

Screwtop

by Vonda N. McIntyre

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Hot and wet from the fine, steamy rain, Kylis sat on her heels at the top of the drilling pit and waited for the second-duty shift to end. She rubbed at a streak of the thick red mud that had spattered her legs and her white boots when she walked across the compound. Redsun's huge dim star altered colors; white became a sort of pinkish gray. But among the forest's black foliage and against the Pit's clay, white uniforms stood out and made prisoners easier for the guards to see.

A few other people waited with Kylis at the south end of the deep slash in the earth. Like them, she crouched unsheltered from the rain, strands of wet hair plastered to her cheeks, watching for friends she had not seen in forty days.

Below lay two completed generator domes; above them rose the immense delicate cooling towers, and the antenna beaming power along the relay system to North Continent. Fences and guards protected the finished installations from the prisoners. Kylis and the rest worked only on clearing the fern forest, extending the Pit, drilling a third steam well-- the dirty, dangerous jobs.

Paralleling the distant wall of volcanoes in the east, the drill pit extended northward. Its far end was invisible, obscured by the rain and by clouds of acrid smoke that billowed from the trash piles. The Pit was being lengthened again to follow the fault line where drilling was most efficient. Another strip of frond forest had been destroyed, and its huge primitive ferns now lay in blackened heaps. The stalks never burned completely, but until the coals died a bank of irritating smoke and sticky ash would hang over the prison camp. The fine rain sizzled into steam when it fell on glowing embers.

Kylis started at the long shrill siren that ended the second shift. For an instant she was afraid the hallucinations had returned, but the normal sounds of the prison responded to the signal. The faraway roar of bulldozers ceased; the high whine of the drill slipped down in pitch and finally stopped. People left their machines, threw down their tools, and straggled toward the trail. They passed beneath the guards' towers, watched and counted by the Lizard's crew. One by one and in occasional pairs they started up the steep slope of clay and debris and volcanic ash, picking their way around gullies and across muddy rivulets. Screwtop seemed very quiet now, almost peaceful, with no noise but the hum of turbines in the two geothermal power plants, and the rhythmic clatter of the pumps that kept the drill pit unflooded.

Kylis could not yet see Jason. She frowned. He and Gryf, who was on the third shift, had both been all right when she got off duty. She was sure of that, for news of accidents traveled instantaneously between working crews. But Kylis had been alone, sleeping much of the time, in the nine hours since the end of her shift. Anything could happen in nine hours. She tried to reassure herself about her friends' safety, because the pattern and rhythm of the work just ended had been too normal to follow a really bad accident.

She could not put aside her anxiety, and knew she would not until she had seen and spoken to and touched both Gryf and Jason. She still found herself surprised that she could care so much about two other human beings. Her past life had depended on complete independence and self-sufficiency.

Below, Gryf would be standing in the group of prisoners near the drilling rig. She tried to make him out, but the only person she could distinguish at this distance was the guard captain, called by everyone-- when he was out of earshot-- the Lizard, for his clean-shaven face and head gave him a smoothly impervious reptilian appearance. He was standing alone, facing the prisoners, giving orders. He wore

black, as if in defiance of the heat, as a symbol of his superiority over everyone else in the camp. Even so, he was conspicuous now only because he was separated from the others. Gryf was conspicuous in any crowd, but the rig was too far away for Kylis to identify even Gryf's astonishing ebony and tan calico-patterned skin. The first time she had seen him, his first day at Screwtop, she had stared at him so long that he noticed and laughed at her. It was not a ridiculing laugh, but an understanding one. Gryf laughed at himself, too, sometimes, and often at the people who had made him what he was.

Gryf was the first tetraparental Kylis had ever seen or heard of, and even among tetras Gryf was unusual. Of his four biological parents, it happened that two of them were dark, and two fair. Gryf had been planned to be a uniform light brown, only his hair, perhaps, varicolored. Genes for hair color did not blend like those for skin. But the sets of sperm and ova had been matched wrong, so the mixture of two embryos forming Gryf made him his strange paisley pattern. He still had all the selectable intellectual gifts of his various parents. Those qualities, not his skin, were important.

New tetraparentals were special; the life of each was fully planned. Gryf was part of a team, and it was inconceivable to the government of Redsun and to the other tetras that after all the work of making him, after all the training and preparation, he would refuse his duty. When he did, he was sent for punishment to Redsun's strictest prison. If he changed his mind, he could at a word return to the tetras' secluded retreat. He had been at Screwtop half a year and he had not said that word.

Kylis was no Redsun native; she was oblivious to the others' awe of Gryf. She was curious about him. Neither because of nor in spite of the pattern of his skin, he was beautiful. Kylis wondered how his hair would feel, the locks half black and wiry, half blond and fine.

He was assigned to a nearby crew. Kylis saw immediately that he had been given hard and dirty jobs, not the most dangerous ones but those most tiring. The guards' task was not to kill him but to make life so unpleasant that he would return to the tetras.

Kylis waited to speak to him until she would not risk discipline for either of them. Without seeming to, the Lizard was watching Gryf closely, padding by every so often in his stealthy, silent way, his close-set eyes heavy-lidded, the direction of his gaze impossible to determine. But eventually his duties took him to another part of the camp, and Kylis left her own work to tell Gryf the tricks experience had taught her to make the labor a little easier.

Their first night together was Gryf's first night at Screwtop. When the shift ended, it seemed natural to walk back to the prisoners' shelters together. They were too tired to do much more than sleep, but the companionship was a comfort and the potential for more existed. They lay facing each other in the darkness. Starlight shone through a break in the clouds and glinted from the blond locks of Gryf's hair.

"I may never be let out of here," Gryf said. He was not asking for sympathy, but telling her his future as best he knew it. He had a pleasant, musical voice. Kylis realized these were the first words she heard him say. But she remembered his thanking her for her advice-- and recalled that he had thanked her with his smile and a nod and the look in his eyes.

"I'm in for a long time," Kylis said. "I don't think there's that much difference between us." Screwtop could kill either of them the next day or the day before release.

Kylis reached up and touched Gryf's hair. It was stiff and matted with sweat. He took her hand and kissed her grimy palm. From then on they stayed together, growing closer but never speaking of a future outside the prison.

Several sets later Jason arrived and changed everything.

Kylis brought herself back to the present. She knew Gryf was below somewhere, though she could not make him out in the blotch of dirty white. She had been on the last shift during a previous set and she knew the schedule. The prisoners still working would not be exposed to much more danger today. Instead, they would have the dulllest and most exhausting job of the period. During the last shift before the free day, once every forty days, all the equipment was cleaned and inspected. Anything done wrong was done over; the shift could drag on long past its normal end. Kylis hoped that would not happen this time.

At the bottom of the slope, Jason emerged from the bright cancer of machinery. He was muddy and grease-spattered, gold-flecked with bleached hair. He was very large and very fair, and even on Redsun where the light had little ultraviolet he sunburned easily. Though he had been working from dusk to

midmorning his legs were horizontally striped with sunburn, darkest at the top of his thighs and lightest just below his knees, marking the different levels to which he had pulled the cuffs of his boots. Right now they were folded all the way down.

He glanced up and saw Kylis. His carriage changed; he straightened and waved. His blond beard was bristly and uncombed and his hair was plastered down with sweat. The waistband of his shorts was red with mud splattered onto his body and washed down by perspiration and rain. As he came closer she saw that he was thinner, and that the lines around his eyes had deepened. They had been lines of thought and laughter; now they were of fatigue and exposure. He hurried toward her, slipping on the clay, and she realized he, too, had been worried.

He heard I was in sensory deprivation, she thought, and he was afraid for me. She stood motionless for a few seconds. She was not quite used to him yet; his easy acceptance of her and his concern seemed innocent and admirable compared to the persistent distrust Kylis

had felt toward him for so long. She started forward to meet him. He stopped and held out his hands. She touched him, and he came forward, almost trembling, holding himself taut against exhaustion. His pose collapsed. Bending down, he rested his forehead on her shoulder. She put her hands on his back, very gently.

"Was it bad?" His voice was naturally low but now it was rough and hoarse. He had probably been directing his crew, shouting above the roar of machinery for eighteen hours.

"Bad enough," Kylis said. "I've been glad of the work since."

Still leaning against her, he shook his head.

"I'm okay now. I've quit hallucinating," she said, hoping it was true. "And you? Are you all right?" She could feel his breath on her damp shoulder.

"Yes. Now. Thanks to Gryf."

Jason had started this set on first day shift, which began at midnight and ended in the afternoon. Its members worked through the hottest part of the day when they were most tired. Halfway through his third work period Jason had collapsed. He was delirious and dehydrated, sunburned even through his shirt. The sun drained him. Gryf, just getting off when Jason fell, had worked through his own sleep period to finish Jason's shift. For them to switch shifts, Gryf had worked almost two of Redsun's days straight. When Kylis heard about that, she could not see how anyone could do it, even Gryf.

Gryf had broken the rules; but no one had made Jason go back to his original shift. The Lizard must never have said anything about it. Kylis could imagine him standing in shadow, watching, while Gryf waited for a confrontation that never came. It was something the Lizard would do.

Jason's shoulders were scarred where blisters had formed in the sun, but Kylis saw that they had healed cleanly. She put her arm around Jason's waist to support him. "Come on. I found a place to sleep." They were both sticky with sweat and the heat.

"Okay." They crossed the barren mud where all the vegetation had been stripped away so the machines could pass. Before they turned off the path they drew rations from the mechanical dispenser near the prisoners' quarters. The tasteless bars dropped through a slot, two each. There were times in Kylis' life when she had not eaten well, but she had seldom eaten anything as boring as prison rations. Jason put one of his bars into his belt pouch.

"When are you going to give that up?"

Jason nibbled a corner of his second ration bar. "I'm not." His grin made the statement almost a joke. He saved part of his food against what Kylis thought ludicrous plans of escape. When he had saved enough supplies, he was going to hike out through the marsh.

"You don't have to save anything today." She slipped her tag back into the slot and kept reinserting it until the extra points were used and a small pile of ration bars lay in the hopper.

"They forgot to void my card for the time I was in the deprivation box," Kylis said. In sensory deprivation, one of the prison's punishments for mistakes, she had been fed intravenously. She gave Jason the extra food. He thanked her and put it in his belt pouch. Together they crossed the bare clay and entered the forest.

Jason had been at Screwtop only three sets. He was losing weight quickly here, for he was a

big-boned man with little fat to burn. Kylis hoped his family would discover where he was and ransom him soon. And she hoped they would find him before he tried to run away, though she had stopped trying to argue him out of the dream. The marsh was impassable except by hovercraft. There were no solid paths through it, and people claimed it held undiscovered animals that would crush a boat or raft. Kylis neither believed nor disbelieved in the animals; she was certain only that a few prisoners had tried to escape during her time at Screwtop, and the guards had not even bothered to look for them. Redsun was not a place where the authorities allowed escape toward freedom, only toward death. The naked volcanoes cut off escape to the north and east with their barren lava escarpments and billowing clouds of poison gas; the marsh barred west and south. Screwtop was an economical prison, requiring fences only to protect the guards' quarters and the power domes, not to enclose the captives. And even if Jason could escape alive, he could never get off Redsun. He did not have Kylis' experience at traveling undetected.

The fern forest's shadows closed in around them, and they walked between the towering blackish-red stalks and lacy fronds. The foliage was heavy with huge droplets formed slowly by the misty rain. Kylis brushed past a leaf and the water cascaded down her side, making a faint track in the ashes and mud on her skin. She had washed herself when she got off duty, but staying clean was impossible at Screwtop.

They reached the sleeping place she had discovered. Several clumps of ferns had grown together and died, the stems falling over to make a conical shelter. Kylis pulled aside a handful of withered fronds and showed Jason in. Outside it looked like nothing but a pile of dead plants.

"It isn't even damp," he said, surprised. "And it's almost cool in here." He sat down on the carpet of dead moss and ferns and leaned back smiling. "I don't see how you found it. I never would have looked in here."

Kylis sat beside him. A few hours ago she had slept the soundest sleep she had had in Screwtop. The shade alleviated the heat, and the fronds kept the misty rain from drifting inside and collecting. Best of all, it was quiet.

"I thought you and Gryf would like it."

"Have you seen him?"

"Only across the compound. He looked all right."

Jason said aloud what Kylis feared. "The Lizard must have had a reason for letting him take my shift. To make it harder on him." He too was worried, and Kylis could see he felt guilty. "I shouldn't have let him do it," he said.

"Have you ever tried to stop him from doing something he thinks he should?"

Jason smiled. "No. I don't think I want to." He let himself sink further down in the moss. "Gods," he said, drawing out the word. "It's good to see you."

"It's been lonely," Kylis said, with the quiet sort of wonder she felt every time she realized that she did care enough to miss someone. Loneliness was more painful now, but she was not lonely all the time. She did not know how to feel about her newly discovered pleasure in the company of Gryf and Jason. Sometimes it frightened her. They had breached her defenses of solitude and suspicion, and at times she felt exposed and vulnerable. She trusted them, but there were even more betrayers at Screwtop than there were outside.

"I didn't give you those extra rations so you could save them all," she said. "I gave them to you so you'd stop starving yourself for one day at least."

"We could all get out of here," he said, "if we saved just a little more food." Even at midmorning, beneath the ferns, it was almost too dark to make out his features, but Kylis knew he was not joking. She said nothing. Jason thought the prisoners who fled into the marsh were still alive there; he thought he could join them and be helped. Kylis thought they were all dead. Jason believed escape on foot possible, and Kylis believed it death. Jason was an optimist, and Kylis was experienced.

"All right," Jason said. "I'll eat one more. In a while." He lay down flat and put his hands behind his head.

"How was your shift?" Kylis asked.

"Too much fresh meat."

Kylis grinned. Jason was talking like a veteran, hardened and disdainful of new prisoners, the fresh meat, who had not yet learned the ways of Screwtop.

"We only got a couple new people," she said. "You must have had almost the whole bunch."

"It would have been tolerable if three of them hadn't been assigned to the drilling rig."

"Did you lose any?"

"No. By some miracle."

"We were fresh once too. Gryf's the only one I ever saw who didn't start out doing really stupid things."

"Was I really that fresh?"

She did not want to hurt his feelings or even tease him.

"I was, wasn't I?"

"Jason... I'm sorry, but you were the freshest I ever saw. I didn't think you had any chance at all. Only Gryf did."

"I hardly remember anything about the first set, except how much time he spent helping me."

"I know," Kylis said. Jason had needed a great deal of help. Kylis had forgiven him for being the cause of her first real taste of loneliness, but she could not quite forget it.

"Gods-- this last set," Jason said. "I didn't know how bad it was alone." Then he smiled. "I used to think I was a solitary person." Where Kylis was contemptuous of her discovered weaknesses, Jason was amused at and interested in his. "What did you do before Gryf came?"

"Before Gryf came, I didn't know how bad it was alone, either," she said rather roughly.

"You'd better get some sleep."

He smiled. "You're right. Good morning." He fell asleep instantly.

Relaxed, he looked tired. His hair had grown long enough to tie back, but it had escaped from its knot and curled in tangled, dirty tendrils around his face. Jason hated being dirty, but working with the drill left little energy for extras, like bathing. He would never really adjust to Screwtop as Gryf and Kylis had. His first day here, Gryf had kept him from being killed or crippled at least twice. Kylis had been working on the same shift but a different crew, driving one of the bulldozers and clearing another section of forest. The drill could not be set up among the giant ferns, because the ground itself would not stand much stress. Beneath a layer of humus was clay, so wet that in response to pressure it turned semi-liquid, almost like quicksand. The crews had to strip off the vegetation and the layers of clay and volcanic ash until bedrock lay exposed. Kylis drove the 'dozer back and forth, cutting through ferns in a much wider path than the power plants themselves would have required. She had to make room for the excavated earth, which was piled well back from the Pit's edges. Even so the slopes sometimes collapsed in mudslides.

At the end of the day of Jason's arrival, the siren went off and Kylis drove the 'dozer to the old end of the Pit and into the recharging stall. Gryf was waiting for her, and a big fair man was with him, sitting slumped on the ground with his head between his knees and his hands limp on the ground. Kylis hardly noticed him. She took Gryf's hand, to walk with him back to the shelters, but he quietly stopped her and helped the other man to his feet. The new prisoner's expression was blank with exhaustion; in the dawn light he looked deathly pale. Hardly anyone on Redsun was as fair as he, even in the north. Kylis supposed he was from off-world, but he did not have the shoulder tattoo that would have made her trust him instantly. But Gryf was half-carrying the big clumsy man, so she supported him on the other side. Together she and Gryf got him to their shelter. He neither ate nor drank nor even spoke, but collapsed on the hard lumpy platform and fell asleep. Gryf watched him with a troubled expression.

"Who is that?" Kylis did not bother to hide the note of contempt in her voice.

Gryf told her the man's name, which was long and complicated and contained a lot of double vowels. She never remembered it all, even now. "He says to call him Jason."

"Did you know him before?" She was willing to help Gryf save an old friend, though she did not quite see how they would do it. In one day he had spent himself completely.

"No," Gryf said. "But I read his work. I never thought I'd get to meet him."

The undisguised awe in Gryf's voice hurt Kylis, not so much because she was jealous as because it

reminded her how limited her own skills were. The admiration in the faces of drunks and children in spaceport bazaars, which Kylis had experienced, was nothing compared to Gryf's feeling for the accomplishments of this man.

"Is he in here for writing a book?"

"No, thank gods-- they don't know who he is. They think he's a transient. He travels under his personal name instead of his family name. They are making him work for his passage home."

"How long?"

"Six sets."

"Oh, Gryf."

"He must live and be released."

"If he's important, why hasn't anybody ransomed him?"

"His family doesn't know where he is. They would have to be contacted in secret. If the government finds out who he is, they will never let him go. His books are smuggled in."

Kylis shook her head.

"He affected my life, Kylis. He helped me understand the idea of freedom. And personal responsibility. The things you have known all your life from your own experience."

"You mean you wouldn't be here except for him."

"I never thought of it that way, but you are right."

"Look at him, Gryf. This place will grind him up."

Gryf stared somberly at Jason, who slept so heavily he hardly seemed to breathe. "He should not be here. He's a person who should not be hurt."

"We should?"

"He's different."

Kylis did not say Jason would be hurt at Screwtop. Gryf knew that well enough.

Jason had been hurt, and he had changed. What Gryf had responded to in his work was a pure idealism and innocence that could not exist in captivity. Kylis had been afraid Jason would fight the prison by arming himself with its qualities; she was afraid of what that would do to Gryf. But Jason had survived by growing more mature, by retaining his humor, not by becoming brutal. Kylis had never read a word he had written, but the longer she knew him, the more she liked and admired him.

Now she left him sleeping among the ferns. She had slept as much as she wanted to for the moment. She knew from experience that she had to time her sleeping carefully on the day off. In the timeless environment of space, where she had spent most of her life, Kylis' natural circadian rhythm was about twenty-three hours. A standard day of twenty-four did not bother her, but Redsun's twenty-seven hour rotation made her uncomfortable. She could not afford to sleep too much or too little and return to work exhausted and inattentive. At Screwtop inattention was worth punishment at best, and at worst, death.

She was no longer tired, but she was hungry for anything besides the tasteless prison rations. The vegetation on Redsun, afflicted with a low mutation rate, had not evolved very far. The plants were not yet complex enough to produce fruiting bodies. Some of the stalks and roots, though, were edible.

On Redsun, there were no flowers.

Kylis headed deeper into the shadows of the rain forest. Away from the clearings people had made, the primitive plants reached great heights. Kylis wandered among them, her feet sinking into the soft moist humus. Her footprints remained distinct. She turned and looked back. Only a few paces behind her, seeping water had already formed small pools in the deeper marks of her bootheels.

She wished she and Gryf and Jason had been on the same shift. As it was, half of their precious free time would be spent sleeping and readjusting their time schedules. When Gryf finally got off, they would have less than one day together, even before he rested. Sometimes Kylis felt that the single free day in every forty was more a punishment than if the prisoners had been forced to work their sentences straight through. The brief respite allowed them to remember just how much they hated Screwtop, and just how impossible it was to escape.

Since she could not be with both her friends, she preferred complete solitude. For Kylis it was almost instinctive to make certain no one could follow her. Unfolding the cuffs of her boots, she protected her

legs to halfway up her thighs. She did not seal the boots to her shorts because of the heat.

The floor of the forest dipped and rose gently, forming wide hollows where the rain collected. Kylis stepped into one of the huge shallow pools and waded across it, walking slowly, feeling ahead with her toe before she put her foot down firmly. The mist and shadows, the reddish sunlight, and the glassy surface created illusions that concealed occasional deep pits. Where the water lay still and calm, microscopic parasites crawled out of the earth and swarmed. They normally reproduced inside small fishes and primitive amphibians, but they were not particular about their host. They would invade a human body through a cut or abrasion, causing agonizing muscle lesions. Sometimes they traveled slowly to the brain. The forest was no place to fall into a water hole.

Avoiding one deep spot, Kylis reached the far bank and stepped out onto a slick outcropping of rock where her footprints would not show. Where the stone ended and she reentered the frond forest, the ground was higher and less sodden, although the misty rain still fell continuously.

The ferns thinned, the ground rose steeply, and Kylis began to climb. At the top of the hill the air stirred, and the vegetation was not so thick. Kylis found some edible shoots, picked them, and peeled them carefully. The pulp was spicy and crunchy. The juice, pungent and sour, trickled down her throat. She picked a few more stalks and tied the small bundle to her belt. Those that were sporing she was careful not to disturb. Edible plants no longer grew near camp; in fact, nothing edible grew close enough to Screwtop to reach on any but the free day.

Redsun traveled upright in its circular orbit; it had no seasons. The plants had no sun-determined clock by which to synchronize their reproduction, so a few branches of any one plant or a few plants of any one species would spore while the rest remained asexual. A few days later a different random set would begin. It was not a very efficient method of spreading traits through the gene pool, but it had sufficed until people came along and destroyed fertile plants as well as spored-out ones. Kylis, who had noticed in her wanderings that evolution ceased at the point when human beings arrived and began to make their changes, tried not to cause that kind of damage.

A flash of white, a movement, caught the edge of her vision. She froze, wishing the hallucinations away but certain they had come back. White was not a natural color in the frond forest, not even the muddy pink that passed for white under Redsun's enormous star. But no strange fantasy creatures paraded around her; she heard no furious imaginary sounds. Her feet remained firmly on the ground, the warm fine rain hung around her, the ferns drooped with their burden of droplets. Slowly Kylis turned until she faced the direction of the motion. She was not alone.

She moved quietly forward until she could look through the black foliage. What she had seen was the uniform of Screwtop, white boots, white shorts, white shirt for anyone with a reason to wear it. One of the other prisoners sat on a rock, looking out across the forest, toward the swamp. Tears rolled slowly down her face, though she made no sound. Miria.

Feeling only a little guilty about invading her privacy, Kylis watched her, as she had been watching her for some time. Kylis thought Miria was a survivor, someone who would leave Screwtop without being broken. She kept to herself; she had no partners. Kylis had admired her tremendous capacity for work. She was taller than Kylis, bigger, potentially stronger, but clearly unaccustomed to great physical labor. For a while she had worn her shirt tied up under her breasts, but like most others she had discarded it because of the heat.

Miria survived in the camp without using other people or allowing herself to be used. Except when given a direct order, she acted as if the guards simply did not exist, in effect defying them without giving them a reasonable excuse to punish her. They did not always wait for reasonable excuses. Miria received somewhat more than her share of pain, but her dignity remained intact.

Kylis retreated a couple of steps, then came noisily out of the forest, giving Miria a few seconds to wipe away her tears if she wanted to. But when Kylis stopped, pretending to be surprised at finding another person so near, Miria simply turned toward her.

"Hello, Kylis."

Kylis went closer. "Is anything wrong?" That was such a silly question that she added, "I mean, is there anything I can do?"

Miria's smile erased the lines of tension in her forehead and revealed laugh lines Kylis had never noticed before. "No," Miria said. "Nothing anyone can do. But thank you."

"I guess I'd better go."

"Please don't," Miria said quickly. "I'm so tired of being alone--" She cut herself off and turned away, as if she were sorry to have revealed so much of herself. Kylis knew how she felt. She sat down nearby.

Miria looked out again over the forest. The fronds were a soft reddish black. The marsh trees were harsher, darker, interspersed with gray patches of water. Beyond the marsh, over the horizon, lay an ocean that covered all of Redsun except the large inhabited North Continent and the tiny South Continent where the prison camp lay.

Kylis could see the ugly scar of the pits where the crews were still drilling, but Miria had her back half turned and she gazed only at unspoiled forest.

"It could all be so beautiful," Miria said.

"Do you really think so?" Kylis thought it ugly-- the black foliage, the dim light, the day too long, the heat, no animals except insects that did not swim or crawl. Redsun was the most nearly intolerable planet she had ever been on.

"Yes. Don't you?"

"No. I don't see any way I ever could."

"It's sometimes hard, I know," Miria said. "Sometimes, when I'm tiredest, I even feel the same. But the world's so rich and so strange-- don't you see the challenge?"

"I only want to leave it," Kylis said.

Miria looked at her for a moment, then nodded. "You're not from Redsun, are you?"

Kylis shook her head.

"No, there's no reason for you to have the same feelings as someone born here."

This was a side of Miria that Kylis had never seen, one of quiet but intense dedication to a world whose rulers had imprisoned her. Despite her liking for Miria, Kylis was confused.

"How can you feel that way when they've sent you here? I hate them, I hate this place--"

"Were you wrongly arrested?" Miria asked with sympathy.

"They could have just deported me. That's what usually happens."

"Sometimes injustice is done," Miria said sadly. "I know that. I wish it wouldn't happen. But I deserve to be here, and I know that too. When my sentence is completed, I'll be forgiven."

More than once Kylis had thought of staying on some world and trying to live the way other people did, even of accepting punishment, if necessary, but what had always stopped her was the doubt that forgiveness was often, or ever, fully given. Redsun seemed an unlikely place to find amnesty.

"What did you do?"

Kylis felt Miria tense and wished she had not asked. Not asking questions about the past was one of the few tacit rules among the prisoners.

"I'm sorry... it's not that I wouldn't tell you, but I just cannot talk about it."

Kylis sat in silence for a few minutes, scuffing the toe of her boot along the rock like an anxious child and rubbing the silver tattoo on the point of her left shoulder. The pigment caused irritation and slight scarring. The intricate design had not hurt for a long time, nor even itched, but she could feel the delicate lines. Rubbing them was a habit. Even though the tattoo represented a life to which she would probably never return, it was soothing.

"What's that?" Miria asked. Abruptly she grimaced. "I'm sorry, I'm doing just what I asked you not to do."

"It doesn't matter," Kylis said. "I don't mind. It's a spaceport rat tattoo. You get it when the other rats accept you." Despite everything, she was proud of the mark.

"What's a spaceport rat?"

That Miria was unfamiliar with the rats did not surprise Kylis. Few Redsun people had heard of them. On almost every other world Kylis ever visited, the rats were, if not exactly esteemed, at least admired. Some places she had been actively worshipped. Even where she was officially unwelcome, the popular regard was high enough to prevent the kind of entrapment Redsun had started.

"I used to be one. It's what everybody calls people who sneak on board starships and live in them and in space-ports. We travel all over."

"That sounds... interesting," Miria said. "But didn't it bother you to steal like that?"

A year before, Kylis would have laughed at the question, even knowing, as she did, that Miria was quite sincere. But recently Kylis had begun to wonder: Might something be more important than outwitting spaceport security guards? While she was wondering she came to Redsun, so she never had a chance to find out.

"I started when I was ten," Kylis said to Miria. "So I didn't think of it like that."

"You sneaked onto a starship when you were only ten?"

"Yes."

"All by yourself?"

"Until the others start to recognize you, no one will help you much. It's possible. And I thought it was my only chance to get away from where I was."

"You must have been in a terrible place."

"It's hard to remember if it was really as bad as I think. I can remember my parents, but never smiling, only yelling at each other and hitting me."

Miria shook her head. "That's terrible, to be driven away by your own people-- to have nowhere to grow up... Did you ever go back?"

"I don't think so."

"What?" "I can't remember much about where I was born. I always thought I'd recognize the spaceport, but there might have been more than one, so maybe I have been back and maybe I haven't. The thing is, I can't remember what they called the planet. Maybe I never knew."

"I cannot imagine it-- not to know who you are or where you come from or even who your parents were."

"I know *that*," Kylis said.

"You could find out about the world. Fingerprints or ship records or regression--"

"I guess I could. If I ever wanted to. Sometime I might even do it, if I ever get out of here."

"I'm sorry we stopped you. Really. It's just that we feel that everyone who can should contribute a fair share."

Kylis still found it hard to believe that after being sent to Screwtop Miria would include herself in Redsun's collective conscience, but she had said "we." Kylis only thought of authorities as "they."

She shrugged. "Spaceport rats know they can get caught. It doesn't happen too often and usually you hear that you should avoid the place."

"I wish you had."

"We take the chance." She touched the silver tattoo again. "You don't get one of these until you've proved you can be trusted. So when places use informers against us, we usually know who they are."

"But on Redsun you were betrayed?"

"I never expected them to use a child," Kylis said bitterly.

"A child!"

"This little kid sneaked on my ship. He did a decent job of it, and he reminded me of me. He was only ten or eleven, and he was all beat up. I guess we aren't so suspicious of kids because most of us started at the same age." Kylis glanced at Miria and saw that she was staring at her, horrified.

"They used a child? And injured him, just to catch you?"

"Does that really surprise you?"

"Yes," Miria said.

"Miria, half the people who were killed during the last set weren't more than five or six years older than the boy who turned me in. Most of the people being sent here now are that age. What could they possibly have done terrible enough to get them sent here?"

"I don't know," Miria said softly without looking up. "We need the power generators. Someone has to drill the steam wells. Some of us will die in the work. But you're right about the young people. I've been thinking about... other things. I had not noticed." She said that as if she had committed a crime, or more

exactly a sin, by not noticing.

"And the child..." Her voice trailed off and she smiled sadly at Kylis. "How old are you?"

"I don't know. Maybe twenty."

Miria raised one eyebrow. "Twenty? Older in experience, but not that old in time. You should not be here."

"But I am. I'll survive it."

"I think you will. And what then?"

"Gryf and Jason and I have plans."

"On Redsun?"

"Gods, no."

"Kylis," Miria said carefully, "you do not know much about tetraparentals, do you?"

"How much do I need to know?"

"I was born here. I used to... to work for them. Their whole purpose is their intelligence. Normal people like you and me bore them. They cannot tolerate us for long."

"Miria, stop it!"

"Your friend will only cause you pain. Give him up. Put him away from you. Urge him to go home."

"No! He knows I'm an ordinary person. We know what we're going to do."

"It makes no difference," Miria said with abrupt coldness. "He will not be allowed to leave Redsun."

Kylis felt the blood drain from her face. No one had ever said that so directly and brutally before.

"They can't keep him. How long will they make him stay here before they realize they can't break him?"

"He is important. He owes Redsun his existence."

"But he's a person with his own dreams. They can't make him a slave!"

"His research team is worthless without him."

"I don't care," Kylis said.

"You--" Miria cut herself off. Her voice became much gentler. "They will try to persuade him to follow their plans. He may decide to do as they ask."

"I wouldn't feel any obligation to the people who run things on Redsun even if I lived here. Why should he be loyal to them? Why should you? What did they ever do but send you here? What will they let you do when you get out? Anything decent or just more dirty, murderous jobs like this one?" She realized she was shouting, and Miria looked stunned.

"I don't know," Miria said. "I don't know, Kylis. Please stop saying such dangerous things." She was terrified and shaken, much more upset than when she had been crying.

Kylis moved nearer and took her hand. "I'm sorry, Miria, I didn't mean to hurt you or say anything that could get you in trouble." She paused, wondering how far Miria's fear of Redsun's government might take her from her loyalty.

"Miria," she said on impulse, "have you ever thought of partnering with anybody?"

Miria hesitated so long that Kylis thought she would not answer. Kylis wondered if she had intruded on Miria's past again.

"No," Miria finally said. "Never."

"Would you?"

"Think about it? Or do it?"

"Both. Partner with me and Gryf and Jason. Not just here, but when we get out."

"No," Miria said. "No, I couldn't." She sounded frightened again.

"Because we want to leave Redsun?"

"Other reasons."

"Would you just think about it?"

Miria shook her head.

"I know you don't usually live in groups on Redsun," Kylis said. "But where I was born, a lot of people did, even though my parents were alone. I remember, before I ran away, my friends were never afraid to go home like I was. Jason spent all his life in a group family, and he says it's a lot easier to get along." She was skipping over her own occasional doubts that any world could be as pleasant as the one Jason

described. Whatever it was like, it had to be better than her own former existence of constant hiding and constant uncertainty; it had to be better than what Gryf told her of Redsun, with its emphasis on loyalty to the government at the expense of any family structure too big to move instantly at the whim or order of the rulers.

Miria did not respond.

"Anyway, three people aren't enough-- we thought we'd find others after we got out. But I think-- "

"Gryf doesn't-- " Miria interrupted Kylis, then stopped herself and started over. "They don't know you were going to ask me?"

"Not exactly, but they both know you," Kylis said defensively. She thought Miria might be afraid Kylis' partners would refuse her. Kylis knew they would not but could not put how she knew into proper words.

The rain had blurred away the marks of tears on Miria's cheeks, and now she smiled and squeezed Kylis' hand. "Thank you, Kylis," she said. "I wish I could accept. I can't, but not for the reasons you think. You'll find someone better." She started up, but Kylis stopped her.

"No, you stay here. This is your place." Kylis stood. "If you change your mind, just say. All right?"

"I won't change my mind."

"I wish you wouldn't be so sure." Reluctantly, she started away.

"Kylis?"

"Yes?"

"Please don't tell anyone you asked me this."

"Not even Gryf and Jason?"

"No one. Please."

"All right," Kylis said unwillingly.

Kylis left Miria on the stony hillside. She glanced back once before entering the forest. Miria was sitting on the stone again, hunched forward, her forearms on her knees. Now she was looking down at the huge slash of clay and trash heaps, the complicated delicate cooling towers that condensed the generators' steam, the high impervious antenna beaming power north toward the cities.

When Kylis reached the sleeping place, the sun was high. Beneath the dead fern trees it was still almost cool. She crept in quietly and sat down near Jason without waking him. He lay sprawled in dry moss, breathing deeply, solid and real. As if he could feel her watching him, he half opened his eyes.

Kylis lay down and drew her hand up his side, feeling bones that had become more prominent, dry and flaking sunburned skin, and the scabs of cuts and scratches. He was bruised as though the guards had beaten him, perhaps because of his occasional amusement at things so odd that his reaction seemed insolence. But for now, she would not notice his new scars, and he would not notice hers.

"Are you awake?"

He laughed softly. "I think so."

"Do you want to go back to sleep?"

He reached out and touched her face. "I'm not that tired."

Kylis smiled and leaned over to kiss him. The hairs of his short beard were soft and stiff against her lips and tongue. For a while she and Jason could ignore the heat.

Lying beside Jason, not quite touching because the afternoon was growing hot, Kylis only dozed while Jason again slept soundly. She sat up and pulled on her shorts and boots, brushed a lock of Jason's sun-streaked hair from his damp forehead, and slipped outside. A couple of hours of Gryf's work shift remained, so Kylis headed toward the guards' enclosure and the hovercraft dock.

Beyond the drill-pit clearing, the forest extended for a short distance westward. The ground continued to fall, growing wetter and wetter, changing perceptibly into marsh. The enclosure, a hemispherical electrified fence completely covering the guards' residence domes, was built at the juncture of relatively solid land and shallow, standing water. It protected the hovercraft ramp, and it was invulnerable. She had tried to get through it. She had even tried to dig beneath it. Digging under a fence or cutting through one was something no spaceport rat would do, short of desperation. After her first few days at Screwtop, Kylis had been desperate. She had not believed she could survive her sentence in the prison. So, late that

night, she crept over to the electrified fence and began to dig. At dawn she had not reached the bottom of the fence supports, and the ground was wet enough to start carrying electricity to her in small warning tingles.

Her shift would begin soon; guards would be coming in and going out, and she would be caught if she did not stop. She planned to cover over the hole she had dug and hope it was not discovered.

She was lying flat on the ground, digging a narrow deep hole with a flat rock and both hands, smeared all over with the red clay, her fingernails ripped past the quick. She reached down for one last handful of dirt, and grabbed a trap wire.

The current swept through her, contracting every muscle in her body. It lasted only an instant. She lay quivering, almost insensible, conscious enough to be glad the wire had been set to stun, not kill. She tried to get up and run, but she could not move properly. She began to shudder again. Her muscles were overstimulated, incapable of distinguishing a real signal. She ached all over, so badly that she could not even guess if the sudden clench of muscles had broken any bones.

A light shone toward her. She heard footsteps as the guard approached to investigate the alarm the trap wire had set off. The sound thundered through her ears, as though the electric current had heightened all her senses, toward pain. The footsteps stopped; the light beam blinded her, then left her face. Her dazzled vision blurred the figure standing over her, but she knew it was the Lizard. It occurred to her, in a vague, slow-motion thought, that she did not know his real name. (She learned later that no one else did either.) He dragged Kylis to her feet and held her upright, glaring at her, his face taut with anger and his eyes narrow.

"Now you know we're not as easy to cheat as starship owners," he said. His voice was low and raspy, softly hoarse. He let her go and she collapsed again. "You're on probation. Don't make any more mistakes. And don't be late for duty."

The other guards followed him away. They did not even bother to fill in the hole she had dug.

Kylis had staggered through that workday; she survived it, and the next, and the next, until she knew that the work itself would not kill her. She did not try to dig beneath the fence again, but she still watched the hovercraft when it arrived.

By the time she reached her place of concealment on the bank above the fence, the hovercraft had already climbed the ramp and settled. The gate was locked behind it. Kylis watched the new prisoners being unloaded. The cargo bay door swung open. The people staggered out on deck and down the gangway, disoriented by the long journey in heat and darkness. One of the prisoners stumbled and fell to his knees, retching.

Kylis remembered how she had felt after so many hours in the pitch-dark hold. Even talking was impossible, for the engines were on the other side of the hold's interior bulkhead and the fans were immediately below. She was too keyed up to go into a trance, and a trance would be dangerous while she was crowded in with so many people.

The noise was what Kylis remembered most about coming to Screwtop-- incessant, penetrating noise, the high whine of the engines and the roar of the fans. She had been half deaf for days afterward. The compartment was small. Despite the heat the prisoners could not avoid sitting and leaning against each other, and as soon as the engines started the temperature began to rise. By the time the hovercraft reached the prison, the hold was thick with the stench of human misery. Kylis hardly noticed when the craft's sickening swaying ceased. When the hatch opened and red light spilled in, faintly dissipating the blackness, Kylis looked up with all the others, and, like all the others, blinked like a frightened animal.

The guards had no sympathy for cramped muscles or nausea. Their shouted commands faded like faraway echoes through Kylis' abused hearing. She pushed herself up, using the wall as support. Her legs and feet were asleep. They began regaining sensation, and she felt as if she were walking on tiny knives. She hobbled out, but at the bottom of the gangway she, too, had stumbled. A guard's curse and the prod of his club brought her to her feet in a fury, fists clenched, but she quelled her violent temper instantly. The guard watched with a smile, waiting. But Kylis had been to Earth, where one of the few animals left outside the game preserves and zoos was the possum. She had learned its lesson well.

Now she crouched on the bank and watched the new prisoners realize, as she had, that the end of the

trip did not end the terrible heat. Screwtop was almost on the equator of Redsun, and the heat and humidity never lessened. Even the rain was lukewarm.

The guards prodded the captives into a compact group and turned hoses on them, spraying off filth and sweat. Afterward the new people plodded through the mud to the processing dome. Kylis watched each one pass through the doorway. She had never defined what she looked for when she watched the new arrivals, but whatever it was, she did not find it today. Even more of them were terribly young, and they all had the look of hopelessness that would make them nothing more than fresh meat, new bodies for the work to use up. Screwtop would grind them down and throw them away. They would die of disease or exhaustion or carelessness. Kylis did not see in one of them the spark of defiance that might get them through their sentences intact in body or spirit. But sometimes the spark only came out later, exposed by the real adversity of the work.

The hatch swung shut and the hovercraft's engines roared to full power. No one at all had been taken on board for release on North Continent.

The boat quivered on its skirts and floated back down the ramp, through the entrance, onto the glassy gray surface of the water. The gate sparked shut. Kylis was vaguely disappointed, for the landing was no different from any she had seen since she was brought to Screwtop herself. There was no way to get on board the boat. The familiar admission still annoyed her. For a spaceport rat, admitting defeat to the safeguards of an earthbound vehicle was humiliating. She could not even think of a way to get herself out of Screwtop, much less herself and Gryf and Jason. She was afraid that if she did not find some chance of escape, Jason might really try to flee through the swamp.

She ran her fingers through her short black hair and shook her head, flinging out the misty rain that gathered in huge drops and slipped down her face and neck and back. The heat and the rain-- she hated both.

In an hour or two the evening rain would fall in solid sheets, washing the mist away. But an hour after that the faint infuriating droplets would begin again. They seemed never to fall, but to hang in the air and collect on skin, on hair, beneath trees, inside shelters.

Kylis grabbed an overhanging plant and stripped off a few of its red-black fronds, flinging them to the ground in anger.

She stood up, but suddenly crouched down in hiding again. Below, Miria walked up to the fence, placed her hand against the palm lock, and waited, glancing over her shoulder as if making certain she was alone. As the gate swung open and Miria, a prisoner, walked alone and free into the guards' enclosure, Kylis felt her knees grow weak. Miria stopped at a dome, and the door opened for her. Kylis thought she could see the Lizard in the dimness beyond.

Almost the only thing this could mean was that Miria was a spy. Kylis began to tremble in fear and anger, fear of what Miria could tell the Lizard that would help him increase the pressure on Gryf, anger at herself for trusting Miria. She had made another mistake in judgment like the one that had imprisoned her, and this time the consequences could be much worse.

She sat in the mud and the rain trying to think, until she realized that Gryf would be off work in only a few minutes. She did not even have time to wake Jason.

When Kylis turned her back on the guards' domes, Miria had not yet come out.

Kylis was a few minutes late reaching the drill pit. The third shift had already ended; all the prisoners were out and drifting away. Gryf was nowhere around, and he was nothing if not conspicuous. She began to worry, because Gryf was frequently first out, never last-- he did not seem to tire. Certainly he would wait for her.

She stood indecisively, worried. Maybe he wanted something in the shelter, she thought.

She did not believe that for a moment. She glanced back toward the bottom of the Pit. Everything happened at once. She forgot about Miria, Lizard, the prison. She cried out for Jason, knowing her voice would not carry that far. She ran downhill, fighting the clay that sucked at her feet. Two people she knew slightly trudged up the hill-- Troi, skeletal, sharp-featured, sardonic, and Chuzo, squarely built and withdrawn. Both were very young; both were aging quickly here.

They supported Gryf between them.

Ash and grease disguised the pattern of his paisley skin. Kylis knew he was alive only because no one at Screwtop would spend any energy on someone who was dead. When she was closer, she could see the ends of deep slashes made by the whip where it had curled around his body. Blood had dried in narrow streaks on his sides. His wrists were abraded where he had been tied for the punishment.

"Oh, Gryf-- "

Hearing her, Gryf raised his head. She felt great relief.

Troi and Chuzo stopped when Kylis reached them.

"The Lizard ordered it himself," Troi said bitterly. Screwtop held few amenities, but people were seldom flogged on the last day of the shift.

"Why?"

"I don't know. I was too far away. Anything. Nothing. What reason do they ever have?"

Kylis quieted her anger for the moment. She took over for Chuzo. "Thank you," she said, quite formally.

Troi stayed where he was. "Get him to the top, anyway," he said in his gruff manner.

"Gryf? Can you make it?"

He tightened his hand on her shoulder. They started up the steep path. When they finally reached the top, the immense sun had set. The sky was pink and scarlet in the west, and the volcanoes eastward glowed blood red.

"Thanks," Kylis said again. Chuzo hesitated, but Troi nodded and left. After a moment Chuzo followed him.

Gryf leaned heavily on her, but she could support him. She tried to turn toward the shelters and their meager stock of medical supplies, but he resisted weakly and guided her toward the waterfall. If he wanted to go there first, he must think his wounds had been contaminated.

"Gods," Kylis whispered. Clumsily, they hurried. She wished Jason had heard her, for with him they could have gone faster. It was her fault he was not there. She could not hold

Gryf up alone without hurting his back.

Gryf managed a smile, just perceptible, telling her, I hurt but I am strong.

Yes, Kylis thought, stronger than Jason, stronger than me. We'll survive. They continued.

"Kylis! Gryf!"

Gryf stopped. Kylis let him, with relief. Jason splashed toward them.

Gryf's knees buckled. Kylis strained to keep him out of the mud, away from more parasites. Jason reached them and picked Gryf up.

"Could you hear me?" Kylis asked.

"No," Jason said. "I woke up and came looking. Where are you taking him?"

"To the overflow pipe."

Jason needed no explanation of the dangers of infection. He carried Gryf toward the waterfall, swearing softly.

The cooling towers from the steam wells produced the only safe water the prisoners had for bathing. It spewed from a pipe to a concrete platform and spilled from there to the ground, forming a muddy pool that spread into the forest. The water was too hot for anyone to go directly beneath the cascade. Jason stopped in knee-deep hot water. They were all standing in heavy spray.

Jason held Gryf against his chest while Kylis splashed water on Gryf's back from her cupped hands. She washed him as gently as she could and still be safe. She found no parasites and none of their eggs. The water swept away mud and sweat, turning Jason gold and bright pink and Kylis auburn and Gryf all shades of dark brown and tan.

Kylis cursed the Lizard. He knew he would look bad in the eyes of the tetra committee if Gryf were crushed or bled to death or went home with everything but his brain. But he would look worse if he could not force Gryf to go home at all.

Gryf's eyelids flickered. His eyes were bright blue, flecked irregularly with black.

"How do you feel?"

He smiled, but he had been hurt-- she could see the memory of pain. They had touched his spirit. He

looked away from her and made Jason let him turn. He staggered. His knees would not support him, which seemed to surprise him. Jason held him up, and Gryf took the last thin flake of antiseptic soap from Kylis' hand.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

Gryf turned her around. For a moment his touch was painful, then she felt the sharp sting of soap on raw flesh. Gryf showed her his hand, which glittered with a mass of tiny, fragile eggs like mica flakes. Gryf used up her soap scrubbing her side, and Jason got out what soap he had left.

"This cut's pretty deep but it's clean now. You must have fallen and smashed a nest."

"I don't remember--" She had a kinesthetic memory, from running down into the Pit. "Yes, I do..." It hit her then, a quick shock of the fear of what might have been-- agony, paralysis, senility-- if Gryf had not noticed, if the eggs had healed beneath her skin and hatched. Kylis shuddered.

They returned to the compound, supporting Gryf between them. The wall-less, stilt-legged shelters were almost deserted.

Jason climbed the slanted ladder to their shelter backward, leaning against it for stability while he helped Gryf. The steps were slick with yellow lichen. Kylis chinned herself onto the platform. In their floor locker she had to paw through little stacks of Jason's crumbling ration bars before she found their mold poultice and the web box. She had been very hungry, but she had never eaten any of her friend's hoarded food. She would not have had such restraint a year ago.

Jason put Gryf down between the makeshift partitions that marked their section of the shelter. Gryf was pale beneath the pattern of tan and pigment. Kylis almost wished Troi and Chuzo had left him in the Pit. The Lizard might then have been forced to put him in the hospital.

She wondered if Troi or Chuzo might be helping the Lizard make Screwtop as hard on Gryf as they could. She did not want to believe that, but she did not want to believe Miria was an informer, either.

Their spider-- Kylis thought of it as a spider, though it was a Redsun-evolved creature-- skittered up the corner post to a new web. Kylis often imagined the little brown-mottled creature hanging above them on her tiny fringed feet, hating them. Yet she was free to crawl down the stilt and into the jungle, or to spin a glider and float away, and she never did. In dreams, Kylis envied her; awake, she named her Stupid. Kylis hoped the web box held enough silk to soothe Gryf's back.

"Hey," Jason said, "this stuff is ready."

"Okay." Kylis took the bowl of greenish mold paste. "Gryf?"

He glanced up. His eyelashes and eyebrows were black and blond, narrowly striped.

"Hang on, it might hurt."

He nodded.

Jason held Gryf's hands while Kylis applied first the mold, then delicate strips of spider silk. Gryf did not move. Even now he had enough strength to put aside the pain.

When she was done, Jason stroked Gryf's forehead and gave him water. He did not want to eat, even broth, so they kissed him and sat near him, for his reassurance and their own, until he fell asleep. That did not take long. When he was breathing deeply, Jason got up and went to Kylis, carrying the bowl.

"I want to look at that cut."

"Okay," Kylis said, "but don't use all the paste."

The poultice burned coldly, and Jason's hands were cool on her skin. She sat with her forearms on her drawn-up knees, accepting the pain rather than ignoring it. When he had finished treating her, she took the bowl and daubed the mold on his cuts. She almost told Jason about Miria, but finally decided not to. Kylis had created the problem; she wanted to solve it herself if she could. And, she admitted, she was ashamed of her misjudgment. She could think of no explanation for Miria's actions that would absolve her.

Jason yawned widely.

"Give me your tag and go back to sleep," Kylis said. Since she had been the first to get off work this time, it was her turn to collect their rations. She took Gryf's tag from his belt pouch and jumped from the edge of the platform to the ground.

Kylis approached the ration dispenser cautiously. On Redsun, violent criminals were sent to

rehabilitation centers, not to work camps. Kylis was glad of that, though she did not much like to remember the stories of obedient, blank-eyed people coming out of rehab.

Still, some prisoners were confident or foolish or desperate enough to try to overpower others and steal. At Screwtop it was safest to collect neither obligations nor hatreds. Vengeance was much too simple here. The underground society of spaceport rats had not been free of psychopaths; Kylis knew how to defend herself. Here she had never had to resort to more serious measures. If she did, the drill pit was a quick equalizer between a bully and a smaller person. Mistakes could be planned; machines sometimes malfunctioned.

The duty assignments were posted on the ration dispenser. Kylis read them and was astonished and overjoyed to find herself and her friends all on the same shift, the night shift. She hurried back to tell them the news, but Jason was sound asleep, and she did not have the heart to wake him. Gryf had gone.

Kylis threw the rations in the floor locker and sat on the edge of the platform. A scavenger insect crawled across the lumpy floor of fern stalks. Kylis caught it and let it go near Stupid, barricading it until the spider, stalking, left her new web and seized the insect, paralyzed it, wrapped it in silk to store it, and dragged it away. Kylis wondered if their spider ever slept, or if spiders even needed sleep. Then she stole the web. store it, and dragged it away. Kylis wondered if their spider ever slept, or if spiders even needed sleep. Then she stole the web.

She grew worried. She knew Gryf could take care of himself. He always did. He had probably never really reached his limits, but Gryf might overestimate even his strength and endurance. He had rested barely an hour.

Kylis fidgeted for a little while longer. Finally she slid down into the mud again.

Water seeped quickly into new footprints in the battered earth around the shelters; Gryf had left no trail that she could distinguish from the other marks in the clay. She went into the forest, with some knowledge and some intuition of where he might be. Above her, huge insects flitted past, barely brushing clawed wingtips against the ferns. It was dark, and the star path, streaked across the sky like the half-circular support of a globe, gave a dim yellow light through broken clouds.

Kylis was startled and frightened by a tickling of the short hair at the back of her neck. She flinched and turned. Gryf looked down at her, smiling, amused.

"Kylis, my friend, you really needn't worry about me all the time." She was always surprised, when he spoke, to remember how pleasant and calming his voice was.

His eyes were dilated so the iris was only a narrow circle of light and dark striations.

Every few sets, someone died from sucking slime. It grew in the forest, in small patches like purplejellyfish. It was hallucinogenic, and it was poisonous. Kylis had argued with Gryf about his using it, before her sentence in the sensory deprivation chamber showed her what Screwtop was like for Gryf all the time.

"Gryf-- "

"Don't reproach me!"

"I won't," Kylis said. "Not anymore."

Her response startled him only for a moment; that it startled him at all revealed how completely drained he really was. He nodded and put his arms around her.

"Now you know," he said, with sympathy and understanding. "How long did they make you stay in the box?"

"Eight days. That's what they said, anyway."

He passed his hand across her hair, just touching it. "My poor friend. It seems so much longer."

"It doesn't matter. It's over for me." She almost believed the hallucinations had stopped, but she wondered if she would ever be certain they would never return.

"Do you think the Lizard sentenced you because of me?"

"I don't know. I guess he'd use anything he could if he thought it'd work. Never mind. I'm all right."

"I would have done what they want, but I could not. Can you believe I tried?"

"Do you think I wanted you to?" She touched his face, tracing bone structure with her fingers like someone blind. She could feel the difference between the blond and black hair in his striped eyebrows,

but the texture of his skin was smooth. She drew her fingers from his temples to the corners of his jaw, to the tendons of his neck and the tension-knotted muscles of his shoulders. "No one should make friends here," she said.

He smiled, closing his eyes, understanding her irony. "We would lose our souls if we did not."

He turned away abruptly and sat down on a large rock with his head between his knees, struggling against nausea. The new scars did not seem to hurt him. He breathed deeply for some time, then sat up slowly.

"How is Jason?"

"Fine. Recovered. You didn't have to take his shift. Lizard couldn't let him die like that."

"I think the Lizard collects methods of death."

Kylis remembered Miria with a quick shock of returning fear. "Oh, gods, Gryf, what's the use of fighting them?"

Gryf drew her closer. "The use is that you and Jason will not let them destroy you and I believe I am stronger than those who wish to keep me here, and justified in wishing to make my own mistakes rather than theirs." He held out his hand, pale-swirled in the darkness. It was long and fine. Kylis reached out and rubbed it, his wrist, his tense forearm. Gryf relaxed slightly, but Kylis was still afraid. She had never felt frightened before, not like this. But Miria, uncertainty, seeing Gryf hurt, had all combined to make her doubt the possibility of a future.

Gryf was caught and shaken by another spasm of retching. This time he could not suppress it, and it was more severe because he had not eaten. Kylis stood by, unable to do anything but hold his shoulders and hope he would survive the drug this time, as he had all the times before. The dry vomiting was replaced by a fit of coughing. Sweat dripped from his face and down his sides. When the pitch of his coughing rose and his breath grew more ragged, Kylis realized he was sobbing. On her knees beside him, she tried to soothe him. She did not know if he was crying from the sickness, from some vision she would never see, or from despair. She held him until, gradually, he was able to stop.

Sparkles of starlight passed between the clouds, mottling Gryf with a third color. He lay face down on the smooth stone, hands flat against it, cheek pressed to the rock. Kylis knew how he felt, drained, removed, heavy.

"Kylis... I never slept before like this."

"I won't go far."

She hoped he heard her. She sat cross-legged on the wide rock beside him, watching slow movements of muscle as he breathed. His roan eyelashes were very long and touched with sweat droplets. The deep welts in his back would leave scars. Kylis' back had similar scars, but she felt that the marks she carried were a brand of shame, while Gryf's meant defiance and pride. She reached toward him, but drew back when her hand's vague shadow touched his face.

When she was certain he was sleeping easily, she left him and went to look nearby for patches of the green antibiotic mold. Their supply was exhausted. It was real medicine, not a superstition. Its active factor was synthesized back north and exported.

Being allowed to walk away from Screwtop, however briefly, made remaining almost endurable, but the privilege had a more important purpose. It was a constant reminder of freedom. The short moment of respite only strengthened the need to get out, and, more important, the need never to come back. Redsun knew how to reinforce obedience.

Kylis wandered, never going very far from Gryf, looking for green mold and finding the rarer purple hallucinogenic slime instead. She tried to deny that it tempted her. She could have taken some to Gryf-- she almost did-- but in the end she left it under the rocks where it belonged.

"I want to talk to you."

She spun, startled, recognizing the rough voice, fearing it, concealing her fear badly. She did not answer, only looked toward the Lizard.

"Come sit with me," he said. Starlight glinted on his clean fingernails as he gestured to the other end of an immense uprooted fern tree. It sagged but held when he sat on it.

As always, his black protective boots were pulled up and sealed to his black shorts. He was even

bigger than Jason, taller, heavier, and though he had allowed his body to go slightly to fat, his face had remained narrow and hard. His clean-shaven scalp and face never tanned or burned, but somehow remained pale, in contrast to his deep-set black eyes. He licked his thin lips quickly with the tip of his tongue.

"What do you want?" She did not approach him.

He leaned forward and leaned his forearms on his knees. "I've been watching you."

She had no answer. He watched everyone. Standing there before him, Kylis was uneasy for reasons that somehow had nothing to do with his capacity for brutality. The Lizard never acted this way. He was direct and abrupt.

"I made a decision when sensory deprivation didn't break you," he said. "That was the last test."

The breeze shifted slightly. Kylis smelled a sharp odor as the Lizard lifted a small pipe to his lips and drew on it deeply. He held his breath and offered the pipe to her.

She wanted some. It was good stuff. She and Gryf and Jason had used the last of theirs at the end of the previous set, the night before they went on different shifts. Kylis was surprised that the Lizard used it at all. She would never have expected him to pare off the corners of his aggression out here. She shook her head.

"No?" He shrugged and put the pipe down, letting it waste, burning unattended. "All right."

She let the silence stretch on, hoping he would forget her and whatever he wanted to say, wander off or get hungry or go to sleep.

"You've got a long time left to stay here," he said.

Again, Kylis had no answer.

"I could make it easier for you."

"You could make it easier for most of us."

"That's not my job." He ignored the contradiction.

"What are you trying to say?"

"I've been looking for someone like you for a long time. You're strong, and you're stubborn." He got up and came toward her, hesitated to glance back at his pipe, but left it where it was. He took a deep breath. He was trying so hard to look sincere that Kylis had an almost overwhelming urge to laugh. She did not, but if she had, it would have been equally a laugh of nervous fear. She realized suddenly, with wonder: The Lizard's as scared as I am.

"Open for me, Kylis."

Incredulity was her first reaction. He would not joke, he could not, but he might mock her. Or was he asking her an impossibility, knowing she would refuse, so he could offer to let her alone if Gryf would return to the tetras. She kept her voice very calm.

"I can't do that."

"Don't you think I'm serious?"

"How could you be?"

He forced away his scowl, like an inexperienced mime changing expressions. The muscles of his jaw were set. He moved closer, so she had to look up to see his eyes.

"I am."

"But that's not something you ask for," Kylis said. "That's something a family all wants and decides on." She realized he would not understand what she meant.

"I've decided. There's only me now." His voice was only a bit too loud.

"Aren't you lonely?" She heard her words, not knowing why she had said them. If the Lizard had been hurt, she would revel in his pain. She could not imagine people who would live with him, unless something terrible had changed him.

"I had a kid--" He cut himself off, scowling, angry for revealing so much.

"Ah," she said involuntarily. She had seen his manner of superficial control over badly suppressed violence before. Screwtop gave the Lizard justifiable opportunities to use his rage. Anywhere else it would burst out whenever he felt safe, against anyone who was defenseless and vulnerable. This was the kind of person who was asking her for a child.

"The board had no right to give him to her instead of me."

He would think that, of course. No right to protect the child? She did not say it.

"Well?"

To comply would be easy. She would probably be allowed to live in the comfort and coolness of the domes, and of course she would get good food. She could forget the dangerous machines and the Lizard's whip. She imagined what it would be like to feel a child quickening within her, and she imagined waiting to give birth to a human being, knowing she must hand it over to the Lizard to raise, all alone, with no other model, no other teacher, only this dreadful, crippled person.

"No," she said.

"You could if you wanted to."

So many things she had discovered about herself here had mocked her; now it was a claim she had once made to Gryf: I would do anything to get out of here.

"Leave it at that," she said quietly. "I don't want to." She backed away.

"I thought you were stubborn and strong. Maybe I made a mistake. Maybe you're just stupid, or crazy like the rest of them."

She tried to think of words he would understand, but always came up against the irreconcilable differences between her perception of the Lizard and what he thought of himself. He would not recognize her description.

"Or you want something more from me. What is it?" She started to say there was nothing, but hesitated. "All right," she said, afraid her voice would be too shrill. Somehow it sounded perfectly normal. "Tell Gryf's people to set him free. Get Jason a parole and a ticket off-world." For a moment she almost allowed herself to hope he had believed her offer was sincere. She was a very good liar.

The Lizard's expression changed. "No. I need them around so you'll do what I say."

"I won't."

"Pick something else."

For an instant's flash Kylis remembered being taunted like this before, when she was very small. Anything but that.

Anything but what you really want. She pushed the recollection away.

"There isn't anything else," she said.

"Don't hold out. You can't bribe me to let them go. I'm not a fool."

He needed no officially acceptable reason to hurt her. She knew that. Fear of his kind of power was almost an instinctive reaction for Kylis. But she whispered, "Yes, Lizard, you are," and, half-blind, she turned and fled.

She almost outran him, but he lunged, grabbed her shoulder, pulled her around. "Kylis-- " Standing stiffly, coldly, she looked at his hand. "If that's what you want-- "

Even the Lizard was not that twisted. Slowly, he let his hand fall to his side.

"I could force you," he said.

Her gaze met his and did not waver. "Could you?"

"I could drug you."

"For seven sets?" She realized, with a jog of alienness, that she had unconsciously translated the time from standard months to sets of forty days.

"Long enough to mess up your control. Long enough to make you pregnant."

"You couldn't keep me alive that long, drugged down that far. If the drugs didn't kill it, I would. I wouldn't even need to be conscious. I could abort it."

"I don't think you're that good."

"I am. You can't live like I did and not be that good."

"I can put you in the deprivation box until you swear to-- "

She laughed bitterly. "And expect me to honor that oath?"

"You'd have children with Gryf and Jason."

This was real, much more than a game for the Lizard to play against Gryf. He wanted her compliance desperately. Kylis was certain of that, as certain as she was that he would use his own dreams to help

fulfill his duty to Redsun. Still she could not understand why he felt he had some right to accuse her.

"Not like this," she said. "*With* them-- but not *for* one of them. And they wouldn't make themselves fertile, either, if you were a woman and asked one of them to give you a child."

"I'm quitting. I'd take him out of here. I'd give him a good home. Am I asking that much? I'm offering a lot for a little of your time and one ovulation." His voice held the roughness of rising temper.

"You're asking for a human being."

She waited for some reaction, any reaction, but he just stood there, accepting what she said as a simple statement of fact without emotional meaning or moral resonance.

"I'd kill a child before I'd give it to you," she said. "I'd kill myself." She felt herself trembling, though it did not show in her hands or in her voice. She was trembling because what she had said was true.

He reacted not at all. She turned and ran into the darkness, and this time the Lizard did not follow.

When she was sure she was not being watched, she returned to Gryf's rock in the forest. Gryf still slept. He had not moved from the time he fell asleep, but the gray rock around him gleamed with his sweat. Kylis sat down beside him, drew up her knees and wrapped her arms around them, and put her head down. She had never felt as she felt now-- unclean by implication, ashamed, diminished-- and she could not explain the feeling to herself. She felt a tear slide down her cheek and clenched her teeth in anger. He will not make me cry, she thought. She breathed deeply, slowly, thinking, Control. Slow the heartbeat, turn off the adrenaline, you don't need it now. Relax. Her body, at least, responded. Kylis sat motionless for a long time.

The heavy, moist wind began to blow, bringing low black clouds to cut off the stars. Soon it would be too dark to see.

"Gryf?" Kylis touched his shoulder. He did not move until she shook him gently; then he woke with a start.

"Storm's coming," Kylis said.

In the dimming starlight, a blond lock of Gryf's hair glinted as he rose. Kylis helped him up. Dead ferns rustled at their feet, and the sleeping insects wrapped themselves more closely in their wings.

At the edge of the forest Kylis and Gryf picked their way across a slag heap and reached the trail to the prisoners' area. A faint blue glow emanated from their shelter, where Jason sat hunched over a cold light reading a book he had managed to scrounge. He did not hear them until they climbed the stairs.

"I was beginning to get worried," he said mildly, squinting to see them past the light.

"Gryf was sick."

"You okay now?" Jason asked.

Gryf nodded, and he and Kylis sat down in the circle of bioluminescence that did not waver in the wind. Jason put his book away and got their rations and water bottles from the locker. The stalks Kylis had picked were by now a bit wilted, but she gave them to Gryf anyway. He shared them out. The meal was slightly better and slightly more pleasant than most at Screwtop, but Kylis was not hungry. She was ashamed to tell her friends what had happened.

"What's the matter?" Jason asked suddenly.

"What?" Kylis glanced up at him, then at Gryf. Both were watching her with concern. "You look upset."

"I'm okay." She leaned back gradually as she spoke, so her face was no longer in the light. "I'm tired, I guess." She searched for words to put into the silence. "I'm so tired I almost forgot to tell you we're all on night shift."

That was good enough news to change the subject and take her friends' attention from her. It was even good enough news to cheer her.

Later they returned to the hiding place in the forest and slept, lying close with Gryf in the middle. In the distance the sky flashed bright, then darkened. Only a faint mutter reached them, but the lightning revealed heavy clouds and the wind carried the sound closer. Kylis touched Gryf gently, taking comfort in his deep and regular breathing. Lightning scarred the sky again, and seconds later thunder rumbled softly. The wind rustled dry fronds.

Gryf stroked Kylis' tattooed shoulder. He touched her hand and their fingers intertwined.

"I wish you could get out," she whispered. "I wish you would." The lightning flashed again, vivid and close, its thunder simultaneous. Jason started in his sleep. During the brief flare Gryf looked at Kylis, frowning.

It began to rain.

In the morning Kylis woke by reflex, despite the absence of the siren. The whole day was free, but she and her friends had to rest, for the night shift was first on duty. Gryf was already sitting up. He smiled in his it's-all-right way.

"Let's see," Kylis said.

He turned. The welts were silver-gray down their lengths, even where they crossed. They were uninfected and the ends had begun to heal. Gryf stretched his arms and looked over his shoulder. Kylis watched his face, the fine lines at the corners of his eyes, but he did not flinch. Biocontrol was one thing Kylis had proper training in, and she knew Gryf could not stretch human limits indefinitely. This time, though, he had succeeded.

"How much better are you?" she asked.

He grinned and Kylis laughed in spite of herself. She forced away the thought and worry of the Lizard. Together she and Gryf woke Jason.

But all the rest of the day her apprehension grew. She was certain the Lizard would not accept her refusal easily. Now Kylis had to look twice at the little movements in her peripheral vision, once to make sure they were not hallucinations and again to make sure they were not the Lizard. By evening she was taut with acting out a pose of normality and maintaining an artificial calm, and she was affecting Jason and Gryf with her agitation. She would not speak of the reason. She could be nearly as stubborn as Gryf.

Kylis was almost relieved when the siren shrieked and they had to return to the installation to gather their rations and the set's allowance of medicinal soap. She had tried being angry, and sullen, and heedless, but under it all she was frightened.

They walked past the guard stations, across the lengthening shadows of afternoon. At the top of the Pit they stopped, looking down. But they could not delay; they descended. The heat from the unworked day pooled in the center of Screwtop. The sides of the Pit reflected heat; the metal of the machinery radiated it. The effects of temperature and noise combined synergistically.

Kylis and Gryf and Jason were all assigned to the probe crew. Across the Pit, Kylis saw the Lizard watching her with no expression at all. She looked away. Miria was on this shift, too, but Kylis did not see her.

They dragged out the new drill bit and raised it; it hung suspended above the shaft, taller than a person, narrow and dangerous. It frequently seemed to recognize the absurdity of its domestication by weak human beings, and rebelled. At Screwtop it was all too easy to ascribe personality and malevolent intentions to inanimate objects.

Shaft sections lay in racks like giant petals around the stem of the drill, fanning out in rays opposite the bubble-covered works of the first two generators. The hum of turbines spread across the floor of the Pit, through boot-soles, reaching flesh and blood and bone. To Kylis, the vibration seemed to be the anger of the wounded earth, unwillingly giving up the secrets and the energy of its interior, helpless in its resentment.

When this shaft was finished, the temperature at its bottom would approach 800 degrees C. When the crew broke through the caprock and released the pressure, that temperature was enough to turn the water below into superheated steam. It was enough to drive another generator. It was enough, if they did not seal the caprock properly, to kill them all instantly. They would seal it, tap it, and build an air-conditioned bubble over it. Then engineers, heavily protected, would move in and build the machinery. The prisoners, who were not trusted anywhere near the generators, would move farther on to drill another well.

This was a clean way of generating power, and cheap in all but human terms. The wells eventually ran dry and power needs for North Continent grew greater. Redsun had no fossil fuel, few radioactive elements, too many clouds to use the energy of its dim star.

Gryf's job was to guide the shaft sections to the drill. Some concession was made to his value; he was not put on the most dangerous jobs. The command to begin was given, and the small contrived delays and grumblings ceased.

The work turned the prisoners almost into automata. It was monotonous, but not monotonous enough. Complete boredom would have allowed daydreams, but danger hung too close for fantasies. Sweat slid into Kylis' eyes when she was too busy to wipe it away. The world sparkled and stung around her. The night passed slowly. The Lizard watched from a distance, a shade like any other shadow. While he was near, Kylis felt alone and, somehow, obscenely naked.

At midnight the prisoners were allowed to stop for a few minutes to eat. Gryf eased himself down the control tower ladder. At the bottom, Kylis and Jason waited for him. They sat together to eat and swallow salt tablets. The break gave them time to rest against the morning.

Kylis sat on the ground, her back against metal, half asleep, waiting for the bell. The floor of the pit was wet and muddy and littered with broken rock and ash, so she did not lie down. The Lizard had kept his distance all evening. Kylis thought he was unlikely to do anything direct while she was among so many people, though they could do nothing against him.

"Get up."

She started, frightened out of a light doze by the Lizard's voice. He and his people had their backs to her; they moved between her and Gryf and encircled him. He rose, emerging from the shadows like a tortoiseshell cat.

The Lizard looked at him, then at Kylis. "Take him," he said to his people.

"What are you going to do?" Hearing the note of panic in her own voice, Kylis clenched her fists.

"The tetras want him back. They need him. They're getting impatient."

"You're sending him home?" Kylis asked in disbelief. "Of course," the Lizard said. He looked away from Kylis, at Gryf. "As soon as he's had enough of the deprivation box."

Beside Gryf, Jason stood up. Gryf put his hand on Jason's arm. The Lizard's people were moving nearer, closing in, should the Lizard need aid. A few of the prisoners came closer to see what was happening. Miria was among them. Kylis watched her from shadows, unseen. As the guards led Gryf away, Miria half smiled. Kylis wanted to scream with rage.

"How will they like it if you kill him?" Jason shouted.

"They take that chance," the Lizard said.

"It won't work," Kylis said. The deprivation box would never make Gryf go back to the tetras, and it could not force Kylis to do what the Lizard wanted. Even for Gryf she could not do that.

"Won't it?" The Lizard's voice was heavy and angry.

"Don't do this to him," Kylis said. "Gryf is-- just being here is like being in the box. If you put him in a real one--" She was pleading for Gryf; she had never begged for anything in her life. The worst of it was she knew it was useless. She hoped bitterly that Miria was still human enough to understand what her spying had done.

"Shall I take you instead of him?" Without waiting for an answer, laughing at her, the Lizard turned away.

"Yes," Kylis said.

He swung around, astonished.

"You can put me in the box instead of him."

The Lizard sneered at her. "And send the tetras you instead of him? What use do you think you'd be to any of *them*? You could be a pet-- you could be a host mother for another little speckled baby!"

Leaning down, scooping up a handful of mud, Kylis took one step toward the Lizard and threw the sticky clay. It caught him in the chest, splattering his black uniform and pale skin. Kylis turned, bending down again. This time the clay was heavy and rocky.

"Kylis!" Jason cried.

"And *you*!" Kylis shouted. She flung the mud and stones at Miria.

As the Lizard's people grabbed her, Kylis saw Miria fall. Under the spotlights the clay was red, but not as red as the blood spurting from Miria's forehead.

The Lizard, scowling, wiping clay from his chin, barely glanced at Miria's unmoving form. He gestured to Kylis.

"Put her where she can't hurt anyone else."

They marched her away, leaving Jason behind, alone. They put Kylis in a bare cell with one glass wall and a ledge without corners and ventilation that did not temper the heat. They stripped her and locked her in. The room passively prevented self-injury; even the walls and the window yielded softly to blows.

From inside, she could see the deprivation box. It was the correct shape for a coffin, but larger, and it stood on supports that eliminated the vibration of the generator.

The guards led Gryf into the deprivation room. He, too, was naked, and the guards had hosed him down. He looked around quickly, like a hunted animal alarmed from two sides at once. There was no help, only Kylis, pressed against the window with her fists clenched. Gryf tried to smile, but she could see he was afraid.

As they blindfolded him and worked to prepare him, Kylis remembered the feel of the soft padding packed in around her body, restraining head and arms and legs, preventing all movement and all sensation. First it had been pleasant; the box was dark and silent and gave no sensation of either heat or cold. Tubes and painless needles carried wastes from her body and nourishment in. Kylis had slept for what seemed a very long time, until her body became saturated with sleep. Without any tactile stimulation she grew remote from the physical world, and shrank down as a being to a small spot of consciousness behind the place her eyes had been. She then tried to put herself in a trance, but they had expected that. They prevented it with drugs. Her thoughts had become knit with fantasies, at first such gentle ones that she did not notice. Later they separated themselves from reality and became bizarre and identifiable. Finally they were indistinguishable from a reality too remote to believe in. She remembered the encompassing certainty of madness.

Kylis watched them lock Gryf into the same fate. They turned on the monitors. If he tried to ask to be let out, the subvocalization would be detected and his wish would be granted.

After that no one came near them. Kylis' sentence in the box had been eight days, but the sensory deprivation had overcome her time sense and stretched the time to weeks, months, years. She spent her time now waiting, almost as isolated. At intervals she fell asleep without meaning to, but when she awoke, everything was always the same. She was afraid to think of Gryf, afraid to think what might be happening to Jason alone outside, afraid to think about herself. The hallucinations crept back to haunt her. The glass turned to ice and melted in puddles, and the walls turned to snow clouds and drifted away. Her body would begin to shiver, and then she would realize that the walls were still there, quite real, and she would feel the heat again. She would feel Gryf's touch, and turn to embrace him, but he was never there. She felt herself slipping into a pit of confusion and visions and she could not gather strength or will to pull herself out. Sometimes she cried.

She lay in the cell, felt herself change, and felt her courage dissolve in the sterile whiteness. The floor of the cell cradled her, softly, like a soothing voice telling her she could do what was easiest, anything that would ensure her own survival.

She sat up abruptly, digging her nails into her palms.

If she believed all that, she should yell and beat her fists on the glass until the guards came, beg them to take her to the Lizard, and do what he had asked. If she did that, everything Gryf was going through and everything she had endured would be betrayed. If she decided now to let another person make her decisions for her, or if she lost herself so completely that she could not make them herself, then she had only trivial reasons for what she had done.

Her reasons were not trivial; she could not force herself to believe they were, not for Gryf's sake or Jason's or her own. Gryf had found the strength to gamble coming to Screwtop on the chance of his own freedom; Jason had found the strength to stay alive where by all rights he should have died. Kylis knew she would have to find the same kind of strength to keep her sanity and her control.

She wiped the back of her hand across her eyes, put her right hand on the point of her left shoulder, leaned against the wall, and very slowly relaxed, concentrating on the reality of each individual muscle, the touch of plastic beneath her, the drop of sweat sliding down between her breasts.

When a cool draft of air brushed her legs, she opened her eyes. The Lizard stood in the doorway, looking down at her, a black shape surrounded by concentric rings of color. She had never seen him with such a gentle expression, but she did not return his expectant smile.

"Have you decided?"

Kylis blinked and all the bright colors dispersed, leaving a stark black-clothed figure. His expression hardened as Kylis gradually returned to Redsun's hell and made the connections she needed to answer him. Her fingers were half curled. She turned her hands over and flattened them on the floor.

"You haven't changed... you haven't changed me."

The Lizard glared at her, his expression changing to disbelief. Kylis said nothing more. She did not move. The Lizard made a sound of disgust and slammed the door. The cool air stopped.

He did not return, but Kylis did not try to convince herself she had beaten him.

She stared through the window and willed the tetras to come and free her friend. They must keep track of what was done to him. She could not believe they did not realize what such isolation would do to one of their own kind.

She had been staring at the same scene for so long that it took her a moment to realize it had changed. Four guards came in and began to open the sensory deprivation chamber. Kylis leaped up and pressed her hands to the glass. The deprivation chamber swung open. Kylis remembered her own first glimpse of light as the guards had pulled the padding from her eyes and disconnected tubes and needles. Gryf would be trying to focus his black-flecked blue eyes, blinking; his roan eyelashes would brush his cheeks.

The guards lifted him out, and he did not move. His long limbs dangled limp and lifeless. They carried him away.

Kylis sank to the floor and hugged her knees, hiding her face. When the guards came, they had to pull her to her feet and shake and slap her to force her to stand. They led her through their compound and pushed her through the exit, locking the gate behind her. They did not speak.

Kylis stood in the harsh illumination of spotlights for a few blank moments, then walked slowly toward the comforting shadows of night. She had needed darkness for a long time. Everything seemed more than real, with the absurd clarity of shock.

She saw Jason before he heard her; he was a pale patch on the edge of the light, sitting with his knees drawn up and his head down. Kylis was afraid to go to him.

"Kylis?"

She stopped. Jason's voice was rough, almost controlled but breaking. She turned around and saw him peering at her over his folded arms. His eyes were very bright. He pushed himself to his feet.

"I was afraid," he said. "I was afraid they'd take you both, and I didn't want to stay here alone."

"Go away."

"What? Kylis, why?"

"Gryf's dead." Desperation made her cruel. She wanted to go to him, and mourn with him, but she was afraid she would cause his destruction too. "And Gryf's the only thing that kept us together."

Stunned, Jason said nothing.

"Stay away from me," Kylis said, and walked past him.

"If Gryf is dead, we've got to-- "

"No!"

"Are you sure he's dead? What happened?"

"I'm sure." She did not face him.

He put his hands on her shoulders. "We've got to get out of here before they kill us too. We've got to get north and tell people what's going on."

"Crazy!" She pulled free.

"Don't do this to me, Kylis."

His plea sliced through her grief and guilt, and even through her fear for him. She could not stand to hurt him. There was no fault in Jason, and no blame to assign to him. His only flaw was a loyalty she hardly deserved. Kylis looked around her, at the bare earth and the distant machines and the soft black ferns, all so alien. She turned back.

"I'm sorry," she said.

They held each other, but it was not enough comfort. Jason's tears fell cool on her shoulder, but she could not cry.

"There's something more than Gryf and the tetras," Jason said. "Please let me help. Tell me why all this is happening."

She shook her head. "It's dangerous for you to stay with me."

Suddenly he clenched his fingers around her arm. She pulled back, startled, and when she looked up, he scared her. She had never seen cruelty in Jason, but that was how he looked, cruel and filled with hatred.

"Jason-- "

"I won't kill him," he said. "I won't... let me go-- " He looked down and realized he was gripping Kylis' arm. "Oh, gods." He let her go and turned and walked into the forest.

Rubbing the bruise he had left, Kylis slowly looked behind her. What Jason had seen was the Lizard watching them from the gateway of the guards' enclosure. He did not move. Kylis ran.

The thick band of multicolored stars, shining through breaks in the clouds, lighted the way only where the ferns did not close in overhead. Kylis stumbled through the darkness, not even slowing for pools of rainwater. Her legs ached from fighting the suction of wet clay. Suddenly her shoulder rammed a rough stalk and her momentum spun her, flinging her against another. She stopped, gasping for breath, the air burning her throat.

Kylis straightened and looked around, getting her bearings. The stars glittered like sparks in the surface of standing water. She walked more carefully among the ferns. Her footsteps spread ripples out around her and the water sloshed gently from her boots. Only when she reached the shelter of dead ferns did she realize how silly and unnecessary it had been for her to be careful not to fall.

Inside the cool nest she lay down and composed herself. When she finally caught her breath, she began breathing slowly and regularly, counting her heartbeats. Gradually she extended the number of beats for each inhalation, for each exhalation, then she slowed her heart as well. She thought about Gryf, dying deliberately rather than giving his life to those he hated. And she thought about Jason, who would never kill even in vengeance. She was certain of that. If she were gone, he at least would be safe.

She felt the gasp reflex growing stronger and set her perception of it aside. Her breathing had ceased now, and her heartbeat would stop soon. Her thoughts slowed, her memory drifted to more pleasant times. She found herself with Gryf again, kissing him, standing in the clean hot lake, touched by spray from the overflow pipe. She smiled. A bright yellow star glittered through a gap between the ferns. Kylis let her eyes close, shutting out the last light.

Insistent hands shook her. She was dimly aware of them and of a voice calling her name. She concentrated more strongly on dying. A fist pounded her chest and she gasped involuntarily. Someone leaned down and breathed into her mouth, holding her chin up and her head back, forcing air into her lungs. Her heart pounded. Pushing the person away, Kylis sat up angrily and almost fainted.

Miria caught her and made her lie down again. "Thank gods, I found you. I could hear you but then you disappeared."

Kylis did not answer, but only blinked her eyes against the light Miria carried. She tried to be angry at her, but it seemed too futile.

"Kylis!" Miria's voice rose in panic. "Are you there? Can you hear me?"

"Of course I'm here," she said. She felt dizzy. She wondered why Miria had asked such a silly question. "What do you mean, am I here?"

Miria relaxed and brightened her lantern. "I was afraid I'd come too late." She had a bad scar, pink and new, on her forehead.

"Get away from me. Why couldn't you let us alone?" Kylis knew she would not be able to try to kill herself again for quite a while; she had used up too much strength.

"Gryf's all right," Miria said.

Kylis stared at her. "But I saw-- How do you know? You're lying!"

"He's all right, Kylis. I know. Please trust me."

"Trust you! You told the Lizard about Gryf and Jason and me! He never knew before how much he could hurt us! And now he'll go after Jason, too, so I'll-- " She stopped.

"The Lizard knew you were together, but I never told him your plans. You honored me with a request to join your family. Do you think your judgment of me was so wrong?"

Kylis sighed. "It wasn't very good about the kid who turned me in." She had to rest and breathe a moment. "I saw you go inside the fence without any guards. And after that, the Lizard-- "

"What was he trying to make you do?"

"Have a child and give it to him."

Miria sat back on her heels. "To *Lizard*? Gods." She shook her head in disbelief, in sympathy for Kylis, for anyone, particularly a child who would come under the Lizard's control. The yellow lantern glow glinted from the dark and lighter brown strands of Miria's hair. Kylis suddenly saw the two distinct colors for the first time. The lighter brown was not sun-streaked-- it grew that way naturally.

"You're a tetra, aren't you?"

Miria looked up, and Kylis knew she would not lie. "Yes. Anyway," she said sadly, "I used to be."

"They let you go?"

"No!" She ran her hand across her hair and spoke more calmly. "No. I was never like Gryf. I never understood what he wanted, at least until a few days ago. Until you and I talked..." She drew in a long breath. "Three years ago I was in an accident. I was foolish. I took chances I had no right to take, and I nearly drowned. I died for several minutes. No oxygen could get to my brain." She looked away, fiddling with the control on the lantern. "I can remember who I used to be, but I'm not her anymore. I cannot do the work I was meant for. I feel so stupid... I was afraid you'd done that to yourself. I was afraid you'd damaged your brain."

"I'm all right, Miria." Kylis pushed herself up on her elbow, suspicion and anger forgotten for a moment. "They sent you here because you had an accident? I think that's awful."

"They could have-- they should have, for what I did. But I'm here to watch Gryf."

"To protect him? And you let them put him in the box?"

"You know enough about Gryf to know..." Miria's voice faltered. "I was not here only to be sure he lived. I wanted to force him to go back to his team. I wanted him to make up for my failure."

"Why should he be responsible?"

"Because we're the same."

"Miria, I don't understand."

"He had the same place I did, on a different team. For important projects we make two groups and keep them separate, so they will confirm each other's research or develop alternate lines. Gryf is my trans-brother. That is what we call tetrads with the same parents in opposite couples." She rubbed her tawny forearm. "He was never meant to be a trans, of course, but it made no difference for the work. I crippled my team-- I felt I had to keep Gryf from crippling his. I felt responsible."

"What's going to happen now?"

"Now..." Miria grasped Kylis' hands. "I'm not a tetra anymore, Kylis. I have no vote. But I have a say, and I will do my best to persuade them to set him free."

"Miria, if you can-- "

"I may do no better than keep them from sending him back here."

"Why did you change your mind?"

"Because of what you told me. I thought about it all the time Gryf was in deprivation. What I was doing to him to force him to share my loyalties-- I almost killed him! I allowed the Lizard to torture him. You knew better than I what that could mean."

"But he's all right-- you said he's all right."

"He is," Miria said quickly. "He will be. He overcame the drugs and put himself in a deep trance. I haven't lied. But I had nothing to do with freeing him before he died. I understand now what happened. After two days I realized Gryf must be let go, but the Lizard would not come out and he would not reply to my messages. He hoped to break you to his will and Gryf to mine. When he could not-- finally he was afraid to keep Gryf in there any longer." Her voice was strained. "I've caused you so much pain. I hope

some day you will all be together, and happy, and will be able to forgive me."

"Miria, I wish-- "

The roar of a plane drowned out her words. Kylis glanced up, startled. In all the time she had been at Screwtop, she had never heard or seen a plane. The North Continent was too far away, and here there was no place to land.

"I've got to go. I shouldn't have left Gryf, but I had to talk to you." Miria helped Kylis to her feet and out of the shelter. Kylis accepted the help gratefully. She felt wobbly.

They waded through shimmering shadows as Miria's light swung on her hip.

"Kylis," Miria said slowly. "I don't know what will happen. I hope I can free Gryf. I will try to help you. And Jason. But the Lizard serves the government well. They may decide he was right and I wrong. Whatever happens will take time, and I may not be able to do anything at all. I don't want to deceive you."

"I understand." Jason was in no less danger now, nor was she. But at least Gryf was safe. For a few moments Kylis could set aside her fear in the joy that he was alive.

They entered the compound's long clearing and reached the path that led toward the prisoners' shelter. Kylis saw the vertical-takeoff plane hanging in midair. It slowly lowered itself, straight down, until it was out of sight behind the bank. Its engines slowed, idling.

"I can't take you to your shelter," Miria said. "I'm sorry-- "

"Can I come the rest of the way-- just to be sure-- ?"

"Gryf will already be on the plane, Kylis. You wouldn't be allowed to see him."

"All right," she said reluctantly. "I can get back myself from here."

"Are you sure? Will you be all right?"

Kylis nodded. "For now."

"Yes..." Miria shifted her weight back and forth, reluctant to leave her alone but anxious to meet the plane.

"Go *on*," Kylis said.

"Yes. I must..." She hesitated a moment more, then leaned quickly forward and embraced Kylis. "This is such a terrible place," she whispered. "Somehow I'll change it." She turned abruptly and hurried away.

Miria walked silhouetted against the lights and lantern. Kylis watched her go. At least she could hope now. She realized she must find Jason and tell him everything, but most particularly that Gryf was alive and out of the prison. Perhaps to be free. Then he could contact Jason's family--

"Oh, gods," Kylis groaned. "Miria! Miria, wait!" She ran toward the enclosure, stumbling from exhaustion.

She reached the bank above the fence just as Miria put her palm against the lock. The gate swung open.

"Miria!" Kylis cried. She was afraid Miria would not hear her over the engines of the plane, now inside the enclosure. But she cried out once more, sliding down the hill, and Miria turned.

She met Kylis between the bank and the fence, taking her elbow to support her as she struggled for breath.

"Jason's family," Kylis said. "Redsun thinks he's just a transient but he's not. If his people knew he was here, they'd ransom him." She remembered most of Jason's name, his family name, and told it to Miria.

"Can you tell them? Just send a message?"

Miria's eyes widened. "Is that who he is?"

Kylis nodded.

"It will have to be done carefully, to keep his identity a secret, but I can do that, Kylis, yes." Then she sobered. "You'll be alone-- "

"I'm all right alone. I've always been alone before. I can protect myself, but I can't protect Jason from the Lizard. Will you do it? Will you promise?"

"I promise."

Kylis clasped Miria's hands for an instant and let her go. Miria went inside the enclosure and boarded the plane. The engines screamed, and the aircraft rose, sliding forward like a hovercraft through the

gateway. Clear of the fence, it rose higher until it had cleared the height of the marsh plants. It accelerated straight north.

Kylis watched it until he was out of sight. She wished she had seen Gryf, but now she believed Miria; she could believe he was alive.

In the eerie gentle light of dawn, as Kylis started away, the harsh spotlights dimmed one by one.

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