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# Ice Prison by Kathleen Sky

## *PROLOGUE*

Mithras was a frozen hell of a planet; a blizzard's joy, a haven for hurricanes, and a toy for glaciers. Covered with permafrost and whipped by high speed winds, it should have been useless as a place for men to live. But there were minerals under the frozen tundra, and there were men and women the Confederation did not want on any of its other planets.

The Confederation Colonial Service, or CCS, had put Mithras to use as a penal colony and had transported the riffraff of the galaxy to its frozen wastes. Most of the early convicts died in the bitter cold; those that survived bred generations of miners for the CCS. The planet was now technically only a mining colony—but those who had to live there knew better. It was still a prison.

The CCS had established a main cave in the horseshoe-shaped ridge of hills that made up the only inhabited area on the planet. The Colonial Service section was at the back of the low half circle, the mines curved away to the west, and on the east was the Homecave.

This was the closest thing to a real home the Mithrans would ever know. It was a bank of caves and grottos—man-made, cut into solid cold rock by the first prisoners. No tunnel connected the Homecave to the CCS cave. Originally there had been such a tunnel, but after five convict uprisings it was deemed advisable to seal off any connecting area between the colonists and the people who governed them. The policy was set early and stayed locked into a chance-formed system.

Howell looked out of his bubble-sled at the sheer-walled cliffs and the

swirling snow and knew he wasn't going to like Mithras. He was a cold and lonely man, well suited for a life here, but the CCS had warned him that Mithras was not very likely to make that life pleasant... or too long.

## ***CHAPTER ONE***

"Commander Gulimel, do you mean to tell me all of this was caused by a child?" Captain Burian Howell glanced up at the face of his new second-in-command. Finding nothing there but Slavic inscrutability, he hunched his neck deeper into his shoulders like a frustrated bird of prey. Howell glared with hooded eyes at a stack of infocubes littering the top of his desk, cubes bursting with data on the chaos that was Mithras. He could easily understand why the CCS had given him a shiny, overdue set of captain's stripes to go with the job. Five hours on the planet's icy surface and he was ready and willing to give the stripes back and demand a nice, safe commander's position on any planet but Mithras. After all, he had been more than a little suspicious when told of his new rank. It hadn't been earned by either good behavior or bootlicking any of the top command of the Confederation Colonial Service. He sighed and looked hopefully up at Gulimel, towering over his small desk in the incredibly cramped office he must now call his own.

"Not exactly a child, sir. Kiedron Agata is over fourteen." Lieutenant Commander Jens Gulimel stood at rigid attention in front of the desk, the effect of military precision marred by the fact that his blond hair was in dire need of cutting and his dress tunic was entirely too tight for his chunky frame. "That's old enough to breed on a colony planet—husbandhigh, they say." He surreptitiously tugged at his uniform collar. "I know that and I don't like it. Children make lousy parents. When you reach eighty-seven as I have, you'll see how young fourteen really is. I only hope the CCS lets you live so long. I don't think I'll see my one hundred and fifty if they keep dropping things like this on me. Of all the stinking, incompetent, muddleheaded messes." Howell looked even more a predator as he bent over the cubes, an owl picking daintily at the bones of a mouse—or in this case, a rat. His white wispy hair and long beak of a nose made him appear even older than his years. Misguided vanity kept him from using cosmetic aids, and only the pressure of his superiors forced him to use the life-lengthening techniques that kept his body still strong and almost young. His long, tapering fingers sifted through the stacks of cubes as he sniffed in disgust at the smell of the

Colonial Service's latest batch of carrion.

There was one cube in the viewer at his side. The screen was lit, illuminating the face of a child-soon-to-be-woman called Kiedron Agata. Howell adjusted the focus and stared at the image of a round-faced girl with wide, childish brown eyes and dark, raggedly cut hair. Her mouth was tight, hostile. Nothing childish there.

"So this is what's brought a whole colony to its knees? One little twit of a girl—and according to CCS reports, not even very bright at that."

"I've developed a healthy cynicism about official CCS reports—there's always the possibility of down-and-out fraud," Jens said cautiously. He appeared to be sweating inside the too-tight uniform, and Howell watched the phenomenon with interest. Even with the warmth inside the cave, the office was quite a bit colder than he was used to. "Doctor Ronson, before his death, said she was the smartest child he had ever met on Mithras," the aide finished.

"Why didn't someone listen to him and get her off planet? We have schools for colonial children, jobs, positions—why wasn't she spotted by the Academy recruiters?"

Jens shifted uneasily, his ice-blue eyes betraying some inner turmoil. "Ronson was a sandfreak, sir. Out of his mind most of the time. You know what CCS doctors are like—if he had been any good he wouldn't have been on Mithras. So none of the brass paid much attention to his ravings about the Agata kid. After all, if the Academy hadn't found anything worthwhile in her, how could a recruiter expect an addict to be more perceptive? The girl showed as a low normal—fine for breeding, but nothing to excite the Academy in the brilliance department."

"So she faked the tests out. How—who was behind her? Children don't run revolutions by themselves, commander."

"No, sir." Gulimel's voice was flat and dry. "But you see, the whole colony is behind her, all except our personnel and the nab troops; we don't get any help from the colonists. At first it was her father running the show, but it only got worse after he died. Kiedron is the mind behind this now, and the longer you're here the more you will understand that." Jens' voice betrayed some doubt as to how long Howell might last on Mithras. The captain knew there had been three commandants in the last year alone.

One had been killed by Tovo Agata, Kiedron's father; Kiedron had killed the second; and the last one had been taken off planet raving mad and screaming in paranoid delirium. But he had suicided less than four hours out from Mithras, and here was his second-in-command without a scratch on him. *How deeply was Gulimel involved in the deaths of my predecessors?* Howell wondered. *And will I be next?* He looked up at the calm blond man in front of him and wanted very much to trust him. He had to trust someone in this ice prison the CCS had given him. But Gulimel was alive and three other men were dead—and Howell had a definite feeling that Gulimel was not saying even half of what he knew.

Mithras was no model colony, even without the Agata brat. It was primarily a mining colony with some deep cave agriculture and food processing. The colonists were a sullen lot, fifth generation and increasingly disenchanted with the CCS.

Howell tapped the edge of one of the cubes and watched it topple off the stack to land on the floor at the lieutenant commander's feet. Jens swiftly retrieved it and returned it to the desk. "Sit down, Gulimel," Howell said, waving a hand in the direction of a small toadstool of a chair jammed between the side of the desk and the wall. "I hate having people loom over me. Being as tall as I am, I prefer to do the looming."

Jens nodded and slid gratefully onto the chair.

He tried to smile, but to Howell it came out looking suspiciously like a grimace of pity.

"Tell me," he continued, "you've served under three commandants in the last year alone—all obviously unsuited for the job. Why weren't you given the position this time around? You've got more than enough seniority."

"First, I didn't want it, and second—well, it's all there in my file. The Service doesn't even want to raise me to a full commander, let alone a captain. I married a native." Jens seemed tense, and Howell wondered if this was what the man had been trying so hard to hide.

"A colonial, you mean. This cryogenicist's paradise hasn't got any natives. A colder, more nasty place would be harder to find anywhere. If I were native to Mithras I'd have died of the blue megrims before I was born."

Jens Gulimel grinned and visibly relaxed. "The colonials don't like it much either, but they have no choice. Would you like to have a look at one of the mines now, sir, or would you prefer to grill the CCS nabs about the Agata kid?"

"I suppose the mine would involve getting back into one of those walking sleeping bags I was brought here in? The idea of bundling up like that every time you go to the surface could get to be a bloody bore."

"Freezing to death would be more of a bore. I'm afraid the suits are a necessity; without them you wouldn't last five minutes out there."

"Then how does the Agata manage to be so active if she has to run around in thermals? Seems as if that would make her easier to catch."

"She's fifth generation; they don't feel the cold as badly as we do. Kiedron uses that fact to the hilt. She can move in, hit, and be away before the nabs can even suit up. We've tried acclimatizing the men, even tried cold-model androids, but no luck." Jens spread his hands in resignation. "No one not born here ever gets used to the cold, and as for the androids—Kiedron hunted them down and had them killed, one by one."

Howell swallowed noisily. "I think I would like to see the mine now. It can't be any more depressing than these cubes."

The two men moved through the cramped corridors of the CCS cave, Howell having to duck to avoid the low roof. All the corridors had been cut out of the rock by hand several generations ago by the first colonists, back when Mithras was used as a penal colony. The thermal suits were stacked in cases close to the openings of the tunnels, a situation that Howell could see would be a problem. It would be only too easy to sabotage the suits or remove them altogether, making the job of tracking down the revolutionaries that much more difficult. When questioned about it, Jens glumly admitted that this had happened more than once, and even elaborate locks had been useless.

"We even tried having nabs stay in thermals round the clock, but they couldn't take it—the suits are too cumbersome and hot," Jens explained as he helped Howell into a bright red outfit. "The Service doesn't care what kind of equipment we get here, sir. I think most of this was left over from

the Vegan Wars, hundreds of years ago—you talk about war surplus! These were the best things they sent us and they're none too good. Nothing's too good on Mithras."

"By the Mother, they must weigh fifteen kilos! No wonder the nabs couldn't take it."

"You'll appreciate every gram once we hit the outside, sir, believe me."

Jens was only too right. Howell hastily pulled his faceplate shut as the lieutenant commander opened the outer lock. Cold air sucked quickly into the lungs could kill; Howell took several deep breaths of the oxygen-rich mixture in his tanks and waited while Jens closed the lock behind him. The bright red suits that Howell had found ridiculous at the spaceport took on a chilling purpose as he watched the flurries of snow almost hide his aide from him, even though he was less than two meters away.

The wind-driven snow caused other problems as Howell watched his face mask rapidly fog up. "Gulimel!" he called over his hood mike, "I can't see a thing. My face plate is frosted over."

"Hit the defrost button on the right, inside your hood. You should be able to reach it with your tongue." Jens's voice was tinny in his ears. Howell quickly found the button and with some clumsy maneuvers managed to turn it on. The face plate rapidly cleared and Howell could see a red blocky form to his left that should be Gulimel.

"The mine is this way, sir," the voice hummed in his hood as Howell watched the figure beckon. "If you're worried about getting lost I suggest you use the lifeline at your waist and hook onto me.

I'm used to finding my way around—but it's very easy to lose your sense of direction out here. The compass on your sleeve helps some, but not enough, unfortunately." Another flurry of snow obscured Jens, and Howell moved clumsily in the direction he thought would lead to where he had just seen the man.

"I think I had better...."

A red-clad arm reached out of the blue-white emptiness to his right and grabbed his elbow. He had walked right by Jens and had not even seen him. How a revolution could be managed by a very small group was

beginning to be only too clear to him. "I do think the lifeline *would* be best, commander," he said as he fumbled at his waist.

Jens was quicker and had the line out and snapped in place before Howell was even sure where it had been. Clearly he had a lot to learn about survival on Mithras. Saying very little, he let Jens lead him across the frozen wasteland toward the mines. He had to take Jens's word for it that that was where they were going. The lieutenant commander could just as easily be leading him into a trap with Kiedron Agata waiting to do in another commandant. Howell mentally composed a letter of resignation for the CCS as Jens pulled him over the icy tundra.

The location of the mine was marked by a dark, slab-sided tower squatting over the grav tube. Howell almost bumped headlong into the tower, and only Jens's tugging on the lifeline saved him from a nasty bruising.

"Ought to put a bleeper on the swiving thing."

Howell muttered as Gulimel led him to the entrance lock. "Make a report on that, commander. I want beepers on every stationary object in the colony. Then we may be able to find things without killing ourselves in the process."

"Lustvogel tried that, sir. Kiedron had them deactivated in a week—all except for the one she had placed in the middle of an active glacier. We had nabs chasing themselves all over the hills for ages. Lost twelve men. It's much safer to make the men understand that they must stick together and never feel too secure out in the open. Standard survival tactics."

"Yes, quite." Howell had an uneasy feeling that almost anything he might come up with would have been tried before and rejected because Kiedron had sabotaged it. He went back to composing his resignation letter and had just about completed it by the time he and Jens reached the bottom of the five-hundred-meter-deep shaft. The grav tube opened out on a maze of rock-lined tunnels, all of them marked with cryptic notations as to direction and degree of slope.

"Don't pay any attention to those, sir. Chanoch did them one night for a lark. Had us really confused for a while. The night shift thought that the day shift had done them and vice versa."

"Chanoch? You mean Kiedron didn't do *this* bit of mischief?"

"Yes, sir. Ezhno Chanoch is Kiedron's second-in-command. He's a couple of years older than Kiedron, but not as bright. His father's an Outcaver. Watch your head here; the ceilings are low and not very smooth."

The mine was indoors, but no attempt had been made to provide artificial heating. As a result there was ice everywhere and deep pools of slushy water. Howell slipped several times in the first few meters and it was only Jens' surefootedness that saved him. Over Howell's protests, Jens had insisted on retaining the lifeline in the mines. But now the captain was glad of the extra security, though he would not admit it aloud.

The ice underfoot wasn't always water. Pockets of frozen carbon dioxide were frequent in the below-freezing temperatures and there was the danger of slipping into a pool of liquid acid or chemical slush left over from the mining machines. Jens pointed out that some of the more liquid pools were the most dangerous and must be avoided at all costs. Howell shivered inside his thermals when Jens told him how quickly the chemicals could strip a man of clothing and flesh, and dissolve his bone to a frothing nothingness.

"Can't something be done?" Howell asked, skirting a particularly deep pool. "People could be killed so easily down here. Confederation safety regs state that—"

"They don't apply here, sir. Our major function is producing more minerals for the Confederation, and if a few colonials die in the process, what of it? They breed quickly." Jens's voice was bitter.

"And I always thought of Hell as being hot," Howell mused. "This is more of a hell than could ever be imagined by mind of man. I would sell my soul for a lake of fire about now. And after I'd warmed myself at it I'd dump about half the CCS into it."

"And the other half, sir?" Jens picked up quickly on the straight line.

"Why, I'd send *them* to Mithras!"

Laughing, the two men moved slowly down the tunnels toward an area where Jens said a work crew would be.



They could hear the miners long before they were close enough to see them. The mining-bore machines thundered in the narrow tunnels as they ate great chunks out of the stone walls. Light from the glow panels set in the wall was dim and flickery, the panels vibrating to the snarling sound of the drills. Jens and Howell rounded a corner in the tunnel and were almost on top of the mining crew. The group of some two dozen men was packed into the narrow end of the dig. Several of the men were on top of the massive bores while others filled shuttle hoppers with the cut rock. The air vibrated with noise. The men were almost naked even though the temperature hovered at around minus fifteen celsius.

"Do you see why Kiedron and company have the drop on us, sir?" Jens asked. He was still using the hood mike; trying to talk in the deafening proximity of the bore drills would have been an impossibility. Howell noted that the miners used a series of rapid hand motions to communicate. He made a mental note to learn it quickly, as he dodged out of the path of a bore drill traveling in reverse as it built up momentum for its next attack on the end of the tunnel.

The walls were colored a rich blue-gray by veins of ducocite, a mineral vital to the production of data-processing equipment. The Confederation believed in making use of both convicts and whatever resources a planet could produce. The combination of the two had formed the problem that was Mithras. There were none of the original convicts left, but their descendants were still doing the time.

"They must be freezing to death," Howell said to Jens as they watched the miners work. "How did they learn to adjust to the cold?"

"Easy—those that couldn't, died. What you see here is planned evolution. I'm picking up a little of it myself. Living here ten years has made me able to at least tolerate cold, and my children are even better at it than I am. I guess my wife had more to do with that than I did. She has trouble with heat. Put her in a room over zero celsius and she melts."

"Then these people can never leave Mithras!"

"If that were true, we wouldn't have any trouble with recruiters. Actually it's not that bad—it's easier to adjust to heat than to cold. All you have to do is keep the electrolytes balanced and avoid dehydration or heat prostration. I figure it might take one generation to bring these people back to normal, and the kids who get taken to the Academy must be able

to adjust pretty well. But the Mithrans wouldn't want it. They love the climate, oddly enough. It's the CCS they hate."

"And I'm the CCS around here." Howell shivered as though a sleam had walked on his grave. "Let's get out of here. The cold..." Howell let it trail off. Even with the thermals a chill was creeping in, and his toes and fingertips were numb.

"Right, follow me. I'll show you the reports on your predecessors and then call in some of the nabs to give you a better picture of what we're up against."

Jens led Howell back down the frosty corridors toward the grav tube, neither of them saying much. Howell was too busy trying to keep warm and Jens seemed preoccupied.

Howell was thinking longingly of a hot bath and some tea, and he devoutly hoped they were close to the tube entrance when Jens stopped in his tracks beside a dark lump along their path. With a half-smothered exclamation, the aide knelt beside the frost-covered mound. Then, getting quickly to his feet, he reached out to pull off Howell's lifeline. "Let's get out of here," he muttered. "Walk slowly but keep moving. The grav tube is just around the next turn. I'll be right behind you, but don't look back."

Howell moved ahead at a brisk walk, wondering what had happened. Was this the ambush he had feared? Jens Gulimel could so easily shoot him in the back and dump his body into one of the acid pools—then report him as lost on the tundra. No one would ever know or even care. Jens's comments about Service doctors also applied to Service commandants. Rotten planets got rotten commandants—or men like Howell who would not toe the party line. Such men generally ended up dead.

As he turned the corner Howell could hear the sound of a fight behind him. He sensed rather than saw the flash of a laser, then Jens was beside him sprinting for the tube. "Run for it!" he gasped, suiting his actions to his words. Howell was not far behind him. The tube was empty and both men threw themselves into the arched opening and hit the deckplate at the same time. They rode up in silence. At Howell's first attempt to question, Jens quickly shushed him and stood, head tilted, listening for another grav disk rising below them. There was no sound at all from the depths of the mine.

Once on the surface Gulimel signaled over his pocket transmitter for a squad of nabs to meet them at the tower. He motioned to Howell to pull his laser and stand just to the left of the grav tube entrance, while he took up an identical pose on the right side and stood waiting. The mine was still, no sound of anything from the tube, but Jens did not relax his vigilance until the squad of nabs joined them. He had a quick conversation with the squad leader in the hand language and the squad disappeared down the grav tube and into the mine.

"I think we should leave, sir. The nabs will take care of it, and the sooner you're back in the main cave, the better." Howell nodded, too cold to speak.

They reached the cave quickly, Jens half dragging Howell the last few meters to the sealed hatchway. Once inside, Howell stamped his feet to get the circulation back in them and removed his faceplate. The rush of warm air stung his cheeks and neck, and he raised his still-frosted glove to the smarting skin and touched it gingerly.

"I see you know a little about cold," Jens commented approvingly. "The last man in your spot about tore half his cheek off by rubbing too hard after coming indoors."

"I was a skier," Howell said briefly, tugging at his thermals to get them off.

Jens came to his aid and the two of them stripped down to their uniforms. To Howell's surprise his uniform was soaking wet, and one glance at Jens standing like a drowned rat in the ruins of his dress uniform made Howell wonder if he looked as bad.

"Sorry, sir, that's the way they work. The layer of sweat helps insulate your body from the cold. There are some dry clothes through here." Jens led him toward a locker room. "Showers are through that door, but don't get it too hot. Try lukewarm at first." Howell nodded. Stripping off his soggy uniform, he made his way to the showers, shivering with the cold in the room and his own lowered body temperature.

Once back in his office, dressed in a clean uniform and wrapping himself around a mug of tea, Howell looked up at the lieutenant commander standing again in front of his desk.

"Sit down, Gulimel," Howell said in a voice as cold as the outdoors. "Now, do I get told what all of that was about, or do I just get to play audience around here?"

"Sorry, sir, I didn't want to risk our necks standing around jabbering out there," Jens sat down on the toadstool chair. "I could tell the cold was getting to you and I was afraid Kiedron might get you, too. That was a dead man in the tunnel, sir. A recently dead man in a CCS officer's uniform—one of yours."

"What? How did he get my uniform? Gulimel, I want an explanation!"

"Yes, sir. He was a mine foreman, not well liked. The uniform was probably stolen from your quarters. It had been pulled on over his thermals and was considerably torn in the process. I think it was meant as a warning," Jens concluded dryly.

"And Kiedron Agata?"

"The body had its throat cut—that's the trademark of Kiedron's gang. There were some of her brats hidden down one of the side tunnels, armed with knives and sticks, I managed to wing one of them, I think."

"I want to talk to that squad leader when he gets in—if he gets in."

"He will. Hesslin is well liked by the miners. That's why I called him instead of some of the others. Getting along with the natives—sorry, colonials, is of vital importance here. Captain Lustvogel never learned that, and Kiedron killed him. There are too many of them and not enough Service personnel. We have to learn to get along."

"Like you did?" Howell regretted the remark as soon as he said it. Mithras was already destroying his good sense.

"Possibly." Jens reacted to the remark by folding into himself. His flat blue eyes revealed some of his discomfort. "Hesslin drinks," he said, not looking at Howell. "Ronson snorfed sand and I... I have my wife. If you want to stay sane, Howell, you'd better find something, too." This was the first time Gulimel had used Howell's name and had not called him "sir." Howell writhed mentally at the implied insult.

"I've never been much of a drinker; alcohol and I don't agree too well. I

don't care for sand, and I've never met a woman with enough magic in her to keep me interested for long—so shall I take up Kiedron hunting to keep myself amused?" Howell asked in return.

"No good. Captain Lustvogel tried that, and he found her." Jens rose to his feet. "If you will excuse me, sir, I will inform the foreman's widow of her new status. She works in the mines too— like my wife."

"Fine," Howell nodded, and then roughly cleared his throat. "Jens, I'm sorry. I've been a fool."

Jens nodded, and smiled lopsidedly. "Don't write that letter of resignation yet—give yourself some time to build up some real grievances."

"What?" Howell stood up. "How did you know? What are you, a Jug?"

"No, it doesn't take any telepathy to see what you were thinking. It's the same for all you commandants. Only difference is that the others wrote their letters—and it didn't get *them* off Mithras." With a slight wave of his hand, Jens left the office while Howell pondered whether he had a friend or an enemy in the man.

Making a mental note to look up the lieutenant commander's file, Howell sat down and turned on his viewscreen. The cube with Kiedron's face was still in place. Howell found it much more disturbing than before his trip to the mine. *Kiedron killed him*. Jens's comment about Lustvogel flashed through Howell's mind. Lustvogel's file would be something to check too. Howell flipped through the cubes on Kiedron until he found the one describing Lustvogel's death. She had ambushed him in cold blood and had cut his throat. A paragraph or two onward made it clear the blood was not so cold, after all. Heinrich Lustvogel had been the man responsible for Tovo Agata's death. The colonist had been killed by the commandant; Kiedron had avenged, and was still avenging, her father's death.

Howell caught himself thinking how big a part Kiedron must have played in Marios Rap's insanity. He had a good suspicion he would soon find out what she had in mind for him. The reign of terror had already begun with the death of the mine foreman dressed in his uniform.

Sighing, he shut off the viewscreen and watched the page he had been reading fade into nothingness. He thought of looking for Gulimel or the

nab squad leader, and about writing that letter of resignation. Sometimes cowardice was the best way out. But to let a fourteen-year-old girl and some cold drive him away... the fatcats of the CCS would love having him admit failure. He had managed to get as high as he had by not failing. It had been the one thing that had forced the service to do some things his way. It had been his protection against punishment for the beard pulling he so often felt compelled to do. He couldn't lose that protection now. *After all, he thought grimly, if I can tame Mithras and the Agata chit, they'll have to give me those admiral's stripes—and maybe even the top spot, eventually: head of the CCS.* Howell smiled his best bird of prey smile.

"Kiedron, my love," he said aloud to the empty office, "I am not going to let you get away with this. I'm not like anyone else you've been up against. I'm going to find you and tan your rotten little hide."

Howell felt much better, more of a man. A fit product of his training and a potential head of the Confederation Colonial Service. The resignation letter would never be written. He was going to stick it out, stay sane, do his job—and win.

## ***CHAPTER TWO***

"Alancia, has he stopped bleeding yet?" Ezhno Chanoch glanced back over his shoulder at the huddled group of seven youngsters gathered around the barely visible shape that was Haldar, stretched out on the floor of the mine shaft. A bloody pool was forming on the rocky floor and trickling in a slushy stream toward Chanoch.

He was responsible for the encounter with the new commandant, and it had not gone well. He held in one hand, with a certain deliberate negligence, the dead mine foreman's laser. Unfortunately, Chanoch had no more idea of how to aim and fire it than would an orangutan—which he closely resembled. It was the first time he had gotten his hands on any weapon more deadly than a vibroblade, and he was reveling in the sense of power it gave him. It was also the only tangible thing to be gained from this raid. Bad luck, he told himself, was the only reason he had missed the commandant. He growled under his breath and pointed the weapon in the direction of the shaft's mouth, hoping someone would come within range so he would be able to kill him.

"Haldar is bleeding buckets. We'd better make tracks for the caves before we're caught." The small girlchild pushed her dirty blonde hair out of her eyes and looked worshipfully at Chanoch.

To Alancia, the red-haired Chanoch was a minor god—a fact he exploited shamelessly.

"Well, I guess you may be right. But I did want to wait for the nabs Papa Jens is likely to send after us. I wish I'd killed the motherjumper." He glared ferociously for Alancia's benefit and waved the laser about. "A commander's first duty is to his troops, though, so I'll put my feelings aside."

"Yeah, and Agata will skin you dead if Haldar snuffs it." A small dark-skinned boy had gotten up from beside the wounded child and moved to a position just behind Chanoch. "You'd better give that laser to Agata, or I'll whistle on you," he added as a warning

Chanoch stiffened and stuck out his lower lip. "Ponce, I'll leave you for rat bait if you open your mushbox again. Sure I'm going to give this to Agata—what do you take me for, a fool?"

The expression on Ponce's face showed plainly that this was exactly what he thought of Chanoch, but he shrugged and only repeated Alancia's message. "Haldar is going to snuff it soon, so we'd better zazz back to earth quick. The nabs'll never bother to track us outside."

Grumbling under his breath about cowardly brats, Chanoch hand-signalled the rest of the children to carry Haldar; then, taking his place at the front of the procession, he led the way through the maze of tunnels toward an exit. Kiedron had been prepared for any emergency and had made sure that there were more exits and entrances to the mines than were on any nab chart. Her father had started the underground on Mithras and his daughter had been his best pupil. He had also taught her to take advantage of talent wherever she found it. Chanoch had been in training as a miner—a skill that made him very valuable to Kiedron.

The route to the exit involved a steady climb upward through level after level of mining tunnels. There were no grav disks here, so the trip toward the surface was slow. Ponce and Alancia were both in their early teens and strong enough to support most of Haldar's weight in an awkward two-plus carry. The younger children took turns helping with the load while

Chanoch did nothing to ease the burden for anyone.

Instead, he worried about the reception he'd get from Kiedron Agata. Granted, the harassment was by her orders, and she would feel no loss over the dead mine foreman; but she rarely tolerated sloppiness. Chanoch had a nagging suspicion he had been sloppy.

The last leg of the journey involved climbing through a tunnel half-filled with mining waste—a task resulting in a more than normal share of skinned knees and bruises for everyone. Haldar had passed out soon after being shot, so he was spared the worst of the jolting. His wounds had been bound up with Alancia's shirt, leaving her bare above her ragged trimslax. Her slim adolescent body glimmered in the dim light from the wall panels as she trudged along behind Chanoch. Ponce kept up a low muttered commentary on the state of the passageway and what all of this was probably doing to Haldar's innards.

The mouth of the tunnel was partially blocked, requiring the children to leave one at a time. Chanoch ordered Ponce to put Haldar down and check that the surface was clear of nabs.

"Why don't you go see? I'm bagged from all this toting." Ponce was struggling with the limp body, helping Alancia make the wounded boy as comfortable as possible.

"Because I'm in charge of this expedition, and as commander it's important that I be able to lead us back to the caves. You couldn't carry me too; I'm too big for you to manage."

"And what if I buy it? Would you just leave me here?" Ponce's voice rose to a squeal of indignation. "I'm a load myself, so tell me, what'll you do if I run smack into a nab squad?"

"I'll use this on them," Chanoch waved the laser under Ponce's nose. "While you guys were slumping along, I figured out how to use this here weapon and I think I could get to be real good with it."

"And I'm to be the one to find out how good?" Ponce's voice dripped sarcasm. "I'll take the look-see, but I'll also take the laser." Ponce's hand shot out and snagged the weapon. "After all, if it took you the better part of two hours to figure this out I'd probably manage it in a minute or two." Before Chanoch could do more than sputter, Ponce was gone, his snakelike



body slithering its way to the mine opening.

The surface was clear—or comparatively so. The heavy fogs that were a feature of Mithras obscured everything beyond a meter or two. There could be a whole army on the tundra and Ponce might not see it. But he would hear it. His senses told him the area was safe, so after tucking the weapon into the waistband of his ragged trimslax, he made his way back to the concealed group.

"All clear. The nabs are beating the slush out by the north quad but I think we can glide them without being noticed."

"Right. I want everyone on the quiet from here on." Chanoch knelt on the dirt floor and scratched a few lines into the soil with one grubby fingernail. "See, here's the cave and here are the nabs. We got to weasel-walk, but not coming any closer than a fog to them. Alancia, do you want to lead a yahoo run up into the hills to distract them?"

Alancia pushed her hair out of her face and considered Chanoch's suggestion. She was feeling very proud that he had the faith in her to lead the nabs on a chase all over the tundra. But part of her was not convinced that was what Kiedron Agata would have wanted her to do.

"Don't be a stupid," Ponce snapped. "If Alancia plays hide and creep with the nabs, who's going to help with Haldar? You?" he challenged Chanoch.

"No. I'm the one who'll lead you back to the caves. I can't be burdened down while I'm thinking. *I* have to be responsible since the rest of you can't manage it. Skip the yahoo run—we'll just duck them. But it would have been fun."

Ponce snorted and went to arrange the carry they would use to pass the unconscious Haldar over the rocks to the entrance. Utilizing a bucket-brigadelike motion, Haldar was transported to the open air. Alancia shivered at the first burst of wind, then seemed to steady herself for the trip.

Chanoch, with the only heavy jacket in the group, made no move to offer it to her. It had been part of the load stolen from the new commandant's luggage and he felt a certain pride in its bright color and fancy braiding. He was not about to give it up to anyone—except maybe

Kiedron Agata.

The temperature on the surface was well below freezing, a fact the rag-tag band ignored. Even Alancia, her nipples turning stiff and blue with the cold, accepted it as a normal part of her life. She pressed her body closer to Haldar to conserve her own heat and to protect the child from the wind.

Plodding after Chanoch, the group made its way across a tractless tundra. Roads would have been useless on Mithras. As fast as they could be built, the snow would have covered them and obliterated every trace that they had ever existed. Chanoch used his nose and ears, plus the conditioned homing sense inherent in most natives of Mithras, to lead them back to safety.

They sensed two squads of nabs along the way and passed them without the troops ever knowing they were in the vicinity. Keeping close to the ground, they moved in a deliberately broken, shuffle-slide movement that would not carry on the wind as anything more than random noise. Kiedron had learned from the senior Agata. The cave in use at this time was hidden in a low ridge of hills. Its entrance was blocked by a curtain of ice, and almost invisible if you were not positive of its location. The ice had been formed by the children pouring water and mine waste over the hillside until the proper effect was achieved. Even if the nabs had found the cave it would have been dismissed as an abandoned mine shaft and probably given a very perfunctory search—which was what Kiedron was counting on.

The children moved around the rusting mining tools scattered at the entrance, and Chanoch signaled the young guard hidden on a lip of ice over the tunnel leading to the cave. The child, grinning like a gargoyle, watched them pass under his vantage point and then gave a half-smothered exclamation at the sight of Haldar being carried in.

"Hey, has he snuffed it? Agata isn't going to like that."

"Hush your jaw rattling," Chanoch ordered. "Of course he's still good for a battle or two. Do you think we'd have taken this much trouble with a stiff?" Chanoch turned and motioned his cavalcade forward. Ponce stayed just long enough in view of the guard child so that he could see him let go of Haldar with one hand and make an obscene gesture at Chanoch's back. The child giggled and resumed his gargoyling.

The main cave was a low-pitched room with no signs of any improvements on nature. Agata and company had neither the manpower nor the need to dome every cave they lived in. Such effete actions were for nabs, not the children of Mithras. Their home caves had been similarly cold and they had no desire to change that. Bags of food and piles of clubs and firewood littered the corners of the cave. The food was either begged or stolen, the wood patiently gathered in Mithras's snowbound forests. There were no knives in these heaps. Knives were too valuable to treat so casually. Any child possessing such a weapon cherished it by day and slept with it at night. Possession of a knife made one a warrior and, consequently, important. Chanoch wore two knives habitually, a style that Ponce scorned as being ostentatious. If Chanoch couldn't pin someone or something with the first knife he'd have very little chance to use the second. Life was a very harsh teacher in the milieu these children moved in, and they thrived on it. Those who didn't thrive were dead or deported.

Alancia and Ponce went to bed Haldar down and look for the first aid kit. Kiedron had taught most of her charges all she had learned from the Colonial Service doctor and, in the process, had turned out some fairly competent healers. Necessity had made this imperative. They could not take the risk of seeking help from the colonists or any other adult. Sometimes an injured child would be returned to his or her original home, but there was too great a risk of discovery in that to do it very often.

Chanoch had paid no further attention to the wounded boy. He was too busy wandering around the cave and telling the group of twenty or so youngsters present about how brave he had been on the mine raid. When he asked about Agata he was told she was out on a reconnaissance trip looking for a new cave to hide in should the new commandant get eager to start hunting them down.

"Ho," Chanoch puffed out his cheeks in an exaggerated show of bravado, "we don't have a thing to worry about that way. You shoulda seen him jump when Papa Jens found a body dressed up in the commandant's clothes. I thought I'd split a gut watching them scramble to get out of the mine. He's mouse liver like the rest of the CCS. I almost killed him today, but my aim was a little off. I was using a laser that was a bit different than the ones I'm used to."

"When you get done bragging, Jason says Agata wants the supplies checked and bagged for transporting." Ponce had slipped up behind

Chanoch in time to hear him blathering about the laser and his dark face reflected exactly what he thought of Chanoch.

"You take care of it. I have more important things to do," Chanoch replied loftily. "And by the way, where is *my* laser?"

"I gave it to Jason to pack with the rest of the weapons—and since when did it become your laser? We had a talk about that in the mine and you said—"

"I know, I know, I'm going to show it to Agata. But she'll be so pleased with how I ran things that she should give it to me. After all, I ran that raid and I am second around here."

"I've never heard Agata say that. But she did say you were supposed to check out the supplies— something about the duties of a commander, I think."

Chanoch's ears turned red and he stamped away muttering about upstart know-it-alls.

"I guess things didn't go so good, huh?" A younger teenage girl with a slightly Oriental cast to her face looked up from where she had been sitting with her back to the cave wall. In her hands was a coil of macramelike rope.

Ponce laughed harshly. "Chieng, if you had only been there! Chanoch made a rat's ass of himself. I thought he was going to blow his own stupid head off with that laser. He managed to fire off one shot, but the way it bounced around he could have hit any of us before he'd hit a nab."

"What's Agata going to say? I'll want to be in on the firing squad."

"No such luck; she still needs that clod. But just you wait until we get a few more young miners on our side—then it's goodbye, Chanoch!"

"And hello, Ponce?" Chieng smiled up at him, fluttering her eyelashes in an exaggerated gesture of admiration.

"Could be—it just could be." Ponce swaggered away, his hands tucked into the belt covering the bulge in his clothing made by a concealed laser.

## ***CHAPTER THREE***

"One week on this cold storage of a planet, and I've seen nothing but infocubes." Howell, with Jens beside him, was trying to make some small amount of sense out of the late Marios Rap's files.

"Oh, come on, Burian. That's not fair! I've given you a complete tour of the CCS caves, let you check the supplies with me and even taught you how to put on a coldsuit without breaking it or your arms."

Howell was forced to acknowledge the truth of his aide's version of the past week. "Yes, but ever since the death of that mine foreman I've had the feeling you're keeping me in cotton wool. I am supposed to be commanding something around here, aren't I?"

"Steady, fire-eater. Your time to bite something will come yet. Meanwhile, back to the files."

"I joined the Service for adventure, not to be turned into a bloody file clerk. My problem is that I believed all those recruitment posters." Howell picked up another deck of cubes, making loud meek groaning sounds at its weight and awkwardness.

"See why I didn't want the job?" Jens shifted his weight on the small stool and eyed Howell's more ample chair with interest. "Any time you want to trade seats, you can have this hemorrhoid special."

"I've requisitioned a new chair, but it wouldn't fit in here. You're just going to have to make do. I'll give you the chair if you'll take the position that goes with it."

"No way! Too much work for a block of blubber like me. It takes one of you skinny types to stand all the pressures and the running around. You work about a seventeen, eighteen hour shift in here. Me, I get to head for the Homecave after only a reasonable ten or fifteen hours. Such is the advantage of being second-in-command on a CCS post."

"My heart bleeds for you every time I go to my broom closet of a sleeping quarters. Remember that next time you bed down in your cave."

"Don't worry; if I forget, my wife reminds me." Jens finished sorting a deck of green color-coded cubes and stacked it on the desk. "I'm a real

home boy. Jest settin', sleepin' and filin', that's me."

"But was it really necessary to keep every file in triplicate? I've seen at least two other copies of this report on cave fungus production in the last hour alone, and the gods know how many more times I'll come across it."

"That's Mithras for you. I thought it was kinda foolish myself when I first ran into it under Granthum. But Rap was the worst about the files—he insisted on six copies of everything."

"So that means I've got three more to go?"

"Not likely. The CCS copy and the one for the Central Council go out each month on the ore-ship. That leaves four on planet. Unless the captain of the ship didn't think getting CCS mail out was important. In that case there's six—or less, depending on when Kiedron last burglarized your office. Then you might not have a single copy of anything left. Once she even gave us some reports her father had dummied up in return for our own—that was a fun month. But don't worry if you're missing something. Most reports are nothing more urgent than a list of how many times in the previous month the commandant was almost killed. Rap was fond of those. I think he did up six copies of his suicide note out of habit."

"You're a very funny man." Howell's neck was buried in his shoulders in a gesture Jens had come to recognize as a sign that the commandant was amused—but not much.

"If I don't find what I'm looking for, one or the other of us will be out there stark naked, doing calisthenics on an iceberg. And I don't want it to be me. Now I was briefed on this mess and I've read the official reports on Mithras—and they're a crock. I was hoping to find the real stuff here in Rap's mare's nest, but no such luck. I'm depending on you to fill me in on what the hell happened to do in three commandants in little more than a year."

"Ah, I was hoping to hold off on the history lesson a bit longer, but since you asked..." Jens got to his feet and stretched. "I suppose it is part of your survival training." He settled himself on the edge of Howell's desk and propped his spine against the wall.

"Now, when I got here ten years ago, Tad Granthum had your spot, and other than being an incompetent fool he wasn't too bad as a commandant.

He had a thing going with a woman in the Homecave, and for several years things bumbled along. Then his woman was killed in a mine cave-in, and Granthum went ape. He took to roaming the caves and taking any woman that caught his eye. He wasn't too careful about whose wife or daughter she might be, and so Granthum had an accident in one of the mines."

"I read the report on that one. Seems that Tovo Agata was the one blamed for the 'accident.' I'm surprised Agata was able to get away with it."

"It was only fair. One of the women Granthum raped was Agata's wife. She dived into a waste-pool when she learned she was pregnant by Granthum. She only had one child by Tovo and I guess that was all she wanted—his kids or no one's. She wasn't too stable, I'll have to admit, but she sure was a beauty! Not many of our women would have done that; but then, rape isn't too common in the Caves. A man could die for less than just touching another man's woman without her consent. They call it Caver Justice—it's harsh, but effective. Poor Gia, not very bright, but too beautiful to die that way."

"Was this before or after Granthum's death?"

"Before. The Service has a lot to answer for when it comes to the Agata family. If I'd been in Kiedron's place I'd probably be doing the same things she is. Particularly after Lustvogel got here.

"The CCS sent him to Mithras because he had a good rep about calming down unruly colonies. His calming consisted of trying to terrorize the lot of us, nabs and Cavers alike. He started the practice of outcaving people who wouldn't do things his way. That's why we have over two hundred of our best men living like animals out in the old mine shafts. We have to watch out for them and Kiedron as well. It's damned unwise to set up too many factions that all hate you. That was Lustvogel's mistake. I never saw such a man for doing so many things wrong. He did in the older Agata and then he had Kiedron to face. Standard justice on Mithras, Burian. None of us blamed her a bit—in fact, some of the Cavers claimed they had an even better right since Lustvogel had made Outcavers of their kin. None of us were about to go after her for killing a man we all hated."

"Did *you* have anything to do with Lustvogel's death?" Howell's voice was slow and soft, but the question hung there in the room like a grenade

with its pin pulled.

"That's an interesting question, sir. Do you really think I'd be fool enough to answer it? If I said 'yes,' I could be court-martialed, and if I said 'no,' would you really believe me?" Jens shifted his position on the desk to face Howell.

"I had to ask. Since I first arrived here, one thing has been going through my head—why are you still alive when three other men are dead? I need an answer so I'll know if I'm going to end up just as dead. Everyone has a price, Jens. I want to know what yours is." Howell knew he was pushing his aide badly, and probably doing him a great disservice; but Howell had no faith in loyalty for loyalty's sake. He knew his own breaking point and he needed to know what it was for Jens Gulimel.

"I hoped you'd get to understand Mithras better than any of the clowns before you, and I think you're making a good start." Jens looked up at the cracks in the ceiling and exhaled softly. "Yes, I have a price, My wife and children. As long as I'm alive she gets a light job and my kids aren't available for conscription. That's probably why she married me. Lots of women take up with nabs because they know it will make life easier for them and their children. But my staying alive is the key to their safety. Anything that threatens that will have to be dealt with by any means I can. But don't worry, Burian. I like you—and if I have to sell you out I'll give you fair warning."

"Good. And I'll do the same for you. If I have to throw you to the CCS wolves, I'll warn you first. I'm not like anyone you've had here before. I'm not incompetent, I don't go in for killing anything that moves—and as for Marios Rap's manifold stupidities—I knew Rap several years back on Burson's World, and he was a frootloop then. We had bets going on how soon he'd go round the bend on us. They shouldn't have ever sent him to a powderkeg like Mithras—the poor sod.

"But as for myself, I'm a mean, sneaky mother-jumper who gets things done my way. I know where a lot of CCS skeletons are hiding. I know every dirty trick in the book and have used most of them. But I am honest, in my own way. I believe in creative honesty—not all the truth, not all the time, but always consistent and not too badly bent. You play fair with me and I do the same for you. But nothing is as important to me as I am."

"That's true of most people," Jens said. "But most of them can't or



won't admit it. What's your price? You asked for mine; I think I have a right to know what yours is."

"Power. I want to be the head of the Confederation Colonial Service, but on my terms and without licking one pair of CCS boots on the way up. I'm the best man they've got for the job, if they'd only wake up and realize it; instead they sent me here. I could get the whole CCS working right by my methods, and I think I could do it without making anyone too unhappy. Mithras, for one, would be less of a hell-hole, that's for sure."

"But you wouldn't be helping Mithras for Mithras's sake, would you?"

"Altruism is a crock. Any man who says he only works for the good of his fellow beings is a fool, a liar or a crook. But a well-run Mithras is proof that I can do my job and any other job I may want. It's for the good of both Mithras and myself that we work well together."

Jens nodded, relief written clearly on his face. "Good, I can buy that—now, shall we get back to the files?"

"First tell me how Kiedron manages to find out what's going on around here. She can't be getting anything from these." Howell tossed the cube on food production at Jens; he caught it easily.

"Nearly everyone you come in contact with is a source of information to her. She doesn't push people harder than they can stand, and she does hide their kids for them. So they feel ratting on you is a small price to pay in the way of loyalty. *I* even had to use her to find out what Lustvogel was going to do. He didn't always tell me. Real paranoid flippo, that one."

"Could he have been a little frightened over your talks with Kiedron working both ways?"

"Oh, he knew that! *He'd* even bargained with her over some things—she helped keep the Outcavers in line—in between the times he was trying to kill her. That's how things work on Mithras."

"Hurrah, and down the rabbit hole." Howell shook his head in disbelief. "I've been on a lot of crazy planets in my day, but this one..." He threw up his hands and let them drop for lack of a truly meaningful gesture describing Mithras. "I've been going over the records and it seems like there should be a lot more colonists than the barely seven thousand on

record. Has Kiedron managed to hide that many kids—or is someone faking the population count?"

"Yes and no. There are some Outcavers working the older mines and blackmarketing; that fouled up the ore counts, but not too much. Kiedron has at most a hundred to a hundred and fifty kids salted away. More than that would be impossible to keep supplied. She gets them back into the regular work force as soon as they look old enough. And yes, the records are inaccurate, but not always deliberately. Some Cavers have their children in private rather than using the CCS clinic, and those births go unrecorded. Death records for anyone are hard to get, too. Many of the colonists don't like the CCS recycling program—and some of the Outcavers, we hear, practise cannibalism. Our worst problem is the Academy recruiters. They're like locusts, swarming in here and picking off the best and brightest of our children. I suppose they think they're doing the best thing for the Confederation, but they're killing Mithras. The average intelligence quotient is falling...."

"But it's that way on every colony world," Howell pointed out. "None of them have complained about it nearly this much."

"Other colonies have plenty of kids and plenty of room to spread out in," Jens pointed out. "Life on Mithras is concentrated in these caves, and every child is precious. Then, too, the Mithrans are a lot tougher than most other colonials, because their life is harder. Did you know that the birth rate is falling along with the intelligence quotient? Not many women want to have children for the Confederation to steal. And speaking about *that*, we're due for some trouble very soon around here. An Academy recruiter is due on planet with the next oreship. I'd bet Kiedron is out in the Homecave rounding up children right now; that's the standard time for her to act up."

"Well send some nabs out there to stop her. By the Mother of All, can't we just once come out ahead of her?"

"I've already taken care of that. There's a squad checking several of the families out. But Kiedron generally rolls right over the nabs. They're afraid of her." Jens picked up a cube and toyed with it. "I am, too, when it's right on the line. I have a family out there. What if she swings a deal giving the recruiters my kids in return for the ones belonging to someone a bit more helpful to her?"

"She really knows where to bite, doesn't she? I want those nabs doubled. Try to get ones without families—some of the newer lot that arrived with me. Put them on shift and a half, if necessary. She'll get those children over my dead body."

"Your dead body would be quite easy to arrange. You and I are not the only ones with a going price around here. The game is called survival. Wait until you know more about Mithras, Burian. You might decide Kiedron is right—you said yourself you don't always play it the Confederation way."

"I've been thinking along those lines too, and the cubes prove you're right—the genetic base on Mithras is being weakened. But the idea of that little twit—hell, I don't know what I'm doing here that will help or hinder. But I am counting on you to teach me, if Kiedron lets me live so long."

"I'm glad you feel that way. For the first time since I got to this ice block I'm beginning to feel some sort of hope for it." Jens unfolded from the edge of the desk. "Want to do a supply inspection with me, or shall I give you more lessons in hand-speak?"

"Both; I can watch what the men moving the supplies are saying and learn while I inspect."

Jens looked away. "I've been teaching you the basic vocabulary—what I can of it. Most of the words are obscene, and some of the things the workers might say about you wouldn't be too flattering to your ego. Then too, it might not be wise to let people know you can read them. Some folks will say the damndest things in front of someone if they think he can't understand what's being said."

"Right." Howell rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He was growing a beard to help keep out the cold, and it itched. "Let's get started on the lesson, and this time I want the dirty parts first. No doubt they are the ones that get the most use." Howell's eyes gleamed. "I also need to be filled in about current customs involving the womenfolk. If you know those two things you can survive long enough to learn more. Insulting a woman or a being's swear-by gods are the quickest ways to an early grave on most colony worlds."

Jens nodded, his face split by a wide grin. Smiling came easy to the lieutenant commander—but then, Howell reflected bitterly, he wasn't the

commandant of Mithras.

"That's not a bad idea, but let's stick to the life-and-death ones for now. Hold your right hand like so. That's the sign for 'fire in the mines.'" Jens demonstrated by raising his hand and shaking it vigorously. "With practise you'll be able to not only say 'fire,' but with the proper wrist action show exactly where it is and how bad."

"Like this?" Howell held up his own hand and waved it limply about.

Jens collapsed in belly-jiggling guffaws. "You've just said that triplets were born to an eighty-year-old man in the middle of an oil fire!" he explained when he could recover his breath. "Now, slower, and watch the wrist action." Jens again made the motion for "fire in the mines," and Howell ineptly tried to copy it.

"If you go into giggling hysterics every time I open my hand, we'll never get anywhere," the commandant complained. "I've never met such a man for giggling. Look, Gulimel, how's this?" Howell held his wrist flat and wiggled his fingers like seaweed.

"Better, but that's a pretty small blaze. Let's try for something more like this." His hand moved in a clockwise motion as he shook his fingers in a shallow arc.

"Ah! I think I've got it now." But before Howell could raise his hand to demonstrate, the door dilated and Hesslin and a subsquad commander, Hiru Senjaro, walked into the room.

"Sir, Kiedron's in the west village." Hesslin leaned on the edge of the desk casually, and Howell could see he had stopped to change uniforms after coming in from outside. The subsquad leader was still in his coldsuit, but obviously uncomfortable in the warmth of the office. "We saw her with five children in tow leaving the Pleski place about half an hour ago. I think she's heading for the north end of the village. There are some more kids there."

"Hesslin," Howell asked in as reasonable a tone as he could manage, "why didn't you call from the Caves when you spotted her?"

"Sir, the lines were cut and our hood mikes would have been static prone with the storm out there, so I decided to come here myself."

"None of the Cavers would flash a message here for us. They were too busy getting their kids tucked away. They know a recruiter is coming." The subsquad leader was new to Mithras and obviously annoyed with his superior's methods.

"Don't bug it, Senjaro," Jens said. "That's the third time this week the lines have been down. It's nothing new, so letting it get to you catches no Kiedrons. Hesslin, get the crew working on the repairs. Senjaro, you take me to where you last saw Kiedron. Put a shift at the north sector air lock while you're at it. Your men are new to this and it's time they saw some action."

"Come on, Jens! Let's not stand here jabbering. Move on out!" Howell was out from behind his desk and pushing his way through the overcrowded room toward the door.

"I'm not sure you should go on this one, Burian. Senjaro and I can handle it ourselves. I've wanted him to get a crack at Kiedron."

"And I want a crack at her, too! Do I have to make an order of it?" Howell danced with impatience in the doorway, making short, abrupt dashes from room to hall. The door's dilation effect was fluttering from his nervous pacing. "Come on! We don't have the time to argue over it." Howell was completely in the hall at last, and the door closed behind him with a sort of resigned sigh.

"He's right, Commander Gulimel." Hiru Senjaro nodded in the direction of the door. "I feel the same way; and if we don't get a move on ourselves, our hyperactive commandant will be halfway to the Caves without us."

Hesslin nodded agreement. "Let the snow-eater get his mouth full, Jens. It might teach him something."

Jens and Senjaro caught up with Howell at the coldsuit cases. The commandant was struggling to suit up by himself and making a botch of it. Senjaro grinned at Jens and went to Howell's aid.

"I'll do it myself!" Howell waved him away. "If I'm going to make it here I have to do things on my own. Coddling makes for a low survival rate on

any planet."

"True." Jens had suited up with practised efficiency and was signaling Senjaro to open the door lock. "But those who foul up, die. Mithras gives no credit for just trying. And this is no time to be playing games."

"It's no game." Howell slammed his faceplate into position. "You've made it clear that this is no emergency action, and that my succeeding here is based on how well I can cope with things as they are. I intend to cope, and that way succeed."

Jens nodded sharply and did not answer. His expression, before the faceplate had hidden it, had been one of mild annoyance. The lock open, the three men stepped out into the cold of Mithras.

"There's a sled station about two meters to our left." Jens snapped the lifeline into place connecting himself and Howell. The commandant, pleased with one victory, made no complaint about the safety precaution. Senjaro had disappeared into the sleet-filled whiteness. Howell heard his voice, tinny over the earphones, announce that he had found the sled.

"This way." Jens tugged on the line. They bumped into the snow-scratched bubble protecting the sled, and Howell stood with nagging impatience while Senjaro and Jens cleared away the ice from the locks and opened the bubble.

Howell was sure he could have walked to the north end of the caves in the time it took the two men to put the sled into operation. He was forced by the overcrowding inside to ride over the jet hump, and the heat rising through his heavy suit was decidedly uncomfortable. He tried to ignore it, knowing he would soon be far more uncomfortable from the cold of the surface. He felt as though he were slowly smothering in the bulk of his own and the other men's suits. The small dome of the sled seemed walled with red puffy wads of warm fabric.

The sled skimmed over the permafrost, through the blinding whiteness. Howell had no idea how Jens was able to pilot blind with only the most sketchy of instrument panels. Senjaro, noticing Howell's bewilderment as the commandant tilted his helmet to look alternately out of the clear dome and back at the pilot's chair, decided to explain.

"No point in using much instrumentation out here, sir. The storms

would make garbage of most of it and sabotage would make anything left undependable. After being on Mithras a while I'm told you learn how to fly one of these by feel alone."

"And if I can't manage that?"

"You stay in your office," Jens said abruptly, "like Rap did, and go mad. It's learn or else, out here."

Howell turned his head to try to see something of Jens's face. His cold tone and obvious disapproval were unsettling. Worry about the deaths of the last three commandants rose like a ghost in Howell's mind. He could see nothing but the vaguest outlines of the lieutenant commander's features, and he hurriedly fought down the ghost. "I'd rather take my chances out here. Going off the deep end has no enchantment for me." He knew his voice was filled with false bravado, but he could feel the kick of adrenalin rising in his body. At last, some action! Courage, real this time, was surging through his body. He felt ready to take on a regiment of Agatas. At last he was going to have a chance at Kiedron hunting, and all the disapproving aides in the universe couldn't dissuade him now.

The sled dipped lower and banked toward the end of the low hills that marked the termination of the Homecave. The sled touched down, its repellor field digging shallow troughs in the ice below. Howell could see the bulk of the rock cliffs in front of them, and in between the flurries of sleet could make out the massive air lock.

He started to climb out of the sled after Senjaro, but Jens put out a hand to restrain him. "Stay here, sir. Hiru and I know these caves and you don't. We can't be hunting for you and Kiedron at the same time."

Howell started to protest as Jens unsnapped the lifeline. "I could stay fastened to you..."

"He's right, sir," Senjaro said reluctantly. "You would be safer here, and much more useful, too. The caves double back on each other something crazy, and Kiedron might make it past both of us and our nabs. But this way, with you out here, we might have a chance to capture her. The air lock is the only way out and you're guarding it."

"Very pretty. I get to play *sahib* while you two beat the bush. Only thing is, I remember your orders, Jens, about a shift being stationed right inside

the air lock. It was a good try, Senjaro, and I appreciate it. Politeness will get you almost anywhere. You win, both of you. I'll stay with the sled and try to believe I'm useful out here."

"Good." Jens got out of the sled and moved through the drifts toward the air lock. "Don't leave the sled," he called over his hood mike. "If Kiedron does get past the guards, stun her down. The kids with her aren't likely to do much without her giving the orders. If you miss, don't go after her. You'll get very lost, very quickly. If we don't get the Agata this time, I'll call out several squads to comb the hills. She can't go far with a bunch of brats. But if I do, we'll have everyone and his cousin on the mikebands. That much noise would make it impossible to track one man—so stay put!"

Senjaro and Jens disappeared into the open air lock and closed it behind them. Howell was left alone, for the first time, on the open plain of Mithras colony.

He had intentionally left the dome of the sled open to keep his view clear. The defrosting equipment in the sled would work only marginally if the sled was not moving. Howell saw this as one more CCS blunder. A sled could have been designed to maintain a comfortable environment if stalled, but such a sled would have been more expensive and complex. It didn't matter to the fatrats back at central if a stranded nab froze to death because there was no way to safely keep his sled warm until he was rescued. The way the sled was designed, any use of heating equipment would cause the sled to sink into the melting slush below it—a course of action that was plainly a form of suicide.

Howell burrowed into his suit and waited.

He felt his feet go numb first and then the tips of his fingers. *The suits are as marginally designed as the sleds*, he grumbled to himself. Time seemed to have stopped, and he could not get to his watch under the thick glove. Nothing in the white emptiness around him was real—only the cold.

He could see the air lock only in brief flashes between the falling snow. The wind was dying and nothing moved in the vicinity of the sled. Howell yawned and felt the adrenalin leaching out of his system. He cursed himself for being an impetuous fool.

The slow falling of the snow stopped and the sky seemed to lighten.



Visibility in the pale, golden light was better than Howell had ever seen in his brief time on Mithras. The hilltops were touched with mist only at the highest ridges. The low horseshoe of hills that made up the colony was clearly visible. The plain sparkled in the almost magical light. Howell was enchanted by the phenomenon and did not realize it only signaled the beginnings of a howling blizzard. He turned his head to see the full panorama of his new command and, in that magical moment, found himself facing Kiedron.

There was no mistaking her. She was so close to the sled that Howell felt he could reach out and touch her. She was shorter than he had expected, and prettier. Her hair shimmered and was touched with snowflakes like a crown of lace. She was dressed in a pair of tattered trimslax and a dark green parka he recognized as one of his own. Her rosy face was sweet and touched by the sunlight, her mouth a round "O" of surprise. They looked at each other for what seemed later like hours, then she turned and ran across the, plain toward the hills of the mines. She stopped once to wave at him, and, dreamlike, Howell waved back.

He had been stunned by the sudden appearance of the girl and the fact that she was alone in this fairy-tale setting with the light reflecting off her upturned face. Pulling himself back together, he cursed himself for blatant stupidity. The elf-child he had stared at like an awestruck peasant was the most dangerous person on this planet.

Yelling, he jumped out of the sled and fell to his knees. Firing off a bolt from his stungun, he knew he was too far out of range.

Howell stumbled after the girl, firing as he ran.

She swooped smoothly over the ice like a deer while he slogged along behind. The air was filled with shining crystals of light and the snow glittered around him.

The adrenalin was back.

Ignoring his cold hands and feet, he trailed the girl. She was all that he could think of. Jens's warnings were forgotten in the thrill of the hunt. It was going to be so easy to bring down the elusive child who had destroyed three commandants before him.

Almost at once he found himself regretting the capture. He wanted to

hang onto those few fragments of time when the two of them had looked at each other and there had been nothing of hunter and hunted between them. He wanted to see her face as it had been: young, childlike.

The storm hit with a sudden roar of hail on his helmet. Visibility was lost in an instant. The cold, wet sleet again covered the tundra of Mithras.

Howell thought he heard the echoes of a mocking, elfin laugh in the sound of the wind brushing by him. He was alone, somewhere out in the tundra, and Kiedron had led him here to die.

## ***CHAPTER FOUR***

The wind and snow lashed at him as Howell fought to keep his footing. He thought he had been running in a straight line from the sled, and his compass verified that. If he could keep from deviating from that line there was more of a chance he would be found. The winds would swiftly cover any traces of his path; his main worry was that the cold would kill him before he could be located. His only hope was in conserving his body heat and energy; for that, he had to stop walking.

The tundra was not perfectly flat. Hillocks and ravines crisscrossed the valley. Such a variation could save his life. The wind knocked him to his knees, and he decided it might be safer to stay as low to the ground as possible while searching for some shelter. Then too, he was none too sure he could manage to stand up again and had no wish to find out he was right.

His slow, creeping progress was causing a snowbank to form around him, and this, he realized, might save him. Shoving at the snow, he pushed through the top crust and found a pocket of softer snow. He dug deeper, the heat from his suit icing the edges of his pseudocave. Doglike, he shoveled the snow out behind him until he was covered by a thick white blanket. The winds screamed overhead and ruffled the snow covering him. He knew, in time, his layer of insulation would be scored away by the blizzard. But it might last long enough for his needs. He wrapped his arms and legs tightly to his body and rolled up into the fetal position. Relaxing as much as possible, he breathed shallowly and waited.

Jens, fearing Howell would have taken his orders to stay with the sled too literally, had dashed out into the storm, only to find the sled empty.

He had taken the risk of going out into a blizzard for the sole purpose of rescuing Howell. Finding him gone was a shock. Jens slogged his way back to the air lock, but the guards swore that no one had come in or out while Jens was outside. He was sure then that Howell had tried to make it to the air lock when the storm broke, but had failed to reach it. Men had died before on Mithras only centimeters away from safety. It was only too easy to get lost out on the tundra. When the storm passed, Jens would send out a search party to find the commandant's body and take it to the recycling plant.

Resigning himself to the loss of what might have been a good commandant, Jens returned to his home grotto to sit out the blizzard with his family. This one might last for days, and no work would be possible in such a storm.

Howell dozed and curled himself tighter into his snow cave. Some of the top crust had thinned, but he had dug deeper and was almost warm in his shelter. At intervals he woke to check the snow covering him. He flexed his arms and legs to prevent stiffness and went back to a sleep that was filled with dreams of Kiedron—disturbing dreams of an angelic child mocking him across the cold plain.

Energy conservation was his prime concern— that and keeping warm. There was a hard wall at his back. It was either hard-packed ice or rock. It was impossible to tell which, but its only purpose was to keep out the wind. Howell was grateful for it, whatever it was.

Thirst was a problem. With all the ice and snow around him, Howell still did not dare to open his faceplate. The resulting loss of heat would do him more harm than his thirst. His toes were frostbitten and he could not move his fingers in his gloves. In between naps, he cursed the Service for not equipping their coldsuits with some form of high energy liquid supplies. Glucose, vitamins anything was possible—damn the CCS!

He heard the winds grow quiet overhead, but was not sure how much time had passed. He was too cold to move and feared he would permanently lose the use of his feet. He tried not to think of dying or of not being found. He had to believe he was being looked for. If he stopped hoping, there was no need to go on fighting. His burning thirst made him

risk a small crack open in the faceplate; the resulting melted snow helped a little, but he shivered from the increased cold inside his suit. He *had* to be found!

At first he thought he had only dreamed the sound, as he had been dreaming the images of Kiedron over and over when she had stood looking at him across the plain. He shook his head to clear it. The cold made his mind seem as numb as his fingers. Then he realized it was a voice, the sound was real. Opening his dry mouth, he tried to make his swollen tongue form words. The only sound was a dry croak.

"Thad, Hiru. Someone's out here in the snow!" It was a voice Howell recognized as Hesslin's. They must have been out looking for Kiedron, too.

Howell tried again to speak. His croaking was louder, and he moved his stiffened arms and legs to signal where he was. His head burst through the crust of ice over his hiding place, but the air around him was filled with swirls of snow. He cried out again and heard answering voices that seemed to be closer. Out of the snow three bulky red forms were moving toward him. He waved an arm and then fell back into the snow. His head swam with the effort of moving and the pain in his fingers made him sick.

He could feel his body being dragged out of the snow and strong arms around him. "By the Mother! It's the commandant." Senjaro's voice seemed to come to him at a great distance as he fainted in the men's arms.

Howell came to at the CCS cave entrance as Senjaro, Hesslin and Thad were stripping off his coldsuit. "You were a lucky devil," Hesslin was saying as Howell tried to focus his eyes.

"Water!" His voice was cracked and hardly more than a whisper. Hesslin held up his head as Thad Benin slowly poured warm water down his throat.

"I'll get the showers ready. He's going to need a slow thawing out and a lot of rest." Senjaro looked down at the commandant with admiration in his dark eyes. "By the Lady, I didn't know an off-worlder could make it for

two days alone on Mithras. He's a real tough one, he is." Senjaro moved out of Howell's view, and he could hear the subsquad leader's footsteps as he walked across the locker area to the showers and tubs that made up the equipment for warming up after the cold of the outside.

Howell's mind felt wrapped in cotton candy— all soft and fuzzy. He knew he was safe and that he would live. His toes were white from the cold and the cutting off of circulation, but Hesslin assured him that they would be all right in time. Howell nodded and sank deeper into his soft mental cloud.

He was jerked back to reality by the sounds of hissing steam and Senjaro's agonized screams. The screaming rose to a head-pounding wail, and Hesslin and Thad let Howell slide abruptly to the floor as they ran across the corridor to the locker room and the showers.

"Cut the main lines, Thad! I can't see for the steam! CUT THE WATER LINES!" Hesslin's voice was the only one Howell could hear. Senjaro was silent. The screaming had ended. There was the sound of men running, water splashing and then a quiet stillness broken only by Hesslin's sobs.

"The filthy bitch, the damn filthy bitch. Kiedron's sabotaged the showers. Steam, nothing but filthy, scalding, man-killing steam..."

## ***CHAPTER FIVE***

There was a warm water bed under him and a metal framework of heated blankets draped over his mostly bandaged body. It felt so good to be really warm that Howell was reluctant to even admit he was awake. Just to lie still and relax was so comforting that he could almost block from his mind those last few minutes of Huru Senjaro's life.

*If I wake up, I'll have to face all of that—explaining to Jens—going out there again—and catching Kiedron Agata ... oh, to hell with it!* He toyed with the idea of not waking up at all, but just staying in bed, being fed through a tube in his arm and being always warm. *But that's no way to get where you want to go, Burian.* The coldly sensible part of him was back in command. *Get up, lout, and get up fighting! You're Captain Burian Howell of the CCS ... Shove it. ...* He knew he was playing games with himself, that he would get up, go back outside and try to catch Kiedron... but not now.

Jens was beside him, he could hear the heavier man pacing beside his bed. *Poor old Jens. If I don't crack open an eye the man will probably be giving me up for dead and writing for a replacement for me.*

Howell opened one eye and let it drop in a slow wink.

"So, you are playing dead-android! I thought you were holding too still to be really sleeping."

"Resting my old bones, lad. Can't an ancient crock like me get a little time to himself?"

"Sure, if you were really as half-dead as you'd like us to believe. Your stock has gone up no end around here. You've survived something that's killed younger and smarter types than you."

"Younger, maybe; smarter, never! As I said before, I know a little about cold and how to combat it." Howell opened both eyes and it seemed he could hear his eyelids creaking under the effort. "I have to admit I would have been a very cold corpse in another day or so. It was my good luck that Hesslin and..."

"Hiru." Jens's voice was sad and his face crumbled a bit. "By the Lady, that was a good man. I had hopes of his being one of the best nabs we've ever been sent. I was even afraid to commend him in reports for fear the Service would find out they had sent him to us by mistake—and now he's dead. That steam bath wasn't meant for you— just the next poor clod that needed a thawing out. Don't take too much of the guilt on yourself, Burian. It could have been any one of us. There were four squads of nabs out on the tundra looking for Kiedron. She probably didn't have any one target in mind when she fixed the pipes."

"Just bad luck, huh? I want to fry that little twit for this. No more stunners. Tell the men to kill on sight."

"They won't obey that. They'd be afraid of provoking a full scale revolt. One thing you've got to learn—only give orders you're sure will be carried out."

Howell sighed and shifted position. A stab of pain shot through his legs. "Yowl! What have those bloody doctors done to me? My legs feel like a buzz saw stopped halfway through them. Gods, what a mess."

"You've been through a lot and your legs are the worst off. You'll be lucky enough to keep all your toes, but it is going to hurt and you will be in bed a while. I brought you some more files to work on—they'll keep your mind off your aches and pains."

"I think I'm still asleep. In fact, I'm sure of it." Howell let his eyelids fall. "I'm asleep," he announced.

"Then I'll just leave these cubes here until you wake up." Jens made an exaggerated attempt to tiptoe across the room. He sounded like a herd of none too quiet herbivores attacking a mud puddle. "The bed is leaking," he explained in a piercing whisper. "We can't generally keep a waterbed warm without having the bag blow somewhere." He squelched noisily across the floor and Howell could hear the door opening at his approach.

"Silly clod." Howell's voice was warm with affection. "And if I haven't said it yet, thanks."

"For what?"

"When I know, I'll tell you. Now bug out and let an old, dying man sleep."

With the white-blood cell ointment preventing infection and forming new skin on his blackened toes, the doctors said Howell was healing well enough to deal with his files. The pain in his hands and feet was just barely tolerable. They felt as if they had been dipped in fire. The doctors had encased his extremities in an amino acid-based gel to help them form his new skin. They itched, but there was no way to scratch them. A tube was stuck in each arm—one for the dextrose and supplement solution, the other for the antibiotics. Howell felt like a swollen corpse fished out of the water and left to dry. Jens had to help him with the files. But the man was a mine of information. He brought Howell everything Marios Rap had written about Kiedron—most of it quite insane. And they went through Lustvogel's cubes as well. Granthum had left little information on the colony, mostly production records. There was nothing about Kiedron, her mother or his foraging in the Homecave. There was suspiciously little on Tovo Agata. Howell asked about this and was reminded of how much material Kiedron might have stolen from the files.

Lustvogel's cubes were the best in terms of information—most of it false. His views on punishing the Cavers had led to a definite factioning within the colony. Lustvogel was paranoid on the subject of the Cavers, and it was easy to see why so many of them had claimed the right to kill him. The Outcavers fascinated Howell. Jens knew a little about them, but said he had very little contact with their leaders. Lustvogel had used a policy of "burn them, burn them all," so very few Outcavers returned to the Homecave. They couldn't take the risk of being caught. Jens said that Lustvogel had tossed Outcavers alive into the recycling plant.

"Could someone live through that?" Howell asked in outraged horror.

"Lots of them did, but they ended up hideously scarred. The first thing down there is a tank for rendering down proteins using enzymes and other chemicals. But I'd rather take my chances there than in a slag pit—there's no chance of coming out of one of *those* alive."

"Scarred, driven from their homes, hunted down—what more could that man do to them?"

"Make them less than men, or try to. It didn't work. From what I've heard about the Outcavers, they're even better organized than we are. They ship out a little ore, steal from the ships at the port and stay out of the way of the nabs. They treat their women well too, I'm told. Every now and then some girl leaves the Homecave and joins the Outcavers. Generally it's because she's too ugly or stupid to get a Caver husband—but there are rumors that Outcaver women live like treasured pets, wearing only the best of furs and never having to work. That sort of thing would have some appeal, I suppose."

There was very little about making things better for the Cavers. Lustvogel had seemed to feel that Mithras was his private hunting preserve— with men for game. Howell read everything he could find on Lustvogel's attempts to catch anyone that he was hunting. Kiedron wasn't listed until after her father's death. There was surprisingly little about why Lustvogel had killed the older Agata. Jens, when questioned, admitted that even he didn't know exactly what had happened.

"Lustvogel wasn't very hard on Tovo. A lot of us were puzzled by that. Then, for no reason, he killed him. I found Tovo dead in his cave, Lustvogel's knife in his throat, and Kiedron in shock. My wife, Rhoiannin, looked after her for a while. Then Kiedron set out to get Lustvogel. She



wouldn't say what had happened to her father, and Lustvogel wouldn't tell me anything, either. He was one scared man, though—right up until Kiedron got him."

"Then Kiedron's the only witness left? That could be interesting. I have a few theories on how to catch Kiedron, but they can wait until these medical-johnnies let me up on my feet. They say my legs are swollen like a pregnant sleam—the fools."

"Want to tell me about your theories? Maybe I can help with some of the planning," Jens asked, too casually.

"No way. As you yourself said, everyone's a spy for Kiedron. If only I know, then she won't know until I'm ready for her. Let it ride, Jens, I'll tell you when I'm ready to go to work on it. But you can warn that twit she's up against someone who has no resemblance to Lustvogel. Tell her that. It might keep me alive long enough to catch her."

Howell did have an idea, and he spent the long weeks of healing perfecting it. He asked for every cube on construction methods used on Mithras and spent a lot of time studying the maps of the caves in the hills around the base. Finally, when his doctors agreed he was well enough to get out of bed, Howell had narrowed his plans down to one cave and one particular set of construction machines.

It took several days of being out of bed and walking around to restore his sense of well-being. He still had nightmares about the cold and dying out on the tundra, but he knew he was well enough to face Mithras again.

He was told by Jens that the accident had caused the CCS to delay sending an Academy recruiter to Mithras—a fact that made Howell bless the CCS for finally doing something right. He knew that his return to work would bring on the recruiter... and it would bring out Kiedron as well.

He asked Jens to meet him at the air lock closest to the Homecave and also asked Hesslin to bring along a squad of his best nabs and a construction crew with an engineer.

The group was milling around when Howell arrived. Jens was beside himself with impatience and Hesslin was simply looking puzzled. "I don't

know what he wants this for either, Jens, but he said to have it here, and..." Hesslin was explaining wearily as Howell joined them.

"Don't fret, I will explain. We are going Kiedron hunting—so suit up."

"Do you mind telling us how you plan to catch her, or do we just wait for her to walk up and turn herself in?" Jens's voice dripped sarcasm.

"Something like that." Howell was pleased with himself, but he had no wish to push his aide too far. The man was valuable to him and he was beginning to like him very much. "I want you to round up some children of the right age and intelligence to be attractive to a recruiter. Then I want Kiedron told where they are. Use some kid you trust for that part.

"I've picked an old mine shaft where I want the kids stashed. It's called CRS-7665 on the maps. It's small and has no ore in it, I think, from the maps; it's about the last ridge or so before the hills slope downward out at the end of the mines. I checked all the map cubes and I asked Hesslin about it. Only one entrance, I was told, and that's a narrow one."

"Trapping Kiedron in a one-way cave has been tried before. Rap did that more times than I can remember. She always got away somehow."

"Not this time. So, can you get me the kids as soon as I'm ready at the cave?"

"It'll take about two hours to round them up— I'll have to reassure a lot of Cavers, Burian. They don't think you'll turn the kids over, but this will make them damned suspicious." Jens looked very worried, but willing to go along with Howell.

Hesslin said nothing. He had seen some of the orders Howell had given for the equipment he wanted at the mine. He rubbed his chin and looked thoughtful.

"I only want a few kids," Howell was explaining. "Nine or ten ought to do. I hope that'll be enough bait. Too many brats milling around could mess things up for me." Howell had finished suiting up. He was a bit slower than most of the men with him, he found. But he was improving his technique; soon he wouldn't even need a lifeline.

The cold wind hitting his suit made Howell shudder. He couldn't really

feel the cold yet, but he knew it was there. It would only be a matter of time before the chill would be creeping into his hands and feet. *I must not react*, he told himself. *I must not show that the cold bothers me. If I let go, even a little....* A vision of himself running, raving mad, across the tundra intruded into his thoughts. He squashed it swiftly and stood waiting for Hesslin to fasten the lifeline.

"All right, I'll get the kids and take them to the cave. I'll send Arnie, my oldest, to tell Kiedron— but what then?" Jens's voice intruded and banished the last of Howell's thoughts about the cold. Glad of a respite and something else to think about, he turned toward Jens to make the communication between them clearer in the howling static of the wind.

"I've been spending most of my time reading how Lustvogel and Rap both tried to catch Kiedron and why they failed. I saw that sleeping gas didn't work..."

"The temperature was too cold for the gas to spread out evenly, and even when we thought that we had that partially licked we found that most caves were too porous to work well as gas chambers."

"And remember what the Academy recruiter said would happen to Lustvogel if even one kid was killed accidentally," Hesslin added.

"Right. The Service would even like us to deliver *Kiedron* alive and kicking—something about wanting to study her development and figure out why she scored so low on their supposedly foolproof tests." Jens laughed. "Poor sods, not realizing the test, not the kid, was off."

"Jens, get a move on with the kids. I'll meet you at the cave." Howell motioned to Hesslin to start toward the bubble sled.

"But wait," Jens called. "Aren't you going to tell me how you'll capture her?"

"I'm not telling anyone. That way if it doesn't work I won't seem as big a fool." Howell waved as he and Hesslin and the construction people moved off at a trot.

"I don't even know, Jens, but Howell's the best man for Mithras; trust him!" Hesslin's last words drifted through the helmets of the two groups. Jens shrugged inside his coldsuit and motioned his nabs to follow him to

the Homecave.

The cave was exactly as Howell had pictured it. A low, shallow beginning of a mine shaft with no other exit, not even a crevasse or cleft in the rock that could be a possible exit. The floor of the cave was rough; large rocks formed outcroppings, and pools of ice and slush were waiting for the unwary. There were a few too many places to hide, but the narrow opening was easy to block.

"Perfect, perfect!" Howell wanted to rub his hands together and crow with delight. He was going to catch the uncatchable elf-child. He tried not to think beyond that point. He would, he supposed, have to either kill her or turn her over to the CCS. They would most likely kill her after taking her mind apart and making sure someone like her could never reappear on Mithras. *And then what would I find interesting to do around here?* Howell found himself wondering.

"Hesslin, get that engineer-johnnie over here for me," Howell called. Hesslin and another red-clad figure appeared out of the drifting snow and into the lip of the cave.

"Sir, this is Lieutenant Kiku Hoshi; she's one of the best construction engineers we've got." The second red-clad figure bowed and Howell awkwardly returned the bow.

"Now, lieutenant, what I want is to have a frost killer brought right up here to the mouth of this cave, and I want it covered with some white camouflaging. I've already put in a request for the frost killer, but I do need you to tell me the best place to put it for optimum heat in this cave."

The engineer walked into the cave and began several calculations on its height and depth.

"You see, Hesslin," Howell commented, "I intend to use the one thing no Mithran can tolerate—heat. I found out while I was out here just how bad cold can be for someone like myself. But I've seen the Mithran miners work stark naked in conditions nearly as cold as I had to endure. Kiedron can stand cold, but not heat! I think I've got the little baggage!"

"Jens isn't going to like this." Howell could see that Hesslin was, by

reflex, trying to shake his head. In the helmet, it didn't work very well.

"I run things around here, not Jens. But you're right, he won't like it—and that, more than my fear of his being Kiedron's spy, is why I wouldn't tell him anything."

Howell felt the ground begin to tremble under his feet. He turned to watch a gigantic machine punch its way through the precipitation. The winds had died down slightly and there was only a silently falling curtain of snow to block his view.

It was while he had been reading Marios Rap's files that Howell had gotten the idea of using heat on Kiedron—the files and the pain in his own legs from the aftereffects of frostbite. Heat was the one thing no fifth generation colonial would be able to tolerate—and that was what Kiedron was going to get.

The frost killer moved through the eerie silence like a gigantic metal beast of prey, its jaws opening to show the reactors within. They were generally used to thaw the frozen ground on a building site such as a spaceport field; then a cold-action epoxy would be added to the melted ice to form a hard, permanent foundation for any structure built on Mithras. In the beginnings of the colony they had even tried to construct towers and buildings, but the energy needed was far greater than that required to dig caves. The cave tunnels, too, provided the much-needed minerals, so the prospect of getting two jobs done at once had made the frost killers all but obsolete. The machines were cumbersome and unpleasant for the colonials to use. The heat they generated made it impossible to use anyone who had been born and bred on Mithras as crew. Rap had complained frequently in his reports that the Confederation Colonial Service was not sending him enough new personnel among the nabs who could manage a frost killer as well as do correctional duties. The colonials' dislike of the frost killers had given Howell his idea on how to trap Kiedron and keep her trapped.

"Pull that thing up close, Lieutenant Hoshi. I want it able to swing around quickly and cover that cave entrance."

"That can be done, sir. But how shall I disguise the machine while waiting for Agata to walk into your trap?" The engineer motioned to the machine crew where she wanted the frost killer stationed beside the cave. Her hand gestures, even in gloves, were swift and precise. "I think, sir, you

had better keep my crewmen here. They're new to Mithras, but some of them are already making Caver friends and finding Caver women acceptable. We can't trust them not to run straight to Kiedron with news of this development."

"Right. Put them to work on some camouflaging. I had in mind covering the 'killer' with some tree branches and patches of snow, maybe a few rocks, too. With the visibility as poor as it is, I think that ought to be enough to do the trick."

"No, it won't work. You're failing to take into account that Kiedron's eyesight in snow is much better than your own. She'd spot something that clumsy very quickly. I have a better solution. There's a storage cave fairly close and it has a wide enough entrance to house the frost killer. A machine sitting in a storage cave would not seem out of the ordinary."

"I knew some of the caves were big, but not that big."

Hoshi managed something between a shrug and a bow. "We put class seventeen V-wingers in caves like that—several V-wingers."

"But there are no V-wingers..."

"Didn't Gulimel tell you that your records are incomplete?"

"I surrender, Hoshi. Jens did tell me, and you're right; they aren't complete. So store that thing wherever you think best. You're the engineer."

Hoshi bowed again and signaled the frost killer crew to follow her to the caves. Howell watched the huge machine move ponderously through the snow like a walking mechanical house. He wondered if he would ever see it again and how long it would take to trust anyone on Mithras.

"Rap was her lover." Hesslin's voice was calm and matter-of-fact as he watched Hoshi depart. "She hates Kiedron for killing him."

"Kiedron didn't kill Rap; he suicided. Or at least, that's what the records show. He died four hours out from Mithras and there wasn't any way Kiedron could have done it."

"Rap thought otherwise. Read his last cube sometime, sir. He knew

there was no way for a person to leave Mithras once they were assigned here. So his leaving alive, he was sure, had to have been a plot on Kiedron's part—so he killed himself to avoid what he was sure would be a worse death at her hands."

"Do *you* believe that?" Howell asked.

"No." Hesslin stood beside Howell, rocking back and forth. Howell could hear a catch in the man's voice and wondered if he was crying. "I know what the security is like here—I've tried to escape several times—and there's no way anyone from Mithras can get on board a CCS ship. That's how I know Kiedron couldn't have killed Rap."

"But you're a nab, not a colonial! Surely you can leave when your tour of duty is done."

"*No one* leaves Mithras, nab or colonial. This is a prison, sir, and we are the prisoners—not the colonials. They can stand all this, and if it weren't for the Service they'd love Mithras. But they are our jailors."

Howell's mind was rocked by what Hesslin was telling him. He had heard that there were such places for personnel the Service had no further use for. But what a vicious turn of fate to make him think he was in command of his own prison!

"Dead, that's the only way to leave Mithras, and even then you can't. Your body goes to the recycling plant and you become a part of Mithras forever." Hesslin's voice was sad but under control. "Let her go, sir. Catching Kiedron will only benefit the CCS, not Mithras. She's the only bit of freedom these people have."

"I wish I could, but if I'm to do any good for Mithras, I have to live long enough to do it. Capturing Kiedron is my only chance. But I will tell you, Hesslin, if what you say is true, this planet will go subtropical before I turn her over to the CCS. That's a promise!"

Leaving Hesslin to position the nabs away from the cave, Howell went inside to recheck any possible escape routes. He had read more than one report on how Kiedron had gotten out of seemingly tight places simply by knowing the topography a bit better than her would-be captors. The cave

walls were rough and cracked in spots, but unless Kiedron was a rock lizard or was capable of changing shape, there was no way out of the cave but its entrance—and Howell would have that sewn up.

There was enough cover inside the cave to prevent being able to see all of it from the opening, and this worried Howell. How could he be sure all the children were knocked out by the heat and avoid killing any of them? He would have to wait for the engineer to return and discuss it with her. He cursed himself for not bringing one of the Service doctors with him, but it was too late to do anything about it and he didn't dare send anyone back to fetch a doctor. Trust, he realized, would have to be one of the first things established on Mithras.

As he thought about what Hesslin had told him he decided that since they were all here together, there was no point in a nab-colonial state of warfare. If he could only manage to teach these people that they were all on the same side. Us against the CCS! That might be the key to governing the planet. Howell grinned inside his coldsuit. The Service might have made a major mistake in sending him here. It might even be in favor of someone like Kiedron keeping things too upset for a commandant to do anything but chase after her. That was an interesting idea, one he would have to give more thought to when he had the time. *When the suns go nova, when the Service turns benevolent, and when the Mithras commandant has the time. Busywork, that's the best thing for a prisoner* ! Howell thought bitterly.

He could hear voices on the mike system. They overlapped and ran into each other, and the static didn't help, but Howell was sure that one of the voices was Jens's. He moved quickly toward the cave entrance.

Jens was there, pushing a small band of children along in front of him, most of them scarcely clothed. A lanky blond boy not yet in his teens was leading them and reassuring the children as they moved toward Howell. Jens led the group into the cave, and then introduced the blond boy.

"This is Arnie, my oldest. He's nine." Jens pushed the boy toward Howell and motioned him to hold out his hand. The child was dressed in a cut-down coldsuit, but the hood was open. Howell gravely shook hands with the child and, the ordeal over, Arnie ran back to his father's side.

"He told Kiedron you wanted the children here, and he told her it was a trap," Jens explained. "You're going to have a tough time following



Lustvogel's act, Burian. Most children around here are told the commandant will get them if they're naughty."

Howell was amused by the fact he was a fearsome thing to a little boy. "Tell him I only eat children for breakfast on alternate Tuesdays. Since this isn't one of those days, I'll let him off," he said in his best growly voice. The child jumped and Jens laughed.

"Don't fash it, Arnie, the commandant knew you would tell Kiedron—he wanted you to. He's a man who plays the game fairly." Jens ruffled the boy's hair and sent him into the cave. "I'll have him stay with the children. They trust him." Jens looked at Howell and waited.

*Damn!* Howell knew his aide suddenly had him by the short hairs. If he didn't tell Jens quickly what he was planning, Arnie would be in the cave with the others when it was heated up. Jens, Howell knew, would never forgive him if he endangered Arnie.

"Jens, I think there's something we ought to talk about." Howell paused, stalling for time and a chance to think of what he was going to say. "I'm going to use heat to capture Kiedron, and Arnie's coldsuit could be lethal for him."

Jens went white. "Do you know what heat will do to these children? Are you trying to kill them?"

"It'll do less harm than gas, flooding or some of the less nice methods Lustvogel tried. Sure the heat will knock them end over tea kettle, but it'll be safer for them than the cold was for me."

"Then are you doing this for revenge? Killing ten kids as well as Kiedron seems like a high price even for a commandant." Jens's voice was harsh and grating. Howell could tell the aide was holding himself rigid inside his coldsuit. One wrong word and he would spring at Howell.

"Look, this is the only way I can help Mithras. The Service hasn't bothered to do anything about this place because the colonists and the nabs are too busy doing in each other to ask the CCS to act like a government instead of a prison. I have no intention of killing those children, but I do intend to catch Kiedron and end her reign of terror. Trust me, Jens. Trust is all we've got."

"Trust you? How much have you trusted me? From the moment you got here it was clear you felt I was just waiting to do you in. You're a bundle of paranoia, and now you're trying to kill our children. I won't have it. I'll kill you first." Jens sprang, and then collapsed abruptly as Howell's foot caught him square in the gut. Howell bent over the prostrate man and opened his faceplate so that Jens could retch without filling the helmet.

"Sorry, but I couldn't let you attack me. That's it, easy there." Howell held onto his aide until the heaving stopped. "Feeling better? Now, let's talk this out in my office—later. I've got a job to do, and you can help with it or I can stun you down and have you hauled back to the caves. Which is it going to be?"

"I'll stay," Jen whispered, gagging. "Arnie..."

"Hesslin, get the Guhmel kid out of the cave," Howell called to the squad leader hiding in the rocks over the cave entrance.

"No." Jens stood up, clutching his coldsuit. "No, he stays. Arnie knows enough to get out of the suit before he overheats. You are going to do it slowly, aren't you, Howell? It'll be less rough on the children."

"Yes, I'll do it slow." Howell wanted to pat Jens's shoulder, but he knew the time wasn't right for any display of pity or sympathy.

Hesslin had his men hidden in the rocks around the cave, where Jens and Howell joined them, and Hoshi was in position at the storage area. Howell could hear her directing the crew in the cave. The voice faded in and out, but Howell was sure he could reach her when she was needed. Suddenly something hit him—Arnie was in a coldsuit with a hood mike!

"Jens, would your son be listening in on this band?"

"Yes, I would in his place. But don't worry— there's not much a nine-year-old can do against a frost killer."

"I'm more worried about what Kiedron—hold it! I think we've got a live one."

Howell wasn't positive, but he did think he had seen a small round figure moving toward the cave. Then he saw it, closer this time. Kiedron, alone.

"Where is her backup?" Howell hissed.

"Arnie said that Chanoch wouldn't come with her and she set out alone to prove what a coward he was."

"Isn't that just like a kid to go off half-cocked?"

The figure was closer to the mouth of the cave. A quick look-see, and Kiedron was inside. Howell heard a shrill whistle in his helmet and Hesslin and his men were moving into position in front of the cave.

"Look out, she might have a laser," Hesslin called as he directed his men to take cover. There was no blast of firing from the cave, nor any movement. Howell remembered the dead mine foreman and his missing laser, and shivered. Someone might get more hurt on this expedition than he had intended. He moved down the slope of the rocks, and took cover in a crevasse behind Hesslin. Jens joined him, and both men hunkered in to wait.

The ground rumbled under them and Howell knew the frost killer was coming. The machine rose out of the snowy wastes like a prehistoric monster made of iron and plastics. Its gaping maw breathed fire as it moved to cover the entrance to the cave.

"The children are screaming, and Arnie is taking off his coldsuit," Jens said flatly. Howell could hear the boy telling his father what was happening in the cave over his own speakers, but it was more horrible hearing Jens coldly repeating his son's message.

"Arnie," Howell called, "tell me when the children are too warm. I don't want anyone hurt. Do you understand me, Arnie?"

"Yes, sir. Kiedron understands, too, but she's mad." The boy's voice was hesitant but calm. Howell blessed the child and reminded himself to commend the boy in his next report. Having Arnie inside would assure everyone that no children were going to be killed.

The heat was rising. Even Howell could feel it under his boots. The snow on the ground began to melt. Icicles fell with dull, plopping sounds. The trees creaked as the slushy snow slid off their branches.

"Come on, keel over in there," Howell urged as Arnie's voice, fainter

now, said that Kiedron was still on her feet and searching desperately for a way out.

"I'm sick, Papa," Arnie said. Jens stood up and ran toward the frost killer, waving his arms. "Kiedron is, too, she fell..." Arnie's voice died as Howell jumped up and told Hoshi to turn off the frost killer and get back away from the cave.

The frost killer didn't move. Howell could see a small, red-clad figure seated at the controls, and felt a cold chill at the thought that the engineer wasn't going to move, that she intended to kill Kiedron and the others.

The same thought had obviously occurred to Jens, for he was starting to draw his laser. "Jens!" Howell barked in as crisp a voice as he could muster. "Put that weapon down and stay right where you are. That's an order, mister!"

"But she's—"

"Do it!" The command in his voice was overpowering. "I'll take care of her, but you'd better stop or I'll have you up on charges before you can blink twice."

With great reluctance, Jens stopped his charge and watched helplessly as the frost killer continued to pour heat into the cave.

"Lieutenant Hoshi, this is Captain Howell." His voice was deceptively soft while talking to the engineer. "The job is accomplished; you can turn off the machine."

No answer. The frost killer continued its operation.

"Do you think killing those children will bring Marios back to you? You already feel guilty enough about his death—do you want eleven more on your conscience. There are eleven children lying unconscious and helpless inside that cave. Eleven small bodies. Picture them in your mind, lieutenant. Take a good look, because that image will never leave you for the rest of your life if you fail them now."

The coldsuited figure was still for a moment, then moved one hand. The frost killer shuddered and the heat stopped. Hoshi was slowly bringing the machine around and backing it away from the cave

Howell let out a light sigh of relief. "Thank you, lieutenant," he said quietly. He discovered, much to his chagrin, that he was trembling, and willed his body to stop it. That was no way for a commandant to behave.

Howell could see Jens running into the cave with Hesslin and his men right behind. Before Howell could reach them, Jens was out with Arnie in his arms, and Hesslin was carrying a limp bundle that had to be Kiedron. The nabs followed with the rest of the children.

"Get them to the clinic—quickly!" Howell was weak with relief. Now if only they were all right. He realized suddenly what a risk he had taken, and sat down abruptly in the snow. If this had failed....

"Sir, you got her, and the kids seem to be all right." Jens stopped to reassure Howell. Arnie was stirring in his father's arms. Howell walked into the still-hot cave, picked up Arnie's coldsuit and returned with it to Jens. "Here, he'll need this. He's a brave man—and so's his old dad." Howell patted the boy's hand as Jens spread the coldsuit over as much exposed skin as he could reach.

The children were all in the medical wards being treated like young lords and ladies. The med-corpsmen stuffed them with goodies and a lot of fluids. The only one not enjoying the feast was Kiedron. Hesslin had ordered her confined to a top security, one-bed ward, and had stationed six nabs, fully armed, to guard her.

Howell moved through the main ward, talking and joking with the children. Arnie was beside him, and already the boy had a highly proprietary air about him as he talked about how he and the commandant had actually captured Kiedron. Howell watched the children with amusement tempered by pity. Some of them shied away from him as though he were the devil incarnate. He hoped they would, in time, get over their fear of him. Even Kiedron—in time.

"Where is our star revolutionary?" he asked Jens beside him. "Did you throw her in irons or something?"

"No. We just thought it would be safer if she didn't have the other kids around. She was hard hit by the heat, poor twit. She kept running around...."

"Where is she?" Howell demanded. A strong urge to look at the girl who had disrupted a complete colony pulled at Howell's mind. He wanted to gloat, to threaten, to affirm his own superiority. "I want to see her—now."

"It isn't safe! She tried to kill you and if it hadn't been for Hiru she would have managed it."

"You told me that could have been anyone. I want to see her."

Jens shrugged. "If you insist, but I'm going in with you. Over here." He led Howell through a doorway into a hall. There were two nabs armed with stun weapons standing guard outside a locked room. Jens nodded to the guards and they stepped aside to let him code the door to open. Nodding to Howell, he moved to one side of the door and bowed the commandant through. "After you, sir. Your captive awaits you."

The room contained four guards nervously watching a small girl lying in bed. Her hair was still wet and her eyes were wide and frightened. She clutched the blankets around her and stared at Howell. Her lower lip trembled as she watched him approach the bed.

Howell looked down at Kiedron and all feelings of gloating left him. She was so small, so childish, so really harmless. And this had managed to do in a colony!

Howell sat down on the bed and smiled at the girl. "You poor little kid, all that hassle with none of us remembering you were a child!" Howell reached for her, and with a small, stifled sound, Kiedron was in his arms holding on tightly.

## ***CHAPTER SIX***

"Do you realize what a fool thing you did in there, Burian?" Jens sat in Howell's chair and fed a cube into the recorder to make his report on the capture of Kiedron Agata. Howell paced the small office, deep in thought. He appeared not to have heard Jens, so the aide repeated the question in a louder tone.

"Huh?" Howell stopped his pacing to look off into the distance somewhere behind Jens's head. "I guess I should have... since she did kill Lustvogel . . . but so little!" Howell resumed his pacing, and Jens shrugged

and went back to the cube. He softly gave the facts about the capture, his voice as unemotional as he could manage. Howell stopped briefly at the desk to listen to the report, then resumed his tightly limited circling of the room. When Jens finished, he shut off the recorder and waited for some reaction from Howell—something other than his dreamlike state of shock. The sound of the machine shutting off did have some effect on the commandant. He sat down abruptly on Jens's toadstool chair and shook his head like a dog fresh from a bath. "I can't help wondering why I did it." Howell looked at Jens as though he were finally seeing him. "I could have gotten myself killed by that twit. Getting emotional in my old age—that's an excuse, nothing more, Jens. When I saw her out there on the tundra—the first time, when I was lost—I felt a magic like nothing else in my life. I've had a lot of women, loved some of them, married a couple, but no magic. No magic in any of them." He slowly wiped his face with one hand as if he were clearing away dust or cobwebs. "I'm a romantic fool at heart. I think I always wanted to hear celestial music or have something new and wonderful happen each time I fell in love. What I usually felt was an urge to get someone into bed, and I rationalized it as 'love.' But now, at my age, magic!"

"We all want that, and we all rationalize what we really get," Jens said. "I know, at times, that my Rhoiannin can be just someone I share a cave with, but then there are the times I look at her and she is so beautiful, and my breath gets stuck in my chest because I'm so amazed that she's my wife. That's magic, too. It just isn't magic all the time. No marriage is. You couldn't take the constant tension of feeling so perpetually excited."

"I know things slow down after the first thrills. And anything, no matter how good, can get less so as you get used to it, but that's not what I mean. Kiedron is something very special. A child who has managed a very difficult thing like a revolution, and yet she really doesn't know what she's accomplished. She's never really thought it out. She is so young—just beginning to learn that life has shades of gray in it. I saw her in that bed, her whole being screaming I need, I need!' and I knew that I was what she needed. That's the magic, Jens, being needed so very much. I've never had anyone really need me before."

"Kiedron needs to be locked up like the wild thing she is. You're going to end up very dead, Burian, if you go throwing yourself at her like that too much. She's a trained killer! Her father..."

"To hell with her father! He never gave that poor kid a chance to be a child, and that's what she needs. To stop having to run, hide and be frightened day after day. She needs someplace safe to rest and be a child in, and I can be that place."

"You sound like you think she's a six-year-old. That's also a woman in there... or didn't you notice when you were hugging her?"

"Yes, I knew that too. Husbandhigh! That short child is going to turn into a short woman, and she'll always be little to me. There must be some inherent fragility in smallness..."

"Fragile? Kiedron's about as fragile as a class five starship. That girl has taken on two full grown nabs at a time and managed to down both of them. That's a very tough little Caver we're talking about."

"No." Howell shook his head. "She's not, that's her problem. Under the legend of her toughness there's something soft and unformed. It's hard surface and scared core. She's never had a chance to grow up, and it might even be too late now. You can't force maturity the way Agata did and not have to pay a price for it. Only Agata won't be the one to pay; Kiedron will. There will always be something stunted in her, something childlike, crying to get out. I want to be there to help her when her shell breaks; it's going to be very painful. By catching her, I've taken away everything she knew. I've destroyed her purpose, and now she needs me to give her something better in return. I want to give her a chance at life."

"The CCS might have something to say about that. The recruiter is going to want Kiedron. They won't let you keep someone that dangerous on Mithras now that she's been caught."

"I'll let her go free first! The CCS isn't going to get her." Howell slumped tiredly on the stool. "I'm going to my room for a rest. I think I deserve it. Get Hesslin and that engineer to do up their reports and send the whole mess off with the next ship. I'm tired, Jens. Bone, dead tired." Howell got slowly to his feet and walked out of the room, his shoulders hunched in what looked like defeat. Jens watched the door slide closed and realized he wasn't feeling any too elated, either, Aftershock, and the danger to his boy, he decided. Or it might be that Howell was right, that catching Kiedron could turn out to be something worse for Mithras. What did you do with an ex-revolutionary?



Howell's quarters, while cramped, were reasonably comfortable. But in his present mood his bed might as well have been carved from the rock of the cave walls. He looked up at the ceiling, his euphoric mood fast evaporating.

"Why her, and why now?" he muttered to himself. "I thought those infatuous fires were banked a long time ago!"

Howell considered himself a calm, cautious man when it came to women. He had been both fair and emotionally under control for the last thirty years at least. No woman had ever had to worry about Burian Howell turning a pleasant little flirtation or friendly weekend into anything sticky. He was gallant, expert and careful. And he always picked women as emotionally mature as himself when it came to romance. Yet here he was, infatuated as a boy, over a girl young enough to be his grandchild. And he liked it. Liked the excitement, the warmth and the needing. That had been the one thing missing in all his involvements—that was the magic he had been hoping to find in someone along the way. But he hadn't expected to find it on Mithras, or with someone like Kiedron. She was short, only slightly pretty, uneducated, and worst of all—young!

"Nasty, I am an idiot. Jens is right, I'm getting foolish in my old age." Howell turned over and buried his face in the pillow. "Mithras has a rotten effect on a man's mind," he mumbled into the soft foam. "And other parts of his anatomy. Why her?"

He already knew the answer to that: because. He could come up with a thousand reasons why he shouldn't be feeling the way he was, and only one reason for why he should. He loved Kiedron. She had managed, without the slightest effort, to capture a man that far more beautiful and talented women had pursued and never caught.

The human emotion of loving was a complicated combination of wish fulfillment, childhood traumas and biochemistry. Temporary insanity, too, played a part in it—as did neurosis, sexual frustration and ego. Love was an unpleasant, unhealthy and miserable state for the human mind to cope with. Howell was enjoying every rotten minute of it.

*I don't even like her very much—how can I? I don't know her, except as a born killer of commandants and anyone else who gets in her way.*

*She has no redeeming qualities beyond being little, and in trouble, and needing me to get her out of it. It was all so very childish.*

*Fourteen, she's fourteen years old. I could be arrested on some planets for even thinking about a fourteen-year-old girl—or boy. She is more boy than girl, too. Brought up by that crazy father of hers to be a revolutionary. Ha! Babies running revolutions. She's never had a chance to be what she is, a little girl. That's what I like about her, she's not a little girl, she's Kiedron. She hasn't been trained to play any stupid games because of being female. She doesn't have to be sweet or cuddly. Agata gave a whole new meaning to the idea of 'Daddy's little girl'—vibroblades instead of hair ribbons. Damn it, I like that! I like it enough to try forgetting how young she is, and enough to remember it when it counts. She'll need time and a lot of gentleness. She'll need the rest of my life! And I'll be glad to give it to her. Oh Kiedron, my snow-elf.*

Howell fell asleep clutching his pillow, a soft smile on his face.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

It was Ponce who brought the news of Keidron's capture back to Chanoch. He had been out gathering supplies in the Homecave and had heard it, he said, from Arnie Gulimel.

Chanoch was stricken for all of fifteen seconds.

"Now maybe she'll listen to me when I tell her something. I'm no fool. I knew it was a trap." Chanoch inflated his flabby belly in an attempt to look impressive. Since his audience was Ponce, it was a wasted effort.

"Yeah, and Agata knew it was a trap, too. But she's the bravest woman I know. She didn't let cowards like you stand in her way."

"But she shouldn'ta done it, Ponce. It was dumb."

"Right or dumb is pointless now. What are we gonna do to get her out of there?" Ponce waited impatiently for an answer, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. If Chanoch failed to do anything—which was likely, knowing Chanoch—he, Ponce, could offer to lead a raid and rescue Agata himself. He would gain points and Chanoch would look like a prize fool.

"I'll have to think that out." Chanoch rubbed his lightly fuzzed chin and tried to look thoughtful. "You said she was under heavy guard in the med wing, so that means she's sick. Running in there and pulling her out could be pretty bad for her. If we wait until the doctors get done, we can spring a regular holding cell easier. Someone on the staff can keep us posted on how she's doing. So we wait till then."

"That's it, huh? Wait?" Ponce shook his head at Chanoch's stupidity. "What if I offered to go in there and spring her myself? I'm not afraid of nabs and I can do it—I'm good." Ponce didn't mention his extra insurance, the laser he had hidden deep in a food bag.

"No. I don't want that kind of risk taken with Agata's health. She stays until I say otherwise. I'm in command now, and what I say goes. And if you don't believe that, I'll kick your tail until you do."

"You and who else?" Ponce muttered, backing down a bit. Open warfare with Chanoch would have to wait, but a lot of sport would be had by making the older boy's life as difficult as possible.

"I think she should sweat a bit," Chanoch was saying. "I want her to wonder when I'm going to get her out of the CCS's hands. Maybe I'll do in the commandant on the way, just as a reminder that I'm pretty fierce myself."

"You wait too long and you're gonna see Agata walking in the door demanding to know why she had to get out all by herself." Ponce ambled away from the sputtering Chanoch. His mind was teeming with plans and he had to be alone to sort them out—there were so many ways to do in Chanoch.

Kiedron took a long time healing.

The doctors had given Howell a tentative prognosis of a day or so. The symptoms of heat prostration did clear up rapidly, but she was listless and depressed. Two weeks after the capture, Kiedron was still weak and frail—mostly through her own efforts. She had refused to eat, and the doctors had put her on a life-support feeding. The first couple of times she pulled out the needles as fast as they were inserted. Even a beating from a guard didn't deter her. Then a barbed needle was used, making removal

more painful than it was worth. Kiedron, after tugging at it a bit and almost passing out from the pain, sullenly let it be. She would lie in bed, sleeping or staring at the ceiling. Howell's frequent visits neither disturbed nor pleased her.

Howell wasn't too surprised at her reactions. After months of running around playing revolutionary, the poor kid probably needed the rest. It was, he reflected, the first time she was forced to be still. The beating alarmed him and he sent the offending guard to the mines. Hesslin had put a monitoring system into the room, which helped a little.

Howell paced the length of the room and turned to face her. "Do you know your room is bigger than my whole office? And I don't even have enough space for one guard."

"Stop humoring me. I know what you'll do as soon as I'm well enough to leave this bed. I'm going to be dissected by the CCS after you get done picking my brains. I won't tell you anything so you might as well have them kill me now." Her voice was labored, and he could see she was trying hard not to lose control.

"No one is going to kill you. I've given my word on that. How long do you think I'll last around here if I do in the hero of Mithras?"

"Ex-hero. Take a look at my guards. Any or all of them would cheerfully do me in, given half the chance. Hesslin put in a monitoring system to save my skin. I've also had seven changes of guards in the last two days alone. If you don't kill me, they will." Kiedron turned her head to glare at a young nab in one corner of the room. That woman shifted uneasily and bent to examine the setting on her stungun. The weapon was incapable of killing, but it could disable a victim long enough to polish her off at leisure with a knife or fists.

"I'll have the hide of anyone who makes one move like that, and I'll nail it to my office wall. I mean that."

"Word of a commandant! Your word isn't worth squat around here. You're Service trash that the CCS dumped on us, and the sooner you understand that, the better. We run Mithras, not the CCS." Kiedron had tried to sit up, but the pull on the IV made her quickly change her mind. She lay back on the bed, and a small groan involuntarily escaped as the needle shifted position in her arm. "That's a bitch," she murmured,

whitefaced with pain. The guard snickered, and Howell glared at her.

"Shape up, soldier, or I'll have you assigned to mine duty with no coldsuit." The nab snapped to attention, eyes straight forward, face muscles rigid.

"And stay that way!" Howell turned to look at each of the four guards in the room. "Any of you want out of this duty, tell me and I'll have you assigned elsewhere." Howell let the import of his threat sink in. The guards might be getting a bit restless about Kiedron, but they had to know he was still in command.

"I'd put the lot of them out of here," Howell said apologetically, "but I'm afraid you'd be long gone before the next bed check. I can't risk that."

"You're right, I would. But Chanoch will be here to spring me soon, so don't sweat it." Kiedron looked as though she were really trying to believe that. Howell made a mental note to check out what was being said about rescuing Kiedron in the Homecave. Jens or Arnie would be his best bet for honest information.

"Look, Kiedron," he turned back to the girl. "I need your help in bettering things here on Mithras. I want to do the right thing. All this upset and bloodshed is worthless. We could—"

"Shove your wanting to help. I know all about CCS commandants and their promises. You're here to exploit us and give as little in return as you can."

"Was your father a Rad? The propaganda sounds familiar. Try not to think in slogans—it rots the brain."

"Don't you *dare* make fun of my father! He was a great man and he cared about Mithras. He really cared. Not like the swinejumping clods the CCS has always sent us. We could have governed ourselves with my father in charge. We could have been great." Her lower lip trembled, then hardened into a stubborn pout. "Why should I bother with you? Commandants never listen to anything a colonial has to say. But remember, we are the masses and we will win in the end by the power of right and—"

"Spare me the political diatribes." Howell threw up his arms. "I've

heard them all before, and yours are about as half-baked as most of them.

Next you'll be hitting me with an 'all power to the people' number."

Kiedron's face lit up. "Hey, I hadn't heard that one. I like it."

"You would. It's an old ethnics' slogan. They varied it to fit whatever ethnic they were working with at the time. It's fairly standard Rad talk. Then there are the slogans like 'Antarians now!'; and of course, 'trisexuals unite!' That's a good one, and you can vary it depending on the culture. I dabbled with Rad when I was a few years older than yourself, but I outgrew it."

"I won't. My father raised me to think of the rights of the people and to oppose tyrants. I'm giving my life for that."

"More pointless rhetoric. Is that all you can do, spout your father's political views? People who only have one conversational horse to ride are bores." Howell leaned back in his chair and looked at Kiedron. "You're a child, remember that. And I'm going to treat you like a child. That's something no one around here has had the guts to do. So shape up, kid, before I send you to bed without your supper."

Kiedron tilted her head and grinned. "What ya gonna do, pull my IV or something?" Howell looked at the needle in her arm and burst out laughing. Kiedron's clear, bell-like laugh joined his as they both watched the dextrose level in the bottle over her bed,

"All right, that's enough jabber for now. You get some rest. I'll be back tomorrow to ask more questions—try to have some better answers than outmoded slogans that you don't even fully understand." Howell stood up and bent over the bed to pat Kiedron on the shoulder. She didn't flinch away, nor did she welcome the caress. Howell nodded and turned and left the room.

"You listen to what he says, you hear?" The guard Howell had bawled out was watching Kiedron. "You tell him what he wants to know or I'll beat your brains into mush."

"Go twitch on an open stungun!" Kiedron lay on her back staring at the ceiling and thinking.

"How could her father have done that to her?" Howell paced the small space in front of his desk. Jens was on the mushroom and Arnie sat on the crowded desktop.

"Easy. Tovo had charisma and Kiedron worshipped him." Jens smiled, remembering something from the past. "We all worshipped him," he said softly. "Tovo Agata was the only chance most of us had to feel like we had some control of our lives. He was going to free us." Jens shrugged. "Freedom on Mithras is too often a quick trip to the recycling plant. That's what Tovo got—and I what we'll all get in the end."

"What about Chanoch? Is he going to rescue Kiedron?"

"Not bloody likely, sir!" Arnie said from the desk. "Chanoch is having a dill of a time being kingpin of Mithras. Kiedron can rot for all he cares."

"Ah, it's so simple," Jens said. "The queen is dead, long live the king. Howell, you'll find that happens pretty fast around here. Unfortunately, Kiedron knows that, too, and I'm sure it won't be fun for her."

"Uh, yes. We've already had an incident or two. Hesslin told me he's thinking of changing her guards again. One of them threatened her today after I left. Thank the Lady, Hesslin thought to monitor the place and avoid anything getting physical. I'd hate to have her harmed."

"Arnie, tell the commandant what the talk is in the Homecave about Kiedron."

"Well, sir, a lot of people think they'd like to count coup on Kiedron. You know, lardheads who wouldn't take on anything bigger than a dead rat now think they're a match for her." The boy kicked his heels against the side of the metal desk. The sound was a hollow "boom" in the small office.

"It sounds like I've harmed her more than I thought." Howell stopped pacing and picked up a cube from his desk. Arnie scooted to one side to give him more access to the records. "No, don't move, I'm just messing around—this isn't the right cube. I had one here of this morning's visit. I wanted you to hear it."

"I think it's still in the viewer, sir." Arnie craned his neck to see the coding on the cube. No coding. "Is that the one?"

"Yes, thanks. Jens, I keep playing that cube over and over. I am repeatedly struck by the utter simplistic rot that child talks. Kiedron is a guileless child who follows the orders of the last person to get on her wavelength. She's no leader, she just implements orders."

"But what about her activities around here— the killings and raids?"

"Her father's program. She'd go on following that particular one until she was stopped or killed. I stopped her. Now my problem is to see that she doesn't end up dead. I have to reprogram her or kill her myself—and damn it, Jens, *I can't kill her!*"

Reprogramming wasn't too easy, either. Howell found he could only go so far without running into an avalanche of political fru-fraw. One minute he would be talking to a wary-eyed child, and the next to an automaton that would repeat garbled slogans and warn him to mend his ways. He had to work around her father's earlier programming or blank it out completely.

Kiedron was well enough to walk a little. Howell had persuaded Hesslin to leave her unguarded when the commandant visited her. He watched her make slow progress around the room, clinging to the walls for support. The IV, on a spring frame, waddled after her like a skeleton robot. Kiedron seemed afraid of falling. She jumped at the slightest sound, and she was becoming much more listless and vague. Howell was worried.

"Tell me about the recruiters, Kiedron. One of them is due any day and I don't know what I'm up against." Howell sat on the chair beside the bed and watched her progress around the room. She was dressed in a medcorps jumpsuit of a shiny yellow fabric; it made her skin look jaundiced.

"You should ask Jens that." Kiedron rested by leaning a shoulder against the wall. She reached up to wipe the sweat off her upper lip. "Are you going to let him have the kids he wants?" She sounded as though she were trying to work up some enthusiasm for fighting Howell, and not succeeding too well.

"I don't know yet. I thought you could help me decide. It's understanding the system on Mithras that's so damned hard. I need your



help."

"Why?" Kiedron slid limply to the floor in a tangle of limbs and IV hose that tangled themselves into a sort of lotus before Howell could come to the girl's aid. She waved him away and sat, staring at the floor. "You're the CCS and I'm fighting you. Why should I help?"

"You're supposed to be convincing me that I should fight the CCS along with you; we're both prisoners here, aren't we?" Howell was worried about her apparent lifelessness. Perhaps she did believe she was only a deposed hero now... or she could be working on a very sly method of escape by pretending she didn't really want to escape. It was very puzzling. Howell sighed, wondering what to do next.

"Talk yourself into anything you want. The other CCS louts did it, so can you," Kiedron laughed bitterly. "You have no idea how to run Mithras, do you? Don't they give classes in terrorism at the Academy? Try Granthum's, or even Lustvogel's methods. Didn't dear Gulimel give you any briefing on your predecessors? The blessed Confederation Colonial Service doesn't give a damn what you do to us just as long you don't try to leave Mithras."

"I was never told I couldn't leave here. That's one of the little surprises Mithras has for its commandants," Howell said. "I was dumped into this mess with as little briefing as could be arranged by my superiors. By the time I found out anything it was too late to stop it. I was so slow I had to find out from Hesslin what my real status was."

"Oh, Hesslin," Kiedron yawned, a pink-and-white-kitten yawn. "He doesn't know some of the real dirty stuff, and since you don't either—I'm not going to tell you, so there!" She gave Howell the finger and waited for his reaction.

Howell unsmilingly returned the gesture. "I played this sort of game when I was fourteen, too." He stared pointedly at the girl's childish figure, eye-tracking her small breasts and then glancing away as if distinterested. "Puny," he remarked, and then went back to contemplating the IV apparatus.

"Are you going to rape me?" The question was abrupt and caught Howell off guard. Here he was playing silly games with a naughty child, and she had to come up with something like that. He had to stop and work

at the comment from several angles. Mainly he had to guess just what sort of an answer this wicked-minded cherub might be expecting from him.

"No," he said coldly. "Immature females never were a fixation of mine. I prefer my partners voluptuous, well-trained and willing. Besides, you have no figure to speak of."

"You left out that I was a colonial." Her voice was as cold as his.

"I said that when I mentioned you had no figure. Like most colonials. I've seen around here, you're short and on the bulky side. In a few years you'll run to fat. I never liked fat women—or fat men, for that matter."

"Oh, so you prefer men. That explains why you and Jens—"

"That explains nothing. We were discussing you, remember? I suppose at your age you have done a certain amount of the clumsy fumbling that you think is sex. So did I when I was fourteen. When you're older, and find a man who does like his women on the stocky side, you'll probably find out what sex really is."

"And what is it, O fountain of wisdom?"

"Sarcasm, child, will get you nowhere quickly. But I will answer your dumb question. The fact that you ask it proves my point. Sex is a sport for mature adults who know how to play the game well and who care very much about pleasing themselves by pleasing another person. Also, it's the friendliest thing people can do together. You're not a friendly person, Kiedron; ergo, you are not sexy."

"Chanoch thinks I am." Her lower lip jutted in a gamine pout. "He thinks I'm terrific!"

"Then why hasn't he swooped down and rescued you from a dirty old man like me? I take better care of someone I think is 'terrific' But I'm a lot older than Chanoch, and a whole lot smarter."

"I'd rather have Chanoch than you!" She was starting to sulk, Howell noted, amused.

"As I thought I made clear, it isn't a choice you get to make. You don't appeal to me sexually at all."

"But you hugged me when I was brought into the ward. I thought—"

"I have a fondness for children. I like them; they're self-centered and selfish and they know it. Children are too young to have picked up the habit of lying to themselves. I admire the cunning and deviousness of looking so innocent while being quite sure the world belongs to them. Sex has nothing to do with it."

"Then are you going to turn me over to the CCS?"

"The CCS will get you over my dead body."

"That can be arranged," Kiedron said wickedly.

"Funny, that's what Jens told me, too, and he said you'd do the arranging."

Kiedron sat up and looked very shocked. "But I..." she stammered. "Pa did it only when it was worthwhile and helped Mithras. I'm not going to..." She ran down abruptly and sat open-mouthed. Her eyes were wide and frightened.

"What? Who made it worthwhile and why?"

Kiedron shook her head and wouldn't answer. She got slowly up from the floor and walked stiffly over to the bed. Staying as far from Howell as possible, she slipped beneath the covers and turned away from him. "I don't want to answer any more questions," she said. "I'm too sleepy to talk."

"We're planning to move Kiedron to a holding cell today if that's all right with you, sir." Hesslin, Howell and Jens were cleaning up after a training run out on the tundra.

"Good. What about the other kids, are they well enough to go back to their parents?" Howell ducked under a cool shower and waited for it to warm up. He was getting used to the cold, no longer feared it, but still wasn't very fond of being outside.

"Back to their parents? Burian, are you letting them go? I thought you'd

be keeping them for the recruiter."

"What recruiter? I've been hearing recruiter, recruiter, recruiter until it's coming out my ears, and he's not here yet. Certainly I'm letting them go, I got what I wanted—namely Kiedron. So I have no further use for them. Let this mythical recruiter round up his own children. I won't fight him, but I'm not about to help him, either." Howell stepped out from the shower and dried his hair. "Say, Jens, now that things are quieter around here, how about taking me to your home? I've never been there, and I'd like to meet this wife you keep bragging about."

Jens grinned with pride. "Sure, come to dinner tomorrow. Afterwards I'll have Arnie give you the fifty credit tour of our grotto area. That boy knows the whole Homecave better than I do. I think he'll make a good nab."

"You ought to see my oldest, sir." Hesslin pulled a clean uniform over his head, his voice muffled by the stretch cloth. "She's a crack shot and a whiz at psychology and crowd control tactics. I'm training her to fill my spot someday."

"Do most nabs train their children to follow in their footsteps?" Howell was fascinated. It was one more example of how the Service perpetuated the system.

Jens nodded. "Sure, it's a better life than being a miner, and both jobs are about as safe—which is not much on Mithras. But I've always felt dying as a nab was quicker than being buried in a cave-in or getting the lung-rot. Besides, it makes for better nabs if they were born here rather than shipped up. New fish die too quickly; the survival figures are stinking."

"Oh, what are they, on the average?" Howell felt he was on to something. Mithras was like a puzzle, a bit here, a word there, and he intended to solve it.

"Two thirds die in the first year, sir." Hesslin supplied the data. "We try not to get to like a new fish until he's been here a while; keeps his death from being too personal."

"Umm," Howell had finished dressing and was busy stuffing his dripping uniform down a laundry chute. "Jens, I'll want to talk to some of

the Cavers about this kind of thing, so if you'll round up a few of them willing to talk—oh, and by the way, I'm bringing Kiedron with me."

"By the Lady! Why do you want to do anything that foolish? She'll either duck out on you or be killed by some buckethead with a grudge."

"Not necessarily. I want to show the Cavers that she's all right and that I'm looking after her. It might stop some of the coup counting if they know they'll have to face me if anything happened to her."

Jens shook his head in disbelief. "You're a nice guy, Burian, but you're soft in the head."

## ***CHAPTER EIGHT***

Kiedron was finding her captivity both boring and nerve-wracking. She was becoming less and less sure that Chanoch would rescue her, and more and more frightened about her future on Mithras. The actions of the nabs in her room had convinced her that she wouldn't last a day out in the Caves without some protection. There were too many people she had lorded it over, too many that she had extorted food and clothing from, to expect anything but retribution. She had failed as a leader and couldn't be of any more help hiding children from recruiters. She had nothing unless she could regain her past position as a source of power. Chanoch couldn't hold things together for very long, and if she didn't get back in control quickly she would find her organization either changing radically under his rule or, worse, falling apart at the seams. Her father had never prepared her for failure; she was psychologically unfit for the role Howell had cast her in. She had been taught to either succeed or die—nothing else. Kiedron had never expected the turnabout in the people around her, the hatred for a has-been hero that the Cavers obviously felt for her. They had worshipped her father, but he had died a hero's death—she had been caught like a cave mouse. There was no glory in being a cave mouse, she decided.

Chanoch was unstable, and their last fight before she had gone out after the children had made it clear he was becoming restive at taking her commands. It was only the fact that the rest of the children, and the Cavers, followed her that had kept him in line—but what was happening to him now? He would have the children behind him because they would have no one better to follow. There might even be a struggle for the top

spot. Kiedron didn't trust Ponce very much, either. He was smarter than Chanoch and a great deal more ambitious.

She wasn't going to be rescued.

It was that simple. Any getting out of the CCS cave would have to be done on her own. She looked down at the barbed IV needle and grinned sourly. She could just see herself dragging that contraption across the snow with a squad of nabs in pursuit. It would be almost laughable, if she felt like laughing.

There were four nabs in the room, all armed. Hesslin had the viewscreens going and monitored around the clock. She wasn't going anywhere right now.

Hesslin wasn't going to help her, nor would Jens. Both men had made it quite clear they took their orders from the new commandant. And she could understand that very well.

This new man was completely different from any commandant Kiedron had ever met. He reminded her of the tales her father had told about the man he had known as "the commandant" when he was a boy. Someone who seemed to care about Mithras, the Cavers—and her.

*He cares!* Kiedron found that thought warming. No one had really cared about her, Kiedron, since her father had died. Oh sure, there were a lot of people to fear her, to respect Tovo Agata's kid, and even to help her when she was on top. But there had been nobody to really care how she felt, or what she was thinking about or wanting. She wanted someone to care about her.

Not like Chanoch. His idea of caring was a clumsy roll in the furs and grumbling about things not going more his way. He had been coldly selfish, she realized Chanoch had seen her primarily as a step up to the power he wanted. Alancia mattered more to him as a woman than she did—and he certainly didn't treat that poor stick very well. Life with Chanoch as a mate wouldn't be any too easy a thing. Kiedron hadn't really thought seriously about the boy in quite that way. He was useful to her, an occasional help and somebody to talk to—nothing else. *He didn't even understand what I was saying half the time—the dolt!*

Kiedron's father had taught her about men in the abstract. How to get

them to follow her, how to make them mad enough and how to use that mad. The uses of propaganda and how to control mobs. But not very much about men as individuals. Sex was no mystery to a Caver child; what with the crowding in the caves and everyone sleeping in the same room, most Caver children knew what there was to know about sex and where babies came from by the time they were five or six. But Tovo Agata hadn't taught his daughter anything about love. He had been too busy; teaching her how to set explosives and where to place a good ambush to worry much about her emotional life. He had been the only man she'd had any close contact with, and he had been everything to her. They had been partners and co-workers. He had always treated her as another adult. She really couldn't remember being a child. "Freedom" had been the first word she'd been taught to say. No dolls for Kiedron Agata, only a toy Molotov cocktail and a wooden vibroblade. On her sixth birthday, her father had given her a knife and had shown her how to use it to cut throats. At ten she had her own vibroblade—a real one this time. Tovo had promised her a laser when she turned fifteen—but Tovo was dead and there would be no laser from him. There would be nothing from him except his blueprint on how to take over Mithras, and she had failed at that.

She wanted to cry, but forced herself not to. She had vowed never to cry. The daughter of Tovo Agata was made of tougher stuff than that. She buried her face in her pillow, the unshed tears stinging behind her eyelids.

Even with the guards in the room she felt lonely. Kiedron had never slept in a real bed before. In the Homecaves, bed had been a pile of furs, which she had shared with both of her parents. Even after her mother had died, she had bundled with her father and whatever other Cavers he was working with at the time. When she had left the Homecaves, there had always been other children in the furs, or Chanoch. She didn't like being alone. No matter how many of those cold-faced nabs Hesslin crowded into her room she would still be alone.

Howell's visits slowly became something to look forward to. The man *was* different and his feelings about giving the children to the recruiter did match her own. "Over his dead body!" Kiedron giggled, a sound that made her nab guards snap to suspicious attention.

"Can't I even laugh in this hell-hole?" she asked. None of the nabs answered. They very rarely talked to her. They had learned that threats or

taunts would gain them quick reprisals from the commandant. So most of the time they spent their watches in sullen silence. These nabs had feared her once, Kiedron knew, and they might be made to fear her again. But not while she was strapped to a glucose bottle. She had to get out of the CCS cave.

But there was no place to go.

There was nothing in her future except the commandant. He held her life in his hands. He could turn her over to the CCS recruiter, he could kill her himself, or he could...

She had nothing to fear from him. His soft voice and gentle smile made it quite clear he wasn't going to hurt her. And he wasn't interested in her body—or so he said. That had rankled—him and his chatter about what a child she was when it came to sex. *Give me a few minutes in the right circumstances with you, Howell, and we'll see what a child I am!* Oddly enough, that thought gave her a great deal of pleasure. Someone to snuggle with, to be close to, and to care a bit. There would be no selfishness in him when he bedded a woman. How she knew that was a puzzle to her. He was different from her father—better in some ways; the very bottom of her mind told her that, and she pushed it away. She didn't want to think about her father as being less than perfect. He had to be perfect. He had died a hero. Anything that would tarnish his name she would bury forever in the dark parts of her mind. She was supposed to have been living proof of his greatness, and here she was, the prisoner of the CCS.

No. She was Howell's prisoner. He had made that very clear. The CCS wasn't getting her away from him.

*He wants me!*

Kiedron didn't even care what he might want her for, the wanting was enough. She could tell he didn't want anything *from* her—not power, or sex, or her revolutionary's talents. He just wanted her to be herself, Kiedron. No one had wanted that—ever. Not even her father.

Even her mother had made her more than just "Kiedron." She had to be the proof that Tovo Agata and his woman could have a child. She was the next generation, proof of their immortality. She was to live on—an Agata—for them.



Howell was so gentle, so concerned with her health. He would spend time arguing with the doctors over the care she was getting. He even sat on the edge of her bed and tried to spoon-feed her some soup. She had been feeling more than a little fractious that day and had upset the whole bowl of the steaming stuff into his lap. Instead of yelling at her or slapping her face, he had just looked sad and had left the room to change his uniform.

"Burian Howell." She rolled the name around on her tongue. "Burian Howell—Burian Owl!" He did look like the pictures of owls that her father had pointed out to her in a nature infocube. He had even found an owl-like creature living in the woods north of the cave hills. He had brought it home, a fledgling like her, and she had loved it. That funny beak of a nose and the tufty feathers on its head—and the scraggly beard.

Howell had the beard, not her pet *owlette*. A scratchy straggle of a beard. It tickled when he bent over her bed and patted her on the shoulder to say "goodnight." She wasn't sure she liked the beard. Her father had never had one. She gave it some thought and decided she preferred her men without beards. She would have to speak to Howell about that.

*"Owl, the beard has got to go. I don't like it!"* Silly to think about something as unimportant as a beard when the man wearing it had the power of life and death over her. But it did matter.

*Do I love him?* That thought was almost too stunning for her to even begin to cope with; love for a commandant went against everything her father had taught her. But yet there was a feeling of safety and warmth she hadn't had since her father had died. Her father had been the one constant in her life. And now she felt as if she might love Howell, too. Chanoch had never made her feel safe; quite the contrary, she was always having to patch up his blunders for him. She had made Chanoch safe, not the other way around. But Howell was CCS and a commandant.

*I can't let him know, not yet.* She had to be sure of what she felt and what to do next. Then too, there was the chance that Chanoch would get her out of the CCS cave and back in position as the hero of Mithras. That could make a lot of difference about herself, and Howell.

But Chanoch wasn't going to rescue her. If he had any such plans, she would have heard about them by now. She was on her own—except for Howell. She would never have to worry about Howell. He wouldn't be

fighting her for top spot, he already had it. There would be no blunders to clean up; Howell wasn't a man to blunder, and if he did, he cleaned up his own messes. He wouldn't yowl for help from anyone. Her father had been like that; the only help he had needed was hers.

*But he's old. Older than my father.* But the Confederation had all kinds of drugs and stuff to make a man seem much younger than he really was. Howell could be any age he wanted to be. Age didn't matter that much. She had loved her father and he was older, and she hadn't loved Chanoch, so that must prove something. *I wonder what Owl's like without his clothes.* There was one way to find out. But first she had to get out of this med ward and get the needle out of her arm. There was nothing sexy about an IV needle, even to a doctor. *I'll get well, and I'll show Owl how wrong he is about me. I've managed to kill commandants before, I should be able to bed one. Look at Lustvogel, the pig! All I had to do was take off my shirt, and the fool didn't even see the vibroblade until it was too late.* The image of Lustvogel out on the tundra, staring pop-eyed at her exposed chest gave her a warm glow of satisfaction. It had all been so easy. But Lustvogel had wanted her body. *Well, commandants are generally men, and men are alike in one way . . . this one only thinks he's different!*

Kiedron smiled up at the ceiling and plotted how to get Burian Howell.

Howell was present when the doctors removed the barbed needle. Kiedron had become bored with the dullness of the IV feedings and was now willing to eat. She had lost several kilograms, and the needle digging into her arm each time she moved had made eating seem like the wise thing to do.

The attending doctor, an ex-schizoid named Hanici, pressed his thumb to the locking plate on the end of the needle coupling. The barbs at the point of the needle would only fold into the shaft by responding to the lines and whorls of his thumb—something Kiedron had found out only by long, painful experimentation. The needle slid easily out of her arm, and Kiedron breathed a sigh of relief. "Only the damn CCS would think up something that nasty," she muttered, glaring at Howell.

"Child, it's people like you who make the wonders of science possible. Without your lack of cooperation it wouldn't have been necessary; ergo, the fault is yours."

"Go twiddle a futzed compbox." Kiedron said it with a half-smile that removed part of the sting.

"If you're trying to shock me, you'll have to do better than that. Try telling me to squat on a reactor or something. Never curse in a small way, Kiedron; if you are going to waste your breath in such a half-assed manner, try doing it right. I've met very few women who could curse well. Most of them are better at actual fighting—they're dirtier and less principled. That and sarcasm. Women have raised sarcasm to a fine art. We men pale by comparison."

"Bug it, so I can get dressed. I don't want a dirty pig like you standing around eyeing my body." Kiedron got out of bed and reached for the CCS trimslax and tunic; on the chair next to her bed.

"Sure, but I didn't know you had a modest bone in your body. That kind of self-consciousness is something most Rads lose very quickly. All that banding together in socialistic goodwill has something to do with it, I think. I learned more about sex than I did about politics when I was Rad."

"Shove..." Kiedron stopped and waited for him to leave.

"Good girl, you're learning fast. I'll leave, as you wish," the door dilated at his approach, "but I won't promise not to watch over the monitor."

Kiedron threw the tunic at the door as it closed behind Howell.

Hesslin brought Kiedron, under guard, to the CCS cave entrance. Jens and Howell were already suiting up. "Is she going to need a suit?" Howell asked. "Or isn't two weeks enough to decondition her?"

Hesslin laughed. "Put her in a suit and she'd die of the heat! I brought some extra men along; I thought it would be safer."

"For whom?" Howell eyed the two husky guards with interest. Hesslin had used women guards in the ward and this was the first time he'd put a couple of men on Kiedron.

"For her, unfortunately. There's a lot of nuts out there waiting for her skin."

Howell nodded and adjusted his helmet. "Open her up, Jens, we're going out without Hesslin's guardbears."

"Now wait a minute!" Hesslin growled.

"He's right." Jens slid his helmet into place. "You show up with a couple of momeraths like that and the whole Homecave goes off the deep. We can't risk it. Howell and I are armed, and I sent Arnie with word of what would happen to the first lard who laid a finger on Kiedron. The Cavers might not be afraid of Kiedron, but after his time in the blizzard they sure are afraid of Howell."

"Well, all right, but I'll be in a sled outside the cave if you need me. Use the high frequency, the squeal will be enough for me to come running."

Jens clumsily nodded and opened the air lock. Howell grabbed Kiedron as she dashed by him. "Easy, child. I think we'll fasten you to my suit for now." Howell slid the lifeline out of its pouch and attached a coded lock. He fastened one end of the line to Kiedron's arm and the other to his suit; then, peeling off a glove, he thumbprinted the lock. "Got you now. I'll be hooked to Jens and you'll be hooked to me—how cozy."

Kiedron started to say something, then paused and subsided into lumpish sullenness. She followed Howell out of the lock and into the bubble sled. She sulked all the way to the caves, refusing to answer any comment Jens or Howell directed her way. Both men ignored her sulks and talked around her personal black cloud.

"I'd better fill you in on a few things, Burian. Like the smells and the cold, they—"

"Not now, Jens. Only tell me anything I need to know to save my skin. I prefer to form my own impressions, if you don't mind. And as to smells— I worked on a farm with a thousand stinking pigs when I was in my teens. Made the Academy seem like a paradise by comparison. My father was never one to believe in idle hands."

"A pig farm!" Jens sounded incredulous. "Where did your father find a pig farm to send you to? Most meat factories only accept trained farm technicians, and since you were at the Academy—"

"Pa owned it. He was a biologist working on some sort of immunization

program for the colonies and needed all those pigs. I had to take care of them. Lead out your Cavers—nothing smells worse than pigs!"

Once inside the cave, Howell cracked open his helmet and was forced to admit the smell was close to pigs, at that.

The caves were cool, which kept down some of the smell, but after generations of Cavers and their smoking fires, rotting furs, damp children and strange eating habits, the place was a little ripe. Jens explained that part of the smell came from the hydroponics caves and the yeast farms. The air was cool in the caves, but the fires scattered around the various chambers and the presence of so many people in so crowded a space did keep the area warmer than outside—though not much. Howell stayed in his coldsuit with the helmet open, but Jens took most of his suit off. Howell felt his nose turning numb—whether from the cold or the smell, he wasn't sure.

Jens's cave area was a small collection of grottos he shared with his wife's family and a fellow nab and her family. There was a motley array of children playing in the center of the floor. Most of them were naked or had scraps of clothing covering their dirt-encrusted bodies. Howell shuddered at the primitive conditions. Jens grinned and said nothing.

Arnie wasn't at home but his younger sister, Gem, came over to Kiedron and shyly asked her how she was doing in the CCS cave. Kiedron jumped and braced herself while she sorted out what the child was asking. Realizing that Gem was not being mean, she relaxed and sat on the floor with the girl and the tangle of children. As soon as Howell took off the lifeline she was quickly engrossed in a game involving a stack of small stones, a slab of dry bread and a captured cave rat. Howell, after watching a bit, figured out that the game was a combination of gambling and lion taming, but he was hard put to figure out the rules. The children's finger motions were too fast for him to follow and he only caught an occasional gesture. After ascertaining that Kiedron would be safe with the children and that Gem was guarding her, he followed Jens to a deeper part of the grotto to meet Rhoiannin, Jens's wife. She was bending over a yeast tank when the two men found her. She straightened up and turned to face Howell, and he was struck by how beautiful she was. Rhoiannin had startlingly red hair wound in a loose knot on top of her head, bright green eyes and a tall, slender body. Howell understood what had sent Granthum rampaging through the Homecave if other Caver women were as lovely as

Jens's wife.

Jens beamed with pleasure as Howell bowed and took Rhoiannin's hand. Flustered, the woman bowed back and welcomed him to the cave. Her voice was soft with a hint of a lisp. It, too, Howell found lovely.

"We left Kiedron playing with the kids," Jens explained as he led the group back into the main part of the grotto.

"It is a good thing we are not out on the main floor, love," Rhoiannin said. "There are those who would like to kill her."

Howell noticed that her speech patterns were stilted and wondered if that was an attempt on her part "to speak like the wife of a nab. It was an interesting affectation and a bit amusing, too.

The children were still playing with the rat. The animal was as big as a standard cat and its fangs were at least five centimeters long. None of the children appeared to have been bitten, and all of them were noisily enjoying the game. Kiedron's clear, bell-like laugh sounded out over the others like a chime on the wind. She looked like what she was—a child.

Rhoiannin offered Howell some fresh milk from her goat and Howell accepted. The milk was good and warm. Rhoiannin milked the goat right into the cup that she then handed to Howell. He had not noticed the animal when he had entered the grotto and he soon understood why. As soon as Rhoiannin did up a cup of milk for Kiedron the goat wandered out of the grotto and was quickly lost to view.

"We let her roam. That way other people feed her and that saves our grain stocks a bit."

"Don't other people milk her, too?"

"Oh, yes," Rhoiannin answered, "but that's all right. If they feed it, they should get some milk. That is only fair."

"But aren't you worried that someone will steal her?"

Rhoiannin looked genuinely perplexed. "Who would steal my goat? All know that it is mine and that my husband is your second. No, to steal my goat would be very foolish. That is a good way to end up in a slag puddle

with your bones boiling."

"Caver Justice," Howell murmured softly.

Jens started and yelled for Howell. "Someone's coming, they're running this way—hide, Kiedron! It's a man from the sound of it."

Kiedron ducked swiftly under a pile of furs in one corner and vanished as if she had never been. Howell was amazed at the speed of the girl and the fact that she could conceal herself under the furs without leaving a telltale bulge.

The running man turned out to be Hesslin.

"Chanoch is attacking the CCS cave, sir!" Hesslin stood panting in his coldsuit, his chest heaving like a bellows. "He's inside the cave with about twenty of his brats and they're looking for Kiedron."

"The turd, the stupid, stinking slimeworm!" Kiedron erupted out of the furs, her face pink with anger. "Who told him to do anything that stupid? He should have checked where I was first. Oh, that piece of sewage, he could have gotten me out of here so damn easy. I'll kill him, I'll throw him alive into the recycling vats, I'll—I'll..." Kiedron sat down abruptly and beat on the furs in an agony of frustration.

## ***CHAPTER NINE***

Jens jumped to his feet, reaching for his helmet and the top of his suit. "I'll head back to the CCS cave, Burian, but I'd suggest you stay here. If Chanoch was foolish enough to think Kiedron was in the ward he may be too foolish to figure out where she really is. Hesslin and I can stop that lardhead, but it would be better if you and Kiedron were well out of his way."

Howell, to Jens's amazement, quickly agreed. The two nabs left for the caves while Howell sat on a stone bench and placidly drank a cup of Rhoiannin's yeast beer. Kiedron sat on the heap of furs and sputtered. Howell was pleased to see how quickly the girl would turn against someone she had liked. It gave him more than a few clues on how to wean her from her father's politics. Rhoiannin sat silently beside Howell, her face creased by worry lines.

"Don't fret, my lady." Howell set his empty beer cup on the bench, "Jens is a good nab and he won't come to any harm."

"I'm more worried about Chanoch. The boy is such a clod, a real waxbrain." Once Jens had left the grotto her vocabulary and speech patterns changed abruptly into standard Caver. Howell noticed it, but made no comment.

"Who's in line after Chanoch, Kiedron?" Howell asked the still-fuming girl.

"A twitter called Ponce, and he's as big a fool as Chanoch. When I was there to keep them in line things went really smooth, but now... oh, sleam squat on both of them!"

"Go back to your sulking, child, until your swearing vocabulary improves."

Howell leaned against the stone wall and considered how he would handle things if Jens managed to catch Chanoch. He had no interest in the boy and wasn't sure what he would do with him. Jens had told him the recruiters had refused to take him, and Howell was mentally going over a list of all his old friends at the Academy who might be bribable when Arnie came into the grotto.

" 'Lo, Ma, I hear the recruiter's in. Has anyone started collecting kids?"

His mother frowned at him and jerked her head in Howell's direction. Kiedron stopped fuming and Howell watched an expression of calculated cunning slide over her features.

"Where is the recruiter now, Arnie?" Howell asked. "Your father's over at the CCS cave stopping a bit of foolishness from Chanoch and I would hate a recruiter to see some of that."

"He's just got into the port, sir. Shall I have some of the nabs give him the long way 'round?"

"Good boy—get on it!" Howell watched with satisfaction as Arnie shot out of the room like the rat when the children had tired of playing with it. "I'm going to make that kid a field assistant as soon as I can figure out how to falsify his age so it'll pass the CCS computer," he told Rhoiannin.



She shook her head. "I'd want something better for him, like the right to pick what he wants to be. But if he can't, a nab's better than nothin', and much better than bein' grabbed by a recruiter."

"Oh yes, the recruiter." Howell fell to thinking busily. The CCS was sending him a new problem, bless their furry little brains. It might be wise to go along with the recruiter and gain some points, but if Hesslin was right that Mithras was his prison, there was no reason to cooperate with anyone but the colonials. Howell was enjoying all this plotting, he admitted to himself. It made him feel alive and warm to think about shafting the Service; maybe he, too, would get used to the cold like Jens had. And then there was Kiedron. Howell looked at the girl and then at Rhoiannin. The comparison was ludicrous—Rhoiannin was beautiful and Kiedron was a half-formed child, but yet...

Howell chewed the inside of his cheek and realized just how important Kiedron had become to him. She was resourceful and clever, and in time he thought he could get her over her worship of her father. *Then what?* he wondered. *Will she worship me? Is that what I want from her?* Husbandhigh, that's what Jens had said. No one would think much of it; she was free and so was he.

"You gonna sit there lumping, or are you gonna do something about that sleamjumper of a recruiter?" Kiedron's voice cut through his thoughts like a vibroblade.

"You're the expert on recruiters, you tell me," Howell challenged.

"They're bad." Rhoiannin answered his remark, Kiedron said nothing. "They take the kids and we never see them again anymore. They can't come back. They can't marry another Mithran. Lost, they're lost to us."

"Is that why your father helped you fake the tests, Kiedron?" Howell was trying to get the girl to speak.

Rhoiannin again jumped on the question, annoying Howell enough to make him want to snarl at her. "Yes, Tovo taught Kiedron and she taught the other children, but then the CCS got suspicious and started taking all the children. That was no good, too."

"*Kiedron*, I want to know how *you* feel about the recruiters!"

"Why, how could she feel anything but hate for them? They're pigwash, all of them." Rhoiannin's voice was maddeningly calm, and Howell could see she was impossibly stupid as well as beautiful. Kiedron grinned at his discomfort as Rhoiannin babbled sweetly on in her soft voice. "They go around like they own us and they steal our things as well as our children. I had a yellow shawl, it had belonged to Jens's mother. It was so lovin' with a long fringe on one side and a green bird sewn on it. I really loved that shawl. Jens said I looked like a queen in it. I don't know just what a queen is, but it must have been nice if Jens said that of me. And I know I'm pretty. All the men was after me and Jens got me to...."

Howell blocked out the sound of her chirping voice and watched Kiedron soundlessly laughing at him. *The imp*, he thought. *My little snow-imp*.

He smiled warmly back at the girl, startling her into open mouthed surprise.

Jens found Hesslin's men mopping up the last of the raiders. Chanoch was fighting near the air lock with Ponce right beside him. Hesslin and Jens attempted to bracket the kids while the nabs inside the cave drove them out toward their stunguns. A young blackhaired girl ran screaming at Jens and he shot her down. Ponce shrieked and slid to his knees beside her fallen body.

"You sleam trash, you've killed Chieng, you killed her!"

"Chill it, Ponce. She's all right. I only stunned her. It's Chanoch we want, and you, too, not the girl," Hesslin yelled.

"Well, you're not gettin' me, squat!" The laser came out so quickly from under Ponce's shirt that Hesslin had only a brief glimpse of it before Ponce shot him down. Jens hit the cave floor as Ponce aimed for his head.

"Let's get out of here, Chanoch!" Ponce ran for the door with Chanoch right behind him. The lock was opened swiftly and Chanoch disappeared into the outside whiteness. Ponce hesitated in the doorway and then walked over to Jens. "I'm gonna kill you, nab. I'm the last of Mithras you're gonna see."

"Ponce?" Chieng sat up and began retching. "Ponce, help me." Ponce turned at the sound of her voice, and Jens stunned him down.

"You lardhead, you filthy lardhead." Jens got slowly to his feet and moved over to Hesslin. The laser had cut a wide hole through the squad leader's body. There was no sign of life. Jens closed the man's eyes and walked over to pick up the laser. It was the mine foreman's missing weapon. Jens looked at it in his hands, then turned to glare at Ponce. He hefted the weapon and sighted along its barrel to Ponce's head.

"Don't, Gulimel, please don't." Chieng reached out to touch the fallen body. "He's mine. He's all I have. Don't kill him."

Jens sighed and lowered the laser. "Get him out of here, girl. Take him away to the far places where the Outcavers are. I swear if I ever see him again I'll kill him with my bare hands."

Chieng nodded and pulled Ponce limply to his feet. His eyes were not quite focusing, but he could make out Hesslin's body on the floor. Ponce's mouth hung open in surprise. "Damn!" he said softly. "I didn't even know if I could hit anyone with that thing."

"Look good, squat, look good at what you've done. A man died today because of you. A good man. And I have to tell his widow. Do you have any messages for her or the kids he fathered?"

"No. Damn, I didn't know it would really work..."

Jens and the remaining nabs watched Ponce and Chieng leave the cave and vanish into the snow.

"Why'd you let them go, Gulimel?" one of the nabs asked.

"Simple; someone's got to feed Hesslin's family. As long as those two are alive, there's a chance they'll help support Hesslin's kids. It's justice," Jens said bitterly. "Caver Justice."

## ***CHAPTER TEN***

Howell found the Academy recruiter waiting for him when he got back to his office. Captain Forbes was a regular staff type with shoulders full of

official lettuce masquerading as decorations. He had the standard poster-type square jaw, regulation crewcut and the sort of bland persistence Howell recognized as one of the worst characteristics of the service man.

Howell had stopped to change into a fresh uniform and to pay his respects to Hesslin's body. Forbes was fuming at being left waiting. He was pacing Howell's cubbyhole office and polluting the air with an Aldarianweed cigar. Howell hated him on sight. He had dealt with hundreds of men just like him and expected he would deal with a hundred more before his life was over. It had always been Howell's contention that the Service stamped its regulars out of some kind of mold. Calling them androids would have been too kind.

"So, you're Howell. I've been told a lot about you." Forbes showed a mouthful of perfect white teeth around the cigar. "Too bad none of it was good."

"Put the weed out, kid. I don't allow smoking in here, and it's Captain Burian Howell to you."

"In that case, I am Captain Dav Forbes, special recruitment branch, CCS."

"Yeah, the baby stealer. I've been wondering when you'd drag your ass in here. I wouldn't sit down if I were you, you're not staying. I hope the captain of your ship wasn't planning a long stopover. The sooner you're off *my* planet the happier I'll be."

"That can be arranged, captain. I'm no happier than you are. Now, we'll just round up the children and I'll be long gone before you know it."

"You're not getting any children."

"Now, Howell—"

"*Captain* Howell."

"Captain Howell, I know from the reports I was given that I am to pick up twelve children. Unless you can tell me that some unforeseen accident has occurred to those children, I will leave here with them. Let's see, I was to pick up—" Forbes took a sheaf of papers out of his shoulder bag. "Ah,

yes. Reif Tabler, Kit Aseko, Marv—"

"None of them are leaving. You recruiters are destroying the people of this colony. The tests show that mental abilities are dropping and scores are lower each year. You are going to turn Mithras into a planet full of morons if you keep this up."

"As long as they can mine ore and have kids, the Service doesn't care about their I.Q.s at all. I want those children, and I have the right under CCS regulations to take them."

"And I," Howell said coldly, "have a colony to run. How can I keep the mine production up if you barge in here and get my people mad? There'll be less ore if you take the kids. It upsets the miners." Howell held a careful control over his tongue. It would do no good to blurt out that he knew he had no more power on Mithras than the lowest colonial. As long as the CCS didn't know that he knew he was a prisoner as well, they would have to keep up the polite fiction that he really was in command of Mithras. Howell smiled at the recruiter and waited.

"The last men here managed to get ore out, kids or no kids. I think you're just going at this wrong, captain. The other commandants went according to regs and were the richer for it. I suggest you do the same. You'll be rewarded far better than you might expect."

"The only reward I'll settle for is the right to leave Mithras as soon as possible."

Forbes smiled coldly. "I have, I'm sorry to say, no authority to offer anything of that nature. But if a raise in pay, some little luxuries, women—"

"Mithras is a prison, and I have no training in penal control. I'm the wrong man for the job. All I am interested in is leaving here and going to a planet where my experiences would be of more use to the Service. It's that, Forbes, or you don't get the children."

"I hear you managed to catch the Agata brat. You're to be congratulated on that nice bit of work." Forbes abruptly changed the subject. "I intend to give you a commendation in my reports for that, you know. We've been wanting that child for quite some time. There are several tests we want to give her. I'll be taking her back with me as well as

the other children. I have to admit I'm more than a little interested in her, too; I hear she's pretty, for a colonial."

Howell's hands knotted into fists. "Lay one hand on that girl and you'll end up in a slagpit by my orders. Kiedron's under my protection and she's not leaving Mithras without me."

Forbes sleam-smiled. "Ah, I think we've established your price at last. I'll leave you your little bedmate, and I get the children. Naturally there won't be that favorable report in your records that I was mentioning, but you can't have everything now, can you?"

Howell's fists came up too fast for Forbes to block them. Howell knocked the wind out of the man with one blow and decked him with another. He stood over Forbes's body as the man slowly regained consciousness, vomited and then gagged. Howell watched the man's efforts to stand up with cool satisfaction.

"You've made a bit of an error there, Captain Howell—in fact, you've been very rash, very rash indeed." Forbes choked on his own vomit and the rest of his speech was lost in a coughing fit.

"You're the one to worry, Forbes. I can have you drop-kicked from here to the south pole and no one would be the wiser. Even if I'm caught, what would the Service do to me—give me a worse planet? I have news for you, there aren't any worse ones in our entire system. The CCS would have to ignore me or kill me, and to do that they'll have to bring me to trial. And I'll make such a stink the Confederation would never get it out of their noses. You and the CCS have no control over my actions until you take me off Mithras—and then will you get some action!" Howell turned and walked out of the office. "And I want you to clean up that mess before you leave. I keep a neat office around here," he said as the door dilated. "I'll be at a funeral if you want to talk some more—come out and join me, if you dare."

Arnie had been waiting at the air lock when Howell came to suit up and had requested that Howell be present for the committing of Hesslin's body to the wastepant. Howell had morosely agreed to come.

The wastepant was situated in the last cave of Home village. It was a

hollow sounding room filled with the echoes of rushing water and the smell of chemicals. There was a round, well-like opening in the center of the cave. The body, wrapped in a fur robe, was resting beside the well. A woman was on her knees beside the body, and Howell knew this must be Hesslin's widow. Two children were with her, and Howell sadly realized he had never bothered to ask Hesslin very much about his children. Hesslin had been a good nab, and his children would be good nabs, too. Howell made a mental note to place on record the fact that these children could not be taken from Mithras, and then remembered what Jens had said about only his remaining alive would keep his kids safe from a recruiter. Hesslin's wife would have to remarry very quickly or Forbes would claim her children along with the original dozen he was after. Then too, Forbes would be testing the smaller children and recording them for a later scoop. The system was very thorough and quite vile. Howell knew he had to stop it and he had to do it here while people were stirred up about Hesslin's death.

Odd, how he had asked Jens to get a group of the Cavers together for Howell to talk to—but this hadn't been what he'd had in mind at the time.

Howell moved slowly through the crowd to Jens's side. "Tell me," he whispered, "is anything said over the body, any kind of proper farewell?"

"Not generally." Jens wiped a tear off his cheek. He and Hesslin had been close. "The family sort of says goodbye and we help put the body into the plant."

"Would people mind my saying a few things? I have an idea about stopping the recruiter and I think now would be a good time."

Jens frowned. "I don't..." Then his face cleared a bit and he almost smiled. "You cave lizard! How right Hesslin was about you being good for Mithras. Tell them how you're going to save Hesslin's kids and you'll have them eating out of your hand."

"I intend to do better than that. I want them to eat the CCS's hand clean off at the wrist and go looking for more." Howell smiled his hungry predator special and elbowed his way out onto the sand surrounding the well.

"Fellow inmates of Mithras. Are we going to let the CCS take Hesslin's children from us?" he shouted to the Cavers.

The crowd muttered and swayed with surprise. Hesslin's wife reached up to grasp Howell's hand. "Don't let them have my babies, sir. Please don't let them, they're all I've got now." She broke into fresh weeping and the sound of her sobs blended with that of the rushing water.

"If we don't stop it, the CCS will have them. You all know the only safety for a child is having a living nab parent, and—"

"I'm gonna marry Helsa and raise the kids," a miner called from the edge of the crowd.

"Ah, but that won't work, my friend. You're not a nab, and Forbes is hungry to make his quota."

"Let's kill the recruiter!" someone shouted.

"Dump him in a wastepit!" a woman's voice cried out.

"Now what good would that do?" Howell held up his hands in the position for attention and silence. The use of the miners' hand talk was not lost on the Cavers. There was a murmur of approval from the crowd. "If we kill this one there'll only be more sent here, and a new commandant as well. I might end up in a wastepit if any CCS types die. No, I have a better idea. What is the sole reason the Confederation bothers with Mithras?" Howell waited expectantly. The crowd muttered and growled. Howell began to tense; what if no one answered him?

"Ore! We mine the ore. The buggers need that for their machines!" Arnie's clear voice sounded like the heavenly host to Howell. The crowd picked up quickly on the answer and loudly agreed that ore was what the Confederation wanted even more than the children.

"So are we going to give them our children and the ore as well? Never. Nothing of ours leaves Mithras until we are free to leave as well." Howell jumped to the coping around the well and stood a head taller than the Cavers. "I'm a prisoner just like you and I want to live in freedom, too. I swear that I am on your side, not the Confederation's. They sent me here to Mithras as an exile and a tool. I'll be no one's tool but my own. Are you with me in this, or are you going to hide in your beds like children?" Howell could feel the rising hatred he was feeding. The air was thick with the Cavers' loathing of the CCS. Howell knew he was one of them, an inhabitant of Mithras. He reached up and tore off his captain's stripes



from the shoulders of his coldsuit and threw them on the ground.

The Cavers screamed their approval.

"Let's bury Hesslin as a hero of our battle. We will fight in his name and never be ashamed. The memory of Hesslin will lead us!"

"Hesslin! We fight for Hesslin!" The cry was ragged but sounded determined. Howell hoped no idiot in the crowd would cry out that it had been a Mithran who killed Hesslin and not the CCS. Howell didn't want these people to think, just to fight.

Jens moved forward into the center of the cave. He stood by Hesslin's body, tore off his nab insignia and threw them at Hesslin's feet. "Hesslin," he cried, "I will fight for your children!" Then he stepped back and let the next in line come up to the body and swear her oath. One by one the nabs swore to end the CCS on Mithras. Hesslin was fast becoming a saint. Howell stood on the coping and watched his handiwork with pride. He was going to do in the CCS with a weapon they could never have anticipated—their own men.

"I, Kiedron Agata, do so swear also. Hesslin, your children will be safe." Kiedron knelt by Hesslin's fur-covered body and touched it. "I will carry on my father's work with you, Howell," and she looked up at the man towering over her, "for you are a better man than my father ever hoped to be."

Howell had felt annoyed at Kiedron daring to show herself in the wastepant cave. He was afraid the Cavers would remember that it was Ponce, her follower, who was guilty of Hesslin's murder and, through him, herself as well. But in this charged atmosphere they did not remember anything but that this girl was the daughter of a fallen leader and as such a fitting avenger for Hesslin.

"Kiedron! Kiedron!" The Cavers shouted her name until the walls of the cave echoed with it. Howell leaped off the edge of the coping and took her in his arms. Hugging Kiedron's chunky body, he turned her head away as Jens and five other Cavers slid Hesslin out of the furs and into the open well. The body splashed wetly in the depths of the wastepant while the Cavers shrieked his name in bellowing triumph.

Bottles of liquor appeared. Arnie had a basketful, which he busily

passed around to the Cavers. Howell noticed other baskets making the rounds; bottles were being opened and toasts drunk to Hesslin. Howell moved away from the well, dragging Kiedron with him.

"Over here, you'll be safer," Jens beckoned from a recess in the cave wall. "Cavers get violent when blind drunk, and this lot intends to get both blind and staggering before the night is over. I can smell the animal rising."

"Yes, let's get out of here before the orgy starts," Howell said, moving toward the cave opening. "Jens, your grotto would be fairly safe for Kiedron and me, wouldn't it?"

Jens nodded and went with them to show the way.

The drinking and wildness was spreading through the caves. Men pawed at Kiedron as she passed, and a bottle was thrust into Howell's hand. He drank deeply and passed it on to Jens.

Jens took a swig, shouted, "Hesslin!" and threw the bottle against a wall, smashing it. "We've started something, Burian. I hope you can finish it. The Cavers will tear you apart if you go back on what you've said in there."

"Go back on it? Not on your life! I intend to see it through to the bloody end, and damn the CCS." Howell hiccupped and grinned foolishly. "I never had much of a head for liquor. Damn the CCS and damn Forbes, too. Damn, damn, damn...."

Jens motioned for Kiedron to take Howell's arm on her side while Jens supported him on the other. Slowly they led Howell into the grotto and placed him on a bed of furs.

"Do you think he can go without his coldsuit?" Kiedron asked, tugging at the commandant's helmet.

"I think so," Jens giggled. The two-hundred-proof liquor was getting to him, too. "It's warm enough in here if he's covered in furs. Let's strip him down so he'll sleep like the Caver he is. Then I'll go back to the mob out there and try to keep them from tearing the place apart. Take good care of him, Kiedron, he's the answer to our prayers."

"I intend to take very good care of him, Gulimel. I've been waiting for him for a long time." Kiedron unfastened the coldsuit and she and Jens pulled it off of Howell. Jens left the girl peeling Howell's sodden tunic off his unprotesting body.

## ***CHAPTER ELEVEN***

Howell dragged himself awake in the dim light of the cave. Fuzzily he looked up at the flickering light panels and tried to remember where he was. The stirring of a scantily clad body next to his own brought him fully awake. Kiedron lay snuggled beside him in the nest of furs, her dark hair gleaming in the light. He plumbed his memory, trying to recall how he and the child had gotten there, and what might have happened. He could remember nothing beyond Hesslin's funeral.

"Kiedron!" he hissed, shaking her. "Kiedron, wake up."

"Uhuh?" She turned over and snuggled closer to him.

"Come on, twit-child, wake up! What are you doing here?"

"Seducin' you." She was groggy with sleep and unwilling to leave whatever dream she was in. She buried her head under the furs, and from the sound of her breathing Howell could tell she was again fast asleep.

"Children!" he muttered, and settled down beside her. She was warm and the cave temperature was cooler than he was used to in his own sleeping quarters.

Jens and Rhoiannin were not in the cave. Howell could see the lumpish outlines of their sleeping children wrapped in bundles of fur around the room. The adults, Howell reflected, might be sleeping in one of the inner parts of the grottos. Did they know he was here with Kiedron? Had Jens planned this to keep him happy on Mithras? The questions were fruitless at this time of night. He knew he would find out soon enough, so he sank deeper into the furs with the sleeping girl. Kiedron murmured in her sleep and flung one arm over his belly.

He had no way of gauging the time. He had dozed off and on, but did

not know for how long. His watch was missing from his wrist, and was probably somewhere with his clothing. He hoped someone had taken the time to hang his tunic and trimslax in a warm place; he knew they would be soggy from the coldsuit. He could, he supposed, borrow something of Jens's, but the idea of himself in Jens' larger uniform brought out an involuntary chuckle. A fine commandant he'd look in one of Gulimel's baggy suits!

Kiedron yawned and opened her eyes. She smiled dreamily up at him and stroked the side of his face with her fingers.

He caught her hand and held it still. "Enough, kitten. I want to know what you're doing here— but then, I suppose the answer's kind of obvious."

She nodded and grinned. "I thought I'd climb into bed with you. I stripped you down because you were too drunk to do it yourself, and I bundled you up in the furs. Jens helped."

"Ah, and what else did the obliging Jens help with? If I'm going to be messing around with a half-dressed female, I'd rather do it of my own free will."

Kiedron giggled, a childish sound. "Oh, you haven't done anything yet—but if you really want to..."

Howell groaned and reached out to smack her rump. "Where did your people get the idea I would bed with an underage hellion like you?" he demanded. "I prefer not to feel like a criminal when I take my pleasuring. Here I am, eighty-seven years old and they stick me with a fourteen-year-old infant."

"Fifteen. I had a birthday this month."

"With cakes and candles, I presume?" Howell's voice was mildly enquiring.

"Mean!" Kiedron struggled away from him and proceeded to sulk elaborately. When that received no notice, she turned her head to look at Howell. "I feel safe with you, like I did with my father," she announced.

"Damn. Never say that to any man who can still breathe. It'll make him

want to prove he's neither safe nor your father—even when he doesn't bed with babies."

"I am not a baby!" Kiedron flared. "Don't you know I'm no innocent? Chanoch and I—"

"Oh hush, I have no need to hear about your snuffling, amorous experiments with that clod. Spare me the details. I have a weak stomach for infantile slobbering. I know perfectly well you're considered old enough to marry on this benighted planet, but that doesn't mean I want you." Howell was more angry than he had realized at the thought of Chanoch and Kiedron together. He found himself taking that anger out on Kiedron and berated himself soundlessly for it. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. Taunting you about your inexperience isn't fair."

"And you think I'm ugly, too," Kiedron pouted. "I thought you were just teasing when you told me that. But I can see you mean it—you do think I'm fat and ugly!" She hit the furs with her small fists.

"There, there," Howell took her hands gently in his own. "When did I tell you anything about being ugly? I can't remember saying that. You're anything but a fat troll, my dear. A little short, but—"

"You see? You're doing it again." Kiedron's eyes filled, and threatened to spill over.

"What, calling you short? But you are. Short and round, with baby fat on your tummy. That doesn't make you unattractive. I do recall telling you I liked my women tall and skinny, and that's quite true. Men and women both have certain tastes, but that doesn't mean that only one set of tastes should be the right one for everyone. You'll find a person someday who'll think a round little kitten like you is the sexiest thing in the universe.

"I once knew a woman who was—"

Kiedron punched him lightly in the ribs. "I don't want to hear about the women you've known, either. I can tell you don't want me here, so I'll get myself lost." She started to climb out of the bed and Howell reached for her and pulled her, protesting, down beside him. "Look, imp. Both of us have a lot to learn about each other, and this is a warm way to do it. Maybe I was wrong about skinny women—bags of bones, all of them."

"Then you don't think I'm ugly!" She grabbed him around the chest and hugged him fiercely.

"Blessed Lady, give me strength. I'd forgotten how persistent children were. I'll be hearing about how I called you ugly for the next thousand years."

"But we won't live a thousand years, so—"

"Don't be so literal, child. It's wearing on the nerves. Can't you see there's a major difference in our thought patterns?"

"I know, I'm just a stupid colonial, an ugly, stupid child who—" Howell clamped his hand over her mouth.

"Kiedron, one more word, just one more and so help me, I'll... I'm not sure what I'll do. I'm being a fool. I should have let you leave. The gulf between what you know and what you should know to be my woman is so wide there's no measuring it. But you are so special, ice-imp. Why do I finally have to meet the one person I've been searching for all my life when it's too late?" He took his hand quickly away when she made a motion as if she were going to bite his fingers.

"Then we're stuck, aren't we? You're the right man for me, you know. I knew it when I first saw you in the hospital ward. You cared about me—admit it."

"Kiedron, you're too big to spank and too little to do anything else with. Yes, I care—I care a lot. If I had met you fifty years ago we would have ruled the universe by now; that's how right we are for each other."

"So let's be right for each other now; the universe can wait." She reached over and brushed his hair out of his eyes.

"No. There's too much time between us, and too many places and things. You'll never catch up and I'll never be that young again. It's wrong, child—for both of us. We'd only make each other unhappy in the end. I do love you, but the time's out of joint and so am I."

Kiedron sighed and lay still in the furs. "I thought we could be important to each other, like Jens and Rhoiannin."

"Rhoiannin is a fool and a chattering widget."

"I figured you didn't like that. There you were, looking like you had found a real piece of cake and then the way your expression sure changed when you found out the cake was moldy. Jens knows she's not too bright, but what choice has he? That's the way things happen here. All the ones with brains get picked off by the Confederation. If Rhoiannin hadn't married Jens quick, she'd likely have been taken on an oreship as a comfort girl. That's what she was afraid of when she first met Jens. So she married him."

"Why couldn't someone have married you and saved me all this trouble? I don't believe in adultery, thank the gods."

"You're being silly." Kiedron sat up and looked over at the sleeping children to make sure none of them had been awakened by the conversation. In the half-light, Howell could see clearly her pudgy childlike body.

"By the Lady, what am I going to do?" He pulled the furs over his head and pretended to snore. Kiedron snatched them away, giggling.

"I got very curious about you when I was in the hospital ward. You were so different from any commandant I'd ever met. I asked Jens a lot of questions about you—what you were like, and all. One of the things he told me was that you faked being asleep when you wanted to get out of something. I see he was right."

"Jens, I'll kill you for this." Howell grabbed quickly for the furs. Kiedron was attempting to clear them off his body, and he had a good idea what she had in mind for his anatomy. "No you don't, brat. It's cold as a strumpet's heart in here. Now stop it or I'll beat the daylights out of you." Howell buried himself in the furs up to his eyebrows, but Kiedron dived to the bottom, pulled up the furs and began to tickle his feet.

"Stop that, child. I'm too old a man to be treated without respect—that's my leg!" Howell kicked out at her. "Now get away there and be still—go to sleep, even."

"I'd rather talk about you, if you don't want to do anything else." Kiedron came up from under the furs, rosy and warm. "I love you. I wanted you to know that. No matter what we do together, I'll always love

you."

"And I love you too, imp. I've loved you ever since I first saw you out on the tundra. My magic child—fool that I am."

"Why a fool? We love each other, we're both stuck on Mithras, why not enjoy it?"

"Because I don't intend to stay on Mithras. I think we can stir up enough trouble here for the CCS to want to change things—in fact, they'll have to change them. I want to be on top when those changes are made. And that'll have to be on my own, love. I have only one drive in life; getting to the top of the Confederation Colonial Service and then changing it into what it should be, a way of bringing developed planets into the Confederation, not just some form of slavery. We have—"

Kiedron yawned and cuddled under the covers. "You'll manage all that, Jens says so. You're tough."

"And you don't understand a thing I'm telling you. I can't be sidetracked now, Kiedron. I can't let myself be pulled down here like Jens—with a wife and children to protect. I have a job to do and nothing—not even you—comes ahead of it. My taking over the Service is too important to risk. Do you understand that?"

"All the men I care about have something else they want to do. I can go with you, you know. I'm not too old to get acclimatized to warmer planets. The other children do it when they go to the Academy. Howell, please! Take me with you."

"I can't It's too dangerous. You might be killed or hurt and I couldn't run the risk of that. I can't spend more of my time worrying about your safety than about my goals. I'm sorry, dear. I'm sorry you're not old enough or independent enough to go with me. I do want you to remember I was glad you came to my bed—even if I don't exactly sound like it now. Think about that when you're older—it'll help make you understand me better."

"But I wanted to be here and anywhere else you go. I wanted it! You're nice and I love you. You'll do a lot for Mithras and I want to do a lot for you. You're like my pa, and I loved him, too."



"Not the same way, I hope!" Howell lay back on the furs and looked into her bewildered face and cursed himself for getting so involved with her "Never mind that, I'm an old crock with a mean streak—I never meant to slander your father's good name."

"Pa worked for the CCS as their paid spy." Her voice was so matter-of-fact that Howell was sure he had heard her incorrectly.

"Would you mind going over that bit slower? For the record, I mean. I don't think I understood what you said there."

"Pa was taking credits from the CCS as their spy. His job was making trouble for whoever was in charge." Her voice dragged like a death-knell for Tovo Agata. There could be no doubt. Howell had heard her correctly the first time—Tovo had been a traitor to his people.

"Ah, a fox in the henhouse to keep all the little chickens stirred up so they wouldn't turn and rend the farmer stealing their eggs. Clever, very clever— and very CCS. Of all the double-dealing pretties to play on a planet. If it weren't so clever, I'd cry." Howell wearily closed his eyes in thoughtful pain. "But why, child? Why did he do it?"

"I don't really know, exactly." Her soft voice was beginning to break around the edges. "I guess it might have been the importance, the hero stuff, or maybe the chance to be truly safe from the nabs—I just don't know."

"The money?" Howell hated to ask that question, but it hung there in his mind like a dead, bloated thing.

"Or the money." Her words were a thready whisper. "I loved him better than anyone. I knew it wasn't right, but I loved him too much to hate him for being CCS. I killed for him, and lied and cheated, and all the time I knew he was wrong and evil. I—loved—him." Her sobs were coming faster and her body shook with the wrenching force of the pent up pain.

Kiedron's sobbing was something new to Howell, and his heart melted with the sound of that harsh weeping. He had seen her yowling, spitting, or defiant with silly speeches. But tears were something he had thought impossible from her—an Agata wouldn't cry, ever. Gently he pulled her close into his arms and rocked her slowly.

"There, there, my sweet, my baby—it's all right. You're going to be fine, I'm here." Kiedron cried as if she had been storing those tears for a lifetime—two lifetimes, hers and her father's. Howell held onto her trembling body and let her cry herself out. The sobs slackened and a watery hiccupping took their place. She had left long shining trails of tears across his grizzled chest and all over his shoulder. She sniffled and Howell wiped her face with one of the covers and kissed her reddened nose.

"Now, baby kitten, as soon as you can, I want to hear about the CCS, your pa, and... Lustvogel, too." Howell remembered Jens telling him that Kiedron had seen her father die and had killed Lustvogel for it. Howell felt a stirring of vengeance in his gut and knew that the CCS had a lot to pay for. They might find themselves dealing with a troublemaker they couldn't buy off. The thought filled him with a very real pleasure.

"I want to talk about it, but I'm afraid I'll start crying again." Her sniffing was louder and Howell reached out a leg to snag his still-damp tunic.

"There's a handkerchief somewhere in here if it's not soaking wet." It was, but Howell passed it to Kiedron anyway. She clutched it like a security blanket and continued to sniffle.

"It started before I was born. There was a lot of trouble here with people killing other people. Nabs doing in Cavers, and commandants doing what they damn well pleased. Not much ore was getting mined. So the CCS decided something would have to be done about it. They tried to get some of the nabs to spy, but that didn't work— those guys found out they couldn't get wives if they were reporting on the Cavers. Then too, some of them ended up in the slagpits. So anyway, the commandant at that time, a man named Trent, he got hold of my pa when he was a boy and brought him up to work for the CCS. Pa was to make the miners go back to work and get lots of ore. So he pretended to be helping the Cavers hide their kids. He couldn't hide all of them, but even the trying made him a hero to the Cavers and they did whatever he said—like mining ore and stuff. He made all kinds of hoorah throughout the caves and it was real exciting, Pa said. He was doing what the commandant told him to do, and that way the commandant didn't have to come down so hard on the Cavers.

"It worked out good for everyone, so Pa didn't feel bad about taking the CCS money. He thought he was helping people more than he was hurting

them. Sure he had to kill someone now and then, some Caver who was too much trouble to the CCS or the commandant, but he generally managed to blame that on the nabs or something. Pa said he really liked that guy Trent. Things went along that way for quite a while, then Trent was killed by a drunk nab and Pa got mad and became a real revolutionary most of the time. And the CCS still paid him. It was weird. He thought they'd be coming after him, but they only paid him and let him go on stirring things up. Since the CCS didn't care, Pa just did what he pleased. No matter what he did, both sides thought he was great. He killed a few commandants, when they needed killing, and he lived like the king of Mithras. Pa had the most beautiful wife, the best grotto and lots of bathing water—and heat in his cave, too.

"I was born and everything was just wonderful. I was the only kid Ma had—she was sickly—so Pa trained me to follow his work. He didn't tell me about his money from the CCS, not until Ma killed herself. Then he hated Commandant Granthum and the CCS. He tried to turn down their money. But they said unless he kept on being their man, they'd tell the Cavers what he really was. Pa, he thought about that for a while and then he took the money. He felt he couldn't do anything for Mithras if he was dead. He would have been, too, if the Cavers had found out he was a spy. So he went along with the CCS. But he had to kill Granthum. Justice and all. Then Lustvogel came—"

"Lustvogel killed your father, didn't he?" Howell had hardly dared to speak for fear Kiedron's flood of words would stop. He was seeing the core of this child, trustingly loving of anyone who cared for her.

"Yes, and I killed Lustvogel." Kiedron's face screwed up with pain and the tears began to track down her cheeks. "I killed him! I killed them both! Me, it was me!" The girl dived into Howell's arms for comfort; he held her, stroking her hair.

"Don't stop your tears until they're done. Cry, baby girl, you've a lot of crying to do." He knew he would have to protect her. Kiedron would need someone to tell her what to do for some time to come. Howell sighed at the responsibilities, but he knew he would accept them out of love for Kiedron. "Love comes in many shapes and sizes," he murmured into her soft dark hair.

Kiedron clutched the handkerchief and began to talk about her father and Lustvogel. "Pa taught me how to fake the tests. He knew his work for

the CCS wouldn't keep me on Mithras, so we did what we could. Lustvogel found out from Doctor Ronson, where Pa had me studying medicine, that I was smarter than the recruiters had thought and he came to talk to Pa. He wanted Pa to go on helping the CCS or lose me to the recruiters. Lustvogel said he would hand me over to the recruiters himself. I was standing there and I begged Pa to send me away. I didn't want him to have to listen to scum like Lustvogel just to keep me safe. Pa was wavering a bit, then Lustvogel did himself in. He looked at me, up and down, and he reached out and ripped my shirt off. He said to Pa, 'I'll keep her here on Mithras if I can have her as my woman.' Pa got real mad. Not because Lustvogel wanted to bed me, I was almost old enough; but because it was a commandant pawing another of his women. He was remembering how Ma died and he just went all red. He tore at Lustvogel and knocked him down and then he kicked him hard. Lustvogel had a knife and he used it. Pa was dead where he stood. I just stood there and screamed. I could hear the Cavers coming and I screamed and screamed. Lustvogel ran; he knew what the Cavers would do to him for killing Pa. Jens took care of me until I got over the shock."

"Did Lustvogel try to tell people what your father had done?" Howell asked softly as he stroked her hair.

"Yes, but no one would believe him. They knew he was scared. He was going to die. He knew it, and he was scared. He didn't know who was going to kill him. Lots of Cavers claimed the right to do it. Jens says he went crazy there before I got him. It was my place to kill him, the Cavers accepted that. Caver Justice is very fair. I got him out on the tundra and I cut his throat. I kept remembering his knife sticking out of Pa's throat and I was slashing at him until he was dead." She paused. "Can I stop now? Talking about it makes me really sad."

"Sure, you've told me enough for now. Rest, try to sleep a while. You're safe, elf-child. I'll keep you safe."

"I wanted you as my man because I knew nobody could make you sell out—you're a real hero. My pa was just a pretend one. I wanted to look up to him and think he was the best person in the whole universe, and then I found out he wasn't anything but a thing the CCS owned like they own everything else around here—everything but you."

"A father. You need the right man to play father, but no husband. I would be better at that, you know. I could teach you the things your own

father didn't; things like ethics and fighting for a goal instead of a slogan—oh, so many things I could teach you. But it would have to be like that—no sex. Fathers generally don't do that sort of thing." Howell closed his eyes and waited for whatever she might say next. It would probably be silly and illogical, but it would be completely Kiedron, the child he loved. In time maybe he would get over thinking she was only a child. And he might even manage to overlook the damage he could do to her—just to keep her with him.

"Well, in that case, I guess I'll have to settle for your being my father. That could be kind of nice, too," Kiedron said reflectively. "I need your help in figuring out what to do next, now that I'm not a revolutionary any more. I like the idea of ending the CCS and I want to help with that if you'll let me. I'll even stay here on Mithras if you say I should."

Howell opened one eye. "Then you'll accept what I'm offering you? No questions, no recriminations, just blind acceptance?"

"Yes. That's what I gave my pa, and he didn't deserve it half as much as you do. You're a better Mithras man than he was."

"I see," Howell answered weakly. He was amazed at her casual letting go of the hero worship she had left for her real father, and a bit hurt by it. He had, with a small part of his mind, hoped she would fight a while longer and even manage to convince him that her way was best. But he could see too clearly what marriage to her could mean: the gradual growing apart as Kiedron matured, the possibility of her finding someone more suited to her as an adult. He wanted her to be happy. That mattered more than anything physical that might happen between them. Howell shrugged under the furs and decided to do some accepting of his own.

"We'll manage it, baby. You and I will manage it." He kissed her on the lips, a gentle, fatherly kiss. "Rest, I'm here."

Kiedron sighed and snuggled closer to Howell. One hand was tangled in the chest hair, the other clutched his damp handkerchief. She slept easily, like a child. Howell wished he could sleep so effortlessly—but then, he now had more to worry about than Kiedron. She had managed to hand her problems successfully over to him with calm assurance. Howell remembered too late that he had always disliked dependent women. But then, Kiedron wasn't a woman, either. Smiling, he touched her cheek and tried to relax.

The children were starting to stir, and Howell realized he had managed to sleep a little. Jens was awake; he could hear the aide's rumbling voice in one of the inner grottos. Howell turned to wake Kiedron, then decided to let her rest. Her eyes had dark circles under them and she did look a bit peaked. Howell was trying to figure out how to free his numb arm from under Kiedron's limp body when the children started yelling and pointing toward the door.

Howell looked up and saw someone who could only be Chanoch with a band of armed men. They had only knives, sticks and a few vibroblades, but they still looked too dangerous to argue with.

"Look, he's got her in bed with him!" Chanoch screeched. "Rape! Commandant rape!"

"Now look, you snot-nosed brat..." Howell sat up in the furs and looked around for a weapon.

Kiedron woke up, took one look at the intruders and screamed. The pack was on them in seconds. Jens came running from the other room with a stungun in hand. But it was impossible for him to sort Howell and Kiedron out of the writhing tangle of bodies on the furs.

Kiedron was kicking and punching savagely. She was much smaller than most of the men, but she was used to such infighting. Howell had learned his fighting style in a hard school as well and was doing a lot of damage to his attackers.

Chanoch grabbed for Kiedron and pulled her out of the heap of bodies. He had ducked down beside the furs and done very little of the actual physical work. With a vibroblade held at Kiedron's throat, he shouted for the fighting to stop and demanded that Jens drop his weapon.

"Don't move, Kiedron—don't do anything." Howell tried to put all of the feeling he had for her into his voice. "Don't fight Chanoch, he's got the upper hand now. Just hold still."

"He's right, Agata, I do have the upper hand now, and you're gonna do what I want, not what you think should be right all the time. So you shut up and be good." He held her small body close against his own, and Howell felt physically ill at the contact between the two of them. Kiedron's eyes were wide with fright, and she watched Howell hopefully, waiting for him

to make his move. She would obey him; she was going to do exactly what he told her. As long as she did that she was safe from anything Chanoch might take into his mind to do. For now his target seemed to be Howell, and the commandant preferred it to stay that way.

"We only came for this woman-raping commandant, not you, Gulimel. Stay nice and you and Agata won't be hurt. But if you don't..." Chanoch left the rest of the threat dangling, as he nicked Kiedron and brought blood trickling down her neck.

Howell was pinned to the furs by six husky men. His mouth was bleeding and he had been kicked in more places than he cared to think about. "Leave her alone, Chanoch," he said, struggling "to get an arm free. The man holding his arm shifted and then sat on the almost-free limb with a sickening crunch. The radius snapped like matchwood. Howell grimaced and tried not to cry out. Any signs of weakness would bring out the blood cravings in these animals. "I'll go with you, just let Kiedron alone." He tried for as strong a voice as he could manage.

"No, Howell, they'll kill you," Kiedron shrieked. "Chanoch, you pig kisser—"

Chanoch laughed and held her body closer to his own. "I've come back for my doll, just like I told the kids I would. Don't worry, I still love you, even if you were raped by this stinkin' nab."

Howell waited for Kiedron to start yelling or fighting, praying she would have the good sense to hold still as he'd asked her to.

Kiedron was very still—but then, a vibroblade at the throat was a good teacher of patience and nonresistance.

"Get them out of here," Chanoch snarled at the men with him. They were far too old to be part of Kiedron's regular gang, and Howell knew he had won the support of most of the miners last night. These disreputable specimens, Howell surmised, must be Outcavers, the renegades Lustvogel had banished from the caves for real or imagined offenses.

Chanoch leered at Howell as he added, "We've got business with you, commandant—Caver business." He tried to sound ominous but his voice cracked in the middle of the comment, adding a ludicrous note to the innuendo.

"He comes with us, but Agata stays," a burly Outcaver said, moving between Howell and Chanoch.

"She's mine, Shand, mine! I decide what to do with her."

"There's a recruiter on planet looking for kids. *We'll* be busy with the commandant. Who'll take care of the kids—you, Ezhno?"

The boy seemed to hesitate, his hold on Kiedron's neck lessened. "Look," the man called Shand continued, "have you ever known a recruiter to catch the Agata? We need her here, not with us. Let her go."

"I'll think about it. This is my raid and I make all the decisions, do you get that?"

"I was only suggesting, boy," Shand answered with deceptive mildness.

"But you can't take Howell out of the Homecave without his coldsuit," Jens said desperately. "You'd be killing him right out with no chance for a trial—that's not Caver Justice, Shand." Jens pointed to the heap of clothing on the floor. "He's good at getting into a suit—I taught him to be fast."

"Gulimel's right, we don't want to kill him fast-like. That wouldn't be decent or just," another of the Outcavers spoke up, then began to pick up Howell's suit. After checking it for weapons he handed it to him.

Chanoch whirled to glare at Jens. "I decide what's done around here, Gulimel. Maki, put them things down—make the pig do his own slopping around. Don't wait on him like some slave.

"Get dressed, commandant, but do it slow and nice or I'll forget I care about Kiedron and stick this blade into her."

"Nice it is." Howell dressed as quickly as he could with one arm broken, pulling on the soggy garments while watching the blade at Kiedron's throat. Chanoch had it turned off, but the edges were sharp enough to cut and all it would take to reactivate it was a quick wrist movement.

Several plans for escape ran swiftly through his mind. None of them seemed very feasible until Chanoch let go of Kiedron, and even then it would depend on the girl's presence of mind and good reflexes. He knew



that Jens would do everything he could to save him, but his life would be worthless with Kiedron dead.

*What will Kiedron do?* That thought ran yapping through his brain. Would she hunt Chanoch down to rescue him, or end up crying on Jens's shoulder? Would his being so quickly caught by Chanoch make her change her mind about loving him? *His* elf-child couldn't desert him. He trusted that as the only true fact in the universe—otherwise everything was meaningless.

He signaled that he was ready to go with the Outcavers, and his use of the Caver handspeak, even hampered by the broken arm, had as much of a good effect on them as it had on the Cavers themselves. Howell smiled to himself. Knowledge had always been the currency of power.

He nodded reassuringly at the silent girl, and watched, motionless, as Chanoch fondled her roughly and then threw her back into the pile of furs. "Keep it warm, doll, I'll be back as soon as we take care of this squat," he boasted.

Two of the Outcavers grabbed Howell by the arms and marched him quickly out of the grotto. Kiedron's crying was the sound that followed Howell out of the Homecave. He could hear Jens yelling for help from the other Cavers.

## ***CHAPTER TWELVE***

The mine that the Outcavers had dragged Howell into was one that obviously had not been in use for years—officially, that is. Its location was unknown to Howell, and he was sure it would not still be listed on any current CCS map.

The walls dripped moisture and there were clusters of luminescent fungus dotting the ceiling and outcroppings of rock. The air was warm enough for Howell to crack open his faceplate. His actions were slow and clumsy; the pain in his arm was sickening and he was terrified of passing out before he could reason with the Outcavers.

"Can I sit down? My arm's broken." Howell directed his comment to the Outcaver named Shand. Chanoch, he decided, he would ignore if possible.

"Sit, but don't try anything funny or I'll kill, you." Shand seemed to be in charge of the Outcavers and, hopefully, a reasonable man.

"I'll decide what to do with this swill; I told you where to find him, he's mine!" Chanoch pushed his way in front of Shand. "Look, Kiedron's my woman, you just came along for the helping, remember? When we toss him into the slagpits it's gonna be me doin' the pushing."

'We haven't figured out if we are going to deep him. He might be worth more to us alive, Ezhno. And you remember this—I run the Outcavers, not you. Stick to your kids and leave my men to me."

Howell leaned back against the rock walls and breathed a sigh of relief. He did have a chance with this Shand as long as the man could keep Chanoch in line. Howell glanced around the cave, looking for some way to escape. There were indications of human habitation in the piles of gnawed bones, scraps of dirty furs and the remains of fire rings. He caught a glimpse of a being, man or woman, scuttling off into the dark. It had been working on something hanging in the dim light— something that stank of fresh blood. Howell peered into the dark trying to make out what the blackened lump might be. He remembered Jens mentioning the rumor that some Outcavers had been reduced to cannibalism, and he had a stomach-churning fear that it might be a half-eaten nab or Caver. Shand, seeing the direction of his gaze, laughed and held up a torch. The carcass of a small deerlike creature was clearly outlined against the wall, its blood forming a slushy puddle on the cave floor.

"Don't worry, Howell, you're not near the dinner a dead *royca* will be—you'd be too damn tough, for one thing."

"But he raped my woman!" Chanoch insisted. "It's my right to kill him."

"Funny, she didn't tell me you were her *man*, Chanoch." Howell gently touched his arm and winced. Without care it would become infected or permanently crippled. He was sure now that Shand had very little intention of killing him. "I've always thought a Caver woman decided whom she slept with. Most of them brag that rape by a nab isn't possible. Nabs haven't the guts for it."

Several of the Outcavers yelled their agreement and made ribald comments on the power and endurance of a Caver woman.

"Take care of the bigstroke's arm, Shand. He's a man, he is," one of the Outcavers said, pointing to Howell's awkwardly held coldsuit sleeve.

"It's your idea, Halle, you fix him up." Shand stood watching, his hand on his blade as the Outcaver called Halle circled in on Howell and pulled out his own vibroblade.

"Gotta cut your suit, laddy—fix that there arm." The Outcaver was old and dirty, stinking of mold and raw gin. Howell lifted his free hand away and waited for what he knew would be a painful ritual.

Halle cut into the thick coldsuit and bared the arm. There was a large purpling bruise on the skin, but no sign that the bone had punctured the flesh.

"Now you just rear back there and bite your teeth. This'll hurt some."

"Got some of that gin you're breathing on me, old man? It would help." Howell shivered, more from shock than the cold.

Halle cackled and produced from a greasy pocket a cracked half liter flask stoppered by a moldy rag. "Drink up, it'll put hair in your ears!"

Howell held his breath against the stink and threw at least thirty cc of the fiery brew as far back in his throat as he could manage. His mouth and lungs were instantly seared, and he knew he could take on his weight in wild sleams. It was strong stuff, but effective. "Do what you have to, I'm ready," he announced in an unsteady voice.

"But he drugged and raped my woman, and you're treating him like he was king of Mithras," Chanoch protested, grabbing Shand's arm. "We all saw him in bed with her, pawing around like some animal. Agata was too scared to even call out. I want him dead. We Cavers know what to do with a commandant that'll take our women."

There were growls of assent from some of the Outcavers, and Howell knew he would have to stop Chanoch before he could get enough of the men behind him. Shand seemed to be his best bet. The older man was clearly in charge of the Outcavers and didn't like Chanoch. Howell thought busily of a plan as he fought to take his mind off what Halle was doing to his arm. Above all, he must not faint or get too drunk to defend himself. He refused a second swig of the alcohol and gasped while the bone was

maneuvered into place.

"Now I don't know about your sexing, Shand," he said when he could get his breath, "but I generally don't try rape in a roomful of other Cavers and their children—too damn noisy for one thing, and it's downright inhibiting. I don't mind the kids getting a sex education. But I've always felt that sort of thing was up to their parents to provide, not a total stranger. So there I was with a woman and you burst in on me screaming rape. I, for one, take that as an insult to my powers of persuasion. I have yet to hear Chanoch prove that Kiedron was complaining. In fact, shouldn't she be the one screaming rape instead of Chanoch?" Howell looked the boy up and down slowly. "Sorry, kid, you're just not my type."

Howell knew that trying to explain he had never touched Kiedron wouldn't work with a crowd like this, and he couldn't possibly get them to believe him. It would only weaken his argument. The Outcavers had as strong a view of the importance of women's sexual rights as any Caver—more, even. Not many females would leave the relative safety of the Homecaves for the uncertain life of an Outcaver; any of their women would be well cared for. Even desperation would not drive an Outcaver to rape or kidnaping; the penalties were swift and deadly. No Caver who considered himself a man would allow such a shame on any of his women, and no Caver woman would allow herself to go unavenged. Suicides, such as Kiedron's mother's, were comparatively rare. Howell was sure her death might have been due to some knowledge of Tovo's connection with the CCS as well as being pregnant by Granthum.

Howell mentally blessed Jens for all that the man had told him about the Outcavers. Caver Justice was just as strong among these men as any regular Mithras people. It had been the CCS, and particularly Lustvogel, that had outlawed these men, not their fellow Cavers. On Mithras, death, not exile, was the accepted punishment for any serious transgression. Only the CCS would think of exiling someone who was already in exile.

A gambler's move seemed to Howell like the best course of action. While the old man splinted his arm he took the opportunity to give Shand more of a looking over. The man was big and brawny; several-generation Caver by the look of him. His dark red hair flowed down his wide back and his arms seemed each as big around as Howell's chest. Also, he was obviously smarter and better trained than the average Caver.

"Let's decide one thing here, Shand—are we having a rape trial or aren't

we? If we are, let's get it out of the way so you and I can get down to the serious talking. The brat," Howell jerked his head in Chanoch's direction, "is getting to be a bore."

Shand grinned and slapped his hand against the cave wall. "I knew you were a smart one the minute I heard how you survived out on the ice. I figured you'd be someone I could talk to about the CCS. But I wasn't sure how to get to you without being cut down by a pack of zap-happy nabs—so I used Ezhno to lead me to you. And he did a fine job, too, even if he is an idiot."

"But he—" Chanoch started to say before a large Outcaver clamped a dirty hand over his mouth.

"Thanks, Lioni. One more word out of the brat and we tie him up. Sit on him for now. I'll talk to him later." Lioni took Shand at his word; he pushed Chanoch to the cave floor and straddled his struggling body. The other Outcavers laughed and pinched the squealing boy.

"Let him up when you think he's learned to mind his manners in front of his betters," Shand said, turning then to Howell. The other men retreated so that the two leaders could speak privately. "Now, you and I have a lot to say to each other, and it isn't about rape, either. Or at least not the kind Ezhno was blathering about. It's Mithras that's getting the raping, and no one gives a damn."

"It matters to me. I haven't been here long, but long enough to see that Mithras is the worst-run colony in the CCS system. You know, it's odd how a bureaucracy works. Get a thing going and no one bothers to change anything without a lot of glue in the wheels. The CCS could have had a model arrangement here with happy colonists and all the ore they could use. Instead, they got 'Mithras is a prison' stuck somewhere in their collective minds and here we all are." Howell pulled the edges of his coldsuit tighter around his arm. The cave was cold and the moist air inside the suit was chilling rapidly.

"Can you stand that cut there? I haven't another coldsuit around—never needed one of the things myself. This talk is important, but I don't want you freezing on us."

"I won't freeze, I'm too tough an old bird. You're right, the talking is more important, so stop blathering about me. I do agree that Mithras is

being raped of its minerals and the children. There is no way this can become a self-supporting colony under the present system—and since the CCS likes the system—"

"We sweat and die in the mines so's the Confederation can have our kids and our only source of income. Why, on a free market I could get double the price those CCS flea skimmers give us for our ore. If only I had my own oreships."

"But they need Mithras as a prison, Shand. Never forget that. I think it's almost become the most important thing about this benighted hole. I managed to make a few top people uncomfortable, but they couldn't get rid of me on the grounds that I didn't do my job well—so they sent me here. It was the same with all the others. I've seen the files, and I knew Marios Rap; this is a penal colony for the CCS, not just for your poor fools who happened to be born here. It's lovely. No need for a trial, no messy inquests; just kick a man up the stairs until he falls over them and breaks his fool neck. I checked the Mithras charter—it's still listed as a prison for malcontents. And by the Lady, am I a malcontent!"

"Don't you got no friends in the CCS?" Shand asked. "If you were such a good bossman, someone must be interested in what happened to you."

Howell laughed. "Bureaucracy again. It takes time to find a man in the Service. They were counting on Kiedron's killing me before anyone got around to even asking where poor old Howell was stationed. After all, there have been an awful lot of dead commandants around here in the last year or so. I was just going to be one more statistic in the files on Mithras. And it's not just me, that's the hell of it. Every new nab or technician sent up here is a prisoner, too. I wonder what Jens, or poor Hesslin, ever did. I guess I'll never really know until I can get off Mithras. I'll fix this little game but good."

"But how can you stop it?" Shand scratched at his wiry red beard. "They seem to have it working to their liking, not ours."

"They weren't counting on my catching Kiedron—and by the way, it wasn't rape."

Shand laughed. "Naturally it wasn't. Never have I seen a woman so snuggled up to a man who's just took her by force. I could see it was a two-way thing. But I'll lay bets you'll end up more her father than her

husband. I know her kind."

"Got that, did you?" Howell smiled ruefully. "I'm her new dad. Speaking of which, how much did you know about Tovo Agata?" This was the big risk, finding out how solid a local saint's feet really were.

Shand bent closer to Howell so only he could hear him. "Tovo was on the CCS payroll," he hissed. "Most people don't know that, but I do. I worked down at the port and I saw a lot of things the CCS didn't want seen. That's why I'm here. Knowing too much to let live and too popular to kill. Most of the port crew would've suspected something if I'd had an 'accident,' so I was accused of stealing a drug shipment and Outcaved." Shand spread his hands and shrugged. "They shouldn't have accused me like that—it gave me ideas. I've stole more than five whole shipments by now, I'd bet!" Howell laughed and slapped Shand's shoulder with his good hand. This was a man after his own heart.

"If we could turn this place into a model colony, we'd have the CCS over a spiked barrel. I think we can manage it, too. They don't dare admit they're holding us without benefit of trial, and they can't complain that they need more troops here, if the ore is coming in regularly."

"But what about the kids? We need them here."

"Simple—blackmail. We tell the miners they'll keep their kids if they turn out the ore on time with no trouble. We tell the CCS we won't blab to the Central Council about what they're doing to Mithras if they leave the kids alone. That should do it."

"That should get us a quick bleeding. The CCS will kill off me and you and then continue business as usual."

"Possibly. But I think there's someone here on Mithras who's the new spy for the CCS. What if we started feeding him what we wanted them to know? What if they had to worry about a commandant working with the Cavers instead of against them?"

"Aye, but how do we find your spy? Tovo was almost impossible to spot. This one will be twice as hard."

Howell nodded. "I'm working on it, and I have a few ideas of my own. Let me think them out and then prove it. Right now we've got some

talking to do with the other Cavers—and as far as I'm concerned there is no such thing as an Outcaver. If your men want to come back to the Homecave, they can do so. No nab of mine will lay a laser on them. Word of Burian Howell."

"I'll take that word and shake on it." Shand reached for Howell's free arm.

"What about the lardhead?" Lioni asked from atop the struggling Chanoch.

"Oh, let the kiddy go, he's harmless. Boot his tail out of here, and if I hear him cry 'rape' one more time—"

Chanoch was only too glad to be free of the Outcavers. Glancing warily from man to man, he edged his way to the mouth of the cave and ran out into the snow.

"Born coward, that boy. Can't do a thing with him. Gods know, I tried."

"Why'd you bother?" Howell asked.

"Man'll sometimes take a bit more trouble with his own son. At least, I think he's mine—Bettina always was a busy woman, and you learn in the Caves not to ask too close about that sort of thing. I had my pleasures and she had hers. We had no complaints, so it was fine with the rest of the Cavers too. Naturally, any man laid a hand on Bettina without her wishing it or liking the idea— well, I'd've had to kill him, you see?" Howell shook his head at simply one more example of the way things were done on Mithras. No wonder some of the genealogy charts made no sense at all.

"You know," Shand said, "it's probably better I'm not sure if he's mine or not. If I had a really good doubt, I'd have drowned him years ago. Agata kept him out of my way for a while. I had hopes of her making a man of him—but here he is, back making trouble for everyone."

Howell was about to reply when there was the sound of a scuffle at the mouth of the mine. A voice was calling his name, the sweetest voice he could imagine. He jumped to his feet and ran toward the opening, knocking Outcavers out of his way in his haste to reach the opening.

"Kiedron, Kiedron! I'm here and I'm all right."



Kiedron fell into Howell's arms and hugged him painfully. His broken arm was agony, but it was worth it to know she was here with him and safe, too.

"Oh, Howell, we were so worried about you! Jens tried to get the Cavers out on a hunt, but Forbes was loose in the Homecave and he's rounding up the children. You've got to do something! Everyone is fighting and there might be some killing this time—Howell, help me."

"Well, Shand, shall my ice-elf and I go arescuing on our own, or will your crew of Caver uglies back me up?"

"You heard the commandant, men. He needs us for a fight," Shand bellowed. He and his men left the cave at a fast trot, Shand giving orders to round up the rest of the Outcavers on the way back to the Homecave. "There'll be recruiter blood on the walls, Howell," he promised, brandishing a vibroblade in each hand.

Howell held Kiedron to his good side and then regretfully let go of her. "Let's go, ice-elf, we've got a job to do, too—but without all the bloodshed, I hope."

## ***CHAPTER THIRTEEN***

The Homecave was in a state of chaos. Children ran screaming through the corridors with Forbes's nabs in hot pursuit. The recruiter obviously wasn't taking the time to designate which children he wanted; his men were taking every child they could catch. The bedlam in the main cave reminded Howell of Brueghel's painting of the slaughter of the innocents—only these children were giving as good as they got. Several nabs were bleeding from knife wounds and one man was down with three boys on his back, hitting him as hard as they could with their small fists.

There was no sign of any nab that Howell knew as a Mithras regular. All the uniformed men were from the oreships, the Port Authority or Forbes's own cruiser. There was no sign of Jens, either.

Howell made his way quickly to tens's grotto and found Arnie holding off two nabs by himself. Three smaller children cowered in a corner and watched the battle in round-eyed wonder. Howell knew that with his arm done up in Halle's makeshift sling he would be of very little use in a

pitched battle. But nothing short of having his other arm broken was going to keep him away from the Homecave now. He reached for one of Rhoiannin's cooking pots and neatly clipped one of the nabs across the skull. The man dropped like a rock, and as the other nab turned to see what had happened to his partner, Arnie kicked him in the gut. The nab doubled over, and Howell delivered the *coup de grâce* with the soup pot.

"Good going, sir." Arnie bent over the two men to make sure they were both out cold, then beckoned to one of the children to tie the men up. All three of the children, with whoops of joy, jumped to the task and, using an assortment of makeshift ropes, soon had the nabs well confined and very uncomfortable.

"Where's your father? Did he get out of the CCS cave yet?" Howell asked as he searched the grotto for a more substantial weapon than the soup pot.

"I'm not sure, sir. He tried to get some help from Forbes after you were taken off by the Outcavers. But the recruiter wasn't about to try and help you. He tossed Pa in the brig when he wouldn't go after any children, and then he took off chasing Kiedron. He has most of the squad leaders locked up, too; they wouldn't help him any more than Pa would. They wouldn't go against the Homecavers for no damn recruiter, anyway. Forbes's a fool not to know that."

"Huh! Think you and some of the bigger boys can spring the brig door—particularly if I told you the combination to the lock?" Howell grinned at the boy. Jens had raised one fine nab in Arnie.

"Oh, I wouldn't need a combination, sir. I'd just blow the door with a laser. I know where Pa has one hidden in your office."

"Why that sneaky bugger! Get the laser, then, and get your father—and if you're up to it, boy, try and get me a stungun."

"Why not take theirs?" Arnie gestured toward his two captives.

Howell winced at his oversight. "You're right. Where is my mind today? Having a broken arm shouldn't have short-circuited it that much."

"I don't think there's much wrong with your mind, sir. I saw you coming in with all of Shand's men. Pa was right—he was sure you'd win

them over pretty quick. I would have joined you, too, but I knew the littles were here and I couldn't risk Forbes's men taking them. Pa wouldn't forgive me nohow for that. He didn't think their being a nab's kids would count for much with that squat."

"With you and me, Kiedron and your father, we should be able to give Forbes a run for his children. And he's not counting on the Outcavers, either. Killing me isn't going to be as easy a job as the Service thought it would. Let's go get us some recruiter's nabs, Arnie!"

From the looks of the caves, Forbes and his men were getting the worst of the battle. By Forbes's own orders nothing stronger than a stun-gun was being used. He wanted the children alive, and the use of lasers would be hard to explain to his superiors. Once the Cavers had realized he was using only stuns they lost all fear and were attacking with real vigor. No finicky rules about not killing would bother them. Vibroblades were in evidence and more than one nab was dead of knife wounds. One of the oreshipmen had his head smashed in by three children armed with a good sized rock. The kids were celebrating their kill with wild whoops of joy until a group of Forbes's men stumbled on them, scattering the children to deeper parts of the caves. The nabs were at a distinct disadvantage because they didn't know the layout of the interlocking grottos as well as the children and the Cavers did. Even those men who had studied Forbes's maps found them useless in the maze of tunnels and sleeping grottos.

They also had not counted on the women being fully as fierce as their menfolk, if not fiercer. The children were the hope of a better Mithras, and too many of these women had seen other kids taken from them and never returned. Forbes had no willing commandant behind him, no local nabs to depend on; he had nothing except his own sense of self-righteousness, which was worthless on Mithras. Forbes was reaping the CCS harvest and was finding it a tough weed patch indeed.

Howell yelled like a banshee, egging the Cavers on. He ran from grotto to tunnel shouting approval of his people's actions and firing off his captured stungun. Forbes screamed at him to come to the aid of the Service, and Howell threw a rock at him. Howell was a Caver that day, fighting for his children as much as any native born to Mithras. He had a child to save—his child, Kiedron.

She was fighting side by side with Shand in the wastepant room, their vibroblades stinging and slashing at the nabs that encircled them. Ducking around the well in the center of the room, they held the nabs at bay by operating as a well-matched pair.

"By the Lady, if only you'd been my kid instead of Ezhno." Shand watched a spectacular duck-and-slash to the ribs maneuver by Kiedron and then jumped high to avoid a stun blast aimed at himself. "Where is that piss-ant of mine—in hiding?"

"More than likely." Keidron kicked out at a nab and stopped long enough to hear the crack of the man's ribs. "He never was one for fighting."

"No, there're better ways of getting what I want, Agata." Ezhno Chanoch and Forbes stood side by side in the doorway of the cave. At a signal from Forbes the nabs backed out of the room, leaving Kiedron and Shand alone by the waste well.

"You were a fool, sweet, not to take up where your father left off with the CCS. I wasn't so stupid. When you told me how much money there was in being a terrorist, I decided to find out if it was true. Now I work for the CCS just like your pa." Chanoch swaggered toward the horrified girl. "I can have everything—gin, fancystuffs, power, all I want. And I can have you, too. Howell's not takin' you away from me. You're my woman, Agata."

"And you're my son." Shand Chanoch looked at the boy as if he were some alien monster. "I let you run wild. I lied for you, even stole things from the ships for you; and all this time—"

"Shaddup, old man. You're a bigger fool than Agata is. Her father filled her full of pap about the glory of Mithras, but you knew better. You knew he was on the take before Agata did, and you didn't even cut yourself in for a slice. I had to stand by and watch you call me an idiot when all the time you was the real clown around here." Chanoch spat in his father's face. "You coulda killed Howell for me, but you made like a buddy with him. I would've let you be a big man here when I took over as the new hero. But you had to mess up my plans, so now I don't need you at all." Chanoch drew a laser out from under his jacket, raised and fired it, Shand lunged for him, but he was too late. The beam sliced neatly through his chest, leaving a charred hole. Shand Chanoch's face was a mask of shocked grief as he stumbled backward and finally tripped into the wastewell. Kiedron

heard his body strike the liquid far below, and cried out in anguish.

"He was a good man, Chanoch, a good man, and you killed him!"

"I'll kill anyone who gets in my way, even you. I want you as my woman, but on my terms. I had to knuckle under to you for so long, Agata. Now it's my time. I get to be the boss and you'll go along with everything I say. Isn't that right, Captain Forbes?"

"You got it." Forbes smiled at the girl, showing all of his too-white teeth. "Howell is finished here. I'll have him sent to have his brain short-wired, so that the most violent thing he can think of is banging two blocks together."

"Do you really think the Mithrans would follow your pet monkey, Forbes?" Howell's voice was cool and nonchalant from the doorway behind the recruiter.

Chanoch and Forbes swung quickly around to face Howell and most of the inhabitants of the Homecave. More Cavers were pouring into the room. There was not one of Forbes's nabs to be seen. The edges of the cave were rapidly filling with Outcavers who clearly looked to Howell as their new leader.

"Your men are running, Forbes. Those who can run, that is. My Cavers are a tough lot for untrained men to take on on their home territory with only stunguns. You've lost; Mithras is mine. If the Service wants anything from us, they'll have to deal with me."

"They'll have you up on charges just as quick as I can report in," Forbes squeaked.

"Clod," Chanoch snarled, "can't you see he's not going to let you report anything about Mithras. He's going to be the new dictator around here. Oh, he'll be nice to the Cavers for a while but then, as soon as he knows he can manage it, he'll be no better than the rest of them. Killers, that's what commandants are—pure, bloody killers."

Chanoch was making a last desperate play for the sympathy of the crowd, one last chance to pit Cavers against the CCS and their nabs—but it wasn't working this time. Chanoch could see the hate in the Cavers' eyes, see them closing in on Forbes, and he knew he would have to wriggle out

of the situation quickly or die with the recruiter.

"You're not going to be killed, Forbes," Howell said softly. "You're going back to headquarters and tell them all about Mithras. You're going to tell them there aren't any more children worth taking off this planet, and that there have been some more ore strikes and the production will triple in the next two months."

"Don't believe him!" Chanoch screamed. "Can't you people see it's a plot to get you to work harder? He's gonna let this recruiter go because they're working together. He's no better than all the others. I'm Shand's son, believe me!"

"You killed him—you killed your own father." Kiedron faced Chanoch. "You gunned him down with a laser, and you're the one working for the CCS. You sold out, Chanoch. You sold us out for CCS credits!"

Chanoch drew the laser from his shirt once more and jumped to the lip of the wastewell. He aimed the laser for Howell, snarling for everyone else to back off. He was too busy watching the commandant to see Kiedron launch herself across the well coping and shove him at knee level. With a scream, Chanoch fell over backwards into the pit, the laser beam deflecting off the walls of the well. He hit bottom, still screaming. Kiedron didn't dare look over the side to see if he had been killed. She clung to the edge of the well and was thoroughly sick.

Howell ran to the lip of the wastepit. "Someone get a squad down there and see if he can be pulled out alive! I want Chanoch so we can show the Cavers just what the CCS felt was good enough for them in the way of a hero." He knelt beside Kiedron and put one arm around her shaking body. "It's all right, the worst is over," he soothed. "We can go on from here and make Mithras a better place for all of us—even the Chanochs of this universe."

"You may not have very much to say about Mithras when I make my report, Howell. You'll be lucky not to be court-martialed." Forbes stood stiffly waiting, surrounded by a squad of nabs with Jens and Arnie in control. Arnie held a laser pointed directly at the Academy recruiter, and it didn't seem as if it would take much to make the boy shoot.

"Why don't you let me kill him, sir?" he asked. "And leave Chanoch down there in the pit, too? It'll be a lot quieter around here if you did."

"Quieter, but not much better." Howell glanced back over his shoulder down into the wastepit. He could hear the sounds of the rescue party searching for Chanoch. "I don't want to be just another tough, running this place the way I feel like on any given day. There are rules to government, Arnie—some of them have to be obeyed."

"And you've broken most of them," Forbes protested. "I, for one, will never give you any kind of a good report on your conduct here. You took the side of the insurrecting colonials against their true government. That, sir, is treason!"

"Forbes," Howell said wearily, "spare me the patriotic speeches. You and the CCS suffer from the same case of mental constipation. The Colonial Service is *not* the true government of these people—the Confederation of Planets is."

"But the Service rules in the name of the Confederation. We—"

"Terrorize, make unjust and unconstitutional laws, and kill a lot of people. I've been through the CCS from Academy student on up, and I know the system. That was the one thing I realized early in my career—you have to work from within. I got big enough and high enough in the CCS to make some waves, and lo, Mithras. I knew I was onto something when Hesslin told me what this planet really was. The Service knows it's got to work with me or kill me—well, I'm still alive. Make your reports, Forbes. Write them any way you want. They'll all say the same thing—Captain Burian Howell has not failed the CCS; but the CCS has failed Captain Burian Howell. I'm going to make Mithras into the best planet in the colonial system by being fair, by setting up sensible rules and by sticking to them. Leadership, that's what I'll give Mithras—not toy heroes or revolutions, just good government. The Service will be down on me like a chicken on a two-meter worm, but they're going to find me hard to swallow. And in this universe, what you can't swallow you learn to live with.

"Jens, get Captain Forbes's ship ready for takeoff as quickly as possible. I want those reports in fast. But make sure you replace all the men he lost here in this messy little war of his—are you going to report that as well, Forbes?" Howell asked with a grin. As the recruiter sputtered, he added, "We will take care of your every comfort— but every man we put on your ship will be a blabbermouth of the first order—my order. Don't think changing ships will help, or killing my men. Think about every oreship

leaving Mithras from now on having reports scattered in every hiding place on it—reports from me or my representatives. The silence about places like Mithras is what makes them prisons, not the nasty climate or the nabs."

"We found Chanoch, sir, but he's in bad shape."

The squad leader, a man called Helms, pushed his way through the mob. His clothing was torn and stained by chemicals. There were red welts on his arms that would turn into scars. Going down into the wastepits had clearly not been easy, but this man had gone—at Howell's orders. Howell smiled at the nab. He had never met the man and barely knew him by sight! But the fact he had been ready to risk the dangers of the wastepits because Howell ordered him to was already a sign that Howell's command of Mithras would be different. The men would follow him because they wanted to, not because they feared him.

A wicked idea occurred to Howell, and he grimaced as he turned back to Forbes. "I'll tell you what, captain. As a token of my esteem—and so that you won't lose face completely when you return to headquarters—I'll let you take one of our children with you: Ezhno Chanoch."

The recruiter sputtered some more. "But I didn't *want* him. He didn't test out high enough; he'd wash out at the Academy."

"We know now those tests can be faked; maybe that's how he scored so low. Besides," Howell added, nodding his head to indicate the guns that were still trained on Forbes, "we insist. The two of you deserve each other so well. We'll give him some preliminary medical treatment overnight here, and you can finish the job when you leave with him on your ship bright and early tomorrow morning."

Forbes wanted to speak further, but Howell cut him off with a wave of his hand. "Take them both away," he told Helms and his men. "I don't want to look at either of them again."

And, turning to his aide, he said, "We also have the matter of Ponce. What did you do with that boy?"

Jens's jaw hardened. "I sent him out to the hills with his woman. I told him never to come back or I'd kill him."



"Bad. Remember your telling me about never giving orders that wouldn't be obeyed? The boy will need food and shelter, and he'll gather others around him sympathetic to his cause. You just might be setting up another Kiedron for me to deal with, and I don't think I can cope with more than one. Get the boy back; I'll deal with him. I'm told he's smart and he may have some good qualities I don't want to let get away. Have him pay his debt to Mithras by caring for Hesslin's family and by working his ass off in the mines. Make something a little more useful of him than a pile of waste products—alive or dead."

Jens nodded stiffly. It was clear he disagreed with Howell, but wasn't going to say anything in the face of the popular approval Howell's decisions were receiving from the Cavers.

"Jens," Howell said softly so that only he and the aide and Kiedron could hear. "I don't want Ponce to think he's got a good reason to kill me—I have too much work to do around here."

"He wouldn't dare!" Kiedron yelled. "I have the concession on doing in commandants, and I want you alive for a long time. If Ponce so much as looks cross-eyed at you, I'll—"

Howell kissed her gently, oblivious to the cheering of the Cavers.

## ***CHAPTER FOURTEEN***

"I knew the past six months were too good to last." Jens stood in the wreckage of Howell's office, watching his commanding officer directing the enlargement of the ceiling and walls. Howell was covered with rock dust, happy as a Caver, and signaling wildly and obscenely to the miners exactly what he wanted done with the enlarging of the room.

"All that blather about building schools and making things better for Cavers—and here you are, working the poor pigs overtime to fulfill your dreams of grandeur. I knew it—inside every commandant there lurks a monomaniac."

"And an aide to make him that way—watch out for that drill, you motherjumping..." Howell waved a fist cheerfully at one of the Cavers who had nearly run him down with the massive machine.

"Come on, Jens, let's get out of this madhouse. I think they know by now what I mean. And if they don't—by hemlock, I'll show them what I want done!"

"Yeah, Kiedron was telling me you were getting pretty proficient with a drill yourself. Do you have to have a hand in everything around here, Burian? Arnie tells me you've been teaching the advanced calculus classes, and Helms was describing some innovation of yours of faster skis for the nabs.

You're too busy for your own good." Jens shook his head good-naturedly. The changes on Mithras had been phenomenal. Howell had set up schools, gotten the Cavers interested in improvements and, as a result, tripled the ore production. Forbes's reports might never have existed for all the news they had received from CCS headquarters. Jens had the feeling Howell was waiting patiently for something to happen, but what it might be, he wasn't saying.

"What do you think of my new office plans?" Howell asked as the two men moved through the CCS tunnel toward the new connecting tunnels for the Homecaves.

"Well, I was a bit surprised. I thought you were used to its being small by now—then Arnie told me you were doing so much work in there that most of the Cavers swore you thought you'd found a new vein of ducocite."

"No, nothing like that. I just felt I needed some room to stretch out in—room for more bloody file cases, too. Without Kiedron to steal them, the records are getting way out of hand. Then, too, with my moving into a grotto in the Homecave I couldn't see any use for sleeping quarters in the CCS cave, so I thought we could do without the wall between office and private room. The project grew from there. I much prefer sleeping in the Homecave anyway, much cozier."

"And Kiedron? How does she feel about your sleeping in the Homecave?" Jens asked the question with some trepidation. Howell had never spelled out to him what the relationship between the two of them really was, nor would Kiedron talk about it. She had been spending most of her time in the medical section, picking up from where her lessons from old Doctor Ronson had left off. She had stated that medicine would be her choice for a career, and Jens knew this would necessitate her leaving Mithras soon to take advantage of better training under the CCS

programs.

"She's too busy to spend much time with me anyway, so I haven't told her yet. But I don't think she'll really care where I sleep, just as long as she can find me easily. She feels she owns me, the twit." Howell sighed.

"Maybe she's right. She's been bugging me to bring up more doctors and a complete hospital—says the only way to teach about coping with cold-caused problems is to have the students in a cold environment. She's got me at least half convinced it'll work, too. I've been cubing a medical friend at the Academy about her ideas and he agrees. We might soon see Mithras turned into a training school for cold-condition medicine. Isn't that a turnabout— Mithras, an Academy!" The commandant beamed with pride. "My little girl's a smart one, really smart."

*Too smart to lose you by leaving here*, Jens reflected. There was more than one woman in the caves who had been making it clear that Howell could share her furs anytime he wished it. Even Rhoiannin had been hinting gently. Jens found Howell's embarrassment about his wife a bit amusing, but knew the commandant had no interest in anyone but Kiedron. As far as Jens knew they were never alone together and they never shared a bed. He shook his head and put it down to a commandant's idiosyncrasies. Every commandant had to have something wrong with his thought processes somewhere. Kiedron was Howell's one and only bit of insanity, it seemed, and Jens found that a very tolerable state of affairs; much quieter than any other commandant he'd worked with.

Howell still looked like an old gray bird of prey. Even Kiedron couldn't persuade him to take the youthening drugs. He still refused to color his hair or tighten up on his aging skin. Jens tried to imagine Howell after youth treatments, and gave up. Some people were impossible to picture young. Howell would always be old and patriarchal, even if Kiedron did try to make him shave his beard or cut his shoulder-length white locks. Howell liked looking old, Jens decided. It fit him somehow.

"Sir. Oh sir!" Arnie was running down the corridor after his father and Howell. "Mail just got in from the port and some of it was CCS—I saw Forbes's chopmark on part of it. I think something..." The boy fell into Howell's arms, panting. The commandant held onto him until he could recover his breath. "I think they sent a ship—I saw it, a full honors cruiser, sir. I think— it was—for you."

"Easy, boy. Probably just some biggy making an inspection tour for his

health. Let's head back to my office and—" A look of comic horror spread over Howell's face. "Gods, how am I going to receive any brasshats with my office looking like that? Bring them to the grotto, Jens—and where the hell is my dress uniform?" Howell turned abruptly and trotted, storklike, in the direction of the Homecave. Arnie and his father watched him fondly for a moment.

"Son," Jens said, "you go take him his mail, and I'll see to the ship and whoever's in it. Our commandant needs some time to pull himself together and remember he's not some rough-mannered Caver."

There were no dignitaries on board the ship, nor any high ranking CCS personnel. The crew, all richly dressed and polite, were of the opinion they were taking someone away from Mithras rather than bringing anyone. Their smooth, efficient calm unnerved Jens a bit and reminded him too pointedly of his own overweight state and patched, ill-fitting uniform. He left the ship as quickly as possible and returned to the Homecave a very puzzled man. The scene of riotous hoopla going on in Howell's grotto was equally confusing.

Rhoiannin was smiling blankly at Howell, who was twirling Kiedron around the room in an awkward waltz, and Arnie, holding a large open bottle of champagne, was getting noisily drunk.

"Would someone mind telling me what's going on, or am I the only sane person left on this planet?" Jens demanded, snatching the bottle away from his protesting son.

"Howell gave it to me. It came from the ship and he said I was old enough to—"

"Howell! Kiedron! Please, someone tell me what's going on—*please?*" Jens shouted in growing frustration as he wrestled with his boy over the wine bottle. Arnie won, and clutched the foaming Jeroboam to his scrawny chest.

"We won!" Howell reached out to grab Jens and swing him into the impromptu dance. "The buggers gave in—we've won! Mithras is mine. Ooph." The dancing and wine had made Howell dizzy and he sat down abruptly on the floor. "Pass me the champagne again, boy. That stuff

always was my downfall—I almost got married once because of that angel's dew."

Jens took the bottle from Arnie and handed it to Howell. He watched his generally abstemious commandant drain about a third of what was left, leaving very little for him to pour gleefully over Kiedron's head and shoulders. The girl squealed and giggled at the bubbles running down her face. Howell kissed a stream of it off the end of her chin.

"They sent that frigging ship for me," Howell chortled. "They want to give me a high mucky-muck job with the CCS—a fancy planet to run riot on. Lots of warmth and comforts—just so I leave Mithras and put you in command." He blinked owlishly at Jens, and sobered up immediately. "They wouldn't really let you be the commandant. One month and you'd be up to your ass in CCS advisors and assistants. Then you'd be out of the job and probably digging ore in the mines if you were lucky enough to be left alive. They don't want Mithras changed, and they know you're my man all the way. I can't let you have Mithras now, Jens, but soon I'll leave and you'll have to keep it. I'll make you commandant of Mithras after I retire—and since you're an independent enough man they'll find they won't be able to get it away from you at any price. But we need the time and we need the Mithrans behind us."

"But you've got that. You're the best-loved commandant this planet has ever seen," Jens said. "Yes—that's why the Service wants to get rid of me. I'm doing my job too well. I'm the best damn commandant around anywhere. And I'll prove it on any planet they send me to—they said it would be warm, Jens, warm!"

"But you're not leaving?" Jens grabbed his again-tipsy superior by the shoulder. "You can't leave us, not ever, Burian. We need you too much. Don't even think of retiring. We can put up with you—large office and all."

Howell peered down into the now-empty bottle. "Arnie, my lad, see if the good ship CCS has any more of this good stuff in her hold. I want everyone in the Homecave drunk tonight on angel's dew. Hell no, I'm not going for quite a while— I've got them licked! I got them to give me what I wanted. They gave me these!"

Howell ripped open his tunic and taped to each nipple was half of a set of admiral's stripes. "There they are, and I'll wear them wherever I please, regulations be damned! I am Admiral Burian Howell of the Confederation

Colonial Service and I am the toughest man in this here universe— and they know it. Blessed Mother, how they know it! Kiedron, let's go take a bath in vintage champagne. I feel like celebrating something or other!"