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Snake Eyes

by Alan Dean Foster

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The mysterious young man Philip Lynx, better known to his readers as Flinx, and his empathic flying snake Pip have gallivanted through five novels written over a span of twelve years. They've become good friends of mine. I feel I know Pip, for instance, as well as I know my own six-foot-long Colombian boa constrictor, Samuel.

I wish I knew whether Samuel was a he or a she, though. It's tough to tell with a snake, and after they get to be Sam's size it's tricky to press the point. Not that it really matters. Sam feels like a he to me, and so far he hasn't bothered to argue about it. It's just a feeling I have, of course. I'm often chided for believing that anything as lowly as a snake can project any kind of feeling.

But it's sure fun to imagine one could, and many's the time in those tales that Flinx has been glad Pip could sense what he was feeling. Never more so than in the story that follows

Her name was Pip. She was a minidrag, or flying snake. She was barely two-thirds of a meter long, and no bigger around than the wrist of a sensitive woman. Her venom could kill a man in sixty seconds. In a hundred if she missed the eyes when she spat.

Until a few seconds ago it had been an unremarkable day. Then unexpected and overwhelming emotion-thoughts had struck her like a wave bowling over an unprepared crustacean. Her own feelings tumbled up and over, spun and submerged and overpowered by other thoughts. Pip was a sensitive empathic telepath, and the emotional outburst she'd just received was not to be denied.

Through slitted pupils she could see the slim form of her young master, an adolescent named Flinx,

asleep on the park bench below her perch. He dreamed pleasant mind-mirages devoid of fear or worry while fu-guelbell leaves tinkled overhead, crisp as the damp morning air. Pip shivered slightly. Moth, Flinx's home world, was always cooler than the comfortable jungle and veldt of her own Alaspin.

Their surroundings, a park in Drallar, Moth's capital city, were familiar and empty of menace. Nor did her roving senses detect anything like a threat in the immediate mental vicinity. Pip decided she could safely leave Flinx for a while.

The other objects of her concern, the offspring of her recent union on Alaspin with a solidly muscled minidrag named Balthazaar, were presently elsewhere, busily engaged in the hunts that were part of a minidrag's early education. She would have felt better about leaving Flinx had her progeny been around to watch over him in her absence, but the call swept over her again, insistent, mournful.

Slowly she slid free of her branch. Below, Flinx snuffled in his sleep, dreaming of matters as incomprehensible to her as they were important to him. Flinx's own mental abilities often weighed heavily on him.

Children playing nearby saw the brilliant pleated wings of pink and blue unfurl. They stared open-mouthed at the leathery, supple beauty of the flying snake, ignorant of the lethal danger those wings represented. They watched with guileless fascination as the exquisitely jeweled creature climbed into the cloying dampness of Moth's air, spiraled above the chiming treetops, and soared southward out of the city.

Knigta Yakus would have traded a twenty-carat hal-lowseye for a glass of water. As events had developed, the sunken-chested old graybeard was one of the few men in the Commonwealth who could readily have made such an offer.

After eight despairing months in the High Desert of Moth's Dead-Place-on-Map he'd discovered a pocket of the rare orange gems extensive enough to support a dozen people in baroque splendor for the rest of their lives. Now he survived partly on the thought of the expressions his discovery would produce on the faces of the boasting rheumy wrecks who inhabited the sandy dives of Edgedune Town.

They had assured him he'd find nothing but sand and a dessicated death in the vast wastelands of Dead-Place-on-Map. And they'd laughed at him.

One hand reached into the left pocket of his torn overalls and fondled what would be an eloquent rebuttal to every taunt and cheap joke. It was the single crystal he was bringing out with him: an electric-orange translucent lump of basic alumina-silicate weighing some two hundred and twelve carats. Properly cut, it would display a remarkable simulacrum of a human eye in its center, an eye that would stare back at whoever looked at it. A well-cut hallowseye also produced an emotional response in whoever saw it, a response generated not by beauty but by peculiar piezoelectric fields within the stone itself.

This particular gem would finance his return to the High Desert, a decently equipped return with proper equipment. After that, he'd mine-out the lode and then he would never have to work another day of his life. But if he didn't find water very soon, he might not have another day of his life left not to work in.

For the hundredth time he reminded himself that this desperate situation was his own damned fault. With ten months' supplies he'd confidently marched into Dead-Place-on-Map, knowing full well that in the desolate reaches of the High Desert he could anticipate finding no water and precious little game.

Five days before, he'd shot a skipgravel. Only hunger had enabled him to eat all of the tiny quasi-rodent, down to the last bean-size organ. That had been his last solid food. His water... when had his water run out? His brain said yesterday. His tongue and throat argued for a week.

Leaning back, he glared at the cloud-mottled sky that had become an unfriendly, unavoidable companion. It was overcast, as always. Few regions on the winged world of Moth saw the sun more than a couple of days a year. But the homogenized clouds overhead held on to their slight moisture content with the tenacity of a bereaved mistress guarding her benefactor's will.

Towering on the western horizon, broken-toothed mountains prevented any substantial moisture from reaching the High Desert. It all fell heavily on their eastern slopes. None fell where it could revive Knigta Yakus.

Painfully he squinted at the distant snow-capped spires of five-thousand-meter-high Mount Footasleep. Beneath it and several kilometers to the north lay Coc-cyxcrack Pass and the town of Edgedune. Both were unbearably far away, impossibly out of his reach.

In his youth, when his body was made of braided duralloy cable insulated in hard flesh, he might have made it. Bitterly he cursed his eighty-two-year-old frame. The insulation was battered, the cables of his muscles corroded away. Dehydration gave his naturally thin form the look of a dead twig. Once-powerful muscles hung slackly from old bones like slabs of exfoliating shale.

A sad snort caused him to look backward. Even though he had already abandoned all his equipment, the dryzam was beginning to fail. The ten-meter-long scaly quadruped stumbled along faithfully in his wake. Its long anteaterlike snou*. swung slowly from side to side over the rocky ground. Absurdly tiny eyes glowed behind the snout. There were five of them, set in a curve across the top of the skull. Like the sails of an ancient ship, twin dorsal fins moved on the back. They helped to cool the tired creature, but that was no substitute for a long drink.

Oddly, the starving dryzam no longer made Yakus nervous, though his desiccated human carcass would make a welcome snack for the omnivorous beast of burden. A more faithful creature Yakus could not imagine. It had never complained about its load, or about the always slim rations Yakus had allowed it. Despite its evident thirst, the prospector was convinced it would die before it turned on him. The animal was the best purchase he'd made on Moth.

Yakus had a great deal of respect for such loyalty. He eyed the slightly swollen belly of the green-and-yellow beast sadly. Its meat and blood could keep him alive for some time, maybe even long enough to reach Edgedune. Idly he fingered the needier slung at his hip. Could he kill it?

"I'm sorry, Dryzam." He'd never bothered to name it.

The creature halted when Yakus did. It wheezed painfully, sounding like a badly tuned oboe. Already it had gone weeks without water. Its supremely efficient, streamlined body had extended itself as far as could be expected.

Five tiny eyes blinked expectantly, patiently back at him, ready to try to respond to his requests. "Tooop?" it inquired hopefully. "Too-whoop?"

"Stop that. Quit lookin' at me like that, you dumb dinosaur." Come on now, Yakus. No place to get sentimental. That's all it is, a damn dumb animal that's goin' to die soon anyhow.

Just like himself.

Yakus had spent most of his eighty-two years struggling to exist in a universe which made it much simpler to be dead. The crystals offered him a chance to spend his few remaining days in comfort. That is, they did if he could only bring himself to slaughter this ugly, staring, urine-colored heap of—

Something which was not a piece of cloud moved in the sky above him.

"Concentration's goin'," he muttered to himself as he fought to identify the object. Lately he'd been muttering to himself a lot.

The shape dipped lower, cruised near on convenient thermals. Yakus was a much-traveled, observant man. He recognized the intruder. He didn't believe his eyes, but he recognized it. It didn't belong in this desolate place, that tiny half-legendary dispenser of instant death. But there was no mistaking that shape and size and coloring.

Yakus was too debilitated, too worn out and despondent, to wonder what an Alaspinian minidrag was doing in Dead-Place-on-Map in the High Desert of Moth. All he could consider now was its reputation. No known antidote, natural or cultured, existed to counter the flying snake's venom.

He had to kill it first.

Riding air currents, the creature swooped lower. Yakus raised the needier. Reflexively his gaze went to the weapon's handle, automatically took in the reading on the built-in gauge.

Empty.

Despair.

He'd used his last charge in the weapon to kill the skipgravel.

Too frustrated to scream and too dehydrated to cry, he reversed the weapon. Hefting it by its narrow barrel, he wielded it like a club. It was an impractical gesture, but it made him feel a little less helpless.

"By God, it figures," he murmured exhaustedly. "Kill me then, apparition," he instructed the approaching winged form. "You'll be quicker, at least."

Despite his seeming resignation, Yakus didn't want to die. He wanted very much to live.

Rowing air, the minidrag stalled and regarded both man and dryzam with unwinking eyes. Fluttering exquisite wings, it came closer, paused, darted away.

"Playin' with me." Somewhere Yakus found the strength to be disgusted. "Snake-an'-mouse, is it, you scaly little bastard? Disappear, vanish, you don't belong here."

Minutes went by. The minidrag did not disappear. Instead, it moved neither at him or away, but continued to hover. This wasn't right. If the creature was taunting him it was going about it in a most peculiar fashion. Likely it had wandered here from some inhabited region. It had to be lost. Didn't it want to drink Yakus's blood?

The minidrag moved much nearer, and Yakus saw something falling from wings and body, saw it glistening beneath wing pleats. He gagged a little.

The minidrag was dripping wet.

Thoughtlessly Yakus threw himself at the poisonous flier. It slipped easily back out of his reach, continuing to stare at him. Yakus fell to the ground, scrabbling at the sandy soil and gravel where droplets had struck. One pebble he touched was still noticeably damp. So— he was no madder than usual.

For a terrifying moment his legs refused to obey and he feared he wouldn't be able to get up. Hope made a powerful crutch, however, and he fought to rise to his feet.

"Where?" he pleaded dumbly, staring at the snake. It stared back at him. "Still wet." He was mumbling again, a little wildly now, as he threw undisciplined glances in every direction. "In this heat, that means that water has to be close by. But which way... oh God, which way?" His attention focused again on the hovering snake.

"You're not lost. You're with someone, aren't you?"

He glared dreamily at the minidrag. "That's it, there's an encampment nearby. Where? *Where!*"

As mute as its less-sensitive ancestors, the flying snake continued to regard him silently.

Yakus started to laugh. Here he stood, in a region no sane being would venture into on foot, conversing with a snake. Why stop with asking for water? He giggled. Why not request linzer-torte and lemonade while he was asking?

Unexpectedly the minidrag made a sudden turn, flew ten meters westward, and turned to regard Yakus expectantly. A little frightened, the old prospector ceased giggling. The minidrag flew back at him, hissed, then whirled and flew to hover once again ten meters off.

The situation was crazy, of course, Yakus assured himself. But then, so was the very presence of the minidrag. If the snake was a mirage, it was acting as sensibly as he'd been. Perhaps he ought to try following the mirage for a while.

"Hup!" His call produced a wheeze like a leaky balloon as the dryzam swung to follow the man following the snake.

Fly ten meters and wait for man and beast to catch up. Fly and wait, fly and wait.

Near the end of his endurance, Yakus had no idea how long he'd been following the insistent minidrag. But he soon knew he could go no farther. If the mini-drag's water was real, it was too far off for him. No one knew he was about to become the wealthiest corpse on Moth. Desperately, his weakened mind sent walk messages to his legs. Water-starved cells rejected the request. Old knees struck unyielding gravel and sand as Yakus's torso toppled forward and splashed into the surface.

Splashed?

He opened his eyes and discovered he couldn't see. The water was too murky. As he raised his head he heard a deep gurgling sound nearby. The dryzam was sucking up water like a skimmer taking on fuel.

Murky water... Yakus would gratefully have accepted a feast made of mud. Anything possessing moisture.

The pool rested in a low hollow beneath a shading, upthrust blade of gray-white phyllite. The pool was barely two meters wide. An ocean.

Crawling in, he lay on his back against the sandy bottom. His throat hurt from the unaccustomed act of swallowing. He felt ten years old.

After half an hour of luxuriating in the life-giving liquid, he thought to thank his benefactor. "Hey, snake, Knigta Yakus gives life to you! Snake?"

Sitting up in the shallow water, he glanced around curiously. The minidrag was nowhere to be seen.

"Oh, well, the motives of a little snake-thing..."

Something nearby coughed unpleasantly. Yakus tensed, the hidden sun drawing water off him. The cough was repeated. Getting to his knees, Yakus looked around warily.

A head peeked out from behind the far side of the overhanging rock. It was a big head, square and nasty. Mostly black, it was spotted with patches of gray and yellow that enabled it to blend in well with the predominant colors of the High Desert.

Yakus had wondered during his long dry march about the possible presence of scavengers. Now he didn't have to wonder anymore. Coming around the stone, the head was followed by a thick, powerful turtlelike body moving on six lean legs. The predator was half the mass of his dryzam.

Ordinarily the big dorsal-finned beast of burden would have pounded this menace into the sand. But the dryzam was so weak from hunger that it could barely stand, and this dark gleaner of the dry sands instinctively sensed the larger creature's helplessness. Once it was finished with the dryzam, the spotted killer would undoubtedly have Yakus for dessert. As rare as substantial prey probably was hereabouts, the prospector was convinced the dryzam would not be enough to satisfy this monster.

Turning to confront the smaller beast now stalking it, the dryzam lowered its head and tooted a feeble warning. Yakus was sure the temporary revitalizing effect of the water would dissipate quickly under the demands of combat.

While the carnivore's attention was focused on the dryzam, Yakus backed deeper into the pond and hunted for the largest rock he could lift. Maybe while the hunter was occupied with his beast, Yakus could sneak up behind and crush the thick black skull. It seemed to be his only chance.

He located a good-size boulder. The dark predator continued to circle the dryzam, tiring it, worrying it. Sheer exhaustion would finish the dryzam's chances before a single blow could be exchanged.

Struggling with the large stone, Yakus discovered that his own reserves of energy were unequal to the task. He might lift it, but he could never carry it and strike with it. The predator yawned, displaying double rows of pointed, curved-back teeth. Yakus groaned at his own stupidity. A water hole! Where better for a lone hunter to make its den? He should have anticipated such a possibility and prepared for it.

Then suddenly something thin and winged darted between the dryzam and the hexapod closing in. It

spat, a thin sound in the dry desert air. The hexapod halted, blinked—then screamed.

Yakus half swam, half ran in his attempts to stay out of the predator's path as it tumbled over and over, clawing at its eyes where the corrosive venom had struck. In doing so, the creature sped the poison into its own bloodstream.

Kicking convulsively, the beast sprawled into the pool. One clawed hind leg barely missed the retreating prospector. Then it scabbled clear of the water, crawled a few meters, and lay twitching on its belly. The twitches grew fewer and fainter, but several minutes passed before they ceased altogether.

As Yakus watched, the minidrag settled itself on a nearby wind-scoured boulder and started to preen. His gaze then traveled to the substantial corpse lying on the sand. Slowly the dryzam wandered over to it. Several long sniffs apparently satisfied the patient creature. The first bite of tough dark flesh was difficult. After that the dryzam ate with increasing ease and gusto.

When a quarter of the predator had vanished down the dryzam's gullet and it still showed no ill effects, a salivating Yakus drew his knife and moved to join in the feast.

After the clouds had turned black and the screened sun had set, Yakus found himself sitting contentedly against a dry rock next to the pool. He'd felt this good exactly three times previously in his life: when he'd defeated Jorge Malpaso, the famous null-ball player, at arm wrestling; when he'd escaped from jail on Almaggee; and four years ago, when on a dare and a bet he'd shown a certain saucy barmaid on Kansastan that aging can improve other things besides wine.

For three days the pool was home, during which time he rested and recovered his strength. Despite his inevitable worries, no other carnivore showed up to claim the oasis. Yakus watched the harmless ones who came to drink and let them leave in peace. He already had as much meat as he and his dryzam could handle.

On the fourth day he rose, secured the rest of the meat as best he could between the dorsal fins on the dryzam's back, and started off confidently in the direction of Edgedune. When the minidrag settled onto his shoulder he wasn't too surprised. Still, he was only partly successful at hiding his fear at the proximity of so deadly a creature, however friendly it had proven itself to be.

The minidrag seemed content to ride there. On the sixth day Yakus tentatively reached out to touch it. It did not threaten him. The prospector smiled. It was several days later that he first noticed the tiny tag clipped beneath the rear of one wing.

IF FOUND ALIVE OR DEAD, the tag read, PLEASE RETURN TO ... It gave a name and several addresses. The first lay reasonably close to Edgedune.

Yakus might die soon anyway, but not before he had returned his leathery savior to its proper owner.

Flinx was drinking at an outdoor stall. A slim youth, red-haired and dark-skinned, he concealed many secrets and unusual abilities beneath an unremarkable exterior.

Only a loud commotion among the stalls lining the upper street roused him from his thoughts, which had been soured with concern these past days. Curious, he turned along with the vendors and other shoppers in the marketplace to see what the cause was. As he did so, something landed with familiar pressure on his right shoulder.

"Pip!" He stroked the minidrag's neck as it curled close to him. "Where have you been? You worried me crazy. I thought—"

"Don't be harsh on your pet!" Flinx looked toward the source of the imploring voice, saw a straight if aged form crowned with curly black-and-white hair striding toward him. The principal source of the commotion which had first attracted him trailed behind the old man. It was a peculiar, high-finned creature that barely managed to squeeze itself between the closely packed street stalls. Children ran alongside, gesturing and poking at the unfamiliar monster.

The oldster regarded Flinx speculatively. "I am Knigta Yakus. I owe your pet my life." A hand like a gnarled piece of firewood indicated the relaxing mini-drag. "Later I will make you rich. But I must know — if this place is your home, and you this minidrag's master, why did it seek me out in Dead-Place-on-Map to save me?"

Flinx murmured reprovingly at his pet, "So that's where you disappeared to." He peered past the gray-beard to inspect the oldster's beast of burden. "A dryzam."

Yakus had thought he was beyond surprise. He discovered otherwise. "You know this creature? I purchased it here, but it is not of this world, and few recognize it. You do."

"Yes. Oddly enough, this creature comes from the same world as my minidrag—Alaspin." He patted the creature's flank, and it tootled in pleasure. "But that doesn't explain why Pip went to you. Minidrags are empathic telepaths, sensitive to powerful emotions. Ordinarily Pip responds only to mine. This seems to be an exception. I wonder why."

"I think I can explain." Yakus sounded satisfied. "I was dying, you see. Your snake sensed that, over all this distance, and came to rescue me." He expanded his chest proudly. "I didn't know old Yakus could feel anything that strongly."

Flinx shook his head in confusion. "No. People have died all the time around me." The way he said that made the perceptive prospector eye him narrowly. Perhaps this boy was not the innocent he looked. "Pip

never left me to save any of them. And she has reasons for staying especially close to me now. I don't understand." Turning, he eyed Yakus. "I'd like to know why she did leave me to save you."

Yakus decided it no longer mattered. "She saved me. That is what is important. She saved me to make you rich. Come with me, help me do a little hard work, and you will have more credit than you can imagine."

The reaction was not quite what Yakus expected from a simply dressed lad only a few years removed from urchinhood. "Thanks, but I already have enough credit for my needs." He seemed embarrassed by the admission.

"However," he continued, before a stunned, disbelieving Yakus could respond, "I'll come with you anyway. You see, it's important for me to know why Pip—my pet—left me. No offense, but I just can't believe it was to save you. Whenever Pip leaves me it becomes a matter of intense interest. There've been too many times when I had to have her around. So... I'll go with you." Flinx grinned. "Anyhow, I've never seen the High Desert, much less Dead-Place-on-Map, though I've heard a lot about it. It's not a very appealing place, I understand."

When Yakus was through laughing, he showed Flinx the crystal. Surely he had nothing to fear from this boy, who seemed honest and deserved well, if only because he was not quite right in the head. "A hallow's-eye!" Flinx was properly impressed. "I've never seen one that big."

Yakus winked conspiratorially. "There are many more this size and larger. The emotions from the deposit are so strong I could hardly bear to work the lode. This"—he tapped the magnificent orange gem—"will outfit us for the work and the journey. We will bring back crystals enough to bow the back of my dryzam. When can you come with me?"

Flinx shrugged, gestured. "When my curiosity's at stake, my impatience matches it. Come on, I'll introduce you to a reasonably honest outfitter."

They walked off down the street, conversing amiably, the dryzam trailing behind. The woman buying jewelry from the stall next to the foodshop edged aside as the bulky beast of burden slid multiple hips down the narrow avenue. She had the slim, lithe figure of an adolescent, but was a good deal older. Flowing clothes obscured all skin save face and hands, which were the color of milk-rich fudge.

A diamond ornamented one pierced nostril. She turned to regard the receding procession with much interest, robes of water-repellent silk shuffling like frozen wind about her. So intent was she on the two retreating male figures that the jeweler was prompted to ask if anything was wrong.

"Wrong? No, no." She smiled at the man, teeth flashing whitely, bright enough to form two small crescent moons in her face. She pointed absently at a pair of wormwood-and-onyx earrings. "I'll take those. Deliver them to this address." She handed the jeweler a card on which was impressed her name, a personal identification number, and the address in question.

While the jeweler hastened to process the transaction through his cardmeter she turned to the man standing patiently nearby. He was short, no taller than she, but perhaps ten years older. Face and body showed globules and bulges of fat. Their surfaces were taut, however, without age wrinkles or the true signature of the hopelessly obese. The man simply had the physique of a baby never grown up.

"You heard everything, Wuwit?" inquired the woman Savaya.

He nodded once. "I did. I'll go get Michelos."

"No." She put out a hand to restrain him, then gestured down the street at the disappearing convoy. "Follow that carnival. See where they go, learn who they talk to, stay with them. I'll find Michelos myself." They parted.

Wuwit watched her progress for a moment, then turned and ambled off after the two men with a speed startling to those not familiar with his abilities. One of the men, he'd noted, was old, the other much younger.

They were an easy pair to trail inconspicuously, since the docile dragon's rump rose and swayed above the ground. So intent was Wuwit on his assignment, however, that he failed to notice the tall, gangly ornithorpe pacing parallel to him on the other side of the street. Nor did the feathered alien notice Wuwit.

A rounded, swaybacked body was mounted on two long, feathered legs. These fitted into boots which reached to the knobby knees. Those knees reached to a normal man's waist. A long thin neck ended in the elongated skull, from which protruded a short, curved beak in front, ruffled plumage behind.

In addition to the boots, the creature wore a slickertic cape designed for his shape. A lightweight garment that kept off the perpetual moisture of Moth's atmosphere, the slickertic did not cover the headdress, a construction of blue-green-yellow foil which complemented the alien's natural gray-and-brown plumage.

Various gems, some real, some imitation, dotted the long weaving neck, the chest, and the long thin arms which had evolved from ancient wings.

The ornithorpe's name was Pimbab. He'd been taking his ease in the same drinking establishment as Flinx. Despite the absence of external ears, the alien's hearing was acute—which was why he was presently shadowing the two humans and their lumbering beast, his mind filled with visions of ornithoid larceny.

Roly-poly human and attenuated bird-thing ignored each other with a single-mindedness of purpose matched only by a similarity of intention.

Flinx wiped the back of his left hand across his brow. Moisture-wrung clouds obscured the sun, but he could feel its veiled heat. Yakus was beginning to draw slightly ahead of him, and Flinx touched his spurs lightly to the flank of his muccax. The squat two-legged toad-creature gave a grunt and hopped to close the distance.

"You walked this?" Flinx asked in admiration.

Yakus nodded, his expression colored with pride as he turned to glance back at the supply-laden dryzam. "I did that. Walked in and walked out, though I couldn't have done the last without the help of your pet." He gestured at the curled, sleeping snake-shape on Flinx's right shoulder.

Flinx glanced backward, past the plodding dryzam, to the distant ridge of the Snaggles, over which lorded Mount Footasleep. They'd come a long way since leaving somnolent Edgedune, and according to Yakus still had a good distance to go. Heat made the terrain and horizon ahead soften and run like multicolored butter.

"I still don't quite understand why you insisted on these muccax"—Flinx rapped the broad, bony skull of his own mount affectionately—"instead of having us hire a good skimmer."

"Too much dust and gravel in the air here. Skimmer's a mistake too many first-timers make," Yakus explained. "Usually they're last-timers as a result." He tapped his visor. "Grit in the air is full of all kinds of abrasive dissolved metals. Chews the hell out of any skimmer's air intakes. No thanks, I'll take my chances with live transport. I like the flexibility a muccax gives me. You get to be my age, boy, and you learn to appreciate flexibility. Besides, in an emergency, you can't eat a skimmer..."

Well behind the lecturing Yakus three other humans rode. "How far?" asked Michelos. He was a big man with a deep voice to match, athlete-tall and muscular. His legs nearly touched the ground on either side of his muccax.

Savaya had shed her traditional silks in favor of a more practical desert jumpsuit. She frowned at the sweating figure riding alongside her. "I haven't any idea. All the time they were talking, he never mentioned distances or location. Only that the mine's out here some place."

"Out here some place." Michelos waved a thick, fuzz-covered arm at the vaporous horizon ahead. "That's more hundreds of square kilometers than I like to think about, Savaya." He squinted at her. "I'm not sure how I let you talk me into this in the first place."

"Yes, you are." She allowed herself a thin grin. "You joined up because you're just as greedy and selfish as Wuwit and me." She indicated the pudgy little figure partly behind them, who was suffering more from

the heat than his two thinner companions. "You joined because I told you I saw a rough hallowseye of good quality that must have weighed two hundred carats."

Michelos started to reply, was interrupted. "It's all right, Mick," Wuwit insisted in his slightly squeaky voice. He was perspiring profusely. "This is easier than knocking vendors over the head and then trying to run from the gendarmes and the crowd. It can't be a total loss even if there is no mine. If we don't find any gems we sneak up behind them"—he nodded forward in the direction of the unseen trailbreakers—"kill 'em both, take the animals and the supplies. They bought plenty of supplies—I know, I saw them doing the ordering. Enough to more than pay for this trip."

"That makes sense, Wuwit." Michelos calmed down and turned his attention back to the dull seared plain undulating before them. Wuwit always managed to cheer him up when he was feeling bad, which was frequently. Michelos was not a man given much to happy thoughts, unless they involved the distress of others.

Savaya nudged her muccax with spurs. "Come on, we don't want to fall too far behind. Hallowseyes aren't found on the surface. Any mine would provide good cover, and in this flat country that could make a big difference if it comes to a fight. We want to get to them before they can get into it."

Michelos spurred his own mount viciously. It bleated and jumped forward. "Don't quote strategy to me, Savaya," he growled. "I'm no pimple-faced novice at this..."

Knigta Yakus halted his muccax on a slight rise of sand that was too high to be part of the plain, too tired to be called a hill. He pointed. "There it is, lad. Bet you'd thought we'd never reach it. Bet you was wondering if old Knigta was a liar."

"Oh, I believed you all the time, Yakus," Flinx told him. "I was just beginning to worry how much meat I'd have left on me by the time we arrived."

The hillock gave way before them to a gentle down-slope. This abruptly turned into a sharp but not high drop, falling for a couple of meters to a flat, wide surface that might have been a sunken road. It was not, though it was gravel-paved across much of its surface, with streaks of darker ground forming ridges here and there.

The dry riverbed they were approaching was impressively broad. At one time a considerable amount of water must have flowed through this part of the High Desert, and recently, judging from the still-uneroded banks.

On the far bank lay a darker spot, which Yakus was gesturing at excitedly. It stood out clearly against the lighter material of the banks: unmistakably a gap in the rocky soil.

"And there's the pocket!" Yakus's excitement was evident in his voice. His hand moved to the south, tracing an invisible path along the extinct river. "Downstream the river floor divides. I found the first piece of crystal a dozen kilometers down there. Had to dig my way upstream. There are twenty other caves, not as big as that one, lining the stream bed in that direction." He nodded at the excavation across the riverbed.

"That hole's the twenty-first. I didn't think it would be the last, but it was. Let's go."

They started toward the river. Flinx regarded the nearing bank warily. "I've never ridden muccax before. You sure they can handle this drop?"

"They're not fast and long-legged, but they're durable." Yakus looked behind them. "They'll handle the bank all right, but I'm a little worried about the dryzam. Seems kind of tired."

"That doesn't surprise me," Flinx replied, "considering the weight of those supplies it's carrying." He looked over a shoulder, saw the placid five-eyed creature trailing dutifully behind them, packages piled high between the stiff dorsal fins. "It's big enough. It should be able to put its front legs all the way down to the bed while its back legs rest on the bank top. As long as it doesn't break in the middle, I think it can make it."

"Hope you're right, boy. We'll have to try it. I don't feel like packing and unpacking half that stuff out in the midday sun..."

Savaya peered over the crest of the sandy ridge. Next to her, Michelos was raising the muzzle of his rifle. She motioned cautioningly to him. "Not yet. Wait till they start crossing the riverbed. Out there they'll have no cover at all and no place to retreat. I don't think a muccax can hop *up* that bank with a man on its back."

Michelos grumbled but held his fire.

The little party of two started down a slight break in the dry river wall where the parched earth had crumbled. As Yakus had predicted, the muccax made the bone-jarring jump down without difficulty. The dryzam made their worries seem absurd by floundering elegantly after them, taking part of the bank with it.

When they were a fifth of the way across the wide dry river, Savaya raised her needier. Michelos had risen to his feet and was aiming his own weapon carefully when something shattered rock before him, sending emerald sparks flying at his boots.

He dropped, and scrambled on his belly back behind the protective rise. "What happened? What the hell happened?" He was looking around wildly.

"Over there." Wuwit fired his own needier in the direction of a pile of boulders looming in the distance. Michelos glanced down at Savaya angrily.

"I thought there were only supposed to be two of them!"

"Did you see more than that?" She too was furious at the unexpected opposition. She raised her head slightly for a look, ducked back fast as another green energy bolt sizzled over their heads to impact on the ground behind them.

"Neither the old man nor the boy said anything about having a separate escort, I suppose?" Michelos's tone was accusing. "If they suspected they might be followed they wouldn't want to advertise their protection, would they?" Then he frowned, thoughtful. "But in that case, why mention the mine so boldly at all?"

"It doesn't make sense, I'm telling you!" Savaya glared at him as she hugged sand.

"Someone's trying to kill us and you two lie there arguing." Wuwit sounded disgusted. Rising, he snapped off a shot from his weapon. More green bolts answered. Soon the three of them were exchanging steady fire with whoever lay sequestered in the tall pile of rocks.

When the first energy bolt had exploded behind them, Flinx and Yakus had reined in their mounts and turned sharply to look behind them.

"We've been followed!" Yakus was more upset than panicked. "We're under attack and—"

Flinx shook his head crisply. "Followed, most likely." He sounded puzzled. "But they're shooting at each other, not at us."

Yakus had learned long ago not to question providence. "Come on, boy!" He spurred his muccax and called a loud "*hup!*" back to the dryzam. Then they were racing full speed for the still-distant mine...

Once, a green fragment of lightning skimmed close enough to singe Michelos's shoulder and send him spinning in pain. His anger overrode the sting, however, and he resumed his position quickly.

A shot of Savaya's was rewarded with a scream from the high boulders. A very peculiar scream.

"That wasn't a man or thranx," she said confusedly. "Something else. This is crazy."

Michelos got off another angry burst from his rifle. When he looked at Savaya again he saw she was tying a piece of white cloth to the muzzle of her needier.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Isn't it obvious?" She started to wave the cloth-clad muzzle over her head.

This display produced a couple of querulous bursts. Then the firing ceased. Taking a chance that the quiet was intentional, she rose and called out, "Hey... who are you?"

"Who are you, chrrrk?" came a reply from the distant rocks. The voice was high, thin, and grating on the ear. "As you are with the miners, whill you want to kkill us so badly?"

"Wait a minute." Wuwit threw Savaya a confused stare. "They think that *we're* working with the boy and the old man."

"We're not with the miners!" Savaya yelled. "We're..." She hesitated a moment. "We're hunting!"

A high tipling laugh sounded from the tiny natural fortress of their antagonists. "Huntting, are you? Whell, lady woman, we're 'huntting' ttoo. Tthinkk I we're huntting the same ggame." A pause, then, "You're ttruthful sayingg you're nott whith man and boy human?"

"On the contrary, as you've guessed," Savaya admitted, her extemporaneous ruse having failed. "Let's both of us call a truce, at least long enough to talk this out!"

"Very whell," the voice finally agreed. "Whee whill advance ttogetther and meett unmounted att tthe cent-ter place bettween our respecctive posititions."

"We agree!"

"Just a minute," rumbled Michelos softly. "If this is a trick, then we—"

Wuwit put out a plump hand and gripped his friend with surprising strength. "Listen, Mick, if you were in their position"—he gestured toward the river bank and the retreating Flinx and Yakus—"and you knew we were following and trying to kill you, would you suggest truce with us?"

"No." Michelos conceded the point grudgingly. "You're right." He looked up at Savaya and nodded as he started to rise. "Okay, let's risk it."

Together the three of them walked over the ridge and started down the opposite side. As soon as they did so, a pair of tall thin shapes started climbing down the rock ramparts.

"Not human. You were right, Savaya." Wuwit thoughtfully regarded the two figures, noticed a third join them in descending. "Chikasacasoo ornithorpes, I think."

Michelos looked at his friend in disbelief, then back across the plain. "What are those birds doing out *here!*"

The same Thing we are, idiot," Savaya told him.

When the two groups were roughly five meters apart, the aliens halted. "Is close enough for preemptory discussion, I think," said the lead creature. He held his beamer loosely cradled under one delicate arm. "I singg tthe name of Pimbab. Tthese are my remainingg companions, Kisovp and Ttor. Boonoom and Lessu-whim were botht recckkless and panicckky durring tthe fighting. Bad ccombination when facing ones of your markksmanship." The inflexible beak could not form anything so facile as a smile, but Savaya had the impression of one. "I feel tthat should increase odds of nexxtt kkill in our favor."

"Forget this business of killing each other. That won't profit anybody. What are you doing out here in Dead-Place-on-Map?" Wuwit wondered.

"Same as you, if I singg tthis sittuattion rightt." Pimbab's head bobbed gracefully on the long stem of a neck. "I was drinkking att a sttall in Drallar when tthere was menttion nearby me of hallowseyes. Being something of a gem fancier—"

"Yeah, we're real big gem fanciers ourselves," Michelos broke in.

"There's nothing to be gained by killing one another," said Wuwit forcefully, despite his high voice. "I think a temporary alliance would be a good idea."

"Just a second," said Savaya, "who's in charge of this—"

Pimbab did not let her finish. "I singg likkewise, man." He gestured with a willowy limb across the dry riverbed. "They have reached ccover now and whill be much hardder tto dislodge. Ttwo or tthree of us would have a difficcultt ttime doing so. Five should do much bettter. If cconversation I overheard was half ttrue, there should be much plentty wealtth for all of us."

"Yeah, suits me." Michelos nodded. "Makes sense. Money's no good to a dead man... or bird."

"Well, I don't agree." Savaya looked furious. "I still think we're better off operating separately."

Wuwit eyed her strangely. "Maybe you're right, Savaya."

"And you," she snapped, "just remember who started this when—"

"Starting's finished," the unjolly little man reminded her. "But I'll go along partly, with what you say about proceeding separately." His needier came up. The or-nithorpes twitched, but the muzzle wasn't pointing in their direction. "So why don't you go start your own group, Savaya?"

"Look, you fat little—" She took a step toward Wuwit, froze when one finger tightened slightly on the trigger. She looked around in outraged disbelief. "What is this?"

"You're so smart." Michelos was grinning as he stepped over to stand next to his short companion. "You figure it out."

"All right. All right." She was backing away slowly and cautiously. "Have it this way then. Between you you haven't got the brains to last two days against them." She jerked a thumb in the direction of the mine.

"I know my limitations." Wuwit nodded toward the watching ornithorpes. "The bird folks' penchant for games and strategies is well known. I happen to think we'll do better with them than with you. Besides, I'm sick of taking orders from you, Savaya. You've flaunted your smarts a little too often over me. See how much good they do you without anyone muscling for you."

"Truly the female seems exccitted," observed Pimbab.

"You can take your muccax and head back to Edge-dune," Wuwit continued magnanimously, "or you can form your own separate party, as you want." For the first time since they'd started the trip, he smiled.

Flinx and Yakus lay down in the cool shade of the excavation. Both rifles rested in front of them, on top of the mine edge. Behind them, down and dug deep into the earth, was an open circular area large enough to conceal both muccax and the dryzam. The dorsal-finned beast of burden was exhausted from the short sprint across the riverbed. Flinx worried that they might have overloaded it with supplies.

Once when the sun pierced the cloud cover, there was a suggestion of orange fire near the back wall of the excavation.

"Sounds like they made peace among themselves," observed Yakus, peering over the rim. "I'll bet both groups were plenty surprised, all nice and set up to ambush us only to find out somebody else had the same ideas." Flinx was staring at him reprovingly.

Yakus looked away, embarrassed. "I know, I know...I talk too much. Someone must have overheard me some place. Well"—he fingered the trigger of his rifle—"they'll have an AAnn of a time trying to winkle us out of here."

"Do they have to try?" Flinx scanned the relatively flat horizon outside the mine. As usual, when his mental talents were most needed they chose not to function. He couldn't sense a thing. "They've got us trapped in here."

"That's a matter of argument, boy. To you, we're trapped. To me, we're comfortably protected." He gestured at the dry river. "If they've got any sense among them they'll come at us tonight." He paused, and frowned as he eyed Flinx. "Say, boy, where's your pet?"

Flinx continued to watch the stream bed. "She flew off when we started our sprint for here. Once it would have bothered me, not anymore. She's left me a couple of times previously—once to come after you, remember? She always comes back."

"I'm glad you're not worried, but I've seen what your little fly-devil can do. I'd feel better if she were here."

Flinx smiled gently. "So would I, but Pip goes and comes as she pleases. Still..." He looked puzzled. "It's not like her to take off when I'm threatened like this. I expect she'll show up fast when they do attack."

"She'd better," said Yakus feelingly. "No telling how many there are out there..."

Night amplified the stillness of the High Desert. Even the insects were silent here, baked into insensibility, Flinx thought.

Careful not to keep his head exposed for long, he periodically surveyed the riverbed. There was little to see in the near-blackness. The perpetual cloud cover shut out the starlight and the faint glow of Moth's single tiny moon, Flame. Even if their attackers possessed light-concentrating gunsights, they'd have to be extraordinarily powerful to pick up enough illumination from the dark desert sky to see by.

"Think they'll wait until just before morning, when they'll have a little light?" Flinx asked.

"Can't tell." Yakus too was gazing out across the dry wash. "Depends on how impatient they get."

There was a tiny click of stone on pebble. Yakus whirled, bringing his rifle around to cover the left side of the talus hill. Behind them the two muccax slept soundlessly, balanced on the tripod of feet and tail, their heads bent over onto their chests. The dryzam lay motionless on its side, curled against the back of the mine and several million credits of fiery orange crystal.

Flinx also jerked around, an instant ahead of Yakus. Sensitive as he was, the emotional feedback effects of the raw hallowseye behind him was making him more nervous than normal. The proximity of so many emotion-amplifying gems was having a dangerous un-steadying effect on his mind.

"You can hold it right there," the prospector ordered.

"Look, I'm throwing my gun in." The voice was unmistakably, and unexpectedly, feminine.

A long needier landed on the rocks in front of them, clattered to a halt near Flinx's feet.

"I'm coming in unarmed. They threw me out. If I try to go back to Edgedune they'll kill me." A pause, then a hopeful "Can I come closer?"

"Into the light?" asked Yakus testingly.

"No, no lights! They'd use them to shoot by. There's enough for you to see me."

And that was enough to satisfy Yakus. "Okay, come on in... but keep your hands over your head and your ringers spread."

A slim outline materialized from the darkness. "My name's Savaya," the figure told them. "I was out there, in this with *them*." This last uttered with contempt. "I don't want your gems anymore." She sighed. "I just want a chance to live and get back home... and back it them."

"Neither of those is a good enough reason for me not to play it safe and shoot you where you stand," said Yakus evenly, raising his needier.

The voice spoke again, hurriedly, desperately. "I told you, I'm unarmed. That's my only weapon, there in front of you."

Flinx kneeled and picked up the needier. "That's what you say."

A touch of amused indifference colored the woman's next words. "Go ahead and search me, if you don't trust me."

"Watch her close, boy." Yakus put his own rifle down next to Flinx and walked over to the shadowy form. Several long minutes passed. There were indecipherable murmurings and one muffled noise that might have been a giggle. Flinx finally tired of it.

"I can't watch the both of you and the riverbed too, Yakus."

"All right, all right," came the impatient reply. The old prospector returned and hefted his weapon.

"Thank you," the woman said simply. "Will you let me help you kill them?" She motioned for her needier. Flinx gave Yakus a questioning glance. The prospector shook his head, watching the woman.

"You can stay. If we live, you live. But no gun."

"I'm a good shot," she argued, coming closer. "There are five of them out there: three ornithorpes and two men-things. If they decide to all rush you at once, another gun could make the difference."

"Especially if it was directed at us, from behind," said Yakus pleasantly. "No thanks, Savaya. We'll take our chances."

Flinx slid down and rested his back against the talus slide. "I don't think they'll rush us tonight."

Black eyes studied him curiously in the darkness. "I can't see you too well, whatever your name is."

"Call me Flinx."

"You seem a little young to be making those kinds of pronouncements with such surety."

"I do all right." Flinx took no offense. If the woman *was* planning some treachery, it would be best if she thought of him as an overconfident child.

Something with the intensity of a green star erupted against the roof of the mine. Both muccax came awake, bleating throaty objections. The dryzam barely stirred, however, as a shower of gravel fell from the scorched pit in the stone ceiling.

Another energy bolt shot by well overhead, while a third exploded against the pile of talus shielding them. Flinx fired in response. Unlike what happened with the energy beamers, it was impossible to tell where his needier was striking. He could only fire in the direction the energy bursts had come from.

By the same token, however, the needier didn't reveal its user's presence. The manipulators of those beamers had better keep moving from place to place as they fired, or Flinx would use their discharges to pinpoint them.

"See anything?" he asked tightly.

"Not a thing, boy," Yakus replied. Flinx noticed that Savaya was curled close to the old man and he didn't appear to be in a hurry to push her away. Well, Flinx had her needier, and he didn't think she could wrestle Knigta's weapon away from him before Flinx could bring his own gun to bear. Nor was the old man a fool... he hoped.

"There, to your right!" she suddenly shouted. Flinx spun to face that direction, saw a shadowy form partly outlined against the rocks. He fired, and was rewarded with a cry of pain. The shape retreated into the darkness. Flinx fired again, but the sound wasn't repeated, and he wasn't anxious to leave the safety of the mine to pursue the wounded figure.

He remembered the source of the warning. "Thanks," he told the woman.

"I told you," she said, a touch impatiently, "I'm on your side now. Can I have my gun back?"

"No. That could have been a trick designed to let you gain our confidence."

She responded sarcastically. "Do you think one of them would risk his life for that? How could they know your shot would only wound and not kill?"

Flinx had to admit she had a point. But he was too concerned about moving shapes in the near-blackness to consider her request. Better to keep the weapon a little while longer, until they could be absolutely sure the woman wasn't faking.

As expected, the energy bolts soon ceased their futile, distracting assault. Yakus looked satisfied. "Tried to draw our fire and attention while one of 'em flanked us," he observed. "If that's the best they can do, we'll have no trouble holding them off indefinitely."

"That's just it," Flinx pointed out. "We can't hold them off indefinitely. With five of them out there, they can send a couple back to Edgedune for supplies and leave three here to keep us pinned down. Sure we've got a stock of food and water, but indefinite it's not. They can afford to wait us out."

"That's so," admitted Yakus solemnly.

"I'm impressed," confessed Savaya, sliding close to the old prospector in the darkness.

"Really? Where would you like to be impressed?"

"Come on now," she chided him gently. "I had a different kind of alliance in mind when I came here."

"I'd say what you need, then, is a good dose of moral support." Yakus moved toward her.

Flinx turned away. Someone had to keep an eye on the dry riverbed. To his horror, he realized that the men he'd thought were asleep had been fully awake and readying for an attack—so much for his intuition. He glanced back into the depths of the mine. A powerful surge of feeling resided back there, a reflection of his own emotions magnified by the hallowseyes. If they were cut, he knew, he'd be a nervous wreck by now. Fortunately they were still in their raw state.

For the first time in years, he felt he couldn't trust his talents. Was that why Pip had flown away?

Worried, he strained to stay awake...

A loud, sharp sound woke him from his half-sleep the following morning. It did not come from outside the mine. Both Savaya and Yakus also woke at the noise, hastily disengaged, and looked down into the excavation.

Both muccax had backed up against the far wall as much as their tethers would permit. They were staring blankly at the dryzam. It was making long hooting noises, and they could hear high-pitched screams seeming to come from all around it.

"What's wrong with the beast?" Yakus wondered. "I've been through a lot with it. I'd hate to see it—" but Flinx was already scrambling down the talus slope. Then he was walking cautiously across the floor of the mine. The dryzam didn't *look* violent, but that screaming and hooting...

All was quiet save for that intense howling.

"Flinx, lad?" Yakus called in the early-morning air. The back of the mine was still clothed in blackness.

"Leave him be," suggested Savaya. "If he gets hurt it's his own fault."

Yakus glanced at her sharply. "This little alliance of ours can be dissolved as fast as it was made, you know."

"Sorry." She was quickly apologetic. "I didn't know you and the boy were so close."

"As close as partners can be."

"It's okay. I'm all right," Flinx's voice floated up to them. A moment later he was alongside.

"Did you find out why it's screaming like that?" Yakus asked.

"Not it—they," Flinx explained with a grin. "Your dryzam was pregnant, Knigta. As near as I can tell in the dark, there are eight offspring."

"Pregnant! I thought she'd been acting sluggish, but nothing to indicate—"

"Knigta, not all animals show pregnancy as blatantly as humans do. It explains a lot." He stared out across the lightening desert. "It explains, for example, why Pip came to rescue you in the first place, which was what I couldn't figure out."

"I don't follow you, boy."

"What's he talking about?" Savaya inquired. The prospector motioned her to silence.

"On Alaspin the minidrag and the dryzam are associative creatures. I told you that, back in Drallar. Pip *was* drawn to the High Desert by an overpowering emotion all right, but it wasn't yours, Knigta. It was the dryzam's. A pregnant associative animal was in danger. I wouldn't be at all surprised to learn that on Alaspin dryzams have been known to save or protect young minidrags."

Yakus looked crushed. "So it wasn't me at all that your pet considered worth saving, just that animal." He gestured with his rifle back into the mine, still resounding with unnurserylike howling and screeching.

"No need to feel slighted," said Flinx consolingly.

"You were saved, after all." He turned to regard the desert. "I also think this explains why Pip left and where she's gone off to, and why she's been gone so long."

Yakus shook his head. "You're making less and less sense, boy."

"I know what to do now," Flinx murmured, not hearing him. He stood up, cupped his hands to his lips, and yelled, "Hey, can you hear me out there?"

"Get down, boy, are you gone crazy?" Yakus was crawling over, tugging at Flinx's boot.

Flinx looked down at him. "Trust me, Knigta Yakus." He turned and shouted once more. "Can you hear me?"

A voice drifted back to them, faint but distinct. And nonhuman. "We ccan hear you quitte whell. Which of you is itt tthatt speakks?"

"I'm called Flinx. I'm the younger man."

The voice sounded elegantly in the clear morning air. "Whee have notthingg tto ttalkk aboutt, man."

"Listen, I'm not ready to die for a little money."

"Speak for yourself," grumbled Yakus, but he let Flinx talk.

"How do you propose tto avoid itt?" the voice called back to him with a touch of amusement.

"By trading this place for our lives," Flinx responded. "On your word," and he added something in birdtalk, so bright and sharp that Yakus jumped in surprise.

"You singg of *tthatt* oath!" the ornithorpe shouted admiringly. "You are whell ttraveled, fledglingg!"

"Your word on that oath then," insisted Flinx once more, "that we and our captive—"

"What captive?" demanded a deeper, human voice.

"That's Michelos," whispered Savaya. "He thinks he's..." She stopped, looked sharply at Flinx. "What 'captive'?"

"Just play along, will you?" said Flinx irritably. "Better to let them think we're getting something out of this... namely you. It'll make our offer to trade sound more logical if they think we have something to gain besides our freedom." He turned his voice back to the desert.

"Let us leave with her, the woman who came with you. She'll be our... compensation for our trouble here. You can have the mine if you let us go safely back toward Edgedune. I'm not ready to fight for it!"

"We'll consider your offer," came the inhuman voice.

"They'll accept," said Flinx confidently, sliding back down behind the protecting wall. "It's a good deal for them."

"I'm not sure I accept, boy," said a frowning Yakus. "What's possessed you?"

Flinx eyed him firmly. "It's important that we get out of here before they do rush us. We can't handle a rush, I don't think. And if we get out, we can afford to wait."

"Wait for what?" Savaya wanted to know.

Flinx didn't smile. "You'll see. Trust me, Knigta."

Yakus grumbled, and finally peered hard at Flinx. "I don't know what you're up to, boy, but you'd better know what you're doing."

"We acceptt tthe offer, if tthe oldd man whill singg tthatt he does also," came a call.

Flinx rose to reply, but Yakus beat him to it. "Yeah, I do, you wormeaters!" and he added another, more pungent comment.

"Give us a couple of minutes to load our supplies,"

Flinx responded after Yakus had finished, "and then we'll leave. We'll be heading south toward Edgedune!"

"Itt shall be so," the bird-creature answered.

"What about dryzam?" asked Yakus as the two muccax were packed for departure.

"She has to remain," Flinx said. "I wouldn't think she could travel immediately after giving birth."

Yakus looked at him shrewdly. "You've got another reason, haven't you, though I can't figure it."

"They won't kill it," Flinx insisted. "The dryzam and her young represent a source of meat; besides, the dryzam's a valuable beast of burden. They'll want her to carry out the hallowseyes they mine. Speaking of which, I'm betting they'll be too involved with the gems to worry about much else."

"This'd better work, boy."

Savaya's gaze traveled from man to boy. "You're both mad, but I haven't any choice now. I have to go with you."

From a hidden place off to the south, the five anxious attackers waited as a pair of muccax shapes moved toward them.

"Here they come."

"Yeah," said Michelos with relish. As the footsteps came closer he and his companion readied themselves.

When it sounded as if the two muccax were directly abreast of them, the five jumped from their various places of concealment. Pimbab and his friends watched as the two humans fired.

Two muccax died, beamed instantly. That was all.

"They're not here." Frantically Michelos searched around the two corpses. "They're not *here!*"

Flinx, Yakus, and Savaya, their backs heavy with food and water, were running across the dry riverbed.

They'd waited until the five figures had crossed to the south of the mine before starting their sprint in the opposite direction.

"Lousy bastards," rumbled Yakus, panting under his load.

"I told you they wouldn't risk letting-you get away. Much easier to kill you." She threw Flinx a venomous glance. "What about that wonderful oath you had that lead bird swear to?"

"I'm sure," Flinx replied, "he took no part in the shooting. His oath bound only him and his companions." He looked sad. "I hated to sacrifice the muccax, but it was the only way I could be sure we'd get out safely. First I had to convince them that we were convinced they would let us go. That was the purpose of the oath."

"I wish I knew what you had in mind, Flinx." Yakus was starting to scramble up the bank, at the place where the dryzam had partly crumbled it. "We're not going far on foot. And they've got the mine. They can hold it and send others after us."

"Why should they, Knigta? Like you said, we're not going far on foot. They know that. They'll trust the desert to kill us, and reasonably so. Besides, I don't think any of them trust the others enough to split up: to chase us. No, they'll leave us alone now, and we can wait in safety."

"Wait for *what*?" Savaya demanded to know. But Flinx ignored her as he started up the bank.

Michelos continued to rage until Wuwit said with calm authority. "Shut up, Mick." He turned to the watching Pimbab. "Tricked us."

"Itt does nott matter," insisted the tall, imperturbable ornithorpe. "Whee have gained possession of the mine, and their animals are dead. Tthey cannott walkk outt of tthe deserrt, nor can tthey attackk us, as whee outnumber tthem. Tthe sand whill become partt of ttheir bodies. Whee need only kkeep alertt while whee mine tthe ccrysttals."

"The crystals," Michelos said, his attention shifting abruptly.

"Yes." Pimbab also turned to look back in the direction of the mine. "I tthink itt is ttime whee tookk a lookk att tthem."

Flinx squinted across the riverbed from his position atop the pile of columnar boulders once held by Pimbab and his companions. "There they are... two of them, anyway." He could see one ornithorpe and a human resting on the parapet of talus fronting the mine. "Keeping watch."

"They know we're liable to hang around," muttered Yakus. "I'm sure the rest of them are in back, chipping away at my crystals."

"Our crystals," Flinx corrected quietly.

"We can't wait here forever," Yakus pointed out.

"Give me a couple of days." Flinx had raised his gaze. "If what I'm expecting doesn't happen, we'll think of something else."

They waited, conserving water, all that searing day and night, and through the next day. Flinx remained expressionless, didn't comment on the blatant way Sa-vaya coddled Yakus. The prospector was obviously pleased by the woman's attention and made no attempt to ward her off. On the contrary, he welcomed her advances.

Flinx was very good at minding his own business. If the old man hadn't learned enough by now to know when... He shrugged silently. He had more important things to worry about. He was beginning to be concerned by the absence of the activity he'd anticipated. Suppose he was wrong in his feelings? In that case he'd placed them in a tough position.

He wouldn't blame Yakus for never forgiving him.

Flinx was a light sleeper. So was Yakus. They woke simultaneously that night.

"Did you hear it?" Flinx strained at the darkness.

Yakus was looking around curiously. He confessed, "I thought I heard *something*, boy."

"What was it like? A sort of buzzing or whirring sound?"

Yakus nodded slowly. "Maybe."

"What's going on?" a sleepy voice inquired.

A terrifying shriek sent the groggy Savaya exploding from her resting place. The shriek was followed by the crackle of an energy beam discharging, then more screams. Some of them were not human. All came from the direction of the mine.

Flinx and Yakus scrambled for a better view of the distant excavation. A woman who'd always thought of herself as cold and strong put both hands over her ears and broke out in a cold sweat.

"Would've been kinder if we'd done the killing, boy." Yakus's voice was almost accusing.

"I know. But it would probably have been us who'd have died."

Green energy bolts flared in all directions from the depths of the mine. They struck walls and roof, speared the desert sky futilely. None stabbed in the direction of the concealed onlookers. They ceased quickly.

"They're dead," Flinx announced calmly when all had been silent for several moments. "We can go back now."

Yakus eyed him oddly. "How can you be so sure?"

"Those yells." Savaya shivered despite the warmth of the night. "What happened?"

"You'll find out in a minute." Flinx glanced at the sky, where clouds were beginning to brighten. "It's almost morning." He started down the rock tower.

Halfway across the dry wash a small winged shape that shone pink and blue in the dawning light swooped to meet them. Savaya started, was reassured by Yakus.

Pleated wings collapsing, the minidrag came in for a landing on Flinx's shoulder. Her coils whipped around under his arm, tightened to a firm perch. The triangular head nuzzled Flinx's jaw as the trio continued their march across the riverbed.

Yakus pointed downstream. Several muccax were standing blankly in the middle of the riverbed, panting with fright.

Savaya fell behind, shortening her pace, and Yakus dropped back to comfort her. His hand tensed on his weapon as they followed the youth up the talus slope leading into the excavation.

Five bodies lay scattered about the floor of the mine. Two were human, three nonhuman; several sprawled in positions easily achieved only in death. Yakus turned one of the human corpses over as they started down the inner slope.

"That was Wuwit," Savaya whispered. Part of the pudgy schemer's left cheek was gone, eaten away as if by acid. "What did this thing?"

"This," Flinx called up to her from the floor of the excavation, indicating the coiled reptilian shape on his shoulder.

"But if she could do this," a puzzled Yakus asked as they moved toward the boy, "why did she leave? Why didn't she stay to help in the first place instead of flying off?"

"Pip's not stupid," Flinx explained. "She probably could have defended me, but only me, against five attackers. She couldn't have saved you and, more importantly, the dryzam—and her offspring."

Yakus grunted. "That animal again."

"So she responded," Flinx continued, "as she would have on Alaspin. Look for yourself."

Moving hesitantly, the old prospector and Savaya walked toward the back wall of the mine. Orange fire was growing there, kindled by the rising sun. Against that fiery wall lay the dryzam and eight miniature replicas of herself, reproductions as precise as those that might have come from a machine.

Circling above those eight shaky young dryzam were six tiny, darting winged forms.

Flinx stood nearby, stroking the back of Pip's head. "Pip knows what it is to be a mother, Knigta. She could have protected me, but what about these newborns? It was important to her to save them, too. But sometimes it takes a family to save a family..."

It was a most peculiar procession which ambled into Edgedune several weeks later. Startled out of their perpetual lethargy, heat-soaked residents came running to gape at the parade.

Leading it were an exquisitely beautiful young woman and a grizzled old man riding a pair of muccax. Accumulated filth and dust couldn't hide the woman's perfect features or the old man's high-powered grin.

Behind them lumbered a strange dual-dorsal-finned apparition, a young man seated on the thick neck behind five staring eyes. A poisonous flying creature circled watchfully above the youngster's tousled hair. In their wake trooped eight duplicates in miniature of the dorsal-finned creature, flanked by six darting, twisting shapes that looked like leathery wasps.

The old man saw some aged figures he recognized. Without dismounting, he took a small sack from the saddleband of his muccax. Reaching in, he brought out a stone the size of his fist that gleamed in the sunlight.

For the first time, a sigh rose from the crowd...

A night of revelry was followed by dawning disaster. Flinx discovered the missing muccax first, the absent Savaya second, and the loss of a very valuable sack last of all. He rushed to wake Yakus.

"I thought you knew better, Knigta," Flinx said accusingly. "Did you really think she meant everything she told you, that she was after anything but the gems? She took the sack you put the pick of the diggings in, the stones you told me were the purest and finest." He shook his head sadly. "I didn't have the heart to tell you what she was doing. I couldn't believe you didn't see through her."

"Now, boy, take it easy." Yakus sat up in the bed and ran his hands through hair the consistency of baling wire. "She only took the one sack, eh?"

Flinx calmed Pip, who'd grown nervous at the surging emotion in her master. "You don't look very upset."

"Oh, boy, you're pretty smart-savvy for your age, but you don't know it all, not yet you don't." He yawned and smacked his lips. "She was prettier than most, and a bit smarter than most... but not that pretty, and not fifty years smarter."

"But the jewels!" Flinx pleaded.

"What jewels?" Yakus was smiling. "I knew from the start what the tart was after, boy. So I dug out a nice batch of linedie along with the real hallowseyes. Linedie's a different type of silicate, though it looks just like the real thing. Usually found together. Takes an expert to tell the raw stones apart. Linedie's also called false hallowseye, also idiot's delight.

"It was a bit of a risk, but I really hoped she'd turn out to be honest." He shook his head disgustedly. "We don't have to go after her, boy. If you want to look Savaya up, you'll probably find her in jail back in Dral-lar, for trying to market linedie as hallowseye."

"Why, you treacherous old scabby dirtgrubber!" Flinx eyed the miner closely. "You were using her all the time, weren't you. You knew just what she was doing and so you used her."

"Fair's fair, boy. I haven't turned a lady's eye in some years." He turned over and lay down again. "Now leave me alone."

Flinx hesitated. There was something... oh, yes. "But this linedie, if it's different in composition it can't have the emotion-feedback qualities of real hallowseye. Why didn't Savaya sense that?"

"She provided her own emotional feedback, boy," Yakus growled from somewhere beneath the sheets. "She was so swamped with greed she couldn't have sensed anything else."

Flinx turned to leave, hesitated. A scaly head nudged him impatiently, and so he forgot his remaining questions.

Pip was right. They had a big nursery to check on.

END