on people. "Let me know if anything new develops with the reverend."

"Will do."

Lyda went off to get some sleep, along with most of the other people. Their diurnal cycles were beginning to coincide nicely.

## CHAPTER TEN

Nearly a week later, as they judged time, Sperlock reappeared with Ervin and Mary. He was all smiles and graciousness and mingled with Lyda's group, talking constantly about the need for faith and how he had brought his own group and others to renewed trust in the Lord. He emphasized his role as a minister, admitting that he subscribed to no specific denomination only when pressed. By the time he had spread the word that he would be preaching near the biggest box out from the column in only a few hours, his engaging personality had many of Lyda's people interested. Almost half of them began gathering in the designated area near the time he was supposed to begin.

Most of the classes were called off for lack of enough participants. Some went to hear Sperlock; others had no interest and used the time for other duties or amusements.

Lyda was among the last to arrive. She scanned the crowd and spotted Elijah up near the front. She edged around to the end of the semicircle of attendees and waited until she caught Elijah's eye. He smiled and she returned it, then began observing the people. They seemed interested and happy to have something different to do. A few who she knew were in one or more of the classes saw her and looked away guiltily, like children playing hooky from school.

It took Lyda less than ten minutes to decide to bring a halt to the proceedings. Aaron Sperlock began by telling everyone how guilty they were for failing to have regular prayer services and how he had observed them eating without first asking the Lord's blessing on the bounty He provided. From there, he gravitated to condemning those spending their time listening to teachers who were committing blasphemy by saying religion evolved naturally, rather than being sent to earth by God himself. When he began on the next subject, Lyda had had enough.

"...and I say to you that the Lord created woman from Adam's rib to be a helpmate to man, and to bear his children and to love, honor and obey him. Yea, we have strayed and this hellish place is our punishment. Only by following the dictates of the Lord as given..."

Lyda interrupted Sperlock in a loud voice when he paused for breath. "How long have you been dyeing your hair?"

"I don't..." He suddenly stopped to think and realized that without mirrors, he wouldn't have noticed how much of his last dye job would be growing out by now.

"Yes, you do. It's as plain as day. Are you a liar?"

"Listen here, you..."

He got no further. Elijah fairly shouted. "You've had a face-lift too, haven't you? Are you so vain you have to dye your hair and have plastic surgery instead of ageing naturally? What are you trying to conceal? Who are you, really?"

"I am a minister of the Lord. I have been called..."

"What church called you? You're not even ordained, are you? That Reverend title you throw around isn't any more real than your hair or face, is it?" Lyda had to yell in order to have her girlish voice heard over the rising hubbub and discord. It was sufficient, and Sperlock reacted by looking around wildly while his neck and face took on a red color everyone in sight could see.

"I am a minister of all people. The Lord needs no denominations." His voice cracked with anger while his face showed plainly that every challenge had hit him squarely.

Elijah put the final touch on his credibility, using the tidbit of information Lyda had supplied. "When did you get out of prison, Sperlock? Or is that your real name?"

The outcry after that remark drowned out any possibility of denial. Several men and women moved into his space and began shouting at him. He tried to stand and explain, but Lyda had planned for that, too. Karen sent him running in fear of his life when she yelled, "How many women do you have sleeping with you, you big fake? I heard it's at least three. You don't even believe in the sanctity of one man with one woman."

Lyda watched Sperlock and the man named Ervin running away. Several men made motions to chase after them, causing them to run even faster. Howls of laughter and derision were the capstones of the "revival". Lyda knew that from now on, her people would listen with a jaundiced ear to any other persons who came around seeking to modify their practices or gain followers. A few minutes after Sperlock and his cohort were out of sight, the woman named Mary approached Lyda.

"Miss Brightner—Mayor, I mean. May I talk to you?"

Lyda recognized her and remembered that she had arrived with the fake reverend. "All right," Lyda said, hoping the plain looking woman with her hair tied back in a loose ponytail wasn't going to try and defend Sperlock.

"That was a good thing you did, exposing that man. He's got a lot of people buffaloed into believing every word he says."

"Then why were you with him?"

Mary looked down at her feet, then back up, trying to match Lyda's level gaze. "It's a man's world now, except ... except I heard it's not like that here. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right. We treat everyone equally and we've made up rules to live by."

"May I stay here? I promise I won't be any problem."

"You're welcome, so long as the food and water is supplied like it has been. If it starts running short, we'll have to split some people off to other columns. In that case, it will be first here, first choice. Okay?"

"That's fair."



"Fine. Go to the column and read our rules." Lyda smiled at her in the way she did for a person who appeared to be sincere in their desires.

In the days that followed, Lyda did notice there was more praying and blessing of the food provided in abundance from the column, but no one attempted to organize regular services. There was a vague feeling among the people that Lyda accepted and approved of private faith but wanted no rabble-rousing clerics. After some thought, she did proclaim that every seventh day would be a day of rest, to be used for whatever activities suited individual tastes. That left room for gatherings of those who needed or wanted religion in their lives, but it was called neither Sunday nor any other designation of a religious nature. Everyone began referring to it as "Rest Day" and the name stuck.

\* \* \* \*

Time passed. Lyda sent out envoys to other columns where people had grouped, offering to teach them all the things she and her helpers had begun and encouraging them to develop simple rules to live by as her own community had done—or to join with her group in a loose association or confederacy to promote the exchange of ideas, and for increased companionship and the opportunity to make new friends. She was pleasantly surprised to find that other nearby groups were glad to follow her lead. Stories about her had spread through the wandering of some of her constituents who liked to explore and meet new people. In time, that led to a gathering of leaders; held at Lyda's column by consensus.

There were an even dozen who attended, each with two aides as Lyda had suggested. She had done that to be as certain as she could that each group got a fair rendition of the meeting.

It went even better than she had hoped after the other leaders' initial surprise at how young she was, how easily she was able to speak and propound her ideas of the best way to live together and how Elijah and Troy, her aides, deferred to her and referred to her as "Miss Brightner", or "Mayor". Lyda was careful to address the other leaders as Mister and Missus, which eased them into feeling comfortable when addressing one so young by title. Before long, she thought most of them stopped thinking of her as a child and accepted her as their equal—or superior.

Lyda had Elijah read her agenda from woven tendril cloth with alphabet letters affixed to it by a loose pasty substance squeezed from a plant growing in the trays, discovered by experimentation. The improvised writing impressed them as much as the actual words.

Elijah began. "Miss Brightner developed our agenda from the best suggestions passed on to her at our weekly "Town Meeting". I'll read them off.

"First, she believes you should each have a formal set of rules for your people to live under, but the particulars should be left up to each group. In short, what we like, may not necessarily be what you do and we certainly don't want to dictate our agenda to any of you.

"Second, she thinks it would be a good idea to have a way for us to formalize unions of men and women or um, other pairings, and to record them in the ledger where we've already written out what we call our Charter that's posted on the side of the big tray there." Elijah pointed, again impressing the other leaders and their assistants. "Also, she proposes that each group recognize the others' unions, no matter how they are performed."

That got general nods of acceptance around the circle they were sitting in.

"Next, Miss Brightner would like us all to agree on a common span of time in office of the leaders, and

to all have elections to either confirm the sitting leaders, or to elect new ones. We've already had our election and as you know, selected Miss Brightner as our Mayor by a substantial majority. For the time being, she appoints her own aides, but she suggests we have the people confirm all our choices in order to let everyone be satisfied that cronyism is being avoided. That's what we did and it seems to have worked fine. We've had no complaints.

"We would also like to form a scientific council, to rotate among our groups, the purpose being to exchange information about the aliens and discoveries we've made or any of us make in the future, not only about the aliens, but about this place we're in as well. Anything we can learn may help us survive future difficulties imposed on us by the aliens.

"We've begun schooling for youngsters and classes for adults, but we don't propose to make them mandatory.

"Miss Brightner asks that we exchange information and methods of caring for the young, almost all of whom have been separated from their parents."

Elijah continued on through several other proposals, including methods of arbitration, formation of an inter-column police force, with training by those with previous experience in legal or law enforcement professions, and regular meetings of elected leaders.

A woman shook her head approvingly after Elijah finished speaking. "Damned if you haven't covered just about all the points I wanted to bring up. One thing you missed is medical care, though. Don't we need to coordinate that, especially for the elderly? Though I'll confess, I haven't seen many old people. I know we have hardly anything to work with, but what we do have could be shared."

Lyda nodded and gave the woman her best approving smile. "You're right. That's one point we didn't think of; I guess because we haven't had much sickness here, nor any really old people to care for." She wondered why momentarily, but it was only a passing thought.

Several other items were added by other leaders, some of which needed to be hashed out and simplified, but at the end of the meeting, the vote was unanimous to accept the agreed upon points.

Lyda thanked them each for coming and surprised a few of them by remembering each and every name of both leaders and aides. She had found that having to do without most written matter sharpened the memory admirably. And as her body continued to develop, she thought her mind was keeping pace; and with both, there was still that sense of vitality and well being.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda stayed so busy for a time that she kept putting off the talk she had decided to have with Rayne Austin. It was bothering her that she still had no interest in sex when by rights and by the looks of her body, it seemed to her she should. One day when she had no really pressing affairs to tend to, she finally asked Rayne if they could have a private meeting.

Rayne was easy to talk to, and she made sure they were alone, taking Lyda for a slow walk back toward the edge of the environs where they had been ejected from the transports, and conversing along the way in a casual, rather than formal setting.

Lyda began after they were out of hearing of any of the group. "I'm pretty well adjusted to having my periods and they're regular so I don't think I have any problems with that, nor anything else physically. But..."

"But that's not all of it, huh?"

"Not at all, Rayne. For one thing, I've been developing awfully fast. Have you noticed?"

"Yes, but I can't say whether that's normal or not for you. Some girls grow up faster than others. You're turning into a very pretty young lady. I've seen how the young boys and men look at you."

"That's one of my problems, though," Lyda admitted. "I don't seem to have any interest in them. Before I was ... raped, I was starting to think about boys and getting curious about sex. You know, the mechanics of it and all. After that, it just stopped for some reason. But at the same time, I began to notice that there's something different inside me. It's really hard to explain. It's like I feel so much better than before the aliens came, like ... like I can do almost anything if I set my mind to it."

"Hmm. You know, I've noticed a bit of that in myself, and I've heard a few others talking about it, so I don't think it's related to you growing up. Perhaps it's an effect produced by the aliens, but we have no way of knowing or a way to measure internal changes, like with ECG's and PET scans. Let's leave that for another time. Now, so far as your lack of interest in sex; well, that happens. You had a terrible experience. But please, don't let that become a dominating influence in your life. It was in no way your fault and what you went through was not an example of what sex is supposed to be like. Sex isn't just for reproduction, as I'm sure you know. Our bodies have evolved to enjoy sex and that's how it should be. It's a wonderful thing when it's done with the right person—with someone you care for."

"Oh, I know what happened isn't my fault. But—well, I'm not completely innocent, you know. I know it's supposed to be nice. But at school, the kids passed pictures and downloads and video clips of lots of sex stuff that didn't look very enjoyable."

Rayne slowed her steps so that Lyda didn't have to worry about keeping up. "You do know that most of the trash you see on the internet isn't normal, don't you?"

"Well, some of the girls said a lot of it was. A bunch of it sure looked icky to me, though. Even disgusting."

"I can just imagine what you've seen from the things that used to show up on my own computer. Some of the acts you've seen are perfectly normal, but some are what we call fetishes. And almost all pornography degrades women in some way."

"Why do they do it then?"

"There are many reasons why a woman gets into that sort of thing, and men as well. Some do it for money, some are in thrall to men or women who force them into it. Some are drug addicts who do it to get money to support their habits. Some men participate just to get lots of sex with good-looking women." When Lyda remained silent, Rayne continued. "Tell you what, you tell me what you think is abnormal and I'll either confirm or deny. Or if it embarrasses you, I can simply run through the itinerary of what I suspect you've seen and tell you one way or the other whether it's normal or not. How's that?"

Lyda elected to let her talk while she listened and asked an occasional question. Rayne started slow, describing foreplay, kissing, normal positions for intercourse. Also included in Rayne's speech was birth control, and how Lyda had to be very careful now that they were in an environment where no birth control other than the rhythm method was available, which she also explained. When Rayne began to discourse on other subjects, Lyda stopped her often. She wanted to be certain she was not

misunderstanding what was normal and what wasn't.

"That's really something most women do, putting it in their mouth?"

"Yes—say at least half of all women. And vice versa, of course."

"It sounds unsanitary."

Rayne chuckled. "Most things we do are a bit unsanitary. We live in a world of germs. But take my word for it; with a man you like, it's something you can do that will please him immensely. And you'll find out, that when you please a man, most of the time it turns out to be pleasurable for you, too. You'll learn to enjoy it because it's part of the mutual sharing with a man you care for." Rayne chuckled. "And in our present circumstances, it's a very good method of birth control!"

"I guess it would be," Lyda said. "How about homosexuals? Are they normal? I've heard opinions both ways."

"Most of them are normal. It's partly genetic and partly environmental, but men who like men and women who like women simply develop that way; they usually have no choice in the matter. Fortunately, in our times, we've come to recognize that fact. In the olden days, it was considered a very serious crime. You could be locked up, beaten, ostracized and have all manner of bad things happen to you. In those days, most homosexuals never admitted it to anyone except others like themselves. They had to live their whole lives in fear of being exposed."

Rayne looked back over her shoulder. They had come a long way. "Let's start back, shall we?"

Lyda turned over all the things Rayne had told her in her mind, sorting out and discarding misconceptions she had been carrying around. There was still one unanswered question, though.

"Why am I not interested in sex, Rayne? That can't be normal."

"I think it is. You're a very mature person for your age; no, I should say you're very mature, period. And that means you've gone way beyond the boys and young men close to your age, but you're not quite old enough physically for grown men yet. Besides that, you've got lots of responsibilities that very few girls as young as you ever have. You have a lot on your mind. And remember, I told you some girls develop faster or slower than others? That goes for sexual interest as well. Just be patient; it will come. And when it does, take it slow and be cautious. Experiment with kissing and holding and touching with the ones you're attracted to, but save the actual sex until you've got it settled in your mind that you're ready and that you really care for the man."

That sounded like a good answer to Lyda. "Thanks, Rayne. You've been a really big help. I bet you were a great counselor."

"I like to think I was, and I don't believe in false modesty. If you know of other youngsters, male or female, that you think are in need of a little help and some honest answers, send them to me. I'll do my best."

"I know you will," Lyda said, sincerely.

Lyda slept very soundly every night after that. She realized after she and Rayne separated that some concerns that had been bothering her were lifted. Before their talk, she had dreamed at least once every

few sleep periods of Big Bill's assault. Now, the nightmares became fewer and fewer and gradually, ceased altogether. She looked confidently to the future and dreamed of storybook princes instead, along with the normal vaguely erotic dreams of youthful girls.

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From time to time, Lyda's volunteer wanderers stopped back by and reported on happenings from other parts of the environment. Sperlock had been run off from several groups after word spread of his deceptions, but he was still holding forth at a column near the edge of the great circular area occupied by humans. There were two other places she heard about that she wanted nothing to do with and warned her people and the other leaders about. There, small bands of men were roaming about committing atrocities, but so far, they were staying away from the area of her confederacy, with its Monitors, as their arbitration and enforcement people were called. They had been organized to help keep order and resolve minor disputes and pass major ones on up the line. The only punishment for infractions was two warnings and then exile. Eventually, Lyda intended to bring the whole spaceship, if that's what it truly was, under the control of her confederacy. Not wanting to push her views, she was taking her time and urging the other leaders not to go too fast. Their authority was being accepted readily now and she didn't want to spoil the gains they had made.

Lyda was busy and happy and still growing in mind and body. And finally, she began to mingle more frequently with the younger people, being careful not to go too far and dilute her authority with too much familiarity. There was even one young man of eighteen or so, Gavin Tamrick, who she was surprised to find herself beginning to like in a way that she recognized as sexual attraction. He was tall and slim with cornsilk yellow hair and blue eyes innocent of guile. He was also very intelligent and had already been in college, studying ecology and zoology, when the aliens came.

One thing that attracted her to him in the first place was that he had managed to tame a few of the little six legged creatures she had encountered on her first day here; the ones that lived in the trays that grew the tendrils and a few other varieties of alien flora. He showed her one day how the little animals had burrows in the trays, which were cunningly concealed by arranging green tendrils so they could squeeze in and out of the holes without disturbing them. Gavin had no idea where the burrows went—they descended down past the bottom of the trays, which were made of the same material as the ground they walked on.

He showed Lyda how to make friends with them. "I've been calling them hexies, for their six little feet. They'll always run from you at first, but if you put your hand down in the tray with a bit of food and hold it there and be patient, they'll come nearer and nearer. It took me days before the first one would take food from my hand. Then if you go to another tray, you have to start the process all over again. They don't appear to communicate."

Lyda was impressed. "What are they for, do you know?"

Gavin ran his forefinger along the ridge of soft bristles adorning the back of the little hexie he had enticed out. He was showing Lyda how tame they could be once they were used to a person. "I really don't know what they're for. They're curious, though; no, I mean there are curious things about them. For instance, when you run your finger along their ridges, you can feel a vibration, sort of like a cat purring. They can learn, too. Some idiots have killed them for no reason at all. Once that happens, any of them in the same tray will never come close to a human again." He let the creature nibble from the bit of column berry in his hand while Lyda watched.

Besides the six legs that had no visible joints, they were identical at each end, with a cluster of catfish-like tendrils covered with very short and thick hairlike growths that were softer to the touch than

the crest running along their backs. Beneath the tendrils was a mouth with sharp little teeth.

"They're funny looking, but kind of cute. Do you think this one would let me pet it?"

"We can try," Gavin said. "I'll rub its back and you try it, too, but be very slow about letting it see your hand. Stick out one finger so it will know what you intend to do. Don't be disappointed if it runs for its burrow, though; they're very cautious."

Lyda tried it. Surprisingly, the creature allowed her touch. She felt the tiny little rumbling that reminded her of a kitten when it was first learning to purr but it wasn't audible at all.

"I can feel a vibration but I can't hear him," Lyda whispered.

"It may be a her. Or an it, for all I've been able to discover. And after a while, they'll start running those whiskers over your hand if you let them. You can feel the purr then, too."

After a while, they walked on, hand in hand. Lyda felt a peaceful harmony in their companionship, something she realized she had been missing ever since the arrival of the aliens.

One night, she returned to her sleeping space thinking that kissing was a nice way to express affection. Gavin hadn't been so shy that he asked permission, but neither had he been overly forceful. Lyda went to sleep with the memory of his lips on hers and wondering how fast she should let the incipient romance develop. A dozen sleep periods later, the big hexapods were turned loose and she had little chance to think of anything else for a long time.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lyda woke up to the unfamiliar sounds of heavy scuttling and noises that resembled both growling and the yapping of coyotes with a bit of hissing mixed in for good measure. She sat up, alerted by the oddity of the dissonant clamor. In the distance, she heard yells and screams of fear and confused voices that made no sense—until she got her first glimpse of what was going on.

A creature with a body colored and shaped somewhat like an oversized, two-headed red dachshund, but much larger, was crouched on six muscular, jointless legs facing her. Like the little hexies, both ends had the same whiskery tendrils sprouting from a bulbous, snoutless appendage that might be a head. The mouth below the tendrils was opening and closing, displaying double rows of sharp, pointed teeth. Even crouched, if that was what its stance indicated, Lyda could tell that it would stand at least waist high to her. If it raised from its present stance, it would be as high as her chest.

Lyda's first reaction was to feel for her gun. The creature hissed and scuttled closer in response to her movement. She hesitated, realizing that because of its size, bullets from her little pistol would be more likely to antagonize it than kill it. Besides, she didn't want to have to kill again, either animal or human—and this big thing looked very much like Gavin's hexies. Maybe if she was careful, it wouldn't hurt her. She sat very still, waiting to see what the creature would do. She could feel her pulse racing and fear threatening to overcome her. She beat the fear back down to where she could think rationally and tried to slow down her racing pulse. She remembered how Gavin had tamed the little ones and that helped to steady her nerves. Strangely, the animal made no further move as she stared at it; it appeared to be doing the same to her, though it had no visible eyes. She did notice that it had a cream colored crest on its back that continued all the way down to where the tendrils began. It thickened there and the



short fat hairs were longer; they were twitching in that area as if a flea was burrowing around and sampling its blood, or whatever bodily fluids served that purpose. She didn't think it was an insect, though; the movement of the thick hairs appeared to be rhythmic, as if they were purposeful.

Louder screams erupted from the area of the column where most people slept. Lyda wanted to go find out what was happening, though she already suspected she would find creatures like the one right in front of her there, too. She thought again of Gavin and the way he had tamed his hexies. Would that work on an animal this size? Maybe, but she doubted that most people would stand still long enough to try it, not when they saw the fearsome teeth the new inhabitants of their realm sported.

Moving slowly, Lyda very carefully got to her feet. She stood still for a moment, then began a slow shuffle, sliding one foot cautiously forward, pausing, then moving the other. *What am I doing?* The thing could kill her in an instant if it wanted to. Yet, she had to do something. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she had the idea that running away wasn't the answer. Surely, it would be able to move faster on six feet than a human could on two.

Lyda got close enough to the animal so she could see that the thick hairs twitching just above the tendrils were speckled with iridescent dots, almost like tiny faceted eyes. It still didn't move from its position.

Slowly and carefully, she reached out her hand. The tendrils straightened out to meet it and began exploring her fingers, then moved to the back of her hand and on underneath to her palm. It tickled and she stifled a laugh for fear of alarming the beast. Her suppressed mirth seemed to release something in the hexapod at the same time. It moved a foot or so past her. Lyda kept her hand in the same position so that as it moved, its crest came under her touch. Like the little hexie, the big hexapod began a subaudible rumbling she could practically feel in her bones, like sound waves so deeply bass, only the vibrations could be sensed.

The rumbling was not at all unpleasant. It slowed and burbled and rumbled again as the animal moved on past her at a slow, six legged walk. It stopped, then came the other way without turning around, like a train with an engine at each end. It rumbled again, then picked up speed after it was past her the second time, and headed off toward a distant column where one of the confederated groups lived.

Lyda let out a sigh of relief and turned back toward her home base, where the noise had not abated, but only grown worse and shriller, with panic the overriding tone. She hurried, but didn't run. As she came close, she shuddered. Several bodies lay on the ground, bloody and unmoving. Others sat or lay against the minimal shelter of the column. Most of her group had disappeared. She searched and found Rayne and Elijah, but not Karen or Troy or the rest of her assistants.

"Did one animal do all this?" Lyda asked Rayne as she bent to help her with a pressure bandage she was applying to a badly slashed man.

"There were lots of them. They came out of the boxes; some big, some little; I guess their sizes depended on how big the boxes were. Here, hold this in place while I get something to tie it on with."

Rayne's voice was evenly professional. Once the carnage was over, she was all concern, using her vocational LVN training required of secondary school counselors in her home state.

Lyda held the improvised dressing in place until Rayne returned, but spent the time trying to see how many were dead or wounded. And watching for more of the denizens who had created the slaughter. Could it possibly have been caused by the same kind of animal that had allowed her to stroke it? She asked Rayne while she tied on the bandage.

The description matched the animal she had met, despite the varying sizes of those that had swept

through her group. It sickened her and made her wonder immediately whether or not the alien organisms had been provoked.

Elijah saw her with Rayne and hurried over. "Miss Brightner! God, I'm glad to see you. I thought you might have been caught and killed when your box emptied out."

Lyda frowned. "All the boxes had those animals in them?"

"Yes. Every one of them around here, anyway."

"What started them killing? Did someone hurt one of them?"

"I have no idea. Maybe. I woke up and one of the smaller ones was right next to me. I just stayed where I was. Frankly, when I saw those teeth, I was too scared to move, then when I did, it was very slowly."

"I just closed my eyes and prayed," Rayne said. "There was a huge one that came toward me. Some man kicked at it, then tried to stab it with his knife. It knocked him down and ripped out his throat, then it came for me, or I thought it did." She shivered. "I just stood still and closed my eyes. I could see there was no use running. The next thing I knew, it was right next to me. I still didn't move and after a bit, it left." She shrugged. "Maybe if you leave them alone, they won't hurt you. Come help me with that woman over there. She's got some broken bones that need to be splinted somehow."

As they approached the badly injured woman, another of the creatures came into sight, a huge one, much bigger than the one Lyda had seen. Rayne shrank back; Elijah attempted to place himself in front of Lyda.

"Just stand still and let it see that we're not threatening it," Lyda said. "That's what I did." She moved slowly up beside Elijah, wondering at his bravery. He had intended to place his own body in harm's way to protect her.

"Yeah, I stood still, too," Elijah said. "But I was too damn scared to move anyway."

Somehow, Lyda thought Elijah was downplaying his role during the attack. He must have tried to avoid the appearance of threatening behavior right from the start.

The big hexapod scuttled up to them. As before, Lyda slowly reached out her hand, and just like the other had done, it examined her with its tendrilly whiskers, then moved along so that her hand stroked its crest as it passed. It was neck high to her and its rumbling response was enough to shake her body.

"Be damned," Rayne said as it went on its way, its six legs moving in a hodgepodgelike pattern that was hard to make sense of, other than it carried the creature along at a fast pace without it appearing to be in a hurry.

"I think they're only dangerous if we provoke them," Lyda said. "We need to get the word out quickly before more people get hurt or killed. If we don't, people will start using whatever they can find to attack the things. And that may make them even more dangerous to us."

"I agree," Elijah said.

"Who's left here?" Lyda asked. "Do either of you know?"

"Gavin is on the other side of the column helping some others who were hurt. There's a band of men around somewhere trying to tie tendrils and cloth and vines together into clubs. The kids scattered and most of the women are trying to round them up," Rayne said. "I got all that while I was tending to the wounded."

"I should have gotten here sooner," Lyda said miserably. "I could have prevented a lot of this. But I was like Elijah; I had to stand still and wait."

"No use worrying over what might have been," Rayne said.

"Yes, I guess not. Listen, Elijah, will you help me by going one way while I go the other and tell people how to handle these things? Otherwise, there's going to be lots more like this poor woman." The one with the broken bones had been tossed against a box by a big hexapod rearing up and using its front pair of appendages like hands to grab the woman and throw her like a rag doll. Her outstretched arms had shattered when she attempted to save her body from being hurt worse as she slammed into the side of the box.

"Sure. And if I can find anyone who'll stay and watch, and a hexapod that will cooperate, I'll give them a demonstration."

Lyda waved consent and headed toward the column. Behind her, both Elijah and Rayne grinned at each other, seeing her going in the direction where she knew Gavin was located.

She found him standing between two medium-sized hexapods with a hand on each of them, stroking their crests and talking to a wary collection of men, woman and a few children.

"See, they're not dangerous; in fact, they like to be petted. You just have to move slow and let them get used to you. Come on now, some of you try it; it's the only way to stop them from attacking."

One little eight year old girl wiggled out of her keeper's grasp and ran toward Gavin.

"Slow!" he cautioned. "Take it slowly, Merrilyn."

The girl slowed down and stopped beside one of the animals while Gavin kept his hands on their crests. She reached up and began stroking it, then laughed as she felt the rumbling stir her body like her daddy's old massage chair when he let her sit in it.

"What's his name?" Merrilyn asked.

"I call this one Tweedledee and this one Tweedledum. Dee and Dum for short." Gavin saw Lyda watching him. He nodded with a gladdened expression, then winked at her. Lyda smiled back at him, feeling the anxiety ease from her mind at seeing him safe and well.

"Can I ride one of them?" the girl asked.

"Not yet," Gavin told her. "Just pet them at first and remember, always move slowly when you're around them. And never run, no matter how big they are. Who's next?"

One by one, most of the band that had gathered around him came cautiously forward and touched Gavin's pets. As quickly as they were satisfied, Lyda picked several of them who had shown the most confidence and asked them to go to the nearby columns and show other people how to handle the

animals. She waited until the rest had finished, then stroked them briefly herself. She looked around. Everyone had either gone or was going. She stood on tiptoe and gave Gavin a brief kiss. "Please help everyone as much as you can, Gavin. Show them they won't get hurt so long as they're gentle with the creatures. I need to see what else is happening and what else we can do for the people who have been hurt."

"Sure, Ly—uh, Miss Brightner. I'll take Dee and Dum around with me. That ought to help. Come on, Merrilyn. You can be my assistant."

"I can?"

"Sure. You were the bravest person here. You came first."

Merrilyn beamed.

Lyda began counting heads and getting the column's people organized, what remained of them. After that, she would see to the other groups in the confederacy.

\* \* \* \*

The carnage had been horrible. Many sleep periods later, some of which she had skipped in order to keep their little society organized and help with the wounded, Lyda met with the other surviving leaders.

Only half of them were still alive. Like the good people they were, many of them had insinuated themselves between the creatures and those of their charges who had aggravated the suddenly appearing animals. Luckily, Lyda had spread Gavin's discovery of how to tame the little tray-dwelling hexies in the days before the big ones were pushed into the environment by the aliens. Some, like herself, had either consciously remembered, or extrapolated the knowledge of Gavin's techniques to the bigger hexapods.

"There's still plenty of the 'pods roaming around, Miss Brightner, and some people just can't make themselves face them, especially the big ones. They run, and if it's been antagonized in the past, it will take off after them. They don't always kill, but they hurt and maim—and you know we have no painkillers and damn little in the way of anything to set bones or sew up gashes." The woman speaking was Savella Meister, a competent former nurse who had stepped in to replace the wounded leader of her column's community. He was still alive, but in great pain and unable to move about.

"We just have to keep trying," Lyda said. "And somehow, we've got to stop those bands on the other side who have devised weapons and are killing the hexapods for the meat or because they still think they're dangerous. That's just making it worse for the rest of us."

"How can we stop them? We can barely take care of ourselves right now."

Lyda had brought Gavin with her as her resident hexapod expert. She turned to him. "Gavin, do you have any ideas?" He had just returned from a days-long expedition to other columns, spreading the word of how to tame the hexapods.

"I learned something that might be useful, but..." He closed his mouth in a firm line and a pensive expression formed on his face, the one Lyda found he wore when different thoughts were conflicting. "...well, if you make real good friends with a 'pod, it will fight other 'pods for you. But I don't like it and I don't think they like it either. Afterward, their rumble isn't nearly as obvious and you get the impression that they've done something that goes against their grain. Frankly, we still know so little about them yet that I would be hesitant to use that approach."

"Do you think they would fight people? If you showed them which ones you wanted them to attack?"

"Miss Brightner, I don't know. They are such friendly creatures, I would hate to get them started doing something like that. It might turn out to be the worst thing we can do." Gavin was careful to address Lyda by her title when other people were around. She hadn't even had to tell him that; he was intelligent enough to know better instinctively. Lyda wondered sometimes if he was like her and felt a vitality and self-assurance over and above the normal energy and enthusiasm of youth. She intended to ask him after this crisis was under control.

"You may be right, Gavin, but give it some thought. I know that Buddy follows me around like a puppy part of the day."

"Buddy?" someone asked.

"That's what I call the 'pod that I met that first night. I don't know where it goes other times, but the last few hours before I go to sleep by my box, it shows up and sticks close. It's like it knows not to come around in the mornings when I'm having meetings and checking on progress and activities and helping the nurses and so on."

"Dum and Dee stay with me, too. Listen, much as I hate to, I'll take a run toward the other side of the circle and see what develops—and what happens if I'm attacked. Maybe they will fight humans, as well as other hexies to protect their friends."

"See me before you go," Lyda told him.

Gavin nodded, then sat silently while the others talked, merely answering such questions as he could about the hexapods when asked. Mostly, he had to say he didn't know. He did reveal that despite their fearsome teeth, they appeared to be vegetarian in nature, rather than carnivores.

An hour or so later, Lyda stood up. "I guess that's all for now, then. We'll give it a few more days here for stragglers to show up, then try to get back into our routines. I hope you all will, too. We can't let something like this ruin what we've accomplished."

"Have you ever thought that the damn aliens are purposely making survival as hard as possible for us?" Savella asked as a parting question.

"I've thought of it," Lyda acknowledged, "but I can't see rhyme nor reason why they're doing all these things to us. That's still no reason to sit down and give up, though. Gavin, come along, please. I need to talk to you before you leave."

\* \* \* \*

"You mean you've had this all along and never let on?" Gavin asked, holding the pistol Lyda had placed in his hand. His blue eyes glinted with admiration.

"I thought it best to keep it a secret. And you do, too. I don't ever want to lead by intimidation. But I wanted you to have it on your trip." She smiled prettily at him. "And you be careful. I've never had a boyfriend before. I want you to come back to me."

Gavin tucked the gun away in his jacket pocket. He put his arms around her waist and Lyda let him pull her close. The hug turned into a kiss and the kiss lingered. Lyda parted her lips and welcomed his tongue, the first time for that. She felt her body responding with a pervading excitement completely new to her.

When she finally broke the kiss, she looked into the blue of his eyes and thought she could easily get lost there. She lay her head against his chest for a moment, then turned him loose. After he left, she watched his diminishing figure until it was out of sight.

\* \* \* \*

Gavin was gone four days. While he was away, Lyda got the classes and their minute industries going again; sent scouts out to try to find missing children and tried her very best to present an example of facing the alien trials with determination and confidence. She was pleased to see her attitude percolating among the survivors, like a charismatic mayor getting a city back in order after a natural disaster. She never hinted that she, like Savella, was beginning to believe the aliens planned all the nasty surprises for reasons of their own. It would do no good and could only harm morale for the majority to believe that the next catastrophe lay just around the corner.

Every afternoon, Buddy appeared and tagged her footsteps like Tonto following the Lone Ranger. She didn't know whether it (though she had begun calling it "he") was being protective, or simply seeking her companionship. Either way, she came to like having him around. The soundless rumbling when he was petted always vibrated through her body like the best of a whole body massage, sometimes so intense that it made her shiver with delight. At sleep time, he tucked his jointless legs under him like a cat laying in a shaft of sunlight. His whiskers flattened over the rounded appendage at each end of his body and lay quiescent. Eventually, he would get up and stand by the box. It opened and he disappeared within it as if it were his home. Lyda wasn't tempted to follow. She had gotten a report of one person who had tried and never reappeared.

\* \* \* \*

Gavin returned with one of his arms in a bloody, improvised sling with the tale of a vicious gang that had learned how to hunt the hexapods by singling out one traveling alone and surrounding it like a pack of hungry wolves. They would then slaughter it with clubs and spears, made of vines tied and stuck together in overlapping strands to make them rigid enough to support a knife or other sharp object attached to the end. It put the hexapods' fangs out of reach and they appeared not to know how to overcome the disparity.

Gavin had sustained his wound when he attempted to stop one such incident.

"I tried to tell them that they could make friends with the 'pods a lot easier than hunting them down and killing them, but they didn't want to listen. And get this; they're eating parts of them. Apparently, they have a good taste. I'm scared that idea will spread. People get tired of the same food all the time."

Lyda touched his arm tenderly. "How did this happen?"

Gavin looked away for a moment, then met her gaze. His eyes were damp with unshed tears. "I was trying to save Tweedledee. He went off by himself for some reason and got caught by them. I did find out one thing, though. Our 'pods will fight for us if we're threatened. One of those bastards won't be bothering anyone again, and another will speak soprano the rest of his life, if he lives.

"Lyda, I don't know how to describe that gang, other than that they're vicious. If I hadn't had your pistol, I doubt that I'd be alive right now, or Tweedledum either." He stroked his remaining pet fondly and was rewarded with a blissful rumbling only he could feel. He closed his eyes and let it course through his body before continuing.

"You had the right idea when you said we'd have to do something about them. And the sooner, the better. There aren't many of them, but they are monsters. I saw some women with them, all roped



together like a coffle of slaves I saw in a history museum in New Orleans once. Some of them looked like they had all the spirit beaten out of them. They walked with their heads hung down like they didn't care anymore what happened. But there were others I could see who glared pure hatred at the sorry bastards. I'd bet anything that if they had a chance, they'd gut every one of them and leave them laying in a pile of their own intestines."

Lyda shivered at the memory of Big Bill, the first time she had thought of him in a long time. She supposed Gavin knew what had happened to her; it was common knowledge, even though no one talked about it. Something he said made her think of possibilities.

"You said they were roped together?"

"Uh huh. With rope made from braided tendrils, it looked like."

"Do you think if we got in among them long enough to cut the ropes, they'd fight?"

"Oh yes, most of them would probably like nothing better. But, Lyda, I don't want you to..." Gavin cut the sentence short when he saw her face. When he was alone with her, it took an effort to remember that this slight, pleasantly curved girl who was still a bit shy of her fourteenth birthday was not only the leader of their group, but the head of the confederacy of columns. "Sorry. I know you have to do what's necessary. It scares me, though. I care for you. A lot."

"I care for you, too, Gavin. And it scares me, too, but that doesn't absolve me of responsibility. We're going to have to do something sooner rather than later, before they get stronger."

"What are you planning, if I may ask?"

"I'm not sure yet. I'll have to think about it and talk to the others. In the meantime, get your arm out of the way so I don't hurt it. I'm going to hold you real close and kiss you again."

Gavin grinned at her, then bent to meet her lips and held her with his good arm while they cemented and reinforced their bonding. Lyda wondered if she might not be in love, and that night thought about what sex with Gavin might be like. Given a little more time, she intended to find out.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Lyda sent Elijah to warn the other leaders about the gangs and to pass on more information about the hexapods. She sent other instructions with him as well. "Tell them I want everyone here three days from now to plan some kind of strategy against those two gangs. We have to end that, and as soon as we can."

"I agree. Damn it all, wouldn't you think that with plenty of food in their bellies they'd be satisfied to ... no, cancel that. There's always going to be the psychopaths and the people with no moral scruples who will take advantage of others whenever they can. I guess we'll always have to contend with them." He ran his hands over the crest of the hexapod he had named Beeswax and was rewarded with a rumbling vibration. "All right, me and Beeswax here will leave as quick as I can get a few things together. It'll take two days or so to get around to everyone."

"We'll be looking for you. Be careful, Elijah. We can't afford to lose you."

"I'll be careful," he assured her.

Lyda stepped forward and gave him a hug, the first time she had ever done that. "You're a good man, Elijah. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Somehow, I suspect you'd manage, but thanks for the compliment. You take care, too."

As Lyda watched him stride off, he raised a hand to his face. She thought he was probably wiping at his eyes, just as she was having to do. They were suddenly wet.

After seeing Elijah on his way, Lyda went to find Gavin. Aside from the developing romance, he had made such an impression on her that she intended to appoint him to one of the vacancies left by the loss of Karen and Troy, neither of whom had returned. Not even their bodies had been found. Lyda thought someone had probably dragged them to one of the disposal areas and let them be absorbed like the other waste. She still had inquiries out, but had about lost hope by now. Besides the promotion, there was another matter she needed to take up with him.

As usual, she found him working with the hexapods. The surviving Tweedle almost never left his side now. Three others just as large were crowding around him, each trying to get closer to him than the other, like house dogs vying for attention from their master or mistress. It was funny to watch. He had an appreciative audience of other people idle at the moment. Gavin recognized her laugh and looked up. He motioned to the people nearby and urged them to come closer.

"Just be slow and gentle. Pretty soon, they'll probably choose someone to tag around after. If not, don't try to force anything on them and they'll be back." He left the observers and came over to Lyda.

"Hi." Gavin winked at her.

Lyda smiled. She felt her heart skip a beat just looking at him. It might really be love, she thought. Aloud, she said, "Let's walk for a bit."

"Sure. Come along, Tweedle."

"What happened to the Dee or Dum?"

"When the other was killed, I dropped it and just started calling him Tweedle. Where's Buddy, by the way?"

"Oh, he usually goes off on some business of his own in the mornings when he knows I'm going to be busy. He'll be back later. Gavin, do you feel up to another trip?"

"What's up now?"

"There's still too much antagonism between us and the hexapods. Not here, with the way you've showed everyone how nice they are, but at some of the other columns..."

"Yeah, I've heard. Anyone in particular?"

"Uh huh. Livingston's column. Or what was his column before he got himself killed the night the 'pods came. Their new leader isn't helping much with the situation. I thought maybe you could offer some

assistance."

Gavin slowed his walk and looked sideways at her. "Suppose they aren't open to me?"

"They will be when I tell them you're on my council."

"I am?"

"Yes. As of now."

Gavin resumed his easy stride, being careful not to outpace her. "Are you sure that won't get you accused of cronyism? Most folks are beginning to consider us a couple, you know."

Lyda took his hand. "I know. That's fine with me and don't worry about impressions. Anyone who has dealt with me for any length of time knows I would never promote a person into a position of authority for personal reasons. They have to be capable. And you are. Besides being a nice kisser."

Gavin chuckled. "On that note, I'll accept the promotion. When do you want me to leave?"

Lyda took a deep breath. "Tomorrow. I want you to stay with me tonight."

Gavin halted, then tugged gently on her hand to bring her back within reach from where she had taken another step. He looked down at her face and saw nothing there but acceptance and caring. Nevertheless, he asked "Are you sure you're ready, Lyda? I know what happened to you back on earth. I don't ever want to hurt you."

Lyda put her face against his chest and rubbed her cheek against the rough woven fabric of his jerkin. "Yes, I'm certain, you ninny. I wouldn't have asked if I weren't. What happened is in the past. I want to look to the future. With you."

Gavin took her in his arms and kissed her, very gently and very sweetly.

Lyda didn't care who was watching. She was happy to be where she was, but it made it feel like a very long time before the day would be over. And then she hoped she would be even happier. In the meantime, there were other things before "night" came she had to take care of. She and Gavin parted, reluctantly, as young lovers are wont to. She heard him whistling as he called to Tweedle and hurried off to another demonstration.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda was walking back toward her box after stopping by the column at the common watering place to bathe and change clothes. Some alien fabric from earth and the new, very rough curtains fabricated from the tendrils gave any who wanted it a modicum of privacy, though before it was ready she found that she, along with most other people, were losing some of the nudity taboos they had brought with them from earth. It was a good thing, she thought. Her original clothing was gone, deteriorated to rags and used for other things now. She had no bra; the training bra she had been wearing had long since grown too small and been put to other uses. She wore pants made of the rough woven cloth and a blouse fashioned from some of the alien cloth brought from the desert.

She was strolling along dreamily and thinking of Gavin and what the night would bring, for once, not occupied with administrative duties. Buddy had appeared and scuttled along on his six legs, matching her slow walk. She placed a hand on his crest, enjoying the vibrations it sent through her skin to the rest of

her body. She wished vainly for a mirror so she could see what her hair looked like now. She had let Rayne cut it several times and now wore it gathered in a loose bundle behind her neck, the best solution she had found, given the limited facilities of their environment. Oh well, she thought, I know he cares for me no matter if we don't have lipstick and hairbrushes and things like that here. I wonder if he loves me like I think I do him? Oh, I hope so, she thought. He is such a good person, and so intelligent and handsome and...

The sudden lurch of the whole world as they had come to know it caught her completely off-guard. Lyda stumbled and fell, cracking her knees and one elbow painfully on the ground. She rolled over and tried to sit up. Another lurch pinned her back to the ground and a surge of increased gravity kept her there.

*No! she thought, not now! Not when we were going to...*

Her personal thoughts were overridden by the sound of outraged screams and yells from nearby. In the distance, she could hear more of them. She saw Buddy's legs bow outward, then straighten, fighting the gravity. A peculiar mewling sound she hadn't heard before came from him as he struggled to stay upright.

Lyda tried to sit up again and found she could do so, but only with difficulty. She felt like cursing the aliens. She knew another change was coming as surely as she knew that whatever happened, it wouldn't be for the better.

Gravity returned to normal. She stood up shakily and began walking back toward the column, hoping to find Gavin before something else happened. Before she had taken more than a few steps, one sidewall of all the boxes in sight vanished as they did when the hexapods came or went, but it wasn't the creatures the boxes opened for. One after another in quick succession, an unending line of the familiar old spider mechs emerged from the boxes, mandibles opening and closing as they spread out and scurried off in different directions.

Lyda managed to avoid one, then on impulse, threw her leg over Buddy and used her knees to try to get him to run. Surprisingly, he got the idea immediately and paid no particular attention to her rump flattening part of his crest, but it still did no good. The mechs poured out in numbers sufficient to do all the herding necessary. Before Lyda could get back to the column, she found herself and Buddy in the midst of a scared and despairing bunch of humans being funneled toward one of the bigger boxes. Several of them tried to break loose. Two of them were quickly slaughtered by the spiders and the rest went resignedly toward the opening in the box, and to whatever fate awaited them.

*Gavin!* Lyda thought as she and Buddy passed inside and immediately began falling through a darkness so total that nothing at all could be seen. She felt her mind slipping into the same insidious darkness that enveloped her body. As scary and fearful as the situation was, she tried her best to keep her mind intact and functioning. She felt a fearful certainty that she would need every facility she could muster in the very near future.

A bright light blasted its way into the stygian darkness, giving her just enough time to brace herself by leaning forward and grasping Buddy tightly. They fell a short distance and hit with a thud. She tumbled off Buddy onto a stretch of moist sand like that on a beach, which cushioned her fall. She sat up and gazed around her. *It was* sand from a beach. She had fallen right at the edge of the tide line. An ocean with waves no bigger than those she might have seen at Galveston beach on a calm day rolled onto the sand at regular intervals. She could see no sign of a shore in the distance and turned her gaze behind her, looking for Buddy.

A series of hillocks held in place by rough bunches of grass and short blue and green bushes covered the near distance, then changed to scrub. Farther away, there was what looked like a forest. A blue mountain range partially hidden by the horizon rose to the sky a long ways off, and it was a sky, with a bright sun beaming down. She was on a planet. Looking one way on the beach, she saw no movement at all. The other direction held her companion, Buddy, and beyond him, another person. Her heart leaped for a moment, then dropped back into its normal position in her chest. Even from this far away, she could tell it wasn't Gavin. She touched the pocket of her worn jacket. The pistol still rested there, though she had been forced to reinforce the pocket with a borrowed needle and thread. And thankfully, her backpack was still on her shoulders. If this had to happen she thought how lucky she was that it hadn't occurred while she was bathing, with the backpack set aside.

Lyda stood sorting out her thoughts for a long moment, then began walking toward the only other human being she could see. There was nothing else to do but start over—and hope that this time, she could find some of her friends and assistants. Particularly Gavin. With him gone, she felt like a hole had been carved in her heart. She brushed at a tear and put her hand on Buddy's crest in order to take comfort from the pleasant rumble of his vibrations.

\* \* \* \*

The other person on the beach turned out to be a grown man, not a child as she had first mistakenly thought. As Lyda approached, she was very surprised to see that he was a short, well developed oriental wearing a kilt-like affair woven from what looked like the same tendrils as the material her trousers were made from. She continued to walk slowly toward him with Buddy close by her side.

He was the first non-Caucasian she had encountered since being captured by the aliens on earth. From the way he was eyeing her, she thought she might be his first Caucasian sighting.

"Hello," Lyda said, keeping a wary distance.

He looked at her, then at the hexapod by her side. He showed not a hint of fright, so she knew he must have encountered them somewhere. "I ... some English. Me Chinese. Kailoong."

"I don't know any Chinese," Lyda said. She didn't recognize the Kailoong reference but supposed it was either a province or the city he was from.

He pointed at Buddy. "Hex flong," it sounded like he said, but Lyda wasn't sure.

"Hexapod," she responded. "His name is Buddy," She added, pointing to him. She curled a finger to her chest. "Lyda Brightner."

The man smiled, showing a row of perfect white teeth. "Bud-dy," he said. He looked very friendly to Lyda. He pointed to himself. "Kim Tsing."

"Sing Kim," she said, remembering from an archive in her mind that Chinese gave their first names last.

"Tsing," he corrected, emphasizing the pronunciation.

Lyda grinned. They were going to have a language lesson right here, it appeared. But which language? She thought a moment, then remembered that Mrs. Long, her last Language Arts teacher, had told the class that with a global economy, English had become the predominant language of business and commerce and was being taught in schools all over the world. Since he had said he knew some English, she decided to go with it. She pointed to the sand and said, "Let's sit."

He understood, but he hunkered down rather than sat like she did, cross-legged on the sand. The trousers she was wearing would repel moisture to some degree, but even so, she retreated to the dry sand before sitting.

For three hours, they stayed in the same place and talked as the sun climbed high in an almost cloudless sky. It became quite warm. Lyda gradually got the impression that Tsing had been a leader much like she herself and had been either in the same spaceship on a different level or in one very similar. She also began thinking of scenarios that the aliens might be trying out by bringing different races together—though so far, Tsing was the only other person she had seen.

Lyda wiped perspiration from her brow. She got up and walked to the line of small breakers coming in. She dipped her fingers into the water and tasted it. "A little salty," she told Tsing when she came back. "Shall we go find some shade, then look for a stream?" She pointed back toward the hummocks and scrub.

"Shade and water, yes. We be careful, okay?"

"Sure."

"Surr?"

"It means yes. I agree. Okay."

"Ah, okay." He stood up.

All the time they had talked, Buddy had wandered around but had never strayed far. Lyda got to her feet and called him. He scuttled to her side and came along as they trudged through the sand and onto the hummocks, which proved to be hard packed earth with small rocks abutting them. It made walking difficult, but they soon passed onto the scrubland. Some of the bushes were more than head height, giving them a place out of the direct sunlight. They stopped under a many branched little tree that resembled a willow with less pliable limbs. Other vegetation looked like nothing she had ever seen on earth. Even the sky was different, a bluish gray color.

Tsing pointed to her face. "Sun," he said simply. His English was improving so rapidly, he was seldom using the wrong word and his accent was fading. Lyda had never heard of anyone learning language so rapidly—but then, she knew her own mind was functioning more efficiently than almost anyone else's she had encountered after her first leadership role.

Lyda touched her cheek and berated herself when she felt the warning sign of a good sunburn, though she didn't complain aloud. In the sunless, always lit environment of the spaceship, she must have lost the tan she had gotten in the desert. She could already feel the incipient pain, though not as much as she would have expected from the length of exposure. She forced a grin. "Too much sun."

Tsing agreed, touching his own face, though it wasn't nearly as red as she bet hers was. "Food?" he said next. "We must eat."

Lyda had kept the habit of storing a bit of food that didn't perish easily in her backpack. She shucked it off and dug inside, being careful not to let him see the box of cartridges for the pistol. The pocket where she kept her food was nearly empty. She had been occupied with thoughts of Gavin and their impending union and forgotten to replenish it, one of her rare lapses. She took out the double handful of column



berries that was the total of her supply and split it with Tsing. She also let them each drink a small amount from the single plastic water bottle she still carried; the top of the other had finally cracked, rendering it useless.

"Thank you," he said gratefully.

Lyda sat down again to eat. She was beginning to worry about not having seen any other humans. Where were they? And the children—they needed to be gathered up if there were no adults with them. No telling what might lurk in the forest or here, or even in the ocean.

"We should try to find the children," she said to Tsing.

He nodded. "Of course. We both think alike."

Lyda started as she suddenly realized that there had been very few misunderstandings between them as they talked, far too few for a first meeting with someone who didn't know English perfectly. It was almost as if they could sense each other's thoughts. *And it was true!* She couldn't read Tsing's mind, not in the fashion depicted in science fiction stories and movies, but anytime he spoke, his intentions were perfectly plain. Another change in me, she thought. Him, too, she amended. Where will it all end?

Tsing nodded agreeably at her as he chewed on the berries, just as if he knew what she was thinking. Lyda decided to simply accept what was happening—not that there was anything she could do about it.

She did wonder if it would hold true for anyone else they found here. So far, she had kept what she sensed about the improvements in her body and mind to herself, but she had noticed signs of the same thing in a few others. A general phenomena, one taking place in those who worked and thought and tried to cope with harsh conditions? She wasn't sure, but it was very intriguing and becoming more so.

While they ate, both she and Tsing examined the vegetation around them. The predominant color was a mix of blue and green, some growths more of one than the other. Tsing tested the suppleness of some of the branches and trunks of the smaller growths. He found a couple of limbs to his liking and pulled out a folding knife and cut them off. Then he quickly sharpened one end of each and carved a handle at the other, turning the branches into serviceable foot long stabbing knives. When he had finished, he handed Lyda one of them.

She thanked him very politely. She felt they were going to get along fine if the progress made so far was any indication. And she knew why he had improvised the weapons; they might need them. They could hear sounds of small living things in the brush and had caught sight of tiny, insectlike creatures. Small animals implied a food chain, and that in turn, suggested the presence of carnivores.

\* \* \* \*

The scrub gradually changed to bigger growths, and alien sounds of the fauna became more audible as they cautiously explored a little deeper into the interior. Before long, they began to encounter other people, some moving in from the beach to explore like them, and others having no knowledge of it. Apparently, the aliens had dumped them at random, some along the beach, and others progressively farther inland.

Lyda quickly convinced the few children they encountered to come along with them; they had lost all contact with the adults previously in charge of them. She had no trouble doing this; it was as if she could pick out the ones who needed special assurance and could tell which children had the confidence to follow and mind what she and Tsing said. She saw only one baby; who was with its mother. Most women who had survived the trials so far had tried to avoid becoming pregnant. At each change, if they

didn't have their children within reach, they had become separated.

Within an hour of beginning to walk, they had almost a dozen children, ranging in age from five or so up to barely adolescent. They were a mixture of races and colors, from ebony black to one redhead like herself. What they all had in common was they were scared and grateful to have someone help them.

They ran across even more adults, but none that either of them had known beforehand. Lyda began to despair of finding Gavin. She thought it was going to be just like the other times; she would encounter no one she had previously known.

Lyda made a point to try to talk to all the adults, albeit cautiously. She had learned. After consulting with Tsing, either one or the other would always ask them if they wanted to come along, then privately, they would compare impressions. They always agreed, another sign of their minds working in similar fashion.

Lyda looked up at the sun with each encounter, and either she or Tsing told those who elected to come with them, "We're planning on setting up a camp in the scrub near the beach where we can bathe, but we're trying to find a stream or river to follow back to the ocean first. We'll need fresh water."

There were three Chinese women traveling together who decided to accompany them, the biggest group they found. Other men and women were either paired or single, but like the children, they were of all races. There were three Hispanics, three more Orientals and a half dozen Caucasian, black and mixed races. Most, but not all, spoke some English. Lyda quickly made friends by being reassuring without trying to exercise undue authority—though she discovered most of the adults seemed to sense her talent for leadership.

She and Tsing walked together as often as possible. She liked him.

"We must have all been on either the same spaceship or the same kind of ships, don't you think?" she asked him.

"Of course. Everyone recognizes your 'pod. I'm wondering why more of them didn't come with us."

"It was quick. It happened when lots of them were feeding. Buddy was different; he knew I was always busy in the morning, so he fed then and stayed with me in the afternoon. Besides that, I was riding him."

Tsing raised his brows in admiration at that feat, then said "Ah. You were a leader, yes?"

"Yes, I was. I was Mayor of our column, and President, as we called it, of all the other nearby columns. We had a sort of confederacy, and I had plans to expand it to cover all the individual groups before we got dumped here."

"Very good. You are wise for one so young. I was leader, also, though not of so many as you."

"I thought so," Lyda grinned. "You take charge so easily."

"As do you. And you see..." he paused to wave casually at the group they had gathered, "...others assume we will lead. Strange, is it not?"

Lyda hesitated a moment, then decided to see if the phenomena affecting her was specific, or general. "I've grown up fast. And after every move, I've felt ... changes inside me, like I'm smarter and more competent."

"Yes. I have experienced the same phenomenon. I believe others have, too, though not all to the same extent. You and I, we now sense thoughts, do we not?"

Lyda glanced at Tsing. His face had a serious expression, as if it was complementing his mind. "I think so, Tsing."

Tsing nodded.

"It's physical, too," Lyda said. She reached out her hand as they passed a short tree and easily broke off a branch to demonstrate. "I'm stronger than a girl my age should be too."

"How old?" Tsing asked.

"I just turned fourteen."

"You matured quickly. And I found my older assistants regaining a touch of youth. Is there a pattern?"

"The aliens are behind everything that has happened or is happening to us," Lyda said bitterly, thinking of her parents and Gavin.

"Yes, but do they control our adaptation to adversity?"

"No," Lyda said instantly. Her mind worked quickly now, better than it ever had. "They don't control what we do or how we act."

"I agree. Also..."

Tsing got no farther. They were leading the way and almost stepped into the stream as they rounded a large boulder and a thick cluster of tall, swollen growths like pumpkins sitting on top of each other.

"Ah, water!" Tsing exclaimed. "But is it good?"

"If it isn't, we're dead," Lyda grinned.

Lyda and Tsing stood guard as their group lined up along the stream and got down on their hands and knees to drink. When their turn came, Lyda found the water to be cool and wonderfully refreshing after their time in the sun and the long walk. They both looked to the sky simultaneously to see where the sun stood, then grinned at each other. We're still working in concert, she thought. This might be nice, not to have all the responsibility myself. She gave no consideration to the idea that she would ever become a follower of others. Her mind had grown too much to simply obey orders blindly, if it had ever been inclined that way. She didn't think it had; she had always questioned the way of things, sometimes driving her parents to distraction with her eternal, "Yes, but why?" She smiled wistfully inside herself at the reminiscence and walked on downstream. Some of the other adults who had been deposited inland went on ahead. They were anxious to see the ocean Lyda and Tsing had told them about, and to test their hypothesis that they might be able to gather food along the seashore.

A babble of loud voices; some angry and shouting; some incongruously laughing as if making fun of a cripple brought the first indication of a crisis ahead. Lyda mentally squared her shoulders and hurried forward. Emergencies and catastrophes were nothing new. She felt the whole force of her mind and body tensing for whatever this might entail.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The advancing members of their group had run into another band of refugees and somehow got off on the wrong foot; at least that's what Lyda hoped had happened. If so, she and Tsing could probably straighten it out. If not...

There was no misunderstanding. A huge man, who looked like he was a weight lifter in the past, was barring the path to the ocean. He was mostly Afro-American with Hispanic and perhaps other racial mixtures contributing a minor fraction to his makeup. He was backed up by two other hard looking Afro-American men and one stout woman, but Lyda sensed immediately he was the one with whom they would have to contend. She also decided there was an extremely sharp intelligence behind the glare radiating from his face; a countenance marred in several places by wide scars that looked as if the wounds had needed stitches, but never received them.

"You crackers haul ass. This be our hood," he said in the patois of the black ghetto.

Lyda and Tsing stepped forward. Lyda waved her hand backwards, indicating to those behind her to stay put.

"You can't claim a whole stream, nor access to the ocean," Lyda said.

"You go around. You, Chink, get yo' ass gone, too."

"We will not," Tsing said firmly. "We must work together. Who knows what the night will bring?"

Lyda could sense that Tsing held as little hope of cooperating with this man as she did. She could practically read the resentment and hatred at the life he had been born into emanating from him, along with a fierce determination to dominate whatever world he found himself in now. She could sympathize in a way, but not agree.

"You motherfucking Chinks and Whitebreads think you so smart; now you in the same fix we is. An' I be the chief headknocker in this hood. I be the man now."

"You're not being sensible," Lyda said. "It's too late to try another route. And if we go upstream, we'll foul the water for you. It would be much better to cooperate."

There was no reasoning with him. He had obviously survived so far on his size and domineering personality and intended to continue doing so. He stepped forward. "Last time I say it. Go away. Niggers can stay, long as they not Toms. You, bitch, you can stay tonight. I fuck you and send you on yo' way tomorrow. How that be? You like a big black dick 'stead of them itty whitebread peanuts?" He laughed uproariously and was joined by his close cohorts.

"No," Lyda said firmly.

The huge man rushed a few steps forward and swung a huge hand at her, fingers open but held together to deliver a brutal slap to the head. Lyda dodged most of it, but the tips of his calloused fingers brushed her cheek with bruising force. She fell backward into Buddy, which helped her to keep her feet. Even as she felt for the pointed stick Tsing had carved into a weapon for her, Buddy curled one end in front of

her and took the brunt of the man's charge, causing them all to topple in a heap, with part of Buddy on top of her.

Lyda could see Tsing grappling with another of the men as she got her knife free, then their bodies froze into position as a terrified scream of pain split the air like the rising whine of a jet engine getting ready to be released from its restraints. She scrambled out from under the pile as blood splattered her jacket. Buddy was busy tearing out her enemy's middle, even as he continued screaming and began struggling and stabbing at the hexapod. His knife and the hand gripping it were already stained green with the peculiar body fluid of the hexapod. He made one more effort, then collapsed with Buddy's teeth still rending his flesh.

Lyda ran to where Tsing's struggle had resumed. Before she reached him, his first attacker stumbled away with one arm dangling, but the other was all over him, the disparity in their sizes bearing Tsing to the earth. His antagonist was in a killing rage with his hands around Tsing's throat and squeezing with all his might. The cords in Tsing's neck were standing out in stark relief as he tried to resist the pressure.

There was no time, nor any way to use the self-defense techniques she had learned from the classes she attended, nor did she want to draw her gun. Without regret or hesitation, she plunged her long, wooden knife into the side of the man's neck and twisted savagely, trying to force it upward. Her muscles flexed with abnormal strength as she drove it into his brain. His eyes bugged out in stupefied surprise. His grip on Tsing loosened and there was the sudden stench of bodily wastes polluting the air.

It took two quick hard yanks to free her weapon from the man's neck. Tsing coughed in relief while she stood up and whirled around, looking for more opposition. There were two or three struggles still going on. She shouted, as loud and forcefully as she could. "Stop it! It's over with!"

People of all races and ages stared at her and Tsing, who was still coughing but on his feet and ready for further combat. The fighting ceased and those who could get to their feet did so, slowly and warily.

Lyda was furious. She had never wanted to kill again and now she had been forced into it. She knew that walking away would have solved nothing. The man Buddy had torn into would have dominated and subjugated everyone on the planet had he lasted; she knew that implicitly. She went over to his still body. Buddy was laying beside him. She put her hand on Buddy's bloody crest and got only a faint vibration in return. Even as she felt the feeble rumbling, it faded away to nothing. *Damn, damn, damn! Why did it have to end this way?* She stood up and glared at the gathered crowd of people. Her enraged scrutiny caused several of the new group to shrink away.

She kicked at the big man's body, trying to sublimate some of her anger into something no longer a threat. "Do you see where his kind of attitude leads? Is this how you want to live, with brutality and savagery and no rule of law except the arbitrary dictates of cruel and malicious men and women? Tsing and I both asked you politely to cooperate, not fight!" She took a deep breath, calming herself in the process.

"All right; it's done. We can't undo it, but we can keep it from happening again. Is there anyone who wants to speak for that man?" She pointed her bloody knife at the one with the injured arm Tsing had subdued. He was still staring at the short Chinese, wondering how such a little man had overpowered him so quickly.

"He ain't no good. He be slinging dope and pimping since he ten years old!" came from the big woman who had been at his side.

"What were you doing with him, ma'am?" Lyda asked.

The woman examined her curiously. Lyda sensed she wasn't used to being addressed respectfully by a white person, and especially not when she had been running with two of the dead men, but Lyda thought she had caught a hint of innate goodness in the woman, distorted by her circumstances, perhaps.

"Someone had to keep his hos in line. They most as bad as him." She pointed to two young black women and a white female a few years older. All had hard faces and belligerent stances—or had until they were pointed out.

It took Lyda a second to interpret hos as whores, though she knew they weren't necessarily prostitutes. It was a general, though derogatory, term. "All right. My name is Lyda Brightner. I was Mayor of a big group of people in the spaceship. Mister Kim over there was, too, but not at the same place I was. I guess the aliens separated the races up until now for some foul reason of their own. Now, I'm asking, is that man worth keeping?"

"No."

"Anyone? Does anyone speak for him?" One of the black women the big woman had referred to as "hos" opened her mouth as if she was going to say something, but ultimately closed it without speaking.

"Mister Kim?"

"We used exile. If they came back, a very bad beating. Once more, and we disposed of them." His voice was hoarse from the choking but understandable.

"We used exile, too. On your way, Mister. Don't come back this way." She touched her bloody wooden knife for emphasis. He started to protest, then thought better of it for the moment. Once far enough away that her knife was no longer a threat, he turned and shouted, "Goddamn Toms! You be letting them put us down all over again!"

Lyda ignored him and looked to Tsing to see if he wanted to take over. He touched a finger to his neck to indicate he had trouble speaking.

"In case you didn't hear what Mister Kim said, I'll repeat it. Neither one of us ruled by force. Once we got our respective groups organized, we held elections. We can do the same here once we find out how to feed and protect ourselves. And I don't want to hear anything about Toms or Whitebreads or Chinks again. Everything Mister Kim and I do is based on fairness. Period.

"Now, Ms..." Lyda looked to the big woman.

"Florida Williams, ma'am." She grinned, displaying a couple of gold crowns. "You sure you want to hold 'lections? You outnumbered."

"By what? Older people? All I ask of any leader, including myself, is competence and fairness. If any of you can do better, Mister Kim and I will step aside—after elections. Is there anyone else here who needs to leave?"

No one spoke against anyone else. Lyda caught Tsing's cynical expression. This wasn't going to be easy.

"Okay, let's leave it. Is anyone hungry?" She grinned when she said that, knowing almost everyone must



be.

A medley of assents followed that question.

"Well, I am, too. Some of us have gathered some things that might be edible but we haven't tried them yet. We were waiting until we got back to the ocean where there's saltwater in case we needed to purge. We also thought we might find fish or shellfish there to eat. Shall we go while there's still some daylight?"

\* \* \* \*

As simply as that, Lyda became a leader again, though it was no cakewalk and did take some time; and she was more of a co-leader with Tsing than having sole responsibility. She did notice that her authority appeared to carry slightly more weight than his, though she never tried to exploit it, and Tsing was quite happy to maintain the status quo.

There was precious little to eat at the seashore, but Lyda and Tsing and some others quickly got the hang of gathering what they could from the shallow water and the leavings from the tide. She made sure it was all saved until it was becoming dusky and time to quit.

"Who's going to try this stuff first? It may poison us!" a man asked, eyeing a double-tailed creature which had just recently stopped wiggling.

"I'll go first," Lyda volunteered, knowing it was her duty. She peeled back a crusty covering from one of the tails and took a bite. It was salty and muscular, but not too unpleasant.

"It tastes all right to me. Let's try some of the other stuff a little at a time before we let the children eat. Does that sound okay?"

Nods greeted this. By the time darkness fell, what food had been collected was gone, with Lyda, Tsing, and two others who claimed to have a good memory charged with noting who ate what. One man had a spate of violent diarrhea later on, but that was the only illness.

"It's going to be hard to feed this many people," Lyda said to Tsing after everyone had eaten, with the children getting the most of it. "We're going to have to organize expeditions inland for vegetable matter and try to devise some nets to catch fish or their local equivalent from the stream and ocean."

"I'm wondering if there are carnivores. There should be. I saw animal prints."

Lyda nodded, both to Tsing and to nearby listeners. "If the ecology is at all like it is on earth, there will be. We'll have to make some spears and try to find wood and string for bows and arrows."

At that moment, a shrill growl erupted into the night from somewhere behind the hummocks, followed by a shriek like cats fighting.

Tsing grinned. "I think that answers our concern. I will make spears tomorrow."

"We need to set a place upstream to drink and bathe in, and another area way down the beach for waste disposal, too," Lyda said. "And also ... has anyone been a baseball pitcher? We need someone who can throw a rock real hard. And..."

The banter went on far into the night. Neither Lyda and Tsing made any effort to conceal what they talked about. They both encouraged others to join in with suggestions and comments. She noted with

pleasure that after a while, the two groups seemed to be mingling and saw Tsing nodding his head approvingly.

\* \* \* \*

The first election was held a week later, though Lyda and Tsing both thought it was more like nine days or so. The days were longer than on earth and it took some getting used to, especially as none of the various races had been living on exactly the same cycles in their previous environment.

Lyda and Tsing decided to stand for "Mayor" as they got everyone to call the office, as a team rather than either of them running separately. They were elected by a majority, but not by much.

Tsing and she both spoke after the results had been tabulated.

Tsing went first. "Thank you for your support. Miss Brightner and I will do our very best to provide fair and competent leadership. Tomorrow morning, we will announce a number of persons who will form a council to advise us and help with the administration and other duties. These people will not be selected arbitrarily, but solely by the standards of competence and how well we think they can do the jobs we have for them.

"We will take a month to let them work and in the meantime, we reserve the right to replace any who we don't think are working out. In turn, at the end of that period, we will ask you to confirm our choices. Any who are not confirmed, will be replaced by another choice and again, you will have a chance to either confirm or deny them a seat on the council.

"There is an enormous amount of work to be done and we'd like to get on with it. Miss Brightner?"

"I can only affirm what Mister Kim just said. I would like to add that I totally agree with his notions of rule by competence, fairness and consent. And as of now, I'm going to make my first donation to the community."

Lyda turned her back on the crowd and took off her jacket first, then her blouse, while noting that Tsing neither avoided looking at her breasts nor stared overlong at them. She winked at him, put on the jacket back on over her bare breasts and zipped it up to the middle of her chest.

"There. My blouse can be added to the fishnet the volunteers are constructing. I sure hope it catches something bigger than what I was using it for."

She sat down to good-natured cheers and laughs. It had been the perfect touch.

\* \* \* \*

Hunting proved more difficult and dangerous than any of them had anticipated. It made Lyda think their cave man ancestors hadn't been as dumb as people thought. No one knew the art of flint knapping, although some thought they did from reading Jean Auel's *Earthchild* series, but either the flinty looking rocks here weren't composed of the same material as those on earth, or the art was harder to master than reading about it indicated.

Spears with fire hardened points and a band of drivers proved to be the most effective method of hunting herbivores big enough to feed the community. After much trial and error, several deaths, and not much food on the table, the technique was finally mastered. Lyda insisted on inserting herself into the hunting bands from time to time, despite Tsing's initial objections. She thought it was because he was becoming enamored of her and the male protective instinct drove his reaction. Lyda did make sure that

both of them were never absent at the same time. One of them and at least a couple of the council members needed to be present at all times to keep the group functioning as a lawful community rather than a gang of loosely associated members of a mutual aid society.

Lyda's status was greatly enhanced on her second hunt, when the prey suddenly turned and ran in the opposite direction, straight at the line of beaters she was among. It was a large animal with rippling muscles and strong teeth, but not what they thought of as a predator until then. It had been seen grazing in the scrub and was presumed to be a herbivore. Lyda knew better when a set of sharp pointed tusks suddenly extended from each side of its mouth as it charged. It might graze on the local flora, but those tusks were made for ripping and tearing.

It took all her courage to stand her ground and not run as the nearby beaters did when they saw the extended, inwardly curving tusks gleaming white in the sun as the creature opened its voluminous jaws. She quickly set the base of her spear firmly into the ground and timed its rush toward her, its speed and distance and exact time of arrival clicking into place in her mind as neatly and quickly as the solution would have on a calculator. Even so, the irresistible weight and force of its charge overwhelmed her. She saw the gaping mouth with its sharp forward teeth loom into her vision as quickly as the flash and bang of a thunderstorm right overhead. She yelled something that might have been a primeval challenge as she tilted the point of the spear up at an angle designed to impale its chest at the precisely timed moment of its charge, then all she could see was the scales and bristles of its underbelly as she went down beneath it. One of its hoofs thudded into her side with enough power that she felt a rib crack. Another gouged out a furrow in her thigh, then it was behind her, kicking and trying to regain its feet, with the spear impaling it through and through.

Lyda jumped up, ignoring her wounds, and threw herself onto its back. She held on with one arm around its neck and jerked it back, feeling the muscles of her arm ripple with the exertion, then plunged her fire hardened wooden knife into its crazed orange eye, knowing from the anatomy of smaller animals that a bundle of nerve and blood vessels were beneath it. The strength with which she pulled back its head surprised even her, as well as the force behind her plunging knife. She knew she was much stronger than a girl her age and size should be, but not this much! The sharpened end went into its eye and all the way through. The tip of it came out under the beast's jaw, slick with its blood. The speed and accuracy of her calculations during its charge were something she contemplated later.

The others of the band who had run when the animal reversed course, now came hurrying back with astounded expressions of admiration on their faces. Lyda suddenly became aware that the hoof which had cracked one of her ribs had also torn her jacket, exposing one of her breasts. Without making a fuss about it, she adjusted the garment enough to cover herself until she could make some repairs. She touched the side pocket and determined that the little revolver was still secure, then let a couple of her admiring audience bandage her thigh while the others field-dressed her kill. All they could do for her was to pull the edges of the gash together and bind it so it would leave a minimal scar. She was surprised to find that it had already quit bleeding. Even her rib didn't hurt much when she moved, so she didn't even mention that injury.

Tsing saw the bruise, though, when she sewed the tear in the jacket back together with an unsophisticated length of crude rawhide thong they had learned to make.

"You didn't tell me about that one," Tsing said, pointing to her side where blood from crushed capillaries and surface veins had darkened her skin.

"It was one of the hoofs. It stepped on me as I went down under it. I'm just glad it didn't land on my belly. It might have broken through and mangled my insides." She examined her repair job on the

garment still wet from the stream where she had washed out the fluid from the boar, as they were calling it, even though it resembled that animal about as much as a piglet did one of the giant European boars of earth memory.

"Why didn't you run like the others?"

"Would you have?" Lyda removed the piece of cloth she had draped around her neck and let hang over her breasts while she threaded the rawhide through the holes cut with her paring knife. She didn't attempt to hide from Tsing's scrutiny. She already knew he admired her and was becoming more and more attracted to her.

Tsing shook his head. "A leader can't afford to turn tail. But damn ... Lyda, please be careful."

"I'll manage," Lyda said. "Smell the meat cooking? At least that flint stuff will spark when metal hits it, even if we can't make spearheads from it." A female carpenter had somehow hung onto her hammer all this time and used it to finally provide them with fire and cooked meals.

"Lyda ... never mind. I'll be back in a little while." Tsing got up and walked off without looking back.

Lyda knew what his problem was, and it was hers as well. He was falling in love with her. If not for thoughts of Gavin, she might have reciprocated his affection in time. He was all a woman could want in a man: strong, capable and attentive. He also had a gentle manner about him that belied his strength of mind and body. But so far, she couldn't stop thinking about Gavin, even knowing she would probably never see him again. Perhaps later, but not now. The hurt was still too fresh.

\* \* \* \*

That one hunting incident increased Lyda's status tremendously. Only one of the council members she and Tsing had picked was voted out of office. Neither of them was very sorry to see him go. He had turned out to be way too assertive when there was no call for it, a failing that hadn't been apparent until he was given some responsibility. She and Tsing consulted and selected another member to replace him, Florida Williams, the big woman who had fingered the remaining one of the three men who had instigated the confrontation when they first met. Once the domineering presence of the former leader of the group was out of the picture, she proved to have a wealth of practical knowledge and experience that made people listen to her. Lyda paid attention to her as well. She told stories about growing up in the ghetto that were as alien to her as fairy tales. She was able to see why so many blacks had been resentful of the white power structure—and to a degree, she couldn't blame them.

"It the attitudes that so hard to change," Florida told her. "Once drugs got to be so common, kids see the easy money, the fine clothes and cars and women the dealers have. Too many of them want to be make it the easy way 'stead of learnin'; then studyin' and readin' come to be like sissy, somethin' the man do." She shook her head and grinned. "Listen to me; I talk just like them if I don't think first. I'm trying to get out of it though. No need to act black here. Everybody the same. You a good girl, Miss Brightner. Not hardly any girl so young be so smart. Hell, not many grown people smart as you."

"Thank you," Lyda said. "It's easy when you have a good home and parents and lots of books around all your life."

"Hmmp. Books don't give you good sense; they just give you knowledge; you hear?"

"I want to know more," Lyda said.

"You head going to bust with all that knowin'," Florida said.

"Not likely. I want to get classes started here before long. Would you be willing to teach? We all need to know what life is like on the bottom and how to cope with it."

"Why, child? You don't allow bottoms!"

Lyda pointed to the distant mountains, limned against the setting sun. "There could be hordes of other people out there who would love to see themselves on top of the heap. Suppose they got up an army and conquered us? Besides, knowledge is never wasted. It all goes into your mind and merges with what you already know. If you're careful to sort out fact from fantasy, any new learning is good. And it won't hurt anyone here to know how Afro-Americans and Hispanics had to live in some places."

Florida nodded agreement and began to talk again. Others besides Lyda listened. She was a good speaker and able to keep an audience enthralled.

During this period of organization and finding the means of survival for them all, thoughts of Gavin were never far from the surface of Lyda's mind, particularly at night. She and Tsing slept near each other and once or twice, she had cried over Gavin when she didn't think he was watching, then discovered he had been. His usual reaction was to vanish somewhere for an hour or two. Lyda knew Tsing's attraction to her was a problem that wouldn't go away any time soon.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Two members of the council, Tom Buskin and Jenny Forton, volunteered to lead exploration parties in opposite directions along the beach from their camp, now set up near the stream and close to where it fed into the ocean. Lyda hated to let them go, but she and Tsing deemed it necessary. The herbivores learned quickly and were becoming skittish, making it hard to feed everyone adequately. The wariness of the herbivores in turn caused the carnivores to become more aggressive and made hunting more dangerous. The exploratory parties were an attempt to solve that problem, but there was another one that Lyda and Tsing and the council discussed privately before they left.

A drizzling rain was falling but there was little shelter as yet from the elements. Fortunately the climate was semi-tropical; the only real discomfort came when it stormed. The people simply had to bear it and try to keep critical supplies sheltered as best they could.

"We can get most of us out of the rain in another month or so," Lyda said. "The hummock grass makes a good thatch roof and the ones we've made so far appear to be lasting. It's just a matter of having the time to gather enough of it." She wiped moisture from her face and slid her hand over her damp hair. Water gathered at the piece of old bra strap she used to tie her hair behind her neck and drained onto the back of her old jacket. She had cut the sleeves off the jacket and widened the arm holes when she needed more room for her burgeoning breasts and growing body. She was now bigger than the slight woman she had taken the jacket from back in the desert. The bottom of it only reached to just below her navel now, but she didn't intend to abandon it until she could contrive a suitable replacement to carry and conceal her little pistol. New clothing was going to become another problem before long, but for the present, they could cope.

"There is an additional matter," Tsing prompted.

"Yes. The aliens are apparently mixing the races here. We have no problems with it, but there are far too few people here to account for everyone from all the places we came from, regardless of whether it was different levels on the same ship or different ships entirely. Even counting how many might have died when we were herded and dumped here doesn't explain how few of us there are. That leaves other places—and possibly situations not nearly so good as we have here, despite being a little hungry." Lyda stopped and waited for responses.

"You've already asked for volunteers to explore our environment in greater detail. Are you saying we should watch out for other groups that might be, uh, inimical to ours?" Tom Buskin asked with raised brows.

"Exactly," Tsing said. "We need to know now, rather than later. We've all had experience with gangs that have survived everything so far through simple brutality and total lack of morals. Lyda and I think those types are growing fewer but there will still be some. Perhaps some who have managed to gain enough followers to be stronger than us."

"Like that Shank motherf ... that sorry Shank bastard Miss Brightner took care of. He would've found more like him if they still be ... are still around. And what people he didn't find like him, he would've scared into doing what he say ... said. We don't need his kind, not no more, not ever," Florida declared, her mouth set in a grim line that replaced the usual cheerful smile she carried.

"Him and others; maybe not so bad, but not good either. The aliens just keep on putting us into fixes that kill us off. Why? Why are they doing this?" Jenny asked, her gaze darting from one face to another, seeking an answer.

"We don't know," Tsing said. He shrugged his shoulders, a little thinner now than when Lyda had first seen him. "We may never know. But we can't just roll over and play dead, like dumb animals. We're humans."

"Back to the agenda," Lyda said. "If we knew what the aliens ultimately wanted, we might like it or we might not. It doesn't matter because they aren't talking to us. Right now, we need more food and more information. Those are our priorities."

"I could try going inland," Tsing said deferentially. "We haven't gone far in that direction, either."

"You know why," Lyda reminded him. "The carnivores get bigger and badder the farther into the forest we go."

"Yes, but there might be better hunting grounds if we go far enough."

Lyda overruled Tsing for the first time, hoping he wouldn't resent it. She knew that he wanted to put some distance between them before his unrequited affection for her became a source of gossip and possible discontent in the community.

"Mister Kim, do you think we can afford to wait until the other two parties return before considering an inland expedition? It would be hard to spare two council members and you, too."

Tsing nodded slowly. He knew Lyda was right. He thought of asking to replace either Tom or Jenny as leader of the small bands preparing to explore along the beaches but decided not to try. The other two had already volunteered. To replace them would undercut their authority as council members. "I'll wait. How long do we give them? Two weeks going and two weeks back?"



"I was thinking of a week each way," Lyda said. She didn't want them gone for any lengthy period.

"How about ten days each way?" Tom suggested. His South African accent was still detectable in his speech but otherwise, he spoke nearly perfect English.

"All right. Is that okay with you, Mister Kim?"

"Fine." He turned to the two who would lead the expeditions. "We can only spare three people for each of you as support. Everyone else needs to work on the problem with food supplies."

"We'll manage," Jenny said confidently. She was a tall mix of Nordic, Afro-American and Polynesian ancestry that had come about from her parents and grandparents serving in the military, as she had herself, where mixed marriages were more common than in civilian life. She had been home on leave in Texas when the aliens arrived and never made it back to her base.

Lyda had a lot of confidence in them both, but if either of them survived, she would bet on Jenny, with her quick mind and athletic body. Her father had been a French Legionnaire and migrated to the United States after retirement, where he married an American woman. Jenny had been carrying on the tradition with a career in the American Army.

"Is there anything else we need to cover before we go?" Tom asked, making motions to rise from his sitting position.

"No, that's all. If you're both ready, try getting off early tomorrow morning."

"Sounds good." Tom rose and stretched a hand out to Jenny to help her up, not that she needed it. Lyda knew that a romance had developed between them. Florida and the others said goodnight, leaving Lyda and Tsing alone.

They walked together over toward their sleeping mats, laced together from salt water plants that grew in the sand in a thick cluster like cattails. The mats were raised above the ground on branches harvested from the edge of the forest and enough room was left in the lattices to allow them to drain. Their mats were separated by several yards, giving them each some privacy but keeping them close enough to talk as needed on affairs affecting their small society.

This night, Lyda decided to take the initiative. She sat down on her mat and crossed her legs, noting how worn her trousers were becoming. She looked directly at Tsing, making as much eye contact as possible in the starlight, brightened only by the one small moon that lit the sky.

"Tsing, I wish I could feel the same way about you that you do about me. It would make life much simpler, but I won't try to force an emotion that isn't there yet. I do want you to know that you will be my first choice when I decide I'm ready for romance again. I don't know when that will be, but until that happens, I don't want you to pine over something that isn't available. Can you understand?"

Tsing met her gaze silently. She could practically see the wheels turning in his mind. At last he smiled, a wistful yet hopeful expression. "That is more than I expected, Lyda, and I will try to be content with it for the time being."

"If I hadn't fallen for Gavin before we landed here, we would probably be sleeping together on the same mat by now. But I did and I have to get over him first; otherwise, it would spoil what we may have in the

future."

"I understand, Lyda, and you are wise beyond your years. There is one thing you must remember, though. The aliens will not wait, given our past experiences. Sooner or later, they will change our environment again, and almost certainly, we shall be separated."

"I'll remember, Tsing. And believe me, you are a man worth waiting for."

Lyda felt Tsing's emotion during the exchange move from near despondency to hopeful expectation—and she surprised herself by beginning to sense the same hopefulness in herself. Before sleep, she kissed Tsing good night. It became a ritual after that.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda's broken rib and wounded thigh healed so rapidly, she was able to assist with the hunting and fishing again within a few days. Hunting provided only enough meat for marginal survival. They made up the rest of their food supply from the sea. They had discovered that fishing was best at high tide—at least the high tide the small moon was capable of causing—and that the improvised nets provided almost all of the curious two-tailed fish. For some unknown reason, they refused to take a baited hook.

Even fishing had its risks. There was one denizen of the ocean, more mammalian in appearance than anything else, that was always ready to carry off an unwary fisherman or bather. It never struck when large groups were together, which had quickly made mixed bathing the norm, rather than the exception. The stream was used for hand and face washing and to rinse out clothing, but it was cold and the ocean was where most people bathed. The water was less salty than the oceans of earth and very warm.

Lyda was with the throng of people who liked their baths in the morning when the first expedition returned two days early. She saw Jenny's unmistakable form coming along the beach from a long way off—and there was only one person with her. That bodes ill, Lyda thought.

She hurried out of the sea and into her worn clothing before the others noticed the approaching couple. She wanted to get to them first before they told their stories to the whole gathering; not to conceal any bad news, but in order to decide how to handle it before the general meeting she knew she would have to call early. Lyda ran along the beach toward Jenny on calloused feet. The makeshift coverings she used for shoes had to be saved for hunting.

Jenny heard her quick footsteps in the sand and looked up.

As Lyda neared, she observed that Jenny's face was haggard. She was limping and favoring one side of her body. The spear she carried was crude and freshly made, its point not hardened by fire. The woman with her, a South American of almost pure Indian ancestry, still carried the bow she favored but only one arrow remained in her quiver.

"Sit down a moment, you guys, and tell me quickly what happened before the thundering herd arrives."

Jenny didn't smile at Lyda's feeble attempt at humor. She dropped to the ground wearily, as if glad to be off her feet. Consuela sat down beside her. Lyda rested on her knees as she listened. Jenny did the talking, speaking in a monotone.

"There's a big group, much larger than ours, four days walk down the beach. It's led by a man who was a General in the Chinese army. Somehow, he convinced his people that everyone on the planet has to come under his rule in order to survive."

"That's stupid," Lyda said. "How is he getting them to follow him?"

"The smart ones tried to fight but didn't get far. Right from the first, he began preaching about how events on this planet shouldn't be a repetition of what happened to China and India on earth, back when they were colonized and dominated by Europeans centuries ago. He gained sufficient followers, and quickly enough, to subjugate everyone in his area. Many people who didn't like his ideas left, but a lot more stayed. Now he's organized a ... a goddamned *army*, of all things, and intends to conquer us all." Jenny shook her head in disgust. "Wouldn't you think we've had enough of that kind of thinking back on earth?"

Lyda was puzzled. "How did you find all this out? Did he just tell you, or what?"

"Not a bit of it. We ran into one of the patrols he sends out. There were half a dozen of them. I guess they figured three women and one undersized man wouldn't be much of a problem. Right off the bat, they ordered us to come with them. I refused, of course; I could sense they were up to no good." She stopped talking for a moment and licked her lips. Lyda pulled out her battered water bottle and passed it to her. She began drinking thirstily.

"And that's when the fight started," Consuela said, eyeing the water bottle.

Jenny passed it to her and wiped her mouth. She grinned wryly. "Yeah. I guess those martial arts classes I took for years finally paid off. And Jeff, bless his little heart, fought like a tiger. We need to remember him and Susan. They made it possible for Consuela and I to kill them and get away."

Lyda thought over what Jenny had said and within seconds, fitted in the missing piece. "You must have captured one of them and got him to talk."

Jenny nodded. "Uh huh, except it was a her. A day or so without water and she spilled her guts. We were tired and hurt, though, and got careless. She tried to escape. Consuela got her with an arrow while she was running back to Mao."

"Mao?"

"Mao Tse Tsung. A revered Chinese leader. The general was named after him and studied his writings. He actually believes he's a reincarnation of Mao."

Lyda couldn't remember anything about Mao Tse Tsung except a vague reference to him in a history lesson. It named him as the leader of a Chinese revolution that started the country on the road toward becoming a world power. She suddenly wished the history book had been more detailed, but maybe someone in the camp would know more about him. For now...

Lyda heard steps behind her and reached out both hands to help the women to their feet. Practically the whole community had come to meet them. A barrage of questions started, but as soon as Jenny and Consuela were upright, Lyda quickly quelled the torrent by holding up both hands. "Folks, we'll advance the date of our general meeting and hold it tonight. Jenny and Consuela will tell their story then. Right now, let's let them eat and rest and have their wounds looked at."

Assuming consent, she waved the throng away, getting some help from Tsing, who came up just then. He had been farther down the beach, searching for shells to use as tools when they came in sight. Raising his eyebrows in question, Tsing didn't speak when Lyda gave him the faintest of nods. They had become

so adept at sensing each other's intentions and attitudes that simple gestures were all it took for understanding most of the time.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda and Tsing exchanged glances after the evening gathering had been convened. They heard from Jenny first, then Consuela, as they told about their adventures. Lyda let Tsing speak first.

He stood up and took a deep breath, then expelled it in a gesture remarkably like a sigh of resignation. He spoke loudly. "I know of Mao. It happens that I lived for a time in a province in China he controlled, with the blessings of the central government. He is ruthless, honest and well-versed in military tactics and affairs. He has also written articles for military journals and civilian publications, glorifying Chinese achievements and predicting that China and India will become the dominant nations of the future, a future he believed was a mere decade or two away when the aliens arrived.

"He is also a brilliant man, from what I've read about him, though some of it may be propaganda ordered by the media empire he controls—or did control. Whatever, from what I know of him, there's no doubt in my mind that he is bent on ruling this planet and every being on it."

"He also has an army," Consuela said. "Food appears to be more abundant in his area. They have had time to begin rudimentary training of recruits—although the ones we fought weren't very good yet, or we wouldn't be here telling you about them."

Jenny took over again. "He has lots of soldiers and all the secondary leaders are former military types. Mark my words, he will be coming this way soon, and he brooks no opposition. Everyone in his camp has been forced to take an oath to serve him and the "State", as he calls it. Our captive said he executed all the leaders of two other groups he took over out of hand, no trial or anything, and he's had others killed for trying to leave."

That remark brought on shouts of defiance and expressions of fear, all mixed together. Lyda and Tsing had a problem getting the meeting back under control. Once they did, Lyda scanned their faces, trying to form a gestalt of their emotions, but it wasn't possible yet. There were too many conflicting thoughts and attitudes bouncing around among the participants, gaining momentum then losing it as new stances and feelings emerged. She decided to bring the meeting to a close, but Tsing spoke first.

"I, for one, will not serve a man like that. Nor, I think, will Miss Brightner."

"I won't join with him, and I'll try to protect anyone else who doesn't—but I won't lie to you; I don't know of anything else to do except try to get away.

"Folks, we need to think this over. In the meanwhile, we'll send patrols out so we won't be taken by surprise. The council will meet right now and we'll all gather again at midmorning tomorrow and decide on a course of action. The hunting parties will be cancelled and added to the fishing crews at high tide. It's at daylight tomorrow. And please, don't despair. We've all lived through catastrophes and upheavals before; we'll make it through this one, too."

\* \* \* \*

"You sounded awfully confident, Miss Brightner," Jenny said after she and Tsing had gathered the council and brought them over to their sleeping area.

"I am confident that most of us will live through this crisis. I don't know about the kind of life we'll have afterward. Did your captive give you any idea of their numbers?"

Tsing whistled at the figure Jenny mentioned.

"Yeah," Jenny said sadly. "Not much hope of fighting them off, is there?"

"No," Lyda admitted. "But I don't feel like submitting to a tyrant, either. Mister Kim?"

"Same here."

"Is there any hope that negotiating would improve matters?"

Tsing shook his head. "No. It's like the old religious wars on earth. Faith or the sword. Submit or die. Mao is obviously a survivor; he's made it this far, same as we have, but I don't see him changing his mindset at all. Chinese hegemony has been his enduring philosophy since childhood, according to his official biography. What Jenny's captive revealed is proof that he's not only sticking to it; he's going beyond simple hegemony. We might be able to live with that, but not under state totalitarianism with routine executions as examples to make the people behave." Tsing gave a mirthless chuckle. "Not that we'd live long anyway, according to Jenny. As leaders, we'd be the first ones he'd execute."

"What about India? The people from there, I mean? Any chance of getting a rebellion started in the ranks?"

"No. He's smart enough to integrate enough Indians and other non-Chinese into the command structure to give their support legitimacy, but he's far too clever to allow them enough power to be a threat."

"Then it's retreat or fight," Lyda said. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I don't want to try leading our people into a war they can't possibly win."

"But where would we go?" Florida asked the question that logically followed Lyda's statement.

"Either the interior, or along the beach in the direction Tom's group headed," Tsing said. "We need to decide quickly, though. Mao will work fast after his patrol turns up missing, and I suspect he will find the bodies quickly enough to tell they weren't killed by the local fauna. He'll probably deduce that anyway, and if not, footprints along the beach will lead him in this direction." Tsing's face was as troubled as a groom whose bride hadn't shown up for the wedding. He pounded his fist on his thigh. "He almost certainly has planned on expanding along the beach anyway. He could already have his army on the way!"

Lyda knew that, too. "I don't want us to try the interior unless we have to. And Tom should be on his way back. We'll go along the beach until we run into him and see what his group has turned up, if anything. We'll decide then whether to continue in that direction and try to stay ahead of Mao, or tackle the interior and make for the mountains. There might be a pass we could defend or we might find more people. Is that satisfactory with you all?"

No one else had any better idea of what to do. Lyda suggested they get some rest and prepare to begin packing what they could carry after the morning fishing and general meeting was concluded.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda scanned the crowd the next day. Many of them already had their belongings packed into such gear as they still possessed, but she wasn't looking at the preparations for moving; she was trying to see if anyone was missing. Her memory, near perfect now, couldn't find a dozen or more men or women who

should have been there. She made no mention of the desertions, nor saw any need to. Anyone who was observant enough would know, and they could figure out as well as she could that the ones who weren't there had gone to join Mao's Regime. She sighed inwardly, though her face remained placid. Dissent appeared to be a facet of human behavior. That wasn't a problem; she knew that different viewpoints were as necessary to the species as the air they breathed. It was dissent that hurt others she had no patience with. And these desertions would hurt. They would give Mao all the information he needed to start an army on the way—if he hadn't given marching orders already. She consulted briefly with Tsing, and they decided to go ahead and lay it out anyway, so that everyone could decide now what they wanted to do. Both of them spoke and answered what questions they could, then Lyda cut it short.

"Folks, we've outlined the choices to you. Neither Tsing nor I will lead you into a fight we can't win. Those who want to stay here and join the Maoists, please try not to provoke the soldiers when they get here. Wave anything white you have and let them know you don't want to fight. For those who are going with Mister Kim and I, we need to get moving. Go over your assignments with the council members and be ready to leave in an hour. Everyone watch the children; don't let them stray. Mister Kim will be in charge of the rear; I'll take the front."

\* \* \* \*

Lyda looked back over her shoulder at the cluster of ragged humanity following her path along the beach. She had arranged for her and several young men and women armed with spears and bows to lead the way and watch for danger. As she walked purposefully along, lengthening the distance between them and the main body, she knew they had little chance of outrunning an army unburdened with children. All she could hope for was to find some other people, enough to make Mao think twice before attacking. She was upset because she couldn't think of any other course of action; always before, no matter what the situation, she had managed to overcome the odds and emerge from any crisis a stronger and better person. Like Dad used to say, she thought; sometimes there's just no cure for a problem.

She had told everyone accompanying them that they might be killed for staying with her if Mao's soldiers overtook them. She was surprised by the number who chose to come, and even more shocked and proud that they had enough confidence in her leadership to bring most of the children they were caring for along, too. She thought that was good; leaving children behind would only give a man like Mao hostages to force his will on them. She knew that few sane humans could resist watching children being mistreated, and she had no doubt that was what would happen if Mao thought it would work.

Lyda intended to fight if they were overtaken. If Mao was with his army, she hoped to get close enough to him before she was disarmed to shoot him dead. If not, and she survived, she intended to circle back and try to get close to him. It was probably a plan slated for failure, but if it came to that, she would do it and face the consequences. In the meantime, she had to hope she wasn't leading her followers into a situation where all they could do was die gloriously. Her only real hope now was that Tom had found a large enough group to oppose Mao that she and her band could join.

If all else failed, there were the mountains. If she and others who thought like her lived, perhaps they could find a haven there and overcome Mao's regime in the future. It wasn't a very consoling thought, nor a very likely probability.

The day was hot and humid, hindering progress. Lyda trudged along, simply putting one foot in front of the other and trying to stay alert for threats from indigenous life they hadn't encountered yet. She had to consciously slow her steps to keep from getting too far ahead of the main group. Just at nightfall, she met Tom and his three companions. His face split in a wide grin when he recognized her, then fell when he saw the grim expression on her face.



"What is it? What's happened?" Tom Buskin asked as soon as they met.

Lyda gave him a very brief summary, then asked him essentially the same question.

Tom sat down in the hard-packed sand above the shoreline they had been traveling on. "We found a great place to live, Miss Brightner, but good God, I never expected to find an *army* chasing you!"

"Never mind that. Tell me about what you found. And quick."

Tom hadn't realized the urgency of the situation until then. "Oh. Well, the beach curves back into a sort of rocky jumble that we had a hard time crossing. On the other side, the terrain begins rising and looks to be impassable, but the jumbles also rise, then feed into a valley with sheer walls. There's plenty of game and fruit trees in there. Not only that, it looks as if the carnivores don't like the rocks. We didn't see any signs of them in the valley. I'm telling you, it beats where we are now all to..." He suddenly realized he was talking as if they were still back at the original beach.

Lyda had to grant him a small smile for that, but quickly went on with the questioning. "Would the valley be easy to defend once we're there?"

Tom thought a moment. "Yes, I think so. The jumbles, jumbles—whatever you call a bunch of big boulders strewn out for a couple of miles—are hard to get through. There's one place right before you get to the valley where a few bowmen and pikes could hold off an army. I started to turn back there, but we still had time so we went on. Now, I'm glad we did."

"I am, too. Let's get back to the others and tell them. No, wait; how far is it?"

"Another day's walk."

"How's the beach up to the rocks?"

"It's easy. We could do it at night."

"Then we will. Come on, let's go." Lyda didn't let him see the chagrin she felt at leaving some of her charges behind now that a safe haven was in sight, even though it had been their choice—and seemed like a good decision at the time.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Mao's army detachment caught up with them just as they got into the rocks. Once there, Lyda had gone back to be with Tsing to form a rearguard after asking Tom to lead the others through the packed boulders. He had been intelligent enough to mark his trail; otherwise, the whole group might have gotten lost in the wilderness of huge rocks. As it was, most of the non-combatants were well into them when the rearguard came under attack.

Lyda would forever remember the running, disorganized combat through the narrow defiles among boulders far too high to see over. It remained in her mind as a series of brutal hand-to-hand combats with fanatical men and women, interspersed with hurried retreats and attempts to set ambushes, then more struggles with knife and spear; all mixed together with constant battle cries, screams of pain and grunts of exertion that echoed and bounced eerily around the lunar landscape like the sounds of a riot by inmates in

a crazy house.

For the first time, she was sorry she hadn't told her people she was armed with a gun; to fire it now might send them into a panic from not knowing who possessed a weapon from earth. Twice, she was forced into direct combat, once with a woman, the second time with a man. She killed the man by using her spear like a quarterstaff, a trick the martial arts instructor had taught in one of the classes. The woman was cagier; she stayed out of range and waited on reinforcements. Lyda had to attack before another enemy showed up. She very nearly lost her life by underestimating how quick the woman was with either hand; she was also big and strong, and had a longer reach. Only a fanatical bit of strength called up from some unknown reserve enabled Lyda to catch the woman's knife arm and gradually force it away from her throat as they rolled up against the edge of a boulder.

The woman also underestimated Lyda. Her slim curved body hinted at feminine weakness, the least of her attributes. Lyda saw the certainty of approaching death in the woman's eyes. She would remember that look forever as she gradually turned the knife back toward the woman's chest, then used the weight of her body and the strength of her arm to sink it home.

For a moment, Lyda couldn't move; she simply lay on top of the bloodied corpse trying to get her breath and energy back. The struggle had taken just about all she had left in her. The sound of scampering feet nearby finally got her upright. She yanked her knife free as she did and almost attacked one of her own people, a man named Marvin, she remembered; steady and reliable if not brilliant.

"Miss Brightner! Hurry; we're at the pass. Oh God, you're hurt!"

Lyda's cheek felt raw from being scraped against the boulder and blood had made a red swath down what remained of her pants from a wound in her thigh. She vaguely remembered plucking a crude arrow from her leg, luckily one without a barbed point. An idiotic thought crossed her mind about it being a good thing the flint wasn't workable; otherwise, the arrow would still be stuck there.

"Can you make it?" Marvin hurried forward to give her a hand.

Lyda took one step, then another. The muscles in her thigh were still intact enough to walk. "I'm okay. Let's go."

She followed Marvin, wondering where everyone else was. Then she remembered that three of the rearguard lay dead among the rocks, and others had been scattered in the fierce fighting. She stumbled on, exhausted almost to the limit of her strength. Others joined her and Marvin as they moved forward through an ever narrowing passage. She thought they had made it when she saw the three bowmen, Jenny among them, guarding the site of the only access into the valley. She knew that's where they had to be when she noticed one of the others was Tom. They were all perched up high and using smaller boulders and a few shrunken trees that had managed to find root in the scant soil for cover.

"Where's Tsing?" Was the first thing she called up to Jenny.

"He said he was going forward to help bring the last of us back here. I haven't seen him since," Jenny called back down without taking her eyes off the passageway Lyda and her group had just come through.

Lyda took her eyes off Jenny for a moment, then heard a scream of surprise. She looked back up to see her struggling with a spearman, trying to fend him off with her bow. Tom was just pulling his spear from the bowels of another attacker. The third Bowman tumbled off the perch as she watched. He hit with a

dull thud as Lyda searched frantically for the source of the new threat. She saw it when a dislodged stone bounced down the rock wall. Halfway up was a crack between adjoining boulders which a few of Mao's soldiers had found by accident and followed to the top. Two men jumped to the ground from there, landing in front of her. She grappled with the first, trying to get a hand loose and draw her gun; firing it wouldn't matter now.

Lyda turned a knife thrust and tried to knee the man in the groin. He grunted but it didn't slow him down. She couldn't tell where the other man was, but knew he was close. Suddenly, she thought she was going to die. Her mind surged with bitter protest. A hard blow to the kidney sent a flaring pain through her body and sapped her remaining strength like a sudden debilitating fever. Her antagonist pushed her away and she fell, hitting her head on a rock. The scene above her whirled dizzily. She tried to rise but her muscles felt like jelly. She realized she was going to be too late anyway. A spear held by two brawny arms was raised high. As it started its downward plunge, a body threw itself on top of her.

Tsing! She saw his face for one brief moment before the spear went into his back. The point went all the way through his body. It's bloody tip pinked her left breast. She saw Tsing's mouth open and close, once, twice as his eyes widened. Then they closed, too.

Lyda tried to scream but had no air in her lungs. The man yanked his spear loose and pushed Tsing's body off her with his foot. He raised the spear high and plunged it down again. Lyda managed to roll over just enough so that its tip splintered on the hard scabble she was laying on. Then the spearman got a surprised expression on his face and silently collapsed into a heap beside her. The remainder of Jenny's crew had subdued the rest of the opposition and she had put an arrow through his neck.

Lyda could barely walk as someone helped her up to a ledge, then over to where the valley came into view. It was barely discernible through her tears. Tsing had truly loved her. He had died for her. She was sorry now that she hadn't been able to grant him what he had wanted most in this world before his death: her own love.

\* \* \* \*

By late that evening, Lyda had a strong force defending the pass and was trying to get the survivors organized. Far too many had lost their lives and it was mostly the best among them. She grieved for Tsing but tried not to do it in public. Too many others had lost loved ones for her to cry in front of them. Later, she thought. I'll cry later when I'm alone. Even so, she had a hard time holding back the tears; it made her realize that for all the changes she had noticed in herself, she was still a woman and could still feel deep emotion. That was comforting, in some small way.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning as they were settling into the lush valley, the aliens came with their transports and their mechanical beasts, still looking like misshapen spiders, and still just as relentlessly intent on rounding up every human being still alive.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda thought the spider mechs were less tolerant of resistance to being herded into the transports this time. She moved among her people, encouraging them to go where the mechs directed while trying to avoid them as long as she could herself. The mechs speared several people with their mandibles when they tried to resist or run away. Before long, they were all driven into the bowels of the familiar big transports. She thought at first she would try to see if Mao was on this ship, and if so, shoot him dead, but she never got a chance to act on the idea.

The crowding was more severe this time, as if the aliens were deliberately trying to ratchet up the

pressure. Lyda did her best to keep the two children near her from being crushed. She could offer little help under the circumstances but she did the best she could. She never knew whether she was successful or not, because whatever was operating the ship did something with a blinding red light. It began on one end and swept over the packed compartment in a slow wave that put everyone to sleep. Lyda saw its progress and how the people slumped and fell as it passed over them. She had just enough time to get herself and one nearby child into a reasonably comfortable position before she lost consciousness. She never knew when the transport left the planet.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda awoke to the most terrifying experience of her life, a trial of fear that she was never able to properly define as real or imagined. All she knew was that the aliens were playing with them again. There was no possibility of feeling concern for anyone else at the moment. It was all she could do to keep her own sanity.

She thought she was still on the transport because of a vague sense of other people around her, but the atmosphere had changed. There were no discernible boundaries to the confinement era. For as far as her mind could reach, there were only terrifying images that could have come from the deepest dregs of a truly insane subconscious, worse than the worst nightmares she had ever heard of or imagined. Her first reaction was to scream and try to run. When that proved impossible, her mind tried to retreat into itself and become catatonic, immune to influences from the outside world. *No, no, no!* she cried, rejecting that kind of oblivion, but finding nowhere else to go. She tried to run but it was impossible and there was no place to escape to even if she could. She batted at the air, trying to fend off the horrible projections.

*Projections? Goddamn, it's the aliens doing this. It isn't real, it isn't real!* Over and over, she shouted the words to herself, and from that reservoir of courage she had found within herself again and again, she quit fighting and began attacking. Whether she was walking or running or not going anywhere, she had no idea. All she knew was she had to face this terror and beat it down or she would go forever insane—and to fight meant going toward the terrors, not away from them.

Trembling and shaking, heart pounding as if it would burst from her chest, Lyda made her mind and body override the terrified reaction of her lizard hindbrain still reacting to ancient terrors. She came closer to the indescribable projections. They beat at her like all the demons of perdition, damnation and madness, infinitely worse than the terrors of every Halloween haunted house and horror movie that ever existed. She closed with the horrors, merged with them, fought and conquered them with sheer courage and determination; then at the very moment of Lyda's triumph, she again lost consciousness.

\* \* \* \*

When Lyda woke the second time, she was alone, and in an entirely different environment. It was clearly artificial, but whether it was another ship or a city on some planet was impossible to determine. The gravity never varied, nor was there day or night. What was striking was the beauty of the place. It was a fairyland of colorful avenues and glittering buildings with open storefronts stocked with all manner of food and clothing. Residential quarters were also invitingly open and sported heated baths and soft beds, along with many other items designed for comfortable living. Lyda didn't find out about the available pleasures until later. She was so happy to be able to bathe and find clean, comfortable clothing and all kinds of delectable food, that she spent many hours, probably running into days had she been able to measure them, before she was sated.

Lyda wandered the city by herself at first but gradually, other people began appearing. All of them were as fascinated and pleased with the luxuries as she was, but she couldn't help wondering what the catch was.

Lyda had intended to ask others when she encountered them whether they had undergone the same

nightmarish ordeal in the transport as she had, but the first time she tried, her voice froze as tightly as her mind. Neither she nor anyone else she ever met was able to talk about the experience. To her, it remained somewhere back in the recesses of her brain, a hidden icon she could call up and use as a reference to compare to anything else bad that might ever happen, but never a thing to talk about. She didn't think anything could possibly be worse than that horrendous experience, but it was something not designed for communication to others. She suspected that everyone who survived had probably had to face their own individual brand of fear and horror but there was no way to really tell.

The people she did meet were as varied as from any polyglot city on earth, though all had been hardened and changed to a degree by the struggles since first being captured by the aliens. As usual, Lyda tried to help those she could to cope with the new environment, while being wary of persons who had evil intentions. She quickly found most of them could be separated into two broad categories; those who began assuming the sybaritic comforts now available for the taking were their due for surviving the appalling conditions of the past, and the ones like her, who accepted the eminently desirable amenities, but refused to believe they were available for no other reason than to make them feel good.

The city was like all past habitats the aliens had thrust humanity into in one aspect. Lyda could find no other person she had met in the past. After the first "day" or two, she did find company.

The first individual she met and one she gravitated to almost immediately was a man with skin the color of rich caramel, dark hair and Polynesian features. He turned out to be from Truk, one of the Pacific Islands she didn't recognize. He spoke broken English at first, but picked up the nuances and increased vocabulary even quicker than Tsing had.

When they first met, coming out of adjoining clothing "shops" at the same time, he gave her his full name, then laughed.

"Don't even try to pronounce it; you probably can't. Just call me Tapa; that's a nickname my parents gave me when I was a kid. Something from a television program."

Lyda kept her distance and decided to see where he stood right away. "I'm Lyda Brightner. The aliens came this time just after I led the people I was in charge of to what I hoped would be a haven from Mao's army. Do you know anything about him?"

"Mao Tse Tsung? Sure. Chinese revolutionary of the last century." He frowned, then snapped his fingers. "I was just going to ask what in hell Mao's army was, but I can guess now. There was someone by the name of Mao in our transport. Even before other ... things ... happened, someone yelled 'Mao, you son of a bitch!' and stuck a knife between his ribs."

"Good," Lyda said, dismissing Mao from any further consideration. She took in Tapa's appearance. He was wearing a wraparound of brightly colored cloth like the tapa lava-lavas the Polynesians used to make from pounded bark. It was decorated in geometric figures of an odd but pleasing design Tapa told her later was also an original characteristic of the casual tropical clothing.

"I take it he gave your group a hard time?"

"Mine and everyone else's he could subdue. If he's dead, forget him. I like your outfit, by the way."

Tapa laughed merrily again. "The climate in this place is almost tropical. Why not dress like it? You've done well, yourself."

Lyda was wearing pants and undergarments of soft cloth she had gleaned from the shop. When she pulled them on, they immediately adjusted away small irregularities into the most comfortable clothing she had ever worn. Her top was a green blouse with rolled up sleeves, which fastened with tabs that gripped even better than Velcro, but loosened easier. Somewhat incongruously with her other clothing, she still carried a backpack, but she had found a new one with self adjusting straps and a lower portion that fastened around the waist and provided an easily accessible pocket on each hip. She stored her pistol in one of them; the other was empty as yet.

"Thanks. It is nice to have new clothes. I'm afraid my old ones were at the end of their useful life."

"The food and hot water here isn't bad, either. Um, may I ask why the backpack when everything we might need is so readily available?"

"I don't mind you asking. I like to keep a few goodies on me at all times. The damned aliens may dump us on a deserted island the next time, or a worse wasteland than the desert where I landed the first time."

"Hmm. I hadn't thought of that. Maybe you're smarter than I am. I'll bet you have a jacket in that pack, too, huh?"

"Yes, and a water bottle and some non-perishable food."

"You know, I think I'll copy your idea. First though, may I suggest we go find a place to sit and compare histories? And if we meet others on the way, perhaps ask them to join us; assuming they're compatible, that is?"

"All right," Lyda agreed. She could sense nothing threatening in Tapa's manner or attitude; in fact, she realized that she could tell almost with certainty he was a good person and had survived the aliens through intelligence and congeniality toward others, rather than through more violent means. She had the feeling her mind power had increased to another level. As a test, she reviewed all she had learned about this new place in seconds and cataloged it in her mind under good, bad, and probable danger with effortless ease. Her mind had indeed gained power with this change; presumably her body had too, but she left that for later.

On the way to one of the little parks that always sported a self-cleaning and heated pond, they ran across a middle-aged woman. She declined to come with them, mumbling something about going to eat.

Lyda caught the tinge of an unstable mind. She wondered, then concluded it was because of an experience similar to the one she had undergone on the transport. The woman had survived her terrors, but not without being scarred by them.

She and Tapa sat down together on one of the comfortable benches. Two other people were cavorting in the pool with their new clothes laying in a heap beside it. They looked up and waved, then went back to playing.

Lyda spoke first. "This is all nice, but it makes me wonder what it's for. Not a reward for surviving so far, surely?"

"I don't think so," Tapa said. "You telling me what you're carrying in your pack gave me a wake up call. There must be danger here; we just haven't found it yet. Unless..."

"Yes?" Lyda prompted.



"I went into one place with real comfortable seats and beds. There were screens in front of the chairs and on the ceiling above the beds. As soon as I was seated, I started experiencing images of wonderful pleasures waiting on me, just about anything you could think of. They passed like a continuous slide show in my mind. I saw one that looked particularly interesting and thought I'd like to try it. Immediately, I was transported ... well, not physically transported, but I may as well have been because it became impossible to tell reality from simulation. I won't go into what happened except to say it was so incredibly satisfying that I'm afraid others who discover similar places will become addicted." He stopped talking and gazed thoughtfully into the distance, as if seeing into the future—or perhaps remembering the ecstasy he had experienced in that room.

"I saw a place like that right after I got dumped here, but I didn't go in. At the time, I was more interested in getting clean and well fed. Like everyone else, I suppose."

"Sure. But it will soon become common knowledge what's to be found there."

"It will have to be investigated," Lyda decided. "But let's be careful. I'll bet there's traps there for the unwary."

Tepa examined her for a long moment, still thoughtful. "You assume agreement, as if leadership comes naturally to you."

"I sort of grew into the role," Lyda said quietly. "It wasn't easy."

"No, I suspect it wasn't. There's an aura about you that I can sense. It's powerful. You must have gone through the crucible more than once."

"You have an aura, too," Lyda told him. "Not like a color, but ... a self-image that emanates from you. That's something new this time."

"Yes, like the improvements in physical strength and mental acuity many of us have noticed in ourselves. Some have gained more than others, though. Such as yourself."

"I've noticed that."

"Well, I'm content to follow your lead, even as young as you are. I'm more of an assistant than leader—but I'm very good in that role."

Lyda gave him her warmest smile. "Good assistants are as important as good leaders, if not more so. I've learned that, too."

"Fine. Shall we begin our investigations?"

"Why don't we see if we can gather some more people first, so we'll have as much comparison as possible? Some of us may react differently than you did."

"True. But if I may suggest, you should at least know a little about the ... pleasure rooms, I guess we can call them, before introducing others to them."

"You're right. Would you mind staying with me?"

"Not at all."

"Let's go then."

\* \* \* \*

Lyda sat down in one of the chairs in the first pleasure room they came to. It immediately adjusted to the contours of her body. As soon as she was comfortable and began gazing at the screen, it assumed depth and startling clarity. Suggestible images began flashing in her mind, hanging just long enough for her to decide to pass on. Rather than concentrating on a particular one as Tapa said he had done, Lyda tried to make up a pleasing adventure in her mind. She couldn't stand to think about romance yet, so she imagined herself enjoying a good adventure movie. Immediately, she was transported into the role of the female protagonist in a vacation trip across America such as Mom and Dad had been planning. She enjoyed it hugely. The images were as clear as reality and just as moving. She felt her soul stirring at beautiful landscapes, admiring the accomplishments of great men, anguishing over the sense of death and suffering hanging over great battlefields and on and on. She had to force herself to bring it to a halt.

Lyda blinked and looked away from the screen. Tapa was sitting on the floor watching her.

"Well over an hour, near as I can judge," he said. "And the whole time, a green haze obscured you, the screen and the chair you're sitting on. I couldn't tell what kind of reaction you were having."

Lyda sighed at the return to reality. She had enjoyed the venture so much and had related to the supporting personalities as if they had been her own loving parents. She suspected right then that if she returned to the screen and brought up a vision of Mom and Dad, she would be instantly transported into their simulated presence—and feel every bit of the emotion such a reunion would bring. She shook her head vigorously to get rid of the idea.

"Tapa, I see the danger of this place already. It's a dream palace, an escape mechanism where you can go and feel as if you're living a real life with all the enjoyment and pleasure and none of the pain. It even let me think up my own adventure—and live in it just as if I were there. Can you imagine how enticing and addictive this could become? Reality as you want it, not as it is."

"I see," Tapa said slowly. "You'll notice I'm sitting on the floor. I was tempted to go another of the preprogrammed pleasure trips while waiting on you. And I'll confess, I didn't consider trying something from my own fantasies. Perhaps you have a more inquiring mind than I."

"That's not it," Lyda said diplomatically, though she suspected he might be right. She told him the truth. "I've lost one man I loved, and another I think I would have come to love, so recently that I didn't consider a romantic adventure; not even one of those suggested by the screen."

"The ones already there are tempting enough. I don't know whether we should experiment much with our own fantasies. As you say, it is the perfect escape mechanism."

"I think I'll have to try," Lyda said slowly after a long moment of concentration. "Otherwise, how can I know enough to warn others away from it?"

"Ah, but can you escape entrapment yourself?"

"I'll still risk it. Maybe you could stay and observe and try shaking me or something if it goes on too long. But not now. I want to think about this some more first."

"Excellent. This indeed requires thought."

Lyda was amused at the very precise English Tapa had begun speaking in such a short time and the way it was becoming contaminated by imitating her own east Texas twang. His stilted language mixed with a country accent sounded so funny that she had trouble not laughing. She found herself liking him very much.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

As was done before where there was no discernible difference between night and day, Lyda and Tapa decided to call a sleep period a "night" and the time they were awake a "day". The problem, as before, was getting everyone to adapt their biorhythms to the same schedule. It would be a gradual process, Lyda knew, and would take a while to accomplish. In the meantime, she searched for and found what she hoped she would, a big parklike area surrounded on all sides by places to sleep. It would be perfect for a central area to congregate and return to after explorations, for that was on her agenda, too.

Once she and Tapa each picked a place to sleep, they began trying to induce others to join them. Some did; others were perfectly content to go their own way and enjoy the new luxuries. Lyda didn't feel she had any more time to waste. She got Tapa to watch her again while she sat in a chair in one of the pleasure rooms and induced the simulated reality to take over her mind. She deliberately chose to imagine a romance, not with Gavin in particular, but a man with his general attributes. Before allowing herself to sink into the dream, she formed the thought that it would not involve sexual acts. She was smart enough to know her first sexual experience with a lover should be real, not a lifelike fantasy, yet the simulated romance involved the touching of her breasts as Gavin had just before they were separated. It was ecstatic, as were the kisses and hugs and even holding hands.

When Tapa shook her out of it after the hour she had allowed, she was shaken and emotionally drained. The imaginary lover had been real enough to touch and sweeter than the nectar of fruit warmed by a hot summer sun, and his touch had heated her body even more.

"Never again," she told Tapa. "If we settle down here, we have to try and find some way to convince people to stay away from the damn pleasure rooms. They are worse than any drug ever invented on earth—and I suspect even more addicting than drugs, especially since there doesn't appear to be any physical withdrawal symptoms." She shivered, thinking of all the ways the rooms could be used—and abused.

"I have to agree. I tried a room once more yesterday when we separated. I wanted to see my wife again. I should have left well enough alone." His face saddened with the tragedy of an all too vivid reincarnation of his lost love, and the knowledge that in a way, he had reversed time, canceling some of its healing balm.

"I thought you had done something like that, Tapa. Thank you for telling me."

"I should thank you for believing the rooms shouldn't be used. But how can we convince others?"

"I don't believe in coercion. We have to persuade everyone to stay away from them by reasoning. Not only that, we can't have any of our people sneaking off to the rooms once they agree to stay out of them; not if we can find a way to keep them away. It would corrupt the rest. Tapa, those rooms are the hidden danger of this place. If we are kept here indefinitely, damn near everyone will succumb to them."

So far, "our people" consisted of Lyda, Tapa and half a dozen other adults. She had yet to see a child. That, if anything, was causing her to lose sleep. Had the visions in the transport been so horrible that no child's mind could stand them? She hoped not, but it didn't look promising. She got Tapa and the others to begin exploring farther and farther from "Central Square", as they called it, like heralds of old, crying warning to all who would listen.

Lyda instructed the explorers to try to induce anyone that showed the least promise to return with them and settle in Central Square with the others. She planned on starting classes again, along with any other activities she could think of to keep people occupied and out of the pleasure rooms.

Surprisingly, there was little quarrel with her leadership, even from the men and women she could tell had progressed in their abilities like she and Tapa had. It was as though when they met, they sensed and accepted her acumen in that department and only made suggestions. As time passed, the assembly grew, as solitary wanderers and newly discovered little groups joined them. Lyda had already discovered that a part of the human heritage was the need for company of its own kind, and the need of a large majority of humans for something to believe in outside themselves; either religion or a great cause or a political system; anything that attracted others to the same fold. That was how Mao had been able to marshal so many followers in so short a time, she thought; he presented them with a cause to believe in.

Lyda had her own beliefs, but they involved what she had come to think of as the encouragement of the attributes found in decent and thoughtful people, and a system of government that cared for the weak and allowed those who could do so room to exercise their abilities and talents. Again, she formed a council of advisors, half a dozen men and women and one boy not much older than herself, but precocious to a degree. He had a mind that exceeded her own in its need to expand and grow. He laughed about being named Leonardo and insisted it was after the American actor, not the Renaissance genius, even though he was from Italy. In any case, he insisted on being called Leo and was more interested in learning about the huge city they were in than anything else. He had an infectious smile and brushed incessantly at his dark, curly hair.

Leo was the only other person besides herself and Tapa that she fully trusted to never go into a pleasure room without permission—but he was so brilliant, that she began to form a plan for him and the pleasure rooms—if he would agree.

Lyda went out to walk around the city herself once every couple "weeks", but never farther than the distance she could travel in half a day. She always returned to the square to sleep. Others had gone far beyond that range but never came to an end of the city, nor found any striking changes from the area they lived in. Occasionally, she did meet individuals or couples who had wandered into their area from somewhere else. Always, she stopped to talk to them and try to get the ones she sensed were compatible to return with her and join her group. She was successful less than half the time. Some of them were already addicted to the pleasure rooms and wanted nothing to do with a government that discouraged their use. Others were deranged from the horrors of the transport and not susceptible to reason, while still others simply preferred to be alone for the time being and enjoy the luxurious living.

One person Lyda met in her solitary sojourns was Frieda Holtz, a blond with her hair tied back like her own, but a taller and more mature woman. She walked with a confident stride as if she had a direction in mind. When she saw Lyda, she stopped, then came toward her.

"Hello, I'm Frieda Holtz from Germany. Do you speak English?"

"Yes, most people here do, or they learn it quickly. I'm Lyda Brightner, from America."

"English is becoming the universal language among us survivors. You are ... how old?"

Lyda could tell the German woman was friendly and intelligent. "I'm old enough to be the mayor of the people I live with," she said politely. As near as she could calculate, she was now well past her fifteenth birthday, but she had the appearance of a woman of eighteen. Or so she thought from reflections in the pools. She didn't know whether the aliens had no use for mirrors, or depriving humans of them was part of their unknown strategy, but they were never available.

"Good. Never tell a stranger your real age." She laughed as if that were some kind of joke, then continued on. "Your group does what? If you sit in the dream rooms all day, I do not want to go there." She spoke as if she had already discerned Lyda's intentions, and Lyda thought she had.

"We discourage it."

"Not forbid?"

"No. I don't run that kind of group."

"You are wise, then. May I come with you?"

Lyda was gratified. "Certainly. We'll be glad to have you."

"You know that already, eh?"

"Yes. You're a good person."

"As are you. And one who has gone through the fire, I believe. Shall we walk and talk?"

"All right. It's time to head for home anyway."

"Yes, I know. This is a new thing, is it not, our being able to sense others' intentions and attitudes?"

"Not everyone is good at it," Lyda reminded her. "And only surface intentions are open to those who have the ability. Deeper thoughts are still private."

"So far. Perhaps the progression will continue, as the strength and healing ability and resistance to injury of our bodies may also."

Lyda had often wondered that very same thing. How long would the improvement of mind and body continue? Just recently, she had tested her strength, using readily available containers and water to estimate the weight. She took care that she did it privately; she knew that superiority in strength over males affected the psyches of some of them adversely. She could lift two hundred pounds above her head without straining unduly, yet her body was that of a normal young woman, as slim and as nicely curved as she could possibly wish. As a further test, she had attempted to cut her own arm. She could, but the skin resisted her efforts, toughening under the worn sawteeth of her paring knife, but remaining soft and still feminine to the touch elsewhere.

"Have you thought of where the improvements might ultimately lead, and why the aliens are doing this to us?"

"Of course. All of us have wondered about it, those who have survived the trials so far. But reasons?"

There could be many. I have considered some, as I'm sure you must have, but nothing I thought of is subject to testing."

Something in Frieda's way of phrasing made her think she must have been a scientist of some sort. "Subject to testing" was similar to the wording she had heard some of Dad's friends use when they were invited over.

"What kind of science did you do before the aliens came?" she asked.

"Physics. And believe me, the aliens have upset most of the theories I learned before they came. We were transported to at least one new planet at faster than light speeds. Either that, or the propulsion method is far beyond what we can comprehend. If we were transported at slower than light speeds, the time dilation effect was reached very quickly."

"Could the planet have been a construct in the Oort Cloud, maybe?"

"And the other environments? Were we in a ship? And where is this place? It's huge, endless."

"Nothing is endless," Lyda corrected.

"Yes, but still big enough so that it couldn't be hidden on earth."

"How about illusion? Could we be imagining everything that's happened by ... uh, having it implanted into our minds? Or projected into our minds somehow? Sort of like how the pleasure rooms work?"

"It would make no difference either way. Personally, I don't believe it has been illusion, nor do I think you believe that."

"I don't," Lyda declared. "All this should be discussed, though. I've got a class started where past experiences are compared and contrasted and gone over. No conclusions so far, but many interesting theories. Hypotheses, I should say."

"Right. No way to test them, but interesting to talk about. You were in science—no, I see you are too young, unless you were a prodigy."

"I've tried to attend as many of the classes I start as possible, particularly the ones covering subjects I know little about. Hey, there's Anay."

Anay was a recent addition, an Indian who had been a medical doctor practicing in Calcutta. He had seen his wife and two children die from wounds inflicted by the spider mechs in the initial invasion of earth. He had overcome his grief and now used his time to study the physical and mental changes that had taken place in the bodies of many of the survivors.

"Greetings, Miss Brightner. As always, I am pleased to see you have returned safely."

"There's nothing to hurt us here except the pleasure rooms."

"And humans."

"That hasn't been a problem so far, but you're right, Anay. We should remember that humans can be dangerous. Thanks for reminding me."



"You're most welcome."

Lyda introduced Frieda and they walked on into the central courtyard. Classes were finished and most of the group was already gathered for the evening's informal meeting. Lyda had instigated that daily routine to keep people from straying to the pleasure rooms. Some went anyway. Lyda felt she was fighting a losing battle. While the friendly back and forth banter went on, she listened, but with half her attention. The other part was focused on Leo and a project she had decided on, if he would agree to it.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda got together with Leo and Tapa after the gathering broke up, and as an afterthought, asked Frieda to join them. Frieda had impressed her with the way her mind roved and her agreement that the pleasure rooms were dangerous. Lyda had already discussed the subject with Tapa several times and he had agreed to supervise if Leo decided to participate.

"It's like this, Leo," Lyda began, trying very hard to convey to the cheerful prodigy how serious she was. "We're losing ground to the pleasure rooms. I can see a time coming when all but a few of us will be spending most of our time there. Anay tells me he's already run across several cases of malnutrition and dehydration because some people who want to dream their lives away won't even come out from under long enough to eat and drink enough to stay healthy. Also, more people are starting to use virtual sexual episodes in place of real sex. If we could get them to stop after a couple of times, it might be a good thing, though I have my doubts. As it is, I can see no good at all in the practice on a continuing basis."

"He also says it is affecting their minds, Miss Brightner. The ones using the pleasure rooms to excess are becoming delusional and unable to react normally to everyday events. Anay is an interesting man. Too bad he doesn't have much medicine to practice; that's his real love." Leo was the perfect assistant. He used her first name in private but never when anyone else was present. Tapa was the only other person she felt comfortable enough around to get on a first name basis with in private—but others did the same, simply because hardly anyone could pronounce his long, many-syllabled Polynesian name. She had learned over and over how much a simple title such as "Miss Brightner" made people listen more attentively and follow her orders with less resentment.

"Yes," Lyda agreed. "Tapa and I have talked about this effect, and what we can do to reverse the trend toward the use of the pleasure rooms, despite all our warnings."

"And you want me to help. I can tell that much but not exactly what you have in mind. Clue me in."

"We think there must be some way to use them for simple entertainment while toning them way down. Perhaps even find a way to use them as teaching machines."

"Hmm. I think I know what you want. Use them like movies or interactive games, or educational television, but without all the intense emotional involvement. Have you any ideas about how to bring this about?"

"No, I don't. Neither does Tapa. Frieda?"

"I tried the dream rooms several times before becoming aware of the danger inherent in them. I wasn't as smart as you, Miss Brightner. I almost lost myself in fantasies of home and family."

Lyda smiled at her. Frieda had picked up on the use of her title immediately and pronounced it in a manner so natural, anyone would think she had been working for Lyda for years.

"Yes, but do you know of, or think you might know of any way to ameliorate the fantasies?"

"I haven't given it any thought. Quite frankly, the idea hadn't occurred to me. I can see why you would want that, though. Suppose I talk to Leo about it and see what we come up with?"

"Include Tapa. I want him to monitor anything you decide to try. And only Leo is to carry out the testing. He's the only person I know that might have a strong enough mind to resist the siren song of the rooms."

For once, Leo lost his infectious and cheerfully grinning expression. "Why do I suddenly feel like a mouse in a maze? Never mind, I'll do it; but can I have Anay along as well to monitor my mental state? I know he's not a coconut doctor, but he knows more about how the mind works than anyone else around here."

Frieda howled. "Coconut doctor! I love it! Never have I heard a psychiatrist called that!" She laughed so hard that her heavy breasts shook, despite her perfectly fitted bra.

Lyda had to laugh, too. She hadn't heard the term either.

\* \* \* \*

Three days later, Tapa came to see her looking very solemn. He seated himself by Lyda in the corner of the Central Square Lyda had reserved for conversations with council members. Every time she sat down on one of the benches, she was appreciative of how much more comfortable it was than the ones on earth. There was really no comparison. She squirmed with contentment as it adjusted to her contours.

"We're ready," he said simply.

"Tell me about it."

"There's really little to speak of yet, Lyda. We have decided on how to begin and proceed. However, if a few of our ideas work out, we will probably have to involve Frieda in the testing as well as Leo."

"Is she agreeable?"

"Reluctantly, but she is willing if it becomes necessary."

"Is there anything you can tell me about what you'll be doing?"

Tapa debated, then shook his head. "I could, but it would probably be wasted conversation, since much of what we will do will depend upon initial, very careful and limited testing of our first ideas. Leo's ideas, mostly. If they work, we can go farther. If not, we have other options under consideration."

"Is there anything I can offer to help you?"

"Only allow us to be alone for as long as two weeks in a secluded area. We want to go slow and have no curious bystanders, especially any who might think we are using the tests simply to gain approved time in the pleasure rooms."

"I guess I can do without you for that long, though it won't be easy. But secluded? There's no such place here."

"No, of course not. What I meant is that we will travel some distance, so it isn't likely we will encounter any of our people. Frieda has an excellent spatial memory and sense of direction. She will tell you where we will be and exactly how to get there in case you need to fetch us home. You'll have to memorize it."

"That's no problem." For all the comforts and amenities of the fairy city, no one had yet found any writing or reading material. It was like the aliens *wanted* them to have nothing to do but indulge their every desire in simulations well nigh impossible to tell from reality—except the pleasure rooms provided emotional experiences and sexual involvement more intense than the real thing. That, Lyda knew as a certainty, was the ultimate danger of the rooms.

"Good, then. We will leave first thing after we wake up and have eaten. Here is where we will be in case of emergency."

Tepa related the location to Lyda very slowly, along with the route to get there. It included many turns and seemingly roundabout pathways but Lyda fixed it in her mind and repeated the directions perfectly. She knew she could have memorized the material just as easily had Frieda spoken rapidly.

Tepa nodded that he was satisfied.

The next morning, Lyda saw them off while most of the group were just getting up and around. All she could do after that was count the days and hope they would come back safely and with their minds intact.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Surprisingly, Lyda saw the three return in less than a week. They looked sleepy but Leo was grinning like an impotent man who had just discovered the virtues of Viagra. The others appeared to be pleased, but Lyda reserved judgment. She couldn't help but be suspicious of the insidious power of the pleasure rooms; it was possible they had all been seduced by some illusion not yet encountered, despite her strict instructions that Tepa was not to indulge under any circumstances. She wanted one completely impartial witness.

When Tepa saw Lyda wasn't reciprocating their enthusiasm, he waved his hand negligently. "It's all right, Miss Brightner. We found the key. And so simple, too. Wait, let me rephrase that sentence. Leo found the key. Any of us might have done so eventually, but trying for it would have been a very great risk."

"Let's go to the council bench and you can tell me about it. Do you want me to send for a meal?"

"That can wait. Sleep is what we need more than anything, but I know you are anxious to hear of our success."

"I'm even more anxious to know if it can be applied to everyone."

Tepa's smile faded, though Leo's and Frieda's did not. She soon found out why.

Leo took the lead by first describing how a person could use the pleasure room as a teaching tool. A person with a good enough grasp of a subject could tie into the screens by simple concentration, then project the simulation to an audience, being very careful the other participants were unable to see into the depths of a screen themselves. In that way, the intensity of the simulation was diluted, yet the

verisimilitude was maintained.

"The same thing applies to the preprogrammed fantasies. One person with a strong mind can access the simulation and dilute it to intensity levels low enough to keep the watchers from becoming addicted. We would have been back a day earlier, but we took the extra time to see if more people in the chain made a difference. They didn't. The first dilution the originator performs is good for any number of people."

"How about personal fantasies? Can they be diluted also?"

"That's the rub," Frieda admitted. "Personal simulations involve the initial contact person so intimately that they forget where they are. Before you know it, the audience simulations will fade and the person supposed to be directing it gets the full intensity. Leo could manage it, but I couldn't."

"I suspect if I did it often enough, I'd find myself losing concentration also," Leo said. "I couldn't find a way to avoid becoming involved in personal simulations over a long period of time. After half an hour or so, I could feel my concentration slipping and had to break it off. Everything else is fine, though."

Lyda ran her fingers through her freshly washed hair. Since settling down in the city, she had begun letting it fall naturally around her shoulders rather than pulling it back in a ponytail or braid. She was finding that she wanted to look attractive, whether she was involved with anyone or not—but so far, she hadn't found a man in the city who interested her.

"So what you're saying is that we'll be able to use the pleasure rooms with audiences for entertainment and teaching, but the lure will remain?"

Leo shrugged, but still held his grin. "That's the gist of it, Miss Brightner. Good news and bad news. Honestly, after sampling the pleasure rooms on my own a couple of times before meeting you, I was doubtful we could accomplish even this much."

"Would more experimentation help?"

"I'll do it if you ask me to, but frankly, I'm fearful of going much further. I got a sense of danger lurking in the illusions, behind the lure, so to speak."

"If you say you're scared, then everyone else should be. It's not as much as I hoped for, but more than I expected. Let's declare victory and go home."

That brought laughter enough and then some.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda let it be known she wanted everyone who could to attend the informal evening meeting. Word spread rapidly that her two chief assistants had returned with important information about the pleasure rooms. By the time everyone who intended to listen had gathered, Lyda got the impression from the crowd that many of them were hoping she had found some way to let them use the pleasure rooms as they were.

She asked Leo to explain.

Leo was clearly not as used to speaking in public as she was, but he did an adequate job. Most of the community already knew the high regard Lyda held him in, but there was still disappointment evident in their faces and attitudes as they listened to him.

Lyda did her best to allay the regret. "The pleasure rooms can be used now, in a limited fashion, but I am emphasizing again in very strong terms how dangerous they are. Only selected individuals will do the entertaining and education. I know it won't be as intense as individual simulations, but it will be infinitely safer—and still much better than anything we had on earth. Let's remember that part and be grateful. Thanks to Leo, we have a wonderful tool now for teaching and learning and group entertainment. Leo and Frieda have also volunteered to start the first classes from the pleasure room here in the square tomorrow, after we have a bit of work done that will keep other screens from distracting you.

"I'm going to step aside now and let the three council members who risked so much answer questions. We'll have another meeting tomorrow night about classes. At that time, we'll let everyone know about other classes and when entertainment will be scheduled. We will all be open for your suggestions as to what kind of classes and ... movies, I guess we can call them, you want to participate in. Thanks."

Lyda nodded and smiled at her audience, then stepped down from the bench that was used as a podium for speakers. She forced herself to stay until the meeting broke up many hours later. She spent all the time absorbing the thoughts, desires and hopes of her people. She wished she could do more for them, but this was certainly better than nothing.

She stopped Leo before he left to thank him again.

"Ah, I didn't do much. That sort of thing was a hobby of mine anyway. Did I ever tell you I wrote the software and designed the characters for *Broken Arrow*?"

"You did that game? I loved it, but Mom and Dad thought I wasn't old enough for it. I only got the chance to play it once, at a friend's home."

To her astonishment, Leo blushed. "Uh, thanks," he said. He looked as if he wanted to tell her more about the game, but then nodded and hurried away.

Lyda thought she knew why *Broken Arrow* was designed for mature teenagers and didn't stint on sex or nudity, though it was all tastefully done. She also knew now that Leo had put her on a sort of pedestal in his mind, a place where he hadn't imagined her as a sexual creature. He obviously did now, though apparently, it had just begun. She started thinking of some way to derail the heroine worship she knew would turn into sexual longing on his part if not stopped soon. As brilliant as he was, and despite being older than her by a year or two, she knew she was far more mature. Her body was certainly ready for sex, but she was hesitatnt. After the last two episodes, she didn't want to commit to a man, simply because she knew that the aliens would come again and they would inevitably be separated. She still thought of Gavin, too, in the nighttime fantasies all young persons are prone to indulge in. She tried to be realistic about the ones she had, knowing they were driven by the hormones building rapidly toward adult level in her body.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda was disappointed more people didn't opt for the classes and audience participation in the several pleasure rooms she set up for the purpose. The majority did, but far too many showed little interest. Those people gradually drifted away, despite all she could do. She was certain they simply migrated to another part of the city where no one was around to make them feel guilty and became lost in the rooms, where they could satisfy every longing or fantasy imaginable.

The explorers she sent out in wider and wider searches from Central Square still brought back new members, but those grew fewer and fewer, as did the wanderers who stumbled upon her community by

accident. None of them ever reported more than a dozen or two people associating with each other. The situation reminded her of postwar eras she had heard about from others, where after fierce battles, returning soldiers wanted nothing more than to sample the pleasures of life they had been missing. It was different in that most soldiers eventually tired of all play and no work and returned to productive lives, but this was a unique paradigm. No soldiers or citizens suddenly released from wartime constraints had ever been subjected to such a plethora of consumer necessities and such easy access to ecstatic bliss and instant gratification.

It was frustrating, for Lyda found herself spending more time trying to keep her community functioning amidst plenty than she ever had in the previous, harsher environments. One thing that kept her happy was attending Leo's technical and science classes and Tapa's renditions of Pacific Rim history and economics.

Learning in the pleasure rooms stretched the mind in a way no simple lecture or reading ever could. Some days, her head fairly buzzed with the effort to integrate all the new facts and theoretical speculation she absorbed.

It was during the sleep periods that Lyda found herself lying awake for hours sometimes, wondering if she was ever going to love again. She felt the need for sexual release, like a captured fox pacing its cage, but she was determined she wasn't going to feed it with just any old applicant. If there was anyone on the horizon, it would be Leo, she thought. He was maturing very rapidly now and a union with him no longer seemed like such a stretch. Given a little more time, she thought she might initiate a romance with him and see what developed. Even as it was, she found herself gravitating toward him more than anyone else. His capacious mind fascinated her—and his body had grown into a prime example of young male vitality and muscular maturity.

Lyda walked with him after the evening meetings more and more frequently. They began holding hands, then kissing goodnight. So far, it's good, she thought. I like him. And I may as well admit it; Gavin is gone, Tsing is dead and the aliens may return any moment. For all I know, this might be my last chance to enjoy loving a man. She decided Leo was the one, but she wasn't going to spoil the union by trying to hurry it along.

\* \* \* \*

There was no advance notice nor precipitating crisis that gave warning. The spider mechs simply appeared all over the city one day, and began their brutal roundup of the human inhabitants. It happened so suddenly, with the mechs in such numbers and so ferocious, that she barely had time to grab her backpack by one strap and part of her pile of clothing with the other. She had just gone for a long swim with Leo and they were resting by the edge of the big pool in the central square.

Lyda was wearing a minimal bathing suit, a skimpy two-piece. They had come into vogue, along with other fashions once the community settled into a routine, but it was haphazard. Most of the people had suffered in environments where body modesty was the least of their concerns. Lyda sometimes wore the suit when she was swimming for exercise or pleasure and always when she was with Leo, knowing how the sight of her nude body might affect him—while thinking it probably wouldn't be much longer until he could look at her as much as he wanted.

The spider mechs made no bones where they wanted the people to go. Big oval-shaped conveyances as white as hen's eggs and capable of holding dozens of people appeared at intersections and in the Central Square. Lyda got her arms into the straps of her pack, dropping the towel she had intended to dry off with in the process. She scanned the whole area while avoiding a mech and saw no way to escape. Resignedly, she headed toward the open maw of one of the alien vehicles. An unseen force shoved her inside along with others, crowding them together like sardines and just as tightly packed.



Lyda was one of the last to be taken by that particular craft. As she saw the entrance begin to close, her last thought was that despite searching vast areas of the city, no young children had ever been found.

They had disappeared as completely as the fairy tale children of Hamelin, following the piper into oblivion. And she never again saw any of the ones who opted to experience the full intensity of the pleasure rooms on a regular basis.

\* \* \* \*

There was no red, consciousness-sapping light this time. Neither was there room to sit and brace against the frequent changes in gravity and momentum. There wasn't even a way to tell whether it was a spacecraft or a local conveyance. Lyda thought the alien technology was so advanced that the sense of change in location could have been just as easily cancelled out had the aliens desired. Perhaps they wanted their captives to know they were being moved, but there was no way to find out. She and the others had to stand and suffer through the jostling and pressure of bodies being thrown this way and that.

Lyda was fortunate she was among the strongest of the tightly packed captives and was able to resist changes in momentum without great effort. Her main concern was to keep from injuring those near her while trying to keep her own balance.

Time passed, but she couldn't tell how much. Eventually, the smell of human waste pervaded the air as bladders overflowed and bowels could no longer hold their contents. Again, Lyda felt the degradation was deliberate. Whatever the aliens did to humans always turned into a trial. Some environments were worse physically than others, but conversely, the city of plenty had seen the most loss of stable minds once able to function. They had lost the young children there, too, which Lyda thought contributed to the general sense of malaise after they had been there for a time.

The air was beginning to get really foul when the craft lurched to a stop. It opened at both ends and again, an unseen force pushed them, this time out instead of in.

Lyda stumbled along, unable to see much of what was happening, but keeping a tight grip on the clothes in her hand; she was determined not to lose them. No sooner had she had gone a few steps beyond the vehicle, than the floor opened under her and she fell into a lightless void. There was no sense of others around her, nor any sensation of movement, just an endless time of almost total sensory deprivation.

A sudden flare of light preceded her exit into a new world. She landed on hands and knees, but not heavily. She scrambled to her feet and looked around, squinting at the sudden bright light while trying to gauge the dangers she would encounter this time. Her clothing and jacket dangled from one hand. She had kept a fierce grip on them throughout the ordeal.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda didn't have long to wait, nor get much of a chance to see what her surroundings were like; all her attention was suddenly focused on the monstrosity in front of her. If the most evil looking rat on earth could grow fangs coated with a green slime and expand in size to shoulder height, then become able to rise up and walk on hind legs almost as large as those of a kangaroo, while holding a tool of some kind in one of its front paws, which included flexible digits and an opposable thumb, then it might have approached the appearance of the creature in front of her. Small red eyes blinked intelligently and stared at her with a gaze that would have done credit to a weasel in the midst of feeding on live prey.

Lyda shrank back, pawing for her pistol, and felt only skin. She was still clad only in the bathing suit. She almost tried to retrieve the gun from her jacket with her other hand before she observed the big ratty animal was wearing a harness of some kind, like a draft animal—or an intelligent species of unknown origin. It was no illusion; she was certain of that, but she had no idea of its status or standing in the new

scheme of things the aliens were subjecting them to. There were screams and sounds of scuffling in the background but she couldn't take her eyes off the nasty looking beast in front of her. It took a step forward on one of its big rear appendages.

Lyda started to retreat, then held her ground. Was this one of the aliens, so long concealed while their dirty work was done by the mechs and other unseen servants? There was no way of telling but she decided to stand fast, even though one of the abiding fears of her early childhood had been rats, accidentally seen one time in a movie her parents were watching while unaware of her presence. She gritted her teeth and repressed a shudder of revulsion as it opened its mouth. A drop of green slime dripped from one of its top fangs onto its thin bottom lip. A narrow, three pronged tongue shot out and licked the drop of goo back into its mouth. The lips curled back in a rictus that might have been a snarl or a grimace of disgust at her appearance. The scrap of bathing suit she still wore exposed most of her skin, in contrast to the rat creature. It was covered with thick, wiry gray fur, startlingly similar to an earthly rat.

Lyda made a supreme effort and gave the creature a tiny smile, displaying a minimum amount of teeth, just enough so that if it were intelligent, it might notice that her dental equipment wasn't designed for ripping or tearing. It worked well enough so the rat thing settled back on its big hams and waited, eyeing her carefully.

Very slowly, keeping a wary eye on the thing and never letting go of her backpack, Lyda peeled off the suit and got into her spare set of clothes. She slipped her arms into her jacket and began adjusting her backpack. The rat animal sat patiently, but its eyes darted here and there, moving independently of each other. Noises and yells of rage and fear were still audible somewhere behind her. She thought it might be observing whatever was taking place but she didn't dare look herself.

When her backpack was secure and she felt confident enough to take her gaze off the creature for a moment, she looked around. A giant cockroach, or its equivalent, was chasing a screaming woman. It was bigger than she was. The woman found herself trapped in an alcove along the wall. She beat at the insect with a quarterstaff she must have brought aboard the transport craft. A brown ichor dripped from one of the big insect thing's antennas that had been broken off near its base. Both antagonists disappeared into the depths of the recess. A moment later, the screaming stopped.

The big rat creature paid no mind. It went back to watching Lyda. While they were engaged in the staring contest, Lyda moved her gaze every thirty seconds or so, trying to get an idea of her surroundings. She was in a large space bounded on one side by an irregular wall that curved up at an almost indiscernible angle, indicating she was inside a room that must be very large. She took a chance and turned around in a circle. There was an endless expanse of the surface she was standing on in one direction, broken only by odd projections and extrusions here and there. In the opposite direction, she could see a maze of halls, entrances and high walls. That was where she thought most of the screaming and yelling had come from. It was fading now and could hardly be heard. Directly behind her was a long stretch of what looked like shrubs and giant mushrooms growing from the floor. The whole place was brightly lit.

Which area would be safest? She certainly didn't want to tangle with that cockroach thing. She couldn't see very far into the halls and open entrances. That left the scrubby looking mushroom and shrub area. It offered a blend of a reasonable view into the distance and obstacles to hide behind if danger threatened.

The rat was still staring as if it were prepared to do so all day, but so far, had made no threatening move. Lyda wondered if she could make friends with the thing and suddenly thought of Gavin. He would probably already be petting it and scratching behind its ears, except for the fact that it didn't have ears she could see.

Lyda decided to make the first move. She took a careful step forward, then another. She stopped. The rat took a step toward her with its big hind legs. Lyda came closer. She raised her hand and very slowly stretched it out toward the creature, even while thinking how horrible it looked. It touched her hand with one of its skinny clawed digits, but Lyda sighed as she saw that the sharp claw retracted before it made contact with her. A sign of friendship? She gave it the benefit of doubt when it unfolded the other four digits, claws also retracted, and rubbed the tips of them across her open palm. Friendly? Yes, but was it intelligent? The tool it was holding in its other hand resembled nothing she had ever seen before. It was no help and might not even be a tool. She wondered if it could speak and decided to find out.

"Hello. My name is Lyda Brightner."

The thing made some unintelligible noises that might have been language, or might have been the rumblings of its last meal being digested.

She pointed to her chest. "Lyda."

It raised its hand to its head. "Sgghghhhgff," it said, then it turned one of its eyes down to gaze at the metallic looking object in its other hand. It made another noise as it held the object upright. A slender knife blade extended and retracted back into the tool, then the creature attached it to the harness it was wearing.

Lyda supposed he had told her the name of the knife tool it had been holding but she couldn't even come close to pronouncing the noise it had made. She could see that language was going to be a problem, but that could be worried about later. Right now, she wanted to get away from this area before another of those giant cockroach things came along. She pointed toward the mushroom and shrub plain.

"Go," she said.

"Bggghehhff," it answered, but came with her, walking upright with a peculiar side to side wobble like a woman with extremely wide hips.

Lyda tried to sense its thoughts like she could now do with humans, but if it had a mind, it was in park. She gave up the attempt and concentrated on where they were going.

The mushroom looking growths had smaller clusters budding off at their bases, like piles of marbles arranged around a baseball. As she and Shaguff, as she began calling her companion, penetrated deeper into the plain, the growths became larger. Lyda could see to where they turned into an irregular brown and red forest in the distance.

Lyda remained very alert, not wanting to be taken by surprise, but she was anyway. As they neared a mushroom twice her height, it split open like an overripe melon and disgorged a cluster of knee high organisms that looked like caterpillars and moved like inchworms. In perfect unison like a platoon of soldiers at drill, they humped their way forward, coming directly toward them.

Lyda froze, not wanting to make any mistakes. Shaguff raised its tool as if brandishing a weapon. Lyda frantically waved her hand, then pointed to the ground. It wavered, then lowered its arm. The inchworm creatures stopped two feet from them, their movements still perfectly unified. All at the same time, they reared up, raising half their length. Lyda shivered when she noticed the first third of their undercarriage consisted of hundreds of tiny teeth, similar to the rasping maw of a sucker eel. When she and Shaguff made no hostile moves, they all swiveled together and moved off at a right angle. She watched as they

headed directly toward another giant mushroom and burrowed inside it from the base. The worms were feeding on them.

Lyda felt a touch on her shoulder. She started and twisted her neck. Shaguff was touching her in a gesture she didn't understand. Respect? Friendship? Disgust for not killing and eating the inchworms? There was no way to tell for sure, but she thought it was trying to indicate to her that she had done the right thing. She hoped so.

A terrified human scream came from somewhere ahead of them, sounding as if the person was about to be torn to bits—which might very well be the case here, Lyda thought. She broke into a run toward the source of the sound, not waiting to see if Shaguff was coming with her.

Lyda came to an abrupt halt before a big grove of shrubs, all head high or above. A woman was darting here and there among the trunks, trying to escape the clutches of what Lyda first took to be a spider mech. Then she could make out that it was organic, a caricature of the earthly brown spider grown to monstrous size.

The woman's screams never stopped, even as she ran. She made a turn at the edge of the grove, intending to dart back into it for cover, when she saw Lyda. She changed her mind and ran toward her like a soldier under an artillery barrage searching for a foxhole. Then she saw Shaguff and halted. The screaming stopped but her eyes were crazed with fear. She looked over her shoulder and shrieked when she saw how close the spider thing was. She looked back at Shaguff, then like a prisoner forced to choose between death by hanging or a firing squad, decided that Shaguff was the lesser of two evils. She came on.

"Stop!" Lyda called to her. "Don't run, it might be friendly!"

The woman paid not the slightest heed. She galloped past them as if escaping from the Devil himself.

Lyda stood still as the spider approached. Once the woman was past them, it seemed to lose interest in her, but now they were the focus of its attention. Lyda saw that it really didn't resemble a spider that much, nor one of the alien spider mechs either. It had only four legs, with two other shorter appendages which writhed like captured snakes but ended in a cluster of tiny tentacles she was sure could function as efficiently as hands. It had no discernable head, but there was a maw in front guarded by mandibles that moved in all directions. It must be able to see, Lyda thought, even though it had nothing resembling eyes. The important thing was that it wasn't attacking.

Humans have an almost instinctive fear of spiders, a loathing for rats and disdain for crawling insects. Lyda could already see the pattern: the aliens were subjecting their human captives to the most terrifying and disgusting animals of earth in the guise of intelligent avatars. She had no doubt the thing in front of her was intelligent. It had a rope of woven matter coiled in loops and hanging from a handy backward facing hook above one of its mandibles, and odd bits of cloth were attached to various parts of its body. But the most telling feature was when she showed no fear (though she was quaking inside), and it didn't come toward her in a blind attack.

Shaguff backed up. Lyda motioned him (her? it? Call it him, she decided) forward, hoping he would understand the gesture, then waited. Pattern or no pattern, there was no way of telling whether or not the aliens had mixed potentially friendly or truly inimical creatures into the habitat together. This place will be like a continuous game of Russian Roulette, she thought. The spider—may as well call it that, she told herself—touched her outstretched hand with the cluster of little tentacles at the end of its front appendage. They writhed like worms in her hand. She had to consciously restrain herself from trying to

shake them off, just as she would have if someone really had given her a handful of worms.

"Hello, I'm Lyda Brightner," she said, doubting the being could speak. She didn't even know whether it could hear her or not. There was no answer to her greeting, but apparently, it was satisfied. It left her and approached Shaguff. He shrank back, raising his gadget again. Lyda waved for him to stop. He did, immediately.

That was all it took, but surprisingly, the spider decided there was something about them it liked and wanted to come with them. Lyda looked for the woman it had been chasing. She was a long way off, but had halted and was watching them, resembling a reluctant gladiator who had no intention of going back into the arena with the lions again. When Lyda started walking toward her, she broke into a run and was soon out of sight.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The new environment proved to be the toughest nut Lyda had yet tried to crack. She found few other individuals with strong enough minds to overcome their instinctive fears and dread of the creatures in this habitat. It was hard to even approach other humans with Shaguff and the spider, whom she immediately named Spidey, in tow. She began referring to the spider as her, assigning to it the opposite gender than Shaguff, just for amusement. She actually had no idea of what sex either of them were, or whether they had genders at all. Even with them along, she gradually accumulated some companions and began learning about their new home.

One of her new friends was Soo Long, a Korean who had grown up under a dictatorship so severe, even the worst of the environments he had been subjected to were an improvement over his previous life. He reacted to the different shaped occupants as if they were more of a nuisance than a threat. He was also absolutely fearless, causing Lyda to wonder how he had lasted so long.

"You're going to get yourself killed taking chances like that," Lyda said, soon after they had met. Soo had just faced down something that resembled a cross between a praying mantis and a grizzly bear. He put his hands on it. It huffed and walked back toward the mushroom where they had encountered it on its peculiarly jointed legs. It walked like a crippled horse.

"I've thought I was dead so many times that it doesn't matter anymore," Soo told her, watching the creature amble away. "Besides, you can only die once."

That was true, Lyda thought, but she wanted to live. One day, she hoped to see the end of these trials and find out what they were all about. She told Soo the same thing, hoping to change his attitude. She could read his surface thoughts easily, as she found she could with most people now. She was careful with the ability, using it only to judge people, not invade their privacy. Soo told her he had lost his only son to the security police of his homeland, then escaped across the border to China with his wife, only to see her killed by a spider mech when he was captured during the invasion.

"I'm not ready to die yet," she emphasized.

Soo only shrugged. "Yes, you obviously have a love for life. And I would like to be around for the end of our strange adventures, but I've become a fatalist, I suppose. Nevertheless, I can be of help here. Only you and a few others are willing to brave the strange and different, but I sense you have become very important in the scheme of things. Better for me to die and you be spared if a confrontation turns

lethal."

"I don't want you to die on my behalf," Lyda told him sternly.

Soo gazed toward the giant creature they had just met. It looked fearsome and Lyda thought it could become dangerous if provoked, but once it opened its mouth, most of her apprehension vanished. Its chewing apparatus was that of a herbivore.

"Why are you laughing?" Soo asked. The others who had joined them were looking at her curiously, just as puzzled.

"See the top of that mushroom? If we had looked closer, we would have seen that was what it was feeding on. It's not a carnivore. In fact, I'm wondering if those mushroom things are edible. I'm getting tired of shrub berries."

Almost every shrub was replete with clusters of grape-sized fruit that satisfied both hunger and thirst but they grew wearying after a time.

Soo started to approach the animal and got a warning growl for his trouble.

"Let's leave him be and try somewhere else," Lyda said. She led the way to another of the big mushroom growths and stopped. "I'll try some of the little ones and see what they're like." She dislodged a few from the sand colored earth around the big parent plant. Any place where the flooring wasn't metallic, it had the consistency and color of soft sandstone.

"How do they taste?" Ivan Petrovich, a former Russian coal mine supervisor asked.

"Like mushrooms," Lyda grinned. Ivan was fun to talk to; they bantered a lot.

"Ask a silly question..." Ruth Larson, an Amerindian from the Midwest who had joined them that morning, said. She bent down to pick some.

"Go ahead, but don't sample yet," Lyda told her. "Wait until we find out how they affect me."

"Then why pick now? They're everywhere."

"I'd like to see how well they keep," Lyda said. Preserved food in her backpack had proven invaluable before; perhaps it would again.

Ruth gathered a few and handed them to Lyda.

"Thanks." Lyda had become the accepted leader of this group of humans. All of them had undergone enough changes themselves to be able to tell that Lyda was the ablest of them. So far, she thought, but anyone who's made it this far and can overcome their fear of the animals here will be strong. I may find someone I'm willing to follow, rather than lead all the time. She didn't think it would bother her if it turned out that way. Her mind functioned so smoothly and efficiently now, she knew she would recognize a better qualified person than herself almost immediately, but so far, no one of that caliber had turned up.

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Ruth Larson was the weakest one of group, but Lyda admired her in a way. She was deathly afraid of anything resembling an insect or reptile, but she worked hard at conquering her fears. She had survived



the initial dump into what they were calling the “BEM World” by fainting at her first encounter with an alien sophant, one that looked like an upright squid with a lizard head. One of the older members had started the BEM designation; Lyda had barely recognized the old science fiction term. It was the acronym, used most often in humorous ways, for “Bug-Eyed Monsters”.

Ruth always stayed as close to Lyda as she could, borrowing some of her courage. She was a slight blond woman who was intelligent enough—and more—but lacked self-confidence. Lyda liked her because she made no bones about needing someone to direct her abilities; that was how she had survived so long. Lyda admired anyone who could look into themselves without flinching and recognize their own shortcomings.

Ivan had the volatile mood swings imbedded in the Russian character, but he was completely reliable in a crisis and jollied them all along with tales of Russian bureaucratic incompetence that made the American system appear to be a paragon of efficiency by comparison.

There had been one nonhuman addition to the group, a hive creature with dozens of specialized organisms that apparently shared the same brain. The individual units were either stick thin or fat but within those two categories, there were several other variations in size and shape. It even learned some English, the only species Lyda had encountered so far that appeared to care much about verbal communication. Shaguff used a gabble still meaningless to Lyda. She thought their individual world gestalts were so different that it might take years of study by comparative semantics experts to understand the other's language. The one thing the intelligent alien creatures had in common was loyalty to the group. This was proved to her in dramatic fashion one day.

Lyda had given up on finding any more compatible humans in the mushroom plain, or in the forest it merged with. The forest was so thick as to be well nigh impenetrable. After covering all the open areas within reach, she asked the others to go with her into the maze of halls and arched openings near the wall that led to more halls and entrances and corridors.

“Why?” Zhang asked. Shang Kai Zhang was a peasant from the Chinese hinterlands, relatively uneducated but extremely bright. The peasant shrewdness learned from his father's example had helped him to survive, learn and vastly increase his understanding of the rest of the world as it had been before the aliens came. He had also quickly absorbed the need to respect other cultures and different attitudes.

“There have to be more people here. That's the next place to look.”

Zhang wasn't one to placidly accept marching orders. “We'll face more danger. Are more humans worth the risk?”

“Zhang, none of us would probably be here now if I hadn't taken risks for other people,” Lyda said gently. “I won't ask anyone to sacrifice themselves for someone they don't even know, but we're all human. We should try to rescue as many as we can before more of them fall victim to false assumptions. Most of the creatures here are willing to leave us alone, or even work with us, so long as they're not provoked.”

Zhang studied her face for a few moments while the others waited. “All right,” he finally answered. “Perhaps your way is best.”

Lyda had known he would agree. Her mind and her very understanding of human behavior had made another leap here, as had her body. She had never felt so alive, so full of vitality and purpose. Whatever the aliens intended, if it was something a human being could understand, she knew she would be ready;

as would these others with her and ones she had known in the previous environments—if they still lived. She led the way back, cutting across the mushroom plain at an angle to bring them to the palace of halls she had seen the cockroachlike being chase that woman into weeks ago. She had decided to try it first, rather than the barren metal expanse with cubes and rectangles sprouting from the floor. On the way, she was startled to see the remains of a hexapod, along with the body of its presumed human companion. She had seen a few skeletons of hexapods at the last place but had presumed they all perished there. Apparently, at least one made it this far.

Almost two dozen humans and the aliens made a big enough group that they had to spread out a bit in order to find enough food to sustain them. As they hiked along on the second day of the trek back, Lyda talked to Ivan. She had found he could sense attitudes and intentions in others almost as well as she could.

"Our group is still unstable," he said. "We'll all follow you, but we need a purpose to hold us together. Something greater than mere survival."

Lyda mulled that statement over before answering.

"That's a good observation, Ivan. Sometimes I get so busy with trying to keep everyone alive and organized for survival that I tend to think *that's* the purpose. I've noticed my failings in that area before, but it seems every time I finally get to a point where I can concentrate on the broader picture, the aliens gather us up and dump us somewhere else and it all starts from scratch again."

"Scratch?"

"Beginning."

"Oh. A pretty piece of slang there. English is such a wonderful language. I'm glad my intelligence and memory has improved so much that I'm able to absorb the myriad nuances of it now. Yes, there is the constant uprooting. That would be enough to drive many people mad, yet here we are, stronger than ever." He chuckled. "I wonder if the aliens intended that?"

"I don't know—but think about how many of us have died getting to here," Lyda said quietly, remembering all the deaths she had seen and been a party to.

Ivan sobered. "Yes. We're fortunate, I admit."

Lyda gestured toward Shaguff and Spidey and the Hive creatures; all nearby. "Have you wondered if perhaps those beings have gone through the same winnowing process we have?"

The concept startled Ivan. He stumbled, then caught back up with her. "No. I haven't thought of that at all, nor have I heard anyone else mention such a possibility. You're a unique individual, Miss Brightner. You think, how do they say, out of the box. What do you believe?"

"There's no way of telling for sure," Lyda said honestly, "but if I had to guess, I'd say no, for one very simple reason. I haven't seen a sign yet of them fighting among themselves, and they must be as strange to each other as we are to them."

Ivan nodded. "That sounds logical."

"Which doesn't necessarily mean it's true. Conclusions are only as good as the data they're based on."

Since we don't understand how to communicate with any of them other than in a very limited fashion, we don't really have enough information to say." Privately, Lyda believed the other intelligent beings they were interacting with were simply one more trial designed for humans, but she was as blind as ever to the ultimate purpose.

"Look," Ruth said from her other side. "We're getting close."

They had been traveling about four hours. Lyda called a halt so everyone could rest and stock up on enough of the pseudomushrooms and scrub fruit to last for several days. After that, they entered the first great hall, with Soo leading the way at his insistence.

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Lyda split the group into four parties to explore the first corridors and some of the entranceways from them for a minimal distance. They all led from the hall into unknown terrain. Each party took a corridor with instructions to return within two hours. Lyda wanted to proceed carefully and compare notes.

When they had all returned and were together again, it was Ivan who reported the most interesting find. Lyda had remained with a core of five others to provide support if needed, but none of the other explorers had found anything except endless metallic byways.

"There's a huge cavern at the end of the second hallway that branches from this main one. It's a different kind of place. We could see a plain of tall grasses and small knolls and big trees that look like firs with big cones like ... like small furry pineapples. From where we entered, we went to the top of the first knoll to get a better view of the place. We could see a large band of humans chasing little Volkswagens with multiple antennas, but they only look like cars; they are actually animals. Their little feet just move so fast, they resemble wheels when they're in motion. We didn't try to go any closer."

"Did they see you? The humans, I mean."

Ivan shrugged. "Not that we could tell, and I thought it best to return without trying to contact them."

"Good. You did fine, Ivan. So did the rest of you. Now we know where to look for more people. Let's all eat and get some sleep, then start that way tomorrow."

Lyda posted the guards as she did every "night". Like most of the environments they were subjected to, there was continuous daylight. She had become so used to it by now that it didn't bother her, nor many of the others.

The next day, she led the way toward the cavern, which Ivan had told her was very large but not unlimited.

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They ran into trouble almost immediately. It was no little animals the size of the German cars, but what resembled a dinosaur from earth, like one of the predecessors of Tyrannosaurus Rex. It stood over eight feet tall and had the same great hindquarters, but its forelegs extended far enough from the body to be useful. They were tipped with four clawed digits that could function together like a hand. This was evidenced by the snapped off trunk of a sapling, which it was using as a club to beat off the attacking humans, who were armed with makeshift spears.

The sight of Lyda's group interrupted the battle long enough for the dinosaur to break through the circle of humans and stride off at an angle between Lyda's group and the others. Several of the people who had

been attacking began yelling something at them. They were just far enough away for the intermixed calls to be undecipherable. Lyda found out what they were hollering about only when she heard a scream from Ruth.

Lyda whirled around. A second great reptile was charging them, obviously having heard the cries of its own kind and was coming to the rescue. It bowled several people off their feet and made directly for Lyda, as if it somehow knew she was the driving force behind this party of humans. Its head was lowered with its toothed jaws gaped open, ready to snap her body in two.

There was nothing Lyda could do except take the second before the dino was upon her to crouch and prepare to dodge, if she could. She never got a chance to find out whether or not she would have succeeded. A gray streak passed her and put itself between her and the reptile's charging body. The teeth closed on Shaguff's rear leg and lifted him off the ground. He dangled upside down while everyone except Lyda scattered. One of the dinosaur animal's rear legs brushed her in passing, sending her flying. She hit the hard-packed earth with a bone jarring thud, but her improved body absorbed the shock easily. She rolled over and was instantly back on her feet.

Lyda stifled the start of a scream at the sight of Shaguff hanging from the miniature Tyranosaur's mouth as it turned. It flung Shaguff away, preparing to charge again. Lyda ran toward where her alien companion landed; she couldn't abandon him after he had saved her life. The creature lowered its head to see better. It took a hesitant step forward with one of its huge legs, then stopped. If Lyda had been watching, she might have seen puzzlement in the intelligent glint of its eyes as it watched her succoring the rat animal instead of running.

Lyda found Shaguff still alive, but great gaps had been torn in the flesh of his rear leg. It was leaking a copious amount of fluid the color and consistency of maple syrup. She emptied her backpack of all the cloth she had in it and began applying pressure to the worst wounds. Shaguff gibbered painfully. While she worked, some of the others who had run began returning, circling around the big dinosaur that was still where it had halted, staring at them from round orange eyes.

"Here, hold this in place," Lyda ordered the first person she saw. "Get some more cloth and wrap the dressings in place." She looked up to see the big group of people who had been doing the attacking moving in their direction. "Don't let any of those people hurt him or Spidey. Where's the hive?"

"We here," the nearest one said, a spindly stick figure whose specialty was to carry what the chubby little grass harvesters sliced off at ground level and wound into bundles for later consumption.

"Come," she said, hoping they would obey. Sometimes they did; other times, they ignored orders. This time, they chose to follow her.

Lyda led them in the direction of the pair of dinos, which had paired up and were standing together, simply observing. She figured the hive could lose a member or two and still function normally, while a member of any other species would be lost for good—including herself. As she neared them, she slowed down, alert for any hint of an attack.

Up close, the beings appeared much larger than they actually were. They towered over her by a good three feet or more but still made no threatening moves. Lyda glanced behind her and saw the hive trailing behind her. The hive was all in a row, with the different shaped specialties staying together, as always. She stopped half a dozen feet from the nearest reptile and held still with her hands hanging by her side. From this close, she could see that they each wore what appeared to be tool belts with unidentifiable gadgets secured by loops.

Two great heads lowered to the level of her eyes. They stayed there for a few minutes while she waited on them to decide what to do. Finally, first one, then the other, stretched their snouts toward her and prodded her in the chest with a motion resembling a horse looking for an apple in a pocket. She remained very still and let them explore with their snouts and then their forelegs. She sighed with relief when she saw how careful they were being about not hurting her with the sharp tips of their flexible digits. All the while, the hive stayed in a long row strung out behind her, as useless as a tail on a grounded kite. She might as well have not brought them with her, except she had wanted to show the dinos that humans could get along with creatures different from themselves.

Lyda looked back again. The bigger group of humans had joined her own followers and were staring at the scene, some of them with their mouths hung open in utter disbelief that she had still not been harmed. At last the Tyrannosauruslike animals raised their heads, bellowed something sounding like a foghorn, and strode rapidly away. Lyda turned and hurried back to see how Shaguff was making out. She passed some of the strangers on the way, noting that they gazed at her in awe, like a prophet who had just returned to earth and begun performing miracles.

Lyda kept a tight rein on her emotions. Did no one but herself ever think of trying to make friends with the other inhabitants of this place? It beat fighting any day of the week. She knelt down by Shaguff's side. He blinked his little red eyes at her and uttered a string of gibberish.

Lyda answered with a soothing comment she knew he wouldn't understand, but she hoped the tone of her voice would convey her feelings. She saw Spidey coming through the throng of strange humans. They moved quickly aside, like the parting of the Red Sea. Spidey folded his legs under him and began using his two tentacled appendages to touch the area of Shaguff's wounds. Lyda patted them both, then stood up and moved away. She faced the combined group, standing with her legs spread a foot apart and hands on her hips, presenting a magnificent image of a strong, beautiful woman, one who could handle anything life threw at her.

"I hope that demonstration, and seeing how this being threw himself into the jaws of the dinosaur to save my life, is enough to make it clear that no matter how frightening the creatures of this place look, they are intelligent. They fight only when provoked, as I saw you doing when we arrived. Wouldn't it be better to follow our example and make friends with them?" Her mind roved the crowd and felt the shame rising from most of them at having allowed themselves to be led into yielding to their fear instead of using their minds to overcome it.

"Who the hell are you?" a gruff voice asked from the middle of the crowd.

"I'm Lyda Brightner. I'm the leader of this group. I can't order you around but I'll tell you plainly that I will become very angry if I see anyone abusing the beings different from us for no good reason."

The one who had questioned her stepped forward. He was a burly dark-skinned man with black wiry hair and a lopsided nose. Thin scars decorated his cheekbones and around his eyes. He sensed something different about Lyda but was too confident in himself to stop and think. Lyda immediately tagged him as a boxer, perhaps a little past his prime but still capable of getting into a ring—or cowing those around him with his prowess. She touched his mind with hers and found a powerful, driving intelligence mixed with an aberrant sense of satisfaction from having power over others.

"I don't give a damn what you say," he snarled. "We ain't sucking up to no spiders or rats or goddamned dinosaurs either. You hear?"

"I heard," Lyda answered calmly. "And I'm sure you heard me."

The man stepped forward quickly and grabbed Lyda by the front of her blouse. A button she had painstakingly fastened with scavenged thread popped free. Lyda made no move to avoid his advance or his hands, but as soon as he had a good hold on the lapels of her blouse, she gripped him by the hips and raised him high over her head. He yelled and let loose of her blouse and attempted to strike at her with doubled fists.

Lyda tossed him away as if he weighed no more than a feather pillow. He hit the ground and lay there for a moment, disorientated, but not really stunned. His body and mind had changed, too. He shook his head and got back to his feet, gimlet eyes trying to bore holes in her. He charged Lyda like a maddened bull, forgetting the fact that he was adept with his fists and suffused with new strength imbued to his body by the aliens. He should have approached cautiously, but he couldn't believe someone so small could have thrown him about like a rag doll, and a girl at that.

Lyda met his charge calmly, knowing already she was the stronger of the two, despite his being male. She twisted while ducking a swing designed to tear her head off and used his momentum to lever his body up and over. He flew through the air in a wild tangle of arms and legs and hit the ground again with a solid thump. He tried to get back up, but Lyda was on him quicker than a pup after a steak bone.

It wasn't really a fight. Not only was Lyda the stronger of the two, despite his own improved male muscle, but she had mastered the martial arts taught in the classes she had organized. Two minutes later, he was bloody and thoroughly subdued, just barely conscious. She waited a few minutes until he could walk, then pointed to the horizon. "Get going. We don't want to see you again."

"No, it's murder out there by yourself!"

"Nonsense. I already know you're the one who instigated these other people into fighting the beings here without even trying to avoid it. You can either change your attitude, or let the animals here kill you; I don't really care either way. Now go, and don't come back or I'll kill you myself."

The man looked helplessly for support from his erstwhile supporters. None of them made a move, nor said a word in his defense. However, several did speak up about others who had traveled with them.

"Gordo's had that coming for a long time," a woman with a fading bruise beside her eye said. "Jetner's no better, either." She pointed toward a black man with long arms and a partially bald head.

Lyda reached out to his mind and saw that, if anything, he was worse. Like the thug she had just defeated, he had survived on strength and cunning but lacked the innate intelligence of the other one. She pointed her finger at him. "You can go, too."

"What if I don't want to, bitch?" His accent was pure American.

"Then I'll beat you to a pulp and you'll go anyway; maybe with a few broken bones to help you remember me by."

The black man could sense the auras of attitudes and capabilities to a degree, though at a much lower level than Lyda. He could feel power and determination emanating from her almost like a force of nature. He took a step forward and sensed Lyda tensing her body, getting ready for him. He stopped; his bravery came from abusing those weaker than himself and supporting those who were stronger. He turned and trudged off.



"Who else here isn't fit company for human beings?" Lyda asked loudly with her gaze seeking out two more individuals her mind touch had already told her were evil. She wanted the former followers of the thugs to rouse themselves to speak up. With her leading the way, they did. A woman who was named Spit in her direction and stalked away with her nose in the air, making a spectacle of her disdain, but Lyda and everyone else could sense her mind skittering around like a drop of water on a hot skillet as she began wondering how she was going to survive. The third man she ordered to leave started off as if to pass her, then suddenly attacked, but she had sensed his intentions well in advance. It wasn't much of a fight. A minute later, he was on his way, nursing a broken arm and walking hunched over from the pain in his groin where Lyda had kicked him.

Lyda doubted that any of them would last the day without cohorts to help them. She thought they had probably gathered some support before running into their first dinosaur. She allowed them to get out of sight before speaking again, using the time to let the new people consider what had happened and to reflect on their past involvement with the four miscreants. While they were thinking, she was, too. It seemed to her that there must be many fewer sociopaths and ordinary crooks and villains now than when she was first captured by the aliens, but she still kept running into them. It indicated there might also be fewer people like her who eliminated or neutralized the troublemakers when they could. It made the fact finally sink in that regardless of how far most of the survivors had progressed, there were still many more followers than leaders, and always would be.

Nevertheless, she also knew that most of the captives who had survived were good people; they only needed good leaders to direct them. And from talking with her own followers along the way who had survived separately from her, she knew there were other leaders somewhere, perhaps ones better than herself. In the meantime, the people standing in front of her were waiting to see what came next.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Within a few days, Lyda was extremely happy with the way the new group integrated with her original smaller one and had sloughed off the malevolent influence of the ones who misled them. It gave her hope that the majority of all the survivors, even the ones she had never met, would be able to do the same. If they survived. There had been many, many deaths in the habitats she had been in, and she knew from what others said, it had been the same elsewhere. This place was the most inimical yet, so far as deaths were concerned. The majority of humans simply could not force themselves to coexist with what looked to them like insects, reptiles and caricatures of every beast they had ever had nightmares about.

Lyda did the best she could. As usual, she found herself so busy that for a long while, her only concern was directing and organizing and bringing new people they found under her influence. Lyda was hoping they could learn to at least treat the other creatures in a benign manner, even if they had to be shown over and over.

Shaguff recovered and he and Spidey and the Hive were a great help in her crusade for coexistence and cooperation. They became such familiar figures around the camp she set up that hardly anyone shrank from their presence any more. Lyda used them frequently when contacting other gangs of humans her scouting expeditions turned up, but surprisingly, they were needed less and less often. Bones and mummified remains marked the end of most of the humans who couldn't get along with the other inhabitants. Gordo, the ex-boxer she had defeated, must have been lucky enough to gather a lot of people around him right at the beginning, using safety in numbers to stay alive, because his remains turned up a few days later, the tooth marks still evident on his body.

Lyda met a number of other persons who were directing groups of humans. None of them were unfriendly and certainly not hostile. She set up an affiliation among them to try to learn as much as they could about the place, and to exchange information. Some came to accept her as the head of the loose confederacy but she didn't attempt to make it official; there was no need for that. She gave advice when asked and occasionally sought help herself. She realized she still had much to learn and wasn't at all loath to admit it.

There were not as many different species of intelligent creatures in the miles wide cavern as were living on the great mushroom plains. The intelligent dinosaurs were the dominant species, but certainly not the only one. They fed on ruminants who grazed the grasslands and made little contact with humans, but neither did they bother them once Lyda's influence spread and they learned people were no longer a threat. The other intelligent species seemed to take note and proved to be little trouble unless attacked.

The lack of adequate water was the source of more dissatisfaction than anything else. In the whole area, there were only a few small pools, and they were reserved for drinking. They were considered a neutral area; even the ruminants were allowed to drink there without fear of being hunted. Waste disposal was a problem until someone discovered the depressions between the small grassy rises in the terrain worked well for that purpose. The upper portion of freshly cut grass served as an unsatisfactory and barely functional cleansing material but it was all they found to use.

At last Lyda managed to find time for relaxation, but that brought another problem into play, one becoming very familiar. Ivan began paying her more attention than she liked.

"You're a beautiful woman," he said to her one day as they were sitting beside a campfire of twisted grass, waiting on the haunch of a ruminant to finish cooking. Humans found them as tasty as the dinos did.

"Thank you, Ivan. It would be nice to be able to bathe in warm water again, or even see my reflection in a pool. I have no idea what I look like now."

"I just told you. You're beautiful, even without the makeup women use to enhance their looks. Any man will tell you so if you ask."

"I'm not really a woman yet, Ivan. I'm still a girl."

"What! You are a woman, believe me."

Lyda had known Ivan's advance was coming. He was fun to be with, a good leader and he was gradually freeing himself of the dark moods he was sometimes prone to. But he was too volatile for Lyda's taste. She wanted steadiness and certitude and a quiet intelligence in a man. Someone like Gavin, she thought. She often wondered what he would be like now. Had he grown inside as much as her? Did he remember her as fondly as she did him? Or was he even still alive? There was no way of knowing, but Ivan's last remark gave her a gentle way to discourage his attentions.

She grinned at him. "Ivan, to the best of my calculations, I'm barely sixteen—if that old."

"I don't believe it!" But then he couldn't avoid knowing, for he saw it in her mind. His countenance drooped like a poker player who had just gone bust.

"I'm sorry, Ivan. I'm really not ready for romance right now. And even if I were, I'm afraid. The aliens will be back, you know, and we'll all be separated again."

"All the more reason to take what honest pleasure we can find. But sixteen? You could be my daughter!"

"You'd make a good father," Lyda told him, and meant it. Other than his occasional depression, he functioned as well and as happily as any man she had known, and better than most. She thought he would be good with children if he ever had any.

"Thank you. However, I believe I would prefer to wait a few years and become your husband."

Lyda laughed hard enough to induce him to join her. When they quieted, she said, quite honestly, "It's a possibility. The future holds infinite potential, and judging by the way our bodies have changed, we may live a very long time—if we survive whatever the aliens have in store for us." She touched his shoulder, then his cheek and turned his head to face her. She kissed him on the mouth in a friendly fashion, then got to her feet to tend the meat. It was about done and the aroma was tantalizing.

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As if she had been waiting in line, Ruth was the next supplicant for Lyda's attentions. What was worse, Lyda could easily tell that the woman was truly in love with her. She waited until after Ruth's first advance, thinking that would be the best time to discourage her.

"I'm sorry, Ruth dear. I'm not even ready for a man yet, much less a woman."

"You don't like me because I prefer women?"

"Ruth, you know that doesn't enter into it. Can't you tell?"

"Yes. I guess I was just fooling myself. I never saw you with a man and..." Her voice trailed off.

"It's all right. I'm not upset with you. In fact, it's a compliment."

"Thank you." Ruth changed the subject. "We're going to have some more babies soon."

"I know," Lyda said.

Several women were pregnant. They had even found a few here who had arrived pregnant, from deliberate intent, despite the harsh environments and the knowledge of how very many young children had perished over the last few years. Lyda admired the women who had conceived tremendously. They were a tribute to the spirit of the couples who refused to surrender to pessimism about the future.

"I think I'd like to start a nursery, to give the women some time by themselves," Ruth said. "I love children but I know how much attention they demand."

"That would be great," Lyda replied. She should have thought of the idea herself. Anything to keep the people happy and optimistic.

\* \* \* \*

With some time to spare and no romance in the offing, Lyda decided they should explore the area of the metallic floors with the irregular artificial extrusions growing from it, even though those who had arrived there first had reported it was lifeless—but they hadn't gone far. She left Ivan in charge and took Soo and a few other persons she thought were getting bored. She made sure they all carried enough supplies to last for a week or so, but had to scrounge the group to find enough water containers to last them for that

long.

Lyda led her little contingent out of the grasslands and back into the great hallway they had come through long ago. They stopped once to sleep and load up on shrub berries at the edge of the barren expanse of metal she wanted to explore. From that position, the extrusions blended into what appeared to be a solid barrier on the horizon, but was only an illusion, like a forest would appear to be a solid mass if one looked far enough into it.

One day out, the aliens came again.

\* \* \* \*

The spider mechs appeared as they were preparing to rest and sleep for a few hours. Lyda had been aware of a faint vibration in the air for several hours but hadn't been able to attribute it to any particular source. As the spiders began herding them back the way they had come, she discovered the vibration had simply been the trampling of many feet on the metal surface, hurried along by the threatening mandibles of the spider mechs. The spiders had apparently herded everyone out of the grassland cavern, as well as from the mushroom plains, and brought them all to the area of the metallic surface.

In the distance, the same type of oval-shaped transport craft, which had brought them to this habitat, began swarming in numbers too great to count. Lyda dreaded their appearance, remembering the tight overcrowding when they had been brought to this place, but told her companions not to resist. She had never seen anyone get away from the spider mechs, not while they were still breathing.

Surprisingly, the transport contained so few people, it was actually roomy, and there were padded seats that reclined at a touch into beds. Once the entrance closed behind them, she sat and braced herself for the familiar surges and gravity changes, but they were absent, too. She couldn't even be sure they were going anywhere, but doubted the aliens would go to the trouble of getting them into the transports, then simply let them sit still.

There were facilities for bathing and waste disposal at either end of the ship, unlike the last trip. Lyda took the opportunity to wash her hair and get really clean for the first time in what seemed like ages. She used a little wooden comb an admirer had carved for her to unsnarl the tangles, ignoring anyone who might be staring at her naked body. She was so grateful for the wealth of water that she didn't even attempt to touch the other minds and find out whether anyone was looking. She knew it wouldn't have mattered greatly if they were; the nudity taboo hadn't disappeared, but it had been considerably altered by circumstances.

The craft even furnished clothing, apparently designed for each of the dozen individuals inside. It was unisex trousers with a brief undergarment and blouses or shirts that buttoned. The tops for women could be tightened under the breasts for support if it were needed or wanted. Lyda didn't bother. If strenuous activity became necessary, she could pull the simple fastenings into place quickly.

The whole episode was so different from previous changes that Lyda found herself expecting even more strife and danger than usual when they arrived at their destination. Wherever they were going, it was taking longer than other journeys in the transports had. Lyda tried to relax, eat the palatable meals that arrived from slotted compartments at irregular intervals, and bathe long and often. All the while, she waited for the ax to fall.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda heard excited voices and woke to a feeling of lightness. She sat up quickly and the momentum carried her body into the air. She drifted back to the deck in slow motion and didn't move quite as fast

the next time. Around her, one couple was locked together and flailing at the air, looking for something to grab. Others were glancing around curiously and holding onto whatever support they could find.

Lyda stood up slowly and took a step. She bounced slightly, stepped again and held onto the back of an upright seat. Curious, she fished into her backpack for a preserved bush berry. She held it out, then dropped it and counted the seconds in her mind as it fell. "About a sixth of earth's gravity," she said to the others, who had been watching.

"That's the same as the moon!"

"Doesn't mean it is the moon."

Lyda let the others argue; she simply waited to see what would happen next. It came quickly, with the entrance irising open. It was butted into a hallway lightly padded with a gray colored foamy substance which made walking easier in the light gravity. Those who didn't care for the bouncing motion could use padded stanchions along the walls.

This is all very curious, Lyda thought; for a change, the aliens seem to be going out of their way to care for us rather than see us hurt. Two others were in front of her; the rest behind. Lyda followed impatiently.

She wanted to get the waiting over with and find out what was in store for them. The bouncing walk along the hallway continued for what she judged to be about a quarter mile. Before long, she and most of the others were using the "kangaroo hop", pioneered by the Apollo astronauts long ago.

The hall opened into a great two-storied lobby like a vintage, five star hotel, only bigger. The lobby was filled with humans by the score but none were stopping to stare; they were all moving. Lyda found out why a second later when a gentle but irresistible force surrounded her and propelled her across part of the lobby.

"Lyda!"

She recognized the voice. Leo! She frantically looked around and spotted him, but he was no more able to stop than anyone else. She was taken on across a span of the lobby floor and into an open entrance. Others in front of her were being forced into it and disappeared upward, legs flapping uselessly as they flew out of sight.

Here's where the bad stuff starts, Lyda thought, but she was wrong. As soon as she was inside, she took wingless flight into the space above. The trip was over with so quickly, she hardly had time to feel the weightlessness. She was stopped by the same gentle force, then propelled down another hallway. This one was interrupted at irregular intervals by what looked to be arched entrances with closed doors. She passed several, then was turned into one. She braced herself for an impact, but then passed harmlessly through the opaque entrance as if no barrier was present.

The force stayed with her long enough to get her to the middle of a room, which resembled a sitting room in a luxurious, very expensive hotel suite. It deposited her beside a very comfortable looking chair. Attached to one arm was a large upright screen. It blinked invitingly, as if beckoning her to sit down. She shrugged and did so. The screen swung around in front of her and settled at comfortable eye level. She looked into it and found herself staring into an endless black depth. It seemed to widen and deepen and move forward, drawing her into its embrace as easily and gently as a bride being folded into her husband's arms on her wedding night.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda never knew how long she was out. It could have been seconds or days for all the sense of time passing she experienced. What was important was the knowledge imparted into her mind while she was in the seat.

Lyda learned she was indeed on the moon, somewhere on the face turned away from earth, in an underground cavern designed especially for human habitation. She was one of perhaps a thousand persons there, the only survivors from tens of millions captured by the aliens and put through trials that would have shaken the courage of David and the patience of Job. It was a winnowing process, as Lyda and others had suspected—but never knew the reason why or for what. Now, she did.

The aliens were an elderly species which had evolved into a magnificent star-spanning civilization. They had spread throughout the galaxy over millions of years. Now they were intent on much greater accomplishments in other parts of the universe, perhaps even in different dimensions. There was no way to impart this knowledge to humans; it would have been like showing a set of logarithm tables to an unlettered savage. Lyda understood that they were leaving, but anything else about their future purpose was completely unfathomable to the human mind, even such improved minds as the survivors possessed.

This galaxy was to be left for humans, the species they had picked as one with the most potential for growth. The winnowing of millions of individuals down to the ones here was simply their way of selecting the best of the best—the most courageous, the most cunning, intelligent, compassionate, strong-minded and thoughtful humans possible—and imbuing them with ever better powers of mind and body as they survived each trial. Lyda could look back now and see the purpose of each situation they had been thrown into; to suffer, endure, care for or dominate their fellows, and live, if they could. Now she even knew why so many had been killed outright. The aliens had chosen a random cross section of humanity and disposed of the first ones, those who had little potential for growth, as casually as a rancher culling a herd of cattle. The rest were sent to the same kind of harsh environments Lyda had seen. Once the survivors were transported from there, the aliens departed earth, but only to a series of giant orbiting globes where they stayed, but never responded to repeated queries from earth authorities in any fashion whatsoever.

The changes the ultimate survivors had undergone were permanent, imbued in their genes, and capable of being passed on to their offspring—and to other humans as well. The new genes were all dominant, and encoded within the “nonsense” portion of their genomes. Actual evidence of just how superior they were now would be discernible only by the most minute scrutiny of the most comprehensive autopsy by the best pathologists in the world. Should they ever die through accidents, a possible but not likely fate, their bodies would appear normal. Otherwise, they could look forward to a lifespan of hundreds, possibly thousands, of years. In the meantime, they would live on earth among the rest of the population and gradually and clandestinely become the true rulers of humanity. They would guide its affairs into productive paths, get the environment back under control and prod the inhabitants of their planet into thinking of themselves as a species, rather than so many diverse divisions of race, religion and ethnicity.

The Changes, Lyda learned, were no more than humans would have become able to induce in themselves, given only a few more decades—and assuming that no nuclear war occurred. Their offspring would inherit the increased strength of mind and body while the ordinary citizens of earth would gradually be brought up to their standards over many, many generations. At least that's what the aliens thought would happen; they wouldn't be around to see the results of their intervention.

The cavern on the moon was well hidden and would last for thousands of years with no need for maintenance. It was intended to be a secure place for them and their offspring to retreat for rest, relaxation and mingling with their fellows. The transports were equally long lasting and were stealthed for complete invisibility. No radar or human eyes would ever spot them as they went back and forth between the earth and the moon.



The last bit of information Lyda remembered being implanted into her mind was the knowledge of how to use her thoughts to control every aspect of their retreat on the moon, including the transportation system, how to use the screens attached to the chair to tune in television and radio broadcasts from earth and how to contact others in residence.

\* \* \* \*

*Contact!* Lyda blinked her eyes open. *Gavin!* She sent her thought out into the vastness of the residence and almost immediately met his incoming query. The first thing either of them had thought of was each other.

*Gavin!*

*Lyda!*

Their minds touched briefly and seconds later, Lyda was directing the force used for movement to hurry toward Gavin's suite. It was only as far as one hallway over. Seconds later, they were in each other's arms, their lips locked together as securely as their minds.

The thing Lyda noticed most was how much Gavin had grown, both mentally and physically, with a concomitant increase in strength and vitality. Since they had last been together, he had progressed immensely from the quiet, competent young man she had known. He was at the peak of perfection as a human being now, as strong mentally and stronger physically than herself, his powers developed through trials she could sense had in some ways been worse than hers. Withal, there still existed the same basic core of the person she had fallen in love with, but now mature and every bit her equal.

When their lips finally parted, Lyda stared into his calm blue eyes and saw acceptance and desire there. And like her, a burning need to consummate their love.

\* \* \* \*

It was better than she had ever imagined it could be. The first trembling ecstasy of sex with Gavin was augmented and enhanced by their ability to merge their minds to an almost painful level of intensity, where every other concern in the universe took second place. It was entirely and completely wonderful, but Lyda knew experience would make it even better over time, if that were possible.

"I love you, Gavin. I love touching and holding you and being touched and held," Lyda said dreamily while they lay together afterward, gently caressing each other. Both were still in a mild state of shock from the dazzling amount of pleasure they had received and given to each other during their union.

"I love you, Lyda. I was so afraid you wouldn't be here. I should have known that nothing could harm you. This is so beautiful, it's hardly bearable."

Lyda closed her eyes while he stroked her breast and the curve of her hip, feeling a shiver of renewed desire for him. She sighed.

"I wish we could stay here for a week, doing nothing else but learning all the ways to love each other," she said.

"I know. But the rest of them are waiting on us."

"Yes." Lyda agreed. "I guess if it has to be done, let's get it behind us. All the ones we haven't met will

want to get a look at us, too."

The mental communication had come just moments ago, barely comprehended through their utter delight at the wonders of loving each other for the first time, both physically and mentally. Apparently, they had taken (or been given) more time with their reunion than most of the others.

Lyda gently disentangled herself and retreated for a moment to the sybaritic bathroom, one side of which was equipped with every device, lotion and bathing facility a female could ever want, while the other side was just as equally resplendent for men. Between the two sides was a bath big enough to masquerade as a small swimming pool, equally well equipped.

She came out and dressed in formfitting green slacks and white blouse, which she left open a third of the way down the front. The clothing had been produced for her in less than a minute and the fit was as perfect as anything she had ever worn.

This will take some getting used to, she thought. Every desire in the world at your fingertips—or at the beckoning of your mind. Of course, neither she nor Gavin would abuse their accommodations by neglecting their duties—including the painful one they were on the way to perform now. Gavin had also dressed. He was wearing blue trousers and a white shirt open at the throat in the same fashion as Lyda's. They presented an image remarkably similar to the native born *Sabras* from the glory days of the Israeli settlement era.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

The great lobby was filled. Comfortable chairs sufficient to seat everyone had extruded from the floor and the crowd was seated. There was a palpable tension in the air. Even though the decision had already been made, it still had to be confirmed and carried out.

Lyda strode hand in hand with Gavin to a stage raised far enough from the floor so everyone could see them. As they passed down the aisle between the seats, she heard the sounds and sensed the thoughts of many of the individuals at the gathering. The results of the selection process that had taken place with the aid of communication devices while she and Gavin were involved in their reunion had surprised both of them; first, at the way surface thoughts of the whole community could be merged at once and a consensus agreed upon, and second, at the preference that had become known. She touched Gavin's mind momentarily, as much to reassure herself as him. Becoming the undisputed choice, along with Gavin, of the two people thought most capable of guiding the destiny of a whole planet and species was an honor Lyda had never imagined in her wildest dreams, but it was nevertheless, an accomplished fact. She made a vow right then to do her utmost to think and act in a way deserving the title of uncrowned queen of earth, consort to the equally crownless King Gavin.

They climbed the steps to the stage and turned to face the seated crowd. There were no cheers; the approval came in soundless waves of mind touches. Here and there, she could pick out the distinguishing thoughts of Leo, Rayne, Ivan and others she had known and worked with. Sadly, others were missing. She knew the same situation held true for Gavin; he had lost trusted friends and advisors to the vagaries of chance and danger just as she had.

She and Gavin talked with their voices, using them to seem more down-to-earth perhaps, even though it wasn't really necessary.

"Thank you," Gavin said. "We will work as hard as we can for you and the people of earth."

"Yes, thank you all," Lyda repeated. "It is an honor and a privilege for us to be picked for this duty. And as you have already demonstrated, with duty, comes responsibility." Besides choosing them as their leaders, another process had taken place in the moments after that.

The last of the bullies, con men, and immoral strong men and women who had managed to somehow survive the trials had been separated out and segregated into one group. They were standing over to one side of the stage, being restrained by the group mind now controlling the force that propelled them to and from their quarters. There were several dozen of them, already condemned, but their ultimate disposal left for Gavin and Lyda to decide.

This was the one thing Lyda had dreaded before coming down with Gavin to accept the position of prime leaders of the planet earth. She and Gavin touched minds briefly, then spent several more moments examining the surly but cowed prisoners, who stared at them with resignation written on their faces. They already suspected what was in store for them. She and Gavin agreed on three men and two women who could possibly be rehabilitated. The rest, they condemned to death. Lyda hated making the final decision, but she didn't try to shirk from the duty.

Once the decision was made, the combined force of the assembled minds used the transport system to whisk the condemned prisoners out of the lobby and down into the bowels of their resort, where they would be euthanized and their bodies consigned to the recycling system.

Lyda turned to Gavin as soon as they were out of sight and lay her head on his chest. She knew there would probably be more decisions like this once they returned to earth, but she didn't have to like it and never would.

Gavin made their final announcement.

"We'll give everyone who wants it a two week vacation to renew old friendships and decide where on earth you want to work. Lyda and I approve of the choices you've already made for an advisory council. Until we learn to communicate at long range with our minds, we'd like everyone to stay here with us for two weeks after that, so we can get our first priorities set. That will also give everyone else time to decide which council members they can work with most efficiently and compatibly and what nations and peoples are most in need of our presence. After that, we can return to earth and begin to work toward the future."

Lyda nodded agreement and they walked back up the aisle between the seats. This time, there were cheers.

\* \* \* \*

The only work Lyda and Gavin allowed themselves during their two week honeymoon was to meet the new council, along with friends and advisors from the past, and to acquaint them with each other. Otherwise, they stayed in their suite, enjoying the delight of discovering the myriad ways a couple deeply in love with each other can please and be pleased by the merging of minds and bodies. Lyda practically glowed with happiness, even after they had to begin work. She didn't think living with Gavin and sharing duties and responsibilities with him would ever grow old.

At the close of one of the first days following their honeymoon, after they had returned to their suite and made love, Lyda was stretched out on one of the big loungers with her head in Gavin's lap, where he was seated at one end. He had on a pair of briefs and she was dressed only in a pair of ultra comfortable

panties of a soft, smooth material she couldn't identify but certainly enjoyed wearing. Gavin was gently caressing her breasts while across the room, they had on a news program from earth.

"Mmm. It's hard to concentrate on business with you doing that," Lyda said. "I knew sex was supposed to be good, but I never imagined the experience would turn out to be so much better than the description."

"We'll have to move to a state other than Texas if we want to live together, though," Gavin said.

"What! Oh, goodness. I've been so deliriously happy I didn't even stop to think of that. Of course! Age of consent for a girl is seventeen in Texas and I'm still sixteen!" Lyda thought for a second. "Oh well, we'll probably settle near Washington to be near the center of power anyway. I think the consensual age in Maryland is sixteen, and even if it's not, we can easily deflect inquiries. That does bring up another subject, though."

"Uh huh. The aliens have already left this galaxy forever. When we return and the authorities discover there's less than a thousand survivors from the millions taken prisoner, they will certainly put every single one of us under scrutiny and interrogation. There's going to be the notoriety to cope with, too. All this is something we're going to have to cope with. I'm sure some of the others have already thought of it, too. We'll have to bring it up for discussion."

The touch of Gavin's hand on Lyda's breast was so enticing, it made concentration on anything else almost impossible. She covered his hand with her own, pressing it to her but holding it still. Across the room, a news anchor was asking pundits why they thought the aliens had left the solar system so suddenly, whether they would be back and what they thought had happened to all the prisoners. There hadn't been nearly enough bodies left behind to account for them when the aliens had retreated five years ago.

"They stayed up there for almost five years watching us before they left, Larry. Perhaps they decided we've learned our lesson by now."

"And what lesson is that, do you think, Senator Raycliff?"

"We must become better custodians of our earth is what I think," the senator pontificated.

"No, I believe they waited until we had told them over and over we intended to have peace on earth," Earl Martinhouse, a political pundit said. He earned his living by contradicting politicians.

"Yes, Earl, but we still don't have peace. There are still little wars going on, not to mention all the religious discord their coming has wrought. Besides, according to my sources, they have never communicated with anyone on earth, ever."

"That's not true, Brian. Of course they've communicated. That's how the president and the leaders of other nations got them to leave the surface of the planet and retreat to those big orbiting globes five years ago. And the Secretary General of the United Nations says he was told the prisoners were taken to another planet, but may possibly be returned. There was also a last communication from them before they departed for good, less than three weeks ago."

The anchor looked understandably skeptical. "And what was the gist of that message, Earl?"

"According to my sources at the United Nations, it's still being analyzed. I'm sure the text will be

released once we're certain of the interpretation."

"Congressman Syltatum, how about all the missing persons we know were captured by the aliens? Do you have any knowledge that might shed some light on this issue? The families are still grieving and until they know what's happened to their loved ones, they'll never have complete closure."

The representative did his best to look wisely into the camera. "Brian, I believe that eventually, the aliens will give us a full accounting. After all, they did no real damage while they were on earth. We were the ones who exploded the two nuclear weapons."

"That's true," the senator said. "But you must admit, we were provoked. At any rate, the aliens did provide a stimulus to get a real space program going. Eventually, we'll meet them in space."

The anchor started to comment about the almost unfathomable distance beyond human technology the aliens had gone, but by common consent, Lyda and Gavin used a mind touch to cut the program off. Lyda smiled lazily up at Gavin. She reached up to pull his head down for a kiss, freeing his hand so he could resume caressing her. It was so wonderful and thrilling to have him near, to be lying down like this with him, almost naked, and wanting it to continue forever. Her mind seemed to be battling impulses toward both business and pleasure, though. The thought of forever reminded her of another problem everyone was aware of, but which also hadn't been discussed much.

"We'll manage the interrogations all right," Lyda said. "It's just a matter of us all sticking to the same story, that we were taken to a succession of other planets where survival was very problematical and most of us died. No, we don't know why it was done to us. I suppose that's even true in the ultimate sense because we can't even come close to understanding why they're leaving this part of the universe. And of course, we'll have to say we were returned in spacecrafts so stealthy, they are invisible, which is also true, except we can never let on that we're the ones controlling the ships. That's a fact we can never allow them to learn. It should be relatively simple, though, once we get past the notoriety part. We can easily resist mind drugs if they try questioning us under them. Physical interrogation, using pain—well, I believe we'll probably have to do a bit of mind altering of the interrogators themselves if it gets bad, but we can handle that, too."

"But..."

"But what happens in twenty or thirty years, when our failure to age become too noticeable to ignore? I wouldn't put it past some governments or wealthy individuals to rip us apart cell by cell trying to discover how it's possible, just so they can extend their own lives."

"There is that. We're going to have to get earth under control and working toward common causes by then. Same for the wealthy individuals who hold so much power; we'll have to control them, too."

Lyda smiled up at Gavin. "That's an easy one. We'll just have to accumulate enough wealth ourselves so we can break them if they cause problems. No, I take that back. None of this is going to be easy.

Ordinary people of any culture are slow to change; look at how much discord there still is on earth, despite the appearance of an invulnerable alien culture. We'll have to convince them that change is to their own benefit. Same for the power brokers and the financial movers and shakers. They'll want to hold on to what they have and take from us what they can. We can't give them our long lifespan, but we have at least twenty years before that will become a problem. We're bound to come up with ways to bring them around, even if it's nothing more than offering our own germ plasm to the people truly ready to work for the benefit of the species. The intractable ones ... well, as much as I hate it, we've both learned that sometimes, there's simply nothing to do but eliminate an individual. And listen to me sounding off, like

those idiots we were just listening to, when what I really want is for you to carry me off to bed and forget all this until morning."

Their bed was as soft and pliable as Lyda's body and as ready to be entered as she was. Gavin caught that thought and laughed gently in her ear as he carried her to the bedroom for more love, and then sleep, cuddled in his strong arms.

\* \* \* \*

By the time they were ready to return to earth, all the possible contingencies they could think of had been discussed and planned for. A few, those with no immediate families who probably hadn't even been missed, went on ahead to perform a task for the others, that of finding out about relatives. The day before they were to go, one of the stealth ships returned. Lyda, among others, got a report.

"I'm sorry, Miss Brightner. Your mother lived for a few days after your father was killed and you were captured, but she never regained consciousness."

Lyda nodded her thanks, unable to speak for the time being. She, like almost all of them, had paid a price, one over and above the savage survival trials they had been subjected to.

\* \* \* \*

They all left Moon Palace, as it had been designated, right on schedule but with a mutual vow to return several times a year for relaxation and entertainment. The stealth craft let Lyda and Gavin out in the countryside near the suburbs of Maryland, close enough to Washington to begin their work, but far enough away to avoid constant political entanglement with the people they would have to interact with. They set foot on earth with the clothes on their back and a small number of gold nuggets provided by the fabricators of Moon Palace, enough to get established, but not enough to arouse suspicion or envy. They would tell the same story as everyone else, that the aliens had furnished the gold when they provided them with clothing.

Before they touched down, Lyda happened to think; none of them had ever seen a single alien. Neither she nor anyone else had any idea whether they were individuals, a single entity, or something else entirely beyond human ken. Not that it matters now, she thought, and Gavin agreed.

\* \* \* \*

Lyda stepped out of the craft and set foot on earth for the first time in over five years. She took Gavin's hand and smiled up at him. He returned it, then they gazed together into the distance toward the horizon, where tall buildings were visible. Lyda took out the pistol she had carried for so long. She shook the cartridges from the cylinder, wiped them and the weapon free of her prints, then tossed them all as far into the woods as she could. Then together, she and Gavin went forward, first, to find a place to live, and then, to begin their anonymous reign as king and queen of earth.

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