

“There were one hundred planets forming a wheel, nearly touching one another on two sides, with Earth sixteen globes past the smelly one in one direction and eighty-three past it in the opposite direction. Within the circle between the planets and within the planets themselves lay webbed networks of tributaries along which I and other dimension-skippers could travel while the pipeline bored straight through the one hundred like a core. What, if anything, lay beyond the circle of worlds was a matter that didn’t occur to me. I was too absorbed in my conceit at having accomplished as much as I had.”

THE DIMENSIONEERS

Doris Piserchia

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Chapter 1

It began raining as I prepared to creep along the limb of the tree and I hoped it wouldn't drive the gambers away. They hated getting wet almost as much as they hated being bothered by people who weren't going to ride them. Having already committed myself, I got down on my hands and knees, crawled along the knobby surface and didn't pause until I was directly above one of the beasts.

She was a big cat, darker brown than the others, and she had a powerful body, a great fanged creature with green eyes, lashing tail and a fierce disposition. She knew me almost as well as I knew myself but never would she show me any affection while the others looked on.

Perhaps I was nervous that day, or unusually clumsy, but it didn't matter because a burst of thunder decided things as it broke over my head. My grip on the limb was lost and I pitched through space onto Wyala's broad back.

Just the touch of me was all she needed. The rest of the herd began snarling and spitting at about the time that I was feeling for a handful of long fur.

"Go, you confounded hardhead!" I bellowed, slipping and sliding on her back, threatening to fall off her, wondering at the same time if the whole pack would take a notion to attack me like a gigantic set of teeth.

We had done it before plenty of times, Wyala and I, but there was always something fresh and exhilarating about it. Her ears went back while a snarl came from deep within her throat. Straight into D we sprang and then we both did what Came naturally, whatever it actually was. We skipped.

The last thing I saw of my homeworld was a black sky and a field of dark brown animals who had mutated from lions. Then my cat and I were heading through a broiling vortex of vivid colors that came from nowhere and went nowhere. With no effort we flew at a good pace that I could have increased merely by thinking it. The animal under me wasn't a cat any longer, any more than I was a young human female. What we were was a together-entity bound by some phenomenon I couldn't have begun to describe. Mrs. Asel back at the orphanage kept reminding me that I was too ignorant for words, but one thing I knew how to do was ride a gamber. I knew how to touch Wyala and join my will and intent with hers. Knowing her thoughts without verbally communicating with her, I could guide her flight and feel some of what she was feeling, it would have been the height of immodesty for me to claim that she loved me passionately, but I knew a happy soul when I tuned into one, and Wyala was happy, ecstatically so.

Like a pair of truants, we scampered off the face of the Earth and headed for dimensional worlds and airy seas. Exactly what the places we visited were I wasn't certain, but who cared? No school, no Mrs. Asel or her dogcatcher, no nothing but free space. Me, myself, I and one slightly skitzy cat.

Cloud barriers in space presented to me a high obstacle that threatened not to yield. Wyala bunched her muscles in response to my unspoken command. Rocketing away from the barrier and to the right, we feigned a passing maneuver and then zoomed toward the inner, more vulnerable, side of the wall. It was like entering a whirlpool or like being kissed by turgid air.

"Attagirl!" I yelled, at the same time kicking Wyala in the side. She didn't mind for she knew I was satisfied with her. A savage beast in the climes of home, she was different when in alien territory. Here she belonged only to me.

On the other side of the barrier was a blue ball of gas careening in a long orbit around a spinning sphere of light. Wyala and I didn't dispense with the protective shield of atmosphere we had brought along from Earth because we didn't want to get gassed or cooked, but neither did we feel like passing up a good ride.

Remaining in an either-or passage of flaky air and crashing cymbals, we hopped onto a jetstream made up of a variety of poisons. Away we went tumbling over and over along the orbital path of the gaseous world. I whooped and Wyala snarled. She didn't even bother making miming motions but laid herself out in a spraddle-legged stance with the wind of D shoving her ears back and making a banner of her tail. With both hands full of her ruff, I leaned back, kicked out with my legs and let the stream take me wherever it pleased. We chased that unearthly breeze halfway round the planet before we grew tired and headed for another vortex.

There were hordes of uglies on the beautiful world where we grounded and I marveled at the capriciousness of fate. These people belonged in a murky swamp, every last one of them, not only because they were hard to look at but also because they had evil natures. They were called Kriff. No sooner did Wy and I touch down on a mound of multi-colored stones at the foot of a mountain than a pair of them tried to brain me. It was the first time I had ever been close to their species.

I don't think they were overly stupid but their avidity to inflict damage on their enemies made them too hasty for caution. Dismounting, I leaned over just as one rushed me. She fell across my back and went tumbling head over heels down the hill, screeching like a maniac and desperately trying to regain her feet, no doubt intending to attack me again. Her companion made the mistake of coming at me past Wyala's hind quarters. Quick as a flash the cat took him in a claw and hurled him over her head in the same direction as his friend.

Nobody wanted much to do with the Kriff for the simple reason that they didn't think like civilized people. Ignorant as to how far down the scale in intellect they were, I could see with my own eyes that they possessed a virulent antipathy toward any life form that wasn't their own.

I wanted to stay on the rock mound and enjoy the view of blue lakes, shady glens and forests, but the two at ground level had decided that I must go. Stepping close to Wyala, nudging her with my thigh, I watched them scramble and scabble up after me. The female was the larger of the pair, slightly less than six feet tall, narrow of head, red-eyed, flat-nosed, heavy-breasted. Her flesh was covered with glittering scales of blue, purple and green, or at least they looked like scales. As she drew nearer I could see that her skin was thick and rippling. The scales were illusions.

Much as I wanted to believe that Kriff were carnivorous, I knew they weren't. They hadn't the teeth for tearing meat. Short gray stubs were revealed when they opened their mouths. They wore clothing of a sort, a wide band of cloth around their thighs and sandals on their feet. What they wore in winter I couldn't imagine. In fact I didn't know if they had any winter on this planet. The weather was pleasant enough now, somewhere around seventy-two degrees, ideal really and not at all like Earth where I alternately froze or roasted.

The Kriff had no intention of allowing me to remain and enjoy this world. The two at the bottom of the hill screeched and shrieked and hastened upward in order to get their hands on me. One thing I didn't have to worry about was my transportation out of there. Wyala was my hob, the creature I rode. Whatever her species thought of people, when the two of us were in D she was almost literally my shadow and refused to leave my side. Besides the fondness between us, she knew I was her means of getting back home, and while she liked traveling in D it was only a place to visit. Home was where one always returned, even if they didn't particularly like it, as in my case.

Nudging me at the same time that I nudged her, she kept her eyes on the Kriff and growled at them in a threatening manner. She could have snapped one in half with a single bite, but either the uglies didn't realize this or didn't care. Up the hill they labored as rapidly as they could.

"To heck with these fools," I said to my hob. Casually I hopped on her back, took an easy handhold. "I hope you see that green hill on the other side of the forest," I said to her. "That's where we're going. Maybe it's vacant. I have a yen to rest and relax while I plot my future."

Casting a disdainful green glance my way, Wyala shot into D like a graceful gazelle. So light were we that we might have been made of air. Below us the uglies looked up in anger, but only for a moment, and then my cat and I received a little shock of surprise. The Kriff scrambled back down the hill on fleet feet, grabbed up some long sticks from the ground and straddled them.

I saw them ride their sticks into D after me. Like a couple of witches on broomsticks they shot upward and began chasing me. Not worried but very surprised, I clicked my teeth at Wyala and blinked with her in a hurry to the green hill beyond the trees. No sooner did we land than the Kriff came through D after us. I sensed their presence before I saw them.

"It looks like we can't stay here," said to my gambler "Let's go over by that big lake."

Five miles farther we landed on grass beside blue water. Not alone, though. The witches were right behind us, never deviating from their course, splitting D as if it were their own back yard.

Wyala looked at me and snarled. Like me she wanted to stay and have a look around but the Kriff were fair skippers and chewed up our tail.

"Let's see how good they are," I said. Taking a firm grip on the hair on Wy's neck, digging into her sides with my heels, I whispered softly to her, opened my mind and let her see what was there. She was more than willing, dropped her ears back the way she always did when she was mad or eager, rolled her eyes in the direction of the pair coming at us through mist and away she went.

The thing of it was, those creatures behind us weren't just fair skippers, they were fine. Wyala and I burst all the way into D and zoomed through a cloud bank into an uninhabited world that barely had enough air for us to breathe. Settling down on a mountaintop and letting go of our old envelope of atmosphere we waited to see if we had lost our pursuers.

They came out of vacuum like wide-eyed devils, mouths screeching, one hand beating space while the other clutched a stick. It occurred to me that at the first opportunity I would have to appropriate and examine one of those hobs.

It was too bad that I hadn't landed on a smaller mountain tip. That way my cat and I might have kicked them off. As it was we had to go away into D again with the Kriff after us and no matter how fast we skipped or where on the planet we went, we couldn't lose them.

What was D? How could I describe it? Was it the same for the aliens as for me? Now exactly with my eyes I could see a wide and misty corridor that had no end, and to get into it all I had to do was click something in my head that matched a similar thing in Wyala's head and together we became an entity that neither of us could ever be separately. Maybe we became one with the universe or perhaps we were absorbed within part of it as a swimmer was absorbed in water. Our molecules altered so that we were able to travel hitherto unseen paths. Whatever there was between us and our destination vanished, or we might have simply slipped between spatial debris.

I didn't see the corridor, or what I called the pipeline, with my natural vision. I sensed it was there or I was as aware of its presence as I was of the cat under my thighs. A ravenous predator at home, Wyala became an intellectual in D, a mind enhanced by a part of me, a hungry, searching, curious brain that enjoyed romps through the unknown as much as I.

Besides the endless passageway stretching through space there were many tributaries that I often used because they were short routes within worlds or between two worlds. I used one of the tribs now to see if Wy and I could get away from the Kriff. Sitting on a mountaintop while they bore down on us astride their curious hobs, I hunted in my own head or in the ether about me until I spotted a trib.

"See it?" I said to Wyala. "Let's take it and see if we can lose these bums."

It didn't work. We blitzed into the tributary whose walls were like white wool, rocketed along the center line and exited when I kicked my beast in the ribs. Snarling at me because she had already picked up my intent, she went rear-first around a column of fire, eased down into a pale blue sky and drifted onto a snowbank.

We sat in cold white stillness and waited to see what the Kriff planned to teach us that day. They taught us that we couldn't lose them by traveling through tributaries.

"Do you suppose they're good in the pipeline?" I said, referring to the big corridor, "I don't see how else we can get rid of them. Of course they may be just as good as we are, except that I doubt it. Don't you?"

Wyala agreed with everything I said and did but only as long as our souls were merged.

The Kriff belched from the sky on their brooms, landed too solidly in a deep pile of snow and sank out of sight. Before the male disappeared he shot at me with a gun that sent a jagged piece of glass flying past my head.

"Just for that they're going to be left behind in smoke!" I said. "Come on, pal, let's skip!"

In and out of spatial tributaries we darted like fleas gone mad, up and down, out of one and around into another, and I wasn't exactly congratulating myself for being adept but neither did I belittle my efforts. That was until I realized the aliens were still behind us. They were obviously as adept at skipping as I. Or nearly. Wyala let me know she was also surprised by snarling.

"It's weird," I said, sitting back on her and looking up at the sky. We were on or in a red ball of gas, or rather we were in D while sitting on part of the world, otherwise we would have fried.

This time the uglies came at us from different directions, plainly hoping to trap me in between. "Let's hit the big one and go fast!" I said to my companion. She sprang straight for the pipeline like a brown javelin, her fierce muzzle pointed forward along with her front feet while her tail fluttered in the breeze of flame and fire.

I intended to get into the big passageway, skip as rapidly as I could and maybe dart down along a trib before the Kriff could spot us. It ended up far better than I had imagined. Wyala and I saw the entrance at the same time, penetrated the heavy mist and headed for distance as the aliens closed in behind. They hit the walls of the corridor and bounced so hard the shock nearly dislodged me from my seat on the gambler's back. For a second I thought a massive lightning bolt had touched the passageway. I sensed the openings rejecting my pursuers. No, that wasn't it. The openings didn't do anything. The fact was that the Kriff had missed them and crashed into the wall.

Wy and I waited for them to correct their trajectory, maybe back up a bit and try again for an entrance. Instead they

backed and made some blind stabs at nearby tribes. I could almost see them in my mind, feeling along all the byways ahead of and around them, I could even sense their discomfort and pain caused by the collision against a solid wall.

“That’s one funny thing,” I said to my cat. “They can’t get into this pipeline. Why do you suppose that is?”

Skipping through the big conduit wasn’t the same as trib jumping. For one thing, a moment or three inside it meant that Wy and I moved all the way through several worlds without touching any of them. This meant that we had succeeded in losing the uglies. No tributary covered this much space, so within a few instants I was many worlds away from my enemies.

I didn’t know if those several worlds represented light-years of distance and in fact I wasn’t sure what a light-year was. I didn’t think I was world-skipping. The planets in the sky of Earth weren’t the planets Wyala and I loved. We were in D where the naked eye never penetrated, where sounds never reached human ears and where reason sometimes stood on its head.

“One thing I learned today,” I said to Wyala. “Talent isn’t the same thing with different people.”

“Seems not.”

“These airheads back there couldn’t see the openings into this place. That has to be why they crashed. We practically led them in by the hand and they went stone blind.”

My gamber rumbled in her throat like faraway thunder.

“Do you think their molecules are that different from ours?” I said. “Sure, probably they are, but they’re as solid as we so there’s no reason why the corridor wouldn’t let them in. No, I figure they couldn’t see the doors. You and I, pal, we’re special.”

Chapter 2

It was about a week later and an afternoon of skipping about in D with Wyala had made me hungry. We chased an unearthly wind around an unearthly planet before calling it quits and touching down on a quiet, peaceful world of heady air and sunshine. A small forest surrounded by rolling green hills and a silvery rill that split the wooded section into fragrant halves lured us. While my cat had a long drink of water I walked to the edge of the trees to survey the fields. There were miles of them and they looked exactly like an ocean. Contentedly I turned back to Wyala.

My empty stomach reminded me to look for a fruit tree. Right away I spotted one and began to climb. It was bigger than it looked from the ground, suddenly splayed out in all directions above the other growths, its limbs reaching over the forest like fingers. Whether or not its yellow fruit was edible I had yet to find out. Far out on a limb fat globules swayed in the breeze and it was toward them that I worked my way, erect at first but eventually kneeling. Finally I lay on my belly and scooted.

Usually I let food on other worlds alone because it sometimes made me sick. Today I planned to have a mere taste of one of the yellow balls, just enough to tell me if I liked the flavor. One little taste.

There I was literally out on a limb, flat on my stomach high above a tight little woods, and out went my hand to pluck a fat fruit. Luckily it exploded before I could draw it to my mouth, otherwise I might have been blinded. Fright and astonishment caused me to lose what little grip I had on the limb, and I plunged through a variety of foliage until I crashed hard on the ground. Various outcroppings had helped to break my fall; besides, I was fortunate enough to land on the single patch of thick grass in the clearing.

Seated around a small open fire was a group of some two dozen people and I sensed rather than saw that all of them weren’t of the human variety. As a matter of fact, none of them were. My real attention was focused on a grim-visaged man who stood glaring at me as if I were a boil that had suddenly popped out on him, he had mean slanted eyes, a cruel mouth, a hard body and a mind like an anvil.

“What the devil!” he said in my mind. Menacing, he was, bigger than anyone needed to be, and overly intolerant.

One thing you could say for me was that in time of peril I was a quick thinker. I didn’t need two shakes to assure me

that this bunch would take to me no better than the Kriff.

“Wyala!” I bawled silently, still flat on my back. A rock gouged my thigh and brought tears to my eyes. It was possible that my head was broken from the fall. Certainly I saw stars and experienced the bitter gall of having dropped in on potentially dangerous strangers without being invited or expected.

Nobody blinked or moved until the gambler came charging through the trees. I doubt if anyone in the group had ever seen a member of her species and for all they knew she intended to help herself to a haunch. Anvil-brain took one look at her from the corner of his eye and leaped for me but I had moved by then, slid like a snake out of reach. He fell on his face, cursed and blindly groped for me. One thing he wanted was for me not to get away.

My feelings were just the opposite. While everyone tried to move at once, yelling, complaining, colliding, and while the black-eyed pirate on the ground kept trying to grab a part of me, I did what came naturally. Straight up into the air I jumped and came down with my legs spread wide enough to fit onto Wyala’s back. Who cared if it wasn’t an elegant landing and who cared if I hung from her like a gape as she took off skyward? In D we loved one another, or practically, and I wouldn’t have let go of her for anything.

“After her!” cried the guy with the hatchet personality, and those people showed me their mettle in a hurry. Pastured nearby was a herd of the most outlandish living vehicles I had ever imagined and every one of them covered the distance between themselves and their riders in a prompt manner.

“Don’t let her get away!” yelled the big man. I didn’t know why he was so annoyed with me for interrupting his meeting. After all it was a free universe, or it was as far as I was concerned, and if he didn’t like me he could eat my dust.

It was the closest call I ever had in my life, at home or abroad. Imagine being surrounded by two dozen enemies who loathed your soul and intended to strangle you in their ire. On all sides of me they rode and tried to squeeze me between them and some of their determination got through to me. I felt my confidence drain away.

From Wyala’s mind came the dry message that I was panicking and while it wasn’t something I needed to hear it served to partially unscramble my thoughts. The man with the mean soul came through D on a hob that looked like a crocodile, his hands reaching to grab me while his big legs held tight to his beast. Wyala reared back as the croc opened its mouth and showed us two ridges of large teeth.

“Blink,” I said to my cat and we popped out of their midst. Naturally they swallowed my trail but at least they were behind me now and I found a bit of breathing space. At the moment I didn’t feel as if my brain was getting fed at all but I skipped straight for some tribs at my best speed, while at the same time I carried on a calm conversation with my companion.

“Do you think we can lose them in the tribs?” I said.

“I doubt it. Some of them seem more intelligent than the Kriff.”

“Right. We don’t have time for planning. What do we do?”

“You’re unusually dumb today. How did we lose the Kriff?”

“I remember, only how do we know it will work again?”

“We don’t”

Having made up our minds, we shot up into a red sky and bulleted into the corridor. Around us two dozen people tried to do the same thing and fell on their heads. By the time they collected their drifting hobs, my cat and I were twenty worlds away. They hadn’t been able to enter the pipeline either, just like the Kriff. The openings hadn’t made way for them. Maybe they thought they had been heading for a trib, maybe they thought that if I could enter the big corridor they could too, maybe they hadn’t even seen it.

Lightning crackled as each of them came up hard and drastically against the invisible barrier to get dumped. While they cursed, groaned and groped about for their companions, I hurtled toward freedom, laughing like a hyena. I knew the sounds drifted back along the passage where they could hear. If we ever met again they wouldn’t be at all friendly. It was all right with me. Who cared? No one interfered with me and if I interfered with anyone it was strictly by accident. It was my life and I would live it the way I pleased.

It was getting toward time for me to go back to the dump but as usual we had to make one last stop before we hit the

main trib, a kind of dessert for a pair of heedless rovers. We quarreled about where we would go, Wyala preferring a world with plenty of juicy little mammals while I opted for beauty. We compromised with a little place that contained both.

Down onto a grassy plateau we went where the air was warm and sweet and the breeze was like balm on our faces. If it hadn't been that I could sneak vacations like this I think I probably would have gone off my head. The dump was so impersonal that I felt as if there were a wall between me and the other kids. My hob treated me better than any human ever did.

While she went off to chase something in a patch of weeds, I wandered in the direction of a lake and then was brought up short when I saw a man wading ashore. He wasn't really a man yet but was closer to my age, tall and handsome with a perfect physique and curly brown hair. He wore a brief swim suit.

Hiding in the weeds, I watched him. Perhaps I would go swimming with him in a little while. He looked friendly and oh-so-attractive as he walked across the sand toward me. His things lay on the beach, clothes, towel, some other articles.

It seemed that I wasn't going to get to swim with him after all. He was finished for the day and proceeded to dress. With keen interest I observed.

While I was making up my mind as to how to approach him he walked to the edge of a wood to a tethered animal. It was a large gray wolflike creature with a leather muzzle covering most of its face.

I looked about for Wyala but she was nowhere to be seen. I hoped she was nearby in the weeds. The youth untied his hob, swung aboard its back and blinked out of the world.

"Wy!" I yelled, racing through the high grass and getting more frustrated by the moment. Of all the times for her to have gone chasing a rabbit, or this planet's equivalent of a rabbit! What I wanted to do was skip in a hurry, follow the boy and find out where he lived. It was just possible that he was from Earth.

It wasn't to be, at least not that day. Wyala finally came back, gasping and exhausted, having been outraced by whatever had taken her fancy. She was also annoyed with me for having interrupted her sport. Loping up to me, she took my hand between her teeth and made marks on the skin.

"You don't feel any meaner than I do," I said, straddling her and blinking us into D. Lazily we swam through space while a wind tousled our hair. "You make me tired," I said to Wy, squeezing her ribs with my knees. "There are things besides rabbits. Boys, for instance. Good looking ones."

She gave me a dirty look and showed me a mental picture of her family back home in a cave.

"I know all about that," I said. "Three pups, two girls and a boy, and a husband who's a good pupsitter. But just because you're all settled down and uninterested in romance doesn't mean I'm the same. After this, when I call I want you to come right away and I don't want you wandering off anywhere. What if one of those Kriff or some other alien had been about to attack me? What would you do if I got killed on one of these foreign worlds? You'd never get back home. Or what if I got killed at home? Where would you find another skipping buddy?"

Wyala snarled at the terrible thoughts I had given her, tried to nip my leg, bucked like a horse. She didn't want to lose me. We didn't want to lose each other. Separately we were poor souls doomed to wander a solitary planet. Together we had a round-trip ticket to whatever lay beyond the pales of Earth.

Chapter 3

Mrs. Asel had an active dislike for me and took no pains to hide the fact. "You were late for dinner," she said, scarcely opening her clam mouth. When she wanted to she could be heard all over the orphanage. Concentration camp. Dump.

"Yes, ma'am. I was out playing and fell and hit my head. It knocked me out for about an hour."

She didn't bother sneering. "Naturally, that explains it. Where have you been since Friday evening? This is Sunday night and you haven't been seen during all that time?"

“Sure I was.” I sat in the chair in front of her desk and tried not to squirm. “I was in and out of the place at least a hundred times.”

“Look at you. Filthy, ragtag—”

“Incorrigible, too.”

She was tall and skinny with hard eyes and a pinched nose. Her dark hair was clipped so short there wasn't much to cover her head. She always wore a blue uniform except when she was in bed. It was like herself, clean and wholesome on the outside. Had she been the violent type I would have had a backside whip-striped east, west and crooked.

“Don't tell me you weren't skipping to other worlds,” she said, her mouth twisting in contemptuous amusement.

“I shouldn't have told you all that stuff. It was a bunch of lies, just like you thought, but I was at an imaginative age then. I ain't been doing nothing but walking around in the hills.”

“And not studying your English.” Mrs. Asel picked up a pencil and began tapping it in an irritated fashion on the desk top. “You look like a bum. Don't appear in my office again in such a frightful state.”

“I won't. It's just that I like to obey in a hurry and when Twilly told me you wanted to see me—”

In a dry voice she said, “Simply listen to me and don't talk because all you do is tell lies in street language. I don't care if you grow up totally illiterate. As far as I'm concerned, it will have been due to your own choice. I believe people should get what they want.” She leaned across the desk and impaled me with a cold stare. “Don't be late to class. Don't skip, and by that I mean don't be truant. The next time your seat shows up empty I'll set the dogcatcher on you.”

I sat waiting to see if she was finished with me. She wasn't.

“You didn't go on the class trip to the Ember estate yesterday.”

“I was unavoidably detained elsewhere.”

“Cornelia Ember has practically supported this institution with her generous contributions ever since she moved into the area several months ago, and when she requests that the tenth grade come and view her house and grounds that's what she means. Your roommate said you never had any intention of going.”

“How'd she know that? I never said nothing to her about it.”

“I feel sorry for Twila having to live in the same room with you.”

“I do, too. Maybe you could arrange to move her out.”

“Be still! This institution is mine to run and I'll run it as I see fit. Normally I ignore you. You're a poisonous individual who will never come to any half-decent end. However there are certain functions that I insist you attend and one of them is the weekly trip to the Ember estate. I don't believe you've gone once.”

“That's because the trips are on weekends. My own time is my own, ain't it? I mean ain't I free?”

Mrs. Asel laughed. Sitting back in her chair she regarded me with scorn. “What you are is an orphan. Nobody has a claim on you except the government. I work for the government and that means you belong to me. It's a revolving state of affairs, I'll admit.”

“I'm still free, though.”

“Freedom, freedom! What is it but an obligation to make a hundred choices a day? You do nothing but eat the place out of house and home and torment me. Get out of here. Don't let me hear any more negative reports concerning you.”

She made me pause at the door.

“You won't like the dogcatcher. Take my word for it. Only once in a blue moon do I have to assign him to a student. See that you don't earn his companionship.”

The orphanage, or dump as I liked to think of it, was huge and rambling twenty acres of buildings that housed the juvenile outcasts of civilization. Sometimes I wondered why they didn't have Humane Societies where people like me could be quietly put out of the way. As far as I knew I had lived on this property all my life. Walking across the causeway from the Administration building, wondering why Mrs. Asel detested me, I entered a long, single-storied building and headed for my room.

My roommate, Twilly, was a cross between a thumb-sucker and a Cossack. When she wasn't trying to seduce Chucky the maintenance man she was busy making my life miserable.

"Oh, it's the liar," she said as I came in. Since I had a tendency to beat her up when she helped herself to my things, she removed my locket from around her neck and tossed it onto my desk. "What stupid worlds did you fly to over the weekend?"

"None of your business" I stripped, kicked my clothes into a closet and headed for the bathroom where I had a shower.

"You should have gone to the Ember mansion," she said when I came out.

"What for?"

"It's so fabulous it makes my head spin."

"Any number of things do that."

Twilly sat cross-legged on her bed and ate chocolates. If she kept eating candy she wouldn't be seducing anyone by and by, or vice versa. "Mrs. Ember is really a dumb old broad."

"I hear she isn't even forty."

"Like I said, she's an old broad. Dumb blue eyes just like yours. The kind of perfect looks I hate. For some reason she likes me. She had us all stand in a room as big as a football stadium and then she walked up and down looking at all the girls. Staring, really. It was weird."

"Why does she like you?"

"How do I know and who cares? I'd kiss her feet for what it costs her to have her hedges trimmed. She's got so much money she can like whoever she wants."

"Whomever."

"Oh, shut up. I make better grades in English than you do."

"But I know the most English. And history, geography, math, literature, foreign languages, et cetera. Whatever there is in this universe, dum-dum, I know more about it than you."

Twilly was pretty in a vapid way, long yellow hair, light blue eyes, fair skin, but she was a little bit stupid and never knew when to come out of the rain. "There's one subject you'll never know as much about as me," she said with a contented smile.

"It takes no brains, otherwise you'd be short in that department too."

For the umpteenth time that day one of my fellow men regarded me with scorn. "You're so icky. Such an ick."

"Careful or I'll smack you."

"That's part of what I mean. Instead of being feminine you're a sloppy sod always threatening to punch people, wearing disgusting boots and tramping in the woods like a pioneer or a clod. Why don't you act like a lady?"

"What for?"

"See?" said Twilly. "You don't even know what boys are."

"I know what they are. They're people just like you and me."

“You’re pitiful, do you know that? Really sorrowful.” She was practiced at getting my goat. Instead of slugging her as I wanted to, I climbed into the top bunk and got under the covers. My stomach growled to remind me that I hadn’t eaten lately. Tough. The kitchen was like Mrs. Asel’s mouth most of the time; clam-tight. It reminded me that I would have to make an attempt to get back before dinner. Back from skipping. Sighing, I closed my eyes.

Was I dreaming or did I feel the jetstream of a wild and woolly world tugging at my hair? Twilly kicked the underside of my bunk to tell me I was snoring.

Chapter 4

In spite of my good intentions I didn’t remain a good little orphan for long. Perhaps if the weather had been decent; I don’t know, but it was filthy outside, rained cats and dogs, thundered, flashed lightning, generally made me feel lonely and neglected.

All I ever needed was the barest hint of an excuse and away I went like a hummingbird in the springtime, flitting empty-headedly, paying no attention to where I was going. With breakfast already half-digested and lunch filling my belly, I turned left in the science building instead of right, burst through the door, ran to the dorm and got my bike out of the basement.

Ten miles out of town the wooded trails began. I parked my vehicle under a tree and hiked the rest of the way to the valley of the gambers.

No one knew how they found their way into the seclusion of the foothills. It was an accepted fact that their ancestors had escaped from circuses and zoos. More intelligent than ordinary lions, the gambers hid away from people and minded their own business. Since no one ever came to the foothills, they were left alone, though their presence was known.

The herd was accustomed to seeing me but they still remained aloof, backed into a tight group while they showed me their teeth. There were about three dozen of them, of all sizes, dark brown or black, not overly aggressive toward people but supposedly impossible to tame.

Wyala came trotting out of a cave in a hillside, snarling at a few brethren who barred her path.

“Hurry up, I’m getting wet!” I called. I had to wait for her to come to me since I hesitated to go near the others. As long as I didn’t want to ride them they had little use for me. However, all I had to do was beckon to one with my mind and it would hasten to lie at my feet. I liked to think that nature had seen fit to create them and me at the same time.

Wyala came away from them and we ran into a dusty field. “I just skipped science class so why don’t we go do some makeup work?” I said. Easily I swung my leg over her back and grabbed her ruff. Without moving an inch we flickered out of Earth, sat there in the field that had suddenly become a prowling mist of what I sometimes believed might be all the spirits of the dead, not just people but everything. It touched us with clammy fingers, reminded us that we carried a little bit of home with us like a pocket of breathing space.

After a few moments the mist blew away, leaving us standing in the middle of a great expanse of nothing. I wanted to test the mettle of my strange universe, traverse its length and breadth and find out how far it went “Never mind all those little tribes,” I said to my hob. “It’s the pipeline I’m interested in today.”

We didn’t have to look at the network of tributaries but they were in evidence whenever we wanted to see them. They were like the veins in a muscle or the tracks on a roadmap, raised and real, pulsating like blood vessels, closed-in corridors, and they were everywhere around us. They crisscrossed thousands of others and each led to a destination.

“Let’s go,” I said and Wyala leaped like a hart straight up into the vacuum toward the pipeline stretching like a filmy conduit high above us. “Slow down!” I said and she sensed my intent. Maybe if we didn’t blast into the corridor like a tank we would be able to see just how it was that we got into it in the first place.

“Beats me,” I said, hovering just outside a misty wall. I could sense the thickness of the passageway, measured it in my mind, knew that the density of the walls was about a hundred yards. Nowhere in it was there a doorway.

“How do we get in it?” said Wy. She lashed her tail because she was frustrated.

“I thought it was full of openings. Do you see any thin places in the mist?”

“Nope. It’s all thick.”

“Nothing different about any of it?”

“Well, it’s possible.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you were the attentive sort you’d use your ears more than your mouth.”

“My ears?” I said.

“Listen. Hush now.”

I cocked my head and waited for a strain of music, a thump, any kind of sound to reach me. “What I hear is your grunting and puffing!”

“Hush. Be at peace. Don’t be aggressive.”

That had to be a joke coming from her of the dripping fangs, but I did as she suggested, sat back on her kidneys and thought of grayness. All I could hear was the old familiar cadence of D.

“I hear nothing but the beat,” I said.

Licking her chops, Wy nodded. “What beat?”

“Just the plain old one that’s always here. You know. The beat. It drowns out all other soft sounds.”

“Exactly what I’m talking about and I’m gratified that I noticed it before you did.”

“What do you mean?”

“The beat, child! It changes whenever we approach this corridor. In fact, it changes every time we even think of this place. I never noticed it until now.”

She was right. Sitting on her ample back I let the tum-tum-tum of sound wash into my ears and on through my head like water. The beat was always there in D like a distant pair of lungs drawing air in and out. Tum-tum-tum, except that now it was slightly different. It seemed faster. The beats were shorter. Ta-ta-ta.

“I hear it but I don’t see what it has to do with anything,” I said. “I’ll admit it sounds different now and I’ll admit that you noticed it first. All the same I’m wondering how we get through that wall.”

“Remember the Kriff? And those other people who chased us? They couldn’t get into the corridor after us. Did you wonder why?”

“Of course I wondered why!” Gammers were a species that loved to ramble and never got to the point.

“So nothing,” she said. “You asked me if I sensed anything different. I just did.”

I took time to think about it. “It’s possible you found the answer. Maybe the Kriff and those other people couldn’t sense the change of beat. Maybe it’s a molecular alternation in D or something.” I frowned and shook my head. “I don’t know. It sounds far-fetched. There’s something subtle about this pipeline. I mean, why can we hear something others can’t. We’re all skippers, aren’t we?”

“But obviously not equally endowed.”

I thought about it all the way through the corridor and back again until finally I became interested in what I was doing. The big passageway was full of spooks who whispered in my head like so many dead prayers—not that I heard any words but the feelings were there. It was one of the reasons Wyala and I seldom lingered inside but always traveled through it in a hurry. Today there was a lesson to be learned and I intended to learn it.

It took a long time and many trips back and forth but we finally understood. It was all a matter of our realizing that we kept passing through a world that stank to high heaven. It didn't require much time for us to penetrate the smelly planet and then return to it once again, in about one hundred seconds, to be more or less exact. At last it dawned on me that we were traveling in a circle.

The stinky world wasn't full of rotting corpses. In fact its atmosphere was breathable if one didn't mind how badly it smelled. There were one hundred planets forming a wheel, nearly touching one another on two sides, with Earth sixteen globes past the smelly one in one direction and eighty-three past it in the opposite direction. Within the circle between the planets and within the planets themselves lay webbed networks of tributaries along which I and other skippers could travel while the pipeline bored straight through the one hundred like a core. What, if anything, lay beyond the circle of worlds was a matter that didn't occur to me. I was too absorbed in my conceit at having accomplished as much as I had.

"Not that I know what it all means," I said to my hob. "Do you suppose the shape ever changes?"

"I doubt it. It's too big."

"Am I talking to myself?" We were on the smelly world sitting on a hill in the midst of some red, horrendous clouds. Why we kept touching down on that planet I didn't know. Maybe it made it easy to concentrate on subjects other than one's nose. It was an automatic thing to let down your guard and sniff the environment, somewhat like sticking your nose out of a scarf on a wintry day. It was something you simply had to do. The air here was and at the same time wasn't fit for consumption but Wy and I still popped into it. Had it been a totally poisonous atmosphere we wouldn't have tried to breathe it. How did we know the difference beforehand? We just did. Our one mind could sense things that our separate selves never could have.

Wyala answered me in a dry manner. "Most of the time you talk to yourself because you love the Sound of your own mind but in this case you're having a conversation with me. Some of those ideas you just turned over were mine."

We moved away to a red desert world full of sun and large lizards that sat all day on big flat rocks without moving. At night they crawled about foraging for food, but as soon as the sun broke over the horizon they climbed back upon their rocks and didn't budge for twenty hours. Not that Wyala and I stayed long enough to find that out, but we had been there many times before. It was the most peaceful place in D, which was what I called the circle of worlds. It wasn't a universe, or dot a 3-D universe. It was simply D and the lizards' home was a place to go if you needed tranquility and an opportunity to think.

Like one of the lizards, I lay on a flat rock and tried to stare at the sun. Sweat popped out all over me and I began to gasp.

"Those creatures are at least a century old, I'll bet," said Wy, hiding under an outcropping of stone. "Think how thick their hides must be."

"Their eyes ought to be boiled by now," I said. I rolled into the shade laid my head on the gambler's belly and went to sleep. As I drifted off I kept telling myself that I had to get back home in time for dinner, otherwise Twilly would report me to Mrs. Asel who in turn might set the dogcatcher on me. Whoever or whatever that was.

I dreamed that I was a mutt being chased along a dark Street by a figure whose features never became clear. He was tall and menacing and in his hand he carried a big net.

Later Wyala and I walked up a sandy ridge and down the other side in time to come across an astonishing sight. A youth with curly brown hair wearing flowing yellow pantaloons and a yellow shirt used a sword with a curved blade to hack a lizard to pieces.

Wyala knocked him to the ground, straddled his body and waited for a signal from me to tear out his throat

"No, let him up," I said.

"A wise decision," said the youth, leaping erect and dusting himself off. "I kill only for food."

"He's lying," Wy said silently to me. "Those lizards are too tough for anything or anyone to eat."

"I've seen you before," I said, not ignoring my bob but reserving her opinion for later consideration. "It was on a world of green hills and a silver lake."

"I wish I could stay and discuss it and other things," he said. "Unfortunately, I'm in a hurry."

He reminded me of a preening peacock strutting about before us. Distance hadn't taken away from his appearance at all. He was every bit as good-looking up close. Looking at me, he said, "Would you like to be a member of my harem?"

That was just like my luck. Always bad. I turned him down.

He collected his hob, which was tethered to a rock behind a dune. It still wore the leather muzzle and as it looked my way I could have sworn it telegraphed a message of anguish and pain.

"My name is Dandy," said the youth. He swung into skipping position. "It was a pleasure to meet you both." In a flash he winked out of our sphere, leaving behind the spoils of his sport for us to dispose of.

"You should have let me finish him," Wyala said. She lay down on the sand to watch me work.

I used the sword to dig a hole, after which I shoved the lizard in it and covered it up. I sprinkled sand over the blood.

"He might have been going to eat it," I said.

"You don't believe a word of that otherwise you would have let him have back his sword."

"How could I? You were sitting on it."

"I would have moved on your order."

"Be quiet!" I said. "Do you think I'm fool enough to give up a weapon to someone like him?"

"My feelings exactly. He had just finished shedding blood and the lust might still have been upon him."

I buried the sword beside a rock. "Let's forget all about it, okay?"

"I can do that quite easily."

In a grumpy mood I stomped across the sand away from the grave. Suddenly turning, I was about to vent my negative emotions on my innocent companion when something in the atmosphere far above me captured my attention. "I smell a rat," I said.

"A big fat one. Riders are coming."

"And a lot of them." In four strides I reached Wy and jumped on her back. Why hang around to identify the people who were approaching? If they were enemies, I wanted no part of them, and I had no friends out here, so it seemed wise to clear out. A band of Kriff closed in behind me as I blinked and jumped tributaries.

"That pretty boy sicked them on us," said Wyala. She was climbing a fat purple cloud in preparation for leaping toward a narrow conduit of fog.

"How could he do that? He was human."

"There's an old saying that birds of a feather flock together but they don't always look alike on the outside."

"Just concentrate on getting us out of here!"

I didn't know if she was right in thinking Dandy sent the uglies after us. If he wanted me for his harem I don't suppose he wanted me dead. Or maybe he was in a snit because I turned him down. Actually, I thought he was in a snit because we discovered him at his grisly play. Hacking a harmless lizard to death called for a special frame of mind.

We lost the Kriff by darting into the pipeline and out again. Just as I was beginning to think we were in pretty good shape we touched down on a quiet little world practically in the middle of a pack of them.

I hadn't expected it. As far as I knew they all live on the planet of blue lakes and had no business being here by a campfire cooking a pot of spinach greens.

As if shot from a cannon Wy and I blitzed up and away but not before one of them got off a lucky shot with his glass gun. The shard hit me in the fleshy part of my left shoulder and I immediately began flooding Wyala with blood.

“Don’t panic,” I told her. “Just skip into the pipeline.”

A few seconds of traveling in the big corridor freed us of our pursuers and then the gambler headed for home. I was beginning to feel lousy.

“No, I can’t go there,” I said. It was all I could do to hang onto her. My back felt as if it were splitting.

“Why not?”

“I can’t take you to the dump and I can’t walk. Do you remember that planet where all those people were having a meeting? Let’s go there.”

She didn’t like it but she had to do it since she couldn’t think of a better idea. Straight through the pipeline we flew and exited at the right trib, rocketed down onto a field of ripe hay where we paused to search the premises with our senses.

There was no one in the woods today, but a couple of miles away were some houses. A small group of people sat on some fallen logs while the man with the slanty eyes talked to them. My hob grounded before them and I slid off her into the grass.

“Sorry!” I said. “I sure hope my instincts about you folks are right. You see, it was this way, my hob and I—” Suddenly I was feeling worse than lousy. Spots gathered in front of my eyes and I knew I was in danger of passing out. My last thought was of Mrs. Asel. I was going to be late for dinner.

Chapter 5

The leader’s name was Westman and he didn’t trust me. They had to let Wyala lie in the sick room beside my bed before I consented to talk to them. None of us spoke the same language but because of the unique relationship we had with our hobs we were able to carry on a strange kind of think-speech.

For instance, when Westman asked me who I was I showed him a mental picture of a rich kid living on a grassy estate with a high gate all around the perimeter. Then I showed him myself trembling in fear at the sight of his hob. The big croc stood on legs three feet high and took up most of one side of the room. It had evil yellow eyes, shiny and intelligent, as if it knew I was lying. For the life of me, I couldn’t accept it as a skipper’s companion. It belonged in some swamp terrorizing tourists.

“She’s a smart aleck,” Westman said to his lady friend.

“Not necessarily. She’s young and she’s too hurt to be making up stories.” Sitting on the bed beside me, the woman said, “Where’s your homeworld, honey?”

“I don’t know.” The hand on my arm was warm and gentle but I didn’t want it. She was an alien, and how did I know she wasn’t preparing to take a bite out of me? Dressed in dark tights and blouse, she was a very beautiful person. Her eyes were almond-shaped like Westman’s but her features were delicate and lovely whereas his might have been hewn from stone.

“My home is somewhere in the orange tribes,” I said to her. “How badly am I hurt?”

“A scratch,” said Westman. “Well, maybe a little more than that. Roula cleaned it and applied a bandage. You’ll have no trouble with it. Where in the orange tribes do you come from? Surely you can be specific.”

“I don’t see how. Me and my hob just skip and sort of find the right way. It’s mostly hunt and feel. You see, I’m not too brainy. I just happen to have a little talent.”

“Is that so?” He stood with his hand on the monster croc looking as if he wanted to drag me from the bed and pound on my head. “Let’s have another picture of that estate where you live.”

I showed it to him and immediately felt his mind go ferreting around the edges of my nice little home scene. He was trying to break through my concentration and see what lay beyond the big house and gates. For a few moments I resisted before letting a corner fray and finally cave in. Then he saw a picture of a desert dotted with shacks. All the

people wore rags and traded whatever they had to stay alive. I made them look as stupid as possible.

He withdrew from my mind with a sneer on his face.

“The trouble with you is that you’re too suspicious,” said Roula.

“That’s because something tells me I ought to be where she’s concerned. You do the talking for a while.”

Again Roula touched me. “Now, dear, I don’t want to upset you but I hope you won’t mind telling us what you know about the Kriff.”

“I wouldn’t mind, except I never heard of any. What is it?”

“The people who wounded you. They like to use glass guns.”

“Them! Heck, I don’t know nothing about them. Every once in a while I cross their path. I call ’em uglies. They are, wouldn’t you say?”

“How did you happen to meet them?”

“I run into one on the trail. Let’s see, I think it was when I was skipping through a world that stinks like something rotten. His hob sort of bit my hob. A traffic accident.”

“This hob of his, what was it like?”

“A broomstick.”

She smiled. I sneaked a glance at Westman, who was scowling. He usually did that whenever he looked at me.

“Then what happened?” asked Roula.

“I can’t trust my beast, you see. She’s not even half civilized and she tried to nip that ugly. Naturally he took offense. Most offensive fella I ever saw. We had a quarrel right then and there on the trib and after I whipped him and nearly knocked him off his stick he pulled a gun and shot me.”

“And you came here among friends,” said Westman. “You didn’t want to go back to that fancy home full of servants who wait on you hand and foot. You’d rather have the help of strangers.”

I tried to raise up off the bed but my shoulder threatened to explode. “You was closer!” I croaked.

He gave me a cold stare. “For some reason you’re trying to make me think you’re illiterate or stupid. Why?”

I gave him my puzzled expression.

He made Roula get up, take her beast and leave the room. Then he gave me the third degree.

I knew it was the subject he had been interested in all along. He didn’t really care where I came from because he didn’t intend to let me go. He thought he had all the time in the world to break through my defenses and pick my inferior brain to pieces.

“What wall?” I said.

The one he and his friends had crashed into when they were chasing me the first time we met.

“Oh, that! I didn’t know there was any wall. Where was it? You’re the one who did the crashing, while all I did was skip. Are you telling me there’s a wall out there in D?”

I could tell he was mad by the way his nose went thin.

“You’re pretending to be dense,” he said. “I’m not buying it. You’re one devil of a skipper. Not only have you outrun the Kriff but you’ve outrun the cream of the civilized dimension.”

“Who might they be?” I asked innocently.

Was that a flush rising on his temples? “You’re looking at one of them.”

“You mean you folks? Are you that good? What are you talking about when you say the civilized dimension?”

“The worlds in D. There are one hundred of them shaped like a wheel. Didn’t you know that?”

I looked at him from a different angle. If he and his friends had learned about the circle when they were unable to use the pipeline but only the tribes, they must be better than I thought. “I don’t know much about anything,” I said. “I’m just a servant in that big place I live in. I pretended it belonged to me but it doesn’t. Sometimes I tell lies.”

He looked hot and sweaty. “When we chased you that day where did you go?”

“Home.”

“Yes, but how?”

“Tribes.”

“You mean the ordinary trails?”

“Sure,” I said.

“But you didn’t go that way. We were right behind you and you left the tribes altogether. You jumped clear out of them and when we tried to come after you we slammed into an invisible wall of some kind.”

“That’s strange. You don’t reckon there’s some kind of wall protecting my world?”

“No, I don’t think that!” His voice grew soft again but no less menacing. His attempt at a smile was more like a prune trying to pucker. “You’re either very talented or there’s something fishy going on. Actually, I think it’s both. You can drop the dumb little girl act. How old are you anyhow? Eighteen? Nineteen?”

Now he had my full attention. Did I really look that grown-up? Wyala suddenly closed her teeth on my hand. The pain made me take a second look at Westman. What a cunning rascal he was!

“Since I’m an orphan, I don’t know how old I am,” I said, immediately regretting my words.

“So you’re an orphan, eh? Nobody wants you, is that it?” Almost at once he said, “I’m sorry, I touched a raw nerve there, didn’t I?”

“You didn’t touch nothing, mister. Why don’t you go soak your head?”

“Really, I’m sorry I said it.”

“Who cares? I don’t know nothing about talent, fish or any wall and I’m tired of answering questions. if you ain’t a good skipper it’s no fault of mine. Next time you chase somebody make sure you know what you’re doing.”

He slammed out and left me alone to stew in my own bitter juice.

“He’s the worst dissembler I’ve ever met, next to you,” said Wyala.

“I agree.”

“Boy, is he slick! Not for a second does he scarcely believe anything you’ve said.”

“I know it. I can’t figure it. I’m pretty practiced at lying.”

“It’s because he has a one-track mind. All he’s interested in is that you and I went somewhere that he and the others couldn’t follow. He aims to get answers, kid.”

“And I aim to get away from here. How long was I unconscious?”

“Not long. They let you smell some knock-out stuff while they worked on your shoulder. How does it feel?”

“Well enough for us to go home. You can drop me near the dump and then sneak away.”

“We can’t go right now. He laid a tether on me. I’m tied to the wall.”

“With a chain or rope?”

“I don’t know what it is.”

“Can you bite through it?”

“Probably.”

I sank back and relaxed. “They aren’t so bright if they didn’t check out your teeth.”

“They tried. I discouraged them.”

Roula came in and gave me a glass of water. “My brother is tough only on the outside. Inside he’s altogether different.”

“Except that I never get to see it.” I groaned and tried to move.

“Lie still,” she said. “You’ll start your wound bleeding again.”

“Is it bad?”

“It isn’t deep but it will bother you for a few days. About your being here, though, why didn’t you go home?”

“My hob is to blame. She brought me here.”

“While you were unconscious?”

“The last coherent message I gave her was to take me where I could get medical attention. How can I say why she did what she did? Probably she liked the looks of you people that first time we met.”

Roula studied me. “I can understand that in a way, but skipping isn’t possible unless both partners are alert.”

“Sure, it is. In fact I can skip a little all by myself as long as Wyala is somewhere nearby.”

“We all can, but not when we’re unconscious.”

“Maybe I wasn’t all the way out but was just dazed enough to give the wrong order. That must have been it.”

She went away and left me alone. In spite of myself, I drifted off to sleep and when I awakened I felt better.

“They’ve been in and out of here looking at you,” said Wy. “All of them. There’s a green man with wings and a nose like a bird. Or maybe he’s the hob and the walking mushroom he had with him was the man. I tell you we’ve fallen in with a weird bunch.”

“Have you tested that tether?”

“Yes, it’s a piece of cake.”

“Why would they be so careless?” I said.

“I don’t think that’s it. They don’t expect you to be traveling for a while.”

“I’m late for dinner. Mrs. Asel’s going to be mad at me.”

“Do you think Twilly reported you missing?”

“Naturally. She’s upset because nobody wants her.”

“Why take it out on you?” said Wy.

“Because I’m so available.”

For a while we remained separated. I looked around the room and saw how well-made it was, as good as the best I had seen at home. The walls were made of some kind of slick substance that looked exactly like fine wood. The ceiling was porous and full of light. The bed on which I lay was so exquisitely soft that I wanted to settle in it for the night.

“Better not,” Wyala warned, reading my mind.

“I wonder who these people are.”

“They’re patriots from all over.”

“Patriots? For what?”

“It would be more appropriate for you to ask against what. They’re a force that intends to hold back the Kriff. It seems there’s an invasion going on. The uglies originated on the stink planet. Honest! I’ve been lying here for hours listening to everyone talk. The Kriff started invading other worlds and these people are organizing a front to stop them.”

“Why bother? A lot of the worlds aren’t worth defending.”

“How about home?”

I shook my head impatiently. “You know that’s nonsense. No one will ever invade Earth. Come on, help me get up.”

“Are you sure you’re ready?”

“No, but I can’t stay here any longer. Mrs. Asel scares me more than Westman.”

“I thought no one scared you.”

“I wish, I wish,” I said. My wound was sore as a boil but I took my host’s word for it that it felt worse than it actually was. Like an arthritic old woman, I raised up in the bed, threw off the covers and rolled onto Wyala’s back.

“Uh, oh,” she said. “You’re backwards.”

I lifted my aching head and looked at her tail. “Who cares? I’m going to hold on with one arm and two legs. Can you read me?”

“Perfectly. Your rear is as communicative as your mouth.”

“Very funny,” I said.

The door flew open and Westman came in cussing. “No, you don’t!” he yelled in my mind. “Blasted little bit of space litter, you’ll be blamed well stay put!”

“Chew that rope,” I told Wyala.

Westman was in such a hurry to get to me that he tripped on the rug and fell. His hob came crawling toward me with its jaws wide and hungry.

“It’s a meat eater and I’m meat!” I yelled, my face in Wy’s fur.

“So am I!”

I could hear her teeth working at something and I wanted to turn my head to see if the croc had gotten around the bottom of the bed yet but the pain in my back was killing me so I kept my face hidden. If we skipped or if we got eaten it would be the same to the universe thousand years from now. Or even fifty.

There came a little jerk from somewhere by the wall and then Wyala let out a full-throated roar. I knew she was warlike by nature but prayed she wouldn’t feel compelled to stay and have a showdown with Westman’s hob.

He was crawling across the floor, turning the air blue with his cussing, while at the same time he reached for me.

“We’re going,” said Wy and together we blinked not a moment too soon. Westman’s nails raked my arm while the

croc's hot breath assailed my nostrils. Then we were in D, where things smelled fresh and where freedom was the best of all the gifts of nature. My rear end bounced high on Wy's neck with every motion she made but it wasn't too bad a trip, considering that the patriots hemmed us in on all sides.

Westman was in the lead riding his hideous beast, kicking it in the sides, leaning forward as he got ready to grab me. Probably he would have knocked my head off if he had gotten hold of me.

"Quit fooling around," I said to Wyala. "I have to get home before dawn. Head for the pipeline."

Westman and Roula tried to head me off, but it did no good because D had enough space in it to make almost any kind of maneuver possible. As they came at me in a lightening circle, I ducked underneath them like a submerging swimmer, and as they did backflips to try and catch me in a downward swoop, I changed direction and went straight back up between them again.

While they were doing somersaults Wy shot toward the corridor and literally dived into it.

I don't know if they tried to follow. Probably they made the attempt again and crashed. My back hurt so much I couldn't concentrate on anything else.

As gently as a cloud, Wyala landed on the lawn beside the dorm of home. "I wish I could carry you inside," she whispered.

Gingerly I swung to the ground, swayed for a second, held onto her and then let go. With a flick of her tail she headed out of town at a leisurely lope. She was a cunning, intelligent cat. By staying in the shadows she should have no trouble getting to the foothills.

It was late. Quietly I let myself in the front door, limped down the hall and entered my room. There was no way I could hope to climb onto the top bunk so I hauled the blankets onto the floor and slept there.

Twilly tossed in the lower bunk, snored, muttered under her breath, sucked her thumb and filled the room with the aroma of cheap perfume. If she hadn't had a tendency to fall out of bed I would have made her occupy the top bunk. In the moonlight coming through the window I could see that she was wearing my locket again.

Gradually I relaxed and let sleep come. Tomorrow and for a few days afterward I would have to be especially repentant, obedient and foot-kissy, otherwise Mrs. Asel would find some unpleasant way to keep me grounded.

The moon drifted away and then came back just as the door to the room opened. Half asleep, I blinked and peered at the tall dark figure standing on the threshold. Whoever it was wore a long cloak and a cowl over his head. It had to be a man. It was too tall for a woman. While I blinked blearily and tried to decide whether I was asleep and dreaming, he remained in the doorway looking at me.

When I blinked again he was gone and the door was shut. Carefully I turned onto my good side and closed my eyes. It must have been an illusion. He hadn't had a net in his hand but he was the same figure I had seen in my dream the night before. He was the dogcatcher.

Chapter 6

Nothing happened. I couldn't figure it out. All prepared to be a paragon of etiquette and good behavior, I could find no audience. Those who ordinarily would have cared what I did no longer seemed interested. Mrs. Asel failed to call me into her office and none of my teachers requested a special conference with me. The lack of conflict in my life became a source of great puzzlement to me. Was it possible that I was being written off by the powers as hopeless and beyond reclamation?

Fervently hoping this was the case, I attended classes, went to the library, showed up for all meals, was on time more often than not, with no one paying me any attention. Not a hue or cry was raised when I gave Twilly a black eye, which was truly out of the ordinary. Having discovered that I had a tender shoulder, she hauled off and gave me a whack that made me see red. Immediately I paid her back, expecting to be summarily placed in the dump's equivalent of solitary confinement or the torture rack. It turned out that I needn't have worried. Mrs. Asel was pretending that I didn't exist, perhaps in hopes that I would disappear like the bad weather.

"I'll forget about your punching me," Twilly said to me one evening after dinner.

I had been playing Miss Goody for so long my head ached. "I'm not forgetting anything you've ever done to me," I said. "Shut up and pretend I'm not here." I lounged in the windowseat reading Chaucer and snickering at all the bawdy parts.

"Why do you do it?" she said. My roommate sat on her tidy bunk creating a watercolor. Painting was her sole talent, in my opinion.

"Do what?"

"Pretend you're a dummy."

"Mind your own business."

She regarded me with scorn. "You've read everything in the library, you study textbooks for entertainment, I've yet to ask you a question on any subject you know nothing about. You know it all but you're flunking every course." Her expression grew shrewd. "You don't want to draw attention to yourself, do you? But you make Mrs. Asel mad by cutting all the time. Can't you make up your mind?"

I continued reading and enjoying it.

"If you want to know what I think, I think you've got a screw loose," she said.

"I don't want to know what you think."

"You're mad as society because you're an outcast, so you refuse to contribute anything. You know, it's nobody's fault that we're orphans."

"Dry up."

"Suit yourself." She hesitated. "How about letting me wear your locket Saturday?"

"A trip to the Embers again?"

"I want to look nice."

"Is she going to adopt you?"

A spasm of pain crossed Twilly's face. "I don't know why she singles me out. At first I thought it was because she liked me but now I'm not so sure. Most of the time we talk about this place."

After lights out I lay listening to her suck her thumb. During waking hours I alternated between laughing at her and longing to swat her but at night when she munched her digit and whined in her sleep I felt sorry for her. Like any young creature who hadn't had enough mothering, she was forever destined to travel insecure paths.

The dorm quieted and I lay listening to my own heartbeat. In my mind I hunted through the fields and valleys for Wyala. I thrust out with my consciousness and located her tenuous form slumbering in a cave beside her family. Could she sense me? Something awakened at the exact moment that my psyche went prowling through the ether for her. I could almost see her getting up and going to the cave mouth where she snarled at the moon.

With a contented sigh I relaxed in my bed. It would be a little while yet, after everyone was asleep, but when I was ready to skip, my hob would be waiting for me.

It was late when I climbed down to the floor. Without making a sound I dressed, slipped my door keys into my jeans pocket and opened the door. The long hallway was dark but at the end there glowed a faint light. Abruptly I was brought up short. Someone stood silhouetted against the light, a tall person wearing a dark cloak and a cowl over his head. He faced me in a motionless, menacing stance.

My heart thudding like a triphammer I stepped back into my room as quickly as I could and locked the door. Hastily I undressed and got into bed. Though the weather outside wasn't cold I had a freezer inside my body. Pulling the covers around me I lay shivering and shaking. Now I understood why Mrs. Asel had been ignoring me. Having had enough of my delinquencies she had gone ahead and did what she threatened to do. She had put the dogcatcher on

my trail.

I remained frightened until I grew angry. Then I felt more normal. Was I living in a police state that the director of this dump was entitled to scare me with some kind of boogeyman? Who was the man standing watch out there in the hallway? Why was he called the dogcatcher?

The next day after history class I sneaked away to the dorm, took the basement stairs three at a time and went hunting for my bike. I found it, for all the good it did me. It was chained to a water pipe.

That evening I filched a big pair of steel cutters from the toolbox in Chucky's locker. Craftily I sneaked down the dorm stairs and chopped the chain on my bike into a dozen pieces, which I left lying there on the floor.

I rode west as fast as I could go. Five miles out of town I sped down a dusty trail, rounded a big tree and prepared to head up a narrow incline. At the top of the hill, silhouetted against the sky, was a tall, dark, threatening figure.

My bike went one way and I went the other over a bank and down across a rocky slope, over and over, banging everything I owned about a hundred times. The wound in my shoulder turned wet and hot. None of those misfortunes seemed too significant to me at the time. All I cared about was finishing my struggle with gravity, getting on my feet and running home like a bat out of hell. Which is what I did.

Puberty hadn't done a great deal for me so far (I was a slow developer), but I was in good shape and managed to run the entire five miles back to the dorm.

Twilley never said a word to me, didn't utter a syllable, just stared at me with her fat mouth ajar and clammed up. I showered and went to bed.

Hours later I lay seething and fuming. Finally I could bear my rage no longer, leaped from the bed and threw open the door. Just as promptly I closed it. I seemed to be hemmed in on all sides. He was there again at the end of the hall where the light bulb burned. The dogcatcher was on duty again.

I climbed back into bed. Mrs. Asel was a witch the likes of which I had never met in my life. She might just as well have dropped a lasso around me and tied me to a post.

Again my fear gave way to anger. This was a free country and I was a human being, despite Mrs. Asel's opinion to the contrary. They couldn't get away with this. Her and the dogcatcher. My sworn enemies.

Had I not felt so poorly I would have tried out another idea that very night. As it was my shoulder throbbed and my head thudded. With my rage wound into a little hot ball somewhere in my chest, I closed my eyes and went to sleep. In the lower levels of my mind I could hear Wyala fretting and quarreling with me for standing her up.

The next night found me in the crawlspace beneath the dorm building. I had already checked the hallway and, yes, the dogcatcher waited there for me to try to get past him.

My bathroom had a narrow vent near the ceiling that led in a gradual slope all around the wing and then to an opening under the building. The small door to the outside was always left open by the students so that pregnant cats could sneak into the warm darkness to litter.

I let myself down through the vent exit, scooted onto the sand and made my way toward what I hoped was the opening to the outside. Having no light, I had to feel my way across ground used many times as a litter box by numerous kittens and mother cats.

Once in a while I lay on my back to catch my breath. There wasn't room for me to stand or even to move in a crouch. I was forced to crawl on my belly. At last I made contact with a wall and began feeling my way in a blind search for the exit.

There was an indented section with a small screen that showed a faint light far back in the distance and I spent a few moments peering curiously at it. Soon the expediency of my situation drove me farther along the wall. There was an extensive area to be covered and it took me quite a long time to find the door. When I did, it was locked. In all the years I had lived in the dump that door had never been closed or locked. It was now.

More time was consumed by my crawling around in the sand hunting for the vent through which I had come. Finally back inside my room again, I showered and went to bed.

The next night I checked to make certain the dogcatcher was standing vigil in the hallway before I went out the

window. There was only one way to go once I was outside on the ground, for the wing of the building jutted on my left, leaving only a narrow alley between the sections.

I stood on the grass and looked around. This way of getting out was too easy and I hadn't seriously considered trying it but my options were dwindling. One way or another I had to have a vacation with Wyala.

I was cautious enough to check the window of my room. The screen lay on the ground and the pane easily slid up and down. Leaving it up, I turned and walked toward the street.

I saw the tall shadow come around the corner of the building because I had been watching for it. Quick as a flash I ran back to the window and scrambled inside. Running to the door I opened it and looked out. The hallway was empty. The dogcatcher wasn't there. He was walking around outside my window.

Leaving the door ajar I stood with my eye peeled to the crack and waited. All at once he was there, his big cloaked figure standing beneath the light and looking my way. Shutting the door I went back out the window but didn't go anywhere, just stood biding my time. As sure as bad weather, the dogcatcher came back around the corner of the building and ran toward me.

Inside my room again I sat and thought about it. I let a while go by before examining the window. At first I didn't see anything but then I spotted the thin wire running the length and breadth of the sill and the borders.

So there it was. Someone had set up some kind of electronic eye so that when I went out the window the signal was activated. No doubt it rang a buzzer in the hall, or something of the kind.

I deliberately hung out the window for a second or two, crossed to the door and let myself out into the hall. It was empty again. Trying to be stealthy but wanting to waste no time, I tiptoed along the carpet toward the light. By then the dogcatcher had probably reached the corner of the building. It would take him a few seconds to realize I wasn't outside and it would take more seconds for him to get back to the hallway. By then I intended to be halfway across the campus where there were big trees behind which I could hide. When it came to a battle of wits, wile or deceit I believed no one could best me.

I don't know what made me change my mind. There was no sound anywhere, no smell, no breeze, nothing at all to tell me something was wrong. A few more steps down the carpet and I would reach the light. The exit door lay just around the corner.

Something happened to make me freeze against the wall. There was a niche just beyond the light, a dark receptacle that I couldn't see although I knew it was there. In the instant that I stopped walking I knew my jailer was in that niche waiting for me to blunder into his trap. A few more steps was all he needed and then he could leap out and grab me.

I faded backward, wraithlike and with utmost caution, but I wasn't scared anymore. I retreated because I knew practically nothing about my adversary, He was bigger and stronger than I, but so were most people. One thing I hadn't counted on was that he was clever. Almost to the instant he had calculated just how long it would take me to discover the alarm system on the window. Instead of falling for my diversionary tactics, he had concealed himself in the niche expecting to nab me. So much for that. He hadn't fallen into my trap and I hadn't fallen into his.

The next day I had a few words with my roommate. It was Saturday and she was prepping herself for a class tour of the Ember mansion.

"It seems to me that the trips to see Mrs. Rich and her fancy property are becoming more frequent," I said. "She can't love the tenth grade this much."

She was looking into a hand mirror and now she directed her attention to my reflection in it. "Maybe she likes young people."

"She's the first adult that does. To change the subject, have you ever heard of the dogcatcher?"

"Who hasn't? They go up and down sheets rounding up strays."

Not caring for how she worded her response, I let my irritation show through. "Not that kind."

"I didn't know there was any other kind."

"Are you sure?"

She turned around and scowled. “You’re nuts, do you know that? You ask me do I know what a dogcatcher is and I tell you. If you don’t like my answer look it up in the dictionary.”

I pretended to change the subject. “Is there more than one maintenance man for the buildings?”

“That I know also. No.”

“Chucky doesn’t have a buddy or a pal?”

“No.”

“Somebody who wears a long cloak and a hood over his face?”

“You’re nuts.”

“If you want to wear my locket you’d better answer me in a civil manner even if you don’t like the questions.”

She was exasperated but maintained control. “Chucky works all alone. Whenever there’s a big job he brings somebody else in but they don’t live here like he does.”

“Did you ever see him wear a hooded cloak?”

“Certainly not.”

“I think he does. I think he was snooping in the hall last night. In fact he does it every night.”

“That’s impossible. He isn’t even here. His mother is sick and he went to Ohio to be with her until she’s better. He’s been gone for a week.”

“How do you know he isn’t back?”

Tilly gave me a look of scorn. “Don’t you think he’d let me know that?” Before I could answer she said, “Oh, dry up! He isn’t back, just take my word for it!”

Chapter 7

Not wanting to be available in case Mrs. Asel sent someone around to see why I hadn’t gone on the bus to the Embers, I went through my bathroom vent and worked my way down into the crawlspace under the building. I had a new motive in going there. I hadn’t forgotten the dim light and the strange new pipe and now it was time to investigate.

I had a flashlight, screwdriver and pliers with me and experienced no difficulty finding the screen and removing it. I preferred to be forewarned of impending terror but was forced to go cold turkey that day. The tunnel or pipe was made of heavy aluminum and held my weight without groaning but it was just large enough to accommodate me. Lying on my belly with my arms outstretched, I worked my way into the narrow space and began inching forward.

Halfway through I began to feel like the lead in a pencil. Way off in the distance I could see the light but it always remained the same and never seemed to change. I tried to be as quiet as possible but every once in a while my feet scraped across the metal floor or my head bumped the ceiling. I wondered what would happen if I became stuck. Could anyone hear me if I yelled? If Mrs. Asel knew I was caught down here would she try and get me out?

Right away I lost interest in my project but still I forged ahead a few inches at a time. It was easier than moving backward. Actually it wasn’t but I thought so at the time.

To my surprise the light abruptly loomed large enough to tell me I had nearly arrived at the end of the pipe. Pausing to catch my breath I expended extra effort in being as quiet as I could.

For a few moments I stared through a screen into a small room without fully realizing what I was looking at. Instead of leading to the outside or to another building, the vent ran into a place I had never seen before. I could see a burning light bulb banging from a rafted ceiling, a bookshelf, some cans of paint and a yellow wall.

Cautiously I moved forward until my face was against the screen. Immediately my attention was captured by something lying across a chair arm. As soon as I recognized it my horror began. Someone was sitting directly below me so that all I could see was his hand and wrist, but it wasn't a human appendage. The back of it was bony and covered with brown fur. The fingers were long with abnormally prominent knuckles. They too were hairy. Above the wrist was some shiny black material that looked like the sleeve of a cloak.

My head went up and my breath stuck in my throat, stifling me, making sweat pop out all over me. I had stupidly blundered into the place where the dogcatcher lived. He was sitting ten feet below me and he wasn't human. All he had to do to grab me was rise up and remove the screen. I wouldn't be able to move if he did that. Fright had me lying frozen with my mouth open and my eyes threatening to slide up into my forehead.

I must have made noise as I prepared to move backward but the person below me never moved, or at least the hand lying on the chair arm remained relaxed. The light turned the fur slick and evil looking as I faded back into the pipe.

I don't think I drew a full breath until my head cleared the last of it. Retrieving my tools I crossed the crawlspace, entered the vent and went back to my room.

Not hesitating for an instant, I tore open the door, ran down the hall, burst outside and raced across the grass. Midway through the first cluster of trees I skidded to a halt. Far ahead of me in the shadows a tall figure moved and kept pace with me. If I continued on a straight course the dogcatcher would have me in a matter of minutes.

How? How? How had he gotten out here so fast? How had he known I was on the run? How had he done it? Could he read my mind? How would I ever get free of him?

Life wasn't worth living with walls on every side. I complained to the floor monitor of the dorm and she said there was nothing stopping me from going anywhere I pleased over the weekend as long as I was back by Sunday evening and didn't bring down the law on the place. For fear of being thought insane I said nothing about my private bodyguard.

On Sunday I joined some other juvenile delinquents out on the exercise court and while I shot baskets I cast longing glances at the expanses beyond. We were several miles short of the city limits but there were many wooded sections before the fields and the wilderness began. Not that any of this did me any good. The dogcatcher skulked in the trees on the outskirts of the campus. Now and then I saw him flitting from shadow to shadow like a big black butterfly.

That night after I went to bed I thought about Wyala, let my mind relax and reached out to her cave. I sifted through a myriad mental impressions and visual images before I was able to locate her. She sat watching the moon, restless, sad, worried that something had happened to me.

I told her what I wanted her to do, after which I waited until her emotional reaction passed. I went over it again in my mind, detail by detail, assuring her of my good intentions and swearing to her that it was the only way. Whether or not she decided to do it depended upon how much she wanted to skip with me.

In the morning I was unhappy and nervous. Would she come through for me? Had she understood? I didn't know whether I was putting my life on the line. For all I knew the dogcatcher would kill me when he got his hands on me. His inhuman hands.

After science class I dressed in sweat clothes and joined the others on the soccer field. The weather was so damp I had worried that we wouldn't go outside for gym but I should have known better. Miss Knapp hated kids and didn't mind if we got covered with mud. All I intended to do now was pretend to play soccer and wait for my opportunity.

It came later than I had hoped and by then I was exhausted with tension. The ball bounced my way. Deliberately letting it go by I chased it toward the western end of the field but instead of kicking it back when I caught up with it I passed it and continued running toward a low hill. On the other side was a stone quarry. Ignoring the shouts behind me I ran toward several piles of gravel, at the same time clocking the dogcatcher while he came after me through the trees. His intent was obvious. He would circle to his right and catch me between the mounds.

I made the mistake of believing he couldn't possibly know which pile was my destination. There was no one else around except me and him. And hopefully one small cub from Wyala's happy family.

In a frenzy I scrambled up an incline and stumbled toward a cluster of tall weeds. To my horror the dogcatcher came from behind a gravel hill and darted at me.

On my hands and knees I searched about in the weeds. It wasn't there. The baby gambler wasn't there. Hunting furiously I finally came across it asleep in a shallow pothole. No way could Wyala have sneaked close enough to me

for me to reach her because my shadow kept a keen lookout on the surrounding territory, but if she stayed out of sight and sent her little one to this thicket.

It was one of her daughters, about seven weeks old, a yowling little ball of cat that promptly sank its teeth into my hand.

I didn't care if I scared it when I invaded its mind. I was scared myself, especially since I could hear the dogcatcher pounding over the gravel behind me.

"Come on, honey," I said to the kitten and tried to grab its mind as I grabbed its body. It squealed and took me for a ten-yard skip, just enough to get me out of the dogcatcher's clutches.

It was too bad that I hadn't the time to be sweetly persuasive. The baby was angry because I was so crude. Every time I tried to take hold of the little core of its psyche it skittered away and dumped me onto the quarry ground.

The dogcatcher came after us each time we landed. Blink, we weren't there anymore and he came to a skidding halt. Blip, we landed elsewhere on my head.

I had promised Wyala that the little one would come to no harm so I tucked her inside my shirt where she dug into me with four claws and all her teeth, I don't know if she was aware of a fraction of what was going on. I doubted it. But she was a skipper and had the proper brain matter. Just as my shadow reached out to grab my leg, I and Wyala's baby blinked to the other side of a mound. He came sliding toward us from the top as we popped back into the world.

It was broad daylight, but I couldn't see the face of my tormentor not that I had a great deal of time in which to examine him. He slipped and slid all over that quarry and I'm sure he picked up as many cuts and bruises as I, but for a change he didn't get his way. With the help of my hob's infant I leapfrogged, hopped and hobbled across a mile or so of distance, and then there was mother Wyala hiding in a thicket waiting for us.

We were afraid to skip together with the cub so I continued blinking short distances until we reached the foothills.

"Let her go and she'll return to the cave," said Wyala.

The little one scampered away and I climbed aboard my favorite steed.

"It's been awhile, hasn't it?" she said.

"Utterly unavoidable, believe me."

"Who's that way off there? He seems to be heading in this direction."

"Him? Oh, he's just my shadow. What do you say we split a little reality right under his nose?"

Feeling vindictive, spiteful, victorious and everything else that was petty and enjoyable, I blinked down onto the path in front of the dogcatcher. It was satisfying to see him come to a sudden standstill. His cowl concealed his face which was fine with me since a glimpse of his hand had been sufficient for me. For a second I thought I saw what looked like the snout of an animal. He made a diving grab but it was somewhat of a halfhearted effort, as if he knew it would bring him nothing but empty air. Wyala and I kicked dust in his face as we rocketed out of mundane Earth and skipped for parts unknown. Who won this time, Mr. Dogcatcher?

"It's been so long!" said Wyala, stretching out to her full-length and climbing the side of a whirling vortex as if she were climbing a hill. It wasn't exactly wasted effort since she was having fun. "I needed some rest and relaxation!"

I knew what she meant. She probably hadn't moved a muscle since we last parted other than getting up to eat but it hadn't been the kind of vacation one got while skipping. It was all a matter of freedom, heedlessness, unconcern and selfishness. In D nothing counted but skipping.

"I need it too," I said, "except I like to learn things at the same time that I'm having fun. Let's head for that stinko planet."

"You mean the world of the Kriff?"

"Yeah. Why not?"

"No reason other than that it smells bad and might be dangerous."

“Yeah. Let’s go see what they’re doing down on the surface.”

As long as we didn’t come out into 3 the Kriff needn’t know we were anywhere about, so we stayed in D like a pair of ghosts and allowed only a molecule or two of our aura to seep through the rank atmosphere. It even stank on the surface, which turned out to be a swamp full of bats and toothy predators.

The Kriff were not what you would call builders. Their houses were huts that they lived in for a while until they became messy and dirty, after which the Kriff moved on. They ate anything that wasn’t rocks or meat, plenty of it, so that the flora in large sections of the planet was seriously depleted. The Kriff didn’t care about conservation. Eat, make messes, move on—that was their motto and it explained why they also believed in world conquest, but this time it was someone else’s world.

It was only a guess but I believed they were the only species in D that had the ability to skip as a group, which seemed unjust unless one happened to be a Kriff. They were so sloppy that they needed plenty of territory to spread out. At least human beings were civilized enough to make their world big enough for themselves, or almost, with the exception of thugs. As far as I knew I was the only skipper Earth had to offer, in a manner of speaking.

In the group of patriots Westman and Roula were the representatives of their species, likewise the birdman and the others I had met. A handful of patriots against an entire species wasn’t a fair contest.

“They’ll probably lose,” I said to Wyala. We were standing in space just outside a plateau of Kriffworld.

“I don’t think they can afford to lose. You know how history goes.”

“Kriff conquests are inevitable.”

“What’s to keep them away from Earth?”

“There are a hundred planets in D. They’ll invade the wrong one and get blasted back home.”

“You sound very sure of that.”

I didn’t like the way she said it and kicked her so hard that she inadvertently penetrated the fabric of the planet. We pitched headlong into it and immediately picked up a warrior pursuer.

“Now you’ve done it,” said Wy.

“Just skip, okay? Never mind trying to reform me.”

The Kriff had been sitting spraddle-legged on a fat lily pad munching a piece of wizened fruit. Either his kind loved to skip or they were so hostile that they were ready to attack anyone who blundered onto their turf. This one had his hob tied across his back and at first sight of Wy and me breaking through a patch of green he let out a screech and plunged into the bog. As he raced toward solid ground he reached back for his vehicle.

“I think you did that on purpose,” said Wyala.

“Maybe. They say you can’t fight an enemy you can’t understand.”

“Who says that?”

“Dry up and skip!” The fact was I was getting more than a little annoyed over the fact that every time I went out to do some world hopping these days somebody chased me. Was D shrinking or had it always been so congested?

“Where do you want to go?” asked Wy.

“How about that place with the big caves?”

Away we went across a couple of hundred tributaries to break into the atmosphere of a world that might have been inhabited on its warmer side. The half we landed on was frozen except inside some large caves. There the air was heated by hot springs. Phosphorescent particles in the pools provided light so that the gamber and I were able to make our way to a spacious enclosure.

Sitting comfortably on my cat I waited behind a rock wall until the Kriff blasted from D and landed on the only other solid spot in the area. He came to ground on the path just beyond the wall. Before his feet touched down I let him have

it behind the ear with a rock.

“Scratch one Kriff,” said Wyala. “They smell exactly like their environment.”

“We haven’t exactly engaged in hand-to-hand combat with them too many times. Do you think he’s damaged?”

“Not seriously. He’ll be out for a while.”

I climbed the wall and dropped beside the unconscious alien. He wasn’t too heavy, and I was able to haul him down by the bubbling pool. The time might come when wouldn’t think twice about dumping one of them, but I hadn’t yet arrived at that state. I simply left him lying on the stones.

His hob lay where it had fallen and I bent over to touch it. It writhed away from me. It wasn’t a stick but a living creature.

“I have a headache,” said Wy. “Just reading your mind does that to me. Don’t tell me you’re going to try that thing out?”

“I think I will.” I wasn’t as confident as I sounded but I had been curious about the Kriff hobs from the first moment I saw one. “I don’t suppose it can do me any harm.” I picked the thing up. It coiled around my wrist and I experienced a feeling of distaste.

“I don’t think it can do you any good to ride it,” said my companion. “You need mental contact with it and its as alien as anything you’ll ever see.”

“So are you.”

“You and I developed on the same world. That’s bound to make a difference.”

“You go on ahead to one of those smaller caves and wait for me,” I said. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

She didn’t like it. Her green eyes flashed fire as she glared at me but finally she obeyed and loped away. The sight of her shiny back gave me a momentary sense of unease and remorse. But there was no head like a hard one nor a mind like one that was already made up.

I didn’t expect anything to happen so fast. What I had in mind was to throw out a feeler to see what the snake’s psyche would be like. Instead it met me more than halfway with a strength and virulence that blinked me out of the cave and almost into the path off skipping Kriff.

I think the hob did it deliberately. Sensing that I was the enemy, it used my surprise to take advantage and put me in the way of one of its own kind. There was no camaraderie between Kriffs and their hobs, only a giving and taking that afforded both a kind of satisfaction.

Angered that I had been tricked, I grabbed the beast below the mouth and took control of its mind. Together we blinked into D with the Kriff hot on our trail.

It must have been the alienness of the meeting between my mind and the hob’s but we didn’t go where any of us anticipated. Instead we broke through some strange barrier and went to what I later called the netherworld. I found myself in total darkness with the Kriff hob lying across me screaming in tenor. Behind us the warrior and his beast were both shrieking and trying to turn away.

It dimly occurred to me that there was nowhere to turn. Familiar D seemed to have been extinguished while all around us were redness, blackness and bottomless gulfs.

The Kriff followed me because he had no choice. It was either that or blaze his own trail through the black wilderness. He had forgotten about war and hatred and fought to keep me in sight as if he believed that I knew the way out.

All I knew was that I had made a mistake. I was in a universe that didn’t appear to have any exits. Wyala was back in home D in a cave on an alien world and if I didn’t get out of here and take her home she would stay there for the rest of her life.

That wasn’t the way I planned for us to part. Squeezing the foreign hob in my hands, I rode it like a broom and led the Kriff and his steed through billowing red clouds. We entered what appeared to be a series of canyons where the rock glowed like molten lava. Far below us was solid ground. I didn’t touch down but went near enough to see a bog that

made the Kriff world seem like a vacation resort. Huge and gnarly trees reared from murky water, vines a foot thick trailed in serpentine lengths across the ground, fat fronds and thick shrubs dotted the landscape. Ugly flying things darted in and out of the trees while away in the distance came the bellows of prowling predators.

I called out to Wyala, not because I expected her to hear me but because I was beginning to feel desperate. As rapidly as I could skip I traveled up one side of that dimension and down the other, across, up and sideways. It was huge and relentless, dark and gruesome, nearly devoid of light except for the crimson glow on the mountaintops.

The creature I was riding grew hysterical and tried to escape. I held it in a tight grip while I searched through the gloom in my own mind for a way out. The Kriff who followed me paused in mid-space. As he stared at me there was no hatred or vindictiveness in his expression but only a look of stark defeat. He was terrified.

I kicked him away so that I could think. While perspiration poured down my face I hunted through the mist swirling about me. Somewhere there was an exit from this dimension, had to be, because it had an entrance, otherwise I wouldn't be there.

What good would it do me to land? If I gave the hob a chance to get away I might never be able to catch it again. Besides if the Kriff settled down he was bound to renew his feelings of aggression. I would do no one any good hanging from one of those twisted trees down on the ground.

Darkness, red light, swamps, gigantic flora and a hollow feel to the air were the things offered by the nether-world. I cared for none of them.

I made the hob keep me suspended in space and gradually my mind regained some of its normally shaky equilibrium. If there was nothing familiar outside of myself then I would do some inner plumbing. My breathing slowed, my heart steadied and I began thinking about Wyala and the cave.

Little filaments of light flickered in my mind, tenuous and weak, so much so that I approached them with caution. I saw visions of swirling mists and belching smoke that threatened to blank out the source of that feeble light. Harder and harder I concentrated until I pinpointed the source. Where it was or what it was I had no idea but it was a white light like that in my own dimension and I clung to it. Angrily I held onto the hob and made it look at the glow.

As soon as it took its first frightened peek I made it skip. Never mind taking a chance that the brightness would move or blow away, never mind that my alien transportation didn't want to agree with me about anything. Whether or not it was deliberately at cross purposes with me I didn't know, but I think that was what eventually killed it. At the last minute it tried to abandon me and the transfer from one plane to another shocked it to death.

Writhing like a live rope, it skimmed through a red fabric with me. I could hear the Kriff cry out as he followed. Up and up higher than I had ever gone before I forced the hob to skip, ever upward toward a small trapdoor of frail white light.

Nothing could stop me now. The white light represented life to me and the sweetness of my own universe. Downward swung the door and not an instant too soon I burst forth from the dark region. Behind me the Kriff hit a blank wall and bounced backward. He hadn't seen the light but had merely followed me. Now he was trapped in the netherworld.

I was in my own D again. Sensing that there was something wrong with the hob, I skipped to the cave where Wyala waited for me. No sooner did my feet touch solid rock than the creature fell dead. As its life force drained away I could feel a part of the shock it had experienced during the flight from one dimension to the other. I had been able to withstand the crossover while it had not.

As I knelt over it Wyala came to stand beside me.

"You just had to do it, didn't you?"

"I learned something," I said. "What happened to the Kriff I knocked out?"

"He ran away. I guess he doesn't want to be found."

On the way home I showed her a bird's-eye view of where I had been, "See it?" I said. "See that shadow down there in the center of the big inner circle?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"Where is it would be a better question but I don't know the answer."

“It isn’t one of the hundred worlds and it isn’t a part of the circle in between, I can see that much.”

“I know. Personally I think it’s hell.”

“Wherever or whatever it is the time scale is different from ours. You’ve been gone six hours.”

“What?” I cried. “Do you mean I’m late for dinner?”

Chapter 8

My roommate had never been what I called levelheaded but at least her emotional eruptions were usually inspired by some provocation. Now that I was grounded and had to spend all my free time in my room, Twilly took to throwing things at me for no reason at all.

Having grown tired of bopping her I thought I would try a little diplomacy, perhaps lead her into a civilized discussion regarding her favorite subject. There was in my opinion something to be said for peace when I was in the mood for some.

“Say, there,” I began, “how are you and the Ember woman getting along?”

It hadn’t been the right thing to say. She yanked my locket from her neck, hurled it in my direction and stormed out of the room.

So much for good deeds. Retrieving my property from the floor, I flicked open the tiny heart and looked at the photograph of the baby I supposed I once was. Just because I loaned the locket to Twilly didn’t mean I regarded it casually. It was the only thing I had come into the world of the orphanage with. Though I didn’t believe it was any kind of link between me and anybody, it represented a kind of curiosity piece. Now Twilly had broken the chain.

Deciding never to lend it to her again I hid it in my bureau drawer. Disgusted with confinement, adults and regimen, I climbed into the bathroom vent, entered the crawlspace and wormed through the tunnel to the dogcatcher’s room. With my face against the screen I looked down upon the annoyed and unpleasant countenance of Mrs. Asel. To my surprise she was talking to my nemesis of the cowl and black cloak. I could see his hand lying on the chair arm.

“You’ve been extremely wretched to me,” Mrs. Asel said in her most reproving tone. This time I detected a trace of something else in her voice, a kind of fear or contempt “Extremely wretched,” she said.

“How so?”

The dogcatcher’s voice was as interesting as his hand. It was difficult to understand him not only because he kept his voice down but because he didn’t talk like a human being. His words seemed to form quite deep in his throat and by the time they were heard they had assumed an odd cadence and pitch. “How so?” he said and I shivered.

“I go to much trouble for your sake. I provide you with the necessities, I’ve prevented your becoming a public spectacle, nobody harasses or teases you, and what have you done for me in return?”

“All that I can.”

“Which isn’t a thimbleful! Wretched, that’s what it is!”

“You mean that’s what I am.”

“Of course! Haven’t you understood a word I’ve said? I’m complaining because I give you a few little chores to do and you don’t do them.”

“She isn’t all that easy to hold down,” said the person in the chair.

“Who?” Mrs. Asel’s face darkened. “I’m not talking about that brat! If you can’t keep her from sneaking out that’s too bad. I refuse to spend money hiring a professional to see that she attends class and I certainly won’t bother the truancy people anymore. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, I’m here primarily to see that they don’t starve. Their

education is their own business.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“Chucky is gone and you know it. He won’t be back for a while. In the meantime the plumbing in the Science building needs to be looked at, and the wiring in the laundry, and the ceiling tiles in the gym are loose.”

“It takes me a long time to do that kind of work. You know how awkward my hands are. The tools are difficult to manipulate. Not only that, I have to work after lights out with just a tiny flashlight. It isn’t easy.”

Mrs. Asel wore her best witch-hag expression. “You aren’t conscientious enough!”

“I work eighteen hours a day. I’m sorry I don’t accomplish more.”

“You’re sorry! What do you think I am? Do you ever spend a moment considering my feelings? How much more of this do you think I can take?”

“I don’t know. I’m sorry. I’ll try to do better.”

Mrs. Asel turned to leave the room. Moving to where I couldn’t see her, she said acidly, “I heard some of the children talking about a boogeyman prowling about the grounds. Stay Inside when you aren’t working. I don’t want you scaring them.”

The furry hand tightened on the chair arm. Softly came the words, “Yes, Mother.”

Which only went to prove that truth was stranger than fiction. Imagine Dogface being Mrs. Asel’s son!

I crawled back to my room and let myself out the door like any first-class citizen. Gratified by the decision that I could go to the devil as swiftly as I pleased I took off across a concrete concourse. On the other side were some trees and beyond them was a back trail and a shortcut that led to my wrecked bike. Unfortunately I never got there. As I went past a big tree the dogcatcher jumped out in front of me. I shrieked and ran the other way back across the concourse and around the corner of a building toward a crowd of students boarding a bus.

My intent was to lose myself in the crowd, maybe take another trail at the far end of the campus. Just as I was about to abandon a group of students, I happened to glance toward the Administration building. In an instant I froze. Quickly I faded back so that I wouldn’t be out in the open, and then I took another look at the man on the steps. It couldn’t be Westman, I told myself, couldn’t possibly be he, but it was. Westman of D was standing on the steps of the Admin building on Earth. He was dressed in slacks and shirt; he had a normal haircut. Almond eyes and all, he stood looking around, attracting no attention.

Feeling hemmed in and put upon, feeling paranoid and harassed nearly beyond human endurance, feeling like a dead duck, I allowed the students to push me onto the bus where I found a seat in the rear. Where else was I to go? Westman waited for me out there on the steps while Dogface was in the woods.

It didn’t take me long to realize how stupid I had been. All along I had resisted the trips to the Ember estate when all the while it was the perfect way to get free of the dump. There were two teachers seated in the front of the bus who looked at no one and who seemed not to care that among all the juniors was one lone sophomore. I don’t even think they noticed me. Perhaps they were so relieved to get away from the dump that they didn’t mind who shared their emancipation.

I could have taken off as soon as the bus pulled into a tree-lined driveway but the thought of Westman back there made me temporarily lose my appetite for skipping.

I wasn’t overly impressed with the Ember property. So what if some people had everything while I had nothing? There were acres of landscaping that looked like a golf course, gazebos, bridges over creeks, servants’ houses, garages, gardens, cottages and the biggest mansion I had ever seen. The students strolled up the drive that led all around the main house, through a maze of flowers where we could stand on a hill and see all the buildings, after which we were allowed inside the main fixture.

Sometime during the tour I grew tired of the comments everyone made, divorced myself from them and went off on my own. Now and then I saw servants but they didn’t interfere with me. No doubt they were accustomed to having gawky kids underfoot, since the Ember woman had busloads coming in all the time. In my opinion she was a little off her track.

The artwork on a wall somewhere in that cavernous edifice interested me, so I hunted until I located a light switch,

then I stood in the center of the room and had a good look. Scarcely had I gotten started before a man came out from behind some satin drapes. My turning on the lights must have alerted him. It reminded me of the electronic signal on the window of my room back home.

Tall and slender, dressed in a starched black uniform, He wasn't an old man but he wasn't young either, very white hair and brows, dark eyes, severe expression. He inspected me for a while before discreetly fading back into the drapery. For one perverse moment I considered following him and making a pest of myself but the paintings were interesting and I hadn't finished looking at them.

They smelled like money. By that I mean I could imagine how much the artist had earned for his work. Or rather the artists. It was obvious that the displays had been done by more than one person. Five to be exact. I liked strong colors, disliked downbeat themes, wasn't keen for upbeat themes but preferred interesting ones such as quests, discoveries, struggle, things in between beginnings and endings. The past and the future meant nothing to me and I didn't want artists depicting them for me.

The room was incredibly long. My attention was captured by a portrait of a woman hanging at the end of it.

There was a chair with a high back and high winged sides directly across from the painting but I didn't look at it.

Standing in front of the display I studied the figure in the painting, the vivid blue eyes and red hair, the high-bridged nose and the pale skin, the jutting jaw and generous mouth.

"Attractive or not?" said a voice behind me. A woman sat in the chair. I hadn't heard her come in but I knew she hadn't been there when I first entered the room. She looked like the subject in the portrait except that instead of wearing a brocaded gown she wore jeans and a pink blouse.

"Some of both," I said.

"You're too young to be a junior."

"I'm a stowaway."

"You haven't been here in my house before. Why is that?"

"No particular reason."

"The idea didn't appeal to you, is that it?"

I shrugged. "I suppose."

She was tall and strongly built, not at all baggy or dumb, as Twilly had described her. I knew she was Cornelia Ember.

"Would you like to stay?" she said. "There's lots of room, as you can see."

"No, thanks." I moved to go.

"Do you wonder why I keep having schoolchildren come here?"

"I haven't wondered, no."

"I'm looking for someone."

"I hope they want you to find them," I said and went out.

The bus trip back to the dump was uneventful and no one seemed surprised that I hadn't tooted off somewhere. Feeling out of sorts I couldn't make up my mind whether to go find Wyala or go to bed. Mrs. Asel solved my problem by calling me into her office.

"I didn't know you had an uncle," she said.

"Me neither."

"Stand up straight. Don't slouch. When was the last time you had a bath?"

“Who’s my uncle?” I said. I already knew the answer.

“It isn’t all that certain. He’s more in the way of making inquiries.”

“Yeah, well, he ain’t no relative of mine or anybody else’s.”

Adjusting her glasses, Mrs. Asel gave me a stare of infinite reproof. “How would you know that? I haven’t mentioned his name.”

“I don’t know nothing. I’m just standing here listening.”

“Rudely, crudely and with a total lack of breeding. That’s neither here nor there, I suppose. His name is Westman and he’s searching for his niece. There’s no family resemblance and I told him so but he insists upon seeing you.”

“When?”

“He didn’t say.”

“Where, then?”

“Stop asking questions! I’ll do the talking. If you’ll take my advice, which you won’t, you’ll make this man accept you as a member of his family. He’ll give you a home.”

“How do you know he isn’t a murderer or a child molester?”

She laughed. “People like you don’t ever get what’s coming to them. You’re beyond what we call an adoptable age, which means you stay here until you’re eighteen. If you prefer that it’s your business.”

“Did he say he’d be back?”

“Of course he’ll be back! Why do you think he came in the first place?”

I studied her closely to see if there was anything suggestive of a canine in her physiognomy. She looked more like a mouse or a rat. Keeping silent, I waited while she scrutinized me and seethed. She hitched up her glasses, pulled her nose, fiddled with her beads and generally tried read my mind, minuscule though she believed it was.

“I don’t know who Mr. Westman is. He was skimpy with information about himself. In my opinion he’s on a wild goose chase searching for a lost relative. If he comes back I’ll call you. That’s all.”

I went to my room and finished reading Chaucer. Twilly came in and asked to borrow my locket I fished around in my bureau, found it and handed it over. “Keep it,” I said. “You broke the chain. You’ll have to fix it.”

“You don’t want it back?” she said in surprise.

“If you keep it how will I have it back?”

“You said it was your only tie to yesterday.”

“I don’t care about yesterday anymore.”

“Since when?”

“Do you want it or not?”

Late that night after lights out I opened the window and waited. In a little while Wyala leaped in onto the floor.

“Be quiet,” I said to her in mind talk. “If you wake my roommate it will be the same as waking the whole dorm.”

Growling softly, my hob padded to me and poked her nose in my palm. “We should have done it like this before, instead of using my kid.”

“I don’t like you running in the streets. Some people carry guns and you’re enough to make them shoot first and ask questions later.”

I glanced out the window in time to see a shadow move across it. Wyala had activated the signal and now Dogface was trying to catch his own tail. I gave him time to get back into position in the hallway before climbing onto my transportation. We walked out of the room and ambled toward the light. I was ginning from ear to ear. If there was anything that pleased me in the world it was getting one up on my enemies.

He stood watching us as I nudged Wyala into a fast Canter. Just before we reached him we blinked out of the building into D, but not before I heard him chuckle. As I rode a tributary toward the camp of the patriots I was thinking it out in my mind. It was odd. Instead of being mad at me for having popped away right under his nose, Dogface was amused.

Chapter 9

“You made a mistake tracking me down,” I said to Westman.

He and his sister sat in an open green field while Wyala and I hovered partially in D several yards above them.

“You left me no choice.”

“Sure I did. You could have minded your own business the same as I.”

At the first sign of either of them I would have skipped. Westman knew it and must have warned Roula to remain quiet.

“It just won’t sink into your thick head that D is at war, will it?”

“You’re at war. You and the Kriff. My home is no more than a place skippers pass through. The Kriff have bigger fish to fry.”

Westman sat on a mound of grass beside Roula and the green winged man with the nose like a bird. I didn’t see any hobs at all, or at least I thought not. Sometimes it was difficult to tell the difference.

“How do you figure that?” said Westman.

“Earth is one of the oldest worlds in the circle in terms of technology. Two-thirds of her surface is water, which the Kriffs have no use for except to drink. A great deal of the remaining land is either desert or industrialized. That doesn’t leave much foliage. The Kriffs have no real use for my home except to blackmail me when and if they find out what you know.”

Roula spoke up. “It may be true, what you say, but have you no concern for the rest of us? My brother and I are the only free people from our world because we have the ability to escape into D. Do you care nothing for, others?”

I knew where the conversation was heading but I wasn’t about to go with it. “I care about all of you but not enough to make Earth a target for the Kriff.”

“But we only want—”

“Never mind what you want. It’s what I want that counts since you seem to think I have something to sell. This time I’ll allow you to blackmail me, but only this once. In exchange you’ll forget me and the place I come from. Furthermore you’ll never mention it to any of your comrades.”

“How can you be so cold and hard when you’re still a child?” said Roula.

I shifted my position on Wyala’s back, glanced behind and above me to make certain no one was trying to ambush me. Living in Mrs. Asel’s concentration camp had made a suspicious character of me.

“I’m not being cold and hard,” I said. “I’ve been to the Kriff world. I’ve seen how many of them there are. You don’t have a chance. The only reason they haven’t killed you is that they’re too stupid to monitor all the worlds, but eventually they’ll think of it and when they do you’re finished.”

Westman said, “In the meantime we’re going to blackmail you and you’re going to stand still for it.”

“I said I would but if you bother me again I’ll make your lives a nightmare. I’ll steal your hobs one by one and lead them away where you’ll never find them. I’ll disrupt your comings and goings until you never get anything accomplished, and if any of you ever shows up on Earth again I’ll lead a troop of Kriff after you. Now tell me what you want.”

Westman stood up. “I want to ride with you. I want you to show me the secret passage you use to get away from pursuers.”

“All right. Go get your hob and we’ll skip.”

He looked surprised. So did Roula. “Why are you so quick to give up such a secret?” she asked.

“I never considered it my property. The pipeline is there for anyone to use if he can.”

“If you give us the secret you won’t be unique anymore,” said Roula. “You won’t be able to escape.”

I sat forward on Wy’s back and grinned at them. They didn’t like it, I could tell by the way their backs stiffened and their expressions hardened. I knew they had no special antipathy toward me, no more so than they might have had for a gnat, but I was commodity and they meant to use me. But no more than I allowed.

In a few minutes Westman on his croc and I on Wyala rose from the lovely primitive world where the patriots had their hidden camp. The man beside me wore his normal cross look so that I couldn’t tell what he was thinking, but it didn’t matter because never in a month of Sundays would I ever trust him.

“You don’t think I can ride in this conduit, do you?” he said suddenly.

“I intend to show it to you and try and help you use it.”

“But you don’t think I can?”

“I don’t know. I found it without any help and I should think you people could do the same. The fact that you haven’t proves something.”

He frowned. “I’m glad you’ve given up your country bumpkin facade. Anyone who skips like you can’t be a dummy.”

I didn’t respond. I hadn’t taken him directly to the pipeline because I wanted to give him a chance to locate it for himself or at least to feel its presence as we approached. His croc was a lousy hob, thrashed all over D, whipped its huge tail back and forth, snapped its jaws at nothing, rolled its white eyes like marbles in a cup and generally gave Westman a hectic ride.

Pausing just outside the pipeline I said, “Here it is.”

He looked around. “Where? I don’t see it.”

“Try and hear it.”

He couldn’t because of the croc who took advantage of the lull by rolling over like a log half a dozen times. He yelled at it and kicked it in the head so that it settled down somewhat.

“I can’t hear it or see it,” he said. “Are you sure there’s something there?”

“I’ll do you a favor just to show you I’m being straight. I’m going to turn my hob over to you and see if you can penetrate the wall with her.”

“And you’ll ride my friend?” He was smiling faintly.

“And I’ll ride yours, though I doubt if I’ll be trying to get into the pipe. He’s too noisy.”

“Do you think that’s why I and the others have never found this place?”

“You, maybe. I don’t know about the others. Some of their hobs are pretty calm.”

“Okay, we switch. When?”

“Just climb on Wyala and I’ll take over your friend.”

I didn’t think he meant to trick me in any way but, just in case, I grabbed the croc’s mind as soon as he relinquished it.

Wyala was a mouse when I wanted her to be, sat still in space until Westman was aboard. Not so the croc, who was pure louse and tried to take me out with a snap of its jaws. Since I needed a hob out here I intended to have one. I reached forward and punched it in one of its big white eyes, clamped my knees in its sides and held on while it went rolling. It had two tiny ears, which I grabbed and twisted. On a more or less even keel it laid stretched out and growled louder than a thunderclap.

Meanwhile Westman was trying to get into the pipeline without doing such a good job of it. Now and then he and Wy became like smoke and nearly made it through the mist but something kept stopping them. I moved away with my savage hob, observed from a distance, saw how Westman hesitated.

“It’s the cat,” I said, moving alongside him. “She’s better than your croc but the two of you aren’t a match.”

“Let’s switch again. Go in and out of the mist and let me watch.”

Wyala and I drifted through the wall of the pipeline and back out again a dozen times, after which Westman tried it with his croc.

“It’s close,” he said. “I’m beginning to sense the change in vibrations. Maybe with a little practice.”

“With a lot of practice.”

“Meantime you’ve yet to fulfill our bargain.” He leaned on the scaly neck of his hob and stared at me.

“I just fulfilled it. It isn’t my fault that you can’t get through the wall.”

“My situation hasn’t changed a bit, which means you haven’t done anything for me.”

“What kind of reasoning is that?”

“The reasoning of desperate people. You said you’d help us out once. That means you promised to do a task for us.”

Scowling, sighing inside, I looked at him and wondered when *I* would ever see the last of him. The thought made my head ache.

He told me what he had in mind. His group had a problem transporting weapons to their fortress, which was in an unspecified place. Westman wasn’t about to tell me its whereabouts until he saw how I reacted.

I promptly became hostile. “Are you trying to be funny?”

“Not at all. There’s nothing comical about the situation. You owe me one.”

“I owe you? I owe you?”

He nodded. “Sooner or later you’ll get around to asking me how I managed to locate your homeworld. There’s an old man working for the underground back on my planet. He used to skip a long time ago. I described your cat to him and he remembered an Earthwoman he used to know. She also rode a cat.”

“An Earthwoman?”

“That’s right. Once I knew the planet it wasn’t hard to track you down. There are plenty of herds of cats but not too many of them are near orphanages. Wonderful things, those Earth computers.”

“This old man. What if he tells the Kriff about me?”

“He tells only what I want him to tell.”

It was like that. Between a rock and a wall I could squirm all I pleased but it wouldn’t do me any good. In a way I didn’t blame Westman or the other patriots. If they were going to go down, and all their worlds with them, what did they care about me or my home? They could only assume that Earth was in line for conquest anyway.

Needing time to consider my options, I skipped back to the camp with him.

For a few moments we hovered in the clouds and as I swarmed over the group below with my mind I was astonished to pick out a curly-haired youth.

“Dandy!” I said. “What’s he doing here?”

“He’s one of us.”

“You’ve got lousy taste. I think he’s working for the Kriff.”

Westman shook his head. “He’s around them a lot, but which of us isn’t. Relax. He’s one of our most loyal members.”

“Are you certain.”

“I’m certain.”

After we grounded, Wyala and I walked all through the camp. There were cottages for people, small shacks for mammalian hobs, a makeshift swamp for amphibians, a desert for other types. Tree climbers took to the woods.

The cottages were sparsely furnished. Nowhere did I see any Weapons.

“Hi,” said Dandy when he saw me. He looked handsome in snug-fitting trousers and shirt.

“How’s the harem?”

Running his fingers through his hair he laughed. “I hope you don’t hold that lie against me. You can’t blame a guy for trying.”

“Trying what?”

“Never mind. Come along and I’ll introduce you to the gang.”

He was more or less always like that. Bossy and full of confidence. If ever there was a person who got by on his looks and scarcely anything else it was Dandy. At least he seemed to spread sunshine and cheer wherever he went.

The winged green man with the beak for a nose had a name I couldn’t pronounce. I called him Zee. He came from the planet sixty worlds forward from Earth and he was its only free man. The rest were Kriff slaves, growers of fruit and vegetables for the occupying hordes. Zee’s hob looked like a tan mushroom three feet high, three feet across with a depression in the top where he sat when he skipped. The creature sank its roots in the ground and ate like a tree but it possessed a keen Intellect and sometimes claimed that it was the rider while Zee was the hob.

“Take some advice,” Zee said to me when we got to know one another better. He startled me no end because he sounded so scholarly and elegant and because he was so gentle, “Give up skipping,” he went on. “Get rid of your hob, find some fascinating vocation and forget you know anything about the inner worlds.”

“I agree with every word,” said his hob.

“You haven’t taken your own advice,” I said to Zee.

“Because I’m not level-headed. You on the other hand look as if you’ve both feet solidly planted on the ground. Think of all you can accomplish on your own.”

“Thanks but I’m not as level-headed as you think. In fact I’m more hedonist than anything.”

He clucked like a chicken, amusing me and at the same time causing me to wonder if he was pulling my leg. With a somber expression he said, “At least I’m adult. You haven’t even gotten your growth, yet your world expects you to save it from the Kriff.”

“My world doesn’t know I exist.”

“They expect to be saved all the same. Our homes are fortunate because of us. By having a representative in the patriots’ council they’re at least remembered. I know of several planets that are not only conquered but forgotten.”

What a gloomy, brilliant, homesick, straight-forward individual he was. I liked him.

Most of the others in the camp were humanoid with only minor differences to distinguish them from Earthmen. There was Samarth the huge who had two joints in each arm, Dwinga with the very large yellow eyes, Torra with a pair of undeveloped wings growing out of her shoulders, Gath whose hair looked like white rope. When we were all seated in repose around the campfire we looked very much alike.

It would have been relatively safe to choose almost any spot in the circle of worlds for a campsite. There weren't so many Kriff that they could keep a close watch on every section of every planet, so if they located us it would be because they got lucky. Or because someone told them.

No one knew what the person beside him was doing for the cause, except for Westman and his sister. I felt relieved when this was explained to me. As long as I had to stick my neck out I didn't want anyone at the other end to know I was coming. Or that I was leaving from this end.

Westman and I abandoned the fire and went into one of the cottages. He showed me where my room was and let me understand that I could use it whenever I pleased.

"I'll work at my own pace," I said. "Nobody pressures me, nobody asks questions. I have schedules to meet at home."

He never did look anything but mean and it was comforting to watch him tone down his vitriol. "You could stay here, join us altogether."

"Why would I want to do that?"

"You're not like your own kind. You're more like us."

"You're kidding yourself but don't try it on me. If you ever get the Kriff off your back you'll be the sorriest man alive. You like this kind of life."

"Are you always this mouthy?"

"Only when I'm being blackmailed."

"I know you're thinking about that other skipper the old man told me about. What difference does it make? In each new generation of Earthmen there are probably a dozen potential skippers born. Half of them never got off the ground while the others kill or cripple themselves in the attempt, but it won't always be that way. One day the whole circle of worlds will be in motion."

"Then you won't be unique," I said.

"Neither will you."

"My lifespan isn't that long. I won't be around to see it."

"Don't be so sure. Sometimes dormant talent becomes active overnight."

"I think I'll take off now, if you don't mind," I said and went outside.

Dandy was waiting for me. "Want to go for a walk?"

Why not? We strolled through the grass and counted fireflies. I didn't know how many hours ahead of Earth this world was. One day I would take a pad and pencil and go about calculating axial movements and speeds. Right then I relaxed and enjoyed the peace and quiet while I could.

Dandy liked the sound of his own voice, told me about how the Kriff kept a stranglehold on his people and how he had barely escaped with his life. Then he asked me about my world and I told him it wasn't very interesting because it was in the grip of an ice age, that we all wore furs and lived in caves. I showed him mental images of steep escarpments of ice, howling blizzards that swept down onto plateaus of frozen snow, shaggy mammoths plodding through drifts.

He thought it was funny. "How long has it been since you lived there?"

“A long time. My hob was just a kitten when I found her, otherwise I wouldn’t have been able to skip with her, her species grows very hostile with maturity. I tamed her down.”

“Where do you live now?”

“All over. I’m a nomad. I haven’t been home since the day I left.”

“Do you miss it?”

“Would you?”

“I miss my home,” he said wistfully. “My mother, father. I’ve a brother somewhere. He ran away when the Kriff took over. Maybe sometime you and I could go for a visit to your birthplace.”

Before we parted he kissed me. It wasn’t a passionate thing but a mere pecking on my cheek. He looked great, smelled sweet, sounded fine and I had the most intense longing to boot him in the rear. Why couldn’t he be as perfect as he wanted me to think he was?

Brooding, glum, gray in the head, I went off to collect Wyala. Westman had made it clear that no patriot would interfere with me as long as I was loyal to the cause. And what if I became disloyal?

He had smiled in his inimitable way when I asked that question. “Don’t delude yourself that your age would be a factor in our treatment of you if you betrayed us. We’re fighting not only for our own lives but for those of our species. All told we represent many billions of people. One girlchild doesn’t count for much when stacked against them.”

My head was in a noose and I couldn’t figure out how I had managed to place it there. One thing I didn’t have was delusions of grandeur. It wasn’t my dream to emancipate slaves, not because I approved of or even tolerated suffering but because I was practical enough to realize I couldn’t stop it.

The circle of worlds was spacious enough that I could have taken Wyala and disappeared into it, lived the life of Riley in some beautiful place and never entertained another serious thought. If I did that, though, I could probably kiss Earth good-bye. Westman might not be vindictive but he would have to go ahead with his plan and try to do the job I was supposed to do. He would be caught by the Kriff, probably on the first run. They would learn of Earth, and vindictiveness was their middle name. They would sack my homeworld and stomp it into the ground.

Impossible. What of a nuclear missile site with a director who had men and power at his disposal? He could fight what he could see but he wouldn’t see the hordes of Kriff descending upon him, would never know they were nearby until they landed on his head. He wouldn’t be able to lock a door against them, no matter how thick or how strong. He couldn’t keep a single secret document hidden from them. He would be captured, tortured and made to reveal every item of information from the signal codes in his computers to the color of his socks. This wouldn’t be happening only at his site but in every site, outpost and backwater defense camp on the globe. There would be no fighting back. Earth wouldn’t have a chance.

Westman knew I realized this. He needn’t have threatened me with anything but his own intent to try to carry out my mission should I refuse it. He was the most cold-blooded person I ever met and I really couldn’t blame him.

Chapter 10

Kansas in July was sweltering. Wyala complained to me about the weather as soon as we let a little of the local atmosphere pierce our shield. Or rather we came out of D and took a whiff of air. It was almost like submerging in hot water.

“Phew! Can’t we go back to the coast where it’s cool?”

“There are no munitions dumps like this one,” I said. We touched down on a hot metal roof and immediately rose again in case somebody was looking our way. If they did we would resemble a ball of light, I know, because I could see my reflection in the tin.

The warehouse was long and spacious. The loft had open doors at both ends and drop holes leading to lower levels. Flying through one of the doorways, we drifted down through a hole just as a soldier laid another box on a stack of boxes twenty feet high. He was using a small dozer with a forklift, picking up crates of guns and stacking them against a wall.

His attention was captured by the ball of light coming through the drop hole. Immediately he abandoned his machine, slowly climbed to the floor and followed the sphere around a stack. Once or twice he rubbed his eyes.

Making certain that Wy and I kept our true forms in D, I leaped to the top of the stacks and skimmed across the crates. Down on the floor the soldier ran after us.

The only open box I could find had nothing in it but straw so I urged Wyala to use her teeth to open another. It didn't work. She could bite all the way through the wood but was unable to pry up the lid. On one wall of the warehouse was hung a variety of tools. Helping myself to a long pinchbar, I flew back to the box, settled all the way out of D and commenced taking off the lid.

The man on the floor said, "Hey!" That was all he said the whole time, over and over. "Hey!" First he looked at Wyala who had her head draped over the edge while she stared at him, and then he looked at me. Then he said, "Hey!"

Taking rifles from the box, I laid them at my feet. "How many can we carry?" I said.

"Well have to experiment. Remember that in D things don't feel too much lighter."

She straightened as I straddled her. In my arms were four rifles that seemed to weigh a ton.

"Hey!" said the soldier just before we blinked.

Straight toward the pipeline my gambler and I skipped, entered it and traveled for a few seconds before we spotted a blue rippling motion in the mist. It was my travel marker, one I had picked out when Westman showed me the planet earlier in the day.

He was waiting in the cave when I grounded. Taking the guns from me, he laid them against a backwall on a pile of dry hay.

"They're no good without bullets," he said.

I picked my teeth with a straw split, swung my legs back and forth and didn't say anything.

"I wish I hadn't said that," he said. "I've got to team to curb my impatience."

In my opinion he never would. Even after the cave was full he still wouldn't be satisfied. The thought of the rock walls hidden by stacks of guns and boxes of ammo made my back ache.

"Why don't you work out a schedule?" he said. "Pick a number, deliver that and then knock off for the day. Tomorrow you can take up where you left off."

The sight of him reminded me of Mrs. Asel. With a silent command to my hob I blinked out of the cave and headed for the pipeline.

The same soldier was in the Kansas warehouse, up on the stack of crates, examining the box I had looted. Right away he saw the ball of light come out of the drop hole and drift toward a far wall. He came to the alert, climbed down to the floor and hurried along the aisle between crates.

There was the ball of flame bobbing along beside a low stack of ammo boxes. He was near enough to the door to poke his head out and call hoarsely, "Mike! Psst! Get over here quick!"

His attention was off me for only an instant or two but that was more than enough time for me to scoop up a heavy metal box marked 22-long. Just as the guard and his friend turned my way I blinked. No ball of light, no gambler, no girl, no nothing, only two men looking for something that wasn't there.

I could have worked faster in the warehouse and most of the time I did except when some diabolic spirit made me show the man on duty a ball of bouncing light or something more substantial. I learned that his name was Rich and that he was always on guard from 7 .A.M. to 3 P.M. After that someone named Paul took over.

Westman was pleased with the ammo, though he took pains not to show it. Not for anything would he have let me know how much he needed my services. I pretended it was a game and by and by he relaxed and even managed a smile now and then when I showed up with something.

Wyala complained about her sore back until I took her away from the loathesome routine by skipping to an abandoned beach on a faraway world. There we dipped in warm green water and lay in the sun. My hob groomed herself while I groaned and griped about how life these days was mostly work. After a while I fell asleep with my head on her soft belly.

The sun was high when we skipped away from our private resort. Mid-route we nearly ran into someone. At first I thought it was a Kriff, since they seemed to be everywhere, and I gripped Wyala tightly in preparation for some fast moving.

“Hold on,” she said. “You’re always in a hurry. Can’t you sense something weird here?”

Now that she forced me to think of a subject other than flight I settled more comfortably on her back and swarmed through D with my mind. At once I knew it was no Kriff floating in space ahead of us. Instead it was a mushroomlike hob.

“Let’s get it,” I said and we moved to a position beside Zee’s traveling companion.

“I don’t feel any life in it,” said Wy.

That was because the hob was dead.

“What killed it?” I said.

“It’s hard to say. I have a suspicion, though.”

“What is it?”

“What happens to a hob if it and its rider are in D and the rider is killed?”

We looked for Zee in the eddies and whirlpools in D and at last found him floating along a small tributary. He had a long piece of glass embedded in his face right above his beak nose. There was an expression of sadness on his face, as though his last thoughts hadn’t been focused upon his own end but upon something far worse. I believed I knew what he had been thinking.

From a nearby planet I secured a long vine. Returning to the trib I tied the birdman to his dead companion. With them in tow behind us Wyala and I approached his homeworld.

“If any Kriff bother us I’m going to lead them to that place I call hell,” I said. “I’ll take them into it and leave them there.”

“Good idea, but do you think it’s intelligent to come here and ask for trouble?”

“Where do you want to be buried when you die? Which planet?”

“Okay, okay, let’s read the place good before we go in. No use walking into the soup.”

The Kriff were too stupid and egotistical to station guards in the planet’s upper strata. Evidently they knew that Zee was the only birdman capable of skipping and so there were just enough personnel to keep the farmers working.

The birdpeople lived in caves in high cliffs. They preferred being in the mountains but the Kriff made them tillers of the soil. Every able-bodied person helped grow food in the valleys. Able to fly short distances, they used their wings mostly to climb the bluffs or to float from the heights to the ground.

I touched down in the foothills in the protection of rocks, allowing the dead hob with Zee lying across it to land beside me. The hob bore no wounds or marks of any kind. When Zee’s mind had become disconnected from it the creature was unable to withstand the holocaust of D and perished.

A number of birdpeople worked in a rocky garden not far away and after I made sure that no Kriff were about I attracted the attention of a young man. Startled nearly out of his wits he walked toward me with his mouth agape. He

wasn't at all suspicious but obeyed my every gesture, following me into the mound of rocks where Zee lay.

His expression changed when he saw his dead countryman. The glass was still stuck in Zee's forehead, making his face a bloody mask.

Giving me a nod, the boy returned to his garden and came back with digging tools. While I kept watch he made a grave. After Zee and the hob were underground he stood watching while I straddled Wyaja. Waving good-bye to him, I climbed behind some tall rocks and blinked away from the planet.

Later Westman told me I should have brought Zee to the cave where the munitions were being stacked.

"I thought you wanted this place kept secret," I said. "The less anyone skips here the better it will be."

"Zee would have wanted to be buried with other dead patriots."

"I think he likes it where he is. He's home."

"Maybe you're right." Westman slumped against the cave wall, sat down slowly. His Color was poor. He looked exhausted. "Another one gone. The Kriff are picking us off like turkeys."

"Yeah. I'll see you. I'm knocking off for a while."

As dispirited as he was he still managed to give me a hard look. "Don't forget to come back."

"And you're welcome." I blinked home with Wyala.

My roommate, Twilly, was upset because she thought I might have gone to the Ember estate.

"You've been away two days," she said, her expression anxious. More nervously than ever she chewed her nails and twisted a lock of hair.

"What does that matter? I go lots of places. Besides what do you care if I go to the Embers? As a matter of fact I was over there Saturday."

She stared at me, her face pale. "Did you see anybody?"

"Not a soul."

Shrugging, she said, "I don't care if you go. I have no interest in what you do."

Tired and feeling out of sorts, I climbed into my bunk and lay down. My shoulder ached and I kept seeing Zee's dead face. "What does Cornelia Ember look like?" I said.

"A real dumb broad. Overweight, dumpy, brown hair, brown eyes."

"I thought you said she had blue eyes?"

"Oh, yeah, she does. I forgot."

Leaning over my bunk to look at her I said, "Why do you lie so much? It takes so much energy."

"What do you mean? I'm not lying."

"Every time you open your mouth you lie. You pretend that my locket is yours and you don't want me to go to the Embers."

"You make me sick!"

I lay back down. "Don't worry. I'm not going anymore."

In fact I wondered why I had come back here to the dump again. Why didn't I join Westman and the patriots? What drew me back to a place I had never liked and to people who had never liked me? I thought it might be a subconscious attempt to keep from becoming a thorough bum. Flitting all over the hidden solar system was fine in short stints but as

a way of life it led nowhere. There weren't all that many places to go and things to see, though I knew I hadn't gone everywhere yet. Hadn't I found the netherworld by accident and only just recently? It stood to reason there must be more unseen realities.

Feeling as gray and dull as the sky outside, I got the newspaper off my desk, thumbed through it for something interesting and came across an article on a back page. The city was going to round up all the gambers. Certain citizens were complaining that the herd of big cats prevented them from hiking in the foothills. A few claimed to have been clawed or bitten. Supposedly the mayor had intended clearing out the herd and now he was finally going to do it. I didn't believe it. At least I didn't think the gambers would be resettled before next spring.

Having nothing to do until nightfall when Wyala would come to get me, I crawled through the vent to the opening under the building and then skinned through the pipe to the dogcatcher's room. Coincidentally Mrs. Asel was there reading him the riot act. I think she liked doing that to people better than anything else.

"You wouldn't like it if I locked you up in a cage somewhere and charged the public to come and look at you, would you?" she said.

Dogface never moved but sat quietly in the chair with his hand lying where I could see it. "Would you make a sideshow freak of me?" he said in his odd, whispering voice.

"I didn't make you a freak. You did that all by yourself. That's neither here nor there. I want to know where you've been. You've taken to disappearing for hours on end. Yesterday you were gone all day."

"Sometimes I feel the need to get away."

"I don't see why. I provide you with everything you need."

"For which I'm grateful." Dogface hesitated. "There are times when I must withdraw and be my myself."

"I'll not have it! When I want you for a job I insist that you be available, and I don't want you out where anyone might see you. I have a reputation to maintain. It wouldn't do for the town to whisper it about that there's a monster on campus."

"I'm not a monster."

"I don't know what else you can call yourself." Mrs. Asel clicked her teeth and adjusted her glasses. "You're to stay right here and behave as usual. I want you to put a damper on that brat."

"I thought you had decided to let her run free."

"I had, but now . . . it's incredible to think she might be important to anyone, least of all . . . never mind what I said before, keep watch on her."

"I'll try."

"I don't want any foul-ups, do you understand? If she disappears I'll have your hide!"

"Yes, Mother," said the dogcatcher.

Chapter 11

I sat on Wyala in the middle of a rock pile on Zee's world and beckoned to the boy who had helped me bury the dead patriot.

He didn't want to come. He was in a garden now not far from my hiding place. I knew he had seen me but he turned his back to me. Several fields away a group of Kriff were having a corn roast. They were always eating or snacking and at the moment even the sentries had joined the festive group.

Looking over his shoulder at me the boy finally threw away his hoe to come up into the rocks. He hadn't seen Wyala up close the last time we met and now his eyes grew wide with alarm. I walked away a few paces, turned and motioned for him to follow. Reluctantly he did so.

When he saw the mushroom hob sitting on a patch of grass he stopped and backed away. I stopped Wy beside the hob, placed a hand on its warm top and motioned for him to approach.

The only reason he did it was because of Zee but of course I had been counting on that. I got him to come up on the other side of the hob and place his hand on it. Another reason he did it was because he was bigger and older than I. Pride wasn't the exclusive property of humans.

"There, now, I can talk to you," I said.

So astonished was he that he fell onto his back. His contact with the fungus was lost but he'd had a taste; that was at least enough to bring him crawling to the hob upon which he placed a trembling hand.

"Can I really hear your mind?" he asked.

"I'm pretty sure you can," I said. "We couldn't talk unless you came into physical contact with the hob."

His eyes wide with wonder, he stroked the creature, who shivered with pleasure and withdrew its suckers from the ground. It had been feeding but now it desired to indulge another appetite. It was far hungrier for what the young birdman could give it than for food.

Tradition here had always kept the people and the hobs separated. No one ever touched the funguslike growths that were supposedly poison.

Did the birdpeople know about Zee? Yes. They knew that he had the ability to fly all the way off the world; they knew he was waging war with the Kriff and now they all knew he was dead. Only the boy had known about the dead hob but he spoke of it to no one.

Now he caressed the living creature and conversed with me. I told him there was a mission for him to perform for his people but first he had to ride the hob as the dead Zee had ridden the dead one.

He was disbelieving and scared half to death. For a while he tramped up and down the rocks looking back at me to see if I appeared sane. All the while he did it I knew the feeling between him and the hob was growing. I was scared, too, but I tried to hide the fact. Maybe my intent to replace the fallen Zee with another skipper was a foolish idea. Maybe all the birdpeople were able to establish rapport with hobs. That didn't mean they could skip.

"Once you're seated on this being you're going to experience several conflicting desires," I said. "Don't pay any attention to them. Keep your mind on me. That way you'll learn the ropes faster."

"What do you mean?" Not waiting for my answer he knelt, laid his face on the creature's top. "I feel so strange! Like love! It doesn't make sense. I've always been taught that these things were deadly. My parents forbade me ever to look at one."

"They didn't know. Their parents taught them the same thing."

"But why?"

I didn't tell him it was probably because of some disaster concerning the people and the hobs. Thinking about it made me uneasy. What if I led this boy to his death?

"You heard me, didn't you?" I said. "About doing what I tell you?"

"Yes, but what's going to happen?"

"You'll be able to fly off the world like Zee."

As soon as I said it I regretted it, thinking he would be permanently discouraged, but he surprised me by leaping squarely onto the hob's smooth surface and gripping it by the sides. Immediately the two of them began gyrating in midair.

“You aren’t doing what you promised,” I said as Wy and I stepped into D after them.

The youth yelled and darted ahead. It was a piece of cake. He and his transportation were in perfect condition with no anatomical parts scattered anywhere. I couldn’t say the same for their minds. Transported by ecstasy and the sheer joy of emancipation from three-dimensional reality they zoomed off into the beyond with Wyala and me in pursuit. Their symbiotic joining was complete.

No one down on the planet was aware of our departure. I made certain of that. As for D. I didn’t know who was in the area, and that kept expanding as the boy headed for infinity.

Picking his brains in a manner of speaking, I found his name buried in his memory and bellowed it in a mental frequency as loudly as I could.

“Hozun!”

He stopped in space on a dime. Immediately he flew back to me.

“How about falling in and following?” I said. “I know how much fun it is but you’ll have to play later.”

It was to his credit that the exhilaration of being in D for the first time didn’t cause him to go off on any more tangents. He followed me in silence to the planet of the patriots.

The trouble with me was that I never knew when to leave well enough alone. Having delivered one healthy warrior into Westman’s hands I entertained visions of an army of birdmen going out to meet the Kriff. What I ought to have done was to follow Westman’s advice and go back to my regular job of gun-running. Instead, I returned to Zee’s planet.

I would have preferred doing my recruiting in the caves in the cliffs but the mushroom hobs grew on the ground where the Kriff roamed. The soldiers didn’t like hanging about in the high caves where the birdpeople sometimes ambushed them.

My ordeal could only be blamed on bad luck and my rockheadedness. I might have gotten away with it if the man hadn’t cried out when he saw the hob. As I had done with Hozun, I lured this one from a nearby garden into a rocky maze in the foothills and led him to a creature. As soon as he saw it he cried out in horror or surprise, I didn’t know which, and in fact I never found out because he ran away when the Kriff jumped down from the rocks practically on my head. I had unfortunately chosen a spot where a band of them were napping nearby.

There were a dozen of them, all heavily armed. As one came down behind me he hit me on the head with a club, knocking me off Wyala. I’m not sure if it was that blow or one of the others that gave me a concussion. From that point on I wasn’t seeing details clearly. The next thing they did was to beat Wyala into unconsciousness, after which they dragged us into a cabin in the forest.

Sometime during the next few hours they made me realize that they didn’t care what kind of answers I gave them. Either they were just entertaining themselves at my expense or they didn’t know which questions to ask.

Their leader, or the one with the biggest mouth, was named Koho, an unusually skinny specimen who kept peering closely into my eyes and blowing bad breath in my face. Never had I seen a Kriff up this close but I quickly learned that it didn’t matter. Any deadly enemy was ugly and terrifying.

Koho had his friends tie me to a straight-backed chair, after which he held my hair with one hand and slapped my face with the other. Since they seemed mildly interested in where I came from, I showed them all the mental pictures they could possibly want.

“What is this?” said Koho, peering into the shambles of my mind. “What is this?”

“Home!” I croaked. “My home!”

“Ice, snow, caves, wind? What do you take me for I’m a Kcriff who has been everywhere. I know this world.”

“Have you ever landed on it and really looked around?”

One of them pinched my cheek but it was no gesture of affection. Koho polluted my air as he bent down and stared into my eyes. His own were slightly puzzled but full of joy because he had a prisoner.

“That I haven’t done,” he said. “That place is too forbidding.”

“Which is why you think it’s unpopulated. There are loads of us down in those caves. We make igloos too. Very practical if you like cold drinks.”

He yanked my hair and pinched my good cheek. Up close he didn’t look so fishy. He looked like a freak from a carnival with his pebbly, scaly, shiny flesh, but his face and head were far from Earthly. From where I sat it looked as if his eyes were literally hot, like little burning coals. His nose was like an upside-down beak and I wondered how he kept rain out of it. He had big flat teeth like a cow, thin lips, very large and flaring ears and hair like cobwebs. His hands were five-fingered, knobby, quick and sure and cruel.

Nodding to a companion, he had them bring a tame beside me. Laying my left hand out flat, he took my first finger and bent it back until the knuckle snapped.

“Why are you bothering the Kriffs he said and I hastened to assure him that I Intended to bother no one. I kept my eyes off my hand because every time I saw my finger jutting at its awry angle I had a tendency to shriek.

“How do you escape from us in D?” said Koho. Not waiting for an answer he cared nothing about, he pulled my hair and slapped my nose.

“You are a full-grown member of your species, are you not?” he said, and I knew that he knew better. Each time I showed him a mental image of that frozen and desolate homeland of mine I also showed myself in proper perspective to other people.

I don’t know whether I screamed louder when they broke my second finger or when they began beating my senseless hob. She hadn’t twitched since they brought us into the room, just as she made no movement at all when they rained blows up and down her body. The fact that Koho and his friends intended to kill Wyala and me didn’t bother me as much as their methods.

“Kriff people have many enemies,” said Koho. He was very near to me and I wanted to spit in his eyes but my mouth was a desert. My left arm was a hot thing hanging from a lead shoulder. My face felt like a bumpy apple while my head seemed to have a mason inside it who was using a hammer and chisel to split it down the middle. The lids of my eyes kept drooping so that I couldn’t see.

“You are a Kriff enemy,” said Koho. “Fear is a psychological weapon we have put to good use in the past. We will make an example of you to the rest of the skippers in this universe, which will eventually belong to me and my people. The corpses of yourself and your animal floating in D will serve as a warning to the patriots.”

I watched them kick Wyala to consciousness. Their legs were strong and their boots were heavy.

“No more blows to the head,” said Koho. After that they directed their coaxing to the cat’s back and belly.

When I saw her stir I cried out in sorrow, wanting her to be alive but knowing she would be better off dead.

Obviously they didn’t like my reaction. Either that or they were the most sadistic people I had ever come across. They broke my remaining two fingers and then slapped me awake after I fainted.

Wyala stood spraddle-legged in the middle of the floor with her head banging while eight of them held her up. Her right ear was smashed, an eye was bleeding, some of her claws had been ripped out. She looked as if she was dying on her feet.

Koho picked me up like a rag doll and flung me across her back. “Take your choice,” he said in my face. “Die here in this room or skip into your beloved D. I hope you think you can escape. I love good drama.”

Had their snake-hobs been able to bear the weight of myself and the gamber I think they would have killed us on the spot and hauled us into D. Giving my hair a final yank, Koho booted Wyala in the rear. She collapsed under me.

With my good hand I gripped her ruff and pulled. “Let’s go,” I croaked. “Do you want to stay here and die?”

“What’s the difference?”

I could have wept at the agony and defeat in her mind.

“Plenty,” I said. “Remember back home? Remember your kids? These bums have no souls. If we don’t skip they’ll chop up our corpses, drag us out to the tribs and set us afloat.”

“My kids,” she mumbled. “My kids.”

With a supreme effort on both our parts we blinked out of the room. I suppose we were sufficiently rickety while flying down a trib, for our tormentors followed us but didn’t interfere. No doubt they cheered and laughed it up to see what a fight we made of it.

I couldn’t really feel Wyala, no more than she was entirely aware of who or where she happened to be. That the Kriff were behind us we knew; even the dying are aware of their persecutors.

If I had been more conscious or more aware of my reality I probably would have dissolved into screams of pain. As it was I seemed to be a semi-detached, partially alive psyche hauling a weight of bitter suffering somewhere behind me. Within the small and detached mind that belonged to me was an eye that saw, if somewhat defectively.

On an extremely subhuman level Wyala and I agreed that we didn’t want to die with a flock of whooping buzzards around us so we headed in a limping, horribly crippled fashion for the pipeline. If the Kriff stopped us in mid-trib, so be it. If they hauled us apart and booted us in different directions toward eternity at least we could say we had tried, if there was anybody to listen.

Getting into the pipeline was no big deal. The sense of hearing isn’t nearly as delicate as the one of sight or the one of touch. The latter two seemed to have expired along with some of my naiveté but I could hear the pulsing of D above the faltering cacophony of my own heart. Tum-tum-tum. Ta-ta-ta. Evidently Wyala heard it too and the pair of us skimmed through the invisible wall, leaving behind a pack of cursing hyenas who had waited too long before exacting their revenge.

“I can’t!” Wyala moaned, for she read the thoughts in my mind.

“For want of anything better to do!” I gasped. “Think home!”

“I’m unconscious!”

“Me, too! Think it anyway!”

We thought it, both of us together on the same wavelength, neither of us believing that we would ever see it again in the flesh. Ours was too battered and abused but we had no wish to give up everything in the impersonal pipeline. Maybe our wish not to die in any of the places we passed through was the reason our brains didn’t blank out on us. Or not completely.

I remember practically nothing about that trip through the last several worlds. Wyala swears she doesn’t either and argues with me when I try to give her all the credit.

It was dusk on Earth when we crashed down, warm, shadowy and dry for a change. A big yellow ball shot toward me through the trees but I didn’t recognize it. Later I would remember it and realize it was the moon.

We hit hard on a grassy patch in a wooded area. Wyala’s legs held up long enough for me to raise my head and look around. At first I didn’t see the shack between the trees but I kept blinking until it came into focus.

“You did it!” I croaked. “You did it! You brought us home!”

There was a light in the shack and the door suddenly opened. The two of us must have been silhouetted against the darker background of trees; whoever stood there started walking toward us.

My luck, my incredible luck, and all of it so bad these days! Of all the places to land in the vicinity of the concentration camp we had to do it in front of the dogcatcher’s private hideaway. I knew these woods, immediately recognized them as I turned my wobbly head to look at them.

“Wy!” I whispered.

“I can’t move, honey. In fact, something funny is happening in my head.”

Dogface kept coming toward us and there wasn’t a thing I could do about it I had made the mistake of attempting to

come all the way to consciousness when there was no blessed anesthetic. I think I screamed my head off.

I tried to keep my balance as Wyala's legs gave way. The big yellow ball in the sky socked me in the face before it was blotted out by the figure in the cloak. As helpless as a dying cat I lay and watched the dogcatcher bend over me.

Chapter 12

Somehow it didn't confuse me when I awakened in a huge bed in a quiet room in the mansion. In an important way my mind was laid to rest in at least one area. I had no need to wonder what had happened to me lately. I had been hurt and now I was in the house of Cornelia Ember.

My left hand was covered by a cast that extended from halfway to my elbow to the ends of my fingers. Only my thumb was free. I didn't really care about it, no more than I cared about the sun coming in the window or the heavy lavender drapes or the woman sitting in the room watching me. Making certain that I didn't groan, I sat up.

"Good morning," said my mother. I didn't care about that either.

Someone had been walking on me with cleated boots. It didn't occur to me that I wasn't seeing very well until I felt my face. My eyes were puffy and sore. My cheeks were so tender that I couldn't bear to touch them. I looked about for a mirror without really wanting to find one.

Ember got up and left the room so that I didn't have to worry about making it to the bathroom in stoical silence. Now that I was by myself I could gasp, moan and curse all I pleased.

The tall butler with the white hair and the black uniform came in with a food tray that I didn't give a second glance. There were new clothes lying on a chair but they didn't fit. I seemed to have lost weight.

The sun was offensive the way it splattered everywhere. Instead of following Jim the butler out into the hallway I went through a glass door into a garden. I could sense gambers and I had to go and see.

There were two of them inside a high, thick shrub, one an old male and the other Wyala, but not my friend or anyone I really knew. This gamber lay in the sun without blinking. One ear was gone, an eyelid drooped, there were large puffy places on her sides. Her feet were swollen.

She let me pet her and she seemed to know me. When I spoke out loud she cocked her head; when I twisted her good ear she lashed her tail, but when I tried to touch her mind I could find no entrance. My friend had a problem in her brain. She couldn't communicate with me.

The old male didn't bother her. He seemed to realize that she wasn't in prime condition. Now and then he circled around her or approached to touch noses with her but they were fatherly gestures.

When I called him to me he casually and without curiosity left Wyala to come and stand before me. He didn't bare his teeth or ripple a muscle as I extended my hand to touch him. He was the tamest gamber I ever saw. His name was Bruin and, no, he wasn't enthusiastic about the idea of slipping away to D with me.

That was too bad. But not just now. The proverbial sick-as-a-cat description came nowhere near the way I felt. I went back to the room of the purple drapes and the silent, observant woman, climbed into bed and went to sleep. If there was any grief in me it was encapsulated somewhere in my chest. It couldn't hurt me and there it would stay until I let it out. That I never intended to do. I was going to be too busy.

Was it sad that a poor wealthy woman had her infant stolen from its carriage in the lobby of a hotel on the French Riviera? The nursemaid had gone to the desk to inquire about something and when she returned to the carriage the child was gone. Was that sad? The mother instigated a search that took her all over the continents of Europe, Asia and Australia. Leads petered out, new ones surfaced, the pursuit often came to a standstill and meanwhile the years passed. No ransom note, no clues, only rumors, reports and hints that stopped at dead ends. The mother followed every lukewarm trail she could find. Eventually she concentrated on orphanages. It was possible that the kidnapper had become frightened and dumped the child. For how many years had the mother searched, from Europe to America and back again, with no luck? And then one day the child walked into the house to look at some paintings and no one had any doubts because the red hair, the blue eyes and the profile were unmistakable.

Who cared? Not I. Who thought it was sad? I didn't. It wasn't half a match for a lot of years of being nothing and no one, except that I had been tenacious enough to find something in those years for myself. I could skip and I didn't want anyone so much as hinting to me that the woman haunting my room was responsible for that characteristic too.

It was the only reason I had any curiosity about her. There was no way of knowing for certain but it was my suspicion that somebody had ridden old Bruin into D at one time or another.

Food made me want to gag; that was peculiar since my gullet or gut hadn't been bruised. There were no raw places in my mouth but every time I took a forkful and smelled it I thought of Wyala outside in the pen of hedges with her brain so wounded she couldn't talk to me, and then I gagged.

At least Jim the butler didn't give me arguments but took away the trays with regularity while I lay abed beginning to look like a snake.

When I realized that I would need my strength in the future I began forcing myself to eat. Jim agreeably added fattening tidbits to my plate so that by the week's end I could walk about without my pants falling down.

I took up target practice. Why shouldn't there be a shooting range in the house? It had everything else. Most of the guns were too heavy but I finally settled on a sleek little thirty-eight. It fit easily into my hand, and if I didn't take too long aiming, it was light enough. I started wearing it in a cloth holster tied about my waist.

"Not what every young lady wears these days," Jim said to me.

"They don't have my problems."

"Is that so?"

"I know you tattle everything I say, so I don't intend confiding in you about anything. Not that I normally would anyway. It comes from having my tail kicked at least once a day and twice on Sunday."

"Lady Ember is a most devastated woman."

"That's tough."

"She spent all those years looking for you, not to mention a fortune in money."

"I can't feel nothing that ain't in me, can I? It ain't my fault."

"I have it on good faith that you're quite bright. Why do you wish to sound like a goon?"

"Who told you I was bright?"

"The young lady who tried to make us think she was you. Miss Twila."

Poor Twilly. If she only knew.

I got so I could hit a moving target, perhaps not on the bull's eye, but I nipped it somewhere nearly every time.

"Do you plan to go to war?" Jim said to me. Since I talked to him Ember made certain that he dogged my tracks.

Funny how that last thought created a little twinge of alarm inside me.

"Certainly," I said in answer to his question.

"Can anyone join?"

"You haven't got the eyes for it."

"Why? Are you planning to shoot microscopic enemies?"

"No, fish."

"Wouldn't a hook and line do better than a gun?"

“I already have those.”

He didn't believe me, naturally, so he didn't try to take my weapon or keep me out of the shooting room. If I didn't do anything strenuous, or if I wasn't planning to, the cast could come off my hand in four weeks. As far as I was concerned, it could remain where it was for longer than that. If I survived I'd saw it off.

Ember brought the family albums to my room, left them there for me to look at. They remained untouched. Faces had a way of implanting themselves under the skin. The past was like the future to me. I probably wouldn't have much of the latter, I surely hadn't had much of the former, so why not leave it that way?

“I don't suppose you feel like talking about it?” she said.

“About what?”

“Your ordeal?”

“Which one was that?” I said.

She maintained her composure but then she always did. “Who used you as a punching bag?”

“Nobody. I fell out of a tree.”

That evening Jim broached the subject again. I suspected that Ember put him up to it.

“It takes a rare character to lay violent hands on a minor,” he said, making it a point to stare at my blackened eyes. They weren't so bad now. In a few more days I would look like my normal miserable self.

“There are lots of rare characters.”

“Where did you meet your tormentor?”

“I forget. I have amnesia.”

“Except when it's to your advantage to remember. You're quick to point out to Madam that your years in the orphanage were long and unpleasant.”

“Tedious, mostly. It made me bite my fingernails.”

“Madam—”

“It doesn't matter. I'm not staying. She'll get over it.”

His look was cold. “I'm certain of that. You, however, are a different matter. I doubt if you ever adjust to anything. Instead of side-stepping stress you're the type who gets in front of it and lets it bowl you over.”

“You don't like me, do you?”

“You work overtime to see that I don't.”

A couple of days later when I went out to the shrub pen Wyala was gone.

“Don't get excited,” said Jim. He had followed me out.

“I'm not,” I said, but it was a lie. If I didn't get a fast explanation as to my hob's whereabouts I was going to blow my stack.

“The animal is with the rest of the herd on the north edge of the estate.”

“The herd!” I stared at him in surprise. “I thought the mayor was rounding them up.”

“He did. For Madam.”

“Another trick to get me here?”

“Not a trick. More like a hope.”

“It worked, didn’t it?” Before he could ask me what I found so fascinating about gambers I left him and took off across the lawns that looked like green blankets. The corral must have cost a fortune. It was a chain link fence fifteen feet high enclosing ten acres of lush land. There was a stream of clear water, trees, rocks and a feeding trough where chunks of meat were delivered periodically.

All the comforts of home. Wyala was there with her family but she wouldn’t come to the fence when I called. One of her cubs waddled over and I knelt and let it gnaw on my fingers. Through misty eyes I watched my old friend. She didn’t even know I was there.

With my gun feeling heavy on my thigh I walked all over the grounds until I located Bruin. He was in a concrete well at the south end of the house. Sprawled out like a rug, he stretched in the sun, got up and nosed some meat Jim brought him, went back to the same spot and lay down. Now and then he glanced up at the thicket where I crouched and hid. I could have sworn he yawned at me.

I didn’t mind his indifference. I wasn’t ready yet. He could sun himself for a little while longer and the red-haired woman who watched from the window could make a few more plans for me, but in the end I would have my way.

That night I dreamed of frogs. In the morning Ember was sitting in the chair watching me. She didn’t say anything, just pulled the satin cord for Jim to bring breakfast.

Desiring to put on weight and strength I forced myself to eat. Then I dressed and went outside for my daily walk. I managed a mile. When I could go for three or four I would take Bruin and head for the universe. My face looked normal again, no more puffiness or discolorations, my back didn’t creak when I bent over. The only problem was my hand. Encased in the rigid cast, it afforded me very little action. It would probably prove to be a major handicap during the next few weeks.

“How did I get here?” I asked Jim.

“Someone deposited you at the gate, rang the bell and ran away when the chauffeur went to see. Who treated you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Madam called a doctor to come and examine you. He said it had been three or four days since you sustained the damage. Someone with medical knowledge placed a cast on your hand. The doctor put on a fresh one but he said the original would have done. Who took care of you those three or four days? Madam would like to know.”

“I can’t remember.” It was true. Somewhere in a woolly fog in my head was a memory of crashing with Wyala among some trees. Then there was a round orange ball and a flickering shadow that looked like the dogcatcher, but of course it must have been an illusion or a bad dream. Evidently someone found me in the woods but I had no idea who it was.

“Tell Madam it’s a mystery,” I said. “I don’t know who left me at the gate. Was Wyala also left there?”

“Who?”

“The gamber?”

“Oh, the young cat! She was delivered by Express the next day. Very odd.”

I thought so too.

“Madam trusts that your sporting days are over,” he said.

Giving him a sharp glance I said, “Why should they be?”

“I have no idea, since I don’t know what she meant in the first place. She seems to think you’ve run into some rough company and have learned a lasting lesson. She trusts that you won’t be returning to wherever it was you were.”

“How long have you been the butler for her?”

“Ten years.”

“Do you know a lot about her?”

“She is a very private person.”

“Does she ever disappear now and then for two or three days?”

“Never. As long as I’ve known her she has been totally absorbed in finding her lost daughter.” His expression as he peered down at me said that I couldn’t possibly be that person. “She once told me she was climbing a cloud while you were being snatched and that she would never climb again until you were found. Odd, wouldn’t you say? As if anyone ever climbed a cloud.”

So much for individuality. “Do you know what her plans are regarding the gambers?” I asked.

“Why don’t you behave like a lady and ask her yourself? I’d advise you to talk to her before she brings a load of psychiatrists down on you.”

“Is she planning to do that?”

“I should if I were in her place. Either that or ship you back where you came from. She obviously made a mistake about you. You’re from common stock.”

For the first time in days I laughed. “Maybe I’m just an indiscretion.”

His eyebrows high in the air, Jim the butler stalked out of my presence.

So Ember thought I was finished with D? Having guessed that I had run into trouble there, she was now convinced that I possessed enough sense to stay on solid ground. Perhaps she might have reacted that way to having been beaten within an inch of her life, but not I.

I wondered if she suspected it was the Kriff who had tortured me. Probably. Westman’s old friend had been acquainted with an Earthwoman who rode in D. It couldn’t have been Ember for she was too young. It might have been the woman in the portrait in the art room. My grandmother. Anyway Ember didn’t keep that old gamber named Bruin around because she liked his looks. More like for old time’s sake.

She was like me in that she didn’t trust anyone, least of all a stranger who was supposed to be her own flesh and blood. She prepped Bruin so that he didn’t want to ride with me.

I guess my learning how to shoot and the fact that I wore a gun caused her to look at me askance. While she examined me for signs of a diaper-wearer she had once known, she also hunted for symptoms of idiocy, rock-headedness or a death wish. I don’t think she really recognized any such signposts or she would have had Jim lock me in a rubber room, but she did go so far as to try and put the whammy on Bruin. I didn’t mind. If I hadn’t intended riding him I would have readied one of the other gambers, but he was the one. There was work for me in D, the old cat had been there before and he wasn’t likely to spook or go off on tangents.

When I could go a whole day without a nap I was ready for my departure. Early one morning I took a full shoulder band of bullets and a metal box from the range. My gun was on my hip as I sneaked out of the house to the concrete well where Bruin lay on a rock sunning himself. I could tell that he knew I was nearby by the way his tail swished, but he wouldn’t raise his head to look.

Leaving the belt and the box of ammo on top of the wall, I dropped into the well and walked over to him. As I laid my hand on his hip he growled. My hand moved up his back. He snarled.

The call of D whispered in my ears. My nose quivered, the hair on my neck stirred. In my gut was a dreading that threatened to boil over. It had been too long and there was much to do. I couldn’t wait.

“You have no choice,” I said to the big gamber on the rock and dived into his mind.

He groaned. With a guilty look toward the big window above the well he got to his feet. “I have no loyalty to you. Only to her. She and I go back a long way.”

“I realize that, but vacations are funny things. You can take them with almost anybody and appreciate them.”

“I promised!”

threw a leg across his back. There came a clamor at the window over my head as someone opened it. I heard yelling.

“Make up your mind,” I said. “If we go you’re mine until I bring you back. Except that I can’t guarantee I’ll be able to do that.”

He was so hungry he drooled. “How can I argue with destiny?” His eyes glowed like emeralds. “Has it changed any?”

“Does it ever?” I settled onto his back, nudged him in the ribs with my heels and blinked him to the top of the wall where I picked up my gear. Then we just blinked.

Chapter 13

Rich and I were in the munitions warehouse in Kansas and he didn’t really want to shoot me. He held his gun against my head and when I turned to look at him he said in a hoarse voice, “What are you doing?”

“Ripping you off.”

He used a finger to stop the flow of perspiration down his temple. He was young with short brown hair and a little mustache. “Yeah, but why?”

I was standing on the floor lifting rifles out of a box. Bruin waited on the other side of the stack.

“Some friends of mine need this stuff for a war they’re fighting.”

“Who? Arabs? Jews?”

“Birdpeople.”

“Oh, yeah? I gotta do something with you. Something about this business. But I don’t know what. I don’t want to shoot you but the minute I take my eye off you you’ll probably disappear.”

“Are you getting into trouble because of me?”

“What do you think? They take inventory in this place once a month. What are birdpeople?”

“They have wings and they fly, but not very high.”

He looked at me over his gun. “Are you a UFO?”

“Do I look like one?”

“You took like a kid.” He gasped and aimed his gun at Bruin who came around the stack.

“Don’t shoot him,” I said. “He’s only a gambler.”

“I thought they were supposed to be wild and dangerous.”

To Bruin I said silently, “Get over here and be quick about it.” Nonchalantly the cat ambled my way. “Touch him,” I said to Rich. “Pet him between the ears.”

“He’ll bite.”

“No, he minds me. He knows I want him to be friendly.”

Carefully and cautiously the soldier touched the big brown head, stroked an ear.

“Do you feel anything strange?” I asked.

“Like what?”

Bruin spoke in my mind. "You're wasting your time. He's as deaf as a post"

"Some people can communicate with gambers."

"How do you mean?" Rich had his gun pointed at the floor while he examined the cat's head with timid fingers.

"It's like a thought meld. I can join my mind with him and we become one entity. Together we can travel in the fourth dimension."

"I don't believe that."

As his hand dropped off Bruin, I took hold of the cat's ear and blinked both of us onto the other side of the stack.

"We're over here," I said aloud.

Rich came around the pile in a hurry. "You did it again! You disappeared!"

"I skipped. This gamber and I sneaked through a piece of the fourth dimension." I stayed in contact with Bruin in case the soldier decided to shoot me. He just stood looking at me so I said, "I've been watching you."

"What do you mean?"

"On Thursday afternoons you and some of your friends have target practice on the range up on the hill."

"You've been spying on me?"

"Not really. Today is Thursday. How would you like to meet some real aliens?"

He looked at me closely. "Now you're pulling my leg."

"You're shooting today, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Don't be surprised if something unusual happens. I only hope you keep one thing in mind. If any of them gets away it will really be bad." Before he could respond I blinked out of the building with Bruin, stopped long enough to climb onto his back and then we skipped to the planet of the birdmen.

Choosing one of the higher cliffs I entered an empty cave and settled down to wait. I needed the rest anyway. For several days I had been transporting guns to Zee's people and my back was sore. So was my left arm.

I slept for a while. Bruin awakened me by crawling away so that my head hit the dirt floor.

"Thanks," I said, sitting up.

"My conscience is bothering me."

"I don't want to hear that."

"I'll tell you another thing you won't like. She and you might as well be twins. Same brass and rockheadedness."

"You're tight, I don't like hearing it. Come on. Pay strict attention to me for a while or you're liable to get your tail sliced. Ready?"

"Let's go."

I knew where Koho and his friends were. In fact I hadn't really lost sight of him over the last few days. As long as I didn't blink right over his evil head he never even knew I was around. That's exactly what I did as soon as Bruin and I sailed forth from the cave, entered D and swarmed down the escarpment toward a cornfield where half a dozen sadistic gluttons gobbled roasted corn.

I didn't go too close to them. This time I was all brains and calculating, shot into 3 just long enough to startle them out of their wits, after which I grounded a hundred feet away. Hauling my gun from my holster, I let go with a couple of

rounds over their heads. Then Bruin and I split for Kansas and a planet that was a long way off.

Koho knew who it was. I could almost read his incredulity and rage in the atmosphere separating us. It took him and his friends a few moments to straddle their hobs before they took off after me. Their glass guns didn't work in D but they were willing to chase me until I came to roost somewhere.

This time I ignored the pipeline, entered a long red trib that flowered out into a pool of yellow. Around and around that particular whirlpool of vortexes and eternal winds I went until I was certain that all six Kriff were behind me but still well out of reach. Then I blasted for a big gray highway made up of vacuum and dead silence. Only in my mind did I hear the cry of the banshees on my tail. With any luck I would soon hear them voicing a different tune.

In the pipeline I could have covered the distance between Zee's world and Earth in a matter of seconds. Going via tribes took me a little more time but it didn't affect the situation; I knew where I was going while the Kriff didn't. They couldn't catch me in a blue moon.

Only when I sensed the rifle range in Kansas directly below me did I change my speed, braked like a car hitting the skids on a wet road, darted straight toward the ground. At the last moment I shifted ever so slightly to the right so that my hob and I touched turf behind a tall shooting target.

The Kriff landed all over the field and immediately began yelling because they couldn't see me. Then they spotted three men standing about a hundred yards away. My good buddy Koho yanked his weapon from his belt and sent a shard of glass zipping past the cheek of one of the soldiers. The man jerked away at the last instant so that he didn't lose half his face but the missile nicked his cheek, causing a flood of blood to fill his collar.

That was all Rich and his companions needed. I personally saw Koho go down in a hail of bullets. Then I hugged tight to the backside of the target while the others were finished off.

I don't know if Rich remembered anything I had said to him earlier. He had been fired upon by some warriors who plainly weren't human and who were plainly dangerous. As Bruin and I drifted into D I could see that I didn't have to worry about any of the Kriff escaping to spread the story that Earth had become an active enemy.

Later that evening I located Rich's aura in one of the buildings on the Post. The cat and I settled down in a shower room where he stood in front of a mirror with a towel around his waist. He was shaving. When he saw our reflection he cut himself and dropped his razor.

"Sorry," I said.

"Oh. man!" He stood staring with his eyes wide. "Before this afternoon my C.O. thought I was nuts Now *I* think I am!"

"You know those aliens today? Those Kriff? There are about a billion of them all traveling around looking for something to stomp."

For a moment he hesitated. Then he said, "We can't talk in here. Somebody is bound to come in. Can you meet me outside in a few minutes? By the warehouse."

Ten minutes later he came walking up the dark hill with his gun in his hand.

"You don't trust me, do you?" I said. I didn't trust him either and remained seated on Bruin.

"Do you blame me?"

"No. Are you a hero with the C.O. now?"

"He threatened my life if I mentioned those aliens to anyone. My buddies too. Did you pull that stunt on me for fun today?"

"Of course not. Among other things, those six needed killing. Where are their bodies?"

Putting his gun away, he turned and looked down at the lights of the camp. "They're in isolation. I don't know what's being done with them or where they'll be taken. Washington is my guess. Somebody is flying out here tomorrow to question me about gambers."

"Tell them that all a person has to do is touch one and he'll know if he has the talent. This is important. Tell them that if they find someone who can talk to a gamber, don't let him ride it. fly a red flag over the camp."

“Why?”

“The Kriff are all over the place. If beginners start skipping off this planet they’ll be seen sooner or later. I’ll keep an eye on your flagpole and if I see a red flag I’ll come.”

“You’ll let the government people talk to you?”

I lied. “I’ll think about it. Another thing, the Kriff can escape if they touch their hobs; the snaky things they ride. All they need to do is touch them and you’ll never catch them.”

“We’ve got one locked in an aquarium. It eats anything.”

“I know. If you find someone who can talk to gambers keep him away from the snakes.”

I didn’t tell him I wouldn’t be back to steal guns from his warehouse. A few miles away was another building full of surplus war material. There wasn’t even a guard on the premises.

Leaving him there on the hillside I skipped away to the building, helped myself to a box of grenades and traveled with it to Zee’s world. In a high cave I hid the box in a wall niche. Later someone would come and get it and hide it down on the ground. The birdmen were learning how to use the equipment I had brought them without ever having fired a shot or pulled a pin on a pineapple.

Three days went by before I spotted a red flag flying above the Kansas Army post.

I didn’t believe it. So soon? Washington was good but was it that good? Having been filled in by Rich, had they managed to get a gamber and a skipper together on such short notice?

They didn’t even get to see a ball of light when I dipped down through the roof of the C.O.’s office and took a look around. The hair on my neck stood out. The place was wall-to-wall guns, everything but a cannon and an atom bomb. In the center of the room was a big open box that I supposed they wanted me to walk into.

Snatching a piece of paper and a pen from a desk I wrote, “Keep trying with those gambers,” let it flutter into the trap they had laid for me and then I blinked.

It was another week before they flew the red flag again. This time the C.O.’s office was wall-to-wall guns, but instead of the box they had a young male gamber and a middle-aged man.

The man wasn’t touching the animal but sat close beside it. He was twiddling his thumbs. The cat was chained to the wall.

“Hi,” I said. He nearly fell out of his chair. I showed him a mental picture of Bruin and me perched in the air above him. All the guns had come to an alert. The C.O. was a graying warhorse with pale eyes and a ramrod back. His name was Battersby. Instead of speaking words he spat them out like nails. He wished to know what was happening that he couldn’t see.

The man’s name was Connors. “She won’t come out of D,” he said.

What was D?

“A universe. Like a fourth dimension.”

What did she look like?

“A kid. Fourteen. Fifteen. Red hair, blue eyes, riding the biggest gamber I’ve ever seen.”

Why wouldn’t she come out?

“She says she’s too busy to become your prisoner. She wants to take me with her for about an hour. So I won’t be killed later when I try it alone.”

Why couldn’t anyone else see her?

“She’s in D. She says I can see her and talk to her because of the symbiotic potential between me and the cat. She

says I can go where she is.”

Who wanted to kill him?

“The same people who want to conquer all the worlds. The Kriff. They’re like the aliens your soldiers shot.”

The C.O. had several silent fits and some noisy ones before ordering the release of the gambler.

“Are you afraid of me?” I said wordlessly to Connors.

“No, I can see into your mind. None of them trusts you though.”

“Don’t talk out loud.”

“Oh! You mean I can do it by just thinking as you do. I see.”

“Listen to me. They’re okay but they’re too suspicious. As soon as they release that gambler just get on his back and follow me. Okay? No explanations, no questions, no nothing, otherwise they’ll have us here all day. Right?”

He did it. C.O. Battersby had his mouth open to spell out fifty million conditions I’d have to meet before Connors could go anywhere with me, when Connors straddled the cat and blinked out of the room.

He was screaming as we tore along a yellow trib amid a cloud of thick gas. He was still yelling when I abruptly swerved and made him go along with me. Someone was ahead of us in a cloud. Just as quickly I veered back on course as I recognized the figure.

“How are you today?” I said to Hozun.

“Hey, I’m fine but Westman is talking about stringing you up to a tree. Who’s that with you?”

“Meet Connors. You’ll be seeing more of him.”

The young birdman extended a friendly mental hand which the wide-eyed Connors accepted.

“Whew!” he said after we had gone on our way.

“Yeah, I know, but we haven’t got time to play. Actually that’s what D is for, vacations and relaxation, but the Kriff are messing it up. Follow me.”

I took him on a quick tour of the circle of worlds, about three minutes on twenty planets with a fast scan of what they and their people were like. Last of all we dipped down into Kriffland and then back out again. I showed him that the safest way to travel was by blinking from trib to trib, changing direction and maintaining top speed. He could follow me and he did fairly well for a neo. A couple more jaunts and he might be able to outrun the enemy.

“What should I tell them?” he said to me as we landed on the roof of Battersby’s building.

“Everything. You might as well. I’m sure they’ll put you to sleep and raid your subconscious.”

“Is that why you haven’t told me who you are?”

“They can’t help being suspicious and I don’t blame them. A word of advice. Find out where target practices are going on, where ground action is being fought, wherever people are fighting, stuff like that. If you ever get any Kriff on your tail, and you will, lead them to the battlegrounds. Just try and make sure none of them get away. Oh, yeah, something else. I’ll keep answering the red flags. We need more recruits.”

Chapter 14

I slept lousy at night. It had been going on for too long and lately I woke up yelling and moaning. Not to mention the nightmares! Frogs, dogs, witches, devils, nothing pleasant or comprehensible. Sometimes I drowned and a dog came

into the water to haul me out. Afterward he turned into a frog who got beaten by a witch. The devil? That was me, horns and all. Tormented, wading in brimstone, the whole bit. I hated those dreams. Once in a while I awakened with such a sense of urgency that I nearly wept with fright. There was something I had to do but it continued to escape into the fog of my mind.

As for the routine of my life, or the action part of it, there was Westman who brought me cheer. He didn't want to hang me from a tree limb. He wanted to shoot me. He was furious because I was gun-running to the birdpeople instead of to his personal cave and he was apoplectic over the fact that I was recruiting at home. It was his own private war. Furthermore he didn't like my attitude or the size of my mouth.

The cure for my pain was to stay away from him and others who agitated me. That way I didn't have to listen to them. Besides, I had the jobs of running guns and teaching Connors. He confided in me that he had always been fascinated by gamblers but had never been close to one. Maybe that was just as well. He might have gotten near enough to a specimen to skip with it and where would that have landed him? The same place I was. A sea in the midst of confusion.

"I knew you were trouble the first time you dropped in on us," Westman said to me. We were on the patriot planet cooking ourselves a pot of soup over an open fire.

"The tribs are free space and so is the pipeline." I kept sticking my fingers in the soup and getting burned.

"You never did tell me how you got your hand broken." He sat on a log with his hat pulled down until it nearly covered his eyes. He looked like a fugitive from an old western but never would he have played the handsome hero. He was strictly the villain, outwardly. I was growing strangely fond of his inner man.

Back into the soup went my fingers but this time they were on my left hand and I ended up howling. The skin was tender on them since I had cut the cast off just yesterday. Fish-belly or bluish-white, my digits had healed just fine and were fully operative.

"How does a no-account young thing like you figure in my scheme of things?" Westman growled. He finally got up and ladled the soup into two bowls.

"Only on the fringes, I hope;" I said.

Reluctantly, begrudgingly he handed over one of the bowls to me. "You didn't answer my question? What happened to your hand?"

"Where's Dandy these days?"

"Quit changing the subject."

"Who said I was?"

Almond-shaped eyes regarded me from under the hat brim. "Are you saying Dandy beat you up?"

"No, the Kriff did."

"But you think he told them where to find you?"

I shrugged. "He would have if it was to his advantage."

"I'm telling you Dandy is a loyal patriot."

"I'm telling you he's a fink."

He looked disgusted. "Then how come he hasn't told the Kriff where this place is?"

"He probably has. What do they care? Are they going to raid twenty-four people? Wouldn't it be smarter for them to wait until we get something going? If we ever do."

"Your brain is cracked."

"The ammo caves are something they'd like to know about. They'd like to blow that up and they probably will as soon

as Dandy finds out where it is.”

“Nobody knows that but you and me and I’m not telling.”

I thought of my fingers and winced.

“Why would he do it?” Westman’s craggy face seemed to flicker in the fire light. “Why would Dandy want to betray us?”

“And everybody else. Do you know where he’s from?”

“I never asked.” Westman shook his head. “Like I said, what is a little no-account, unloved, unwanted wretch like you doing in my scene?”

“I’m not unloved.”

“Is that so? Tell me someone who loves you.” He waited. “Well? Don’t tell me you forgot!”

The fact was that I had. Like a will-o-the-wisp something fluttered into my mind and then faded away fast. My face turned red. I dropped my empty bowl and stood up. “I’m going to find out why Dandy is working with the Kriff.”

Westman immediately turned the air blue. “I don’t want to hear you say anything like that again!” he bellowed. “That kid has risked his neck for us over and over again! That includes you!”

“I wish he’d leave me out of it. I can do without his sacrifices.”

I had to leave then because he began yelling so loudly the others came out of their cabins to see what was the matter. Samarth the huge, the alien man with double joints in his arms, gave me a wink and a pink smile. I tried to smile back but my heart wasn’t in it. How did I know if this big offworlder smiled when he was friendly? For all I knew he did it when he was murderously angry.

Gath, who had white rope growing out of his head, raised his hand to me as I went past. All I did in reply was to nod at him. Perhaps he hadn’t even seen me.

It wasn’t easy working with foreigners. Half the time I offended them while they spent the other half offending me. Once when I was in my cabin sound asleep Terra with the undeveloped wings came in, pulled the pillow out from under my head and substituted a flat rock. Later she said that her people liked hard pillows. Gath had the habit of stepping on my toes in the chow line, saying that women on his planet were reminded of their station in that manner. Usually I shoved him aside and stomped him back, but that always sent him complaining to Westman. I had made up my mind that the very first time Westman relayed one of those gripes to me I would take off on my own. Strangely he never did. Sometimes I observed him covertly and wondered if he valued my contributions to the cause or if he just wanted me underfoot where he could keep an eye on me.

He drove me away that day, so I rode Bruin to Zee’s world, grounded in a high cave and showed a family of birdpeople how to use .22 rifles.

Later I led another group on a foray in pursuit of a band of Kriff. The birdmen knew how far away from other Kriff they must be before they could fire a rifle without the sound being heard. This presented no great obstacle in little wars because birdfolk could swiftly scout the territory by flying. Besides, they had Bruin and me.

Down a low cliff the people floated and met me in a wooded area. From there we flew to a lake where a band of the enemy dined and tossed stones across the water. They never immersed unless they accidentally fell into water. Neither did they bathe. It wasn’t that they were a dirty species, though I liked to pretend so, but their bodies rid themselves of debris by sloughing off shreds of skin instead of sweating. Not that the Kriff didn’t smell. They stank to high heaven and I don’t know anyone who could bear to be near them besides their own kind.

The group by the lake had a deep fire going. Corn wrapped in leaves lay roasting in the coals, a big green salad lay in a basket on a table, a bowl of fruit was on the ground near the water. It was an innocent domestic scene, except that it wasn’t their planet; the food had been grown and harvested by others and the Kriff were in a mood to kill anyone who annoyed them.

They loved their glass guns. Almost anywhere in D there were weapons superior to the slashers but the Kriff would rather slice an enemy to pieces than fill him full of holes or blow him up. At the first sign of birdmen flitting down from

trees into their presence the pack of them ran for their shooters. To the devil with dining and sport; the Kriff didn't mind some war.

The birdmen were too fair, in my opinion. Rather than descend upon an unsuspecting enemy they gave the opposition time to arm and then the shooting began. A winged woman promptly gave a Kriff a third eye that knocked him across the deep oven. The stink of his burning body mingled with gun oil, powder, sweat and zeal.

Someone lost a piece of scalp when flying glass came close, a Kriff went down clutching his belly, another fell over him and ran herself through on a long sliver lying at an odd angle on the ground.

The secret in fighting Kriff was not to let them reach their hobs. This I could take care of. Loping across the ground astride Bruin, I scooped up a handful of snakes that were crawling out of a pit toward their masters. Carrying them into the trees I flung them away and returned for the rest. One Kriff managed to grab her hob and blink away but I blinked directly after her, grabbed the tail end of her beast and dragged them both back with me. Once on the ground she turned ferocious and ran at me with her gun coming up in her hand. It wasn't a difficult choice. I shot her in the throat.

Five birdmen and myself managed to wipe out eleven Kriff. None of them escaped to tell the story and none of us were hurt. While my companions dug graves in the woods I took the Kriff with the bullet in his belly, tied a hob to him and rode with him into D. Bruin complained about the weight but I paid him no mind.

In Kansas, Earth, I braked at the Army Post, skimmed out of sight along the ground and left the enemy lying on General Battersby's office stoop. Now he had a real live alien to hide from the public. He also had one to examine if his medics got the bullet out in time.

On my way to nowhere I picked up the spoor of a traveler, sort of like a trail of glittering dust crossing my path. Immediately I backtracked while scanning the miles ahead with the special sense that Bruin and I made come alive. At once I relaxed and closed in on the rider. It was no Kriff. Then I recognized who it was. Promptly I faded back into obscurity again. I had promised Westman and myself a few things where Dandy was concerned. The peacock was ahead of me on a red trib, Mr. Handsome himself, riding his big wolf with a nonchalance that could only come from the knowledge that one had no enemies anywhere.

I think he half sensed my presence for he began hopping from trib to trib, occasionally jumping all the way through intersections, blinking from byways to thoroughfares. I let him believe he lost me, disappeared like smoke onto a parallel trail that looked more like a back road. The trouble with sub-tributaries was that they contained pockets of fury that puffed up in my face or dumped me into depressions. I might as well have been driving a jalopy through a bed of potholes.

Still I carried out my intent to make Dandy think he was all alone on his way to wherever he was going. Now and then I picked up a groan from his hob. More and more I was convinced that this rider wasn't in D for his health or the welfare of other worlds.

What I figured was that he had a stash of gold or diamonds somewhere. Such loot would do him no good on a great many planets in D, but I was well acquainted with several where such a treasure could buy him almost anything he wanted.

Actually I think loot was secondary to Dandy's scheme of acquisition. First there came the city of reflections. That was what I called it. He must have had the Kriff build the place shiny bit by shiny bit.

Could anyone love the sight of himself so much that he installed mirrors at every conceivable corner? The structure was about the size of a small city block, almost diminutive, with a tall spire in the center and shorter spires plunging outward. There were reflectors that caught the sunlight and scattered it about.

There were narrow streets of rhinestone, curbs of silver, steps of gold, floors of cedar and blue pine, walls of glass, rooms with mirrors everywhere. The place was a monument to the peacock's ego. It was beautiful and I knew I would never see anything like it again.

I should have been more cautious but there were too many astounding objects and furnishings so that I forgot to watch behind me. Besides the mirrors were confusing and even bewildering, showing me endless rows of myself and Bruin, not just around me but also above and beneath. Dandy must have spotted me as I walked down the central hallway. All he had to do was fade behind a series of mirrors in the nearest room and then when I wasn't watching he darted out and scooped me off my hob.

The room he locked me in was nine by fourteen with window sills of colored rhinestones and bars made of silver. After a while the glitter made my head ache so badly I was forced to lie on the floor and close my eyes. It was a solid mirror.

So was the ceiling. The walls were odd-shaped pieces of glass of various colors. As I suffered I told myself that only a fractured mind could enjoy this view.

The door was bolted on the outside. Dandy didn't need to open it to talk to me. It was constructed of narrow slats of heavy glass that opened and closed like venetian blinds.

"I'm glad you followed me," he said, smiling in at me. He looked especially attractive since he was wearing city clothes; sequined tights and jersey and rose-colored slippers. "I knew you couldn't resist me. People can't."

"All people?" I sat up, leaned against the wall and tried not to look annoyed.

"Sure. I'm what you call favored of the gods. I've got it all."

"Especially the ego. How about letting me out of here?"

"I will after you calm down."

"What makes you think I'm not calm now?"

"Your face is red and you keep clenching your hands. I know how stubborn you are. That's one of the things I like about you."

"When do I face the local firing squad or its equivalent?"

He laughed. "Don't be silly. You're the first girl in my harem."

That slowed me down for a moment. "Even if I don't want to be?"

"You want to be. I can tell. I'll have everything here your heart can desire before too long. More furniture, freezers full of exotic food, landscaped grounds, ten swimming pools, game rooms and courts, everything."

"Great, but don't you think I'm a little young to set up housekeeping?" I said.

"I can wait. You aren't going anywhere."

"But what if I want to leave?"

"You might want to now but you won't later. I'll grow on you."

He went away and left me to contend with my bitter thoughts. He was as crazy as a tubful of lunatics and there didn't seem to be much I could do about it at the moment.

My throbbing head forced me to lie flat on my back. With an arm across my eyes I tried to think up a plot. All that came to mind was my own bad luck. For several nights I hadn't gotten enough sleep, I hadn't eaten anything all day except for a bowl of soup. Besides, my loneliness was tormenting me.

"Cat!" I whispered. "Hob!" Tears came to thy eyes. "Where are you?" I intended to let my mind roam free in the glittering little city while I made an effort to locate and make mental contact with the old gamber.

The tendrils of my thoughts must have gone considerably farther than the city and even the planet.

"Hob!" I said silently with my whole heart and soul. From what seemed to be the other side of eternity a cry sounded inside my head.

"Here I am, honey!"

It hadn't been Bruin who answered me. It was Wyala! Up off the floor I came in a single leap. My hob, my gamber, my cat! I had heard her! Wyala could hear me. She was well!

Only for an instant had the conduit been opened between me and the pal of my bosom before it slammed shut again, but the instant had been long enough. Whatever scars had closed Wyala's mind to me were healed. Her affliction hadn't been permanent. I had my friend back again!

Did I? She was at a distance, to say the least It seemed I didn't have her after all, locked up as I was in the peacock's nest. His number one wife indeed!

I forced myself to sit back down and then I let my mind go out into the corridors and rooms beyond. No more uncontrolled flight now, I went in and out of the rooms until I found Bruin lying on a rug of spun gold in a courtyard outside.

"Hey!" I said. He yawned.

"Are you hungry?" I asked. At once he stood up.

"All you have to do is come and get me out of here. Where's Dandy?"

"I don't know," he said.

"He didn't lock you up because he's stupid. He doesn't have much of a relationship with his own animal. Besides he doesn't think I want to leave him. Lucky me. Follow my thoughts until you find me."

In a few minutes he was outside the door of my prison.

"The bolt," I said.

"Easy as pie." The old cat grasped the metal in his teeth, pulled back and stood aside as the door swung open. A moment later we were in D. I headed for home.

Jim the butler wasn't glad to see me. "Like a bad penny, eh?" he said as I walked through the glass doors into my room. He had been dusting furniture.

"Where's Ember?"

He looked down his nose at me. "If you're referring to Madam she's in the library."

"I hope she stays there. What's to eat?"

He followed me to the kitchen and watched as I made a pile of sandwiches.

"What happened to all the gambers?" I asked.

"Madam turned them over to the government. They're conducting some kind of experiments with them."

"What kind?"

"Since the government hasn't seen fit to confide in me, I don't know. Your beast, her mate and her children have been placed in the concrete well where Madam's pet is kept when he isn't being stolen by you."

I finished making the sandwiches, stuffed them into a paper bag and scrounged in the fridge for apples.

"I take it you think you're going somewhere?" said Jim.

I didn't bother looking around. I should have but I didn't. I was continually overlooking essentials like that. Instead I said rudely, "What's it to you?"

"I think I should inform you that Madam gave me instructions to the contrary. She was of the opinion that sooner or later you would return to see your gamber."

"So?" I said, and then when it was too late I turned to look at him.

"So this." First he filched my gun out of its holster. Then he came up with a big net, and where he got it remained a mystery to me, but not even a butterfly could have escaped his keen eye and traitorous hand, he dropped the thing over me like a sack and scooped me up like a sucker, paying no attention whatever to my threats.

I kicked myself blue in the face without making a dent in the mesh enveloping me. I might as well have saved my breath and strength for I ended up where Jim intended me to, in a walk-in closet.

It had a single light bulb in it, a portable toilet and a door too thick to knock down. Cussing a blue steak, I sat down at the far end and tried not to gnash my teeth. What the devil was the matter with people? Why were they always getting in my way?

Ember had the good sense not to come to see me that evening. I had the sandwiches and apples, which were supposed to have tided me over for a few days. I ate everything, got a bellyache and blamed it on my enemies who seemed to be proliferating beyond all expectations.

Chapter 15

I had planned out in my mind what I was going to say the next morning, every word, down to the exclamation marks and indignant overtones. Then when the door opened finally, when the panel swung aside and my mother stood there staring at me with her big wet blue eyes I'd let her have it. I had it all planned.

My mouth was opening for me to begin my spiel when I glimpsed the first hank of olive drab uniform. Not my flesh and blood stood there but wail-to-wall soldiers greeted me that morning.

"Hello, dear," said General Battersby.

Maybe they thought I had a secret weapon. All generals were SUSPICIOUS types, in my opinion. The moment Battersby laid his pale eyes on me I knew I had been sold down the river.

Oh, sure, he promised that I wouldn't be harmed. Glib words. I was already mortally wounded, since it was nowhere in my nature to take kindly to bondage.

Even while I sat on the plane bound for Kansas, I couldn't believe my mother had done this to me just to keep me out of D. I hadn't even seen her! Wondering if she had some secret relationship to Mata Hari I stared out the window and ignored General Battersby. I particularly loathed it when he patted me on the head and told me how well the two of us were going to get along.

My quarters at the base were comfortable except that instead of walls there was steel mesh all around me. Sometimes the General came in to talk to me while at other times he merely stood on the other side of the screen. He was an all-business person whose face looked like a block of ice. He never ceased to amaze me when he smiled, which he did only to try and assure me that he had my welfare at heart.

"You can't go into D without a hob," I said to him one morning. I took pleasure in the fact that he didn't like hearing that. "If you ever perfect a machine that can penetrate the circle of worlds you won't need a rider."

He was already ahead of me. Smiling at me through the screen of my cage, he said, "It's a turnabout in a way, isn't it? We can send machines beyond the solar system but not people."

"D isn't the solar system."

"Tell me about those worlds."

"Which one?"

"You pick one and tell me about it."

I sat down in an overstuffed chair, propped my feet on a table and took things easy. "Connors must have learned a lot by now. Why are you bothering with me?"

"Mr. Connors obeys orders. I don't want him killed, so he doesn't go beyond the planets on either side of Earth. There's nothing on them."

"No people, but they have a lot of oil."

He tried not to smile but the telltale coldness of his expression gave him away. He was merely testing me.

"I'm glad you said that," he said. "I'm beginning to think maybe I can trust you."

What a liar. The fact was he couldn't trust anyone he hadn't the authority to belt out orders to. When he tried it with me I dummied up and withdrew into silence.

"You don't need me. You have Connors and those other people."

At once he was disturbed. "What other people?"

"You've found a few more skippers. When they're in the same building with me I can't help but know it."

"That's one of the reasons I keep you here. They can't do that. They can't feel other skippers with their minds."

"Maybe they will with a little practice."

"Meanwhile I have you to help me. Your mother doesn't think you should be ripping around in D and I agree with her. You're only a child. What if the Kriff catch you?"

"I've been running from them for a long time. They can't catch me."

Battersby smiled. "Because of the pipeline?"

Connors had obviously been shooting off his mouth. "I can't help you there," I said. "Not unless you're the kind to go monkeying around with my brain to see if there's anything different about it." I stared at him with interest.

"Are you that kind?"

"If I thought it would do any good, but our surgeons aren't skilled enough. You can relax. I'll not make a guinea pig out of you."

"Then what am I doing locked up here?"

"That's a disadvantage of being a juvenile. You need a guardian and I'm it until I hand you back to your mother."

I made him wait while I went into my kitchen for some milk and pickles. Adding some sardines to the plate, I returned to my chair, where I gave him indigestion.

"How do I control a skipper?" he asked.

"Lock them up like me."

"Besides that?"

I smiled this time. "I know what you're thinking. You're imagining thousands of human skippers who all decide to take off for parts unknown. It's one thing if they stay away but what if they build up another world and then decide to come back here and take over?"

He got red and looked as if he wanted to smack me. "Are there people out there who are more advanced than we?"

"A few. They don't have very many skippers either and they're busy with internal wars."

"But it's just a matter of time before they come against us."

"How do you figure that?"

"It's my job."

"I know you're a war man but if you're suspicious of everyone it will keep you from making friends."

He clenched his hands on the mesh wall and gave me a frigid stare. "I approve of making friends with foreign nations."

“Foreign?”

“That’s what they are. It’s all they are, no matter where they live.”

Tell it to the birdpeople. I could just see the General having a conversation with Hozun. He only talked to me because I was human. If I were one of those foreigners he would have me taking the third degree in one of the basement rooms. Like the Kriff, with whom he was getting nowhere.

“I know where there’s a lot of gold,” I said.

“Is that so?” He was only mildly interested.

I wished he had been greedier. “Big chunks of it. There’s a mountain with streaks all over the walls and down in the valley is a trail full of nuggets.”

“I suppose you’ve hidden away a good bit of it for yourself?”

“No, it belongs to the Wuji.”

“Who are they?”

“Blue people. They crush the gold and sprinkle the dust in their hair.”

He simply wasn’t interested. “What kind of weapons do they have on the planets that are more advanced than Earth?”

“I don’t know. I never paid much attention.”

“You must have seen something. Machines or buildings. Think. Tell me what you’ve seen.”

It went on and on like that, the interminable questioning, the suspicions and disbelieving glances, the cajoling and threats. He wanted me to tell him all about ninety-nine planets!

“Why can’t two people ride one gamber?” he said to me at another time. Instead of staying on the other side of the screen he was inside my quarters sitting across from me, looking at me with his hollow eyes. It wasn’t that I disliked him. In a way I was afraid of him. He was dyed-in-the-wool American but anyone so biased had already made up his mind exactly what Americanism was. I didn’t think he made room for any of the fringes that I saw dancing all around the issue.

“It won’t do you any good to ask me a lot of whys,” I said. “I can tell you some whats. More than once I’ve seen two Kriff try to ride a snake but one of them always ends up dead. You can’t take an extra hob along because it will die. I don’t know why. I expect it has to do with the symbiosis. There mustn’t be anything present that will interrupt the melding of two minds.”

Another time he had Connors bring back a canister of gas from D but it turned out to be Earth’s atmosphere. Connors had taken a sample of the shield around himself. Next he landed on one of the worlds bordering Earth but couldn’t come out of D because the place was poison. This frustrated Battersby a great deal.

“Why can’t I get a sample of D?” he asked me.

“Because it would mean the death of the person who got it.”

He blinked. “What if you trailed a container behind you?”

“Whatever I take with me into D is encased by the same shield that protects me.”

“Then you aren’t really in D. You’re just moving through it.”

“Why would anyone want to be in it? There’s nothing there.”

“What about the vortexes and the buffetings you’ve described to me?”

“I don’t know what they are.”

Another day he strode up to the mesh while I was in the living room watching TV. “What about the other solar

systems?”

“What other systems? There are none.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Through a telescope I can see billions of separate systems. Are you trying to tell me that inner space has only got one made up of a hundred worlds?”

I didn’t let him know that the question had never occurred to me. Chalk it up to my age or general mindlessness, but I had become so accustomed to accepting what was visible to my eyes that I forgot the unseen spectrum. Like the netherworld, for instance. I hadn’t mentioned that to Battersby.

I answered most of his questions as quickly and as frankly as I could, because I knew that if he became too impatient with me, he would fill me with truth serum and ravage my subconscious.

“I don’t know what’s beyond the circle,” I said. “The only way I find things is by reaching out with my mind.”

“Then reach,” he said and went away.

I stared after him in surprise. Never once had I attempted to find anything outside the inner circle and here was this military bigot opening vistas to me. What he said made sense. If there was one system it stood to reason that there was another.

One day I was taken from my quarters under guard and escorted to a room full of chalk, blackboards, little desks and thirty small children. It seemed that Battersby was conducting countrywide experiments with gambers. In every county a cat was muzzled and chained to a wall and then first-graders were brought by bus and allowed to file past the animal. Each child laid its hand on the gamber’s head and then described its impressions to the teacher; she then reported to Battersby’s agent. All those who seemed to have some mental rapport with the cat received special attention. It was slow work because there weren’t that many gambers.

He probably gave me the job because he thought I might enjoy it. At least I didn’t ascribe any ulterior motives to him, though I tried once or twice to explain that teaching little kids didn’t appeal to me.

Only the gamber in the classroom was interesting but he was chained to a metal post in the floor. What was there to be done with thirty first-graders who would rather play than learn? One by one I took them and had them lay their hands on the cat. After the tenth failure the gamber was as bored as I.

He was a half-grown specimen who would have laid waste to the class if it hadn’t been for his muzzle. “What say you and I flee?” he said to me.

“As soon as you chew that chain in two.”

Yawning, he stretched out on the floor. “I already tried. It’s too hard. I don’t know why my time is being wasted. None of these little blankheads can talk to me.”

Out of the thirty, only two picked up a smattering of thoughts from the cat.

“They’re would-be’s,” said the gamber. “Maybe yes and maybe no, after a lot of trying. When they’re older. Not now.”

“Why so few, do you think?” I said.

“It’s probably our fault. We gambers. We’re too new, too young as a species.”

“Yeah, too precious. Hurry up and evolve. Battersby is driving me nuts.”

Nearly every day I was introduced to a new class and was expected to weed out the deaf. They constituted almost everyone. It finally dawned on me that about two percent of the kids could hear the gamber and nearly all of the two percent could bear only faintly.

It also dawned on me that Battersby intended to keep me locked up forever. Or until I was eighteen. Same thing. I whined and sniffled until he had Wyala shipped to the base. He wouldn’t let me see her but at least I was able to have long-distance conversations with her.

“It’s your fault for deserting me,” she said.

It was night and I lay in my bunk staring at the ceiling. In my mind's eye I could see her in a big metal cage somewhere outside the building. She was clean and well fed but the soldiers considered her dangerous because she bit at every opportunity. "When did I ever desert you?" I said.

"You must have. Remember when we crashed after the Kriff clobbered us?"

My fingers tingled with remembered pain. "Yes."

"Well? What happened?"

"I was hoping you could tell me."

"How can I do that?" she said. "I was out cold. The next thing I knew, that butler at your mother's place was shoving hamburger down my throat. I bit him."

Silently I lay there yearning to fly, to free myself of the trappings of civilization and skip until my brain atrophied.

"Me, too," said my hob. "I hate this place. They have my kids in a kennel. They won't let me take care of them."

The next day I complained to General Battersby.

"They're special, like all gamber kittens," he said, his eyes gleaming marbles of gray and white.

"They won't be any more loyal to you if you raise them yourself."

"You don't know that."

It was true. I didn't know it. Gratified that he had made points over me, Battersby bustled away to do something important and forgot to ask me how I knew about the kittens. Meanwhile I was left to look at steel mesh and an apartment that grew smaller and duller daily.

Connors came to see me. "I'm sorry I can't help you?"

"You can if you want."

"You don't belong out there while the Kriff are on the warpath."

"But people like you do, eh? I can skip rings around you."

He didn't get miffed. He was a nice guy, married, with a deaf wife, two deaf children and one that could talk to gambers. "I know you're better than I am. Even after I've skipped for ten years you'll still be better, but right now you're not old enough to be let loose. Nobody can control you, not your friends, not even your mother."

"Okay. That stuff wasn't exactly what I wanted to hear but it wasn't why you came anyway. What does Battersby want you to ask me that he's too shy to ask himself?"

Connors looked amused. "You're a wise kid. All bluster, protecting a heart and soul of mush. So okay, he's still curious about the pipeline."

"If you can't use it, knowing about it doesn't matter. It has to do with sound. Hearing the differences in D cadence allows you to get inside. I've always used it and I never wondered about it, until I discovered that nobody else even knows it's there."

"What do you think it is?"

"A weird kind of equivalent of faster-than-light travel. it's shaped like a bore that penetrates all the worlds right through the center. Maybe it holds them together."

"Do you think you could teach me how to use it?"

"I'm willing to try."

He smiled.

“Help me get out of here,” I said.

“I have to get along with Battersby. If he and I are to have a long and inglorious relationship I can’t begin it by disobeying his orders. Besides I think you’re where you belong. You kids are all alike. You think you’re doing what comes naturally when in reality you’re just being suicidal.”

Though the General didn’t approve of my being out of my quarters, he sent guards around every once in a while to take me outside for some exercise. Mostly I shot baskets, dribbled, eyed the landscape and wondered how far I could run before I was nabbed.

Once when I was aiming the basketball at the net I happened to look across the court at a patch of trees. I must have looked funny jumping up in the air for nothing. I had to turn my head to keep from knocking it on the post. Again I looked back at the trees but there was no one there. There had been. I could have sworn it was the dogcatcher.

Chapter 16

Dandy was always a stupid kind of kid. His problem lay in his vision. He was so conditioned to looking inward that all his value judgments were strictly subjective. He couldn’t believe I wasn’t mad about him.

He blinked into my living room as if it were any ordinary landing spot, glanced around with a condescending sneer and then focused his gaze upon me.

“How did you find me?” I said, much astonished.

“I try to keep abreast of current events on advanced worlds. I’ve learned how to read newspapers.”

The wolf-creature he rode sat on its haunches and uttered blood-curdling growls.

So much for General Battersby’s explanations to the press. Anyone in D who could read knew that ESP experiments with gamblers were being conducted in Kansas. Naturally they had nothing to do with aliens or UFO’s or the rumors that some unearthly beings had been apprehended.

“This is the last time I’m going to help you out,” said Dandy.

“You don’t know how grateful I am. I’m sorry I ran out on you the last time but I had pressing business. Your city is a fabulous place.”

He believed me, or at least partially; the alternative was to admit that I wasn’t head over heels in love with him. In his way he was as single-minded as Battersby.

It wasn’t difficult for him to bring Wyala to me. After I showed him in mind vision where she was caged it was just a matter of his blinking in and out of D and beaming guards over the head with a club. I had his word that he wouldn’t bit anyone too hard.

The last thing he did was to open my prison door. Before he did it he gave me a steady stare and said, “I meant what I said. This is the last time I help you. If you run away from me again we’ll meet just one more time and that’s when I’ll kill you.”

I had a chilling image of him hacking away with a sword at the helpless body of a lizard. I knew he meant it. If people didn’t love him the way he wanted he got rid of them.

As usual his foresight was faulty. While I racked my brain as to how to get away from him he opened the door of my prison and led Wyala in by a chain. By no means did he intend to lose control over my animal. I didn’t expect it but Wyala changed my mind. It had been too long since we met, too many days since we flew like the wind in the canyons of nowhere, too long since we had been together.

With a joyous howl she lunged at me, yanking the chain from Dandy’s grasp. While he cursed and hurtled forward I leaped straight up into the air and came down backward on my hob’s brawny hindquarters. With a whoop and a holler

we blinked halfway to kingdom come.

Dandy tried to follow me as I blazed into the pipeline, so when he crashed into that unseen barrier I almost heard him bounce. I certainly heard him shriek with terror and rage. Now the future was up to me. If I ever met Mr. Peacock again I wouldn't have any tomorrows.

There was a need to think, the need to recuperate and get the feel of inner space back into my bones, the desire to be alone with my big brown friend. We blitzed through the conduit, exiting into a balmy yellow vortex that allowed us to enter without attacking us.

Down toward a frozen planet we floated in search of an oasis. Far to the right a pale green stretch of grass beckoned. It struggled to grow through brittle ice, shoved upward to gulp greedily at the sun. Everywhere I looked there were white and silent mounds of snow, pillars of ice, shiny glaciers. We grounded on the grass to take a breath of air that was so cold it hurt.

"What did we come here for?" asked Wyala. "Why aren't we standing on some warm, comfortable hunk having a ball?"

"I don't want to be comfortable. I want to feel threatened so I can make some plans. We are being threatened, you know."

"Only by everyone. It's nothing to worry about."

To keep from freezing I stepped in and out of D. We could only take the cold atmosphere with us when we entered inner space but the motion had a warming effect.

"Uh, oh," said my hob. "Look up there."

On the top of a slight rise stood a large, shaggy, wolf-like animal that stared down at us with slavering jaws and murderous light eyes.

"He looks familiar," I said.

"Who cares? Let's split. Uh, oh, look behind us."

They were all around us, about two dozen of them, not moving toward us but forming a hungry circle that hemmed us in. In her nervousness Wyala backed over a mound and slipped down into a hole, crying out as she fell on a body.

Half buried in the snow was a dead creature that belonged on another world. It was black and hairless, ugly, huge and old. Now I knew where Dandy had gotten his hob. Evidently he had been on this planet in this very spot and when his companion died he was forced to capture one of the wolves and ride it in D. Some people had all the luck. I thought it was too bad he hadn't broken his neck.

Wyala and I blinked away to safety. Approaching the patriots' planet with caution, we scanned the upper strata for some sign of Dandy. That he wouldn't dare come here again I was sure, not when I knew about his city.

The way ahead was clear so we touched down to the campgrounds. I received the shock of my life when I walked through the trees and saw Ember sitting on a log beside the fire talking to Westman. Nearby was Bruin, sprawled out watching the flames.

Later I found out that Westman went to Ember's house looking for me. He was there when General Battersby called to tell her I had flown the coop.

Now she looked up, saw me, gave me a brief glance and looked away. Tongue-tied for one of the few times in my life, I passed her and went to my cabin. At the doorway I turned and looked back at her and Westman. The two of them seemed terribly engrossed in their conversation. A wave of jealousy hit me so hard that I felt faint.

In a little while Westman came knocking on my door. "You get around, don't you?" he said, looking at me from the corner of his eye. He came inside and helped himself to a chair. "That's a very nice lady out there. I don't see how you could be hers."

"I'm nobody's."

His eyebrows rose. "You're in a mess of trouble with the patriots."

“And you’re in a mess of trouble with the Kriff. I figure you’ve got maybe a couple of hours. Dandy doesn’t have any reason not to come down on you now. He doesn’t care what happens to me.”

He opened his mouth to curse, but before he could utter a word, I jumped in and told him about the city of reflections. “They built it for him,” I said. “They had to. No one else could have done it. It must have taken a thousand workers to lay those roads. I’m telling you he’s a fink.”

After a long pause he sighed. “Then we’d better get out.” He paused again. “I’m not going to advise you to go home. For one thing you’re a valuable asset when you aren’t being an imbecile. For another you wouldn’t do it anyway.”

“I’m glad you’ve got that straight.” I showed him to the door, packed some food in a bag, called Wyala from the woods, climbed aboard and skipped.

Trying not to feel like a brat who didn’t want her mother to like anyone else, I headed for birdland and some people who didn’t seem to mind my company overly much. On the way I met an army. If there hadn’t been so many of them they probably would have chased me down and squashed me. Or tried.

There is something about numbers that creates a sense of security. The hordes of Kriff didn’t know who I was, though I practically slammed right into their front line. Had they recognized me I’m sure that at least some of them would have come after me, but following my initial awareness that there was in space ahead of me a great number of riders, I pulled back and jackrabbited to an alternate byway. In silence I sat on Wyala while they passed me by. There must have been fifty thousand in the group, heavily armed, all of fighting age, a band of red-eyed devils on the way to create some hell somewhere.

As quickly as I could I traveled on to Zee’s planet Grounding in the high cave where Hozun’s family lived, I waited inside the mountain until he came.

“I saw the rocks piled in the shape of a circle on the top of the crags,” he said, coming toward me with a hand extended. “My father told me it was your signal.”

“You aren’t with the patriots. Why?”

He shrugged. “They wait. Always they wait without doing anything.”

“You can’t afford to wait and neither can your people. I passed an army of Kriff not ten minutes ago.”

“Are they headed here?”

“I don’t know. They’re heading somewhere.”

The birdpeople didn’t have much time but it helped when one had wings and could fly short distances. Hozun and I traveled rapidly to pass the word that an invasion might be in the offing.

Down the mountains they climbed, floated or flew with their weapons primed and ready. They had to dispose of the occupation troops before the main force arrived. If the army of Kriff I had passed in space were on their way here it could only be for one reason: to rid themselves once and for all of a pesky adversary. How many Kriff had the birdmen bushwhacked? At every opportunity the slaves killed the soldiers, sniping at them with weapons supplied by traitors.

Hozun and I met in the middle of a rice field. Beyond a row of trees was a series of cabins where two platoons of Kriff guarded a building full of glass guns. These soldiers never wandered about in the fields but stayed close to the Weapons.

Leaving his mushroom hob in a protective culvert Hozun set up a machinegun that I had delivered in five pieces weeks before. While he loaded it I flew with Wyala to the roof of one of the shacks and dropped a grenade down the chimney.

The Kriff poured forth like cockroaches, running in every direction, some already armed, some strapping on their holsters, others carefully laying belts full of glass missiles across their shoulders. I let them know which way they should go by dropping another grenade at the edge of the trees.

The Kriff seemed to think that the slaves would attack with rocks and clubs. What they thought the grenades were I don’t know but they came rushing fearlessly out of the woods toward Hozun and me. While the birdman mowed them down like grass, I kept watch in D for any who used their brains. Three attempted to slip down through the vacuum above our heads. All I needed was a crooked cane. I preferred it to a club. In dose combat the adult Kriff had the

advantage over me but they didn't know how to react to my cane as it caught one around the neck and hurled him out of D onto the rice paddy below.

As each one fell I blinked down onto the ground and shot him with my .38. Then back into space I went after another. Hozun had dispatched the two platoons by the time I finished with the last straggler.

Without wasting time congratulating ourselves, we skipped to a battlefield ten miles away where a handful of birdmen were trying to hold off fifty or more Kriff. Dead people lay everywhere, their weapons in their hands, their faces frozen in anger. No one could outshoot the Kriff when it came to guns. If a bullet missed, the slicing shard didn't. The bodies on the ground were Hozun's countrymen.

He set up the gun while I protected him as best I could. A piece of glass nicked me on the head. It bled in a stream down the side of my face and into my shirt. I must have looked like walking death but I felt fine except for a slight dizziness.

The machinegun blasted the Kriff to shreds because they charged instead of circling and sneaking in. Again I think it was the sense of security they gained because they outnumbered us. In a steady line they came at us and were shot, to be followed by another line that was blown away until finally only birdmen were left standing on their feet.

The survivors walked through the fallen ranks and shot the Kriff who were still alive. Should the main forces of the enemy attack there would be no time or spare troops to guard prisoners. Besides, the Kriff had earned their bullets.

Suddenly four Kriff blazed out of D and landed on the field. One raced over to Hozun and hit him on the head with a club. As the birdboy fell away from the machine-gun I leaped off Wyala's back, ran close enough to take aim and shot the enemy in the head.

Hozun was only dazed and while he recuperated, I ran after the three grounded Kriff, but they sped toward a culvert and disappeared.

They tricked me. How they were certain I was coming after them I don't know, but I found myself in a deep arroyo with no place to climb out. When I turned to go back they were behind me waiting for me. They had climbed the embankment and then slid back down after I went past them.

One shot my gun out of my hand without cutting me, accidentally I'm sure. With my back against the side of the culvert I watched them advance on me like a trio of crabs. They had a special antipathy for me because I was a thorn in their side, a pebble in their boot, a splinter under their skin.

I think they planned to dismember me with glass but as the first one raised his weapon Wyala came galloping down the arroyo at a fast clip. With a long leap she cleared the Kriff's head and took part of it along with her right claw. With her left paw she tore the face of the second man. I jumped on the third member, taking time to jam my boot in his throat before I ran away. Wyala finished him on her way out.

A considerable time had gone by since I landed in the cave on the mountaintop but still the Kriff army hadn't come. Only occasionally did I have time to worry or even look up at the sky. The round forces that had occupied the planet for decades were firmly entrenched and not easily routed.

A group of a hundred or more of the enemy laid siege to some farmers who were fighting out of a long low wooden building. The birdmen had a grenade launcher that fired as rapidly as a machinegun and they were holding their own, until a Kriff slipped through D to the roof and set the place afire. He retreated just as Hozun and I touched down on our hobs.

The strategy was obvious. The Kriff would wait until the farmers were forced to evacuate the building, at which time they would all slip through D and pop out into 3 over their heads.

Hozun and I blew their hobs to pieces with grenades. The snakes were in a pit waiting for the call to action but when their owners needed them they didn't answer. The farmers poured from the burning building with their guns bucking, while Hozun and I hung back and riddled them with the machinegun.

One thing about the birdpeople, they were prolific and had no scarcity of warriors to send to battle. All over the planet war raged, with the Kriff losing. They were naturally full of hate but they hadn't the determination or the weapons to quell the slaves.

In isolated areas Hozun had been introducing people to mushroom hobs. Now the new skippers reported to headquarters, which was in a deep cave in a mountain. The Kriff were being defeated everywhere. If they won a battle

in one area they were flattened in another when the local people grabbed their guns and came out of hiding.

“We haven’t been free in so long I doubt if even the oldest people can remember what it’s like,” said Hozun to me.

“They’ll learn. At least for the time being.”

“We’re as ready for the invasion as we’ll ever be. Where is it? I thought you said the army was on its way.”

“It was.” I shook my head. “I’m going up to the top of the mountain. If I sense anything I’ll let you know.”

Wyala and I blinked to the highest spire in the rocky range and sat watching the sky. I felt a familiar sense of urgency prowling inside me.

“You’re as nervous as a cat,” said Wy. “Sometimes you ought to realize that the universe, doesn’t depend upon what you do.”

“What if it does?”

“What do you mean?”

I didn’t answer. Far below, the birdmen were building bonfires to celebrate their victory. They might be keeping a weather eye open for more Kriff, but in their opinion the war was over at least for the day. For the first time in memory they could rejoice.

My eyes swept the heavens. While I waited here things were happening out there in D. The Kriff were supposed to come here by the tens of thousands. I had seen them gathering. Where were they?

I waited but they didn’t come.

Chapter 17

I couldn’t wait any longer. If the birdpeople fought their last war without me, so be it, but I had to go and see what was happening out beyond the clouds.

Could I help it if adolescents were fighting wars that no one should have to fight? Was it my fault nature was so slow about producing skippers?

Never one to leave well enough alone, I took Wyala and went into D to see what the Kriff were doing. I didn’t Like what I discovered. They were still gathering; their thousands had increased to an innumerable host. They didn’t seem to be in a hurry, which meant that wherever they were going they didn’t expect much resistance.

With a sick feeling in my stomach I hung back along a smoking trib and considered my alternatives. What if Dandy was crazier than I thought? What if he had become so angry because I ran out on him that he decided to punish me by loosing the Kriff on Earth? He could do it. All he had to do was tell a pack of lies to their leaders, convince them that my homeworld was preparing an offense against them. The Kriff didn’t really care about facts. They weren’t in need of a great deal of incentive to band together and go and stomp someone. It was plain that they weren’t planning to invade Zee’s world. The bird-men could have been destroyed by a smaller army. They were going to invade one of the older worlds, someone who could fight back. It was all my fault.

“Faster than we’ve ever blinked before, pal,” I whispered silently to Wyala.

She read me all the way, glided along the trib like greased lightning and didn’t rocket until there was at least a world of distance between us and the war horde.

My worrying about how I could convince Westman and the patriots of the Kriffs intentions was a waste of time. The enemy had already visited the little camp.

“Looks bad,” said Wy as we sat surveying the charred ruins.

The cabins had been torn down, dragged into one huge pile and burned. The small arsenal had been blown up. The entire area had been plowed under as if by a tractor. In my mind I could see scores of Kriff riding across the ground on their snakes, making ridges and furrows.

We found no bodies, which didn't make me feel any better. The Kriff might have taken all hands back to their ugly world for a spot of torturing.

"Nobody can fight that many Kriff," I said almost to myself.

"You can't surrender either."

"Right. if you can't fight them, and if you can't join them and if you can't run away what do you do?"

"I don't know. Something drastic."

"Let's go," I said.

The army of Kriff were headed for Earth. I was certain of it. Their leisurely pace heightened my fear and rage. They weren't afraid. Either Dandy had lied his head off to them or they were simply in the mood for some wholesale slaughtering.

"I think they're speeding up their pace," Wyala said.

I thought so too. It looked as if the huge mass had moved from byways to larger tributaries. Soon they would run into some wide highways that would afford them an uninterrupted journey all the way to my home. They weren't traveling through the circle of worlds now but had dropped down into the huge center, which they could cross in a matter of minutes.

If it hadn't been for the pipeline I couldn't have done it. Once inside it Wyala and I were able to return to Vee's world three times. Each time I carried a Kriff body into D and placed it along one of the large tribs which I felt certain the army would take.

It didn't work. They found the bodies floating where I hoped they would and they were curious enough to stop and examine their dead comrades but still they paid no attention to me. I made myself as conspicuous as possible, even went so far as to have Wyala turn and kick one of the corpses with her hind feet.

They didn't care. They sang war songs of victory, chanted somber vows, promised one another a glorious kill and ignored the Earth brat who buzzed around them like a pesky mosquito.

Now and then one or two of them left the group and came after me, but that wasn't what I wanted. I bunny-hopped until my pursuers grew dizzy. Not really thirsty for my blood, they returned to their friends.

No matter what I did they didn't hate me enough. I needed a weapon, something besides my gun for that wouldn't work in D. I tried it but the Kriff laughed when the bullets diverted as if they had struck water and went off at a tangent.

Back into the pipeline Wyala and I roared, blitzed far around the circle until we approached the red planet where the giant lizards basked in the sun. Somewhere down there, buried in the sand, was the sword I had confiscated from Dandy.

It took me too long to find it. On my belly I scabbled around in the sand near the rock where I thought I had hidden it.

"Hurry," said Wyala.

I nearly yelled in my frenzy, made wide sweeping motions with my hands, at last knocked against something hard. I held it high in the air, the sword of Dandy, crusty with dirt and blood, while at the same time I motioned for Wyala. Back into the void we went in pursuit of a large company of bloodthirsty devils.

They hooted with laughter when I appeared before them. Sideways I skittered toward their front ranks, dancing, my gambler stepping high and gracefully. They thought it was funny and whooped uproariously.

My targets had already been chosen, three front-rank buzzards with shiny shoulder belts choking with glass missiles. Their hair was braided with flowers and from their ears dangled pieces of flesh. They were probably generals but that was their only similarity to Battersby of Earth.

I was near enough to smell one of them when I suddenly brought up the sword and thrust it deep into his belly. I only managed it because Wyala's weight was behind me. While he was still screaming I brought the sword down hard upon the neck of the officer beside him.

I would have killed a third or even gone up and down their ranks slaying until they were jolted out of their complacency. The two killings turned out to be sufficient. With an angry roar the entire army let me know that each and every member was aware of what I had done, and for better or worse I had destroyed their two most beloved leaders.

Knowledge flashed from one Kriff mind to another so that when they came at me it was as a single, large, furious enemy. This time Wyala and I didn't hop from trib to trib but chose a highway along which we blazed with a sizable portion of the Kriff species in hot pursuit behind us.

Their glass guns were no more effective than my revolver but they had enough of them so that they didn't mind hurling a few hundred at me. By the time the feat was accomplished I had a head covered with bumps and a gamber with a sore rear end.

Since I couldn't fight the Kriff, or join them, or run away, I had decided to get rid of them. Whether or not I had a hope of succeeding remained to be seen. Straight toward the center of the vast area between the wheel of worlds I blinked with my knees gouging Wy's ribs and my fingers clutching her ruff. Not for anything would the Kriff give up on me now. I had stung them too severely. But not for a minute had they forgotten their invasion plans. This little digression would be brief. Catch the vermin, pop it open like a beetle and then continue on one's merry way.

I had no trouble seeing the doorway to the netherworld but that didn't make me feel victorious. I had an incurable desire to survive any and all my reckless endeavors and this one was no exception, though it was undoubtedly one of the most grim.

Down into a cacophony of red and black color and intense heat I sped, wondering if the Kriff would turn back at the last moment. Had they been less foolhardy and more intelligent they would have veered off from the yawning vortex, but violence was a way of life for them. This howling orifice was new to them but not frightening.

The thing about D was that trauma could often be measured in the matter of a moment. For instance, the entire army behind me entered the netherworld at the same time and those in front were unable to cry a warning. Somewhere in the maelstrom of fear, horror and bad weather a lonely voice cried out. I knew it was one of the Kriff I had stranded here long ago.

Luckily for me no one had the presence of mind to entertain thoughts of revenge, otherwise they would have chased me down and murdered me fifty different ways. They maintained their pursuit of me but it wasn't earnest or determined. No doubt they believed it was better to keep me in sight, though most of their ranks had broken and milled everywhere.

"Remember, I've never been in here before!" Wyala yelled.

"Don't even think negatives! See that little light way up there?"

"Where?"

"Don't give me that! Read my mind! See the light?"

Vaguely. That was what she said. Grabbing her ruff and yanking so hard I knew it hurt, I kicked her backside so that we flew faster than it seemed humanly possible.

The Kriff army tried to get out of the netherworld along with me but they had bought a one-way ticket. Again it was a matter of a nebulous talent or ability that I possessed while they did not. The crashings and collisions were monumental, as were the curses and cries. Wyala and I bulleted through the jaws of the vortex to a blue trib where we paused to look back.

I could sense the Kriff down inside the hole, hundreds of thousands of them all complaining because they didn't know how to get out.

"Do you think they can escape from there?" said Wyala.

"I don't know. I hope not." It wasn't as if I had condemned the red-eyed race to extinction. The netherworld was huge

and filled with flora of all kinds. Of course the place was dark and led nowhere. At least I didn't think it had any openings that they could make use of.

"Wouldn't it be something if they sneaked out a back door?" said Wy.

I shook my head. "If they do they'll end up somewhere else. There are no doors back into D that I know of."

"What do you mean, somewhere else? There isn't anywhere else."

"How do you know?"

While she was working that one over in her mind I headed for parts unknown and tried not to feel bad because the Kriff were so unteachable that they had to be banished.

At about the time that I began again to worry about Ember and the patriots, a band of riders crossed an intersection beyond a cloud of boiling gas. Immediately I faded into obscurity to examine them.

"You can relax," said Wyala. "I count twelve people of different species. One of them is a big slant-eyed man, one has hair like rope, one is a red-haired Earthwoman on a big ugly gamber. . . ."

She continued describing the patriots one by one and I didn't thaw a decent breath until they were all accounted for. Naturally Ember had been paramount in my mind but the others were important too. Since I had just finished putting the lid on a great number of people, tales of survivors were bound to lift my spirits.

"Now we don't have to go leapfrogging everywhere trying to find out what happened to them," said Wyala. "Your warning must have sent them into hiding." As the patriots faded in a cloud of dust she said, "Why didn't we go out to meet them?"

"And get chewed out?"

"For what?"

"How do I know? I get chewed out no matter what."

"Wait till you tell them how you saved everybody's bacon."

"No, not a word. Promise."

"But why?" There was a wail in her mind.

"If General Battersby hears of just one more secret talent or mystery related to me he's liable to dissect my brain."

"Don't tell me we have to do more business with him?"

"Beginning right now. How else can we get your family back home with us?"

She lapsed into a moody silence that lasted all the way to Kansas. I think she was considering her shortcomings as wife and mother; since I couldn't help her I minded my own affairs.

It was early morning when I landed in the field west of the building where the General had his office. The sun was just coming up behind the trees, the air was crisp with a touch of autumn, I felt more lighthearted than I had in a long time. How many months and years had it been since a meeting with the Kriff meant that I must run for my life?

Savoring the flavor of freedom from fear, I walked my hob past a tree just as someone swung a club that caught me behind the ear.

"I knew you'd come!" someone screeched. "I knew you would never abandon your cat's stinking kittens!"

Having been knocked off Wyala, I rolled on the ground just as the club came down again. It was such a murderous blow that I didn't dare give him a chance to try again. Of course I knew who it was, even glimpsed his stark face as I rolled away and staggered to my feet Dandy had been lying in wait for me in the woods and I stupidly walked right into him.

He had already made certain that Wyala wouldn't help me by slamming her on the head with the club. Swaying,

reeling, I felt my head and tried to get a good look at him. For the first time since I had first met him he wasn't clean and pretty. Instead he looked as if he had been dragged through a mudhole. Over one eye was a gash that leaked blood down his face. His clothes were ripped and his hair was awry.

"They did this to me!" he shrieked. As he brought his other arm from behind his back I drew in a quick breath. He was a sword lover, was this peacock, enjoyed slicing things up, and in his hand was a blade similar to the one he had used to murder the giant lizard.

"The old ones did it to me!" he said hoarsely. Big tears rolled down his cheeks. "They're all that's left besides the children. They think I'm responsible for the disappearance of the army. They were going to kill me but I escaped!"

I fell down, carefully regained my footing and continued walking backward through the woods.

"You ruined everything!" he cried. "I know you led them somewhere. Before you die you're going to tell me where they are! Aren't you?"

It was too early for anyone to be about. Ghostly trails of fog rose from the ground, wound about the trees, created an unholy aura around my would-be assassin. Wyala made it to her feet but she was groggy and Dandy kept his eye on her. My head spun like a top because of the crack he had given me. It looked as if the jig was up.

"You mined me!" he screamed and lifted the sword high. At the last moment I think his ego got in the way and made him forget that I was supposed to tell him something before he killed me. As luck would have it I stepped in a hole, went down hard on my duff and sat there as the blade began descending in a whistling rush. Suddenly an arrow pierced Dandy squarely in the chest. It sounded like it was striking wood. Blood gushed from his mouth, the sword faltered. He fell at my feet.

I was too stunned to do anything but turn my head. Just in time I saw a tall figure dressed in a black cloak fade among the trees and disappear.

For the longest time I sat staring at Dandy's hand lying on my foot. My head did a couple of somersaults as I stared at that slender appendage. It made something shift inside my brain before a flood of memories came pouring forth. I was thinking of another hand covered with brown fur. At last I remembered what had happened to me when I crashed after the Kriff tortured me.

Chapter 18

The school would never change as long as there were children that no one wanted. The abjection was caught fast in the walls and the very air. Loneliness hovered like suspended thought, puzzling, wounding. The place looked the same as I walked down the halls.

I met some friends who stopped to talk. Everything was the same with few exceptions. One of the latter was that my roommate, Twilly, had run away with Chucky after he returned from visiting his sick mother.

Mrs. Asel came out of her office as I was passing by. She froze like Lot's wife with an expression that was easy to read. In me she saw a great deal of money going down the drain unless she smiled at me, did a quick about-face and pretended fondness for me.

She couldn't do it. Her face was a mask of regret and irritability as I stepped by her and went on down the hall. It was the first time I ever liked her.

My room had a smell of mustiness in it. In my mind's eye I saw Twilly squatting on her bunk, eyeing me with reproach and suspicion, heard her sucking her thumb while she whimpered in her sleep. I would have to hunt her down and see if she could use a little financial assistance, not that such a gesture on my part would cement anything between us but an instinctive antipathy.

As calmly as if I were picking up a book, I pried off the vent screen in the bathroom and scrambled down to the crawlspace. From there I squeezed through the pipe. For some reason it wasn't so easy this time and I had to pause to think it over. Was it possible that I was finally growing a bit? Would the day come when I was as tall as Ember?

If the answer to my questions was yes it was also inevitable that I wouldn't be crawling through pipes anymore. Cheered by the thought, I hurried the rest of the way to the screen to see if the dogcatcher was there.

As I thought he might be, he sat in his chair thinking and grieving. I knew so much about him that I could practically read his mind.

"Hi," I said, noting the way his hand suddenly gripped the chair arm.

The screen was either stuck or screwed to the wall. "Can you help me with this thing?" I said. "I gained weight and if I don't get out of here I'm liable to be stuck like a sardine."

He didn't move, sat frozen as if someone had blasted him with frigid air.

"Do it," I said. "It's all right. I remember. My memory came back. You don't have to be scared or ashamed."

The cowl covered his face as he worked at the screen. The screwdriver was awkward in his hands because they weren't completely human. As the partition fell away he backed away and hugged the wall.

"Why are you acting like this?" I said. "You don't have to hide from me. We're friends."

He shrank as I laid a hand on his arm. "You gave me some medicine to make me forget, didn't you?" I said. "You're a pretty good doctor. I remember everything you told me about how you were going to medical school when it happened"

Still he stayed by the wall and refused to look at me. "I owe you my life at least twice," I said. "Out there in the woods the other day, and before when I was hurt. You took such good care of me then that I learned all over again how nice it is to love and be loved by someone. You do love me. I know it."

He sighed in a low, sad way.

"If you hadn't shot Dandy with that arrow he would have hacked me into bits. I wish you hadn't run away. You made me come all the way here after you."

His voice came from deep in his throat, muffled, difficult to understand. "You don't owe me anything. What I did was my own choice."

"Of course it was and of course I owe you something, but that isn't why I came. I'd do the same for a dog." As I said it I squeezed his arm so that he would know I wasn't being entirely glib.

"I want you to forget you know me," he said.

"Why?"

"You have a long life ahead of you."

"So have you and both will be better because we know each other."

He shook away from my hand, pulled the cowl lower across his face. "You can't have a friend like me. I'm not the normal run-of-the-mill man."

"You're right. You aren't."

He stood up straighter. "I'm a freak."

"True."

"I frighten people."

"Yes, you do."

"There's nothing can ever change that."

"You're wrong," I said. "Dead wrong, and it's one of the reasons I'm here."

It took me two hours of talking before he would come outside with me. Sometimes he sat in the chair; at other times he tried to make me leave. Once in a while I knelt on the floor beside the chair and leaned on his knees so that he couldn't get up and pace. I spoke quietly, earnestly, perhaps foolishly, but that was because I wasn't practiced at conversing with someone I really cared about. Still I knew my subject, explained whys and wherefores at length until at last he began to wonder a bit. With more talk I strengthened his curiosity.

Two hours later we stood in a vacant space between mounds in the stone quarry where he had once chased me. He wasn't the aggressor now but stood shivering and shuddering while I made him remove the cloak and cowl. Wyala was there with us, so overcome with her own emotions that she couldn't look at him.

He didn't need clothing because the dog hair was so thick and warm, but he wore a pair of shorts. Letting the last folds of the cloak drop to the ground, he stood in the sunlight and was loath to look at me or my gambler.

I was familiar with his story. He had told it to me in detail during the three days that he nursed me in his shack in the woods. All his life he had felt the lure of the unseen universe of D. The pull was strong and he was convinced that he could enter it. One day when he was on vacation from medical school he clasped his German shepherd dog to his breast and willed himself across the interdimensional threshold.

"It worked but not enough," he had told me in his shack while he treated my hand. "I didn't know the dog was the wrong animal to try such a stunt with. I had never been near a gambler, I had never heard of skipping or inner worlds, or anything. I only had the will to do it and I used the handiest companion."

He and the dog merged the wrong way, combined their bodies and immediately dropped out of D into Earth again. They were inseparably connected, a hideous joining that saw the dog's spirit submerged beneath the man's. The dogcatcher was half man, half dog, clumsy, terrifying to those who couldn't possibly understand, doomed to a life of sneaking and skulking in shadows, tormented by his mother, who supported and hid him but who made every day of his existence miserable with her threats and taunts. She hated him for what he had done to her.

"Enough," I said now, picking up the cloak. I threw it away, turned back to him. "Don't turn away from me. I've seen you plenty of times. The medicine you gave me that made me forget wore off after you shot Dandy."

Silently I spoke to Wyala and she walked over to me at once. I climbed onto her back, held out a hand to him. "It will only take a moment. A split second."

He hung back.

"You aren't afraid for yourself. Why do you hesitate?"

"I haven't much to lose, but it might go wrong. What if you're hurt?"

Wyala walked over to him. "You won't be riding her the same way I do," I said. "That would take you completely into D. What we need to take is a half step."

"There's no such thing," he said.

"Not to a normal person but I'm not normal. Neither are you. If you were, this never could have happened to you."

In the end we did it, in spite of his protests and my unspoken fears. For all I knew we would end up as a most unattractive foursome all stuck together in a wailing mass of flesh and abominable suffering. Still I had to go ahead. I had to give to him as freely as he had given to me. Besides, I believed that I could bring it off.

To Wyala I said, "This time you can't afford to be independent in any way. I want you to turn your volition over to me completely."

"What if it doesn't work? What if—"

"Follow me. Do as I say."

It took less than half a second. In fact it was the briefest time I ever experienced or will ever experience in my life. I didn't give my deformed friend the opportunity to read my mind nor did he have the chance to pull back once he clasped my hand in his. I didn't want him prepared for anything. Perhaps he expected me to draw him nearer to me or he might have believed I would hesitate.

As soon as our hands touched I blinked toward D. Toward it, not into it. At the same time I pulled him against me

while I used my mind to shove the dog away. All these things were done in spirit, not in the flesh, in the interdimension, not in solidity.

The deed was completed before I yanked the four of us back onto the ground of the quarry. In my ears was the loud yipping of a terrified dog who was running away from us as if his life and soul depended upon placing distance between himself and the man sprawled on the ground.

The man's name was Mason and he was weeping into his hands.

"Now I know why I kept dreaming of frogs," I said. In my opinion he was every bit the prince in the story. He was one of the most handsome young men I had ever seen. In my life, thick brown hair, brown eyes, even features, a body tall and fine.

Crawling over to me he took my hand and kissed it.

"I know what you're thinking," I said, enjoying every minute of it. "I'm too young to get married."

"Do you mind if I wait?"

I didn't. "There's a circle of worlds out there for us to investigate."

"I'm afraid my talent is nipped in the bud. I've been trying to talk to your gambler but I'm not getting through too clearly."

Turning my head I gave a long low whistle. With a bound the wolf Dandy used to ride cleared a mound of gravel and approached us. I had practically sold my soul to General Battersby to have the creature transported here.

Mason got to his feet and walked over to it. "What in the world!" he said. "It's like reading my own mind!"

"His name is Jal," I said. "He comes from a frozen world where there are no people. I offered to take him back but he loves D and wants a rider."

"Is it possible? How can it be? I can read his every thought!"

"It's possible but I don't know why. I think his species can be ridden by any skipper. Call it another mystery among many."

Mason took hold of Jal's ears, knelt and stared into the intelligent eyes. "He looks so fierce but he's really a lamb. What are these sore places on his face?"

"The man you killed with the arrow rode him. He made him wear a heavy muzzle."

"It's the last time he'll ever wear anything of the kind."

"How about getting aboard?" I said.

"Right now?"

"Sure."

I knew he was scared. He had only just gotten his body back and he wanted to keep it. Lately though, he had gotten into the habit of trusting me and he did it again. Settling onto Jal's broad back, he sat back and looked my way. "I can't believe this is happening to me."

"Let's split," I said. Wyala and I blinked into the unknown. Behind me I tugged on Jal but it wasn't necessary. Mason was doing what came naturally. He skipped.

Chapter 19

It was much later that day when I walked into the living room of my house. Through the great open glass doors I strolled nonchalantly.

“What’s for dinner?” I said to Ember.

Jim stepped from behind the drapes to look down his nose at me. “Spaghetti?” he said.

“Great! I’m starved!” To Ember I said, “Do you suppose you could teach me some manners? I’m tired of being a slob.”

Like a queen she sat in a high-backed chair and regarded me without changing expression. “It could probably be managed.”

“Swell.”

“What are you up to?” said Jim.

Ignoring him I went over to my mother, leaned down and offered my cheek, upon which she planted a cool kiss. “General Battersby has done some favors for me so I promised to help him out with gamblers and students and stuff. Only on weekends. In between I guess you’re stuck with me.”

She didn’t turn a hair. “I can handle that too.”

I went over to Jim. “What are you waiting for? Where’s my spaghetti?” He stood frowning as I turned back to Ember. “Say, do you suppose you and I could take vacations to distant places once in a while?”

“I don’t see why not.”

I studied her in silence, wondered how good she was when it came to skipping.

She studied me in return. “Some mutual acquaintances of ours are wondering what happened to a great number of people. I don’t suppose you know anything about that?”

“Maybe. Some day I might tell you the whole story. Oh, I almost forgot. What’s my name?”

“All the first-born women in the family are given the same name. It’s been that way for centuries.”

For a moment it didn’t click. Then it hit me and I couldn’t believe it. Cornelia? Was my name Cornelia? Was there ever in the wide universe a worse name than that?

Jim had his revenge. He took one look at my face and went away, snickering under his breath.

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DORIS PISERCHIA

The orphan had always known she wasn’t what people described as ‘normal’. Whether merely precocious or a mutant freak, she had always been able to link minds with an equally weird mutated lion and skip into the worlds of the fourth dimension.

What the heck, It sure beat staying in school on Earth—that is until she realized that some of her fellow dimension-hoppers from other planets had more in mind than just a romp in the swamp.

They were launching an inter-dimensional war of imperialism, and she alone held the secret which could save her home world—if she could only escape the truant officer long enough to pull it off!

