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The Horde

by Joseph Green

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CHAPTER ONE



Leo Volz crouched behind the frail shelter of a low bush and tried with desperate earnestness to make the right decision. His life depended on it.

The local hoofed carnivore, resembling a water buffalo with saber-tooth fangs, shook the ground as it thundered toward Leo's hiding place. Saliva dripped from its wide black nostrils, and fear and fury distended the bulging yellow eyes. In its mouth was the pink thigh of a screaming member of the Horde, the humanoid body tossed like a live toy back over the beast's shoulder. Some distance behind the fleeing animal Leo could hear the shouts and cries of the captive's pursuing comrades, muffled by the thick and smoky mist. They would be here within two minutes. Their scoutship might be overhead even sooner, though it was unlikely they had instruments capable of penetrating this soupy air.

Leo's steady right hand held his two-charge laser pistol focused on the carnivore's chest. The noisy explosive projectile gun was in his left. The laser would stop the killer beast, and do so silently. But that would leave him only one charge in his most powerful weapon, and this seething inferno was filled with similar hunters—many, like this one, apparently going mad.

A little to Leo's left was a gurgling, belching mudhole, its popping bubbles filling the air with the nauseous smell of sulfur. Behind him, the mists thickened until they provided excellent cover. But that area was full of similar mudholes, some of them neither noisy nor smelly. One slip, a single fall, could mean death. Unpredictable rockslides from mountains colliding just beyond the mists were another continual danger. The only safe ground was the wood on whose edge he hid, and it was jammed to overflowing with wild animals. They had been forced here by the massively slow but

inexorable grinding of deeply hidden tectonic plates, the force separating this heavily forested peninsula from the mainland.

The thought flitted through Leo's mind that he should fire, just to save an intelligent humanoid from the jaws of a wild beast. That one he dismissed immediately. The screaming captive was a member of the Horde, human only by definition and appearance. He was as dissimilar to Leo as the horned carnivore that wanted to make a meal of the alien's pink flesh.

If Leo tried to slip to one side and away, the pursuing Horde members were likely to see him—and even one glimpse could be fatal. They had sonic rifles that produced a spreading cone of sound still fatal at sixty meters—where the diameter was a good three meters wide. There was no hiding from such a weapon. And Leo, above all, had to remain alive. Misty was already in their hands. Somehow, somehow, he had to live, to rescue his partner and get back to their own small scout and out of this star system.

A flash of inspiration hit Leo, a vague glimpse of an answer—and he pressed the firing stud.

The blue beam crackled through the air, slicing into the animal's hairy chest and burning deep inside its massive body. The carnivore collapsed between one step and the next, dying on its feet. The huge mouth opened in an agonized reflex, and the pink captive went hurtling over the curling horns and slammed into the ground. The shrill screaming ceased abruptly.

Leo left his shelter at a run, holstering both guns and drawing his bush knife. He slid to his knees by the sexless humanoid, which had landed on its back. Leo raised his knife for the quick hard slash across the throat that would ensure silence—and two large green eyes opened and blurrily focused on his face.

Leo froze, knife held high. His heart was racing, the poised hand shaking with nervous tension. He could hear the other members of the Horde party spreading out and calling to each other as they came this way. He had to silence this one, prevent the others from learning his location. For Misty's sake even more than his own, he must stay free.

But he could not swing the knife at that exposed and helpless pink throat.

It was an action of which Leo was simply incapable.

The green eyes stared steadily into Leo's for five seconds, then abruptly closed. The head tilted to one side. The muscular pink body shivered convulsively, and went limp.

Leo quickly held a hand against the alien's mouth and nostrils. He felt air moving in and out. This one could still revive and tell its brethren it had seen the Earthman.

A variant of the fragile plan he had conceived came to Leo. It was still possible... a poor chance, but his only one. He rose and stepped back to the dead carnivore. Stooping, he seized its forelegs just above the hooves and straightened. The flaccid body of a creature that must have weighed over 400 kilograms hung from his hands.

Leo was a big man, standing 190 centimeters and weighing eighty-eight kilos. He was heavily muscled, barely thirty Earth-years old, and in excellent condition. Exerting all his strength, he stepped backwards, tilting to the rear and digging in his heels. The hairy body slid forward over the grass-like ground covering.

Step by straining step, Leo dragged the dead meat-eater toward the mudhole, trying not to lose momentum. But he had to stop a meter from its edge and shift his grip; the ground was becoming soft. When he moved back and grasped the wide trunk under both shoulder joints, he thought he had lost the gamble then and there. The body did not move when he heaved.

Feeling his back muscles cracking with the effort, Leo tried again. And very slowly the trunk slid forward, bit by agonizing bit. He moved a step closer to the edge, until the ground was rising around his sinking feet, and strained once more. The horned head entered the bubbling mud, sank—and Leo stopped the slide with the animal's hindquarters still on firm ground.

His estimated time was almost up, as the shouts of the approaching Horde proved; they were drawing close. A wind could tear the smoky mist away at any second, exposing him.

Leo took a long step back to firm, vegetation-covered ground. Turning, he supported himself with one hand on the dead beast's flank, and leaned forward to smooth and flatten the muddy area where he had walked. And then he moved quickly to the still unconscious humanoid, slung it over one shoulder, and trotted rapidly to the south, where the forest was thick and close.

It seemed to Leo that it had been a half-hour since he crouched and aimed at the charging carnivore. Actually he was well away from the mudhole before the first pursuers reached it. And his two-minute estimate had been close.

Leo was careful to keep on the thick sward, where footprints would be hard to see. When he was a hundred meters from the mudhole the ground suddenly heaved and trembled under his feet, a small surface indication of the terrible pressures at work hundreds of kilometers below. A crack suddenly gaped to his right, the ground parting like some chained demon of the interior opening a hungry mouth. And seconds later he heard fresh rumbles in the distance, as new rock slides started in the mountains lost in mists to the east.

An accumulation of frightened animals, driven this way by an even worse cataclysm to the west, were moving uneasily through the woods. Leo saw two more of the hoofed carnivores, but neither made any move toward them. Most of these creatures seemed to have stopped and were standing uneasily about, as though afraid to go forward. And there was no going back. Their world was vanishing into the sea behind them.

When he was a safe distance from the mudhole, Leo slowed his pace, breathing hard. His burden weighed about fifty kilograms and was perhaps 150 centimeters tall, roughly the size of Misty. He had once carried his partner four kilometers when she sprained an ankle, slung over his shoulders like a shapely sack, muttering foul words into his ear every step of the way. But he had been in no hurry then.

Leo stopped about 300 meters from the mudhole, easing his burden to the ground. To his surprise the large green eyes were open again, studying him. The creature had made no sound.

Behind them Leo heard the humming whine of the Horde scout, hidden from sight by the mists. It was hovering over the mudhole. He would know in a moment if they assumed their comrade had been swallowed by the smelly death-trap.

Leo glanced at the humanoid's mangled pink leg. The four puncture wounds were bleeding heavily, but the flow was steady; no major arteries had been cut. Only the fangs had penetrated very deeply.

"I speak Shemsi," Leo said in that tongue. "Do you speak StandEnglish?"

"Shemsi is the name of my people, not our language," said the humanoid. He had a surprisingly deep voice, one Leo could not help thinking of as "male."

"And StandEnglish I speak, yes, not good," he added in Leo's tongue.

The human and the Shemsi stared at each other. Leo saw a completely hairless pink-skinned humanoid who wore nothing but a harness of soft straps around shoulders and hips, with a carrying case on each side. With clothes on he could have passed for a baldheaded little man, one with an unusually ruddy complexion and large, protruding green eyes. Without them, his color was too obviously an overall characteristic—and where the open harness should have revealed genitalia, there was nothing. His crotch was as smoothly vacant of organs as the belly above it.

"A medical kit in your bag you have?" the Shemsi asked, his voice low and calm. "If my wounds not treated, to death shall I bleed, I think."

The thought of treating the alien's injuries hadn't occurred to Leo. He hastily opened his own side pack and extracted the small but heavy med-kit. Leo reached for a powerful clotting agent, then hesitated. He had rescued this imitation of a human from the carnivore to save his own life, and carried him away only because he had been unable to cut the pink throat. But he felt no compelling desire to try to save this creature from those nasty wounds.

"If a—a congealing agent for blood that is, use it not. Our body chemistries—similar, but same not. Compression of cloths, yes."

This little fellow—and Leo realized he had no frame of reference for neuters, and would have to think of him as a male—was taking a lot for granted.

"Why should I treat your wounds?" Leo asked, letting a low growl creep into his voice. "And speak Shemsi; your English is terrible."

The Shemsi shrugged, a very human gesture. "As you wish. Will you leave me your kit, then?"

Leo hesitated, trying to think. "No, I may need it myself," he finally said aloud. He was listening to the distant whine of the Horde scoutship, waiting for it to either rise and head for their basecamp, or start circling again in search of him.

There was no reason not to treat those bleeding wounds while he waited. Leo opened the kit and set to work.

He had no choice but to pour a strong disinfectant into the punctures and spread it over the other cuts. Any carnivore's mouth was a haven for dangerous germs. The Shemsi would have to take his chances on harmful reactions.

As he carefully cleansed each puncture and packed it with sterile plysorb, Leo suffered a peculiar reaction himself. The pink skin was as smooth and softly pleasing to the touch as Misty's, but with an odd underlying feel of hard muscle close beneath. It seemed a strange combination of male and female characteristics, one he found different and disturbing.

As Leo was packing the fourth deep hole the constant whine of the distant Shemsi scout suddenly changed. He paused, listening. A moment later the high thin sound intensified, then began to move rapidly away.

The wounded Shemsi was also listening intently. After a moment he said, "My brothers have given up the search and are returning to camp."

That was a lucky break for Leo. A steady breeze from the ocean side of the peninsula was rapidly thinning the smog. "Good; I'll be right behind them," he said, his voice filled with controlled anger.

"In your small scout which we failed to find? That would not be wise. Our synchronous platforms would detect you immediately."

Leo opened his mouth and closed it again without speaking. So that was how they had spotted the human scout! Evidently the Shemsi had placed three satellites in equidistant geosynchronous orbits as soon as they established their small basecamp, which indicated they planned to stay—perhaps permanently. If so, this was another highly suitable planet that had been lost to Earth, this one well away from known Shemsi areas of colonization. The government on Earth would want to know. And if they chose to dispute the claim and send out colonists to this world or another in this star system, then the odd, strained relationship of official peace but constant border fighting would go on, as it had now for forty Earth-years.

"Why did you warn me about the sky-spies?" Leo suddenly demanded. "Incidentally, what is your name? Or does your species use individual titles of address?"

The Shemsi smiled. "We have names, and mine is Erith One Eight Zero One Two Six Four Three One Nine. We use as many digits as necessary to separate individuals when several Erithains are serving together. Since I am the only Erithain Shemsi in this two-part grouping, my name is Erith. As for why I warned you of detection should you lift off in your scout, that should be obvious. You would certainly leave me here to die if you could fly to our basecamp. Since you must walk, I hope to persuade you to take me along."

"That," said Leo dryly, "would take some strong persuading!"

"I do not think so, for the major characteristic our two species most obviously share is rationality. You must make your way on foot for almost a thousand of your kilometers. I have been on this planet for over one revolution, and know the animal and plant life far better than you. I am also more familiar with the geography. You had barely started your survey when we asked you to land and account for your presence on our planet. I doubt you know where our basecamp is located, or even the major landmarks around it. Without my aid you will not succeed in reaching it. Without yours, I will surely die. Though our Long Walks are of the east and the west, for the moment they run together."

At the reminder of how this encounter had started, Leo felt fresh anger. Misty had been at the controls as they approached this apparently habitable planet in the Beta Crucis system that the Space Service had sent them to investigate. They had started the preliminary survey by cruising over this continent from east to west, above the equator. On the west coast they had observed a region of very high volcanic activity, where a large peninsula was slowly separating from the mainland. The western edge seemed to be breaking apart, tremendous lava flows boiling up from high-level magma to flow hissing and steaming into the sea. On the east side, two mountain chains were literally grinding into each other as the floating plates supporting them slid past one another at an angle. The heavily forested center of the peninsula was stable at present; but obviously it would soon break up or slide beneath the water. And near the eastern edge of the wood, the scout's highest resolution automated scanning camera had spotted signs of intelligent life and buzzed a warning to the pilot.

The sight that triggered the alert was a group of small thatched huts, not far south of the broad land bridge connecting the sinking peninsula with the mainland. From the air they appeared deserted. When an hour's continuous observation indicated no sign of life, Leo had taken the single grav-sled and gone down for a closer look.

Leo had barely landed and walked away when he heard a strange voice over the scout's radio link, speaking StandEnglish. It ordered Misty to land immediately, in the center of the abandoned village.

While the humans had been hovering, studying the small circle of huts, a Shemsi scout ship had silently approached from the east. Its much larger armament made resistance useless. Leo dashed back toward his sled, intending to hide it among the trees. A pink beam flashed down from the sky and the little craft began vibrating, then seemed to shake apart before his eyes.

Misty had no choice but to obey. She started down, intending to land by the remnants of the sled. When she was less than a hundred kilometers from the ground, the large mountain to the east, which had been steadily showering the area with ashes, suddenly exploded.

The volcano did not produce lava but more ashes, a tremendous mass of soot that blackened the sky and turned day into night. The Shemsi scout was hovering at about two kilometers, almost directly above the volcanic cone. The turbulence shook the craft violently about—and the thick cloud temporarily hid the human ship from view.

Misty, not normally an action-oriented person, had for once made a good crisis decision. Instead of trying to land and pick up her partner, she accelerated and shot away to the north. The air at ground level was still relatively clear. Leo saw her disappear around the side of a presently quiet mountain. He took off in that direction at a run, and had barely disappeared into the forest when the Shemsi scout broke through the overcast and hovered above the circle of huts.

And somewhere in the tangle of gullies and canyons at the base of the mountain, Misty found a good hiding place for the little scoutship. She had left it and headed back on foot, seeking her partner. But the Shemsi, following the pattern of dominant logic for which they were noted, had landed most of their crew between the two humans and started searching in both directions. They had spotted Misty; Leo, fortunately, had seen them first.

For almost two days after the capture of his partner, Leo managed to evade the searching Horde. They had flown above the thick jungle growth in a relentless search pattern, broadcasting an appeal by Misty for him to surrender. Since the humans' standing orders suggested they say anything the Horde wished if captured, Leo had ignored his partner's voice. The land party was far more dangerous. On several occasions they had come close to spotting him. On that final sweep, where they had forced him into the active volcanic area, he had been almost ready to give up. But then one of the panicky and hungry carnivores had attacked a Shemsi, resulting in the dramatic rescue attempt Leo had become involved in.

Erith's reference to "Long Walks of the East and the West" was obviously a colloquialism, but the rest made eminently good sense. He could expect a betrayal once they actually neared the basecamp, but that would be weeks if not months away.

Erith was right; his logic was irrefutable.

"Very well, I agree," Leo finally replied. "We will help each other throughout the walk. At the end we'll try to work out some agreement that will allow me to rescue Misty and start back and you to rejoin your people."

"Done, then!" and Erith extended his hand in a familiar gesture of friendship.

As they shook hands, Leo realized he should not have been surprised. Obviously the weapon-holding extension had to be neutralized to express agreement, in any species.

Leo returned to bandaging Erith's wounds. Most of the lesser gashes had finally stopped bleeding, and the four punctures were oozing only minor trickles. He cleaned the general area, sprinkled it with disinfectant, and wrapped it firmly with plyskin. Then he left his new and temporary partner to look for some food. While running from the Horde for two days, he had found few chances to eat.

When Leo returned to Erith with an armload of fruits and nuts, he discovered that despite differences in internal chemistry, they could eat almost identical plant foods. The Shemsi physiology was apparently incapable of digesting meat. Nor did Erith eat the nuts, choosing only the very juicy and ripe fruits.

They finished the rough but filling meal. "And now I must ingest my primary food, while taking my rest period," said Erith. "Will you call out if danger approaches?"

Leo could only stare in bewilderment. Erith turned on his side and somewhat awkwardly dragged himself into the nearest open area, keeping the wounded leg extended behind him. He sprawled on the grass face up, and spread his arms and legs wide apart. Although filtered through an upper smoky haze, weak sunlight now reached the ground. The steady breeze from the west had cleared the air at the lower levels.

"So it's true," Leo said slowly. "I didn't believe it. You feed on air and water!"

"We absorb carbon dioxide, not 'air'. Our primary method of producing glucose is far more efficient than your single source of energy generation. We use that clumsy two-step process as a secondary system; but to depend on plant cells to synthesize organic compounds, and then disassemble them in the digestive tract is wasteful. The main function of our digestive system is to provide the bulk needed for growth, though it can also supply immediate energy. Now if you will excuse me..." and Erith appeared to fall into a deep sleep almost at once.

The sun was just past the zenith. Leo was tired himself, from two days of constant running and little sleep. But one of them had to be alert. He compromised by walking to a nearby large rock and sitting with his back against a slight overhang. He was only a few meters from the sleeping Shemsi and could see any creature approaching from the thicker forest.

Leo drew his projectile pistol—it was now safe to use the noisy but effective fifty-shot weapon—and laid it near his right hand. For the rest of the afternoon he intermittently dozed and awoke, never actually asleep but getting some valuable rest. For once the mountains were quiet for a few hours, and the weak sunlight in which Erith lay persisted throughout the day.

By the late afternoon Leo was completely alert. Staring at his still sleeping companion, he could not help but wonder at the strange twist of fate that had made him the guardian of a member of the Horde—or Shemsi, in their tongue. So far he had seen several rumors confirmed. The Shemsi were totally sexless, had a chemical in their skin cells similar to but more efficient than chlorophyll, and ingested mostly fruits and water. Confirmation of these theories made him wonder if any of the wilder stories could also be true. Some contended that there were three race mothers from which all Shemsi were born; others theorized that although these people were extremely logical, they were not highly intelligent; and still others claimed that the Shemsi had life spans ten times that of a human.

It was disheartening that the one intelligent species Man had encountered so far resembled a colony of emotionless, humanoid ants. But it was a big galaxy, and they had barely penetrated 200 light-years from Earth. Sooner or later they would find a more compatible species.

In the meantime, Man had constructed colonies in forty other star systems. Only toward Alpha Crucis had a problem arisen, this conflict with another ambitious species. The Horde, too, was expanding into space. Highly habitable worlds like this one were sought after by both peoples.

In human affairs it was an old pattern, and possibly older than humanity itself in the rest of the galaxy. But in this particular undeclared war Man was for the first time a united species, and the opposition a creature only superficially like himself.

CHAPTER TWO



Erith awoke, stretched, rolled over, and sat up. He yawned, and rubbed sleep out of the large green eyes. "Shall we be on our way?" he asked pleasantly.

Leo could only stare at him. Erith smiled. "Well, I *will* need a crutch. But it's usually better to exercise a wound like mine than rest in bed. If I may use that knife?"

Leo drew the heavy bush knife, grasped the blade, and extended the handle. He was watchful for treachery, ready to jump back and draw his pistol at the slightest hostile motion. But there was no need. Erith got to his feet and hopped one-legged to the nearest suitable tree. He leaned against its bole while he cut off a low limb, one with a fork two meters from the trunk. A few minutes of pruning and shaping created a rough but serviceable crutch.

"You propose to travel through these woods at night?" Leo asked as his knife was returned.

"Of course. We Shemsi are nocturnally active, so we have excellent night vision."

Erith gingerly tested his injured leg, making quick little hops and keeping

most of his weight on the crutch. "Painful, but I can manage," he assured Leo. "I suggest we go as far north as possible before turning toward the mainland. The passes are lower and the land is less geologically active at the moment."

There seemed little to do but yield to his companion's superior knowledge. "Lead the way," said Leo.

They moved off through the forest, trying to stay on open ground as much as possible. The sun was setting, long shadows creeping over the land from the west. Erith's progress was painfully slow, but he struggled steadily on. By full dark they had gone a kilometer.

And soon afterward they had their first near brush with death.

There was a shrill, savage scream to their left, followed by a frightened bellow. Seconds later an animal taller than Leo went galloping past, only meters away. The first of this planet's two moons was up, and by its dim light Leo saw a swift and shadowy form running silently after the much larger animal. The creature turned when it smelled slower prey, screamed again to paralyze the new victims with fear, and came gliding toward them.

Leo had already drawn his pistol. He fired, missed in the dim light, fired again—and then it was springing toward his throat. He finally placed two bullets through the hungry killer's furry chest. It curled into a ball in midair, knocking him over with the weight of its hurtling body.

Leo scrambled to his feet, drawing the laser. He had lost the projectile gun. He aimed at the thrashing, squalling killer, then realized he was witnessing its death throes and held his fire. The hunter kicked once or twice more before dying. Leo reholstered his laser and looked around for the more valuable pistol.

Erith silently handed it to him.

Leo took the gun without comment, but in his mind at least one point had been settled. This partnership was not a temporary thing proposed by the Shemsi to put Leo off his guard.

They resumed walking. But within another hundred meters Erith's

crutch hit an unexpected soft spot, and he fell heavily. A quick examination by touch indicated the wounds were bleeding again, and probably had been for some time. Leo decided to stop for the night, and suggested this to his companion.

"Perhaps that would be best," Erith agreed. "I am not as strong as I thought, and these night-hunting carnivores are dangerous."

A short search located a small cul-de-sac among the rocks bordering the jungle. Leo crawled inside, alert for a prior occupant, but found nothing. Gratefully, he curled up on the sandy floor, wriggled out a depression for his hip, and composed himself for sleep. In this warm climate he needed no bedding. Erith was taking the first watch.

He also took the second one. Leo awoke to discover it was dawn, a smoky grayness only slightly less dark than the night. A fresh layer of ashes had been thrown into the sky while he slept, and there would be no sunlight until it gradually fell to the ground.

"I think I do not need as much sleep as you," Erith said when Leo protested not being called. "Normally a Shemsi sleeps from sometime before midday until well into the afternoon, while the sunlight is at its strongest. Such sleep and feeding occupies only a quarter of our daily cycle. You humans seem to need more."

"And we also need to eat more," said Leo. His stomach was growling with hunger.

But first Leo redressed Erith's wounds, throwing away the blood-soaked outer bandages. The packing he left in the punctures. And again he experienced that peculiar revulsion caused by tactile recognition, his fingers conveying the message that he was handling smoothly desirable female flesh.

Leo ate as they walked, plucking fruit and nuts from whatever bushes they passed. Erith also ate heavily of the fruits. They drank at the first clear stream they crossed. The forest was still crowded with animals, but Leo noticed many tracks leading north and east. The bolder ones were moving into the mountains in an effort to reach the main continent. Those creatures

familiar with the territory were choosing a northerly route, along with the two sapients. Those who could not or would not travel would die with the peninsula.

It took them three more days to reach a point where they decided it was safe to head for the mainland. Erith was walking steadily on the bad leg, only occasionally using his crutch. When they stopped that night, Leo removed the packing from the punctures and checked for infection. The wounds seemed clean, and the removal caused only a little bleeding. He doused them with antiseptic again and used the last of his bandaging material for a final external dressing.

The land had grown more stable as they moved north. The prevailing wind here was from the northwest, keeping most of the smoke and ash south and east of them. The mountain range on the sinking peninsula began here as a series of tree-covered foothills. The mountains east of them, on the tectonic plate where the mainland began, were not in motion. This entire area was probably slipping beneath the sea, but it might be several years before the slow process was completed. One day the ocean would wash to the base of those towering peaks a few kilometers to the east.

There had been no sign of a search party from the Shemsi basecamp. They had apparently given Erith up for dead and were content to locate Leo by waiting for him to find the hidden scoutship and fly into the view of their spy satellites.

The companions had fallen into a fixed travelling routine. They stopped walking a few hours after dark, and Erith watched while Leo slept through the rest of the night. They set off again in the gray dawn and walked until noon. Then Leo watched while Erith lay in the sunlight, apparently more unconscious than asleep. He seemed alive only when an apparently involuntary order came to turn over and expose his other side to the sun.

Leo noticed that despite his claims of superiority in energy generation, Erith ate a large quantity of fruit each day. Evidently he needed more fuel than his skin could supply. Considering their heavy exertion and the relatively small amount of skin area a Shemsi possessed, this need seemed natural.

Even so, Leo could not help but envy his companion. Although he ate almost constantly to keep down hunger, still he was losing weight. Natural foods did not contain the calories packed into a like quantity of concentrates.

On the fourth day they turned inland. Crossing the green foothills in the morning, they stopped for Erith's rest period only a few kilometers from the base of the first mountain.

Leo spent most of the afternoon staring at the high stone peaks, trying to pick the best pass. There was no reliable way of determining what lay beyond the next high ridge. Erith had assured him this general area was slightly lower than that farther to the south.

When the sun began to sink toward the ocean, Erith awoke. He stretched and limbered up with some mild exercises. When they started walking he said, "I must warn you, Leo. These mountains are the home of several predators, including flocks of small but very savage meat-eating birds. We lost one brother to them. Your noisy gun will be of little use, and we have only one charge left in the laser. I suggest we prepare weapons when we stop for your rest tonight. In fact, travelling only by night would be safest."

They had not been attacked by predators since leaving the crowded peninsula forest, and Leo did not want to try mountain climbing after dark. He firmly declined the suggestion.

Erith accepted the decision without argument. Leo had learned his Shemsi companion seldom argued. Presumably there was a point where Erith would not obey him, but they had yet to reach it. In their four days together Leo had gradually assumed the leadership, and Erith seemed content to let him.

When they stopped for the night, Erith borrowed the bushknife again and made a trip into the forest. He returned with an armload of springy boughs. Removing his harness, he carefully cut narrow strips from every piece. Then he trimmed the boughs and bound them into two flat shapes resembling very stout tennis rackets.

Once he saw the intended shape, Leo helped him cut the limbs and tie them off.

Erith swung his racket one-handed, then used both hands. "A little heavy, but at least sturdy. Now we have a fighting chance against the birds."

"You seem to dread running into them," said Leo. He could handle his weapon with one hand.

"I saw the brother die when the birds attacked us. It was not a quick or easy death. Our hand weapons were practically useless. Later we designed portable sonic sweeps that are much more effective."

Leo wondered what the Shemsi idea of "effective" was: probably a wide-spreading beam that could make birds fall from the sky like feathered ram.

In four days Leo felt he had come to know his companion reasonably well. Erith was almost phlegmatically calm, ordered, and logical. He had emotions, but they were muted and understated, with few highs or lows. He seemed to share *Homo sapiens'* innate curiosity, and was even more afraid of loneliness. The Shemsi's lack of sexual attitudes caused a curious ambivalence in Leo's reactions, a constant tendency to think of some of Erith's characteristics as "female" and others as "male." In truth they were neither; Leo's reactions were based on his own cultural conditioning. He realized this, tried to allow for it, but learned that was all but impossible.

Leo chose what seemed the best pass, and dawn found them toiling up the steep slope. By noon Leo was both hungry and thirsty. When they stopped for Erith's rest period Leo again found himself envying his companion's ability to live off sunlight, water, and air. At least two of those commodities were usually present.

Leo fell asleep that night with nothing in his stomach but water from his canteen. After his belly stopped growling he was too tired to care.

Next morning they set off with no breakfast, but soon found more water. Its coldness made Leo's stomach ache. They had climbed past the last of the heavy timber, but the ground was still covered with scrub brush and many smaller trees. The air was crisp and cold, but there was little wind. After two hard hours of steady climbing they reached the summit of the pass. Ahead

lay a snow-capped peak that Erith assured Leo stood roughly midway across the range.

The ground at the foot of the high peak was rough and broken, but low enough to allow small trees to take root. Ahead in the distance Leo could see what appeared to be another pass, to the left of the last tall mountain.

"We can sleep in those woods tonight if we hurry," said Leo, considerably cheered by the thought of possible berries to be found there. His stomach had grown numb, but he was starting to feel the effect of heavy exertions without food.

"I think that valley is a little high for most edible plants," replied Erith, his voice doubtful.

By noon they were over halfway down the slope, moving along a natural path, that seemed the remnant of an ancient lava flow. Two more hours would bring them to the edge of the trees. "Let us continue walking," Erith suggested when Leo asked if he needed to stop. "Perhaps you can find food while I sleep/feed."

"Why can't your marvelous skin absorb sunlight and air while you walk?"

"The skin cells need continuous and steady sunlight to perform the complex operations of photosynthesis. Consequently a Shemsi falls into a low-energy-expenditure state approximating your sleep when feeding. This is a physiological function not under conscious control: we must rest to feed. We can control the start and ending of the feeding period, though."

"So a Shemsi lying in the sunlight by a pool of water could live almost indefinitely?"

"Only for a few years. Our metabolisms are far more complex than those of plants. We must have certain compounds our skins cannot synthesize from air and water."

Leo had been wondering what evolutionary necessity had driven the Shemsi upward to intelligence. It was a tenet of Earth-based biology that a species which did not need to change to survive remained the same. In the case of the Shemsi, the ability to synthesize food compounds seemed to

have acted as a free aid, without removing the spur to evolve. Compared to the grim struggle of *Homo sapiens* to live and grow, the Shemsi had had it easy.

Leo looked sideways at his sturdy companion, noted the smooth and featureless expanse of skin below the belly, and decided to stop envying the Shemsi. There were advantages to being a two-sexed species that a worker ant could not possibly appreciate.

Leo's thoughts veered into a new channel. Perhaps it was true that the Shemsi lifespan was ten times as long as the human's. If so, that could compensate for losing the pleasures of sexual exchange, and the joy of seeing one's self perpetuated in the form of children. Maybe humans spent too much of their total time and energy propagating themselves.

That made him think of Misty, and Leo felt an ache in his loins and a heaviness in his heart. Resolutely, he put the thought of the woman he loved more than life itself out of his mind. Later, before falling asleep that night, he would permit himself to think of her. Later....

The travellers reached the grove, and to their pleasure discovered a small stream flowing through a gully on the opposite side, just past the trees. They drank deeply, and Erith promptly sprawled by the water to sleep. Leo set out on a systematic survey. He soon confirmed the pessimism of Erith's initial observation. These were high-altitude plants with needles instead of leaves, without edible seeds. No berries grew on the brush and brambles scattered somewhat thinly over the area; nor did the plants have tubers.

Leo shrugged, and returned to the stream by Erith. The thought of food had stirred his digestive juices and made him intensely hungry, but the hunger faded when he drank more water. He sat down by his companion to maintain guard. The coolness had kept him from sleeping well the previous night, and the lack of food made him feel weak. Leo found himself nodding off in the warm sunlight.

There had been no animal life at all in the glade; none was to be seen on the rocky slopes around them. Leo took a final careful check before letting himself doze off.

Jarred awake by a shout of fear, Leo opened his eyes to chaos.

The sun was low in the west. A swarm of silver birds flew in an endless circle overhead, the whirring of their wings a gentle susurrus that might have lulled the unwary in their slumber. But a steady stream of the lovely birds flashed downward, nipping at Erith with quick tilts of cutting beaks, then winging away with undiminished speed. They were striking first at his eyes. Two bloody spots on his cheeks showed near misses.

As Leo sat up, two feathered arrows dived silently at his face. He saw small hooked tearing beaks coming at him, raised an arm—and felt sharp jolts of pain as he lost two patches of skin and flesh from his forearm.

Something dug viciously into the back of his neck. Leo slapped at it, but he was far too late. The hand came away covered with blood—his. And then he had both arms flailing at the air, twisting and dodging to keep them away, feeling a continual assault on his body as a dozen more tried to rip through his clothes. Most of them were succeeding.

"*Back to back with me!*" a voice panted, and Leo's over-sized tennis racket was thrust into his hand. Erith had fought his way to the weapons lying by the stream, and then to Leo. Grasping the thick handle, Leo swung around until he felt Erith jar against his back. And then he held the racket in both hands, beating the air above his head and on both sides, as a steady stream of the feathered killers descended to slay by countless small nips of flesh.

Leo stopped swinging wildly, and brought down the next several birds that dived at him. They were instantly replaced; one dove under the racket to his left ankle. From both sides they came, two steady streams of flying tormenters, slashing those small hooked beaks at his arms, face, and body. The lattice-work of the rackets brought down many, but the supply of birds was endless.

"Let's work our way into the trees!" Leo shouted. "Break up that formation overhead!"

"Agreed!" gasped Erith, and took the first step that way. Leo followed, trying to maintain the back-to-back contact without looking. The steady attack from above continued, except that now the birds knew enough not to

approach the humanoids from directly in front. They came straight down, or whipped to the side and came in low. Leo kept his heavy racket in desperate motion, from above his head to guarding his ankles. A thin covering of feathered forms littered the rocky ground around the battling sapients.

Erith took another step, then another. He was facing the trees, which were only a few meters away. Gradually the Shemsi turned, so that he and Leo were shuffling along sideways. That made it easier to keep together. The attack from above continued. The birds were taking heavy losses, but Leo was bleeding from at least twenty wounds, and Erith had a more tender skin with virtually no clothes to protect it. Leo now understood how Erith's comrade had been slowly killed.

Leo's arms were growing tired, his breath coming in ragged pants. He could hear Erith breathing deeply behind him. But the trees were close now; already the flying circle above was being prevented from overhead attack.

They suffered a few more nips and killed a few more birds before the protecting shadows of the trees closed around them. For a moment the two attacking streams continued to flow down and back into the circling mass. Then a quick burst of speed brought the bleeding pair near the base of a thickly foliated tree, and the birds were restricted to an almost head-on approach. The birds' casualties increased immediately, their effectiveness gone.

The attack slowed as the two streams of birds grew thin. Then it stopped. For a moment the huge flock continued to circle just outside the trees, as though wondering where to look for another dinner. And then the formation broke, one part flying away in a straight line and the rest falling into place behind. As silently as they had come—Leo had not heard a single noise except the soft sound of their wings—the birds flew off into the swiftly falling darkness.

"And that, my travelling companion, was what I warned you about," said Erith, his breath still ragged.

Leo held up his racket. Several strands were broken, but it was largely intact. "These saved us, Erith. Preparing them was very good planning on your part."

"The thought occurred to me after we lost our brother to them," Erith replied. "But another brother devised the sonic beam, and my idea was not needed."

"Not for the Shemsi, perhaps. But let's have a look at you. I think you lost a little more skin than I did."

Though all were shallow flesh wounds, Erith was bleeding from many lacerations. Leo's medical kit was out of bandaging material. He used the antiseptic liberally, and most of the cuts soon stopped bleeding of their own accord. Those that persisted, he bandaged with strips of cloth from the bottom of his regulation shirt.

There was no way to lock the pads in place, so Erith had to hold the worst ones with his hands.

When Erith was no longer bleeding, Leo stripped off his clothes and the Shemsi examined him. Human skin was not as soft as that of a Shemsi and had proven harder for the small beaks to tear. Erith doused the many small wounds with antiseptic, and Leo redressed.

"I presume your search for food was unsuccessful?" Erith asked as they set about gathering wood for a fire.

"Didn't find one edible bite," Leo confirmed—and had a sudden and very happy thought.

"That *you* would eat, anyway," Leo added, and hurried back to the scene of the fight.

A grisly sight awaited him. Three of the silver birds who had suffered broken wings were calmly eating some of their brethren. When they saw Leo approaching they attempted to flee, hopping awkwardly on both legs, like tiny kangaroos.

Leo ran down the fleeing cannibals, batting them to death with a stick. He hefted the tiny bodies in his hands. They would average over a hundred grams in weight—not much edible flesh per body, but with the number they had killed...

Leo returned with dead birds instead of firewood, and Erith gave him a curious look. When Leo beheaded them and began to pluck the thousands of feathers off the tiny forms, the look grew disgusted. And when Leo gave up on the hopeless task of cleaning the small bodies and instead gutted them, split each through the breast, broke them open, and strung them on a green stick for roasting whole, the Shemsi reached his limit.

"Are you seriously contemplating *eating* those horrible creatures?" Erith demanded, showing as much emotion as he had exhibited in times of deadly peril.

"The contemplation is only the first mild joy. Just wait until you watch me crunching these little fellows and spitting bones, if you want to see a happy man."

"Then I must leave you to your animal feast. My system is incapable of tolerating such barbarism."

"Maybe—but you can knock them out of the sky by the thousands. You would eliminate them as a species and make no use of the bodies at all."

"That is an entirely different matter. I am thinking of the sensitivities of intelligent beings, not the place in nature of carnivorous birds. I fail to see how you can lower yourself to eat flesh at all, much less that from predators."

Leo grinned. "You have your marvelous skin, Erith—and I greatly admire it. But let this omnivore eat whatever he can find in these barren mountains. Otherwise you may end up having to get out of them by yourself."

The first set of little bodies was ready. The smell of burning feathers was strong in the air, Leo removed the stick and slid a second one he had prepared as they talked over the fire. He pulled the first small carcass off the hot wood, cursing when he burned his fingers. Holding the tiny form gingerly by the blackened wings, Leo brought the cooked breast up to his face. The smell of meat made him almost delirious with hunger. He tore into the tiny body, chewed, spat out bones... and Erith walked away into the darkness.

The silver birds had an unpleasantly feral taste, but Leo hardly cared. He leisurely cooked and ate every one he could find, including going back in the darkness to gather up more along the stream bank. Twice he had to stop and hunt additional firewood. By midnight his stomach was full, his face covered with grease, and his hands were filthy.

Leo cleaned up the mess he had made eating, then went back to the stream to wash his face and hands in the icy water. He built up the fire again and curled up by it. Erith silently appeared out of the darkness and sat down on the opposite side.

Leo fell asleep with his stomach blissfully content for the first time in a week. There were some advantages in having an omnivore's diet after all. In a land barren of edible vegetable matter, food could descend from the sky.

Leo awoke in a cold dawn, to find Erith had kept up the fire while his companion slept the sleep of the gorged. There was little need for a guard at this place, and although the Shemsi was sitting up, he was sound asleep. Leo had previously seen him sleeping only while lying in the sunlight.

They made good time that morning; by noon the tall peak with the little grove of trees at its base was far to the rear. The pass Leo had noticed earlier, to the left of the last high mountain in their path, was only a few kilometers ahead. Below was the final dip they must cross before starting up what Leo hoped would be the last of the slopes in their path.

CHAPTER THREE



Two hours after noon the travellers reached the base of the valley that lay between the two mountains fronting on the pass. They stopped there for Erith's sleep/feeding. It was relatively warm and comfortable, and though the vegetation here did not include trees, it was still high enough to prevent another attack by the birds. Leo stretched out by the Shemsi and took a nap himself.

When they awoke it was almost dark. Leo suggested they change their travel pattern by waiting until morning to resume walking. By leaving now they would end up spending the last of the night at a much higher altitude, probably with no wood available.

Erith agreed, and they gathered material for the night's fire. Most of the brush here was thin and light, quickly turning to ash in the flames. They had to cut and pile up a large amount of it, almost denuding the area. Leo did not worry about their depredations: the brush would have a thousand years in which to grow back.

They slept one at a time, not from fear of attack but because the fire required almost constant attention. And without it they would have been very uncomfortable. This closed valley acted as a sink for cold and heavy upper air descending from the high slopes of the mountains. Direct sunlight warmed the valley during the day, though.

Leo's bird-flesh dinner had long ago been digested into a memory. As they toiled up the first slope next morning, climbing what appeared to be another old lava flow, he found himself almost wishing the birds would attack again.

The ascent was steep but short. They reached the top just before noon, and stood looking at the edge of the other forest, some twelve kilometers distant. There awaited food, water, and relative safety. Leo glanced at his companion and saw a smile of relief on the pink face. He was grinning like an idiot himself.

They stopped for Erith's rest as usual, but by agreement cut it down to two hours. With the sun still high, though angling toward the west, they resumed walking. There was a final long hard slope to climb, then a gently sloping incline to the woods. Before dark they entered the warm shade of the giant trees.

Though his legs were trembling with weakness, Leo had no intention of sleeping on an empty stomach. While Erith gathered up what fruits and tubers he could find, Leo walked quietly into the woods, seated himself at the base of a giant tree, and waited. He sat almost motionless for a half-hour, while shadows deepened and the small creatures of the forest gradually

grew accustomed to his unmoving presence.

Two small arboreal animals, faintly resembling squirrels, finally lost their fear and emerged from a hole in the tree just ahead of Leo. He took careful aim and shot one. He missed the second when it scurried away in fright.

The customary sounds of the forest had gradually returned while Leo waited silently for his prey. Now a renewed silence fell, deeper and more fearful than before. Leo walked to the fallen climber, made certain it was dead, and lifted it by the rear legs. It weighed almost a kilogram. He carried it back to the camp, skinned, cooked, and ate it. Erith again left until he was through with his meal.

Fresh meat had never been a part of Leo's diet. He decided he could learn to like it.

Next morning they resumed the old travel routine. Leo sometimes caught naps while Erith slept and fed in the afternoon, but still collapsed like the exhausted man he was from midnight to dawn. He also started hunting during the morning hike. When successful he built a small fire while Erith slept, and cooked and ate his meal. After a few weeks he had become a proficient hunter and sometimes managed to kill fairly large herbivores. When this happened he cooked the meat, stuffed himself, and carried the rest in the animal's hide. Between the meat and the fruits, nuts and tubers he still ate in quantity, Leo had an almost adequate diet. Erith, he noticed, ate almost constantly, but was still growing thinner. He needed to spend more hours lying in the sun each day, but their travel schedule did not permit it.

Erith no longer left the camp when Leo ate meat in his presence, though.

The days stretched into weeks, and the weeks lengthened slowly into a second month. Leo grew as hard and tough as the trees through which they travelled: Erith gained the Shemsi bodily equivalent in endurance. The forest was never the same two days in a row, and yet after a time became monotonously familiar. They averaged about twenty kilometers a day, which Leo felt was adequate, considering the thickness of the vegetation, the time devoted to gathering food, and the slowness of travel after dark.

There were no paths through this virgin wilderness. Erith kept them on an almost due east course, explaining that the Shemsi camp was at the base of the mountain range where this vast woodland ended. When they reached a point where he could climb a tree and see the mountains, Erith could take a more definite aim.

When they had been walking for some fifty days, Leo started climbing the nearest tall tree before they settled down for Erith's afternoon nap. He did this five days in a row—and on the fifth, Leo saw a dim haze ahead that could well be the range they were seeking.

Three days later the weather was clear and sunny over the entire area. When Erith climbed that afternoon, he saw the mountains clearly. He announced they were a little north of the Shemsi basecamp and should start gradually slanting toward the southeast.

The great forest became noticeably thinner over the next five days, and the air somewhat cooler at night. The land had started rising. According to Erith's description, they should be within two or three day's travel of their destination. Leo decided it was time to broach the subject of separation and putting their mutual safety agreement into effect.

Leo made an unusually good kill that morning, just before noon, and suggested they stop a little early. Erith gave him a curious look, but agreed. While his Shemsi companion exposed that remarkable pink skin to the sun, Leo cooked all of the meat he could carry. When Erith awoke, stretching and yawning, Leo was ready.

"Erith, isn't it about two more days march to the basecamp?"

The Shemsi looked at Leo, stretched again, and reached for some fruit he had been eating before lying down. "That is correct, my friend. And you think the time has come to part, perhaps?"

"No 'perhaps' to it. Have you given any thought to how we can assure your neutrality until I've gotten Misty out?"

"Yes, I have. The simplest and easiest way is for me to wait here until you return. Once past this point you should be safe. I will then proceed on

to camp and tell them I accompanied you this far."

"Your people won't accuse you of being a traitor?"

"There may be some... hesitation, a few doubts. But I am convinced I took the sensible, logical course of action dictated by the circumstances. Any Erithain would approve. The Domidains might possibly dispute our point of view, of course. The Ferilains will be happy to accept any reasonable excuse that could lead to forgiveness."

The Shemsi and human had talked surprisingly little about their peoples, considering they had been living in forced intimacy for two months. Leo had learned enough to know that the legend of the three race Mothers was correct. Therefore at least three females existed in this largely sexless species. Each individual Shemsi inherited the characteristics of his particular Mother. The Erithain stood for science, rationality, logic, and self-control. The Domidain were the adventurous ones, enjoying exploration, war, and individual feats of heroism. The Ferilain believed in racial harmony, peace, social consciousness, and love. Any large group of Shemsi had an almost automatic social balancing mechanism at work.

"I'll leave in the morning," said Leo. "At the end of five days and nights I will be back with Misty, or you are free to go on to the base. Is that agreeable?"

"Eminently so," said Erith, rising. He extended his hand, and the human and Shemsi shook in solemn agreement.

There was a small hill in the near distance. The travellers reached its eastern base before sunset, and Leo helped Erith build a comfortable camp. They constructed a lean-to and gathered grass and soft ferns for a bed. Leo had grown so accustomed to travelling after dark that he did not feel sleepy until near midnight. When he finally crawled under the thick roof and dozed off, Erith was sitting quietly before the fire. When he awoke at dawn the Shemsi was sleeping soundly beside him.

Leo lay still a moment in the growing light, staring at his companion. He still had mixed feelings toward this strange creature whose company had been forced upon him for two months. Erith had proven himself a faithful,

efficient, somewhat bland person, with little of the temperament and changeability Leo thought of as "human." The Shemsi was logical and orderly in thought and action, and somewhat slow at both. Leo had his doubts that a person like Erith, left alone in a wilderness, could survive. A group of them, cooperating as fully as they seemed to, would be much more efficient. Social order and group action had to be the dominating forces in Shemsi society.

Overall Erith made a satisfactory, if somewhat dull, travelling companion. But he could hardly compare to the fire and sparkle of a woman like Misty—even leaving out the physical joys of having a mate.

Leo crawled out of the lean-to, awakening Erith. He gathered up his few possessions, including the large hide bag of cooked meat, ate a few bites, and extended a hand without speaking. Erith silently shook it, and Leo turned and left.

He travelled that day until dark fell, eating as he walked. Leo covered almost forty kilometers, double a normal day's travel. He did not make a fire that night and dined on more meat. Well before noon on the second day, he was approaching the Shemsi basecamp.

Leo was reasonably certain Erith intended to wait at their temporary camp, as agreed. But he intended to free Misty and be gone before the Shemsi could possibly arrive, regardless.

The ground had been rising and the trees thinning for the past several kilometers. The Shemsi had chosen this site with their usual logic and attention to detail. It was fronted by the great reaches of the subtropical forest, with its abundant supply of immediately edible food. To the rear lay clear patches of grassland, where experimental gardens could be started with a minimum of ground-clearing. Beyond the gardens the highlands began, leading to the chain of mountains that marked the eastern end of the forest.

When he judged he was approaching the guarded area, Leo climbed a tall tree. He was even closer than he had realized. Their single large building, constructed from lumber cut while clearing land for cultivation, was half a kilometer away. Its overall structure was dome-shaped, but since it was fashioned from straight materials, the outer surface had a faceted

appearance.

Leo judged the top about equal to the height of their scout, which was not visible.

From his position about thirty meters up, Leo could see past the Shemsi's giant beehive to the garden patches. Some twenty Shemsi were industriously working the ground, a few cultivating and the rest clearing away trees and brush. Some of the crops he could see on older areas seemed nearly mature.

Leo carefully scanned the area around the camp, looking for two scoutships. Though he and Erith had not often indulged in small talk, Leo had slowly accumulated some information on the Shemsi. They always travelled to new planets in two scouts, each having the capacity to carry the entire force. Only one ship at a time was risked in planetary exploration. Since only physical objects could exceed the speed of light, and it was some twenty light-years back to the home planet, any significant exchange of information had to be by messenger. Therefore one ship was often gone, either back to Creche World—their word for the home planet—or in local exploration.

Leo carefully scanned the area around the main building. There was a much smaller structure several hundred meters to the side, with two thick cables running through the trees to the beehive: obviously the power supply. But the scout was not visible, nor was there any area of brush or trees thick enough to conceal it.

One scout had to be gone. The other was either concealed well away from the camp, or it formed the central support of their single building!

Leo shook his head, baffled. It made little sense to construct a building that would have to be destroyed when the ship left. And then Leo realized he was projecting his own logic patterns onto the Shemsi—an unproductive and potentially risky way of thinking.

So accept the fact that they *had* built their home around the scoutship, in effect making it a part of this new environment. And go on from there.

The problem was how to get inside and look for Misty. Leo settled down to an intensive study of the camp. There had to be a guard system of some kind... the wires from the power source to the living quarters gave him a clue. He found four others, very thin and tiny at this distance, leading away from the small shed in two pairs, going in opposite directions. They formed a huge circle. By dint of much concentration, he finally located them in front of him, only a few meters ahead. He had stopped just in time.

One wire was on the ground, concealed but not buried. The other was in the trees above it, placed as high as possible. Apparently any warm body passing between them triggered a signal, probably with size, location, and direction of travel indicated on a monitor inside.

Leo glanced back at the camp, just in time to see the Shemsi working in the gardens gather in an open spot and sprawl on the grass. They were well outside the guarded area, and one remained alert against possible predators. Seven others emerged from the main building and joined their brethren in peaceful sleep/feeding. No one in the inner group remained awake. Probably an alert guard was sitting inside at the monitor's console.

There was no sign of Misty. Since this was their main period of rest, they probably had her confined.

Leo descended to the ground, his mind busy with plans. He had been automatically thinking of waiting until dark, to conceal his movements. But that was stupid under these circumstances. The Shemsi would be awake then and could see better than he. Strange though it seemed, the best time to attempt entry was in the bright light of early afternoon.

Leo backed a few more meters away from the wires, then walked parallel to them around the camp. There was one crossing point where frequent travel should have accustomed the monitors to expect signals—the path to the gardens. And unless the system was extremely sensitive, Leo's size should fall within the range normally expected of a passing Shemsi.

When he judged himself within fifty meters of the resting gardeners, Leo took off his worn but still serviceable boots and tied them around his neck. Barefooted, he crept through the brush without a sound, slowly working his way between the alert guard and the trail back to camp. Finally he reached

the main path. Cautiously he eased forward to the edge of the vegetation.

The wires were a few meters down the path to his left. Some thirty meters to the right, the guard paced slowly back and forth. A weapon of some sort hung from his body harness at the hip.

Leo waited and watched. The guard glanced often among the trees and brush around his sleeping companions; only seldom at the more open area toward the camp. Unless there was a radio hidden in one of his two side cases, he was not equipped with one, which meant the plan Leo was slowly formulating just might work.

Leo looked to his left. The path to the camp did not lead straight toward the building. After entering the guarded area, it curved gently to the right. From where he crouched he could see the top of the tall wooden structure, but not its base.

Wriggling backward, Leo stood up and walked toward the path at a clear spot. Before stepping out into the open he looked toward the clearing to his right, locating the guard. At the moment that worthy happened to be walking his way.

The guard turned and went back. Leo quickly stepped out into the path and hurried in the opposite direction. He was over the wire before he had time to wonder if he had guessed correctly. A few more fast steps took him around the gentle bend and out of sight of the alert sentry.

Leo stopped long enough to slip on his boots. If he was wrong—if this was such a departure from the norm that the monitor inside sounded the alarm, or had some unseen means of contacting the sentry—then he had lost the battle before it began.

Leo walked on into the large clearing, heading directly for a door into the building. He had to pass within a few meters of several sleeping Shemsi. Leo stepped softly, keeping on the grass. At the door he drew his laser; the noisy projectile gun would bring the camp down on his head. He had one charge with which to disarm or kill the monitor inside.

How noisy should he be in opening the door? A feeding Shemsi was

virtually comatose, disturbed only by very loud sounds. He opened the door in a normal manner, pulling it closed behind him firmly but without slamming.

Directly ahead was the rounded base of the silvery scout ship. The wooden building enclosed an area some twenty meters wide on all sides of it. Glowing tubes on the walls and high on the curved ceiling provided light. A miscellany of scientific equipment, living quarters, and tools littered the enclosed space. Other than the lack of partitions and resulting loss of privacy, it looked very much like the all-purpose utility building human settlers erected first on a new planet.

Leo examined the living quarters as he walked toward an open hatch into the ship. The chain of logic, luck, and good guesswork that had gotten him this far was about to run out. The alerted monitor should be sitting before his console, waiting to learn what had alarmed the outer guard and caused him to awaken someone and send him in to report. The monitor had heard the wooden door open and close. Next he expected to hear shoes on the metal rungs Leo could see just inside the open hatch.

Leo obliged him. The steel rungs were anchored to the inside wall. Leo holstered the laser and climbed them at a normal pace, making what he hoped was a standard amount of noise. If the guard decided to leave his post and look inside the shaft, Leo was dead.

Nothing happened. Leo reached a platform three-quarters of the way up the vertical ship, and the shaft ended. Drawing the laser again, he stepped through an open hatch into a small airlock, stooping to pass inside. He walked on through the inner hatch and straightened up in the control room.

A Shemsi was seated at a small console to Leo's left, his chair swung around to face the airlock. There was no one else in the room. The monitor gave a startled gasp, gaped unbelievably—and then whirled around in his chair, finger stabbing toward a button.

There was no time to think, to weigh the odds. Leo swung the laser, pulling the trigger without consciously aiming—and a bolt of blue heat smashed into the console ahead of the reaching finger. Glass crackled and shattered, plastic melted and flowed like water. Leo sprang forward as the

singed pink hand recoiled in pain, shifting his grip on the laser to the barrel.

Leo brought the handle of the heavy pistol down on the round skull. The monitor had started out of the chair, mouth open to yell. He collapsed back into his seat, shoulders slumping and head sagging. Leo caught him just in time to keep his face out of the mess on the console.

Easing the slack body to the deck, Leo looked around for rope. None of any kind was visible. He drew his bushknife, cut off the monitor's body harness, and quickly sliced parts of it into wide straps. Before tying the guard Leo had another thought, and closed and latched the hatch.

When the monitor stirred and groaned, Leo helped him sit erect. With his hands tied behind him and his ankles strapped firmly together, the Shemsi had trouble keeping his balance. And his head obviously hurt. Blood was dribbling slowly from a scalp wound.

The fact that Shemsi blood appeared identical to human had always seemed an oddity to Leo, as was the fact the sexless aliens had five fingers and toes. Considering their very different internal chemistry, he would have expected more external differences. But the red blood was probably only superficially like that in his own veins, and there was one major physiological difference that was quite obvious. A Shemsi's teeth were all grinding molars. There had been no need for incisors or fangs in their ancestry.

Leo had carried the heavy laser pistol a thousand kilometers for the one instant it might be needed. He tossed the now useless weapon aside, and drew the projectile gun. Holding it to the Shemsi's nose, he said softly in the other's tongue, "Now you will tell me where to find the human you hold captive—or you will die, and I'll find her myself. Speak if you wish to live."

The monitor visibly quailed in fear. This one seemed to lack the stoical courage of Erith. "Do not harm me! The sexed creature is not here! Ferilain called—yes! One of the Mothers honored our little band; she called!—and ordered her sent to Creche World. The other scoutship and an operative crew departed not long after her capture! We thought you dead."

The conviction that this frightened creature was telling the truth was

overwhelming. Leo fought back a black despair, felt the hand holding the gun shaking, relaxed his finger before he inadvertently killed—and turned away until he could control himself.

The Shemsi was watching in evident terror when Leo swung back to face him. For the first time Leo noticed this one was somewhat different from Erith.

The body build was taller and thinner, and his eyes were brown. The features of the pink face were not quite as rounded. He also had noticeable scars on the right leg and left shoulder.

"Your Mother is Ferilain?" Leo asked.

The monitor nodded, the fear fading slightly. "That is true, as any Shemsi would know. But how did you?"

"I'm beginning to know you," Leo told him, looking around the control room. A search of the few cabinets he saw still failed to disclose a rope. He cut more harness and tied the Shemsi thoroughly to a stanchion, until certain he could not possibly escape and reach an alarm.

Leo set out to explore the scoutship. He could not take a chance that the Shemsi might be lying. Masterful deception could be a part of their culture, for all he knew. But every hatch in the ship opened except one that obviously led to the engine room. And Misty was not to be found.

Leo returned to the control room. The trussed guard could have screamed while Leo went in or out the door, but he must have realized it was unlikely any comrades had awakened and entered the ship. He was also fearful for his life. Individuality was not a part of their culture, but the desire of each Shemsi to remain alive was obviously very strong.

"Was it not as I told you?" asked the monitor.

Leo nodded without answering, inspecting the control room. It was so alien and different there was no conceivable way he could operate this ship. Besides, the console would require considerable repair work before it would be operable. Either he had to have a pilot—and no one here was going to take him to their secret Creche World—or Leo had to recover the hidden

human ship.

He thought of the two-month journey back through the forest, this time alone. Knowing Misty had hidden it well, Leo wondered how long it would take him to find the scoutship. The depression hanging in the back of his mind grew deeper and darker. Even if he found the charts he needed here, located Creche World, recovered the scout, and set out—there were still the planetary defenses to overcome, the whole world of the Shemsi opposing him. There was no way...

Leo asked himself a simple and fundamental question, one he had not faced before because there had been no need. Was life worth living without Misty?

The answer was "No." And therefore he had nothing to lose in trying to get her back. Logic, good sense, his own desire to live—none of these really mattered in comparison. And so there was no real choice involved at all.

CHAPTER FOUR



Leo rechecked the bonds on the Shemsi, who was getting over his fright. A short search located the scout's star charts. As had long been suspected, Creche World circled an unnamed old star in the direction of Alpha Crucis. Leo quickly memorized the star's exact location. Then he stepped into the access well and closed the outer airlock hatch firmly, but without locking it. The monitor's replacement would release him at the shift change. In the meantime, no one would hear him if he started yelling.

The Shemsi sprawled in the open were still lost in sleep/feeding. Leo walked quickly but quietly past them, heading, by the most direct route, for the camp where he had left Erith. This time he passed between the guarding wires without seeing them. Nor did he bother to conceal his passage.

Leo walked swiftly, working off tension. By dark he was calm in spirit and several kilometers from the Shemsi. He ate some of his cooked meat

and went to sleep early. Up before dawn, he resumed walking. The timing was such that he was going to arrive at Erith's camp well after dark, or sleep only a few kilometers away. Leo began trotting whenever the woodland was open enough. He was now in top physical condition and could run for long periods without becoming winded.

At lunch Leo took a short rest and ate the last of his meat. There were edible fruits available, but he did not take time to pick them. The sun was sinking behind the small hill west of the camp when Leo strode into the open.

"Leo!" Erith sprang to his feet from a seat before the fire; he had not heard the Earthman coming. "So you are alive and well! But where is your softly-muscled mate?"

Leo threw himself prone on the grass and did nothing but breathe deeply for several minutes. The muscles in both legs were in semi-spasm, twitching and jerking as though still trying to propel him onward.

Gradually the nervous spasms eased. Leo finally sat up, to see Erith holding out some fruit. His stomach had grown numb as he ran, but suddenly he was ravenously hungry. He stuffed the food into his mouth and swallowed after barely chewing. The soft pulp felt like leaden weights going down.

It was well after dark by the time Leo felt recovered enough to talk. He told Erith what had happened, being careful to include the fact no Shemsi had died. The small hairless humanoid listened intently, nodding occasionally. He seemed to think the frightened behavior of the Ferilain Shemsi perfectly normal.

"This is most unusual, Leo. To have a Mother contact such a small and unimportant band... seldom does this happen. Evidently they wish to study your female partner."

"Then you think she will be safe on Creche World? You may as well know, Erith. I'm going after her."

The Shemsi nodded. "I would have assumed as much. The home world

is well-guarded, Leo. Nothing that flies can approach Birth Mountain, not even one of our own ships. You will not succeed."

Leo shrugged. "We'll see. Now I need some sleep."

And Leo did sleep, while Erith mounted guard. When the sun awoke him next morning, Leo felt as though he hadn't even turned over in the little lean-to.

Leo staggered to the fire, yawning and rubbing his eyes. Erith rose to his feet; he had been dozing sitting up. They smiled at each other in the early-morning light—and Erith stiffened, eyes closing, face frozen in surprise. Body rigid as though in shock, he turned blindly toward the fire, took a halting step, paused... and fell to his knees.

"*Mother!*" Erith cried in a strangled voice, his face lifted to the greenish sky. "*Mother, I hear!*" His hands rose, covering his eyes. He seemed in the grip of some religious ecstasy, body trembling and jerking, teeth chattering, the eyes now streaming tears.

After a moment Erith quieted, but remained on his knees. He lowered his hands and faced the disk of the sun, just rising beyond the edge of the forest. He rocked back on his haunches and remained that way, eyes still closed, while Leo watched and waited.

The visitation or possession, whatever it was in human terms, did not last long. When it was over, Erith rose to his feet, a mingled look of anguish and pride on his smooth-skinned face. He wiped away the tears and cleared his throat. When he spoke, his voice was filled with wonder. "Friend Leo, I was amazed that our little group was called by a Mother—but for the second active Mother to also call the same little band, and within a few months—such a thing has never happened before! And for me to be so honored—you cannot know what this means to us, Leo. There are at least four billion Erithain scattered over twenty-four worlds, and most live out our 1,200 years never dreaming of having the Mother call. No greater glory can happen to a single Shemsi."

"But what did she *say*?" demanded Leo. This unexpected contact seemed to have driven Erith into a highly emotional state, very unusual for the

normally placid Shemsi.

Erith's mouth twisted into a shape that would have been a wry grin on a human face. "The Mother gave most surprising directions, Leo. It seems our partnership is not to end, at least for the indefinite future. I am to accompany you in the search for your scoutship, and go on to Creche World with you if we find it. I am to aid and assist you in every possible way, short of killing a brother. I am to work against my own people, and do so conscientiously and with all the abilities I possess."

Amazed, Leo could hardly believe his ears. "Why?" he demanded.

"That was revealed to me—possibly because the Mother realized you would wish to know. The active Mothers, Erithain and Ferilain, have decided to let you attempt the rescue of your mate. They do not believe you will succeed, even with my willing help—but they desire to study your behavior patterns and examine your ability to act independently, which we much admire. Therefore I am to accompany you and observe your actions."

"And have one of your rulers constantly spying on me through your eyes? Sorry."

"No. Leo, continuous observation would be impossible. A Mother can communicate only with one individual at a time, and you are not that important. I doubt that I will be called again until you are captured or dead. Should we actually succeed in reaching Birth Mountain, my orders would probably change from 'accompany' to 'capture.' But we can solve that problem by separating, as we did here. And even if you are captured, you would probably be reunited with your soft mate."

"In captivity, you mean?"

Erith shrugged. "I do not know the minds of the Mothers, Leo. Most probably in captivity, yes. Possibly they would free both of you if the data I accumulate is of great value to them. We Shemsi have little interest in individuals."

Leo started pacing around the fire, trying to think. This was a situation for which he had no guiding precedents and insufficient knowledge on

which to make a sensible decision. He obviously needed Erith's aid. And apparently it was perfectly safe to trust the little Shemsi, at least until they neared the home of the Mothers. But unless he could break away near the end, reach Misty alone... he had to weigh the advantages offered by Erith's aid against the knowledge that the Mothers could follow their progress if they wished. And the Mothers might lay traps for him, or attempt in some other way to test his unknown abilities as an individual.

Leo mentioned the latter possibility to Erith. The Shemsi smiled. "I do not think so, my friend. The Mothers seem more interested in testing the regular Creche World and Birth Mountain defenses. To change them would invalidate the test. Besides, the most logical and likely outcome of our attempt to penetrate them will be the death of both of us."

Letting Erith stay with him was a decision Leo was not prepared to make at the moment. Instead he asked, "Can you tell me how your Mother communicates with you?"

"I cannot. They have powers far beyond anything we accomplish with machinery, including that of speaking with a child anywhere at any time. Most of their messages are to members of management Trios, workers in important research groups, and others in critical areas. However, each Mother can communicate only with her own children. When a Mother is inactive, as Domidain is at present, a message to one of her brood must be relayed through the child of an active Mother."

"Why is Domidain inactive?" asked Leo.

"Each Mother enters the birth chamber every third year, where she lies in a semi-comatose state and steadily lays eggs. At the end of the year she is awakened by the attendants and returns to active life, while the next Mother enters the chamber. We have had a peaceful and pleasant time while Domidain sleeps, but that will end when she awakens."

"You have a leadership system of Shemsi 'Trios'—each composed of a Domidain, a Ferilain, and an Erithain—but actually the Mothers rule the whole roost. Are they the only true individuals among you?"

"That would depend on how you define the word 'individual.' Since

every child of a Mother born in the same year is identical in the egg, and the influence of the male parent produces only minor variations from year to year, we tend to be very much like our Mother. Domidain provides children who are war-like, adventurous, bold, and courageous. Erithain's children have a predisposition toward science, rationality, and logical thought. Ferilain supplies social consciousness, harmony, love and peace. Only the shaping influences of maturation—such factors as whether one takes the Long Walk to the East or the West, or the number of years one lingers in each stage—make one Erithain very different from another. Still, those differences can sometimes be quite significant."

"That's fascinating, and I'll want to hear more later," Leo replied, wondering particularly about the "male parent." Erith always tended to furnish endless detail once started on a subject, but often failed to provide a clear and complete picture. "But right now I have to make a very important decision. Do I stand a better chance of getting Misty out of there with your help, or without it? It's a tough question."

"I do not believe so," Erith said, his voice low and thoughtful. "Without my aid you will have no slightest chance of success, which is why I was instructed to join you. With it we will still fail—but at a point much closer to your goal."

"I don't know why I should believe you, but I do. Very well, then. Partners it is, until I'm close enough to Misty to do without you. And I only hope you don't get orders to turn on me before then."

Erith put out a hand, a broad smile on his pink face. "I am over 700 years old by your reckoning, Leo Volz. But this will continue the new experiences I have gained from cooperating with you, ones never before available to a Shemsi. I will add much to the knowledge of the Mothers and my people."

"Then let's go," said Leo, and he started breaking camp.

By the time the sun reached the first quarter they were well on their way back to the slowly sinking peninsula, back to the smoke and ashes and volcanic fury that were transforming the edge of a continent. Leo felt as though they were going home.

When the companions emerged from the last of the forest and saw the tall peaks fronting on the ocean dead ahead, Leo's wrist indicated they were six days ahead of the time made on the inland journey. Both were now hardened and experienced travellers. Leo could find his way through the dark with few falls. The Shemsi had developed faster reactions and could march all day on three hours sun-feeding and a little fruit.

"Since your medical kit is almost exhausted, I suggest we cross the slopes where the birds hunt after dark," said Erith.

"A good idea," Leo agreed. He was staring at the pass through which they had come, wondering if there was a shorter way. In his mind he could still see the small human scoutship, and the peak on the peninsula around which it had vanished. Misty had very likely hunted a place to land immediately, knowing she was out of sight of the Shemsi vessel. She would want the trip back on foot to be as short as possible. But unless she found a large cave or closed canyon in short order she would have gone on...

The most logical course was to retrace her route exactly, see what she had seen. But the view was different on the ground, and the extra distance would take too much time. It would be faster to cross the mountains lower on the land bridge, near the active zone, and enter the area she had vanished into from this side.

Leo tested his logic on Erith and found him in full agreement. From where they stood a second pass was visible, one that apparently almost skirted the water. It was higher and would be more dangerous, but had the advantage of being directly in front of the area they wished to reach.

It was almost dark; the travellers ate and resumed walking.

Two days later they stood atop a high escarpment and looked out at the mountain pass where the scout-ship had vanished. It was a region of rugged and craggy but generally low peaks. They had crossed from mainland to peninsula the day before, and the rising tension in the ground had become a tangible quality. Leo felt in his bones that a major cataclysm was on the way, and if they did not find the scoutship soon, it might be lost to the sea.

Almost at once Leo spotted a dark hole in the face of the mountain

opposite them, one Misty would have seen immediately... and so would her pursuers. He looked again, trying to find something less obvious that would still make a good hiding place. A moment later he saw it.

"There," said Leo, pointing. A narrow canyon led up into the hollow between the first peak and the one to its north. The fissure seemed open and easy to reach, but the walls gradually came together overhead. The shadowed passage twisted out of sight around the curvature of the mountain.

Erith stared, shrugged, and started down the slope. Over his shoulder he called back, "If you are wrong, friend Leo, at least it is the closest hole. We can check that large cave next."

But Leo had guessed correctly. They found the scoutship at the very end of the canyon, far past the point where the Shemsi vessel could have penetrated. And Misty had even turned it around, ready for a fast exit if needed.

The sight of the little ship brought an acute, unexpected reaction to Leo. He thought of the months he and Misty had spent in its cramped quarters, the thrills and high excitement they had known on several raw new planets, the depth of intimacy and love made possible by a closely shared life. And Misty suddenly appeared before his eyes, so real and close it seemed possible to reach and touch her.

A short, slender woman but with legs and arms softly curved by firm muscles... hips very wide for her slim frame, below a waist so tiny he could encircle it with his hands... breasts small but beautiful, riding high on her smoothly muscled chest... a darkly olive complexion, with black, somewhat curly hair framing a face of delicate beauty... a hint of fire and steel always present, hidden in the depths of large, dark-brown eyes.

By conventional standards Misty was not a beautiful woman. Her figure was not symmetrical, she was well below average height, and her chin was too small. But Leo remembered the joys and laughter, the coziness, sex, above all the companionship of someone deeply loved and respected. There was an inner strength to Misty, a toughness that enabled her to endure when others faltered. She was wine and moonlight, sun-heat and passion,

happy laughter and sometimes banked, slumbering fires... she was the woman he loved.

Leo remembered, and suddenly his knees became weak with need and longing. He could have stood there in the shadows of the canyon and cried like a hurt child.

"There is in your face the news that a Mother has died," said Erith softly.

Leo blinked, and brought himself back to the present. The most difficult job he had ever undertaken lay ahead; this was not the time to indulge in reminiscence. Taking a deep breath, he glanced at his companion. "Something like that," Leo agreed, not elaborating. But he felt sorry for Erith, who did not understand and could never experience the wonder of heterosexual love.

The round hatch into the airlock fronting the pilot's compartment opened smoothly to Leo's handprint. The ship roused from the "quiet" operating mode as they entered. Fans whispered to life to move the musty air, and lights came on throughout the living areas. This small ship did not have one of the larger computers, which were almost human in intelligence, but it was programmed to perform most needed functions automatically.

"I suggest a direct ascent and a trajectory toward Earth from this star system," Erith said as he seated himself in the second pilot's chair. "My colleagues have no way of knowing I am alive and with you. There is an excellent chance they will assume you are returning home without attempting to find your mate."

"A careful leading Trio would report our departure to Creche World anyway," Leo pointed out.

"True; and since the Trio here, as elsewhere, contains an Erithain and a Ferilain, the cautious way will prevail. But this colony has no safe way of reporting until the second ship returns. Of course both leaders with active Mothers will attempt to reach them by... your closest equivalent is a prayer to a god. The result is usually the same—the one who is supposed to hear seldom responds. But with us, unless there is an immediate answer, we know the message has not been received."

"It would be very interesting to know how the Mothers communicate," Leo said absently. On his main console, he was viewing section after section of engineering data, checking conditions and redundancy reserves. "Our physics don't provide for any electromagnetic waveform that exceeds the speed of light."

"Nor do ours," Erith replied, with the infrequent grin that made him seem far more human. "It may be that the Mothers, who are not physicists in the usual sense, do not understand this ability themselves. It may also be that they do not wish it duplicated by us. Such a device would greatly weaken their control."

Leo completed his inspection and prepared to lift off. He gave verbal directions for an initial course back to Earth, to be reviewed when out of the solar system. The ship was actually operated by the computer, but he monitored the displays and checked its functions.

With a quiet whirring of the anti-grav generator, the little scout rose and headed down the canyon. As soon as the roof overhead split, the ship slanted upward, emerging into the bright blue light of Beta Crucis. It accelerated as rapidly as air friction permitted, the separate gravity field the computer maintained inside the ship compensating for the G-pressures. In minutes they were out of the atmosphere and heading around the star, on the most direct safe pathway to Earth. There had been no sign of acknowledgement by the Shemsi.

Erith had fallen silent. His pink face seemed unusually sober and thoughtful. Although he was following orders received from the highest possible authority, it was obvious Erith did not relish this assignment. To him, there was something fundamentally wrong in assisting someone who opposed the will of the Mothers. To someone accustomed to total and blind obedience, the internal conflict was traumatic.

"Cheer up," said Leo cheerfully. "Perhaps we'll be killed when we try to slip past the Creche World defenses, and your honor won't be compromised."

Erith gave him a puzzled look, but only shrugged. Humor was as alien to him as sex. When he did not understand a human attitude he usually

ignored it.

"Okay, let's get down to business. Tell me how the defense system works and how we can get around it. No, first let's talk about Creche World itself." Leo unobtrusively pressed a "record" button on his console. Later he would review the information until it was thoroughly absorbed. "You've said we have to land in the Stage 5 area where the spaceport is, even if we don't use the port itself. Why is that true?"

"Because no flying craft of any sort is permitted over any area other than Stage 5. Ground travel is also very restricted. Riders and their mounts may freely cross the clear zone between Stages 5 and 4, but nothing may pass between Stages 1 and 2, 2 and 3, and 3 and 4 except creatures moving in the outward direction."

"Go back to the beginning and start with a general description," said Leo, feeling very lost.

"Very well. That is probably best. Creche World has one very large continent that completely encircles the planet like a wide belt. There are islands in both the north and south seas and icecaps at the poles. Neither the islands nor the icecaps are inhabited. The planet is very old. Most geological features have been worn down, but one great mountain remains. This is the home of the Mothers and the cradle of our species. The mountain and the land around it for perhaps a hundred of your kilometers is Stage 1. A clear zone about two hundred meters wide circles the entire stage. State 2 surrounds the Stage 1 clear zone, and reaches from the northern sea to the southern sea. It is separated from Stage 3 by straight clear zones on both sides, extending the full width of the continent. Stage 3 is broken into two parts, as is Stage 4. Stage 5 is the largest in physical area, taking in perhaps half the planet's land mass. There is only one spaceport, and it sits almost exactly opposite Birth Mountain, on the other side of the world."

"Then this phrase you use, 'the Long Walk of the East or the West'—that means a baby from Birth Mountain can go in either direction and still finally reach Stage 5?"

"If he survives, yes. A baby is hatched every two seconds. About half do not live through Stage 1, into which they are expelled as soon as they can

crawl. Those who live and grow cross into the larger Stage 2, where they remain until young adulthood. Although many die in the fights between juvenile gangs, many eventually become adults and cross on into Stage 3, where they join one of the many bands there. When life grows dull the adult continues on into Stage 4, where some live out the rest of their days. Most become bored after a few years and make the final crossing, into Stage 5. And eventually, the one out of four who is still alive and fully educated goes on into space to spread the Shemsi brotherhood among other worlds."

"So Stages 1, 2, and 5 are each complete on one area of land, but 3 and 4 divide into two parts each. There are differences, then, between the two halves of these stages?"

"In a sense. Both halves of Stage 3 are occupied by several thousand bands of young adults. They have little contact with each other, and conditions vary greatly. When the growth urge compels a Shemsi to move on and he enters Stage 4, he learns that the two halves are somewhat similar, even though no steady contact exists between them. This is because both connect to Stage 5, and news and information travels freely back and forth. This seems to exert a strong shaping effect, keeping the two halves quite similar."

For an intelligent creature dedicated to logic, Erith was releasing information in a very disjointed fashion. Perhaps the subject was so familiar to him he had difficulty conveying all the ramifications to an alien.

"We'll get into more detail later. Right now you're saying we have to land somewhere in Stage 5, either walk or ride an animal of some sort through Stage 4, then sneak across the border into Stage 3, and do the same at Stages 2 and 1. If Stage 5 takes in half the planet, then our obvious course is to land near the border."

"Obvious, perhaps, but not the best way. I have been thinking of this matter for some time, Leo. I believe it safest to attempt a subterfuge, one with enough validity to make it credible. We can land at the spaceport and pretend I have captured you and your ship. I will state that Erithain has communicated with me—which is the truth—and commanded that I bring you to her—which is partially true. The fact that your softly-muscled mate

was taken to Birth Mountain will lend the story extra credence. I will demand the use of an aircraft and a flight to the border. The west side seems best, since that is the Long Way I took and I know it better. We will then borrow riding mounts for the journey across Stage 4 and, hopefully, on through Stage 3."

"I don't understand why the Mothers would permit this. In fact I don't understand the Mothers, period.

"Where do they get their information? How do they rule over you?"

"Those are difficult questions, but I will try to answer them. A Mother virtually reads the mind of a son when she calls him, obtaining all his recent strong memories. Since the two active Mothers contact many of their children every day, from every settled planet and many new ones, they receive a tremendous amount of input. But perhaps you are under the impression the Mothers 'govern' as your human rulers do. That is not the case.

Shemsi Trios make most day-to-day decisions. Our final authority is a council of 100 Trios, all from the seventh, or highest level in 100 major areas of activity. The Mothers determine policy, but seldom interfere with the administration of our laws. Nevertheless they are the shaping and guiding force behind our civilization, and every fifth stage Shemsi is aware of this. The Mothers do not contact anyone in the first four stages."

That seemed to Leo a very vague and uncertain way in which to oversee a species of twelve billion beings, settled on seven worlds in their own star system and rapidly expanding to others. But he tried to remember these people were not human, in any sense of the term except sentience. Their system worked. And he would undoubtedly learn more about it in the months ahead.

CHAPTER FIVE

Leo gave the coordinates he had memorized for Creche World to the computer, and asked for travel time. It was less than four days away at top speed. The Shemsi were expanding outward from their home system in the same cautious fashion in which they seemed to conduct all their activities. Earthmen had probably explored most of the star systems in this entire section of the Orion arm; now there was talk of sending an expedition toward the center of the galaxy, across the great gulf to the innermost arm of Sagittarius. After that would come the center itself. And all, Leo hoped, within his life time.

Leo settled down to an intensive study of Shemsi life, culture, and language. The next four days were some of the most fascinating in his experience.

The Earth scout was not well equipped with spare parts, but Erith managed to build the essential item needed to confirm their story. Leo had to wear a metallic collar around his throat, the standard captivity device of the Shemsi. It was supposedly controlled by a small transmitter, also faked, strapped to Erith's harness. A captive was free to walk, talk, and eat, but subject to immediate strangulation if he misbehaved. As usual with the Shemsi, the true article was very efficient.

Creche World was surrounded by a series of twenty-four automated satellites, eighteen of them circling in synchronous orbit around the equator. All were equipped with discreet magnetic field generators. Together they could lay a pattern around the planet that would completely disrupt the movement of electrons through any conductor in the field. The practical effect on a spaceship was the immediate explosion of its power plant. The eighteen synchronous satellites were also equipped with telescopes and lasers capable of pinpoint accuracy. They did double duty enforcing the ban on travel backwards between stages. The Mothers had ordered their construction several thousand years back, when the Shemsi first developed the technology. They had seemed to know, long before the first Shemsi spacefarers confirmed it, that hostile species existed throughout the galaxy.

"Do you think the Mothers let the scout carrying Misty land at Birth Mountain?" Leo asked Erith.

The Shemsi looked doubtful. "I do not think so, friend Leo. If so, they would have already returned. It is far more likely they landed at the spaceport and took transport similar to what we must use."

"That seems very inefficient; it gives me the impression the Mothers must not be in any great hurry to get Misty. But tell me—why will this trip we must undertake be so difficult?"

"The physical dangers faced by two people will be formidable, Leo. Hungry predators abound, and the environment provides many natural hazards. The running bands of young adults in Stage 3 are vicious and hostile. Some will kill strangers on sight. The gangs of juveniles in Stage 2 will also kill, without provocation and without mercy. Stage 4 is usually safe. The people there are students and teachers, having learned better means of overcoming obstacles than unthinking violence. Stage 1 has only tiny children, but our legends say it is heavily patrolled by guards."

To Leo, Creche World seemed a weird and wonderful place, with some ways so strange as to defy logical analysis. He had to keep reminding himself these people were sexless humanoids who lived for 1,200 years, and that what seemed to him a development so slow as to be almost ludicrous was to them a normal pattern. But the fact their society functioned well was obvious. They were Mankind's only known competitor in the starlanes.

With Leo in the pilot's seat, but supposedly compelled by the collar to obey Erith, they plotted a flight path that would bring them within hailing distance of Creche World.

The Earth ship emerged from faster-than-light drive and stopped within minutes. It had barely ceased moving when it was challenged. Erith had the communications set already turned to the Shemsi audiovisual band, waiting.

The bland pink face of a Ferilain appeared on the pilot's small screen. He was looking slightly to the side, apparently at a sensor. Leo saw his eyes widen, and one hand moved out of sight. Evidently he had expected to see a regular Shemsi scout, and some of the ground-based instrumentation had identified it as "alien."

"Stranger, identify yourself!"

"This is Erith One Eight Zero One Two Six Four Three One Nine," Erith answered smoothly. "At the direction of the Trio, Beta Crucis Exploration and Colonization Expedition, I have returned with one captured Earthman and one Earth scoutship, Class II. Request permission to land and an immediate appointment with the Trio, Colonial Service Management."

The Shemsi on the ground was immediately and obviously jarred into a state of deep confusion. This was a totally unprecedented situation for him, one outside both his training and his limited ability to improvise. To add to his near-panic, Erith calmly added, "I walk to the voice of the Mothers."

The latter was the formula phrase for a Shemsi acting on direct orders from his Mother. It carried tremendous weight at all levels of Shemsi management.

The Ferilain started to say something, hesitated, and then hit his "off" switch. The image on the scoutship screen faded. Erith turned to Leo and grinned. Erith had assured Leo he had changed a great deal, in just the few months they had been together. Now the Earthman could believe it. The individual/social balance that leaned so heavily toward the group in most Shemsi had shifted perceptibly in Erith.

It was only a minute before the screen brightened again. This time the hairless face was that of a Domidain. "This is Domid Nine Two Four Six Five Two Eight Seven Three One," the newcomer said authoritatively. "You state you are from Beta Crucis and have a captive Earthman. Is he the companion of the Earthling captured there and sent to Birth Mountain earlier?"

Evidently the arrival of Misty had created quite a stir, if this minor spaceport official knew that much about the two humans. "That is correct," Erith replied. "The Mothers wish him to rejoin his mate."

The official was looking closely at the collar around Leo's neck. "Very well; permission to land is granted. I will attempt to reach the Colonial Service Trio with your request."

The original Ferilain came back on and began giving landing directions, a routine task with which he plainly felt more at ease. Leo made a mental note

in the file he was keeping on the Shemsi; two could play at the evaluation game. This was another confirmation of what he had decided about these people: they functioned very poorly when confronted with an original problem. Only the Domidain seemed capable of making fast decisions. Leo made a second mental note: to observe the Shemsi decision-making process where possible. Were the Domidains the real force behind the species, or did the logic and rationality of the Erithains, and the social-consciousness of the Ferilain, play equally important parts?

The computer took them down. Leo carefully monitored the instructions and responses, afraid the language change might upset the little ship. But the Shemsi tongue was in the computer's memory banks, and it had no difficulty translating.

Creche World was a beautiful sight through the small forward viewpanel. Most of the landmass below was covered with clouds but Leo could see vast reaches of deep green ocean on both sides, stretching away to white-capped poles of floating ice. A mountain range, worn down with age, dominated the center strip of the long continent. The climate was temperate throughout the lower lands that descended to the sea on both sides. Much of the surface Leo could see was covered with forests; probably, knowing the Shemsi, of fruit trees. But there were giant cities sprawled like concrete hives over entire mountains and a thin but noticeable haze in the air above them. This part of the planet was both crowded and highly industrialized.

They settled slowly toward one city that filled an immense low-level plateau in the center of the continent. The scene grew increasingly familiar to Leo, and yet oddly different. The features he recognized were those seen in any Earth city; huge buildings, manufacturing plants, excavations in nearby mountains, roads and bridges, power plants and dams, and all the other artifacts of an advanced civilization.

But there were also noticeable differences. The first oddity Leo recognized was the lack of houses; the city was gigantic, a mammoth warren of low blocky buildings with flat roofs, but there were no dwellings for individuals surrounding them. Erith had informed Leo all Shemsi had their living quarters in the same buildings as their work stations.

The second unsettling factor was more subtle. The amount of traffic on the roads and in the air was a tenth that of an Earth city of similar size.

That, too, was undoubtedly a difference between human and Shemsi civilizations; one caused by the hive-oriented lives of these humanoids. These people would travel less than humans, both at work and at play.

The little scout cut off its rockets and switched on its anti-grav field, turning in the thickening atmosphere and descending on its belly. Losing direct sight of the city, Leo switched to his viewscreen. After a moment he saw the flat concrete field of the spaceport, a huge area near the southern edge of the city. A giant freighter was drifting slowly upward, while another touched down as he watched. Several smaller craft were in motion, including two of the unusually large scouts he had seen on Beta Crucis Two. One section of the great field, apparently older, was reserved for winged flying craft.

"And again I behold Earingell, the Dwelling Place," Erith said softly. "Never did I think to see it again. Here I spent most of my adult life. Here I thought myself content to live out my days. But the restlessness came again, the old stirrings I had thought dead, and I had to move still farther along my chosen track. So it is with most of us. Though some linger for centuries, like myself, and others but a few years, most eventually move on. There are few of us in space who do not think of Earingell as home."

"And the main function of this whole huge city is to support the spaceport?"

"That is correct, friend Leo, though it is also the primary source of finished metals for all of Stage 5. For many Shemsi lifetimes Earingell has built and supplied the ships that fly the blackness between the stars, carrying my brethren to other worlds. One spaceport, one city, is enough. Most Shemsi do not return. Only those who serve aboard the carriers bringing minerals from other worlds land here time and again."

"Did you really want to leave?" Leo asked, as the ground drew rapidly closer. He was still adding an occasional command for clarification, but the scout seemed to be having little trouble with Shemsi directions.

Erith hesitated before finally saying, "Both yes and no, Leo. I had grown bored with my assigned tasks as a chemist, tired of what had become a monotony to me. And yet I was useful, and served my brethren and the Mothers. If, as in the old days, Earingell was the end of the journey, then I might have resisted the vague longing, lived out my years in service here. The colonization program offered an interesting alternative."

There was a gentle thump as the flat bottom of the scout touched concrete, and the anti-grav generator whined down into silence. The pilot's console was a solid bank of green lights. The atmospheric analysis indicated almost one per cent argon, an unusually heavy concentration, but the mixture was not harmful to humans. The gravity was 97 per cent Earth normal, and Leo already knew the planet had a twenty-three-hour rotation. Except for the very different arrangement of the landmasses, Creche World was remarkably similar to Earth.

"Place your systems in the 'quiet' mode as soon as we exit," Leo said aloud to the ship. "Do not respond to any future commands except from Misty or myself."

The "acknowledged" light blinked green on the pilot's console. "It will not matter," said Erith. "The technicians will take your little ship apart to see what they can learn, regardless of its unwillingness to respond."

"I had planned to steal one of yours to leave in anyway," Leo replied cheerfully.

Erith nodded in comprehension. That was obviously the most sensible plan. The fact that Leo was chuckling aloud was an oddity he passed over without attempting to understand.

There was no escort waiting when they disembarked, but a small ground car came rapidly toward them from the blocky control center. When it came to a stop, an Erithain emerged, hurrying toward them. Leo kept a pace back of Erith, trying to look docile.

The newcomer was almost identical to Erith, except for an apparent difference in age. He was a few hundred years Erith's junior. The two Shemsi clasped hands, four at once, and then briefly embraced. "I, Erith

Four Two, greet a brother who has returned," the younger man said, his tone very formal. "May the restlessness not again drive you from Earingell." He was looking at Leo as he spoke, making no effort to conceal his curiosity.

Leo saw Erith suppress a grin. "I thank my brother," he said, with equal formality and a noticeable lack of conviction. "Our Mother called me, else I should not have lived to see Earingell again. Is this the first Earth-man you have seen? A large and ugly brute, is he not?"

I'll put a fly in your fruit for that! Leo silently promised, lowering his head as the second Erithain openly inspected him.

"No larger than some of the other short-lived reproductives," the newcomer said, his tone judicious. "It is his resemblance to ourselves that is startling."

As they entered the small car, Leo was forced to crouch on hands and knees in a rear compartment. Erith Four Two went on, "Your request for an audience with the Colonization Trio is being processed now. We should have an answer shortly." He slipped an audio communicator into his ear as he activated the drive, and headed the little car back toward the control center. "Yes, it has just come through. I am to conduct you directly to the Trio, rather than to detention for the Earthman."

As the driver abruptly turned and headed back across the field, Leo made himself as comfortable as possible and tried to observe the strange architecture. There was no fence or other barrier at the end of the concrete, and Erith Four Two simply looked for a convenient road and entered it.

The streets were broad, smooth, and in perfect repair. The blocky buildings were clean and shining in the morning sunlight, though to Leo it was immediately obvious they were all alike. Traffic consisted of only three types of vehicles, small personal cars identical to the one they were in, larger buses carrying scores of Shemsi, and huge bulk carriers. The latter seemed to be of two types, open and covered. The traffic soon became as visually dull as the antiseptic and monotonous buildings.

It was two hours after sunrise, and this was the free period after the night's work for most Shemsi. After two more hours they would be seeking

the open rooftops, or the identical parks located at regular intervals throughout the city, for their sleep/feeding. In the meantime they were pursuing their leisure-time activities. As Erith had described them to Leo, these leisure activities seemed little different from their work. The Shemsi were not a fun-loving people.

The Colonial Service building was only a few blocks from the spaceport. They parked on the ground floor, which was reserved for vehicles. A Ferilain came hurrying toward them, glancing curiously at Leo.

"Is this car on reserve, brother?" the Ferilain asked of Erith Four Two.

Assured it was not, the Shemsi entered it and drove away. The concept of private property had little importance here, Leo had learned. It would be necessary to find another vehicle when they left, or take public transport.

A steeply sloping ramp with a rough-finish surface led to the upper floors; there were no elevators. The Colonial Service Trio had its office on the sixth floor, and Leo was breathing hard by the time they reached it. So were the two Shemsi, but they seemed to accept this as normal.

The governing Trio for the Shemsi Colonization Service were all old—individuals who had resisted the inner urge to move on. The vast office complex they supervised was deserted at the moment. The Trio sat behind a table at the end of the open room that covered the entire floor of the building. All three looked somewhat irritated at having been called from their recreational pursuits.

The Erithain who had escorted the travellers turned and departed immediately. The old Domidain behind the table scowled at Erith, but it was the Erithain who spoke. "Please state the reason for this emergency meeting, Erith One Eight. What has our Mother asked of you?"

"That I conduct this captive to Birth Mountain," Erith answered at once. "I request the use of air transport and a pilot to reach the western border. I am not qualified to fly light aircraft."

"That is twice within half a year the Mothers have called for trips to Birth Mountain," the old Domidain said, with the most indignation Leo had seen

a Shemsi display. "If this is to continue, we should ask that the guardian satellites be modified so aircraft can be used. Why must the Long Walk in reverse be undertaken every time?"

"Ask the Mothers," the Ferilain suggested, with what to Leo seemed a trace of sarcastic humor.

"We have no choice but to honor the request of one who walks for the Mothers," the Erithain said, glancing at his colleagues. "But you will need five well-armed brethren to ensure a safe journey. And there is no reason why you must leave at once. We would like to question this Earthman for a day or so. There are many mysteries... Also, the biolabs would like samples of his body tissues, particularly the spermatocyte and sperm cells."

Leo saw a surprised look cross Erith's face. But he only said, "As the management Trio wishes. May I ask if you also obtained haploid and diploid reproductive cells from the female Earthling?"

"We did," the Erithain answered calmly. "Some of the past prohibitions on biological research are no longer valid. The Mothers have not directed us to stop this line of inquiry, as in the old days."

"Possibly because we seem to be the only animals on this or any other known planet without reproductive organs," the Ferilain added, and this time there was no mistaking the sarcasm in his voice.

The Domidain looked uncomfortable. "I suggest that you are tired and should rest," he said to Erith. "I will summon a guardian to escort your captive to the labs."

"No, my metabolism has become adjusted to Beta Crucis Two and this is my work period," Erith said quickly. Leo knew this was not true; Erith had learned to lie. "I will serve as your guard in the labs, and absorb by sunlamp when my captive sleeps."

The Trio exchanged glances. The Domidain shrugged, then turned back to Erith. "As you wish. I will take you there myself."

Erith looked startled. He had obviously not expected this, but could think of no graceful way to refuse.

The Trio rose to their feet, and Leo saw all were stooped and bent with age. As the other two disappeared, the Domidain came around the table and led Leo and Erith back to the ramp. It was only two blocks to the building housing the experimental biology laboratory, and he chose to walk. Leo and Erith followed him through the light crowd in the streets, where Leo drew many curious stares. Everyone seemed to realize he was an Earthman, but few had seen one in person. A steady buzz of comment followed them, which the Domidain executive ignored.

The laboratory was not organized in the usual Trio fashion. The single manager was an Erithain, and so were at least half the workers. Leo had been wondering at what point the Shemsi ideal of brotherly equality would yield to the necessity of utilizing unequal competence.

The Erithain manager was easily distinguishable from all others Leo had seen: he had a prominent scar on his left cheek. They found him in the equivalent of a study hall, poring over reports of some work performed in another laboratory. He was also capable of more expression than most Shemsi. When he saw Leo, a look of joy animated his round face.

The elderly Domidain smiled slightly. "Yes, Erith Six Two Seven, this is the male of the human species. Your prayers to your Mother have been answered."

"But this captive must not be harmed, and we can linger here no more than two days," Erith said, quickly adding, "I walk to the voice of the Mothers!"

"So one would expect," the scientist said, his gaze shifting to his younger brother. "We can finish in two days. Suitably safe quarters are available for the human, and the food some of our other specimens eat will serve his needs. If you will turn your restraint transmitter over to me—"

Even a cursory examination would reveal the supposed transmitter to be a fake. But Erith was equal to the situation. "I cannot in good conscience release control of one to whose care our Mother has committed me," he said after a short hesitation. "Therefore I have volunteered to serve as your guard for this specimen."

The older Erithain looked surprised, but nodded. "Very well. Then follow me, and we will confine him until the next work shift."

"Your light aircraft and a pilot will be available when needed," the old Domidain assured Erith as they rose to leave. They separated on the ramp outside, Erith Six Two escorting Erith and Leo up the ramp to the next floor. The huge room they entered was rilled with animals, most of them lying quietly in small cages. A few larger ones had more roomy quarters. Leo was placed in a big cage equipped with a waste disposal and a type of bed.

Two Shemsi, a Ferilain and an Erithain, were working desultorily at a table in the center, where they could see every specimen in the open-fronted cages. Someone was always on duty among the captive animals. Leo watched Erith Six Two lead his companion over to the table and explain his special guardianship. The two Shemsi, apparently underachievers who had been relegated to this menial chore, nodded and exchanged brief greetings.

Erith left briefly, but was back within minutes. He made himself comfortable on a portable mattress the two keepers had given him. Leo noted with interest that its top was of simulated grass.

Erith turned on two wall-mounted sunlamps and promptly fell asleep. Leo was already on the bed, which was both too hard for comfort and too short. But he was very tired, and despite the bizarre surroundings and occasional animal noises, he easily fell asleep. His last thought as he drifted off was a worried one. What did these scientists intend to do to him in the course of their experiments?

CHAPTER SIX



Leo awoke when the cage door opened, to see Erith standing to one side with a finger poised prominently on the restraint collar transmitter. Perhaps in deference to his size, two animal keepers entered and escorted Leo over to the first work area. Erith Six Two, easily distinguishable from a large

crowd of look-alikes by his facial scar and air of authority—as well as a noticeable animation most Shemsi lacked—took personal charge of the tests. And they were many and complex.

The Shemsi weighed Leo, then measured his height, length of arm and leg, and the size of biceps, triceps, femoris, and hamstring muscles. Leo cooperated freely by tensing and relaxing as directed. They even measured the length of his hair, though they obviously knew from studying other hair-covered animals that this was in a continual state of growth.

Erith Six Two was only beginning. A medical technician inserted a peculiar needle in a vein in Leo's arm, one with a flow control. He took sample after sample of blood, into what seemed twenty different containers with separate reagents. Some of these were boiling, fuming, or hissing as they were carried away. Another Shemsi took skin samples, some of only the epidermis but several of the dermis as well. The latter bled profusely and had to be treated with thick pressure bandages. Leo could only hope the antiseptic they used was not poisonous to him—then remembered how he had cleaned Erith's wounds without knowing how the Shemsi metabolism would react. But that had been under field conditions. Here they were in a modern and extremely well equipped laboratory.

It was also a noisy place during the work period. The Shemsi seemed to talk constantly, continually exchanging opinions with their fellows. Leo tried to ignore what they were doing to his body in favor of observing his captors in action. A few definite impressions began to filter through, several obvious differences between these people and his own.

The Shemsi cooperated better than humans. Anything of interest, any discovery or conclusion generated by the on-going examination, was immediately shared with someone. They were intensely fact-oriented, and each new bit of data was promptly passed along, until everyone concerned knew of it.

Occasionally, an accumulation of data would lead one of the milling throng to a conclusion, which he immediately tested on the group. Such statements increased the already high noise level—obviously conclusions were the desired objective of the continual chatter. Most such propositions

stood up under examination, but now and then one failed the test of thorough discussion. Leo saw one Erithain, whose original contribution was rejected, fall silent and devote himself to obtaining more basic data. He was in some form of disgrace—which surely meant he would be more certain of himself before propounding something new again.

Over a period of several hours a conclusion of his own formed in Leo's mind. It was that none of the individuals in the large group working on him, with the possible exception of Erith Six Two, was very intelligent. They spent a great deal of time chewing over the obvious. Conclusions were arrived at by a gradual consensus of coalescing opinion—a slow process, which a competent human scientist might have skipped entirely. A good earth biologist could have taken three of the bits of data the Shemsi procured in such quantity, intuited a fourth—then confirmed or refuted it with a quick check. These people took the three items and examined them endlessly, until the fourth bit was discovered independently, or gradually emerged from the interminable discussion.

There were at least forty people in the group devoted to Leo, and he would have sworn one good Earth scientist and two lab assistants could have done the job more efficiently. And yet their system worked. At the end of the shift, when the sun rose outside and the Shemsi ended their long night of labor—better than half of each twenty-three-hour Creche World day—they had completed a great deal of work. Leo felt certain they had obtained more hard data than creative conclusions—but similar results would gradually emerge when still more data was added later.

Leo had received a snack of fruit and nuts in the middle of the night, but was famished by daybreak. He demanded meat for breakfast—and after another of the windy conferences between Erith Six Two and his helpers, they produced some muscle tissue from a local herbivore they raised as food for captive carnivores. All their tests indicated it was safe for Leo to eat.

To his disgust, Erith was assigned the task of cooking the meat. But he roasted it over a laboratory burner, as he had seen Leo do game animals over an open fire, and served up something that tasted like the wild goat Leo had eaten once in Asia. He disposed of it with relish. Several months of eating anything he could shoot on Beta Crucis Two had inured him to bad

tastes.

That night the tests and sampling resumed, with the same busy inefficiency as before. Toward morning the scar-faced chief scientist spoke to Erith, and Leo learned they wanted to anesthetize him and remove some spermatocyte and sperm cells. The Shemsi did not possess a suitable local anesthetic. They would have to put Leo completely under to perform the minor surgery.

A few of the research team moved into a smaller, enclosed operating room. With misgivings, Leo allowed the medical technicians to tape his mouth closed and insert two tubes into his nostrils, the Shemsi way of administering anesthetic gas. Erith was standing by the table, watching him. His expression was peaceful and unworried.

Leo relaxed. Over a period of several months together, he had learned to trust Erith. His friend would see to it these talkative scientists did no more to his unconscious body than had been agreed upon.

Which made it very disconcerting to awaken and find himself in a dimly lighted rock-walled room, Erith breathing quietly beside him.

Leo lay still for a moment, only his eyes moving to take in the surroundings; then he sat erect. He and Erith were resting side-by-side on two of the imitation-grass mattresses the Shemsi used everywhere. The only light in the small cell came in under the door, which he could see was of heavy wood. They were apparently deep underground.

When Leo reached to shake Erith awake, he saw that the fake restraint control was gone from the Shemsi's belt. He touched his own neck; it was bare.

Something was very wrong here. Leo grasped Erith by the shoulders and shook him vigorously. It took several minutes before the Shemsi regained full consciousness. And when he did, Erith was of little help.

The small humanoid sat on the edge of his mattress, a hand on his aching bald head. "Friend Leo, I do not know what happened, or how we came here. I was watching Erith Six Two close up the small incision in your

right—is not the word 'gonad'?—when I suddenly felt disoriented. Erith Six Two believed that I had inadvertently breathed some of the anesthetic you were receiving, and suggested I lie down until the dizziness passed. I remember walking back to my mattress in the specimen room—and nothing more."

"Can you explain... this?" asked Leo, gesturing at the walls.

"We are almost certainly in one of the ancient iron ore mines that lie under Earingell. Some have been unused now for many centuries. The important questions are how we came here, and why?"

As they sat and talked, Erith gradually recovered from whatever drug he had received. After a time his head stopped hurting. But it was over two hours later before they heard noises outside the door, and it abruptly opened.

Erith Six Two stood there, smiling at them. A Domidain with a pistol Leo recognized as a sonic stunner stood just behind him.

"Greetings, mismatched friends. The Council of the Underground has gathered and wishes to question our tall captive from Earth. Please come along, Erith One Eight. I believe they will also be interested in knowing why you escorted this human here with an unworkable collar and a useless transmitter."

Erith opened his mouth to ask the flood of questions typical of a puzzled Shemsi—and closed it without speaking. Leo observed his friend's reaction with grim amusement. Erith was rapidly diverging from the Shemsi norm of behavior.

The corridor they entered was obviously an abandoned mine shaft, with heavy doors sealing off side tunnels and perhaps other cells. They followed the scientist at a rapid pace, the guard with the pistol bringing up the rear. Erith Six Two led them to a ramp, for what seemed several floors. They emerged into another tunnel, which ended after a short distance at the door of a fairly large, well-lighted room. Inside, a group of about twenty Shemsi sat around a circular table, engaged in the usual chatter. They stopped when Leo and Erith entered.

The faces were all strange to Leo. But he heard Erith take a sudden deep breath, as though startled.

This group of Shemsi ranged in age from mature to very old. All had a certain air of dignity, of expectance of obedience, that subtly spelled "leadership." Leo had a feeling they would not need to constantly exchange information in order to reach a decision.

"I see you recognize some members of the Council of 100 Trios, Erith One Eight Zero," Erith Six Two Seven said aloud. "Almost a third of the council of 100 are also members of the Council of the Underground. Now please answer the questions put to you, as completely as possible. And do not deviate from the facts. There is a drug in your blood, which will react to a deliberate untruth by speeding up your heartbeat. A monitor, now focused on you, will register such an increase. I will know the instant you lie."

One of the youngest Shemsi at the table, a Domidain, immediately demanded, "Start by telling us why your restraint device was a simulation, Erith One Eight Zero. What is your real relationship to this human?"

"In the name of Erithain, whom I serve, I will tell you nothing," Erith replied, his voice steady. "Instead I demand to know how this 'Council of the Underground' came to exist, and what is its purpose. Do you dare defy the Mothers?"

"You will speak, my brother, or you will die," their escort said, his voice grave and quietly certain. "But your questions are fair ones, and I will answer them. Yes, we dare defy the Mothers. That is the purpose for which the council was organized. We intend to free ourselves of the domination of those three females. We plan to construct a truly ordered and logical society, one not subject to the constant changes that occur when a Mother sleeps and loses influence. Their time is over. Birth Mountain is an anachronism, the deaths of the young around it a savage and useless custom that serves no purpose today. We intend to eliminate both."

"And from where are new Shemsi to come?" demanded Erith.

The older scientist smiled. "From here, brother, here. Above us is a

nursery, filled with growing babies who are being carefully and lovingly tended by members of our group. They were hatched from artificial eggs, fertilized by cells from my body and those of the other council members. And brother, unlike at Birth Mountain where one in a million is sexed—*half* these children have sexual organs. They are females!"

For once Leo saw Erith almost overwhelmed with surprise. His mouth fell open, and for a few seconds he could only gasp for air.

The older Shemsi waited, smiling slightly. He went on, "It is not that difficult, as we have discovered in my gene manipulation work. It is merely necessary to remove the unmatched chromosome from a separate cell and pair it with the unmatched one in the cell you wish to germinate. Such chromosome pairs inevitably produce females. And it is our belief that the females we are raising will produce both male and female eggs, without further manipulation on our part. Those children should be Shemsi such as you and I have never seen, brother—born with sexual organs and germ cells."

Leo was not a biologist, but he remembered the simpler facts of human reproduction and sexual differentiation. The sperm cells from a man contained either an X chromosome or a Y, and the Y was in reality a partial fake; it carried a minimum of genetic information. If a sperm containing an X chromosome, fertilized the female's eggs, which always carried the X chromosome, the matching pair produced a female child. An egg fertilized by a sperm with a Y chromosome produced a male, because the Y exerted no real sexual genetic effect, and the X chromosome from the female, acting almost alone, produced a male.

The "unmatched" chromosome to which Erith Six Two Seven referred must be the equivalent of the sex-determining one in a human male, except that instead of having a fake Y there was nothing at all present. Some insects on Earth used that system. These people had apparently succeeded in removing one chromosome from a diploid somatic cell and had forced a similar cell to accept it. How they turned what had been a somatic cell into a germ cell was not explained, but that should be a simpler task than the original bonding of chromosomes.

Erith had finally recovered his composure. "Do the Mothers know of this work? If not, how have you kept it from them?"

"I will answer that one, and then you will speak," the young Domidain interrupted. "This entire area is sealed off from the Mothers by a device my physics' team perfected. It creates a contained field into which their telepathic minds cannot penetrate. Those of us who must leave to perform our duties in Earingell wear a small one on our persons. To the Mothers we have ceased to exist."

"Are you certain of that?" demanded Erith.

The Domidain shrugged. "Who knows the full powers of the Mothers? We have been organizing and working now for almost twenty years, and there has been no reaction from Birth Mountain. Only if someone fails to wear his protector and a Mother happens to call him, or someone deliberately betrays us, will we be exposed. So far that has not happened."

"So you say!" Erith spoke in a loud voice. "You cannot be sure they do not follow your every move!"

"The Mothers have never been known for their toleration of disobedience," a rather stout Ferilain joined in. "We believe they would strike at once should they discover us."

"We will furnish you more information later, since you must either join us of your own free will—or die," the Domidain said, cold and remorseless certainty in his voice. "Now we ask again—what is your true relationship with this human?"

Erith looked at the ceiling as though for guidance—and found it. He lowered his gaze and said, "I think the truth will not be a betrayal of the Mothers, since I act on Erithain's direct orders." And he briefly outlined his instructions to accompany Leo and aid him in the attempted rescue of his bonded mate.

The Underground Council listened, absorbed. At the end Leo saw them exchanging worried glances. A middle-aged Erithain with a misshapen left ear said aloud, "I had not dreamed the Mothers were this interested in the

Earth people. What can be their purpose?"

"Perhaps they intend to establish better relations, as do we," another Domidain suggested.

"While your Mother sleeps, perhaps," Erithain Six Two Seven said. "When she awakes and Ferilain takes to the birthing bed, all may change again."

The Domidain looked annoyed. This group, Leo realized, showed far more individualism than the Shemsi he had seen so far. Perhaps true individuals tended to rise to positions of command in Shemsi society.

"I am not responsible for the actions of Domidain!" the young Councilor declared angrily.

"None of us are responsible for our Mothers," the fat Ferilain quickly interjected. "But we will *all* be held to account if they learn of us before we are strong enough to attack Birth Mountain. Let us not bruise each others' feelings, my brothers. We walk a dangerous path, one neither of the East nor the West. To step off it is to die. Let us reaffirm our support for one another. I call for the circle!"

All the Shemsi seated at the table quickly clasped hands to form a circle. Both Erith Six Two Seven and the Domidain guard who had escorted them hurried to join it. The Ferilain led them in a short chant, which apparently reaffirmed their commitment to the cause and the brotherhood they had formed—without reference to the Mothers, obviously.

Leo waited; this did not seem a good time to attempt an escape. When the "togetherness" ceremony was over, the Domidain guard escorted him and Erith back to their cell.

Leo placed his mouth against Erith's pink ear and whispered, "Is this cell likely to be monitored by hidden—ah, audio or visual devices?"

Erith looked casually around the cell, and spoke in a normal tone. "No, friend Leo; if here they would be in the open. Why should they be concealed?"

Leo did not attempt to explain the psychological differences between a species whose members shared almost every waking thought, and one where individuals were accustomed to privacy and secrecy. There were many advantages in knowing what an opponent thought, even if he was your captive. Instead he said, "Then speak low, and let's have a fast conference. Do you intend to join these people?"

Erith shook his head. "I have been loyal to the Mothers too long to change now, Leo. Even if I were so inclined, I do not believe these rebels can succeed. The Mothers must know what the Underground Council is doing and are letting it continue for reasons only they know. Remember, I would not have known why they wished me to aid you, had they not explained to convince you of their sincerity."

"That thought occurred to me also," admitted Leo. "And I heard that bit about some of your biologists now being engaged in heredity research that was formerly forbidden. The work being performed here in secret seems an extension of that done openly. I would suspect a connection."

Erith frowned, then smiled. "Friend Leo, your ability to reach a conclusion even when half the needed data is missing continually surprises me. Of course there is a connection! For reasons not known to us, the Mothers have chosen to let this underground work continue, but do not want it generally distributed. Therefore they permit these people to work in secrecy."

"Which answers a question with a question. Why should the new discoveries being made here be suppressed?"

"I do not know, but more data will doubtless supply that answer. In the meantime, our course is clear. We must escape and resume our journey."

"Agreed," said Leo, who had never had any other intention. He had been playing a part in the lab cage, but this confinement was real, and he disliked it intensely. Besides, if the Shemsi chose to fight among themselves, that was strictly their business. His mission was to reach Birth Mountain and free Misty. After that he would worry about stealing a scoutship and getting home.

Leo had already examined the interior of the cell. The bare rock walls offered no hope at all, and the door was extremely sturdy. Physical escape seemed impossible. Therefore they had to trick or deceive their captors in some way.

There was a noise in the hallway, and the door abruptly opened.. A Ferilain entered, carrying a large bowl of fruit and nuts in one hand; the other hand held a battery-powered sunlamp. Behind him an Erithain guard stood halfway across the corridor, sonic stun gun ready.

Anyone attempting to reach the guard would not get two steps into the corridor. The one who entered was unarmed. He placed the lamp and food on a little table at the end of the two mattresses and turned to go. It was perfectly clear that grabbing the inside man, or attempting to rush the guard outside, would be totally useless.

That meant no Shemsi would do either. Logic was the dominant characteristic in their behavior patterns; attempting the useless was not logical.

And that gave Leo an idea.

It was too late to execute it now. The Ferilain left and closed the door. Leo listened and heard other doors opening and closing in the corridor. So they were not the only prisoners. But he could be certain all the others were Shemsi, and behaved like it.

Perhaps the best countermeasure against logic and rationality was to be illogical and irrational.

When Leo told Erith what he intended to try at the next meal time, he saw his companion's eyes widen.

"But that will not work, Leo. What you are suggesting is exactly what the guard is designed to prevent."

"Correct. And it's so obvious it can't be done that no Shemsi would even try. So I will."

Erith shook his round head in disbelief. "Very well, but you will only

cause us to be stunned. And your head will ache for the next two days."

"Perhaps. Well see."

They ate and slept for a time, ate the remainder of the food, and waited for the next meal. There was little to do but talk, and from the human viewpoint, Erith was not a good conversationalist. Leo tried to remain on the alert, but he was almost caught napping when the sound of someone releasing the outside bolts finally came again. According to his wrister it was just after daybreak; this would be the last meal of the day.

Springing to his feet, Leo managed to be standing close to the door when it opened. A different Ferilain entered with their food—and to Leo's delight, another Ferilain stood behind him in the corridor, holding the stun gun.

As soon as the bearer passed him, Leo took a step almost into his tracks, turned to face the open door, bellowed "*Hü! Yaa!*" at the top of his lungs, and charged.

Leo saw the almost physical shock on the guard's face, just before he caught the barrel of the gun and twisted it aside. The Shemsi was literally frozen in his tracks with surprise. For a precious two seconds he had been unable to believe an intelligent being would scream like an animal and actually charge a ready weapon. That was time enough for Leo.

The stun gun fired harmlessly into the ceiling. Leo smashed into the Ferilain with his left shoulder. He lifted and hurled the smaller humanoid hard against the opposite wall; the pistol came free in his hand. As the Shemsi bounced off, Leo stepped back and caught him with a hard left to the head. The pink form went down, conscious but groggy. Leo turned quickly and managed to stop the Ferilain in the cell door with another left. His larger size and weight made him a formidable opponent for a single Shemsi.

Leo shifted his grip on the pistol from barrel to butt. He turned again, and shot the Ferilain who was rising from the corridor floor, blood dripping from a split cheek. He swung back to the one he had knocked inside the open cell door and shot him also, though he appeared to be unconscious. He wanted to be certain the two Shemsi would remain out for a time. Erith, still

standing inside the cell, stared at Leo wide-eyed. "I would not have believed it could be done," he said, shaking his head in wonder.

"I'll bet a lot of the animals in your zoos get away," Leo answered, between deep breaths. His heart was racing, a heady feeling of excitement making him feel fully alive again after the dullness of captivity. Down the corridor, they heard the muffled sounds of people speaking to each other behind thick cell doors.

"More often escaping animals are killed," said Erith. "But you are correct in assuming most attempt to return to the wild. Few seem able to understand they are far more safe and comfortable under our care."

Leo was debating the idea of freeing the other captives as a diversion while they sought the exit. A quick examination of the nearest door revealed that it locked with a key, too stout to be easily battered open. The guards' key fit only their own cell door.

Since they were deep underground, and the Shemsi did not believe in elevators, there was probably a ramp at both ends of the long corridor. Leo mentally tossed a coin and turned left. The lights in the roof were far apart, but he could see what appeared to be a rock wall a hundred meters away.

As they approached an intersecting tunnel on the right, Leo motioned for Erith to precede him. The Shemsi gave him a blank look.

"Walk across normally," Leo said in a low voice. "Look down the corridor for a ramp. See if there are any guards visible."

Erith finally realized that one glimpse of Leo would cause instant alarm, and nodded. He walked casually across the open space, looked to the right, and kept going. On the opposite side he whirled around and motioned for Leo to wait.

After two minutes Erith walked back to Leo, again glancing down the corridor. This time he stopped in the intersection. "Two people were at the other end, but they are gone," he said aloud. "I think there is a ramp there. But it would likely go by several inner rooms above us. If there is one at the end of the longer tunnel it would receive less traffic."

Leo nodded, and they hurried on down the corridor. The ramp was at the end, where Shemsi logic required it, and they walked quickly up the long slant. Before turning each corner, Erith stepped around it and made certain the way was clear. Once they had to hide in a former tool room while a small descending party passed them, but Erith had spotted the group in plenty of time.

They emerged onto the ground floor of what had once been a huge smelter. A great deal of rusty machinery filled the abandoned building, most of it obviously of great age.

"As I expected," said Erith. "We are in the oldest part of Earingell. This mine was abandoned after the last ore was extracted, over four thousand years ago."

Leo was not surprised to see the smelter located directly over the mine; that seemed a natural choice for the Shemsi. But he asked, "Why was all the old machinery left here? In fact, why leave a useless old building standing in the heart of your city?"

"The equipment was completely outdated, Leo. And why use energy and resources to tear down a building?"

Leo realized he had been thinking in human terms again, where property rights and commercial considerations would have been important. That whole pattern of thought was alien to the Shemsi. And though they did possess a sense of aesthetics, what would have offended humans meant little to them. When there was no logical reason to remove it, an ugly eyesore of a building in the heart of a vast city was perfectly acceptable.

"I believe it will be safe for you to wait here while I seek a restraint collar and a transmitter, Leo," said Erith. "If the Underground Council sends guards after us you have plenty of places to hide."

"I'll manage," Leo replied. They had discussed their best course of action while waiting in the cell. "But come back in that door—" he pointed to the nearest one, "—and pat yourself on top of the head three times as you walk in."

Erith looked baffled, but nodded. Leo did not explain that he intended to shoot, very quickly, any Shemsi who walked in unidentified.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Nothing at all happened during the two hours Erith was gone. Leo found a good hiding place where he could watch the door and waited patiently. When Erith finally returned he was carrying a small bag. Looking as stupid as he probably felt, the Shemsi lowered it to the floor immediately and patted himself three times on his bald pink head.

The bag contained a collar—this time the real article—and a transmitter. It also held several pounds of some delicious nuts. And to Leo's amazement, his faithful projectile gun, still fully loaded, was inside. Erith had been carrying it in one of his body harness cases when he passed out while watching Erith Six Two operate on Leo. It had been taken to the nearest central storage area, which was where Erith had gone in search of a collar and transmitter. Leo happily reclaimed it.

While Leo hungrily ate, Erith opened the transmitter and carefully rendered it inoperative.

Leo and Erith had decided that at least two of the Colonial Service Management Trio were probably members of the Underground Council. Asking the old Domidain for the light aircraft he had promised them was out of the question. But Erith felt certain the Trio would have followed through on the authorization, since it had been made in front of witnesses. Therefore a plane was probably ready for them, if they could reach it.

"Don't you need some authorizing paperwork to show the pilot?" asked Leo, curious.

"We do not often use such paperwork, Leo. What real purpose does it serve?"

"For you, not much," Leo had to admit. In a society without greed, little private ambition, and no accumulation of personal wealth, many of the common safeguards originated by human society were not needed. This meant any Shemsi who learned to lie convincingly had a tremendous advantage over his fellows, but the incidence of such lying was apparently very low.

"I will claim a personal car from the nearest building and return here for you," Erith suggested. "You will be much too conspicuous walking."

Leo agreed, and Erith again left. The short personal free time a Shemsi enjoyed between the end of the night's work and the start of his sleep/feeding period was nearing its end. Erith had no trouble locating a car and was back within a half hour. He parked as near the door as he could approach, and Leo walked quickly to it and lay down on the narrow seat in the rear.

As the traffic around them rapidly thinned down to almost nothing, Erith drove at a measured pace between the monotonous rows of too-similar buildings. By the time they reached the turn to the spaceport control building, they were alone.

Only a few Shemsi throughout all of Earingell were awake, most of these operating the powerplants, water systems, and other necessary services. The spaceport was an exception. Traffic there was continuous, due to the different sleep cycles of the billions of Shemsi on other worlds.

Leo tried to look properly subdued and walked quietly just behind Erith. By asking directions, Erith found his way through a maze of featureless corridors to the right office, that of Personal Emergency transport. The young Ferilain in charge, a Shemsi of unusually strong personality, listened with grave attention as Erith asked for the authorized plane and pilot.

"Why must you go now?" The Ferilain protested. "The Colonial Service Trio did not say you would be flying during the local feeding period."

Erith explained that he and his captive were on a different sleep cycle. When the official did not look impressed, he finally said. "I walk to the voice of the Mothers!"

"Yes, so I have heard," the Ferilain replied, showing a noticeable lack of respect for the tradition. "But I do not understand how you can attempt such a hazardous journey alone. Very well, I will attempt to locate a pilot. And I am thinking of reporting this lack of consideration on your part to the Management Trio."

Such reports of antisocial conduct were a major technique by which the Shemsi society conditioned every individual to his role. If enough such reports were received within a given period of time, the individual was called before his work group and given a public reprimand. This was a form of extreme disgrace, a censure so severe the individual would remember it for a hundred years.

"I have already been delayed two days by unplanned tests of the human," Erith replied, somewhat testily. "Report me if you wish. I recognize no higher authority than the Mothers."

The Ferilain gave Erith a disgusted look and left to hunt a pilot.

He was back within minutes. Leo had been afraid this thoughtful Ferilain might check with the old Domidain who had made the authorization, but Erith assured him that would be most unusual.

"I have arranged a place for you on a shipment of cargo to Arthingo," the Ferilain said without preamble. "I see no reason why you must have a private plane."

"That is perfectly acceptable," Erith replied quickly.

During a moment of privacy as they were being shown to the plane, Erith explained to Leo that Arthingo was almost on the western border of Stage 5. From there they could take ground transportation to the clear zone.

The winged cargo plane was a bulky, boxlike craft powered by two huge ramjet engines mounted outside the central body. They operated by heating incoming air in a small reactor and expelling it to the rear. The system was pollution-free, and the craft could fly for months on a single reactor charge. Leo felt his respect for the Shemsi rise. Earth could have built such airplanes, but they would not have been commercially competitive with

hydrogen-fueled craft.

The plane had a crew of three, two Domidains and a Ferilain. There was no separate pilot's compartment, the entire inside being one large open area. Erith managed to find seats for himself and Leo away from the crew. They were at a window near the rear, where they could see the countryside below.

The cargo was a series of boxes containing a rare and very heavy mineral from one of this system's other worlds. Normally it would have been delivered by the Shemsi trucks, but some factory in Arthingo needed it in a hurry.

The heavily loaded craft's takeoff was slow, but they cleared the runway easily enough. Leo looked out the window as they flew almost directly west, gradually gaining altitude. The monotonous buildings of Earingell soon faded behind them, to be replaced by other cities, equalljraull. The Shemsi lived in communities of varying sizes, but most were large. The land between them was usually occupied by carefully tended fruit trees. The only other major agricultural industry was raising fiber crops, for which the Shemsi had a wide variety of uses.

Erith explained that the lower lands sloping down to the seas were intensely cultivated, the soil there being very rich. The cities in the lowlands were generally small. The main commerce was fiber and fruit from the lowlands to the great cities along the continental backbone, and manufactured goods flowing out in all directions. Each major city had a manufacturing specialty, and supplied its products to all other cities in Stage 5. Due to its location over immense iron ore deposits, Earingell produced virtually all steel for the entire planet. In latter years it had also become the center of spaceflight activities.

"Friend Leo, I am very tired and need to feed," Erith went on. "I am going to turn this transmitter over to one of the crew. Do not take any action that could cause him to use it."

"I promise," Leo said, his voice dry.

Erith walked to the front, talked briefly with the Ferilain, and turned the

control transmitter over to him. Then he strapped himself into a bunk built against one wall and turned on the overhead sun lamps. In seconds he was fast asleep.

The Ferilain glanced at Leo at frequent intervals, but said nothing. Leo went back to watching the countryside. After a few minutes he became sleepy himself and leaned back in the chair.

Leo awoke stiff and aching, but refreshed. He was hungry, but waited until Erith awoke and returned to sit by him before asking for food. All that was available was some fresh fruit, and the remainder of the nuts Erith had brought to him earlier. Leo ate it all, and still felt hungry.

The long trip finally neared its end. They had covered close to 10,000 kilometers in under ten hours. Toward the last they were moving south to the edge of the great plain leading down to the sea. Arthingo was located in the foothills. For the trip through Stages 4 and 3 they would use riding animals—and they could make much better time on flat land than through the mountains.

Erith had been silent for some time. Leo saw his troubled look and asked what was bothering him.

"Friend Leo, the Underground Council must know we have escaped them, and where we are. We are an unacceptable danger to them. I find myself wondering when they will attempt to eliminate us. If I have interpreted the information we received correctly, most if not all members of the conspiracy live in Earingell. Anywhere out of that city they must act very carefully, or expose themselves. It seems logical to assume they will make no effort to intercept us in Stage 5—but thereafter we can be easily disposed of. I believe we will be in great danger from the moment we enter Stage 4."

"Then perhaps we should travel at night," suggested Leo.

"That is my thought also. Let us find mounts as quickly as possible and be on our way. I would like to cross the clear zone into Stage 4 before the sun rises again."

The sun was setting as they landed. Arthingo was a relatively small city; its specialty was the supplying of fertilizer for the endless hectares of fiber plants that covered the vast plain it overlooked. Leo had noticed the immense green carpet below as they approached the airport. The most striking oddity to him was the lack of separation into fields; there were no fences or other barriers to be seen. At this time of year the plants were almost fully grown, and their rounded green shapes spread across the land like a living sea. In a sense, the order and control were beautiful. No scars, dead spots, or bare hilltops marred the landscape. But such all-out productivity could also become visually monotonous in a short time.

As the efficient but ugly aircraft stopped rolling, Leo reflected that the fiber plants symbolized his impression of the Shemsi. They were homogenous, productive, dull and uninspiring. No individual shoot received much attention, but the crop as a whole was well-cared-for. While not efficient as individuals, the Shemsi functioned very effectively as a society. But he would not want to be a member of this faceless, sexless, monotonous horde even for the twelve-hundred-year lifetime they enjoyed!

Leo felt a secret tug of sympathy for the Underground Council. Somehow they had sensed their lives were incomplete, would always remain less than genuinely fulfilled. But Leo also wondered, if their biological experiments succeeded and they actually produced a two-sexed species, if this would affect their longevity. Was there a tie-in between their lack of sexual organs and the extended life span? If not, if the new sexual beings they were creating lived as long as the sexless workers, could humans learn something about life prolongation by studying the Shemsi? It was an interesting line of thought.

But for the moment the underground was after Leo and Erith, with their deaths or a return to captivity in mind. Until they reached Birth Mountain, their best chance of success lay in allegiance to the Mothers. After that—

Without a word to Erith, the flight crew headed for temporary quarters in the small airport control building. They would be sleep/feeding while most of the town began the night's work. Erith was on his own; they had no further interest in him or his captive.

Erith found an unoccupied personal car sitting in front of the control building and promptly claimed it. From the flight crew he had learned the location of an experimental breeding farm only a few kilometers from the clear zone. It was at the end of the only road leading west out of Arthingo. He intended to claim two riding mounts in the name of the Mothers and get as far into Stage 4 as possible before dawn.

If Erith's analysis of the underground group's course of action was correct, they had nothing to fear until they crossed into the clear zone. To Leo, it seemed obvious that the 200-meter wide-open space was an excellent place for an ambush.

At the farm Erith encountered his first real argument, a claim by the Trio in charge that they needed all their riding animals. Erith finally had to invoke the sacred name of the Mothers. These people had not heard of the capture of either the female Earthling or her bonded mate. Evidently the party bringing Misty to the Mothers had taken another route.

Leo stood quietly behind Erith while the argument went on, and studied the mounts they were trying to claim. They looked surprisingly like horses from Earth, except for being wider in body and thicker in leg. These were the primary transport of Shemsi who worked the fields; there were no provisions for wheeled vehicles except those that tilled the land or gathered in the crops.

When Erith finally got his way, the local Trio grudgingly ordered two mounts to be prepared for them. Leo had never ridden on a live animal in his life. He stared with something like horror as two Ferilains attached a flat seat by straps that went around the beast's neck and both front legs. The rider sat directly above the massive front shoulders, his lower legs encased in two long holsters that reached to the knees. The seating looked secure—but if the animal fell, it would take precious seconds to pull both legs free and jump.

Almost an hour after arriving at the farm, Leo and Erith rode off into the night. In addition to the mounts, Erith had talked the station managers out of two canteens. Two of Creche World's four moons brightened the sky above them, enough so even Leo could see fairly well. It was less than an

hour's ride to the clear zone.

The moment they were out of sight of the farm, Leo turned sharply north.

"Where are you going?" called Erith, turning and hurrying after Leo. "This route will take longer and the ground is rougher!"

Leo nodded. "Exactly what I had in mind. The hills will give us cover from aircraft surveillance. And the *last* place I want to cross the clear zone is directly ahead of that farm. Don't you realize the underground probably has a crew armed with sonic rifles waiting right across the border?"

Erith looked puzzled. "How could a crew have gotten here faster than ourselves, Leo?"

"By the Shemsi scoutship that's probably hovering just out of the atmosphere above our heads right now. Don't you have small landers for two or three people?"

Erith nodded, gripping the reins of his mount loosely with one hand and guiding it with slight pulls to the side.

Instead of a bit in the mouth the head harness controlled the beast by administering slight shocks from batteries and contact points near the ears. A hard pull on both reins would send it to its knees, almost unconscious. The animal had no chance at all to resist—the usual Shemsi efficiency, and disregard for other life.

"The first moon will be down shortly," said Leo, pointing. "The light level will then fall enough that I doubt we can be seen from space. According to what you've told me they had to drop down on this side of the clear zone, and the scouts can't go any farther than the edge. Even if they have us in sight now, we should be able to lose them shortly. Our best hope is that the ship won't dare use its radio to notify the lander that we've shifted north."

Erith ruefully shook his head. "Now that you have outlined the situation, Leo, I can see the logic of it. A twisted and unhealthy chain of reasoning, but believable. If the scout can see us now, you should not have changed our course until the moon vanishes. Since they will not dare use their radio, their

best course of action would be for the scout to descend on the anti-gravs and attempt to eliminate us with its own weapons as we cross the zone."

That thought hadn't occurred to Leo. He promptly turned his mount's head back in a straight line toward the clear zone and slowed their pace. Hopefully, their unseen watchers—if they existed—would think they had detoured around some barrier.

It was almost an hour before the first moon finally faded below the horizon. The riders were only a few hundred meters from their destination.

Leo turned due north the moment the light decreased. They rode parallel with the bare soil of the clear zone for several kilometers, picking their way through rounded old hills, often planted with fruit trees but frequently bare or covered by grass. The land had become noticeably more barren and rocky; the elevation increased at a steady rate. This close to the end of Stage 5, on poor and unproductive land, the Shemsi desire to make every hectare produce seemed to have lost its force.

They rode into the shadow of the first hill that verged on being a mountain, into a darkness so deep Leo had to surrender the lead to Erith's better night vision. There they turned west, heading directly for the clear zone.

The horses—and the term was close enough that Leo decided to use it—did not have Erith's night vision. Slowly and carefully they picked their way. Erith did not attempt to force the pace. After a few minutes the third moon edged over the top of a rise to their right, and again they had a dim light. The mounts moved a trifle faster.

They reached the clear zone with a surprising abruptness. One moment they were clattering down a steep slope toward level ground, and the next they had entered a deadness, completely unrelieved by greenery or shades of color. No life, not even a single blade of grass, was permitted here.

There seemed little point in crossing slowly; they were fully exposed if anyone waited on the opposite side. Leo pulled slightly on the reins and forced his mount into a trot. Erith followed.

They crossed the 200 kilometers without incident and rode into the shadows of some low trees on the opposite side.

Leo did not speak until they were a hundred meters inside Stage 4. He reined up to look back at Erith, who also stopped. The Shemsi was smiling in relief. The tension had been high as they crossed the open space, easy targets in the fair light.

A faint whining sound caught Leo's ear. He held up a warning hand for silence, then led Erith behind a rock outcropping. They dismounted and crept to its top, only their heads visible above the edge.

The whining grew louder, and Leo recognized the sound of an anti-grav generator. He looked to the south. A dark shape more solid than the night obscured the stars, drifting along just inside Stage 5 at a hundred meters altitude. There were no lights visible.

Leo and Erith waited, scarcely breathing, until the Shemsi scout moved out of sight to the north. Then they hastily mounted and rode rapidly westward.

At what he felt to be a safe distance, Leo reined up. Erith pulled in beside him. In the dim light Leo saw a broad smile on his companion's face.

"Their heat sensors cannot reach this far, Leo, and it is doubtful such a small ship would have good audio pickup equipment. I believe we are safe now. But we would surely have been detected had we not hidden the mounts and ourselves behind that rock. I must congratulate you on again reaching a correct conclusion on insufficient data."

"It was easy," said Leo, without noticeable modesty. "But this is just the start. We will have to hide during the daylight hours for several days. A good telescope on a scout hovering just 200 kilometers up inside Stage 5 could see us for a long distance."

"Then we had best be on our way," replied Erith, turning and starting southwest.

They reached fairly open ground shortly, and made good time for the rest of the night. When the sky paled in the east, they hunted shelter and

found it in front of a steep, westward-facing cliff. Erith promptly located a niche exposed to the rising sun, while Leo hunted food. There was an abundance of wild fruit and nut trees, probably from seeds carried across the clear zone by animals. The horses dined fairly well on the lush grass.

Shortly after dark the companions resumed their journey. Leo had slept most of the day; he felt truly rested for the first time since landing on Creche World. Within an hour they approached a small village and detoured around it. Although this should have been a period of maximum activity, Leo saw little life around the dozen or more wooden frame houses.

"Tell me a little more about the activities in Stage 4," said Leo.

Erith smiled. "It is a quiet, pleasant life, Leo. Only the unnameable longing that drives one on... One progresses into Stage 4 after learning the advantages of cooperation and mutual trust. On this western side, all territory is held in common by all the people. They do not cultivate and hence must live in small groups widely scattered over the countryside, primarily in the lower lands. People in Stage 4 do not, in fact, work at all, in the standard sense. It is here that most Shemsi adults receive their non-technical education; teaching and learning are the primary occupations. The stage is so attractive that many Shemsi never move on to Stage 5."

"That's interesting. What *does* drive a Shemsi on?"

Erith sighed. "A built-in compulsion, Leo. I believe it can be argued that the active, *striving* life is inherently more interesting than the quiet, contemplative one—at least for most intelligent beings. But there is good communication between Stages 4 and 5, each knowing the life of the other. Some overcome the compulsion and remain, convinced they would not be as happy in Stage 5 as they are here. It will perhaps surprise you to know the percentage that remains is about equal between Erithain, Domidain, and Ferilain. One would think few Domidain would remain, but this is not the case."

"How many years does the average Shemsi live in Stage 4? How long were *you* here?"

"I remained in Stage 4 for over a century and almost could have made

my life here. I had become a teacher, and instructing the steady flow of fresh young minds that passed through was always interesting. But after a time I began to chafe at my lack of knowledge of the huge machines we glimpsed across the clear zone, to envy those who rode the great steel ships to new adventures among the stars. My thirst for new experiences grew stronger than the desire for a life of quiet contemplation, and eventually I crossed over. Once done, there is no going back.

"And as time has passed, Leo, I have become convinced the active life is inherently superior to one of thought. Stage 4 has good printshops, and books are plentiful. But teaching is the only occupation, and learning the primary means of justifying one's existence. Once one's education has progressed as far as is practicable in a non-technical society, the only choice is to teach or walk on. Most choose to walk, of course. Even those who remain seldom do so for life. Like myself, most eventually follow their students across the clear zone."

The very long lives of the Shemsi gave them an entirely different perspective from that of a human. Leo shook his head in rueful wonder. A human was barely grown and functioning effectively before the decay of ageing set in. The idea of pausing for a century to learn and teach, before deciding one desired a more active life... A strange, fascinating people, in some ways. In others, as Leo had learned, they could be deadly dull.

CHAPTER EIGHT



The country through which Leo and Erith rode was monotonous in its sameness. Toward morning they ran into a long high ridge jutting southward from the central mountains, necessitating a detour to the southwest. Near dawn they easily found a place to hide among the rocks and spent a second quiet day asleep. Leo ate all he could find, but food was scarce here, and he had to settle his stomach by filling it with water.

The horses were beginning to show signs of strain. Their present diet did

not provide the energy they needed for long hours of riding. That night Erith suggested trading horses at the next village they encountered, and Leo agreed.

Luckily, the travellers saw the lights of a small community shortly after dark. Erith led them boldly into the central opening the dozen small houses faced, and asked the nearest Shemsi if he had two horses for which they could trade.

The Shemsi was an Erithain, wrinkled with age, obviously a teacher who had chosen to remain in Stage 4 for life. The spare muscles on his arms stood out like ropes, and there was a visible tremble in his chin. He was staring at Leo with wide-eyed curiosity. Leo estimated he must be more than twelve-hundred-years-old.

"I no longer ride, but... but there are horses... available," the old Shemsi said, haltingly. "I would ask of you... what is this strange creature with... with whom you ride? It is almost humanoid, but... hairy as the beasts of the wood!"

"This is a Man, one of an intelligent species which we in Stage 5 have encountered on distant worlds. I walk to the voice of the Mothers! I was honored to hear the voice of Erithain, and she ordered me to bring this creature to Birth Mountain. Now who may I speak with who has horses?"

A small crowd had swiftly gathered around the travellers. All Shemsi present were adults, but varied in age from the ancient before them to others who seemed barely grown. Leo looked around curiously at the circle of small, simply built houses, obviously designed for little except shelter from the elements.

"Most of us have one horse each," one of the younger Ferilains in the group volunteered. "Since you walk to the voice of the Mothers, you may take mine."

"And mine!" several voices chorused.

"Thank you. We will need a large one for my captive. And we will leave you our mounts to replace them," said Erith.

"But can you not stay for... a time?" asked the ancient one. "We would study your captive at... at length, and speak with you of him. Does he eat meat as do some... other animals? Does his head require extra protection, and thus need this... unsightly mass of hair?"

"I regret that we cannot linger and permit you time to study the strange ways of Man," said Erith, and only Leo caught the amusement in his voice. "But we must be on our way. Now who has the largest horse?"

The trades were accomplished in short order, and Erith led the way out of the village with a minimum of ceremony. Leo almost regretted the speed with which Erith had worked. He would have liked to study these people while they examined him.

Leo's reddish-brown hair had grown somewhat long as they travelled, and he kept it pulled back in a neat ponytail. His facial follicles had been deactivated as an adolescent. He did not feel his hair was ugly, but he endured the unintended insult in silence.

They stopped at dawn as usual. Leo had been calculating in his head for the past hour and voiced his fears. "Erith, I think our pursuit has had about enough time to catch us."

Erith nodded. "If the scoutship personnel concluded at daylight that we had somehow eluded them and landed a party that also procured horses from the breeding station, they could reach this far sometime today by taking minimum rest periods. That would probably ruin the horses, but their sole objective is to catch us, whereas we must plan to ride our mounts for many days."

"You're getting there," said Leo with a grin. "But carry it a step further. The most people they could put on the ground is about twelve. Since there are two of us, and I'm a pretty fearful alien menace, they would want at least four people to a party when they break up into groups. Only the group that takes the northernmost route will find the village where we traded horses and be hot on our trail. So, sometime today four Shemsi armed with those sonic guns should be riding by here."

"We have followed the only easily traversable route, which was perhaps a

mistake," Erith agreed. "Let us maintain a guard then and hope to see our pursuers before they see us."

"If we tie the horses behind that outcropping," said Leo, pointing, "you and I can climb to the top to sleep."

The rock toward which he pointed was over thirty meters high, and the rising sun threw a deep shadow behind it. They rode into the shade and found a meadow filled with thick grass. It was the work of a minute to tie the horses out of sight. Leo hastily searched for food, but found only some half-ripe berries. He ate them anyway. There had been no time or opportunity to hunt for meat, and his diet was as inadequate as that of the horses.

They climbed the back face of the crumbling little ridge and found a tiny alcove covered by clinging brush near the top. With a sigh of thankfulness, Leo hastily cut a dozen bushes for a bed. Erith was taking the first watch, since he could feed better in the strong sunlight of midday. Leo lay down to sleep.

He seemed to have barely closed his eyes before Erith was shaking him. The sun was past the zenith, and he had been sleeping with it full in his face. Leo struggled to his feet and walked around the little flat area, swinging his arms and wishing he had something to eat. Erith promptly took over the empty pile of brush and stretched out to the sun.

The slow afternoon passed. Leo had to walk around to fight off drowsiness. The sun was near the horizon in the west, and Erith had just sat up, when Leo saw a rider coming hard from the east.

At first Leo did not realize he had spotted the enemy. He had been expecting to see three or four Shemsi in a group. But the purposeful way the rider was driving a mount whose head was hanging low in exhaustion indicated it had to be one of their pursuers.

The rider was still some distance off. Leo looked on both sides of him—and finally saw a second rider, almost a kilometer to the south. That meant there was one or two more, riding farther north or south, each keeping the closest comrade in view. This was a more efficient way of

hunting a running quarry, but a dangerous one. Any one rider could be easily picked off from ambush.

But that would indicate the prey had been found, and the remaining three could close in for the kill: the typical Shemsi way of operating. An individual life hardly mattered—except to the individual involved. Leo realized he had been thinking like a human again.

Gesturing for Erith to approach the edge, he pointed out the two riders. The Shemsi instantly grasped the situation. But he surprised Leo by saying cheerfully, "Once we have escaped this danger, my friend, we should have a clear path to Birth Mountain. Our enemies will have no other means of reaching us."

"Unless they know some way to disable the monitors, which they may."

"I doubt this, Leo. The Mothers frequently call on the guardians of the satellites, as is well known. Taking them into the plot would be too risky. Now how do you propose to eliminate these two without undue risk?"

Leo had been wondering himself. This rider was probably going to pass close enough to be picked off by the sonic pistol, but that would leave three coming after them in the dark. Leo's faithful projectile gun, fully loaded and not fired since Beta Crucis Two, was in one of Erith's harness cases.

"You take my projectile gun," Leo decided. "You see best in the dark. Remember that it will kill or disable as far as you can shoot accurately. We'll take this fellow first, then you ride to the south and try to get the second one before you come within range of his sonic rifle. I'll mount also, but wait and try to intercept the one we haven't spotted yet to the north—if he's there. You return to the rock, and wait to see if the fight draws in another rider from the south side."

There was probably a fourth rider still farther north or south, but if so, he could not arrive before the decisive battle would be over. Leo kept the sonic pistol, similar to the rifles he had seen used earlier except that at minimum force it became a stun gun, and at maximum power it had a range of only forty meters.

The first rider was rapidly approaching their rock, though from the looks of his horse he would not be riding much farther. Leo had a sudden attack of squeamishness, and handed the sonic gun to Erith. Common sense and his overriding need to rescue Misty dictated they take no chances, that this unsuspecting Shemsi must be shot from ambush—but the thought turned Leo's stomach.

Erith looked surprised, but obediently took the weapon. For him, Shemsi who had rebelled against the Mothers were outside the pale, and fair game.

They climbed quickly down to level ground, and Erith waited at the edge of rock around which the rider must come. And two minutes later they heard the tired thudding of heavy hooves, and the horse lumbered around the outcropping.

Erith dropped the rider and horse together, their insides turned to jelly by the deadly sonic beam. Leo doubted the Shemsi knew what had hit him.

But the rider to the south knew. Erith hastily handed Leo the pistol and mounted. He rode out from behind the sheltering rock and toward the second pursuer, who had turned and headed directly for them.

Leo also mounted, but clung closely to the western face of the rock and rode north, trying to keep from being seen. He stopped behind the last shelter and carefully looked ahead, but saw nothing. It was possible the one Erith had killed was the northernmost rider.

Leo decided to wait where he was.

From the rear and out of sight, Leo heard the sharp crack of his pistol. He hoped Erith had thought to dismount and steady his arm before shooting.

A moment later the gun fired again, and only seconds later, a third time.

A thrill of fear ran through Leo. If Erith had failed, and the second rider came on in search of him... the enemy almost certainly had the longer range rifles, and someone armed only with a sonic pistol would be completely helpless, once seen.

Leo considered returning to the south edge and trying to see who had

won. If Erith had lost, an enemy with superior arms was even now approaching Leo from the rear.

Leo stayed where he was. Returning would let the rider to the north arrive unseen, if such a rider existed. Leo had to assume he did. If Erith had lost, they were probably doomed anyway. If not, this way both still had a chance.

A moment later a rider appeared out of a shallow gully a hundred meters away, pounding hard toward Leo. The Shemsi had obviously heard the sound of the pistol, which carried far in the stillness of the rural evening.

Leo saw that the straining horse had foam at its mouth. The animal was exhausted, only the pain of the electrodes at its temples driving it into a loping run. The rider was holding the reins with one hand, a sonic rifle ready in the other.

Leo quieted his mount with soothing words and waited.

Leo had planned to shoot the Shemsi from ambush, but that human and illogical reluctance that no Shemsi would ever understand held his hand. He waited until the onrushing rider was well within range of his pistol, then pulled firmly on the reins and shocked his mount into a hard lope.

They emerged from behind the rock after a few steps, and the Shemsi saw them. Leo almost regretted his chivalrous act when he saw the rifle swinging toward him; its owner was a Domidain.

But Leo was poised and ready, and the threat of the moving rifle barrel was enough incentive to kill. He pulled the trigger.

Between one step and the next both mount and rider collapsed, the rifle flying toward Leo and thudding into the ground, the horse falling limply and rolling over his captured rider. Leo distinctly heard the sound of breaking bones.

Leo pulled his horse to a halt, dismounted, and retrieved the rifle. Jamming the pistol into his belt, he turned and rode hard along the rear face of the outcropping, rifle at the ready.

Leo's sense of timing told him that even if Erith had failed, the enemy would not yet have had time to reach the edge of the rock. It might still be possible to confront him from a shielded position.

In fact, the approaching rider was still a hundred meters away. Leo stopped and stared, trying hard to see his features in the gathering dimness. The Shemsi came on fast, rifle in hand. Leo dismounted by the vertical rockface and stood behind it, raising his captured weapon.

"Do not fire, Leo!" came a strong yell. "It is Erith!"

Sighing with relief, Leo lowered his rifle.

A moment later Erith drew to a stop beside him. The Shemsi reached into his left harness case and pulled out Leo's pistol. "This puny toy almost caused my death, but I dismounted after the first miss and wounded his mount with my second shot. The animal stopped, and I took very careful aim and managed to hit the Domidain in the chest. He failed to realize he should hide behind the horse, not being familiar with how this weapon functions. I gave both him and the horse a painless death with the captured rifle."

Leo nodded, without commenting. Anything he could have said would have been superfluous.

There was no sign of a fourth Shemsi in the hunting party. After waiting for an hour they finally decided Leo had been wrong, and the group had broken up into four bands of three people each. Leo felt it was safe to resume their journey, and Erith agreed.

"Now may I suggest we ride through the night as usual, but stop tomorrow to hunt food for you?" the Shemsi asked. "And since it is now doubtful a scout could see us from behind the clear zone, I believe we should start travelling in the mornings and afternoons."

"Agreed," said Leo, though his emotional mood had not shifted that quickly from thankfulness to future planning. He still felt tense and driven. Somehow a Shemsi never seemed to become too personally involved in anything, even in saving his own life.

The rest of the night was uneventful, and they rode on in the morning until the sun was well up. Leo went hunting while Erith slept, and soon shot a fair-sized herbivore. He butchered it, and then spent most of the morning cooking the meat. It dressed out at over ten kilograms, which was enough to last him for several days.

Leo also found some thin-shelled wild seeds which Erith assured him made good feed for the horses. They moved under those particular trees and let the animals eat heartily. When they set out again next morning, all four travellers were rested and refreshed.

They saw several more of the thousands of small settlements scattered throughout Stage 4, but avoided them. The countryside remained very much the same. The temperature on this circular continent was determined more by where you were in relation to the mountains than the gentle change in seasons. They were on the edge of the great plain, where the weather was warm, slightly humid, and broken only by occasional showers.

Five days later they traded horses, with no more trouble than before. A week and several hundred kilometers after that they exchanged them again, and repeated this procedure twice more before they finally reached the clear zone marking the end of Stage 4.

Erith stopped well short of the blackened ground. He stared across the zone with a somber expression on his face. "Never did I think to return to the scene of my young adulthood, Leo. There are memories here that were best forgotten."

"When you were still very much an individual, before the strong conditioning forces in Stage 4 began to shape your final psychological growth?"

Erith hesitated. Finally he said, "This is the last stage before true adulthood, Leo. I have learned from our talks that with you Earthlings, becoming an adult is a matter of physical growth and the passage of a stated number of years. This seems to me a foolish way to determine such an important matter. In Stage 3 we know when we have matured. The life there no longer seems enough. Some prefer the peace of Stage 4 to the constant striving in Stage 5, but no one wants to return to the wild and

savage life of Stage 3."

"Just how savage is it?" asked Leo, curious.

"To begin with, there are many wild and dangerous animals there, none of which are allowed to cross this clear zone. They are confined to Stages 3 and 2. A laser beam flashes down from the orbiting satellites, and burns any animal that starts across. But the Shemsi who live there are far more deadly than the animals. They are young adults, usually less than a hundred of our years in age. We are fully mature physically at about forty, but that is a step of no major importance to us."

Erith was getting sidetracked again. Leo gently asked him to stick to the main point.

"I am sorry, Leo. Very well. The young adults who first reach Stage 3 have had to survive in an even more dangerous world, that of Stage 2. Here they must learn the value of restraint, acquire the beginnings of trust. The people live in large bands, each of which roams around in a given territory. The bands often fight, using clubs for weapons, and individuals are sometimes killed. A band will also trap and fight the larger animals, often just for fun. They have little respect for life, since that virtue must be taught. Any stranger a band encounters in its wanderings must fight or be killed. To be a coward, here, is to die."

"And the Ferilain and Erithain do as well as the Domidain?"

"Those that reach this far, yes. The Domidains are the most numerous brotherhood, but that is because slightly more of them survive the rigors of Stages 1 and 2. Any Shemsi who has reached Stage 3 has proven himself strong and reasonably brave, or clever enough to survive regardless."

Leo remembered the warmth, comfort, and love lavished on babies and young children on Earth, and developed a new respect for his own people. They might be more irrational and less cooperative than the Shemsi, but they had customs he considered much more likable.

"If a beam flashes down from space and kills any animal that starts across, how are we supposed to manage it?" Leo asked, returning to the

business at hand. "You said we could probably ride our horses through Stage 3."

"And I think we can, though there will be no fresh mounts for us from now on. As for getting across, Leo, I have no certainty that we will. But there are old tales... I believe that the satellites overhead operate by visual means and have a low level of discrimination. If they cannot *see* an animal, and a familiar surface does not move fast enough to register as 'alive'... let us gather much firewood, Leo, and set about burning grass. We must create a roof of burned grass under which we can hide."

Leo got the idea immediately; he helped Erith gather wood to start burning a nearby patch of grass. When the work was well along, he left it to Erith and started cutting greener branches to construct the framework.

It took almost a full day. They finally decided to sleep the rest of that night and start across the next morning.

The frame of small branches, large enough to shelter both horses with the riders walking on the ground between them, was surprisingly heavy. The blackened grass they had spread across the top strongly resembled that on the burned ground, enough so Erith felt sure it would fool the spy satellites. The real problem was how to hold the horses to a very slow walk. In fact, Erith felt the only safe way was to take two or three easy steps and stop completely for a moment.

The travellers ran into an immediate problem when they tried to attach the framework to the horses. The animals snorted and plunged, reared and bucked to prevent the branches from touching their heads. There was no help for it. Leo and Erith finally had to mount the beasts, position them on either side of the framework, then grasp it and lift until it rested on their own heads. Though the horses snorted and pranced nervously around, they eventually quieted.

Keeping the heavy load balanced was a precarious business. Leo and Erith finally got the two horses so close together the riders' legs were almost touching, each person with one arm extended overhead to grasp the bottom of the framework, the other on the reins. Finally they were ready. Keeping carefully together, they rode with extreme slowness onto the forbidden

ground.

After three steps Erith said, "Stop!" Leo pulled gently on the reins, and the animal obediently halted. It was only seconds before Erith called, "Go," and they moved forward again.

Leo's arm was tiring rapidly. They had barely left the edge, but he was already wondering if he could hold out to cross this two hundred meters. But to hurry, or drop the camouflage, was to die.

At least the horses were behaving. They seemed to have accepted having a canopy overhead as reasonably normal. They took three more slow steps, halted, three more—and Erith asked, "Shall we try four steps next time?"

"No!" said Leo quickly. "We can get across in an hour this way. Let's not press our luck."

"Very well. But I must soon shift my arm. It is growing numb."

"I'll hold the platform, and you change arms. Then you can do the same for me."

The change in arms was soon accomplished. They rode on, three steps at a time, deeper into the zone of death.

Leo began to realize how fragile and foolish this plan was. If a horse tired of this game and bolted, or even snorted and reared... If they grew impatient and moved fast enough to register as "alive"... The possibilities for disaster were endless.

Not the least of their problems was the necessity of frequent arm rests. A horse happened to shift nervously the next time Leo dropped the reins to make the exchange. The grass-covered roof dipped and almost pulled out of Leo's grasp, before he managed to grip his mount with his knees and bring it to a halt.

Slowly, with pain, fear, and much mental anguish on Leo's part, they rode across the clear zone.

CHAPTER NINE



When the horses took the three steps that brought them within one walk-pause cycle of the opposite side, Leo could hardly restrain himself. His upraised arm was trembling with fatigue, but he dared not try another shift; the one holding the reins was little better. Instead he endured the silent wait, and when Erith said "Go!" a last time, he held his breath as they crossed to green grass again. The moment they were safe, Leo dropped his side of their roof to the ground. It pulled out of Erith's hand, hit the grass, and collapsed into a formless pile of brush.

"That was a rather frightening experience," said Erith quietly. Leo was simply breathing deeply in relief. "I wonder how much consecutive forward movement it would have taken to trigger the beam?"

"Let's not even think about it," said Leo, dismounting. He lay down and spread his arms and legs to the morning sun, as Erith did every day. The Shemsi watched him in puzzlement. And after a few minutes, when not only his arms but his nerves were back to normal, Leo mounted again and they rode on into Stage 3.

"Leo, I would not ask of you that we endure any danger likely to cost us our lives," Erith said a moment later. "But I do request that we try first to run away, second to stun, and only as a last resort take the lives of any Shemsi here. They are savages and would probably be totally merciless to you, but they are our young. I ask that you treat them as such."

"Of course, if I can," Leo agreed. "Let's just hope we don't get backed into any rough corners."

Leo had been gradually heading south as they crossed Stage 4, seeking the easier riding of the flat plain. After the fight with the three pursuers there had been no further need for rocks to hide behind during the day. The land around them now was mostly gently rolling hills, often covered with clumps of trees but no true forests. Those began on the slopes of the mountains at a slightly higher elevation. Erith cautioned him that each large gang of young adults usually claimed a grove as its own, and fought to

defend it. The safest course was to ride well clear of all trees, and hope to outrun any group that tried to stop them.

Leo agreed, though it was obvious that the need for food was going to drive them into the trees sooner or later. But they were lucky on that first day; he shot another of the herbivores that were plentiful here. When they halted to skin and cook it, Erith protested that the fire would alert every gang in the vicinity of their presence. Leo calmly reminded him of their run-away strategy, and persisted.

He did, in fact, get the meat cooked before the first group of curious young adults came to investigate. They had evidently been watching from a distant clump of trees. It was nearly dark, and Leo and Erith calmly mounted and rode away as the Shemsi approached. When they began running to overtake them, the riders reined the slow horses into their best pace, a good canter, and gradually outran them.

The rolling hills made observation for any distance impossible, and the trees were often numerous and close together. The companions rode for less than an hour before Leo suggested they halt and find a hiding place. He was not afraid of being ambushed and killed. But he was worried that a sudden attack would compel them to use the sonic rifles within their killing range.

Erith agreed, and approached the next very small group of trees with rifle at the ready. It proved to be deserted. They spent the remainder of the night there, taking turns at guard duty.

By the light of dawn Leo searched the trees for edible fruits or nuts. Finding none, they resumed their journey. He ate some meat from the pack he had made of the animal's hide as they rode.

The next several days passed uneventfully, and they made good progress. They were a week into Stage 3 before the travellers had their first encounter with one of the deadly beasts that roamed freely here.

Leo rounded a gently sloping shoulder of dirt early in the morning and heard curious sounds just ahead. He shifted the rifle to his hand as a precaution, and slowed his mount's pace. They walked quietly on the thick grass, almost directly into the jaws of a large, lean creature that seemed all

teeth and long bones. It was noisily feeding on the remains of a large herbivore it had killed in the night.

Erith gave a cry of warning behind Leo, but he needed no more indication of danger. They were already too close to the animal's food not to be considered enemies trying to take it away.

Leo brought the rifle to his shoulder, trying to aim. And the skinny killer that resembled an oversized starving cheetah came bounding at him, a fighting snarl disrupting the morning quiet.

The creature was taller than Leo's horse and had teeth as long as human fingers, all of them showing. As Leo squeezed the trigger his mount reared, screaming in fear. Leo's sonic beam vibrated the grass to his right, killing hundreds of insects.

Leo fought to control the horse, to regain his balance and swing the rifle around for another shot—all in vain. The thin hunter, moving like the running cat he resembled, hurled himself forward in a dive that would sink those teeth into the horse's neck—and Erith's beam caught him in mid-leap.

There was no breath for a scream, but the carnivore gave a long, hissing sigh, and Leo distinctly heard the teeth snap closed. It hit the horse, almost bowling it over, but the mount kept its footing and whirled away. Leo let it run, to shed the fear of death through action. And a moment later he gently applied the reins, and gradually brought the trembling beast to a halt.

Erith was kneeling by the carnivore. Leo rode back. When the Shemsi finished his inspection he remounted. "It has been many years since I saw a Bones-That-Eats, Leo. This is one no Shemsi faces alone. A truly hungry Bones will even attack a band and sometimes escape with a member."

Leo shuddered at the thought. This thin killer was certainly more repulsive than the sleek, deadly cats and savage dogs of his own world.

They rode for several more days without incident. Their next close escape came when Erith approached a clump of trees to sleep in one night and discovered too late they were occupied by a very small gang of nine or ten Shemsi.

Leo was only a little distance behind Erith. When the band burst from cover, he reined his mount around and shocked it into a hard lope. He risked a glance over his shoulder and saw that Erith had not escaped. Two pink forms were clinging to his saddle, another pulling at the reins.

Erith's horse stopped, falling to its knees. The Shemsi yanking on the reins had unknowingly shocked it into immobility. Erith was going down, slipping inevitably out of the saddle. Leo let his mount run as he freed his rifle. Seconds later he guided it in a hard turn and raised the weapon.

As best Leo could estimate, he was well past the point where the sonic beam could kill. As a precaution he tried to aim just to one side of Erith, where the strongest force would hit only the young Shemsi. He hesitated a long moment, then pulled the trigger.

Two Shemsi in the direct path screamed, stiffened, and collapsed. Those savagely attacking both the horse and Erith yelped with pain and jumped to their feet, starting an odd, impromptu dance, as though trying to shake off stinging insects.

Leo turned his horse a little more toward the group and fired again, this time to the other side of Erith and at open ground. And then he rode directly for the motionless horse, rifle at the ready.

Though completely ignorant of modern weapons at this stage, the young Shemsi had no difficulty locating the source of the terrible pain they had just felt. The band started to back away. Two hesitated, grabbed the shoulders of one of the two unconscious Shemsi, and tried to pull him along. He was too heavy, and Leo was coming fast. They abandoned the effort and fled.

The adults would have made a much stronger effort to save their brethren, Leo was thinking as he stopped his horse. But even they would have given an individual only his exact due. And when that was not enough... The Shemsi had some subtle way of placing a value on the life of a brother, one beyond Leo's comprehension. Every single Shemsi was worth a certain amount of effort and trouble, and no more. The idea of an individual having infinite value, such as Misty's worth in Leo's eyes, was alien to their thought patterns.

The Shemsi had their values, and Leo had his. He dismounted and hastily checked the two Shemsi. Both were already stirring, twitching and jerking in remembered pain. They were too weak to be dangerous. Leo checked the bridle of Erith's horse, to be certain it had not locked in the "shock" position. The animal was breathing stertorously, its squat body trembling as though with a severe chill. Leo checked Erith last. The Shemsi had caught only the outer fringes of the beams, but Erith was no longer in the full strength of youth, and he had been hit twice.

Erith was unconscious but breathing normally, as if asleep. Leo heaved him erect and slung him face down across the saddle of the one good mount. The sun had slipped out of sight during the brief encounter, and darkness was rolling swiftly across the grassland. The band could attack again, their better night vision almost ensuring success.

But those ignorant young men had no way of knowing their eyes were now better than his. And though they might be brave enough when confronting known enemies like the large animals, Leo doubted they would again attack someone who could inflict pain as he had. He waited by the head of Erith's horse until the animal stirred, shook its head, and finally got to its feet.

Leo petted and reassured the still-dazed horse until it seemed recovered, then swung up behind the slack body of Erith and urged his mount forward, pulling the second one along by the reins. They rode slowly away.

Half an hour later Erith stirred, tried to sit up, and slipped off the saddle before Leo could catch him. It was only a short drop to the ground, and the fall revived Erith. He sat up, holding his head and groaning. The first of the two larger moons had risen, giving enough light for Leo to see his companion.

Leo dismounted, unharnessed the animals, and let them graze while he tended to Erith. He had been clubbed on the head, shoulders, and back, was scratched and badly bruised, but had no broken bones. He was still in a dazed condition, recovering much more slowly than had the horse.

Leo sat with Erith for several hours, while the Shemsi gradually returned to his normal senses. They rode on not long before dawn, and shortly after

sunrise found shelter in one of the infrequent rock outcroppings. Leo surveyed the area from the top of the low mound, spotted a small grove of trees nearby, and rode to it with rifle at the ready. It was deserted, and he gathered all the edible fruits and nuts he could find.

Erith awoke late in the day, almost his old self again. But he had evidently suffered a mild concussion. Erith ate some of the fruit and asked Leo what had happened. The Shemsi nodded in approval when Leo explained that the two unconscious young adults would probably recover, based on Erith's reaction. They were younger, and had only been hit once.

"That is good, Leo. I was not alert enough; I should have seen them hiding in the trees. I am glad no one paid with his life for my lack of care."

"You Shemsi have an odd sense of altruism," Leo said, his voice cool. Young or not, the attacking Shemsi had been adults. And it was within his capacity to kill such savages, if necessary to save his own or Erith's life.

Erith glanced at him, evidently decided this was one of those areas where human and Shemsi understanding could not meet, and did not pursue the point.

Erith's horse was fully recovered. At dusk the companions resumed their long journey.

The rest of the weary days and weeks across Stage 3 were only a repeat of what had gone before. They were attacked by savage carnivores unaccustomed to weapons, and killed several. They had many encounters with the bands of young Shemsi and often had to fight them off with the sonic rifles. By maintaining a vigilant guard, they avoided more ambushes. The horses grew thin and stringy on the inadequate diet of grass and what fruit the sentient beings could spare; they were obviously weakening. The day came when one could not go on, and they abandoned them both and walked. The animals were unlikely to survive. There were too many large carnivores preying on the abundant herbivores roaming the grasslands.

According to Erith's reckoning, they should be approaching the next clear zone. No really large animals were permitted on the opposite side, and they would have had to abandon them there in any case.

On the scale the guardian satellites used to distinguish between "small" and "large," Leo had been happy to learn, he would be classified as the former. Once inside Stage 2, he was not enough larger than a Shemsi to register as a "large animal."

Erith's estimate had been close. Two days later they stood on the edge of the third clear zone, staring at the burnt grass. Erith had already said the same technique as before should work for the crossing, except that this time the roof could be a small one. Of course, no protection would have been needed if they had been going in the opposite direction.

"Do you suppose the party with Misty had to go through all this?" Leo asked as they cut brush and burned grass. "Why wouldn't one of the Mothers simply tell the monitors of the guardian satellites to deactivate them for a few minutes?"

"The Mothers would never take such a personal interest in the work of any small group, Leo. Once a Shemsi has received the Word, it is up to him and his associates to fulfill it. The Mothers have little interest in 'how.' "

"Then your rulers are even more human than the rest of you," Leo muttered sarcastically, scattering burning brands about the unusually thick green grass, which was difficult to burn. Erith did not understand the remark, and as usual with such, ignored it.

The crossing this time was much easier, and they made it without incident. Of course, Leo realized, as they stepped onto safe live growth on the opposite side, this was an all-or-none operation. They would never have known failure if it happened; just oblivion.

"Let me caution you that carnivores still exist here, Leo," Erith said when the tension eased. "Only the large species have been eliminated. Many of those our size or less are still deadly hunters."

"And what happens if they catch one of your brethren while he is still small?" asked Leo.

"He dies, of course. That happens often enough. Babies can do no more than crawl when they are expelled from Birth Mountain at the age of two,

but no natural enemies are allowed in Stage 1. If a baby can find water, it has a chance to survive. Many, of course, do not."

"You can put on body tissue without eating fruit?"

"Yes, though it is a slow process. Most babies mature for two or three years in Stage 1 before learning to crawl or walk well enough to reach the fruit trees, which are abundant there. Shemsi stomachs will not accept solid food for the first four years of life."

"And what happens to the bodies of the babies who don't make it?"

" 'Make it?' Ah, I perceive you refer to 'survive.' Nothing happens except the natural process of putrefaction, Leo. That is why the area of Stage 1 outside Birth Mountain is sometimes called 'The Land of Baby Bones.' Even very young bones survive longer than tissue, and—"

"I don't want to hear any more!" Leo interrupted, very firmly. But despite his revulsion, the image of millions upon millions of tiny baby bones accumulating around Birth Mountain rose before his mind's eye. He saw the great volcanic cone rearing out of a vast mound of thousands of millions of delicate breastbones, round skulls, slim tibias, the separated baby sticks of ulna and radius. It was a horrifying vision—and fortunately not a true one. Even bones returned to the environment in time.

Erith gave Leo a puzzled look, but changed the subject.

Stage 2 was not as wide as Stages 3 and 4, but neither could the travellers walk as fast as the horses. Despite their apparent bulk and awkwardness, the mounts had carried their riders at a surprisingly good pace. Now they had only their feet.

Leo looked down at himself, and for the first time realized his clothes were literally in rags. He had been wearing the same uniform since leaving the Earth scout-ship, supposedly as Erith's prisoner, and there had been no provision for fresh clothes. Space Service uniforms were of extraordinarily strong material, but his had taken more than could be expected. Only the tough boots still held together well.

At the moment Leo was not carrying any equipment except the captured

sonic gun and borrowed canteen. With freshly aware vision he saw that his legs had become hardened sticks, prominent bones moved by lean ropes of hard muscle. In amazement he glanced at his arms, and saw tough but shrunken muscles, large bony wrists, outstanding blue veins. He patted the sunken area where his stomach had once been flat with muscle. Leo realized he was slowly starving.

Leo glanced at Erith. He too had lost weight, though not as much. That miraculous skin of his fed him steadily, day by day, while Leo sometimes had to exist just on water and a little fruit. Despite the admitted inability of the photosynthesizing cells to provide all needed energy, in situations such as this long trek a Shemsi had a decided advantage over a human.

Leo made a decision. It was time to slow their pace a little. He had to be in good shape for the final assault on Birth Mountain.

Leo lowered their walking time to ten hours a day and devoted more effort to hunting and food-gathering. Since Birth Mountain, like Earingell, sat squarely in the middle of the central mountain chain, they were slowly working their way north again.

The going soon became harder, the rolling hills and undulating upland plains giving way to rocky foothills and frequent forests. Leo and Erith debated the merits of returning to the plains and proceeding until almost opposite Birth Mountain, but decided against it. This way was much shorter, and the hunting was better. Leo was making a kill almost every day. And despite his aversion to the idea of eating meat, Erith realized it had more food value than fruits and nuts.

The first band of young Shemsi they saw seemed no different to Leo's eyes than the ones in Stage 3. All appeared young but fully grown. For once they had seen the band approaching and hidden atop a small rise, giving Leo an unusually good look as the group passed below. After the young adults were out of hearing, he questioned Erith about the apparent similarities.

"There is little real difference this close to the zone, Leo, except that the bands on the other side are better organized. You must remember that the growth toward community and solidarity is continuous, not sharply

delineated at the clear zones. A Shemsi enters Stage 2 as a small child, barely able to walk and find food. He moves forward very slowly as he grows older, and only after several years does he encounter his first band, see there are others like himself, and learn they find pleasure and protection in each other's company. The bands in Stage 2 are continuous entities, constantly receiving new recruits from the west side, and losing the larger adolescents to bands farther east. Those this close to the eastern zone are always physically adults."

"And no band of larger kids ever moves a few kilometers to the west and beats up on the smaller kids? Just for fun, maybe?"

Erith hesitated. "Such a thing could happen. I do not believe it would be a frequent occurrence, though. The urge to move on is quite strong at this age. Few would fight it by going in the opposite direction."

The question of how a species developed such an instinctual compulsion remained unanswered, but Leo dropped the subject; no one could explain all the built-in human urges, either.

The weather slowly grew colder as they worked their way west and north. The night air was now crisp, even chilly whenever the wind blew. Leo was so inured to rain he usually ignored it, taking shelter only if a place of refuge happened to be near at hand. They did most of their travelling at night, Erith leading the way. The sun usually provided enough warmth to enable Leo to sleep well during the day.

Twice they encountered roving bands of young adults, too close to miss being seen. Both times the stun rifles scared them away. These youngsters might not have learned civilized ways of behavior, but they easily understood pain.

They had been almost a month into Stage 2, and Leo had regained a little of his muscle tissue, before they encountered the first gang of less-than-adult physical stature. Leo saw them first. He topped a low hill and found he was on the edge of a sharp drop; almost simultaneously, he heard a vicious snarling ahead, mingled with shrill cries of anger.

Leo dropped to his stomach and wriggled cautiously to the precipice.

Slowly extending his head, he looked downward into a narrow gully. Some sixty meters up the draw, Leo saw a gang of Shemsi adolescents, gathered around a pit in the center. He could not see into the opening, but the snarling sounds were coming from there.

"A gang has trapped one of the local carnivores," said Erith beside him. "It sounds like a *sendarko*, the largest in this stage. When they grow old, or if other game becomes scarce, they hunt Shemsi."

Several of the young people around the pit had been gathering stones. They passed them out to the others. Leo did not see the first one fly, but the angry snarling suddenly changed to a loud roar of rage and pain. Then a dozen arms were hurling both large and small stones, and the roar became a moan of outrage and hurt. That swiftly faded into silence.

"I well remember trapping my first *sendarko*," Erith said, wistfulness in his voice. "I had belonged to two other gangs closer to Stage 1, but we did nothing but hunt fruit and water together. If a killer came, we ran or climbed trees. Most of us got away; occasionally someone did not. Learning that I could fight back, that a group could accomplish what a single individual could not, was a great revelation to me. We knew that one certain beast, very large and very old, had started eating Shemsi regularly. We watched him, found his den, observed his comings and goings. Then one day while he was away hunting we dug a trap, very quickly, using our hands and large sticks. We built a grass roof for it, supporting this by thin limbs resting on the bottom. One of us volunteered to tempt the beast. It was a Domidain, of course. No Erithain would risk his life unnecessarily, and a Ferilain could not be depended on to stand firm.

"The flesh-eater returned on schedule, the Domidain showed himself, and the killer charged. He was bounding so high I thought he would leap completely over the pit, and that would surely be the death of the brave tempter. But he did not, and the false cover gave way and tumbled him in. He was so large we were afraid he might leap completely out of the pit. We gathered very quickly, bringing stones as large as we could lift. It was such a pleasure to see the killer die."

"I'll bet," muttered Leo, to whom the killing sounded mean and

vengeful—but then, he had never seen a wild beast eat a fellow human, either.

Their way lay directly through the narrow valley ahead, and Leo decided to wait for the young Shemsi to move on. They finally did, but not before hurling so many stones they must have literally buried the carnivore in the pit.

A detour to the left located a less precipitous way down, and Leo and Erith took it. Leo could not resist pausing at the pit and peering in. He saw a thick, saffron coat on a cat-like animal slightly larger than himself, the first of this kind he had seen. The head and upper shoulders were buried under rocks.

Erith suddenly spat into the pit, one of the few signs of strong emotion Leo had seen in him. Evidently the self-controlled Shemsi retained strong memories of *sendarkos*, and they were highly unpleasant ones.

"Why would the Mothers let such a large and dangerous beast run loose in Stage 2?" Leo asked, curious.

Erith shrugged. "Mysterious are the ways of the Mothers, Leo. Presumably they constitute a form of fitness test. The weak, the lame, the stupid, those who try to live alone, fall prey to them. Only the strong, and those who have learned the value of cooperation, survive to cross into Stage 3."

From then on Leo carried his rifle ready in his hand. These cliffs and tumbled boulders offered good hunting to cat-like creatures that sprang from ambush.

CHAPTER TEN



The nights grew steadily colder as the travellers climbed, and during the day Leo had to seek shelter from the wind in order to sleep. The

temperature did not seem to affect Erith. His skin absorbed well at any altitude.

Late one afternoon Leo killed a large herbivore, a creature with a woolly coat suitable to this cool climate. He took the rest of the night to cook the meat and clean the flesh off the hide. Leo knew only the rudiments of preparing clothes from animal skins, and what he achieved was rough, stiff, and smelly—but it made a warm outer garment over his torn clothes.

The travellers reverted to their old system, whereby they both slept during the afternoon and one at a time in the darkest part of the night. Leo's heavy new garment kept him reasonably warm while asleep.

The fourth day he wore his new coat, Leo was leading the way over a wooded slope when he spotted movement ahead. He slowed his steps and motioned for Erith to be quiet. They moved cautiously forward, gripping their weapons. At the point where Leo had seen a flash of pink he stopped, looking around—and suddenly a young child broke from cover almost at his feet, screaming in fear. The youngster fled down the slope ahead of them, looking fearfully back over its shoulder. It soon disappeared in the thick growth.

Leo turned with a grin to Erith, but saw his companion had a sober expression. "We have gone past the point where the first bands form, Leo. You have just seen a frightened and savage little child, the elemental primitive—a Shemsi alone. This is the low point of Shemsi existence, the nadir from which one can only rise, or die. His brain is not yet fully developed, and he acts primarily on instinct—which I understand you humans claim to have outgrown. That child is already lonely, without knowing what loneliness is. He seeks the warmth of shared experience, though he does not know it exists, nor how it would feel. He has no knowledge of the Mothers, of the Shemsi Brotherhood, of his own place in it as an Erithain. The capacity for rational cognition is there. The desire to *know* that distinguishes an Erithain from the others is present, but dormant. If he lives, his future holds the promise of joy in sharing, of pride in self, and the benefits of brotherhood. He is large enough to soon find and be admitted to his first gang, after which he will seldom be alone again. You have just seen the stock from which all adult Shemsi grow."

Leo listened, smiling at Erith's unusual loquaciousness, but keeping his thoughts to himself. That child might grow up to know a feeling of warmth, but he would never experience real love. At the moment he was an individual, acting entirely on his own. With his admission into that first band, a subtle and prolonged shaping process would begin. The child would have no more chance of escaping it than a tiger of learning to eat lettuce. Somewhere along the way, he would lose the sense of individuality he unknowingly possessed at the moment, lose it by submerging himself into a group identity where every person had a set worth—and no more. The warmth of companionship would be gentle and always present, but he would never know the stronger fires of love, or a burning hate. Within certain broad channels, his actions for the rest of his life were ordained and predetermined.

Leo did not want to live that way.

But it was difficult to discuss any human point of view with Erith, who simply ignored what he did not understand. "Let's go," Leo said instead of trying, and led the way.

Three nights later Erith walked around a clutter of terminal morain rock and almost stepped onto the last clear zone.

Erith stopped so abruptly Leo bumped into him. The moonlight was bright enough to recognize what they had found. Erith, looking across to the opposite side, said softly, "The Land of Baby Bones."

"Yes, but if no large carnivores are allowed inside, and the Shemsi young are too small and isolated to attack us, then we, at least, should be perfectly safe," Leo pointed out.

"Not quite true, my friend. The entire circle around Birth Mountain is patrolled by Shemsi guards, to keep the land free of the smaller predators. You and I will be shot on sight. Adults are strictly forbidden in Stage 1."

"Then we will have to travel solely at night for these last few kilometers, and go cautiously. Let's get across first, and then you can tell me what you know of Birth Mountain itself."

The travellers retreated to a spot behind the mountain they were facing to build a fire for the usual camouflage. They were back before dawn and crossed safely. Once on the other side they destroyed the little roof to prevent a guard finding and recognizing it, and hid for the day in a little cleft on the hillside.

The sun was still behind the mountains to the east. "Tell me all you know about Birth Mountain," Leo demanded before they slept. "Try to distinguish between fact and old wives'—that is, fanciful tales."

"That I cannot do, Leo, for we adults have no facts. All must be 'fanciful tales.' I do not even know how they originate."

Leo sighed. He disliked going into action on a background of flimsy data. But they had no choice.

Another problem was his peculiar relationship with Erith. To date his Shemsi companion had not received a second communication from his Mother, which was according to Erith's expectations. Leo's fears of being spied on had been totally groundless. But at some point Erith would receive new orders and change from ally to enemy. The problem was that Leo needed Erith's help as long as it was available. And from the careless and inconsistent way the Mothers acted, it was possible they had completely forgotten about them and would not visit Erith again until he stood physically before them—if that was allowed.

Leo had already made his decision. He was going to let Erith stay with him, fulfilling his obligation to the Mothers, until Erithain possessed him again. After that, Leo would consider him untrustworthy and insist they separate.

"Then tell me the accepted tall tales," Leo said aloud.

Erith ignored the reference he did not understand. "I will do my best, Leo. Birth Mountain is the highest point on the planet, an old volcano that has been inactive since recorded history began. Nevertheless the magma must be close beneath, for it is supposed to be warm inside the hollow walls. The caldera is about four kilometers wide, very round in shape, with inner walls rising perhaps one kilometer above the inside floor. The volcano was

apparently a very heavy emitter of gasses when active, for the vast walls of Birth Mountain are filled with natural vents. These have been expanded and supplemented over the millennia, until now it is said the entire great mountain is one huge network of tunnels, and may someday collapse of its own weight."

The image that came to Leo's mind was of an oversized anthill, but he said nothing. The similarity was not that exact.

"There are many entrances into the runnels, most closed and unguarded," Erith went on. "I know nothing specific about the layout of the interior. There is supposed to be a large area where the Mothers and their retainers live, a huge warm nursery adjacent to it where the eggs are hatched, and many outside nurseries in the caldera, where the babies are tended for their first two years. They receive water and sunlight, which is all they require. I do not know the details of how the babies are moved, or who takes them out and turns them loose to crawl among the trees. Since a Shemsi egg is produced every two seconds, you can understand that hatching and caring for the tens of thousands produced every day must be a gigantic undertaking. We have always assumed the Mothers keep a chosen group of several thousand adults on hand to serve the babies."

"Do you know what a Shemsi father looks like?" Leo suddenly asked.

"Now you are departing from the main subject, Leo, as you often accuse me of doing. No, we do not know. Adult biologists have always assumed that Shemsi males are somewhat like those of other animals, with external genitalia. Oh, I do not like to think of such things! But if I must... We also assume the Mothers themselves are females on the order of birds, with a single genital-excretory tract. Apparently only a single impregnation by a male is necessary, and the eggs are then fertilized automatically for the rest of the year, a system for which there is ample precedent among the lower animals. Our tales also state the Mothers are far larger than adult Shemsi of the three types we know, larger even than yourself, and are very fat when entering the dormant cycle. Of course this would explain how they survive for a year without food or water, while producing eggs."

Erith fell silent. "How much do you know of how the Mothers administer

their responsibilities?" prompted Leo.

"Very little. We know they use no intermediaries or sub-rulers, or at least we never receive orders from any claiming to be such. We people at the lower levels seldom know if a decision has been made by the Mothers or the high-level Trios. Some disputes work their way up to the Council of 100 Trios, where the decision is final."

"All your activities are divided between 100 areas, and you have higher and higher levels of Trio management until—"

"There are seven layers of management in each of the 100 Areas of Activity, and the top level is automatically part of the council. The ethic of cooperation is so strong in Stage 5 that we seldom have unmanageable disagreements between individuals. Sometimes, though, the goals of one activity will require resources wanted by another, or a future conflict in needs can be predicted. If such questions cannot be settled at the lower levels, the two Seventh level Trios in the affected activities present the case to the council, which then decides the issue."

"That's a reasonably understandable system," said Leo, glad to find something about these strange people he could easily comprehend.

"It is eminently logical," said Erith, pride in his voice.

Leo resisted the urge to tell Erith it was the Shemsi idea of how an individual should live—almost totally submerged in the group, with no true life of his own—that he found repulsive.

"Back to the business at hand. What do you know of automatic guards, spy beams, alarm systems, and so forth, protecting the tunnels?"

"I know nothing at all as fact, but I strongly doubt there are such, Leo. The Mothers have never needed them; therefore why should they exist?"

"Because if they're so good at predicting the future, they should have known I'd be here trying to get in," said Leo, with a straight face.

"No, they set us on this quest to see if you could manage to reach Birth Mountain," responded Erith, with his usual failure to understand irony.

"Unless they plan to reunite you with your soft mate and breed you two, it may be that they will have learned all they wish to know when next they absorb my memories and will then eliminate you."

Leo gave him a savage scowl. Erith did not understand that, either.

Further questioning brought little helpful information. Leo had no choice but to depend on luck and intuition, once inside.

They slept the entire day and resumed walking. Next morning just as the sun rose, Leo climbed a tall tree and looked to the west. Clearly visible above the tops of closer and more sharply pointed peaks, he saw the vast slopes and rearing shoulders of the largest mountain he had seen on the planet.

Leo hastily climbed down. "I saw Birth Mountain," he said to answer the question on Erith's face. "It's quite a sight. Climb up and see."

Erith looked doubtfully at the tree and said firmly, "I'll wait. It should be in sight from the ground tomorrow."

It was; and two days later they slept almost in its gigantic shadow.

The companions had not sighted a single patrol since entering Stage 1. Because of travelling only at night, they had been averaging better than ten hours sleep a day, and Leo found it easy to absorb this much rest. There was a deep and abiding fatigue in his body, a tiredness that reached to the bones. Between Beta Crucis Two and Creche World, he had been walking or riding now for over an Earth year. He was lean, hard, and strong; but he could have used a long rest.

To his pleased surprise, Leo had found that the cone of Birth Mountain was only a few thousand meters higher than the surrounding slopes on which they stood. Erith had said it was the highest peak on Creche World, which was undoubtedly true—but all the mountains on this old planet were well worn by time and the elements.

As they passed on the plain below, he had seen only a handful that were high enough to sustain permanent snow. Birth Mountain had the most, a coating that stretched from the top down for perhaps 800 meters. Measured

from sea level, as humans calculated elevation, Birth Mountain was less than 5,000 meters high. And they stood less than 2,000 vertical meters below its highest point.

Birth Mountain was impressive because of its gigantic size, not its height. The great slopes leading up to the cone made it ten times wider than it was high.

Leo carefully examined the slope just ahead. It rose at a fairly gentle angle almost to the snow line, and even from there on did not seem especially steep. Most of the lower but more sharply pointed peaks around them would be far harder to climb.

The thought Leo had been playing with surfaced, and he said, "Erith, let's try to get into Birth Mountain through the back door."

Erith gave him a puzzled look. "I do not understand, Leo."

"Simple. We're going to climb the outside to the cone and find a way down to the valley floor."

"That will take much longer than locating an abandoned tunnel entrance and forcing our way in," Erith pointed out.

"Yes, but it will leave us in the open where we'll be harder to pin down." Leo did not explain that he hated the idea of being enclosed by the rock walls of a maze of tunnels. Being confined in Earingell had been a hateful experience. And if the tunnels here were as extensive as Erith thought, they might wander around for days before finding Misty's prison. That would give them food and water problems, and increase the chances of being detected.

"I defer to your judgment, Leo, as always," Erith said quietly.

"I think we can make that final climb from the snowline in a single night. Will it be too cold for you without clothes?"

"I do not believe so. Only prolonged cold without protection can drain a Shemsi of warmth."

The sun had been setting when they awoke, and darkness spread across the rugged high country as they talked. Leo ate some of the roasted meat left from his last kill, and they resumed walking. Within two hours they reached the gentle incline that was the first true slope of the mountain itself. Two more hours of easy climbing brought them to a small prominence, and they detoured around it to the left. When they were almost to the point where they could start upward again, Erith suddenly stopped and reached back to grasp Leo's arm. And a few seconds later they heard the voices of the returning party Erith had spotted.

The guards were approaching from the opposite side. Leo looked quickly around for shelter; there was little nearby. Erith dropped flat and huddled against the base of the cliff, which was in deep shadow. Leo imitated him. A minute later a group of Shemsi adults, wearing normal body harness and armed with both handguns and sonic rifles, appeared out of the darkness ahead. They were talking quietly among themselves, and even from this distance Leo caught the tone of weariness.

The party of about eight turned west just before reaching the rock face, and started climbing. As soon as they were out of sight, Erith wriggled forward to the end of the rock and cautiously looked around it. Leo followed him. One moon in the east threw the slope immediately ahead into clear relief, and they watched the party toil up it for about seventy meters. The leader entered the dark shadow of a small vertical face, and Leo heard the creaking sounds of a heavy door opening. The others followed, and a moment later the door creaked again as it was closed.

"So we have found a tunnel," Erith said aloud. "But it is probably one of the heavily-used main entrances."

"Yes; let's stick to the original plan."

They resumed climbing, following the guards. The door, dimly visible in the vertical rock face, was of wood, and massively constructed. They passed it by and detoured around the small cliff in which it was set. The slope ahead was growing more steep, and the chill in the air had become noticeable.

The climb was difficult but uneventful. When dawn broke, they were

past the first scattered traces of snow. For once luck was with them, and they found a sheltered little depression, free of snow, in which to sleep.

That evening Leo ate the last of his food and water. While waiting for the first moon to rise, he filled the canteen with snow and held it between his inner and outer garments. By repeating this three times, he obtained adequate drinking water. An hour after dark they set out for what he hoped would be the last hard leg of their climb.

For six hours they toiled upward, making slow but steady progress. The going was much harder than it had been, but they managed without the use of mountain-climbing equipment. And when Leo's legs were an aching torment and his lungs seemed continually starved for air, they finally reached the rearing side of the central cone itself. It rose before them, as straight and smooth as the wall of a building; and, without ropes, pitons, and grapples, as unclimbable.

Leo looked up, estimating they were within less than a hundred meters of the top. To be stopped now...

"Let's work our way around and look for a cleft or chimney," suggested Leo. "We could split up and go both ways, or—no, let's stay together, in case one of us falls."

The slope they stood atop was steep enough to make falling a distinct possibility. Leo mentally flipped a coin and went to his right, moving slowly and carefully. He soon discovered it was easier to climb than to scabble sideways. The second moon went down and the light became very dim, but practice had considerably improved Leo's night vision. They pressed on, and just as a soft gray dawn lightened the peaks to the east, Erith found a chimney.

The narrow fissure in the vertical wall crooked and turned until it vanished upward. Leo braced himself at the bottom and threw small rocks up between the curving walls, as hard as he could hurl them. By listening intently to the ricochets, he satisfied himself that none had hit a solid ceiling. But there was no way to be certain the way was open except to climb.

Leo placed his back against one wall and his feet against the other, and

started upward.

The fissure was a comfortable 150 centimeters wide at first, but swiftly narrowed to slightly less than a meter. By using his knees for support instead of his feet, Leo managed to squeeze past the close part. Then it widened until the center was almost two meters across, further than he could bridge with his body. Leo worked his way in until he was near the inner wall, and found enough purchase there to keep going.

Twice he had to stop and rest. Each time Leo thought he could never force his tired muscles to move again, that he must inevitably lose his grip and fall, to end as a bloody jelly on the rock below. Each time he thought of Misty, of the certain knowledge she would be waiting for him, depending on him. She was his partner, his lover, and his mate. Without her there was no point in living—and Leo loved life, and every joy and sorrow it brought him. Both times he somehow found the strength to start again, to place his palms against the, rock and slip his back upward, to move first one foot up and then the other, to repeat. With exhausting slowness, with bruised hands and raw back, he climbed.

Leo was dizzy, his eyes swimming and his vision impaired, when his upper back suddenly felt empty space.

He froze, then tentatively moved one hand upward. He was flat against an edge of rock, with air on all sides. He blinked his eyes until he could see clearly again. He was at the top.

Leo struggled up a few more centimeters, leaned back, and pushed himself violently away with his feet. He slid a little, until his buttocks were resting on a firm surface, and stopped. He had only to wriggle backward, and he was safe.

Leo lay as though dead for a moment, not even breathing deeply. Then gradually he stirred, sat up, and looked around. The top of Birth Mountain was rugged and uneven, covered with a light coating of snow. The sun was now well up, bringing a welcome warmth to his face. He could see inward for over a hundred meters, to what seemed the inside edge.

As his brain began to recover, Leo thought of Erith. He did not know the

limits of the Shemsi's strength, but doubted it was as great as his own. And Erith's delicate skin could never survive that ascent up the rough face of the rock.

Leo lay on his belly and leaned over the edge of the chimney. "Erith!" he called softly. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes, Leo," a muted voice came back. "Are you well?"

"Yes. I'm at the top. Are you ready to try it?"

There was a moment of silence. Then Erith said, "As ready as I shall ever be, Leo."

Leo stood up and removed his outer garment. There were no protruding edges sharp enough to snag it on the way down. "Erith, I'm dropping my smelly coat to you. Put it on to protect your back. Ready? Here it comes!"

Before Erith could protest that Leo would freeze without it, he dropped the furry animal hide. Seconds later Erith acknowledged that he had it. Leo looked around for a shelter from the light wind blowing across the peak from the west, and found one at the base of a low ridge. It was free of snow. He curled up into a ball for warmth, and waited to see if Erith would survive the climb. If the Shemsi died in the effort, exposure would probably finish off Leo in short order. But he had no choice in the matter. Erith had to have the coat.

Despite the cold, Leo fell into a light doze. He was awakened by a voice saying, "Best resume wearing your stinking garment, Leo, before you freeze to your death. I am glad to be rid of it."

Leo struggled back to wakefulness, to see a pale, tired, but perfectly healthy Erith crouching by him. And Erith was right. Leo's body was numb and chilled. A few more hours and he would never have awakened.

Leo struggled into the stiff hide. Erith, seemingly oblivious to the cool breeze still blowing across the top of the mountain, stood waiting while Leo stamped around on the uneven rock, trying to restore full circulation to numbed feet. Leo wondered if he was going to suffer frostbite, then realized it was too soon to know.

It would be best to reach a lower level before dark, if possible. Every meter down meant a little less chill. When he felt almost normal again, Leo walked to the inner edge. It was even more straight and forbidding than the outer side.

Leo looked out over the interior of the caldera. About a kilometer below he saw strips of rich green grass, alternating with many long narrow bodies of water. They stretched across the valley floor to the opposite rock wall, four kilometers away. There was a light haze in the air, and visibility was poor. Probably an upper air phenomenon caused by the meeting of warm and cool air currents. Leo could make out what seemed to be a few structures on the ground whose purpose he could not identify. There were many adult Shemsi moving around, performing tasks whose purpose he could not discern.

Erith had silently followed Leo, and stood gazing down at the interior with a troubled expression. Leo could almost hear his thoughts. His life had begun in some nearby birthing chamber, as a tiny egg expelled from the huge mass of Erithain. After an unknown period of time in the nursery he had been taken into this valley for his first taste of sunlight. He had been two years old when some unknown keeper plucked him from among the younger babies and carried him outside, releasing him among the trees at the foot of the mountain. Somehow he had crawled until he found water, had sought the sunlight during the day, had eventually grown until he was both old enough to find fruits and able to eat them. And when the first touch of the inborn restlessness came, he had set out on foot—walking now, and that too learned on his own—toward the rising sun. He had passed over a blackened strip of land without knowing what it was, survived the carnivores waiting on the other side, moved on until he found his first gang, joined... and eventually colonized Beta Crucis Two and ended up in the jaws of a horned carnivore, where he should have died.

Keeping just back from the edge, Leo set off to the south, seeking a way down. He soon found a chimney similar to the one they had climbed, but ignored it. Neither he nor Erith could survive a descent that rugged. After walking for more than a kilometer Leo finally saw a possibility, a gaping crack in the rock face that extended over halfway to the outside. It was about

twenty meters wide at the inner edge, and so rough and broken that climbing down should be relatively easy.

The crack reached a third of the way to the ground. Even if there was no way down from there, it should be warm enough for them to rest in comfort. Leo crawled over the edge.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Leo and Erith found the going hard, but less so than the climb up the chimney. For one blessed difference, they could stop and rest whenever they chose. It took most of the morning to cover the 300 meters.

Although he was almost staggering with weariness, Leo worked his way slowly to the edge and looked down. There was a steeply slanting ledge running out of sight to his left. From here they could walk down for at least another hundred meters.

Leo returned to Erith, found a reasonably flat spot on the solid rock, and relaxed in the sunlight. Almost instantly he was sound asleep.

Leo awoke after dark, hungry, thirsty, and still tired. He drank the last of his water and followed Erith out onto the ledge. He did not know what he would do if they followed it to the end, and found no way down to the valley floor from there.

The ledge did end less than halfway to the ground, but another began just below it, and ran downward back the way they had come. Erith almost fell climbing down to it, but caught a grip with one flailing hand just in time to save himself. Leo followed more cautiously and had no problems. They walked down the new ledge until it ended, at an extrusion of rock that reached up from the caldera floor, still 200 meters below.

Wearily, knowing it was now or never, Leo started down. The sides of this imperfection in the inner cone were rough, affording many hand and

toe holds. By now he was an experienced climber, and if there was a way, he would find it.

Before the sun rose the tired travellers stood on the soft green grass of the valley floor.

And again the sky was gray in the east, though the wall at their backs was still in deepest shadow. So exhausted that he could hardly walk, Leo searched for some place to sleep through the day. There was a narrow crevice at the rear of the extrusion, where it had worn away from the main cone. Leo walked inside, Erith right behind him, and collapsed on the soft and welcoming grass. He was covered with sweat, his exertions in the rapidly increasing warmth having taken him from cold to hot as he descended. He felt sick, as though he had finally reached the end of his strength. Leo had just time to tell himself he would feel better after a good day's sleep before consciousness faded.

Leo awoke to the sound of voices, and a hand roughly shaking his shoulder. He struck out blindly, eyes still clouded with sleep, and heard someone grunt with pain. And then something hard smashed into his head and consciousness receded, hanging faint and dim just before his blurred eyes. He felt someone pulling on his feet, dragging him out of the crevice. A moment later strong hands helped him erect. He stood blinking in the sunlight of mid-afternoon, until his vision cleared. Erith was standing a few meters away, gripped on both sides by two Domids. His own arms were held, and standing in front of him was an Erithain, a sonic pistol in his hand.

The Erithain turned away, to confront Erith. "Identify yourself, brother, and explain how you and this weird creature came to be inside Birth Mountain. You are not of the Guardians. From the looks of you, it seems obvious you crossed Stage 1 and climbed down to here. The penalty for unauthorized entry is death. What have you to say before it is executed?"

Despite his obvious fatigue, Erith drew himself stiffly erect. "Brother, I walk to the voice of the Mothers! Erithain commanded me to aid this Earthman in reaching Birth Mountain, and I have done so. You had best consult with her before taking my life, or that of my companion."

"So you say," his accuser replied, his voice sour with suspicion. He turned

again to Leo. "So this is an Earthman! I have seen his soft mate, and she looks nothing like this one. Indeed, this is a monstrous and ugly creature. What is he called?"

"Leo," Leo said evenly in Shemsi. "I think you will find Erithain wanted us brought before her, if we lived to reach this place. I suggest that you take us there promptly."

The Erithain looked slightly confused. He had not expected Leo to speak his tongue. Like many Shemsi in the lower skill levels, he did not seem very intelligent. This situation was unprecedented, and beyond his grasp.

"Search them for weapons, then take them to Mother Erithain," suggested one of the Domids holding Erith. "She will know the truth."

The Erithain nodded and swiftly hunted through Leo's clothes for hidden weapons. He found a sonic pistol and Leo's bushknife. They already had the sonic rifles and Erith's pistol. The projectile gun had been abandoned some weeks before, after its last round was fired.

With Leo and Erith in the center, the band of guards started marching across the caldera floor. Leo noticed that two Shemsi kept pistols in their hands at all times; they obviously feared his size and strangeness. They could not know he was so tired and weak it was all he could do to stagger along without falling on his face.

The guards jabbered back and forth as much as any Shemsi group. Inadvertently, they answered at least one question for Leo. No one had seen them descend. By the worst possible bad luck, a passing attendant had heard a strange noise in the cleft and investigated, fearing an animal might have somehow crept in. Finding the sleeping intruders, he had summoned the guards.

The noise, Leo felt certain, must have been his own stertorous breathing. Erith slept as quietly as a baby.

For the first time since he had set out to find Misty, Leo faltered in his resolve. It was so incredibly unfair to have come this far, endured this much, only to have his efforts brought to nothing by a freak of chance. A

watchful and malignant fate seemed to hover over him and Misty. He could not endure living as a captive here, even if he had that option. And Misty would wither away once her last hope was gone.

As walking gradually restored his numbed senses, Leo looked around. They were passing by one of the long and narrow bodies of water he had seen from above. He saw that it was only a few centimeters deep, with an artificial bottom. The sun was sinking toward the west, but the shallow canals ran from north to south, and the central part was still receiving warmth. The air itself was warm and humid, far more so than sunlight alone could produce at this altitude.

A movement in the water caught Leo's eye. He looked more closely, and saw several tiny forms floating on the surface. A moment later one turned over, giving Leo a clear look. It was a miniature Shemsi, perfectly formed but less than ten centimeters long.

"So that is how we spend the two years between hatching and expulsion," said Erith softly, speaking only to Leo. "Our bodies at that age must be naturally buoyant. Obviously the digestive and excretory organs are still dormant, and a baby lives and grows on carbon dioxide and water, with the reactions powered by photosynthesis."

It looked somewhat like growing fish in a pond to Leo. In order for a Mother to produce an egg every two seconds, they had to be very small. It seemed obvious that the warmth of the nursery was only to hatch the eggs, and the creatures that emerged were as tiny and helpless as insect grubs. The energy generated by that remarkable skin enabled them to grow, once in sunlight and water, but there was so little of it at first that progress was slow. But with every added centimeter of length the amount of skin surface increased dramatically. Most of their size gain probably occurred in the last few months before expulsion outside the mountain.

The strangeness of the Shemsi was borne home to Leo once again. An adult was a reasonably close analog to a human, but he reached that status through a process both weird and terrible, from Leo's viewpoint. A Shemsi baby never knew the tender care of a mother, the warming touch of her hands; he never experienced the feeling of being protected and loved. No

wonder they grew up to become cool and unemotional creatures, lacking compassion and understanding. As adults, their conscious recognition of brotherhood, and strong sharing of group ambitions, were deliberate attempts to generate the sense of belonging they had missed as children.

The biology of the young Shemsi was so different from the human as to defy comparison. A baby on Earth was born with all ten-billion brain cells in place, though many were not fully developed. A Shemsi had to grow his from a tiny nucleus. Probably that explained why it took forty Earth-years for a Shemsi to reach physical maturity.

On the other hand, perhaps the slower development was also a major factor in the greatly increased life span. Forty years was not too high a price to pay if you could then expect to live thirty times that length. Even with the most advanced age-retarding techniques, an Earthman lived only six or seven times his development period.

The guards led them across a low, railless bridge that spanned the canal they had been following. Leo observed that all Shemsi babies visible in the water seemed roughly the same size. There were a series of bridges across the canals, all the way to the opposite side of the crater. As they passed over several hundred different streams, Leo saw they were connected by many little cross waterways, each with a gate in the center. A number of attendants were working along the banks of every separate canal, using long-handled nets. The largest babies were caught and transferred past the locks, where they swam feebly toward the wider canals. Evidently this was a continuing process.

On Earth such separation by size kept the big fish from eating the little ones. Here it was probably to keep the larger and more active babies from accidentally damaging the smaller ones.

The last two canals nearest the crater wall were shorter than the others, and Leo saw why as they approached them. Here thousands upon thousands of Shemsi about half a meter long were lying on the grass, and getting into or out of the water. These little ones were as tall as most human babies, though much smaller because they lacked fat; their proportions were the same as those of Shemsi adults. They could not yet walk, but crawled

with vigor and strength. And their eyes were open. Leo realized that all those he had seen in the water kept their eyes closed.

Several hundred attendants around the last canal were picking babies up from the grass, comparing them in length to a short staff, then either replacing them or tucking the squirming bodies into four mesh baskets suspended from the body harness. This phase of the work was evidently ending for the day; the last babies were gathered up as Leo watched.

Those attendants carrying babies converged on a single open doorway in the rock-face and disappeared, walking in a purposeful manner. Some of the others milled about, discussing what to do next in their usual chattering style. Their mental level was obviously not very high; nor did the guards seem overly bright. Possibly being picked to stay here spared them the turmoil and strife of trying to survive in the woods, but also prevented development to their highest potential.

The mild exercise of walking had cleared Leo's head, and he felt much better. His attitude had also improved. He was still alive and on his feet. Misty was here somewhere. All hope was not yet lost.

The guards led them through an enormous archway, cut like the smaller doors out of the vertical rock. The inside had a vaulted ceiling, some twenty meters overhead. It reminded Leo very much of the naves of some of the beautiful old churches in United Europe on Earth. The resemblance was heightened by the use of immense woven tapestries to hide the vertical rock walls. Leo realized this was the first time on Creche World he had seen decoration used as an art form, without some obvious practical reason for its existence.

Many smaller arched doorways led away from the main room. Their guards took them across the open space at an angle and entered one near the rear on the opposite side. A short walk brought them to an antechamber; at the opposite end was a wooden door. A guard tapped on it, and the door opened. Leo heard a muffled exchange with someone inside, and the door closed. It was several minutes before it opened again. Leo, Erith, and four guards were ushered inside. The guards left their weapons with the ones who were not admitted.

Leo saw that the two attendants escorting them had long knives hanging from their body harnesses. So long-distance weapons were not allowed near a Mother.

They passed through a short corridor to another door, which opened as they approached. The two attendants led the way inside, Leo and Erith following. The guards brought up the rear.

"MOTHER!" Erith cried loudly, and went to his knees.

Three enormous—females?—stood together in the center of the richly furnished apartment. Around them, so real and palpable it was almost visible, hovered an aura of raw power, a sense of vast and majestic *presence*—as though the natural powers of quaking mountains, flaring suns, collapsing stars, were all held under control in their bodies. They were as tall as Leo, bald and hairless like all Shemsi, and equally pink—but there was a softness in the body tissues, a lack of hard muscles in the arms, a gentle roundness to the hips. And they wore clothes. Long, loose white robes, very similar to the ancient Roman togas, hung from their shoulders to their feet. They were full-bodied, but not as fat as the Shemsi folklore had caused Leo to expect. Their features were more full and rounded than those of their children, but otherwise very similar. The one facing them was unmistakably Erithain, and the other two Domidain and Ferilain.

The one major missing characteristic that indicated "female" to Leo was breasts. Women that tall and stout would normally have massive bosoms. These queens of the Shemsi had none.

Erithain took a step toward them. Her voice was deep and strong, vibrant, and subtly feminine. "Rise, my son. You have done well. Stand before me."

Erith rose to his feet. Leo saw a look of mingled ecstasy and apprehension on his face as Erithain approached him. The tall Mother reached with both hands and clasped Erith's head. Leo saw his face grow pale, and the eyes close. He sagged in her odd embrace, almost falling. The big hands and arms supported him. For several seconds the frozen tableau held, while the other two Mothers quietly watched. Then Erithain released her child, and Erith crumpled slowly to the floor.

Leo saw that Erith was unconscious, not dead. Erithain gestured to two waiting attendants, who seized Erith by the arms and dragged him out of the room. He was breathing heavily, as though in shock. Evidently Erithain had invaded and drained his mind again; probably just of events that had occurred since the first time.

"They were held captive by the Underground Council," said Erithain, turning back to her sisters. "We should have expected this. That group grows ever more bold."

"It would perhaps have been prudent to keep in closer touch with your child, sister," said Ferilain. Her voice was the most mellow of any Shemsi Leo had heard, rich in tone and timbre.

"Have you let your children run wild while I slept, sister?" asked Domidain, and Leo learned that all three sounded much alike. "This burning curiosity that drives you will be the death of the Shemsi! Why must you dabble with changes to the old ways?"

Ferilain turned to the guards. "You may go. Our attendants will restrain the Earthman should he become violent."

The four guards turned and hurried out, without ceremony. The two inner attendants watched Leo alertly, hands on their knives. He decided to behave himself.

"We have gone through all that before, Sister, and agreed that our ways *must* change," said Ferilain. "Our seed cannot compete with these humans. And who knows what other vicious and destructive life forms inhabit the enormous reaches of this galaxy into which our children are expanding? If they can indeed do with their science what we cannot with our bodies—grow equal numbers of males and females—then we must stop producing workers, and let a new kind of Shemsi inherit the world."

"The question, sisters, is whether the females now growing in the hidden nurseries will be Mothers like ourselves, producing only one male or female for each million sexless worker eggs, or equal numbers of both sexes, and no sexless workers." Erithain's voice was low but intense. "We have decided to let the experiments continue, until that vital question has been answered."

Let us remain on the agreed course."

"I want to try something," said Domidain, walking toward Leo. She faced him from a meter away, as tall as himself and certainly heavier. There was great majesty in her presence, a habit of command and expected prompt obedience that was as natural to her as breathing. She reached out slowly and clasped Leo's head in her hands, as Erithain had done with her child.

And instantly Leo felt a vast and indescribable river of mental power rip away the moorings of his mind, tear him loose, carry him away. He floated on the surface of a stream of consciousness so strong and dense he could not sink within it, could not absorb, could not breathe—and knew that in seconds, he could not live.

Domidain released him, and Leo swayed on suddenly weak knees, fought to stay erect, succeeded—and stood. Domidain turned away. "It is as it was with the little Mother. His mind is too alien. Not even the physical contact is enough. We can only communicate with him by speech and check his answers for truth."

Leo breathed deeply, still dizzy, trying to recover his strength and wits. No wonder these females were virtual gods to their children! The *power* he had felt...

But Leo had one subject on his mind, and one only. He dredged up the strength to ask, "Where are you keeping my bonded mate? Let me talk with her and then I will answer your questions, if I can do so without harm to my fellow human beings."

Ferilain gave him a sympathetic look. "Yes, we know of the strong emotional attachment bonded Earth-people tend to develop for each other. Very well, you may join her now and we will question you again later."

The other two sisters nodded, and two attendants grasped Leo by the arms and led him away. It was all he could do to walk.

The two Shemsi took Leo out a different door, through a series of short corridors, and into a long one that seemed to reach for kilometers back into the mountain. They walked down this one for 200 meters, took a left turn

into a cul-de-sac, and opened a locked door.

Leo was too weak to attempt an escape. He stepped inside as a dim form sat up on a narrow bed in the corner, and the door closed behind him.

"Leo!"

Misty had recognized him in the better light from the hall. She almost bounded from the bed and flew toward him, with a muffled cry of delight. He braced himself, and she leaped off the ground and encircled his hips with her legs, in their old abandoned embrace. Her arms flew around his neck, the small chin came down on his shoulder, and the long black hair was pressed against his left ear. He almost went down under the assault, but managed to step back and regain his footing. And then her head shifted, her lips met his, and the pain and struggle and torment Leo had endured vanished, had never been, and there was only Misty in his arms, warm and real and human.

For the moment not another word was spoken aloud. It was enough that they were together, holding each other. Leo walked across the small cell, turned, and sat on the bed, without shifting Misty from her position astride him. Tenderly and quietly he held her, lips still together. It seemed an hour before Misty finally pulled back, the most wonderful hour of Leo's life—and then the soft, bruised lips were against his ear, her head again on his shoulder. They snuggled into each other as though seeking to merge.

For the first time in longer than he could remember, Leo actually relaxed. His muscles softened, the fatigue that had been eating at his last reserves of strength asserted itself, and he became afraid he would pass out where he sat. Gently he moved Misty to one side, took off the sturdy boots that had served him so well, shed the dirty skin that had saved him from a cold death on Birth Mountain, and crawled beneath the covers.

Misty instantly understood his need for rest. She slid beneath the covers with him, tucked his head onto her shoulder, and clasped his body tightly to hers. The warmth and feel and delicious smell of her was the last thing Leo knew before his senses faded.

Leo and Misty were sitting side by side on the narrow bed, quietly

talking, when they heard noises in the hall. According to his wrist, Leo had slept for over twelve hours before being awakened by guards delivering food. Now that he was rested and his stomach full for the first time in weeks—and most of all because he and Misty were together again, Leo was almost content.

The door opened and Erith entered. Leo had grown accustomed to the many differences between Erithains caused by aging and varied environments; now he could easily identify his fellow traveller. There was also something subtly different about Erith that had developed over the last six months, an animation and awareness possessed by few Shemsi. The variety of unique experiences he had undergone with Leo had changed him for good.

"Greetings, my friend. And the courtesies of first contact to you, bonded female." (Erith could not know how close his inappropriate greeting to Misty came to being an insult.) "Leo, Mother Erithain wishes to speak with both of you, with myself in attendance."

There were four of the inner attendants with their long knives outside in the corridor. Leo shrugged and turned to Misty. She linked one arm in his, gave him a quick smile, and they followed the leading guard through another maze of tunnels. Misty pointed out corridors and doors that led to different areas of this immense baby nursery, explaining that the Mothers had allowed her to roam freely so long as she was escorted by armed attendants. She was only locked in for her sleep periods.

"I've also talked to Ferilain and Erithain a few times," Misty added. "They have an absolutely voracious curiosity about Earth and the human species." (Leo could have listened all day to Misty's soft, slightly husky voice.) "Domidain seems to have less interest, but she only awakened out of the year's birthing a few months ago. One of the others was supposed to have taken her place then, but the ordinary routine has been broken for some reason."

"That change is the talk of the Shemsi here," said Erith.

"But all three stay very busy," Misty went on. "Being gods and mothers to twelve billion children keeps them well occupied. Erithain wanted to

spend more time talking to me, since she can't read my mind and absorb it all in one gulp, but each time we try she gets interrupted. I've managed to give her a lot of general background, though."

That was Misty's subtle way of informing Leo she had talked in generalities without releasing much hardcore data. He would have to do the same.

At least Misty had been well-treated here. Lingering in the back of Leo's mind throughout the long journey had been the fear the Mothers might subject her to destructive biological tests. That would have fitted in with what he had seen of Shemsi indifference to the welfare of others. It hadn't happened—but it still could, if he didn't get her out of this fortress promptly, and safely home.

CHAPTER TWELVE



A few minutes of walking brought Leo, Misty, and Erith back to the chamber where the travellers had first met the Mothers. Now only Erithain and a few attendants were there. She was seated in a large comfortable chair, pushed back almost to the tapestry hanging from one curving wall.

Erithain gestured for her guests to sit on a padded bench in front of her. Leo noticed that two of the attendants quietly moved in behind the visitors as they seated themselves.

"Are you well, little Mother?" asked Erithain of Misty. "Have all your wants been provided as I directed?" To Leo's surprise, there was a marked respect in her voice. Evidently Misty had made a strong impression during her stay here.

Which should not really have been a surprise to Leo. He knew of the quiet inner strength his partner possessed, and how resolute she could be under stress. But perhaps part of the respect accorded her was due to her biology. Misty was not actually a mother, but she had the capability to

become one. She and Leo had planned to have a child when they finished their tour of duty in the Space Service.

"All but one, Mother Erithain," Misty replied, and Leo was surprised a second time. There was warmth, even affection, in her soft voice. "But if you could not release me, at least you have had what I wanted most brought here instead. With that I am content for now."

"He brought himself, as you said he would given the slightest chance," replied Erithain with a broad smile. It was apparent she had a far more lively and expressive personality than her offspring. "Truly, I did not accept as believable your assertion that your bonded mate would find his way here. The logical course of action was for him to return home and seek a new mate. Therefore I decided to study his efforts, and assigned one child to aid him and record their progress. It has been a most productive experiment. I have learned that Leo always led the way, drawing on Erith only for knowledge. He has performed an amazing feat, one I do not believe any Shemsi would have lived to complete. If this ability is inspired by the quality you call love, as you have stated, then this 'love' is a very strong motivating agent. I would like to study it in more detail."

"Mother Erithain, love is a human quality that does not yield much information under a microscope or scalpel," Misty said, looking at Leo with a slightly mischievous grin. This was the first time Leo had heard that Misty knew he was on his way to her, and that her strong words to her captors had made his mission possible. "Love is more nearly in Ferilain's province than yours, and even she has no way to relate to heterosexual love."

"Perhaps so. Among us, males are little more than seed-carriers. The same genetic anomaly that occasionally produces a male with sex organs also destroys his mind. Only new Mothers are hatched with both minds and reproductive organs." Erithain had turned until she was facing Leo; Misty must have heard this before. "Mating with one is a hateful act. We endure it because we must, and it is only necessary once every three years. The male's life is terminated afterwards, to be certain we never mate twice with the same individual. We keep hoping for some genetic diversity, a few desirable changes in the pattern. None ever appear. And the Shemsi species has grown so large and spread so far that we are losing control of our

children."

"Is rigid and complete direction so necessary?" asked Leo.

"Our control is never unbending. The pattern of our civilization has not developed in such a fashion that this is possible. But our rule is strong, and this must continue. Our children, whether Erithain, Ferilain, or Domidain, lack a certain ability to ... effectively synthesize, to extrapolate from the known to the unknown in a manner that yields new data. I believe the human term is 'creativity.' Only we Mothers are truly creative, and our time is necessarily taken up with guidance and administration. We have done well as a people until now, but new stresses caused by our expansion to other worlds, and the great number of workers living at once, are tearing our society apart. For one of the few times in our recorded history, no Mother lies sleeping in the Birthing Chamber. We have agreed that birthing will cease until some of our problems are resolved, and the experiments the Underground Council have undertaken have yielded their results.

"I am aware that you wish to return to your own people," Erithain went on. "That may not be possible for many years. Erith Six Two Seven will want you humans to bear children, so that he and his associates can study the child developing in the womb. He will need fresh sperm and egg cells when those he took from you two become weak with age. Until you are needed in Earingell, we will provide more spacious quarters for you here and see to your physical comfort. Since you, Leo, have learned to trust my son here, I am directing him to remain with you. And when time permits, I would like to speak with you again. The transfer of information by voice is tediously slow, but you are a very interesting people, and I would learn all about you that I can. Now what is your first desire?"

"To have a guided tour," Leo said promptly. "Your people are as fascinating as mine, Mother Erithain, even though less varied. I would like to see what is for us a most unusual and interesting place."

"Very well. These two," she gestured at the nearest attendants, "will accompany you. You may go anywhere except the Birthing Chamber and the quarters of the males. Since I cannot read your mind, Leo, I do not know your intentions. Be aware that any attempt to escape will be punished." She

rose, staring into Leo's face as the humans got to their feet. "And yet I think that will not deter you; the same strength which brought you here, will urge you on your way again. Know this, Leo. Though both of you are valuable to us, you are not indispensable. And though I have developed a feeling of sisterhood for this small Mother you call your bonded mate, I will punish her as well if either of you violate my rules. Now you may go."

Leo nodded, and almost bowed. There was an imperial, truly regal quality about a Mother, almost a grandeur... but he would defy her if he must. No one was going to keep Misty and himself imprisoned here for the rest of their lives.

"Let's take Leo to see the nursery," Misty suggested to Erith as they left. Since the Shemsi had not seen it himself, he cheerfully agreed. Misty asked the two attendants to conduct them there.

Their way led through a maze of corridors and back to the huge central chamber, then across it to another of its many entrances. They walked for several minutes down a steeply descending, almost featureless tunnel, one without connecting passages. It finally ended at a massive wooden door. Leo noticed that the air had grown steadily warmer, as though they were approaching an underground hot spring or some other source of geothermal heat.

The guards, who did not seem to fear Leo or be particularly alert, opened the door and led them inside. They were in an immense room carved out of the rock, with a ceiling less than three meters high that was supported by frequent rock columns. Unlike the tunnels and chambers he had seen so far, this one appeared entirely artificial. Leo thought of the labor that had been required to slowly carve away this rock with hand tools—he had yet to see a power tool inside Birth Mountain—and shuddered. But then he remembered these people had lived here for untold thousands of years.

The dominant feature of the nursery was a series of long tables. These twisted and turned around the rock columns until the eye grew dizzy trying to follow them. The tables reached to Misty's waist, were about a meter wide, and had sideboards ten centimeters high. They were filled to the level of the sides with grass, ranging from the bright green of freshly plucked

stems to the dark brown of dried-out hay.

As usual with the Shemsi, the area was crowded with workers. Some were removing old dry grass and replacing it with fresh. Others walked up and down amid the tables, carrying large buckets of water slung around their necks. They were heavily sprinkling the grass, using gourd-like ladles with small holes punched in one side. Others were methodically looking through the browner sections for eggs that had hatched.

Leo noticed that a sheen of perspiration had appeared on his face, though he was doing nothing more vigorous than walking. It was both noticeably warm and very humid in the nursery.

Leo and Misty received many curious stares, but no one spoke as Leo led the way to the nearest table where the grass had turned brown. He stopped and stood watching a Ferilain, who was searching with great delicacy through the decaying layer. Evidently the heat of decomposition, combined with the natural warmth of the room and the artificially high humidity, were all that was required to hatch Shemsi eggs.

The Ferilain gently lifted a small object from the grass. Leo saw a tiny Shemsi, less than two centimeters long. Its arms were crossed over the diminutive chest and the head was bent forward. The nurse placed it in a basket hanging from his shoulder. Leo saw that it too was filled with brown grass.

The searching fingers found another hatchling. This one had its head down and the arms bent, partially curled into a crouch. The Ferilain let it rest in his palm for a moment and measured it with a device he pulled from his harness. Then he replaced the tiny figure in the grass.

"That one hasn't uncurled enough yet," Misty explained. "They are ready for the water when they unbend to a certain length. The egg is just a soft covering, not a hard shell, and it dissolves in a warm and moist atmosphere. The Shemsi baby is curled up inside in a fetal position, very much like a human baby in the womb—though that's about the only resemblance."

"They start breathing spontaneously?" asked Leo.

"I don't think 'breathing' is quite the right term. As best I can tell from a superficial examination, a Shemsi hatchling absorbs carbon dioxide, and later water, through that unique skin. The lungs develop while it floats in the water, and the cells in the skin gradually change from being passive acceptors to actively producing energy from sunlight and air. I couldn't hazard even a good guess on the changes that occur at the cellular and molecular levels. After the transformation is complete, and the lungs have filled out and taken up the work of respiration, the energy from the skin cells goes into growth activities. I'd almost bet there's a special energy transportation system between the outer cells and the internal ones, using a carrier that would be the equivalent of adenosine triphosphate in ourselves. However it works, the nutrients seem to be simply water and air, and the process is very slow at first."

"How long are the eggs in here?" asked Leo.

"About eight weeks. Something like one out of eighty won't uncurl and is 'terminated.' That's such a dreadful word, isn't it? But of course they aren't sentimental about eggs, or even hatchlings."

As they walked through the seemingly endless room, following the winding rows of tables, he saw more of the primitive quality that had already struck him about Birth Mountain. All labor was done by hand, with only crude tools. This entire operation could easily have been automated, except possibly for the judgement required in removing hatchlings from the grass. The work being done in this room by thousands could have been accomplished by fifty people using machinery.

The only modern devices Leo had seen here were the weapons carried by the guards. And even they were for outside use, obviously imported from Stage 5. Access to this mountain was guarded by sophisticated spy-eyes and killing weapons of immense power—but little of that technology had been allowed to penetrate Birth Mountain itself. They had probably functioned this same way since the first Mother stopped laying her eggs in the warm and wet marsh grass, and came inside the mountain to attend them by hand.

Leo wondered how many billions of Shemsi must have been eaten by

predators in primitive days, during that long two years when they floated, hidden by grass but helpless, in the warm shallow marshes. No wonder they had such a high reproductive rate! It had probably been necessary then for the species to survive. Now that same fecundity was making them an expansionist people, seeking needed room on other habitable worlds. And the Mothers were losing control of their incredibly numerous progeny.

Erith had been unusually silent as they walked. He was obviously as intrigued and awed as the two humans. Not many Shemsi had this chance to see their origins. And of course the guards and attendants here were equally ignorant of starships, heavy mining machinery, and all the other wonders of the technological world outside.

The rest of the tour was less interesting. They saw living quarters equipped with sunlamps powered by portable long-life batteries, another of the rare items imported from Stage 5. Leo would have bet the Birthing Chamber was similarly equipped. Amusement and recreational pursuits for the guards and attendants were limited. Primarily, they worked. There was no library, no means of utilizing taped material. A small number of attendants made body harnesses and wove baskets. A select group worked on new tapestries, always ones designed by one of the Mothers. Others brought in fruit from the numerous trees in Stage 1 outside. More cleaned, waited on the Mothers, and maintained a constant guard.

Leo thought these people had the most monotonous jobs of any supposedly intelligent group he had ever known. The dullness of it would have numbed his mind within months.

They returned to the cathedral-like entrance chamber and took a different route to their new quarters. A bed large enough for both of them had been designed and built. It was equipped with two thick mattresses. Leo bent down and sniffed, to identify a familiar odor. They had been stuffed with grass.

The room had two chairs and a table loaded with baskets of fruit, a water jug, and a small platter covered with roasted fish. The heads and skins were still on, but at least their unknown chef had removed the intestines before cooking them.

Erith was able to talk the guards into supplying some wooden utensils, but no metal knives. Leo tried to eat everything available, but his stomach was still badly shrunken and would not hold much. Erith joined them in partaking of fruit and water, then said goodbye and left. The long walk had tired him. Like Leo, he was still badly worn from the long trek and the final mountain climbing.

"I'm going to ask Ferilain if we can have some tapestries for these walls," said Misty, looking with distaste at the bare rock.

"Don't make it too homey," cautioned Leo. "We aren't going to be here that long."

Misty looked troubled. "Oh, I suppose I know that, Leo. But the thought of trying to escape bothers me. The Mothers are not only incredibly powerful, they are... oh, totally Shemsi-oriented, unthinking of others. And accustomed to absolute obedience. Do you know that a Mother can destroy a child of hers, anywhere in the galaxy? She can reach into his mind and *twist*... and he becomes a vegetable. What chance would we have against them?"

Leo told her about the device the Council of the Underground had built, to shield their minds from the Mothers. Apparently it was effective. The growth of science and technology had been very slow in Shemsi hands, but they had at last reached a point where their powers were in some ways superior to a Mother's. And they held all the weapons of mass destruction. If the biological experiments worked out so they could perpetuate themselves, Leo had no doubt they would eventually attack Birth Mountain, as they had said.

"You mean they will try, Leo. Even assuming they seize control of the satellites and turn off the lasers, the council ships will have to fight those loyal to the Mothers. And don't be too sure that telepathic shield is completely effective. The Mothers may want the council members to feel safe and secure, even though they can strike through the shield. Otherwise they might be afraid to continue their forbidden biological work. I don't think the Mothers are really super-intelligent as compared to ourselves, Leo, but all three have tremendous stores of knowledge. And though they

usually have no need for subtlety, I have a feeling they can be devious enough when subterfuge serves their needs."

"We have no real friends on either side," Leo pointed out. He told Misty of his original plan to return across Creche World to Earingell, and steal a scoutship. "That still seems our best bet. It might be years before the Mothers decide to turn us over to the experimenters in the council, if they ever do."

"I don't want to spend the rest of my life on Creche World either," Misty said quietly. "But let's wait a few days and see what happens before we make any firm plans. I want you to get your strength back, and put some meat on those big bones. Besides, it will take several days of bathing to get you really clean again."

Leo grinned, and took her in his arms for a long kiss, despite the fact he suddenly realized he was probably exuding a very ripe aroma. It would have accumulated gradually over the weeks and months, and the occasional soapless baths he had managed would not have kept it down. But to his own nose he smelled "normal."

"In fact we can get started now," Misty said, and led him outside. The attendants escorted them to still another new chamber, this one containing a large natural basin filled with steaming, smoky water. This was the Shemsi communal bath, fed and drained by underground springs. Under the dull but watchful eyes of the guards, the two humans stripped and joyfully entered the water. It was not as hot as it appeared. There was no soap, but Misty took handfuls of fine sand from the bottom and methodically scrubbed Leo from head to toe, sparing only his eyes and hair. He relaxed and enjoyed it.

The days fell into a pleasant routine of eating, sleeping, making love, and talking with Erith or one of the Mothers. Misty had not told her captors about the intrauterine device in her womb that kept her from becoming pregnant, and Leo cautioned her not to mention it. That was a possible ticket for a trip to Earingell, when they were ready. Extracting it was a job for a medical specialist. There were only crude tools and unskilled technicians at Birth Mountain.

The humans were always called by one Mother at a time. Erith was usually present. The other Mothers were apparently busy running the interstellar empire they commanded.

Domidain, who seemed the least willing of the three Queens to accept the Underground Council, questioned Leo and Erith about their experiences in Earingell. She wanted fine and complete detail, including every minute bit Leo could recall. Like their children, the Mothers seemed to need to sift through vast amounts of data to reach a conclusion—but the Mothers had almost inconceivable amounts of information stored in their brains through which to sift!

Domidain was very interested when Erith told her of the lie detection technique the biologists in the underground had worked out. A Mother could detect a falsehood only in her own children; the drug and detector worked on everyone.

The humans had much free time on their hands. Leo spent some of it roaming Birth Mountain, until he was thoroughly familiar with every tunnel and door. He was slowly formulating a plan of escape, in case that became necessary. The Mothers, faced with the need for change, might intend to relax their restrictions and let airplanes start flying over the forbidden stages. If not, he and Misty could always walk back.

The captivity was boring, but pleasant and uneventful; a month went by. Leo regained his full strength and much of the weight he had lost. He started a regular exercise program again, just as they did during long space voyages, and insisted Misty join him. Misty, who disliked exercise, willingly equalled his efforts.

The long lives of the Shemsi gave them a different perspective on time from that of a human. At the end of five weeks, Leo was growing ill-tempered and impatient. Occasionally he and Misty had little spats, though these were quickly settled. The Mothers were in no hurry to decide their fate, but Leo did not have their patience. During the next session with Erithain he told her of the intrauterine device.

Erithain's reaction was to look grave and slightly troubled. Leo soon learned that was only because it was strongly against Shemsi principles to

prevent the start of life. It made them somewhat evil in her eyes. "Though I must accept that your ways are not ours, and obviously a starship is not a good birthing chamber," Erithain added.

"If you want Misty to bear a child, it will be necessary for us to return to Earingell and let the technicians there remove the IUD," Leo pointed out.

"As of now, my children have no need to study Misty developing a baby. The work is not that far along, though it is going well. Many embryos have been conceived in suitable containers, from sperm and eggs furnished by you two. Several are still alive. It will be years before they are ready to study the intrauterine growth cycle. The extrauterine experiments must be completed first, and the data analyzed."

"In that case we won't worry about it," said Leo cheerfully... and knew even as he spoke that the decision to leave had just been made for him.

The preparations for escape were relatively simple. They would exit through one of the long tunnels, avoiding the difficult climb up and down Birth Mountain. Their prime needs would be warm clothes, some food, his old canteen, and weapons. The heavy tapestries Misty had had installed on their walls would make fair blankets. They had been furnished robes, similar to the ones worn by the Mothers, and rough but stout shoes. Food and water were easily obtained. The weapons presented more of a problem. Leo did some careful thinking and planning; eventually he managed to steal two sonic rifles in such a fashion their owners would think them lost. It was not difficult to obtain two of the long knives. A week from the time he had decided to flee, they were ready.

The best time to flee was mid-morning, when the last outside patrols were back inside, and the early evening ones had not yet gone out. That would give them several hours start. Leo intended to cover as much ground in the first day as he and Erith had normally travelled in two, and cross the Stage 1 clear zone the third night. After that, by staying in the foothills and travelling after dark, he felt they would be safe from recapture.

To accommodate their hours to the Mothers and most of the attendants and guards, Leo and Misty had gotten into the habit of sleeping during the middle of the day. On the first morning after their preparations were

complete, Leo and Misty left Erith and returned to their room. Once inside and with the door closed, they swiftly packed their stored dried meat and nuts, filled the canteen, pulled the tapestries from one wall, and cut them into double-thickness full-length cloaks. In minutes they were ready to go.

The sonic rifles were noiseless in operation. Remembering that Erith had admonished him about taking the life of a Shemsi—that seemed an age ago, not a year—Leo opened the door very quickly, and aimed between the two guards when they turned toward him. The sonic wave was so narrow that close to the barrel it did not hit them directly, but there was a bounce-back effect from the wall. It knocked them down—and to Leo's surprise, the shock also drove him to his knees.

The Earthman recovered first and hastily regained his feet. The guards were jerking and twitching. Leo dragged both inside at once, and Misty closed the door. They quickly bound and gagged the Shemsi, who were beginning to struggle. The relief guards would find them that afternoon.

Leo and Misty wrapped their food, water, and weapons in the two cloaks. They hoped to be ignored if someone saw them at a distance. The only strangeness would be the lack of guards following them, and most of these attendants were not bright enough to take alarm from that.

The first short corridor was clear. In the intersecting one they saw two Shemsi at a distance, but were ignored. Leo led the way to one of the long tunnels that ran all the way outside, meeting with it as far from the inner walls as they could manage. The final corridor curved and crooked, following the ancient vent from which it had been enlarged. In the area they could see, not a Shemsi was in sight.

Leo walked as fast as Misty could move without tiring. There were no more side tunnels or chambers, and it would be obvious to anyone they met that the humans were leaving Birth Mountain. Leo took his sonic rifle from concealment and carried it ready to fire. This time they might have no choice but to kill.

Fortunately, Leo's planning worked well. They met no one during the two hours walk. And they finally had a bit of luck. The tunnel curved enough to keep them out of sight of the guardians at the door until they

were within about eighty meters. Leo had established that the sonic rifles could stun at that distance, but not kill. He aimed and shot at the two Shemsi as soon as he saw them. They fell without a sound.

Misty checked the guards as Leo heaved the door open. They were deeply unconscious, but seemed certain to live. Leo closed the door behind Misty, and they walked free into bright sunlight.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Leo had decided to return the same way they had come, for the reason Erith had chosen the Western Walk—familiarity. The Shemsi would probably guess they had gone this way, but that hardly mattered. The methodical Mothers would send search parties in both directions, regardless.

They started down the first steep slope, Misty holding Leo's hand for balance. Leo was moving swiftly, to get out of sight from the door. They scrambled and slid over the steeply descending surface. By the time the sun slipped past the edge of the great cone and shadow enveloped them, they were walking on the less inclined lower slopes.

Just before dark Leo and Misty paused long enough to eat and drink, then immediately set out again. Leo rigged a hand-held line back to Misty, whose eyes were not accustomed to night-walking. They made good time, though he knew a hard-marching band of the Shemsi guards could equal their pace.

Leo had chosen a way that paralleled the course he and Erith had followed coming in, but was several kilometers to the south. It was a less direct route, but one that brought them more quickly to the foothills. When the sun came up next morning and they hunted for a place to sleep, they were less than two night's travel from the clear zone.

There had been no sign of pursuit. Nevertheless, Leo insisted they sleep one at the time. They could afford longer rest periods once the larger

dimensions of Stage 2 had swallowed them. If Shemsi guards passed them during the day, he wanted to know of it.

That night they marched while the sky was still a reddish gold in the west. Misty had not complained about the hard pace, but she already looked worn and tired. The months of confinement at Birth Mountain had weakened her, and the exercises they had undertaken were not enough to restore her full strength.

By the end of the second night Misty's feet were dragging, and she occasionally stumbled and jerked on the line Leo held. She slept heavily through the entire day, but seemed to have recovered some strength by nightfall. Leo held to the fast pace throughout the third night, and just before dawn they reached the clear zone. This time Leo saw it well in advance, crossing a small valley they were following.

It had been a long night, and though she had not complained, Misty was obviously exhausted again. Leo had wanted to cross before stopping, but smoke from the fire they would have to build would be visible for miles in the clear morning light. He decided to wait until dark, and hunted a place to sleep.

Leo took the first watch. He had not called Misty on the previous day, but was now too tired to do without sleep again. He awoke Misty at noon, and she staggered to her feet. Leo almost instantly fell asleep, but awoke two hours later. He saw that Misty was huddled in her tapestry cloak against the rock, sitting up but dozing. He went back to sleep without speaking. She might not spot a distant party passing them, but the sound of anyone approaching would certainly awaken her.

In the early evening shadows Leo found a secluded little former river bed, now heavily covered with grass. By retreating up it a few hundred meters they were able to build a fire that could not be seen except by someone passing very close by. While Misty burned off the grass, Leo returned to the valley it debouched into and gathered branches. In three hours they had the small platform ready.

Since they were travelling in the correct direction, they would be able to walk freely across the other clear zones. Only on this one were the guardian

computers set to kill moving forms as large as Leo and Misty.

The first and largest moon was up, giving a fair light. The crossing was uneventful, and Leo heaved a sigh of relief when they at last stood on the other side. He broke up the little platform and hid the fragments in some thick brush. Misty was somewhat shaken by the extreme tension. They walked for only a few minutes, continuing down the pleasant green valley, before they reached a stream and paused to eat and drink.

"Somehow that... computer-guarded dead strip seems to typify the Shemsi for me, Leo," Misty remarked as they ate. "The computer obviously can't discriminate between large but harmless herbivores and the killer carnivores they want kept out." They had noticed a dead and rotting herbivore a short distance down the strip as they crossed. "The system is very efficient, and it doesn't matter to the Shemsi if a few innocent beasts get killed along with the dangerous ones."

"I suppose that lack of feeling for others is a natural outgrowth of the extreme solidarity they achieve with each other," Leo answered. "Their only source of warmth and emotional support is the group, whereas we start with the smaller but stronger pair-bond. I think the basic difference lies in the Shemsi lack of sexuality. Somehow the Mothers built up an elaborate system that substitutes brotherhood for family ties. The attachment to the group is very strong by the time a Shemsi reaches Stage 5. It's a one-way relationship, in that the group never places too high a value on any individual. I wonder if this complex system would have been necessary if they had evolved as normal males and females instead of queens and sexless workers?"

"Or if they would have gotten as far as they have without those marvelous skins," Misty said thoughtfully. "It's tempting to think of them as hive creatures like bees or ants, but you can't carry the analogy too far. No insect ever had genuine intelligence and individual self-determination.

"They have a workable social system—but I prefer ours," Misty added, suddenly moving into Leo's arms for a quick kiss. He held her tightly, thinking of the year he had spent in Erith's company and of the differences between Shemsi and human personal relations. Erith was a quiet, selfless,

pleasant travelling companion, but he lacked the fire and fury, the higher capacity for both receiving and giving that was normal for humans. On Earth, biologists had long ago established that the *Homo sapiens* was the most sexually active animal known. That strong sexuality was an important component of the human sense of individualism. Leo was convinced in his own mind that sexuality, with all its attendant problems, developed beings of greater competence and range than creatures like the Shemsi.

Though Leo would cheerfully admit he envied all twelve billion sexless Shemsi workers their photosynthesizing skins and long lives!

Feeling somewhat refreshed by the pause and a lessening of tension, the travellers resumed walking. The long narrow valley they were following ended in a twisting, turning defile that separated two rocky foothills. Leo kept his rifle ready, but entered it without hesitation. He and Erith had travelled through many similar passages throughout these hills.

Leo cautioned Misty to stay close behind him. The only real danger was some hungry night-hunter leaping down on them from a den in the rocky walls. And the sonic blast of the rifle could kill in midair if Leo had even a second of warning.

Nevertheless, Leo breathed more easily when they at last emerged into the open, at the beginning of a new and broader valley. But Leo was barely free of the rock walls when a loud voice called, "Drop your weapons and stand!"

The shock, for a brief second, almost paralyzed Leo.

He had finally let down his guard, admitted to a feeling of safety and freedom. But directly ahead, clearly visible in the moonlight, were three Shemsi, hurrying toward them. A fourth had paused, and had his sonic rifle carefully aimed at the humans.

One of the three running Shemsi suddenly staggered, stopped, and sank to his knees, head back and arms extended. The posture was a familiar one. He had been possessed by one of the Mothers.

So at least one of the Shemsi queens was personally supervising the hunt

for them. Suddenly Leo realized what must have happened and saw how they had been caught. The Mothers had taken control of the satellites guarding the clear zone, ordering the Shemsi controllers to perform the scans instead of the computer. At the same time, teams of hard-marching guards had been sent to cross into Stage 2 and wait. The controllers had spotted the movement of the burned-grass roof across the dead area. They knew precisely what to look for, because Erithain had learned of the platforms when she drained Erith's mind. And then the closest party of guards had been directed to intercept the humans, and had caught them.

Or had they? The two guards running toward them were about seventy meters away. The one who was poised to shoot was at least forty meters behind them. At that range Leo did not believe the sonic wave could seriously harm him. It was still possible to save Misty.

Leo whirled, placing his body between Misty and the ready rifleman. "Run!" he shouted in English, just as her startled eyes saw the approaching Shemsi. "Go back through and cut hard right, I saw another way—" and then a giant hand seemed to seize and shake Leo, turning his muscles to jelly and his blood to water. He sank to his knees, too weak to stand, as Misty obediently whirled and sprinted out of sight.

A second jarring wave passed over Leo, this time seeking Misty. But it was too late. Leo was briefly shaken unconscious, but his eyes opened in seconds—just in time to see his partner emerge from the narrow defile and run to his side.

"They'll... punish... you!" Leo managed to gasp as Misty knelt by him. "Erithain... said so!"

"Then we'll endure it together!" Misty said angrily, pulling Leo's head into her lap. "Why did you try to send me off by myself, you big idiot!" She held him, wiping at the blood that started pouring from his nostrils, until the first two guards reached them.

The Shemsi, both Domidains, seized Misty and bound her hands together. Leo was obviously helpless. The other two joined them, and Leo saw the one who had been possessed was an Erithain, and the last a Ferilain.

Leo rolled over to let his still bleeding nose pour onto the grass. The flow was slowing as the burst blood vessels gradually clotted closed. He had been lucky. Some of the smaller veins in the eye could have ruptured, bringing blindness.

The Erithain knelt by Leo and studied his running nose. "We will wait here until the bleeding stops," he announced to his companions. "This large one will be weak for a time. But he does not seem to have suffered permanent harm."

Leo felt as though he might never have the strength to walk again; he felt sure the damage was permanent. But after a time he managed to struggle to his feet, though the movement caused the bleeding to increase. The guards watched him warily, obviously fearful of his size and strength. But they let him keep his hands free until the nose finally stopped trickling blood, and Leo could breathe almost normally again.

The guards tied Leo and Misty together with a rope around their necks, the two free ends held by a guard leading the way and one following behind. The other two walked on each side. Escape was virtually impossible; Leo resigned himself to the thought of returning to Birth Mountain. They would have to wait for another opportunity, and next time plan better.

When the small group reached the clear zone they started across without hesitation, confirming Leo's guess.

It took four days to reach Birth Mountain again. They entered the same tunnel through which the humans had fled, and two hours later Leo and Misty stood before the assembled sister Queens.

Domidain was angry, and clearly showed it. There was compassion on Ferilain's face, but no mercy. And Erithain was the cold and remorseless creature of logic and discipline that seemed to personify the Shemsi.

"You were informed that an attempt to escape would result in punishment, Leo," Erithain began without preamble, the deep voice firm and emotionless. "You have taken up most of my waking time for three days, time which could have been better spent aiding and guiding our

children."

"It is not in our nature to willingly remain captives, Mother Erithain," Misty spoke before Leo could reply. "Even knowing we will be caught and punished, we will try again."

"You have already required more time and attention than you are worth!" Domidain said angrily. She turned to Erithain. "Have you considered extracting more sperm and eggs and then terminating these two?"

"Yes. That would only partially satisfy our needs," Erithain said calmly.

"Then let us fly in one of our surgeons and let him dull their brains," suggested Domidain. "Your requirement is for their bodies."

"Not so!" Ferilain quickly interjected. "I wish to study their behavior patterns, particularly the strong pair-bonding exhibited by these two. Their brains must be functioning normally. And as for your punishment, Sisters, it must not be so severe as to disrupt their usual behavior. This is the first chance I have had to study an intelligent male with sexual organs."

Domidain gave her sister Queen a dark look. To Leo, Ferilain and all her children seemed the weak link in Shemsi society, the frail ones, hardly fit to compete with fighting spirit or rational mind. But somehow the Ferilain constantly proved their worth. Perhaps compassion and understanding of others were as necessary in a functioning society as intellect or force. And besides, Leo had to keep reminding himself, a Ferilain could fight, or a Domidain be a scientist. The characteristics they inherited were strong, but there was plenty of room for individual growth and initiative. Not every Shemsi was a precise copy of his Mother.

"Ferilain is correct," Erithain said after the briefest pause. "Very well, I will change the planned punishment and administer it at a later date. For now," she addressed the guards, "return them to their room and place extra attendants in the corridor on both sides. They are not to leave their quarters."

The guards obediently hurried Leo and Misty to their old room. It had not been touched. Worn and tired from seven days of hard walking, they

collapsed into the comfortable bed.

Two days passed, while Leo and Misty rested and recovered. No one came to deliver the expected punishment. On the third day there was a tap at their door. Knowing who it had to be, Leo called for Erith to enter.

Leo was right. Erith walked in, his grave expression belied by a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Greetings, travelling companion and bonded mate. Leo, Mother Erithain has directed me to punish you both, in such a fashion that you will suffer no permanent damage. I do not wish to do this, but a child may not disobey his Mother—as the Underground Council will someday learn. Therefore you are to receive twenty lashes each by my hand."

Erith was carrying a wide leather strap. It looked, in fact, too wide to be very effective. "Where did you get that?" demanded Leo.

"Mother Erithain saw it in my mind, from a description you once gave me. My understanding is that it exactly suits the need, producing pain but no lasting harm. Will you be first, Leo?"

The strap did not look as though it could hurt unless wielded with a very heavy hand. Leo shrugged and turned his back to Erith. For some reason he could not explain, he felt certain his companion of a year would not swing hard.

Seconds later the strap smacked against Leo's buttocks. It made a loud sound, but produced only a little pain. Leo endured it for nineteen more strokes without difficulty. Misty watched, wide-eyed, until she saw Leo was not even making a face. Erith had not bothered to have them remove their robes.

Despite his supposed impartiality and fairness, Erith was noticeably lighter on Misty. Or perhaps his arm was growing tired. In any case, the blows were barely hard enough to redden her soft skin. But he did deliver the full twenty, as instructed.

Erith tossed the strap aside. "Now that is done, and perhaps we can be friends again. I think Mother Erithain was worried that you and I grew too

close on our long journey, Leo. Therefore she assigned me this unusual chore."

"Which you performed exactly as ordered," Leo said with a straight face. "Now join us in eating some of these delicious fruits."

"Gladly," said Erith happily, and did so. But he ate only a little, while the two humans disposed of a full meal of nuts and fruits. Erith had much to tell them.

"I have seen that which I never thought to see, Leo," Erith began. "A water leak developed in the quarters of the males, and I was asked to lend my knowledge in repairing it. I saw the thirty-two males who are alive at the moment. They range in age from hatchlings to full adults and are the ugliest sight I have ever beheld—even more so than you, Leo." (There was no irony in his voice, and suddenly Leo realized he should have known earlier that when remarks were made by Erith and other Shemsi about his ugliness, they were simply stating a fact—as they saw it. To them he was repulsive. Erith had given no sign of letting this bother him, in all their months together.) "As we expected, the genital and excretory organs are combined, as with most egg-laying creatures. And the males are even larger than the Mothers! A mindless, mewling, helpless lot of ill-smelling flesh, less by far than the beasts of the field. It is saddening to know one like that fertilized my Mother's eggs."

"We humans have a philosophy that says it is what you are that counts, not your ancestry, Erith," Misty told him.

"With us that philosophy could never prevail," replied Erith.

Misty had to smile. For a Shemsi, whose life to a large extent was determined by which Mother he sprang from, this was obviously true.

"Birth Mountain is rilled with loose talk," Erith went on. "So much so the Mothers have directed the attendants to stop repeating unproven assumptions. That is one order not even the Mothers can enforce, for it is part of the nature of a Shemsi to share knowledge and speculation."

"Give us some examples," suggested Leo, curious.

"For one, the Mothers appear to have lost control of the monitor network that guards the clear zones. They took active charge while searching for you, and disrupted the normal routine. When they released the system back to the Management Trio for Space Sciences, all controllers were replaced by newly trained people. And some of the personal attendants to the Mothers say Domidain attempted to reach the controllers one day, and could not. They are all equipped with the protective device that hides the mind from a Mother."

Taking over the synchronous satellites was the obvious first step if an attack was to be launched on Birth Mountain. "What else?" asked Leo.

"A Ferilain who had been working in the protected underground area repented of his treachery, and fled to Earingell. He prayed to his Mother, and she heard. Now they know the Underground Council has been busily building bombs in the old mines. We have never used explosives as weapons, there being no need, but the concept was learned from you humans. And of course explosives would be far more effective against Birth Mountain than magnetic or laser beams."

A clear pattern was forming. The Underground Council, knowing they had been discovered (and unaware the Mothers had known of them all along and tolerated their existence), was preparing to fight. An attack on the Mothers, once considered something to worry about in the far future, was an imminent reality.

Birth Mountain was not as hollow with tunnels as Shemsi legends had it, but a few cobalt or fusion bombs might still shake it into a vast pile of rubble. And a direct hit in the caldera might easily arouse the volcanic furies that had so long lain dormant. The protective covering of rock mantle had to be thin here, for so much heat to escape upward.

The defense of their odd and ancient home was the Mothers' worry. Leo's was how to get himself and Misty back to Earth. If an attack came, escape to the outside again might be easy in the confusion. And this time the Mothers would be too busy to worry about the fate of two puny humans.

The Mothers were evidently very preoccupied. Over a week went by,

and Leo and Misty grew increasingly bored with having to remain in their room. Leo attempted to see Erithain, but the guards would not forward his request. Erith tried, but was unable to gain his Mother's presence.

Finally Erith appeared at their door, only a short time after ending a visit, to announce they were to come to the conference chamber. All three Mothers wished to see them.

Misty had learned soon after arriving that each Mother had separate quarters and a retinue of attendants. They met in the conference room to exchange information and make mutual decisions. One of the many weaknesses of Shemsi biology was that the Mothers could not communicate with each other except verbally. That strange defiance of the laws of physics that allowed a Mother instant communication with her child, anywhere in the galaxy, was a unique ability.

And Leo felt the human species was lucky this was true. If the Mothers had the ability to combine their vast but separate fields of knowledge, they would be even more mentally powerful than they already were.

The Mothers were standing as usual, conversing with each other. There was a smouldering anger on the face of Domidain, and even Ferilain appeared darkly sullen. Only Erithain seemed calm as always.

"Leo and Misty, we have decided to return you to your people," Domidain began, in the abrupt Shemsi manner. "We have pulled back all armored spaceships from Beta Crucis and most of our other star systems. In their absence your fellow humans have become unduly aggressive. We wish you to convey to them that in the future we will be agreeable to settling disputed claims to territory without violence, by whatever means we can mutually devise."

"And for now we ask that no further harm come to our children scattered on those worlds," Ferilain joined in. "On several planets where skirmishes recently occurred, our children were killed after the protecting ships withdrew. There is no need for this. We ask that the slaughter stop, and promise by the Word of the Mothers that we will not renew hostilities when we have surmounted our problems here."

Leo could see no harm whatever in acting as messengers for the Mothers. He felt that he and Misty, between them, knew these people fairly well now. Though they were different from humans in many ways, the similarities the two species shared were far more important. "We accept," he said promptly.

"Excellent," said Erithain. "The attendants will take you out through the main tunnel to the south, where you will find a plateau suitable for a scout landing. Erith is to accompany you and be our ambassador to Earth. He has received his instructions. Now go. Our defenders approach, and we expect to be under attack shortly."

Leo saw that Domidain and Ferilain had started slowly pacing the floor, their eyes closed, both wearing looks of intent concentration. He did not need to be told their minds were roaming among the stars, guiding the fleet of fighting ships they had ordered in from all outlying areas. As soon as Erithain stopped speaking she joined them, eyes closed, feet taking small steps around the circular chamber.

Occasionally, two Mothers bumped into each other. The blind circling resumed without interruption, and the eyes did not open.

Leo kept looking over his shoulder as the guards hustled them out. To the visible eye there was only the sight of three tall robed figures, their subtly feminine forms almost visibly surrounded by an aura of power. Not a single machine was in the room, no weapons, nothing of the complex technology Man had built to augment his body's feeble resources. But these three sister Queens were powerful beyond all human experience, commanding vast resources of science and technology, and numbers of warriors, scientists, and behaviorists so large the figures became meaningless. They came as close to personifying gods as any creatures Leo and Misty were ever likely to see.

Three tall figures draped in white, blindly walking circles in a small rock-walled chamber, deep in the heart of an ancient volcano... turning and twining, bumping into each other, resuming their stately tread... an odd display of power, in human terms.

But terribly real.

The attendants hustled Erith and the humans through the corridors and out the vaulted main entrance room into the open caldera. There they were turned over to three guards, who led them across the growth canals to the opposite side. They entered a tunnel that twisted and turned as usual, but led directly outside. Two hours later they emerged in an area Leo and Erith had not seen, a high plateau abutting the sharply rising cone of the volcano.

The guards started to return inside. "Wait!" called Erith. "Leave us some weapons!"

"You should have no need of weapons," replied a Domidain, surprised. "The Mothers did not tell us to leave them."

"Nor did they say you should not," Erith replied, his voice cool. "We do not wish to be left here without some means to defend ourselves. The Mothers would want you to leave us one rifle and one pistol. If you doubt me, call Domidain."

The guard, looking confused, tried to comply. As Erith had probably anticipated, Domidain was much too occupied with weightier matters to answer him. After a moment he gave up. And after a little more argument, and forceful demands on Erith's part, they received the weapons he asked for.

The guards disappeared into the tunnel, and the two on duty inside closed the massive wooden door. The humans and Erith were alone and free.

And almost immediately the fighting started overhead.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



It was late afternoon. The two humans and Erith stood in sunlight, but to the east, half the world was already in shadow. And out of that shadow a Shemsi scoutship suddenly flashed into view, hurtling toward Birth

Mountain.

The ship was several kilometers away and low to the ground. To Leo's trained eye it seemed to be moving as fast as atmospheric friction on the metal skin would allow. And attached to the sleek silvery hull was a detachable pod.

That could only be a bomb of some sort. Leo would have bet it was one powerful enough to wipe the caldera clean of life if it exploded inside. With the cold efficiency that characterized the Shemsi, the attackers intended to begin and end this combat with a single blow, if that was possible.

It was not. A yellow beam flashed down from the sky. It caught the attacking scout just as it started to rise for the pass over the cone. The bomber's momentum was so great it continued over the mountain, vanishing in a few seconds. But the detachable pod went with it, and the Shemsi rebels inside were dead.

Leo shielded his eyes from the sun and peered upward. Four of the standardized scouts were rapidly descending, already assuming a circular pattern. A fifth was moving farther south and down, heading toward them.

Before the defending ships could reach their stations a second rebel bomber tried another low-level run, this time from the south. It fought back by flashing a beam upward at the closest ship, and caught the fifth one that was almost overhead.

Three yellow beams knifed through the air, and two of them reached the second bomber. It suddenly veered off course and vanished to the east.

The hit defending scout abruptly went into a nosedive, smashing into the ground only a few kilometers away. Leo felt his heart sink. That ship had almost certainly been the one the Mothers had assigned to pick them up. And now there was no escape. They were helpless, stranded beside a mountain that might be blown apart at any second.

To linger there was an invitation to death. "Let's go!" Leo said aloud, before leading Misty and Erith away at a trot. It was unlikely they could get far enough to be safe if the mountain blew, but he preferred the attempt to passively waiting for death.

Several more defending scoutships had appeared in the sky. This caused whoever was commanding the rebels to decide on a change in tactics. Yellow beams began flashing back and forth in the stratosphere. The attackers were zeroing in on the circling defenders.

All Shemsi scoutships were virtually identical, and equally armed except for those recently equipped with bombs. The rebels were moving past as fast as atmospheric heat permitted, while the defenders were locked into slower circling patterns. Leo glanced upward occasionally as they hurried across the plateau. The somewhat outnumbered attackers were having better success in the sky. Those killing beams had a limited range, and their greater fly-by speed made them harder to hit.

The Shemsi rebels launched another bomb attack, this time from the north. With their usual lack of imagination, they had apparently decided to attack from all four quarters and were sticking to the plan. Their obvious hope was that the scout could slip through while the defenders overhead were preoccupied.

That hope was not realized. The first priority of the Mothers was to protect Birth Mountain—and themselves. A hovering scout came screaming down on an intercept course, moving so fast Leo knew the hull must disintegrate. It began crumpling as he watched. But just before the craft flew apart, a yellow beam flashed down and barely caught the approaching bomber, at what seemed its extreme limit of range.

The defending pilot, true to the Mothers, guided his smoking ship away from Birth Mountain. It smashed into the next peak to the east. The bomber survived the effect of the beam and passed over the cone. Leo saw the silver shape of the bomb plummet downward in the sunlight.

Leo stopped. They were still in the open, and there was little point in running a few steps more.

It seemed strange to have come so far, survived this long, only to die as helpless pawns, sacrificed in a game not of their choosing. Leo drew Misty closer with his right arm, and felt the presence of Erith to his left. Impulsively, he clasped the Shemsi around the shoulders. His instinct was to comfort, to offer what solace he could in this hour of their death. And

Erith, with his unswerving loyalty to the Mothers, must be in sore need of comfort. His logical, orderly world was coming apart before his eyes.

They waited, and listened, and watched... but nothing happened. Several seconds after the bomb must have hit, there was still no reaction. It dawned on Leo that it must have been a dud.

That, too, was like the Shemsi. Stirred out of their accustomed pace by the necessity for speed, the rebels had somehow failed in the design of their bomb. Which meant they were all probably duds, and Birth Mountain was safe from total destruction, at least for now.

There was a whistling sigh, a slowly dying scream of heated air from overhead—and the third bomber, now with only the pod carrier attached, settled slowly toward them on its anti-grav generators.

Leo looked desperately for a place to hide. The land for a kilometer on all sides was virtually flat, a grassy table. There were many rocks scattered around, but none large enough to conceal them.

The ship came down less than a thousand meters away. It appeared intact, although the shiny skin had been darkened by friction. Leo felt a sudden wild hope.

"Erith! Is it possible for your yellow beams to kill the people inside a scout without ruining its drive system?"

Erith looked startled. He had to think for a minute, and in the Shemsi manner, did his cogitation verbally. "The yellow personnel death beam is a variant of the pink vibrator, Leo. Both create distortions in magnetic potentials at the molecular level. The yellow beam has a longer effective range because it is designed specifically for cellular tissue, which is more easily damaged than most non-organic matter. A hit upsets the chemical balance in the liquid medium surrounding the body cells, causing a rapid transfer of sodium ions across the membranes. This results in extreme shock, followed by death. It is possible that the crew is dead or dying and the ship still operable, yes."

"Let's test that theory," said Leo, starting for the silent scout at a run.

There was no sign of life from the downed craft. The upper hatch that led directly into the small airlock fronting the pilot's compartment was accessible from the ground. For once Leo blessed the sameness that imbued the lives of the Shemsi. There was no outer locking mechanism—there had never been a need for one in Shemsi experience—and Erith knew how to open the circular hatch.

A careless and malignant fate had destroyed the ship the Mothers had reserved for them. Now good luck had cancelled the bad, and they at least had a fighting chance again. If the scout was still operable... if they could seize it and flee without being noticed by the combatants...

Leo was carrying the sonic rifle; Erith had kept the pistol. Leo traded with the Shemsi. He trusted his own faster reactions, and the pistol was a more maneuverable weapon at close quarters.

"Wait here while we check out the interior," Leo said to Misty. He saw the protest start to form on her face and quickly added, "You're not armed; we are. Now please wait."

Misty closed her mouth without speaking. The hatch opened under Erith's fingers, and he pulled hard as he stepped out of the way. The small airlock inside was empty.

Leo, crouching low, led the way in, Erith right behind him. It was the work of a minute for the Shemsi to operate the inner controls, and release the door latches.

Erith moved to the side. As Leo bent his head and pushed the hatch open, pistol at the ready, he caught a glimpse of Misty entering the airlock behind him, quietly smiling.

And then Leo realized his desire to protect Misty had been foolish. If he and Erith died here, Misty would not want to live. Even if she did, the cataclysm occurring behind them made the possibility unlikely. They would win free, or perish, together.

Two dazed-looking Shemsi sat at the central control console. They turned to face Leo as he sprang inside. The two pilots had not heard them enter the

outer airlock. One fumbled at his seat harness, trying to work himself loose. The second was more alert. His hand dove for the pistol at his side.

It was impossible to reach the Shemsi before he could fire. Leo regretfully squeezed the trigger. The two Shemsi were obviously very sick, perhaps too far gone to live—but Leo would have spared them if he could.

The beam caught both pilots. They jerked erect, as though every muscle had gone into spasm, and as swiftly collapsed. The two were dead before their bodies slumped down into the seat harnesses.

"I'll check the rear section, you take the front," Leo said to Erith, low-voiced. So far no one alive was aware the ship was under attack. The gunnery officer, seated before his console at the front of the control compartment, was obviously dead. A fourth crewman lying on the floor was dead or nearly so. There should be about eight more people aboard, if the ship was fully manned.

Erith nodded, and led the way through the main entrance at the rear. He pointed to a hatch at the end of the narrow corridor, and Leo hurried to it as Erith stepped into the nearest open compartment. The Shemsi fired his rifle almost immediately, then shot again. There was a muffled groan from inside.

Leo reached the hatch and quickly opened the airtight door. He walked through a series of narrow personnel access corridors surrounding the engine, and found three Shemsi sprawled at various places. Quick checks revealed that all were dead. He hurried back to the corridor and the living quarters, where Erith was methodically checking the remaining compartments.

There was a look of calm, somewhat grim determination on Erith's face when Leo joined him. They entered the last room together, and it was empty. "Only one brother was still truly alive," Erith said as they hurried back to the control compartment. "The others were dead or dying; I gave those still living a merciful end."

That, too, was like the Shemsi, at least when dealing with their own kind. But inflicting the "merciful end" had obviously taken a toll on Erith's inner

strength.

Leo considered hurling the bodies out the airlock, but decided to wait. He wanted to get out of the battle zone as quickly as possible. Instead he dumped the gunnery officer on the floor and took his seat. Erith gave him hasty instructions on how to fire the weapons, and he and Misty took the two pilot seats. Leo rose long enough to close the two airlock hatches before they lifted off.

Erith boosted the speed as rapidly as was safe and headed south, directly away from Birth Mountain. He was keeping close to the ground and weaving among the peaks. Hopefully, the defending scouts of the Mothers would be too busy to fire at a ship obviously fleeing the scene. If not, he could at least try to make them miss.

They had gone less than fifteen kilometers when a long high ridge forced Erith upward. Leo had been playing with his gunner's screen, and managed to get Birth Mountain in focus as they rose. He was just in time to see the attack by the last bomber.

The sky was a flashing confusion of fast-moving ships and darting yellow and pink beams. It was impossible for Leo to be certain, but it seemed to him there were now far more defenders than attackers. If so, the rebellion was almost over.

The final bomber came in from the west, low to the ground and rising for the run over the cone, as usual. Two yellow beams came seeking the last daring attacker, and both were successful—but too late. Leo saw sunlight glitter on an object hurtling downward into the cone as the Shemsi in the ship died.

Three bombs had already smashed into the ground, and none had exploded. Leo did not expect this one to go off. Nevertheless he called out, "Last bomb into the caldera! Brace yourselves!"

And the world turned to flame behind them.

The delivery problem with the first three bombs, whatever it was, had been corrected. The power and fury of the blast, confined as it was in the

giant cup of the caldera, was contained and vented upward. A vast column of flame rose into the sky, its top seething and roiling, the sides clean-cut and distinct. Like a giant burning rod thrusting toward space, the column fed itself at the base, rearing higher and higher. And finally, just as the scout dipped down again and a peak cut off Leo's view, the darker top of the column began spreading outward into a familiar mushroom shape.

"Take us up a little!" Leo called urgently. "No one is going to be shooting at us."

Erith had had his screen focused ahead and been intently concentrating on guiding the scout. He had time to lift them just a few hundred meters before the shock wave hit. The scoutship shivered and vibrated under the impact, but easily rode it through. Most of the fury of that titanic blast had been directed upward.

Nothing inside the cone could have survived that terrible explosion. The Mothers, their attendants, the millions of Shemsi babies in the nursery and the growth canals—all were dead. In one bold and radical stroke, the rebels had altered their biology, and their lives. They had paved the way for a new order among the Shemsi.

"Let's head directly for space!" Leo called to Erith. The scout tilted upward immediately in response. Now was the time to go, before the rebels got their battle group reorganized and reactivated the guardian satellites. For the moment, with so much activity occurring in the sky of Creche World, Leo did not expect to be noticed.

They were now some distance away, but Birth Mountain was still visible in the telescope when they reached the thin upper air. The initial bright column was fading, dying away into smoke and blackness. But at its base a new glow had appeared, a shimmering lake of fire that filled what remained of the battered walls of the cone. The ancient volcano was erupting.

The vast accumulation of knowledge possessed by the three Queen Mothers—and the hundreds of Shemsi females who had preceded them in that ancient society—must have made them aware Birth Mountain was not totally dormant. But they had been unwilling to move, clinging to the old ways and the first home, even though their advanced children could easily

have provided a better baby factory. And now the stable but thin layer of protecting rock had been breached, and the hot blood of the planet itself was oozing to the surface.

Erith had finally found time to switch one of his two screens to the rear. Leo saw the shock on his companion's face when it focused on his birthplace.

As they watched, the welling flood of molten rock overflowed two places where the high walls had shattered. Great streams of lava began rolling down the old slopes. Huge boulders were flying into the air, and water, transformed into instant steam, was hissing skyward. The eruption had become a full-fledged volcanic explosion.

Erith turned back to his front screen. Determinedly he picked a course away from the planet. As the last traces of atmosphere vanished he switched on the main drive, which automatically converted the anti-grav generators into stasis generators, freeing the ship and all inside from the effects of acceleration. And within a few short minutes they reached the speed of light, passed over, and were safe from any possible interception.

"Are you going to land with us, or return and try for acceptance by the rebels?" Leo asked. He was at the controls, which he had learned to operate over the past few weeks. Erith was in the second seat, while Misty slept in the crew quarters. Earth was a bright white-and-blue globe a million kilometers ahead, incredibly beautiful, at least to human sight.

"I must return, Leo; I no longer have a mission here. But rather than trying for acceptance by the rebels, I have decided to seek one of the colony planets and attempt to blend in there. With luck, I can live out the rest of my life in peace."

Leo was silent. Erith had changed and grown over their time together, but being forced to dissemble for the rest of his long life would grate on his sensibilities. And yet he would certainly never fit in on Earth. His best hope was that the rebels had declared a general amnesty, and he would be forgiven for helping the captive humans escape.

"I had never thought to see this day—" Erith began, and broke off in mid-sentence. His body stiffened, his head jerked forward, and his eyes closed. Leo stared at him in alarm. And then Erith leaned back, as far as his seat harness permitted, and raised his face to the ceiling. "MOTHER! *Mother, I hear!*"

And finally Leo understood. He waited and watched in silence.

Erith's body jerked and twitched convulsively, the teeth chattering, the eyes streaming tears. The possession went on for what seemed several minutes, though it must have been less. And finally the fury of the emotion passed, and the trembling eased. Erith wiped his flooding eyes with one pink hand, opened them, and blinked away the remaining tears.

Leo did not speak. Erith slowly regained his self-possession. At last he looked over at Leo. Misty had appeared in the door from the corridor, drawn by the Shemsi's loud cry. She watched in wondering silence.

Erith's voice was calm. "I shall be landing with you after all, Leo. I am still the Shemsi ambassador to Earth. Erithain has just reconfirmed her original order and issued new instructions."

"So they had some secret method of getting away!" Misty walked toward them. "I'm not surprised. I'll bet there was a hidden ship somewhere in the mountain, and a fast way out of there. Those old women were too wise to play games with the rebels, letting them run free and have their hidden labs, without taking a few precautions. Who won the final battle, Erith?"

"There was no more fighting after the attacking ships were destroyed at Birth Mountain," Erith answered, his voice somewhat slow and dreamy. "Erithain knew you would want to know and communicated all to me. The Mothers have moved to Earingell and are living in the underground quarters formerly occupied by the rebels. All who survived have been forgiven and accepted again into the grace of the Mothers. And they have announced there will be no more births, unless the children now being raised to maturity do not fulfill their genetic potential to produce two sexes. These Mothers expect to be the last of their kind. As we will be the last of ours."

There was a lingering silence in the small scoutship control room. Misty broke it by walking across to Erith and putting her arms around him. "From the selfish viewpoint, Erith, that is awfully good news. We wanted to keep you with us, and now we can."

"And with peace in effect between our species, maybe our scientists can learn what it is about you that grants such a long life," Leo joined in. "In which case, our friendship will endure much longer than might otherwise be the case. And everyone on Earth will be very grateful to the Shemsi."

The broad smile on Erith's face told Leo he had been wrong in thinking a Shemsi could never know strong emotions. They, too, could learn and grow from experience, regardless of biology. And while it was still true he could never feel for Erith the love he felt for Misty, he had come to value the Shemsi as a true and tested friend.

Perhaps, when Erith grew tired of being an ambassador and their time in the Space Service had been completed, the three of them could be together again. There was a vast and mostly unexplored galaxy out there, and if their lives could be extended to match Erith's... They would be one of the few combinations of three people where there could be no jealousy and no personality conflicts.

That was another dream, perhaps possible, perhaps not. Dreaming was one of the characteristics of the human species, but the Shemsi were rapidly learning. They had a new biology and a new order, to testify to the power of the dream held by a few Shemsi scientists.

But for now there was still a job to do. "Let's go home," said Leo, and reached for the exterior radio switch. "Earth Space Central, this is Space Service Exploratory Crew 69, accompanying Ambassador Erith of the Shemsi. Request permission to land a Shemsi scoutship at Geneva Spaceport. Please acknowledge."

Leo headed toward Earth without waiting for the return call.