

Anne McCaffrey - Ship That Returned

The Ship Who Sang (1970)

The Partnership (with Margaret Ball) (1992)

The Ship Who Searched (with Mercedes Lackey) (1992)

The City Who Fought (with S.M. Stirling) (1993)

The Ship Who Won (with Jody Lynn Nye) (1994)

Introduction

"She was born a thing and as such would have been condemned if she failed to pass the encephalograph test required of all newborn babies. There was always the possibility that though the limbs were twisted, the mind was not; that though the ears would hear only dimly, the eyes see vaguely, the mind behind them was receptive and alert.

"The electro-encephalogram was entirely favorable, unexpectedly so, and the news was brought to the waiting, grieving parents. There was the final, harsh decision: to give their child euthanasia or permit it to become an encapsulated 'brain,' a guiding mechanism in any one of a number of curious professions. As such, their offspring would suffer no pain, live a comfortable existence in a metal shell for several centuries, performing unusual services to Central Worlds.

"She lived and was given a name, Helva."

Those are the opening paragraphs of the first Helva novel, *The Ship Who Sang*, which tells the story of how Helva becomes the mind behind the operation of a stargoing spaceship, and how her first ship-partner, Jennan Sahir Silan, dies tragically when he and Helva have to rescue a religious group from a planet soon to be reduced to a cinder as its primary goes nova. The rest of the first novel tells of Helva's journey out of the intense grief she suffered on Jennan's death and her attempts to find another partner who would be as compatible. Niall Parollan, clever, sharp, outrageously nonconformist, and a womanizer, becomes her "brawn" and they go off together to seek adventures, which have been chronicled in a number of later novels done in collaboration with other writers.

-Anne McCaffrey

The Ship That Returned

by

Anne McCaffrey

Helva had been prowling through her extensive music files, trying to find something really special to listen to, when her exterior sensors attracted her attention. She focused on the alert. Dead ahead of her were the ion trails of a large group of small, medium and heavy vessels. They had passed several days ago but she could still "smell" the stink of the dirty emissions. She could certainly analyze their signatures. Instantly setting her range to maximum, she caught only the merest blips to the port side, almost beyond sensor range.

"Bit off regular shipping routes," she murmured.

"So they are," replied Niall.

She smiled fondly. The hologram program had really improved since that last tweaking she'd done. There was Niall Parollan in the pilot's chair, one compact hand spread beside the pressure plate, the left dangling from his wrist on the armrest. He was dressed in the black shipsuit he preferred to wear, vain man that he'd been: "because black's better now that my hair's turned." He would brush back the thick shock of silvery hair and preen slightly in her direction.

"Where exactly are we, Niall? I haven't been paying much attention."

"Ha! Off in cloud-cuckoo land again..."

"Wherever that is," she replied amiably. It was such a comfort to hear his voice.

"I do believe..." and there was a pause as the program accessed her present coordinates, "we are in the Cepheus Three region."

"Why, so we are. Why would a large flotilla be out here? This is a fairly empty volume of space."

"I'll bring up the atlas," Niall replied, responding as programmed.

It was bizarre of her to have a hologram of a man dead two months but it was a lot better-psychologically-for her to have the comfort of such a reanimation. The "company" would dam up her grief until she could return her dead brawn to Regulus Base. And discover if there were any new "brawns" she could tolerate as a mobile partner. Seventy-eight years, five months and twenty days with Niall Parollan's vivid personality was a lot of time to suddenly delete. Since she had the technology to keep him "alive"-in a fashion, she had done so. She certainly had enough memory of their usual interchanges with which to program this charade. She would soon have to let him go but she'd only do that when she no longer needed his presence to keep mourning at bay. Not that she hadn't had enough exposure to that emotion in her life-what with losing her first brawn partner, Jennan, only a few years into what should have been a lifelong association.

In that era, Niall Parollan had been her contact with Central Worlds Brain and Brawn Ship Administration at Regulus Base. After a series of relatively short and only minimally successful longer-term partnerships with other brawns, she had gladly taken Niall as her mobile half. Together they had been roaming the galaxy. Since Niall had ingeniously managed to pay off her early childhood and educational indebtedness to Central Worlds, they had been free agents, able to take jobs that interested them, not compulsory assignments. They had not gone to the Horsehead Nebula as she had once whimsically suggested to Jennan. The NH-834 had had quite enough adventures and work in this one not to have to go outside it for excitement.

"Let's see if we can get a closer fix on them, shall we, Niall?"

"Wouldn't be a bad idea on an otherwise dull day, would it?" Though his fingers flashed across the pressure plates of the pilot's console, it was she who did the actual mechanics of altering their direction. But then, she would have done that anyway. Niall didn't really need to, but it pleased her to give him tasks to do. He'd often railed at her for finding him the sort of work he didn't want to do. And she'd snap back that a little hard work never hurt anyone. Of course, as he began to fail physically, this became lip service to that old argument. Niall had been in his mid-forties when he became her brawn and she the NH-834, so he had had a good long life for a softshell person.

"Good healthy stock I am," the hologram said, surprising her.

Was she thinking out loud? She must have been for the program to respond.

"With careful treatment, you'll last centuries," she replied, as she often had.

She executed the ninety-degree course change that the control panel had plotted.

"Don't dawdle, girl," Niall said, swiveling in the chair to face the panel behind which her titanium shell resided.

She thought about going into his "routine," but decided she'd better find out a little more about the "invasion."

"Why do you call it an invasion?" Niall asked.

"That many ships, all heading in one direction? What else could it be? Freighters don't run in convoys. Not out here, at any rate. And nomads have definite routes they stick to in the more settled sectors. And if I've read their KPS rightly..."

"... Which, inevitably, you do, my fine lady friend..."

"Those ships have been juiced up beyond freighter specifications and they're spreading dirty stuff all over space. Shouldn't be allowed."

"Can't have space mucked up, can we?" The holo's right eyebrow cocked, imitating an habitual trait of Niall's. "And juiced-up engines as well. Should we warn anyone?"

Helva had found the Atlas entries for this sector of space. "Only the one habitable planet in the system they seem to be heading straight for. Ravel..." Sudden surprise caught at her heart at that name. "Of all places."

"Ravel?" A pretty good program to search and find that long-ago reference so quickly. She inwardly winced at the holo's predictable response. "Ravel was the name of the star that went nova and killed your Jennan brawn, wasn't it?" Niall said, knowing the fact perfectly well.

"I didn't need the reminder," she said sourly.

"Biggest rival I have," Niall said brightly as he always did, and pushed the command chair around in a circle, grinning at her unrepentantly as he let the chair swing 360 degrees and back to the console.

"Nonsense. He's been dead nearly a century..."

"Dead but not forgotten..."

Helva paused, knowing Niall was right, as he always was, in spite of being dead, too. Maybe this wasn't a good idea, having him able to talk back to her. But it was only what he would have said in life anyhow, and had done often enough or it wouldn't be in the program.

She wished that the diagnostics had shown her one specific cause for his general debilitation so she could have forestalled his death. Some way, somehow.

"I'm wearing out, lover," he'd told her fatalistically in one of their conversations when he could no longer

deny increasing weakness. "What can you expect from a life-form that degenerates? I'm lucky to have lived as long as I have. Thanks to you fussing at me for the last seventy years."

"Seventy-eight," she corrected him then.

"I'll be sorry to leave you alone, dear heart," he'd said, coming and laying his cheek on the panel behind which she was immured. "Of all the women in my life, you've been the best."

"Only because I was the one you couldn't have," she replied.

"Not that I didn't try," the hologram responded with a characteristic snort.

Helva echoed it. Reminiscing and talking out loud were not a good idea. Soon she wouldn't know what was memory and what was programming.

WHY hadn't she used the prosthetic body that Niall had purchased for her-reducing their credit balance perilously close to zero and coming close to causing an irreparable breach between them? He had desperately wanted the physical contact, ersatz as she had argued it would be. The prosthesis would have been her in Niall's eyes, and arms, since she would have motivated it. And he'd tried so hard to have her. He had supplied Sorg Prosthetics with the hologram statue he'd had made long before he became her brawn, using genetic information from her medical history and holos of her parents and siblings. Until he'd told her, she hadn't known that there had been other, physically normal children of her parents' issue. But then, shell-people were not encouraged to be curious about their families: they were shell-people, and ineffably different. He swore blind that he hadn't maximized her potential appearance-the hologram was of a strikingly good-looking woman-when he'd had a hologram made of her from that genetic information. He'd even produced his research materials for her inspection.

"You may not like it, kid," he'd said in his usual irreverent tone, "but you are a blond, blue-eyed female and would have grown tall and lissome. Just like I like 'em. Your dad was good-lookin' and I made you take after him, since daughters so often tend to resemble good ol' dad. Not that your ma wasn't a good-looking broad. Your siblings all are, so I didn't engineer anything but a valid extrapolation."

"You just prefer blondes, don't tell me otherwise!"

"I never do, do I?" responded the hologram and Helva brought herself sharply to the present-and the fact she tried to avoid-that the Niall Parollan she had loved was dead. Really truly dead. The husk of what he called his "mortal coil" was in stasis in his quarters. He had died peacefully-not as he had lived, with fuss and fury and fine histrionics. One moment her sensors read his slowly fading life signs-the next second, the thin line of "nothing" as the essence of the personality that had been Niall Parollan departed-to wherever souls or a spiritual essence went.

She who could not weep was shattered. Later she realized that she had hung in space for days, coming to grips with his passing. She had said over and over that they had had a good, long time together: that these circumstances differed from her loss of Jennan after just a few very short years. Jennan had never had a chance to live a full, long, productive life. Niall had. Surely she shouldn't be greedy for just a little more, especially when for the last decade he had been unable to enjoy the lifestyle that he had followed so vibrantly, so fully, in such a raucous nonconformist spirit. Surely she had learned to cope with grief in her last hundred years. That was when she realized that she couldn't face the long silent trip back to Regulus Base. He'd insisted that he had a right to be buried with other heroes of the Service since he'd had to put up so much with them and especially her, all these decades. They had been a lot closer to Regulus at the time that subject had come up. But she was determined to grant that request.

There were no other brain ships anywhere in her spatial vicinity to contact and act as escort. She and Niall had been on a primary scouting sweep of unexplored star systems. She might have resented that first escort back from Ravel with Jennan's body. Not that there was much chance of her suiciding this time. She'd passed that test on the first funeral return to Regulus Base. Which is when the notion to program a facsimile had occurred to her. So it was a way to delay acceptance? Surely she could be allowed this aberration-if aberration it was. She didn't have to mention the matter to Regulus. They'd be glad enough to have her ready to take another partner. Experienced B&B ships were always in demand for delicate assignments. She was one of their best, her ship-self redesigned and crammed with all the new technology that had been developed for brain ships, and stations. Like that damned spare body Niall had bought and which she had never used. She couldn't. She simply couldn't inhabit the Sorg prosthesis. Oh, she knew that Tia did and the girl was glad of the ability to "leave" the shell and ambulate. Lovely word, "ambulate." She and Niall had had some roaring arguments over the whole notion of prosthesis.

"You'd fit me out with a false arm or leg, if I lost one, wouldn't you?" had been one of Niall's rebuttals.

"So you could walk or use the hand, yes, but this is different."

"Because you know what I'd be using on you, don't you?" He was so close to her panel that his face had been an angry blur. He'd been spitting at her intransigence. "And you don't want any part of my short arm, do you?"

"At least they can't replace that in prosthesis," she'd snarled.

"Wanna bet?" He'd whirled away, back to his command chair, sprawling into it, glaring at her panel.

"Trouble is, with you, girl, you're aged in the keg. Set in plascrete. You don't know what you're missing!" And he was snarling with bitterness.

Since she considered herself tolerant and forward thinking, that accusation had burned. It still did. Maybe, after all, she was too old in her head to contemplate physical freedom. But she could not make use of that empty body-shell as something she, Helva, could manipulate. Not all the brain ships she had spoken to about the Sorg prosthesis had found it a substitute for immolation in a shell. And some of them had been just commissioned, too. Of course, Tia-Alex/Hypatia AH-1033-had once been a walking, unshelled person as a child. Maybe, as Niall had vociferously bellowed at the top of his lungs at her, Helva needed to have her conditioning altered: a moral update. For a brain ship, she wasn't that old, after all. Why couldn't she have accepted the prosthesis when he wanted so desperately for her to use it? She and Niall had been partnered a long time, so how could it have altered their special relationship to have added to it that final surrender of self? She really hadn't thought of herself as a technological vestal virgin, one of the epithets Niall had flung at her. She wasn't prudish. She'd just been conditioned to accept herself, as she was, so thoroughly that to be "unshelled" was the worst imaginable fate. Using the prosthetic body was not at all the same thing as being unshelled, he had shouted back at her. While she had been sensorily deprived once, she hadn't also been out of her shell. Nearly out of her mind, yes, but not out of the shell. But she couldn't, simply could not, oblige. Oblige? No, she couldn't oblige Niall in that way. A weak word to define a response to his unreasonable, but oh-so-much masculine request. Well, she had refused. Now she wished she hadn't. But if Niall were still living, would she have relented? Not likely, since it was his death that had now prompted remorse for that omission.

"Preferably before I became impotent, my girl," and this was the holo speaking.

"If you knew how sorry I am, Niall..." she murmured.

Information started to chatter in from her sensors. She didn't quite recall having asked for a spectrographic analysis of the ion trail. Such an action was so much a part of her standard operating procedure that she supposed, in between self-castigation and listening to her Niall program, that she had automatically instigated it.

"Well, well, armed and loaded for bear, huh?"

"Yeah," Niall in holo replied, "but what sort of bear?"

"Those religious fanatics on Chloe had used fur rugs to keep warm... so the analogy is accurate enough," she replied, amused to have been so accurate. "I remember they went merrily off to..."

"Merrily?" Niall's voice cracked in dismay. "That lot never heard the word. So what's hunting bear in this volume of space?" he asked.

"Well, now hear this, dear friend. They're on that habitable planet which, being the gluttons for punishment they seemed to be when I first met them, they have named Ravel."

"No doubt a penitential derived gimmick to remind them of their sins," Niall said in a dour tone.

Helva analyzed the report. "Got an ID on the visitors. Pirates," she said, for her data files had been able to match the emissions with those of Kolnari raiders. Small-yachts more likely-and some medium-sized spaceships, probably freighters, gutted and refitted for piratical practices and two heavier but older cruiser-sized vessels.

The Niall holo whipped the chair round, staring at her. (Mind you, the program was very good to get this sort of reaction so quickly.) "Kolnari? The bastards that attacked your space-station friend, Simeon?"

"The very same. Not all of those fanatics got captured when Central World's Navy tried to round all of them up."

"Wily fiends, those Kolnari." And the holo's expression was dead serious. "Last info from Regulus suggested that two groups, possibly four, had escaped completely. Even one group's more than enough bear-hunters to ravage Ravel with their modus operandi." The holo slammed both hands on the armrests in frustration.

"I wonder that there are any still alive. After all, the virus that Dr. Chaundra let loose on them was one of the most virulent ever discovered." She gave a sigh. "The Kolnari were dying in droves."

The Kolnari-a dissident splinter group that had so adapted to the conditions of their harsh home planet that they were considered a human subspecies-were known to have an incredible ability to adapt to and survive otherwise fatal diseases, viruses and punishing planetary conditions. They had a short life span, maturing when other male human types were only hitting puberty, but the short generations were dangerous despite the limitation. They raided wherever they could, planets, space platforms or freighter convoys, using the human populations or crews as slaves and refitting the captured vessels to their uses-piracy. After their nearly successful raid on Space Station 900, Central Worlds Navy was reasonably certain they had destroyed the main body of peripatetic Kolnari units. They were on alert to locate, and destroy on sight, any other units.

"Huh!" Niall snorted. "Adapting to that particular virus would be just the sort of thing the Kolnari would be able to do, given their perverse nature and crazy metabolism."

"I'm afraid you could be right. Who else would be insane enough to run ships in that condition? Even nomads don't get that sloppy about emissions," Helva said.

"Not if they wish to continue their nomadic existence if they're leaving a system on the sly. Are you being wise to go after Kolnari?" Niall asked, a trace of anxiety in his tone. "You'd constitute a real prize."

Helva did a mental shudder, all too vividly reminded of what the Kolnari leader, Belazir t'Marid, had nearly done to the space-station brain, Simeon. Odd that Niall would remind her of that. She knew she'd done a good program but... Could she rationally believe in the transmigration of souls? Or that the holo was the ghost of the real Niall?

"I can no more leave those Ravel idiots to the Kolnari than I could to the damned nova. And it is sort of poetic justice," she said with a sigh. "Let's see. It's nearly a hundred years since I had to transport them off their planet before their sun fried it. It took time for Central Worlds to find such a suitably remote star system where they would be safe from both nova stars and any profanity from the evils that beset mere men. Let's hope that they have some sort of modern equipment protecting them. If not against novas, at least against predators. Ah! The Atlas says the sun's stable. And there is, or was, a space facility for incoming converts."

"Ha!" The holo gave a bark of disgust. "Any satellite systems?"

"None mentioned. No contact in the past forty years, in fact. Well, I'm about to break into their meditations or whatever it is they do down there. There's nothing but females on that planet. I can't let Kolnari get their hands on all those innocent pious virgins, now can I?"

"It'd be fun to watch, though," said a totally unrepentant Niall.

"Shut up, you prurient sadist," she said as firmly as possible. Maybe she should also shut the program down. No, she needed him, one way or the other, because embedded in that program was the distillation of seventy-eight years of experience... his and hers.

"I was never a sadist, my dear Helva," he said haughtily, and then grinned wickedly. "I'll admit to hedonism but none of my women ever minded my attention... bar you! Have you considered a pulse to any listening Central Worlds units of the imminent unRaveling disaster?"

"I am and"-she paused as she put the final URGENT ALL EYES tag on the beam-"and it's away."

For the first time she experienced a touch of relief that she could approach the group without defiling it by the presence of a male. She'd pause the program-since Niall seemed to talk without any cues from her. Quite likely she wouldn't have as much trouble this time persuading them to seek whatever hidden shelters the planet might provide. Possibly the fact that she had saved them once before would weigh in their obedience to her urgings to make themselves as scarce as possible when the Kolnari arrived. Whatever! She wouldn't let them be victims to Kolnari rape and brutality. And Ravel was only a minor detour from the way to Regulus. She not only felt better to have something useful to do after going into a fugue over Niall's death but also was revived by the need. As she had been needed at Ravel, as Jennan's father had been at Parsaea. True tragedy occurred when those who could have helped were not there when needed. She was here. She was needed. Vigor flowed through the tubes that supplied her nutrient fluids.

"Feeling on form, are you?" the holo asked brightly. "Thatta girl! We gotta do what we gotta do. Data

suggests that there'll be a lot of small settlements, cloisters they call 'em. They've increased their population from the Chloe figures." He sighed. "There isn't enough of the geo-ecological survey to show possible refuges. Planet's high on vegetation though."

"Lots of forests and lots of mountains and valleys. Plenty of cover if they separate. Make it that much harder for the Kolnari to tag 'em even from the air. That is, if they keep their wits about them," Helva said, charged with hope. "They need only lie doggo until the Fleet arrives."

"That is"-and the holo's tone was cynical-"if the Fleet has any squadrons near enough to send in timely fashion or decides such a splinter group is worth saving. I've never heard of their type of Faith... the Inner Marian Circle. Who's this Marian they worship?"

"In this case, 'marian' is an adjective and refers to Mary, mother of Jesus."

"Oh... and what's an inner circle then?"

"I don't know and it scarcely matters, does it? We have to warn them."

"Maybe there isn't anyone left to warn," Niall suggested. "Hey, did you just say they've increased their population from the Chloe figures? How does a celibate religious order perpetuate its membership?"

"Converts," she suggested. She often had wondered how such minorities did manage to continue to practice a faith that rejected procreation as a sin. "There was a new shipment forty years ago."

"Ach!" and Niall dismissed that. "Even if they converted preteens, how could the present inhabitants run fast enough at fifty-odd years to escape galloping Kolnari?"

"Parthenogenesis?" she suggested.

"That is, at least, virgin birth." And he snickered.

"That would go with the theories about Mary."

Niall snorted. "That was just the first recorded case of exogenesis."

"Possibly, but it doesn't detract from the Messiah's effect on man... and woman... kind."

"I'll allow that."

"Big of you."

"To the realities, woman," he said, stirring forward in his chair. "First we have to find out if there's anyone to rescue. AND if there's any safe place to send them so the Kolnari don't get 'em until the Fleet heaves into sight. I wouldn't wish that bunch on my worst enemy... Even my second-worst enemy."

Helva had been scanning the file on the Kolnari. "They might be looking for a new home base. Central Worlds sterilized their planet of origin."

"Then let's not let them have this Ravel, which seems to be a nice planet. Wouldn't want the neighborhood to go to such dogs..."

"They have an indigenous sort of canine on Ravel. Have you been speed-reading ahead of me again?" she asked, surprised because the list of local fauna was just coming up for her to peruse.

"Most of the M-type planets we've been on have some sort of critter in the canine slot. Cats don't always make it." And he shot a snide glance at her. He was a dog person but she had long ago decided she liked the independence of felines. They could argue the merits of the two species quite happily on their journeys between star systems. "Planet does have predators. Furthermore, our Inner Circle does not have any weaponry and does not hunt. They're vegetarians." He grinned around at her again.

"So it's all organic material?" Helva asked at her most innocent, playing on the theme.

"Just the kind of organic virgin material the Kolnari adore." The holo rubbed its hands together and leered.

She ignored that. "Temperate climate, too. Makes a change from Chloe, which was frozen most of the time."

"What! No harsh temperatures to mortify the body and soul?"

"No! And a good basic ecology, which they don't interfere with. Haven't even domesticated any of the indigenous beasts for use, but then, this entry is forty years old, dating from the last landfall. They live in harmony with their environment, it says here, and do not plunder it."

"Which sure does leave them wide-open to being plundered themselves. Which is about to happen. Though, when all's said and done, I wouldn't like to see them plundered or deflowered among their vegetable patches by the Kolnari."

"Nor will we permit it," Helva said fiercely, although she devoutly hoped that she wouldn't meet with the incredulity and pious fatalism that she'd encountered the first time and which, obliquely, had caused Jennan's death.

"Frankly, my dear, I don't know what I could do to help you. You know my reputation with women..." the holo began.

"I'll do the talking," she said, firmly interrupting him.

He leaned back in his chair, idly swinging it on the gimbals. "I wonder if they added you to their Inner Circle as a savior."

"Nonsense. None of the original group would be still alive. They didn't believe in artificially prolonging life..."

"All cures provided by prayer?"

"Avoiding all impure substances. Like Kolnari."

Niall cocked his head at her. "Maybe they'll welcome the Kolnari as a trial sent by whatever Universal Diety they revere..." He paused, scowling. "Mary was never a god, was she? Goddess, I mean? Any rate, would they consider the Kolnari have been sent to test their faith?"

"I'm hoping not. What do we have left of the tapes Simeon recorded?"

"I opine that you would be referring to the rape scene? My favorite of them all," Niall said, and his fingers tapped a sequence. "You wouldn't actually dare to play that back at those innocents..."

"A picture is worth a thousand words," she quoted at him. "If we have to tour as much of the planet as Jennan and I had to on Chloe, I'm going to need to use a sharp, fast lesson. I can rig a hologram for them to see," she added, since she was pleased with the way she handled holographic programming.

"If you do half as well with that program as you have with mine, it'll work, honey."

That remark startled Helva and she activated a magnification of his holographic image. But it was the hologram... one could see just the faintest hint of the light source. How could Niall know that he was a holo? Then she remembered the one they had done together at Astrada III when he had had to replay an historical event to prove a point to a skeptical audience. Surely that was his reference.

"I can't find any indication of how large the population is," she added, having replayed the entry on Ravel several times.

"Might be they don't keep an accurate census. Do they even have a space facility?"

"No, but they DO have a satellite with a proximity alarm!" she cried in triumph.

"And how far away is the nearest inhabited system that'd hear it, much less act?" Niall wanted to know. "Probably contains no more than the usual silly warning..." And he chanted in the lifeless tones of an automated messenger, "... This... Is... An... Interdicted Planet. You... Will Not... Proceed Further." He abandoned that tone and, in a pious falsetto, added, "Or you'll get a spanking when the Fleet comes."

Helva gave him the brief chuckle he would have expected. "Our message will prompt action. No one ignores a B&B ship message."

"And rightly so," Niall said, loyally fierce, pounding one fist for emphasis on the desk.

There was no sound attached to that action. She'd have to work on that facet... when she'd managed to preserve the Chloists, or Chloe-ites or Inner Marian Circle Ravellians from the imminent arrival of the Kolnari. She'd have to be sure they knew just how dangerous and bloody-minded the Kolnari were so they'd make themselves as scarce as possible.

Helva was now speeding along the ion trail, its dirty elements all the more pronounced as she reduced the distance separating them. She'd overtake the flotilla within twenty hours. And arrive at Ravel four or five days ahead of them. She'd have to start decelerating once she passed the heliopause, but so would the Kolnari.

"Don't forget to cloak," Niall said, rising from his chair. He stretched until she was sure she could hear the sinews popping: which, she reminded herself, is why she hadn't added more than vocal sound to the holo. Stretching he was allowed, but not the awful noise he'd make popping his knucklebones. "I'd better get some shut-eye before the party begins."

"Good idea. I'll work on the hologram while you're resting and call you for a critique."

Niall the holo walked across the main compartment and to the aisle and down to Niall's quarters. Did it never realize that it melded with Niall's stasis-held body on the bunk?

She'd almost forgotten the cloaking mechanism that bent light and sensory equipment around the ship itself. She'd only used that device once and had held that up to Niall as a really unnecessary piece of technology for a B&B ship to waste credit on. So, it was coming in handy again. B&B ships had no weaponry with which to defend themselves and vanishing provided a much more effective evasion than the tightest, most impervious shielding.

As she judiciously edited the tapes from the Kolnari occupation of Space Station 900, she mulled over the first encounter with the Chloe-ites. At least this time her brawn couldn't be killed, however unintentional Jennan's death had been. She also had more tricks in her arsenal than she had had as that raw young brain ship.

She sped along and, well before any sensors the Kolnari might have could track her approach, she went into cloak. Of course, they became spots on her sensors, rather than three-dimensional ships. Still, by the size of the signals as she passed them, she learned a good deal about them. To begin with, there were more than she had anticipated, even taking into consideration all the dirty emissions. None of this lot matched the signatures of any of those that had attacked her friend, Simeon: not that that provided her with any consolation.

The Kolnari fleet was an incredible mixture of yachts, large and small, prizes of other Kolnari attacks-a round dozen of them, stuffed far above the optimum capacity with bodies: some evidently stashed in escape pods as last-resort accommodation. The conditions on board those ships would have been desperate even if the life-support systems managed to cope with such overloading. Three medium-sized freighters, equally jam-packed with little and large Kolnaris. Two destroyer types, quite elderly, but these were loaded with missiles and other armaments. Two of the freighters were hauling drones, five apiece, which cut down on the speed at which the entire convoy could travel. Four drones contained nothing but ammunition, missiles and spare parts: the fifth probably food as she got no metallic signals from it. Nineteen ships. A veritable armada and certainly able to overwhelm the inhabitants of Ravel. Which was undoubtedly why that luckless planet had been picked.

She pulsed an update of her earlier message with these details to the nearest Fleet facility-a good ten days away even by the speed of a pulse. The Admiralty had sworn blind that they intended to wipe Kolnari pirates out of space forever. So here was a chance for an ambitious picket commander to make that clean sweep and get a promotion. A small, modern force could easily overwhelm this shag-bag-rag-bag of barely spaceworthy vehicles. On the other hand, the Kolnari would fight to the last male child able to wield a weapon or fire a missile... and they had rather a few of those. Even Kolnari females were vicious fighters. Reviewing what was known of their lifestyle, it was likely a great many of the women were slaves, captured and forced to breed up more Kolnari offspring.

She sped on, wishing she had more information on the Chloes. Living close to nature on another planet was fine in theory, but practice was another thing altogether. As the original religious group had found out the hard way on Daphnis and Chloe a hundred years ago.

She had completed a holographic account of the less palatable habits of the Kolnari, including the modus operandi of their invasion of the peaceful planet, Bethel. The Tri-D coverage had been found in the space wreckage and used in the trial against those that had been captured at SS900. She was delighted to have found the one that showed vividly how the Kolnari dealt with anyone who defied them. That was the short sharp lesson she needed to project. She edited it, added some voice-over, and then programmed the exterior vid systems to play it.

That ought to cut down the waste of time spent arguing. She wanted every single female resident of Ravel

safely hidden away when the Kolnari arrived.

She didn't rouse Niall-why bother him when he was sleeping like the dead-or rather the holo of him. He had always been hard to wake, though once roused, he altered from sleepy to alert in seconds. She had the time, so she did a leisurely spin-in, quartering the globe from darkside to daylight and identifying congregates of life signs... all too many. She'd never make it to every settlement. How could these piously celibate folk have increased almost fourfold from the numbers of the registered settlers? "Multiply and be fruitful" might be a Biblical injunction but, if the last bunch had come four decades before, there were a great many more than there ought to be. Rabbits might multiply so. But virgin rabbits? Well, she'd get to as many... what had they called themselves-ah, cloisters-as she could. Maybe they had some form of communication between the settlements, widespread as they were on the sprawling main continent. She'd simply have to ignore the island groups and concentrate on the larger, juicier targets that the Kolnari would be likely to attack first.

Smack-dab in the middle of the main continent, she easily identified what had been the landing field-well, a few square acres of burnt-out ground, a flimsy concrete-covered grid where ships or shuttles had landed to off-load people and supplies. Rows of temporary barracks, weathered and in need of maintenance, bordered two sides of the field to show that humans had once been accommodated there for however brief a time. There was a low-power source discernible and vegetation had not grown back over the landing area, though in forty-some years there should have been some weeds regaining a root hold. A blocky tower, now tilting sideways, held the corner position of the two barrack rows. From her aerial advantage, she could also see four roads, each going away from the deserted landing place: north, south, east and west. She could see where auxiliary lanes had split off from the main ones, smaller arteries leading to probably smaller settlements. Though none appeared to be more than dirt tracks, the vigorous growths had not reclaimed the track, leaving a clear margin on both sides. Some sort of chemical must have been used to discourage succession.

"I wonder how they decided who went in which direction," she murmured, forgetting that oddity in the press of more important concerns.

"Probably by divine intervention," Niall said, and there he was, seated at the pilot's console.

She hadn't put a voice-operated command in the program, but there he was, and she was rather pleased to hear another voice after the silent days of inward travel.

"Makes it easier to have just four main directions to search in."

"Those tracks were made over a period of years or they wouldn't be quite so visible since the last time they were used forty years ago."

"True. So, eeny, meeny, miny, moe... which track will we follow now? East is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet," he said in one of his whimsical moods.

"Nothing for north and south?"

"Well, we could go this way?" And he crossed his arms, pointing in two separate directions, neither of which was a cardinal compass point.

"North, I think, and then swing round..." Helva decided.

"In ever-increasing circles?" His tone was so caustically bright!

"Mountains, too. That's good."

" 'Purple mountains' majesty, above the fruited plain'..." he quoted.

"That doesn't sound right."

"I've forgot how it goes," he said, frowning.

"They do say that memory is the first thing that aging affects..."

"Thanks! I'll remember that."

Cloaked and at low altitude, she followed the northern track, noting the offshoots and realizing she had bit off quite a lot to chew if she was going to warn even half the inhabitants. She refused to allow the fact to discourage her from her chosen task. And night was falling on the continent.

"Ah-ha!" Niall pointed urgently at the view port. "Fires. Port three degrees."

"And far too much forest for me to land in."

"I don't mind backtracking when you can find a landing spot... Oh, no, I can't, can I?"

"No, you can't, but I appreciate your willingness to offer. Especially since I need to show my little vid to stir them to action."

"You could use the prosthesis," he said in a wheedling tone, grinning at her.

She said nothing-pointedly-and he chuckled. She might have to at that if daylight didn't show her settlements she could reach. She could hover... but she'd need something to project the vid on to for maximum effectiveness.

"I'll just use the darkness for reconnaissance and find out how many places I'm going to have to visit."

"Good thinking. I'll make a list of the coordinates. You might need them if the Fleet does come to our aid and comfort."

By morning his list of settlements, in all directions, had reached the three hundred mark. Some were small in the forested areas, but the plains or rolling hill country had many with several hundred inhabitants. All were ringed with walls, and these seemed to exude the power that showed up at every settlement, as well as a land-dike that Niall called a margin of no-woman's-land. The largest congregation was sited at the confluence of two rivers.

"If they have such a thing as an administrative center, that is likely it," she said. "We'll go there first thing in the morning. When I've had a quick look at that island complex."

"Whatever you say, love," Niall remarked with unusual compliance.

So she-they-arrived bright and early as the sun rose over the cup of the mountains that surrounded the largest congregation of Ravel's Chloe-ites.

"Rather impressive, wouldn't you say?" Niall remarked. "Orderly, neat. Everyone must have a private domicile. Thought you said they were a cloistered order."

The arrangement of the town, small city, did surprise Helva. Streets laid out in the center while garden plots and some large fields were positioned all around but within the customary low surrounding wall. There were main gates at each of the cardinal points of the compass but they weren't substantial: a Kolnari war axe would have reduced them to splinters with the first blow. A power source was visible on her sensors but it seemed to power the wall. What could they be keeping out that wasn't very tall or large or strong? Odd. Larger buildings set in the midst of fenced fields suggested either storage or barn shelters. She saw nothing grazing, though the season looked to be spring, to judge by the delicate green of cultivated fields, all within the walled boundary.

All four of the major avenues leading from the gates, for they were broad enough to be dignified with that title, tree-lined as well, led toward a large building which dominated the center. Part of it looked like a church, with an ample plaza in front of it for assemblies. Behind the church were low lines of buildings, possibly administration. This was a far-better-organized place than the original Chloe had been. Maybe they had learned something in the last century. She could hope.

"Hey, get that, Helva," Niall said suddenly, pointing to a slim structure atop the front of the building. "Not a steeple after all-no bells in it-but it's got something atop it."

Their approach had now been sighted, for the avenues as well as the smaller lanes between the individual housing units were filling with figures, faces upturned. Most were racing towards the square in front of the church, or whatever the big building was.

"Early risers..." Helva remarked.

"Early to bed-that power source is limited to the wall, not any electricity-and early to rise, you know," Niall said in a revoltingly jocular tone of voice. Then he altered to a practical tone, "And there's just about enough space for you to land in front of that church."

"So there is. But it's also full," she said, for they had arrived at the back end of the building and now that she had swung round, she could see that the plaza was filled with kneeling bodies. No one was working the fields.

"The more you squash the fewer we'll have to save from the Kolnari," Niall said.

"Oh, be quiet."

"It's over and out to you, Helva love. Sock it to them."

The devout knelt with upturned faces. She could see their mouths open with dark O's of surprise. But not fear. At some unseen signal, the kneelers rose and quickly, but without panic, moved back, out of the plaza.

"Be not afraid," Helva said gently, using her exterior sound system and ignoring the rich chuckle of amusement from Niall.

"They're not. Maybe you better alter your program, dear heart."

"I need to speak with you."

"Why don't you just hover?"

She made sure she was on interior sound only before she said sharply, "Will you shut up and let me handle this, Niall?"

"Remind them that you saved them from the hellfire of Chloe, dear," suggested Niall.

"That's my next line," she said in a caustic aside. "I am called Helva."

"Hey, Helva, that's you they've got mounted on that building."

In her careful vertical descent, she was now level with the spire. Which wasn't a spire but a replica of her earlier ship-self, vanes and all.

"Well, how's that for being canonized!" Niall said, but she could hear a note of pride in his voice. "You may be able to pull this off after all, love."

Rather more shaken by the artifact than she'd ever let him know, she completed her landing. One of the improvements on her ship body was the vertical cabin and a ramp directly to it, rather than the old and inconvenient lift from the stern.

"You even have a reception party of one," Niall remarked, as a tall figure became visible on the starboard viewers. All around the square the others turned towards that figure, heads bowing in a brief obeisance.

"How else are you called, Ship Helva?" said the tall woman, the hood falling back and revealing the serene face of an older woman.

"Not bad at all," Niall murmured. "She'd look even better in something feminine."

Indeed, Helva agreed with him since the woman had the most amazingly attractive face. A pity she had taken up religion instead of a man and a family. The long cassock robe she wore was one of those amorphous affairs, probably woven or pounded out of indigenous fibers and strictly utilitarian.

"I am Ship NH-834, who was once also the JH-834."

The woman nodded and inclined forward from her waist in a deep bow.

"Bingo!" said Niall.

"We have sent eternal prayers for the repose of the soul of Jennan," the woman said in a richly melodious voice, and from the onlookers rose a murmur of "Praise ever to his name."

"His memory is honored," Helva replied sincerely. "May I ask your name?"

"I am the Helvana," the woman replied, again with a reverent bow of her head.

"Oh, my God, Helva, you made it to sainthood," Niall said with complete irreverence and rolled with laughter in the pilot's chair. "With your own priestess caste system. Wow!"

Somehow his reaction annoyed her so much she almost erased his program. But common sense

reasserted itself. If she was indeed some sort of saint to these people, she needed his irreverence more than ever-to keep her balance.

"You lead your people?"

"I am she who has been chosen," the woman said. "For many decades, we have hoped that you would honor us with your appearance..."

"Once more I come to you with bad tidings," Helva said quickly before she could be inundated with sanctimonious sentiments or perorations.

"That you have come is enough. What is your bidding, Ship Who Sings?"

"They have you pegged, my dear," Niall murmured, grinning like an idiot.

"An enemy approaches this planet... ah... Helvana." Helva had a bit of trouble getting that name/title out. "I have sent for assistance but it will not arrive in time to prevent the landing, nor the brutality with which these people-they are called the Kolnari-overwhelm an unprotected population."

A chuckle, rich and throaty, surprised Helva. She also caught smiles from those around the square.

"It's no laughing matter, Helvana. I have documentation of how they overwhelm resistance. How they... abuse the population." She couldn't quite say "rape" in the presence of girls who looked to be in their teens. "I must ask that you retreat to whatever safety the forests and mountains can provide until the Fleet arrives. Having warned you here in this fine city, I must spread the alarm to all that I can, to protect as many as I can."

The woman named Helvana raised one hand, a polite interruption. "Bird-keepers, send the flocks to warn our sisters. Ship Who Sings, would you know how soon they will land?"

"I'm no more than four days ahead of them," Helva said, wondering at her calmness. With relief, she did see quite a few women disappearing from the perimeter and doing whatever duties the bird-keepers might have. "You must gather what belongings you cherish and make for forest and mountain."

"Four days is plenty of time to set all in motion, Ship Who Sings."

This Helvana sounded not the least bit alarmed, as she bloody well should have been.

"You don't understand, Hel... Helvana. These men are pirates, vicious. They have no mercy on their victims..."

"Show them the tape," Niall said.

"This is what they did on the planet Bethel," she said, and activated the exterior display, using the whitewashed facade of the imposing main building as a screen.

"That will not be necessary," Helvana said. "Turn it off now. Please!" And, since some of the captive audience looked decidedly unnerved by the first scene of battle-armored Kolnari making mighty jumps towards screaming and panicking Bethelites, Helva found herself obeying. "There is absolutely no need to terrify. NO need at all."

"But there is, Helvana. Those men..."

"May I speak to you in private, Ship Who Sings?"

"I wouldn't like to go against that one," Niall said. "She's tough."

"Yes, of course," Helva said to the Helvana. And then to Niall, "Get lost!"

"Immediately," Niall said, rising and skittering off to his quarters.

The Helvana was tall enough to have to duck her head to clear the lintel of the opening and stood for a moment, looking calmly around her, a little smile flickering at the corners of her mouth. Then, to Helva's surprise, she bowed with great reverence toward the central panel behind which Helva's titanium shell was situated.

"I have dreamed of being granted such a moment, Ship Who Sings," she said, her voice vibrant with exultation.

"Please be seated in the lounge on your right," Helva said.

The Helvana took a second look at the raised bridge area that had been Niall's favorite place and turned to the lounge area. With considerable grace, the heavy folds of her cassock flowing around her feet and her heavy boots grating on the metal part of the deck, she reached the first of the sectional couches. With another bow, she seated herself facing Helva's panel.

"I must tell you, Ship Who Sings, that the pitiful colony of the religious you rescued from Ravel's nova learned from that basic mistake."

"I am pleased to hear that," Helva began, "but you must..." The graceful hand raised from the deep-cuffed sleeve. "There was much to be learned if the Inner Marian Circle would survive the science of your civilization."

"Really?" Helva decided that this was a time to listen. "The satellite will have sent its preprogrammed message even as I am certain you sent messages?" Her voice ended on an upward querying note.

"Several, with such details of the invading force as I was able to glean. But, really, Helvana, they're going..."

The hand raised and Helva subsided. She did have four days in hand.

"My grandmother..." Well, that was unexpected.

"... Was one of those whom you yourself rescued. A wise but older Christian sisterhood succored her and the other younger members of that community until a new planet could be found for our Order. And they acquired much wisdom during their waiting." "Not, however, how to combat bloodthir..." The hand went up and Helva subsided again. "We had been children on Chloe, ignorant and kept in ignorance when knowledge would have saved us, and the Blessed Jennan. My grandmother studied much, as did her intimate circle. With prayer and research, we found that this planet was available. A stable primary was our first consideration, of course," she said with a graceful wave of her hand. "Surveys of Ravel proved it would be adequate for our needs and our preferred style of life once we overcame its... nature. The planet has inherent dangers. Indeed we were required to devise a means whereby we could safely

land the first colony expedition." Her expression became distant with memories, but she pulled herself back to the present with a little shake of her head. "We were averse to the use of technology, but that, in the end, was what we required and what we still employ. We have maintained the landing site out of respect for the achievement of technology over rampant nature. The touch of a switch will deter any unwelcome... visitors."

She was talking a great deal more rationally than that rabid idiot Mother Superior at Chloe had. But defending the broad open plains of this Ravel would be the task of an army. A much-better-equipped one than these people could possibly mount.

"We have cultivated not only the land, but the resources of the vegetation and wildlife. There are predators on Ravel..."

"Not anything that could overcome a battle-armed Kolnari..."

The Helvana smiled.

"How many are in this Kolnari battle armor?"

Well, that was the first sensible question.

"I'd estimate five, maybe six regiments."

Her well-shaped eyebrows arched in surprise. "How many are in a regiment?"

Helva told her.

"That many?"

"Yes, that many, and impregnable in that battle armor, too. Unless you happen to have armor-piercing missiles hidden in your fields."

"Nothing to pierce armor," the Helvana said blithely, with a light emphasis on "pierce." "But we will defend ourselves well."

"Don't even consider hand-to-hand combat, Helvana," Helva said.

"Oh"-and there was a lovely rippling contralto laugh-"we wouldn't consider attacking anyone."

"Then HOW do you plan to deal with the Kolnari?"

"May I surprise you?"

"If it doesn't lead immediately to your death and the slaughter of all those innocents out there."

"It won't."

"Which reminds me, Helvana, I saw young children out there, and teenage girls as well as matrons your age and older."

Helva had been reviewing her tapes, because something had puzzled her about the composition of those

calm observers.

"Ah, yes," the Helvana said, smiling graciously. "My grandmother also decided that our community must propagate..."

"Parthenogenesis?"

"Oh, no, that would have been against our precepts. We brought with us sufficient fertilized female ova, removed from our Faithful, to supply us with the necessary diverse genetic balance to ensure that our community will last for centuries."

"Clever," Helva said.

"Not the least of our... cleverness, Ship Who Sings."

Just then Helva's outside sensors picked up a little cough and she became aware that a covey of girls was standing just outside the hatch.

"I think they wish to speak to you, Helvana," the ship said. "Come on in, girls."

Their faces either red with embarrassment or white with exultation, the young women entered, bowing with varying degrees of grace as the Helvana had done, towards Helva's panel. Did the whole damned planet know where she lived?

"The birds have flown, Helvana. And some nearby have responded."

Helvana nodded, pleased. "Enter the responses and report back when all have answered."

The girls left in a flurry, but not before a second obeisance to Helva.

"You've trained avians as messengers?"

"It seemed wise since there are such distances between our communities and decisions must be circulated when necessary."

"Does every community have a... Helvana?"

"No, I am the one so honored by my peers."

"How long will you serve, if that is the correct phrase?"

"It is you I serve," the Helvana said with great dignity. "When I know myself too old to continue intelligent administration, my successor will be installed, chosen from among those who are diligent in learning the canon and tradition of our Circle."

"Well, yes, but let's get to the point. DO you have some safe refuge where you can't be found until the Fleet arrives?"

"Ravel supplies our defense," Helvana said, again with the confident smile.

"Enlighten me, then, because I have every reason to fear for your safety."

"You must look more closely at Ravel."

"Don't tell me you've trained the predators to defend you?"

"No, the planet itself will."

"Well, if your defense is classified, I assure you I won't disclose your methods but the Kolnari are the most effective and ruthless fighting force of all humanoids. They..."

"Against other humans, quite likely..."

"They have weaponry"-and Helva was getting a bit tired of this woman's self-confident denial of any threat-"that could turn this settlement into a cinder..."

"From the air?" And there was just a touch of fear in this Helvana's voice.

"You're lucky," Helva said dryly, "the Kolnari strategy is based more on overwhelming their target with ground forces. Of course, your satellite warning system'll be blasted out of space as soon as they spot it, but the bunch that's headed here don't have any assault ships, unless they've modified some of the bigger yachts. And all of them seem so full of bodies that I doubt they are armed with space-to-surface missiles, too. Though," Helva added thoughtfully, "they could be. However, they think they have total surprise as an advantage to a quick rout."

The Helvana crossed her arms and said, not quite smugly, "Then we shall not be harmed."

"Look, their ships are crammed with bodies, bodies which intend to take over this planet for their purposes which, I assure you, you won't like. You have no armament..."

"We need none..."

"So you say, but you've never seen the Kolnari take over a planet. Let me just show you how they conquered..."

Helvana held up her hand. "God forbend."

"He's not in a position to forbend anything. Look, you've got to take precautions."

"They are already in place."

"What?"

"The planet itself."

"And round and round we go," Helva said, irked. "This is Chloe all over again with a slightly different scenario," she said, allowing her irritation to show in her voice. "You won't be fried by the sun this time but by..."

"No." And Helvana held up a hand with such authority that Helva broke off. "You will have noticed that our settlements, large and small, are walled..."

"Not much good against Kolnari battle-armored troops..."

"Who will not get close enough to our walls... Nor do we go beyond them very often, for it is the vegetation of Ravel that is dangerous to all. Even the predators venture out only on cold nights when the planet sleeps."

"Come again?"

Helvana's smile just missed being a smirk and she cocked her head slightly at Helva. "How much would these Kolnari know about our planet?"

"Only what is in the Galactic Atlas."

"May I see that entry?"

Helva brought it up on the main-lounge screen and the Helvana read it swiftly, smiling her smile as she finished.

"There have been no additions. As promised."

"I do wish I could be as confident as you are," Helva said.

The Helvana rose. "The last time it was the primary which would destroy us. This time the planet will work for us. One question: since the entry indicates a spaceport, will the Kolnari land there first? To organize their invasion?"

Helva thought of that battered collection of ships. "They use whatever's available. They've enough ships to use all the space the landing field offers. Though, in my judgment," she added grimly, "some of them may not make a controlled landing." She paused, wondering if in those dilapidated buildings there were any emergency vehicles or equipment. Then she ruthlessly decided that a few Kolnari would not be missed. "Some are barely spaceworthy, and one was leaking oxygen. You must realize that this is the Kolnari's last-gasp attempt to resettle. They'll fight whatever you have in mind to put against them. They must know this planet is a walkover."

"Not..." Helvana paused with an inscrutable twist to her lips. "... an easy walkover. Not by any means."

"They do have arsenals of some pretty sophisticated weapons," Helva reminded her guest. "Don't discount the possibility of an air-to-surface barrage to soften you up."

Helvana actually chuckled. "What? Bomb our fields and settlements? If their object is to settle here, they wouldn't destroy available housing or crops."

"You don't know the Kolnari as I do, Helvana. Don't treat this lightly."

"I assure you I do not," the woman said, and her face assumed a concerned and serious expression. "Our fields, our homes would be targeted?"

"Very likely, although it is equally likely that, fearing no resistance, they may just land and march..."

"Oh, I do hope so," said the Helvana, one moment her face brightening with something akin to triumph, instantly fading to self-recrimination. "We do not take pleasure in destruction of any kind on Ravel."

"Even to save your lives?"

"Your presence, and your warning, is sufficient." The Helvana rose.

"I have no weapons, no way to defend you," Helva said, unable to keep the frustration and anger out of her voice.

The woman turned, inclining her head. "That is known, so you must seek safety yourself. I know little of what transpires in other sections of the Universe, and your pictures showed us it is not a safe place in which to reside, so you are at risk. You have warned us. We are advised. We shall be safe. Go you to be safe, too, Ship Who Sings."

"I can't JUST LEAVE YOU!" Helva's voice rose and she could hear it resounding outside, causing some of the women still gathered in groups in the plaza to turn around.

"As you cannot defend yourself," Helvana said in a tone that implied Helva was indeed more at risk than her adherents were, "you must depart. I have much to organize."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that," Helva said in a caustic tone.

The woman turned at the airlock, made a deep and respectful obeisance, and strode down the ramp. Immediately she began issuing commands that had all the onlookers scurrying to obey. In moments the plaza was empty and the Helvana had reentered the church or administration building or whatever it was.

"Well, well." And Niall peered around the edge of the corridor that led to his quarters. "That one has style!"

"She's no smarter than that rabid, ranting ascetic on Chloe!" Helva's voice crackled with anger. "As if I'm the one who's vulnerable."

"What was that about the vegetation?" Niall asked. "And close the hatch, love. I don't want someone peering in and catching sight of a MAAAALE..." He jiggled his hands in clownish antic and dragged out the last word.

"What about the vegetation?" Helva demanded irritably as she retracted the ramp and shut off access.

"I'd say it's dangerous and the power to the walls is to keep it at bay. Remember the roads here? All with neat margins... and haven't been used... and they employ birds to carry messages? Doesn't that suggest to you they don't wander much from the walls of their cloisters?"

Helva thought about that possibility. "As a weapon against the Kolnari?" she demanded with trenchant incredulity.

"We can cloak and watch," Niall said, cocking his head slightly at something he had perceived that eluded her. "That lady seemed far too certain of their... indigenous... protections. And we haven't seen everything on this world yet, now have we?"

Helva had been scanning with her exterior sensors, and except for birds coming in to land on what she had initially thought to be multiple chimneys but were rooftop aviaries, she reconsidered the situation.

"I'm going to try another of their settlements," she said, and, making sure there were no bodies anywhere near her, lifted slowly. The plaza was so hard-packed from much usage that only little swirls of dust marked her ascent.

She tried nine settlements, medium, small and another large one, but each time the head woman of the group, while respectful in all other ways, replied that there was no need this time for The Ship Who Sings to worry about Ravellians. But it was good of her to appear to warn them that a time of trial was coming. Helva tried to show the hologram and, after the first horrified glances, everyone turned their backs, squeezing their eyes closed against the proof she tried to exhibit.

"I don't think it's a case of your losing your touch," Niall said kindly, drumming silent fingers on the armrest. "They honestly believe they're safe. Not that the mere odor of sanctity ever saved a saint and certainly won't save these sisters from the Kolnari. But, in case you've been fretting too much to notice, every single one of the walls around these cloisters is on full power."

"Where're the sources? That's something the Kolnari will spot if they make even the most routine scan or aerial reconnaissance." And Helva was more afraid than ever. On the previous occasion, the expanding sun itself had provided proof positive of danger to the doubting religious. What would it take to prove it this time? And why was she stuck with this gullible lot again?

She kept trying and kept getting the same responses from all ninety-seven cloisters she visited. On the way to the ninety-eighth, they saw the spark of bright light in the sky that indicated the Kolnari had just demolished the satellite.

"Nice of them to give us fair warning. Now's the time to cloak, Helva," Niall remarked, his fingers in their restless dance on the armrests.

"I have been while I was flying between these damnable stubborn towns," she replied curtly, and headed towards the pathetic landing field. Since it was there, and nothing else on this vegetating world offered any other large cleared space as a come-on to the Kolnari, she figured that would be where the invaders would land.

At dawn, she and Niall arrived close enough to the landing site, hovering just behind the nearest of the hills that surrounded the facility.

"Ah-ha," Niall said in a thoughtful drawl, as he leaned across the control board to peer at the forward view screen. He flipped on each of the exterior viewers, reducing them to a patchwork that made Helva almost dizzy until she spotted what had alerted him.

The landing field, once unpatterned, level soil, had sprouted the most obscene-looking ground cover, greasy, slimy, a sort of pus yellow and mold green. No more than a few centimeters high. Undoubtedly it gave a smooth, even appearance to anyone above.

"Those are not my favorite colors for a solid footing, Helva," Niall said in a low ominous tone. "Let's just hover and shelter in our cloak."

"Excellent notion," she said, noticing on the port sensor near the prow of her ship that tendrils thrust up towards her, lashing in their attempt to snare the ship. She put more distance between herself and the ground. "Very interesting indeed. Malevolent vegetation."

Niall began rubbing his hands, an unholy expression on his face. "Serves the bastards right. Though let's

hope their disintegrating metabolism doesn't affect the stuff. They're mean enough to poison anything that doesn't poison them first."

"They may have met their match," she replied, willing to be convinced.

The first two Kolnari ships to land were two of the heavier, armed cruisers. They landed smack-dab in the middle of the greasy sward and instantly deployed their armored infantry units while gunners started setting up their portable projectile units. They didn't, as Helva half expected them to, take out the rickety old buildings, which were now covered with viler chartreuse green vines. Not that the Kolnari were apt to be color-conscious. Much less suspicious. Their home world was noted for its offputting appearance.

The troops marched off the landing field, kicking their metallic booted feet at now calf-high shrubs and bushes that impeded their progress, ignorant of the fact that the growths were brand-new additions on the field. They had split into four sections and each started off up one of the main tracks. Three more of the larger ships landed at one edge of the field, crowded with additional troops, who set off after the vanguard, smaller units turning off at each arterial lane. In quick succession, the yacht-sized spacecraft zoomed in, one or two making such rough landings that they plowed their noses into the ground. They were instantly covered with tendrils and twigs that shortly turned into thick branches, wrapping about the ships, tethering them to the field. Had these not been Kolnari whose prime intent was capture and enslavement of the Ravellians, Helva might have been tempted to warn those unarmed, unsuited people who swarmed out of the ships, coughing, falling to the ground, raising arms upward as if they had just been saved. From dying of asphyxia they had. But Ravel's indigenous vegetation vigorously began to engulf them... consuming their still-living forms... to judge by the frantic green-covered contortions and the screams, shrieks and tortured calls. The seeking vines penetrated the open hatches, cutting off the escape of any who saw what was happening and thought of seeking safety inside.

There was undoubtedly not even time for one of the more intelligent captains to warn off the rest of the armada, which continued to touch down wherever they could. Remaining aloft did not seem to have been an option. Every passenger was in too much of a hurry to disembark to notice what had been happening to the earlier arrivals.

"Truly a just retribution has been meted out to them," Niall muttered. "A planet fighting back!" The verdure kept moving, probing, twining, inserting itself everywhere, bursting the seams of some of the oldest and most fragile vessels. "After all the violence they have dealt out to unsuspecting and innocent populations..." His voice trailed off and he snapped off the screen displays of the chartreuse catastrophe.

Without a word, Helva lifted and started up the nearest track, actually the one that headed towards the main settlement, to see what the flora of Ravel was doing to the armored infantry units. The demise of the ground troops-none of which reached even the nearest and smallest of the cloisters-only took a little longer, though they didn't penetrate even within howling distance of any of the cloisters.

"The weeds must exude some really corrosive kind of acid. Look at the pockmarks-holes even-in some of that armor where the vine tips have lashed it," Niall said, shaking his head in amazement. "How do the girls manage that stuff if it can do that to spaceworthy body armor?"

"I do not care so long as it is as effective as it seems to be." Belatedly realizing the danger they were in, the bold Kolnari were, of course, turning their weapons on the demon flora that was smothering them. Perhaps someone on the space field had lasted long enough to send out a message. But on this field of battle the Kolnari weapons increased, rather than decreased, the foe. Blasting or flaming the vegetable matter only caused it to fragment, each part then expanding and multiplying into more attackers. Kolnari warriors in their heavy boots were being tripped up and, once down, became greeny yellow mounds of

writhing shrubbery. Their power packs would have been infiltrated by vine tips, their equipment shorted out. Safe now from Kolnari weapons, Helva uncloaked and recorded the Kolnari defeat, focusing occasionally on what happened when flora was fragmented. She stayed high enough above the carnage... or did she mean "vernage"... to avoid any contact. She thought-only briefly-of trying to acquire a leaf or twig to preserve-at maximum botanical security-for later analysis in the High Risk laboratories at Central Worlds.

"I've never seen anything like it," Niall said, shaking his head. "We do know that there are inimical planetary surfaces, but one which can be contained, tamed, and used in emergencies? One more for the files!" Then he leaned back in the chair, locking his fingers and rubbing his palms together with the great satisfaction he enjoyed at this totally unexpected Kolnari defeat. "Those lassies learned a thing or two, didn't they, about passive resistance."

"Passive wasn't what we just witnessed," Helva said drolly. "They simply let the nature of the planet take its course. Mind you, somewhere in the ethics of their Marian religiosity there must be a shibboleth about taking human lives..."

"Ha! I never considered the Kolnari as humans," was Niall's response. "Besides which, the religious have as much right to protect themselves as any other life-form."

"THEY aren't doing anything. The planet is. That's the beauty part."

"Ah, yes." And Niall's tone turned sanctimonious. "Suffer the meek for they shall inherit the earth... of Ravel, in this case. Well-done, ladies, well-done." He brought his hands together in a silent applause. "We should extend our felicities. Or you should."

"I think the outcome was not only taken for granted but has been observed," Helva said, and activated a long-range screen that showed little flocks of avians circling here and there, before darting off so quickly not even Helva could have plotted so many different course directions.

When Helva touched down again in the plaza, the Helvana and a group of about fourteen awaited her. They wore long black scarves and tight-fitting black caps.

"We come to mourn Caesar not to praise him," Niall quoted.

"Get thee hence, Marc Antony," she replied warningly.

"I'm going. I'm going. I'll not attend this wake in mournful array."

"You're already arrayed appropriately," she called after his disappearing figure, then opened her airlock and extended the ramp.

The deputation entered, making obeisance to her until all had filed into the lounge, their expression somber if respectful, though some were red-eyed with weeping. There would be some tender hearts among such a group. Why they'd spend their tears on the Kolnari, when they knew what would have been their fate, defeated Helva's understanding. But then, she was not religious. She spoke first, not wishing to be embroiled in specious gratitude for this second inadvertent "deliverance" in which she had been only a passive spectator not the rescue vehicle.

"I apologize, Helvana, for doubting your efficiency and ingenuity. The meek have indeed inherited this earth."

Helva devoutly hoped that no one else heard the scoffing snort from the passageway.

"We all deeply regret that we had to prove our invulnerability on Ravel," the Helvana said in a slow, sad tone. "We shall pray for their departed souls."

"I sincerely doubt they had any," Helva said, an acid remark that occasioned gasps of surprise from some of the younger women. "Uncharitable of me, I know, but I have seen their form of conquest at firsthand. I do not regret their destruction. Nor should any here shed any more remorseful tears or rue the incident. The Universe is now considerably safer. After all, none of you..." She paused briefly, "... did anything. Your planet is well able to take care of unwanted visitors and has done so."

There was a brief awkward pause, while the faithful dealt with the unexpected candor of their "savior." To fill in the silence, Helva went on.

"How long will it take you to repair the damage to the space field and the tracks?"

"We may not," the Helvana said after glancing at her companions. "We keep in touch with the other cloisters and there is really no need for all to assemble at the same time. Each community is self-sufficient and there is no longer any need for the space field."

"But you'll keep the walls functioning."

A little smile tugged at the Helvana's lips. "Yes." She inclined her head. "They are required to keep the flora of Ravel in its place."

"But surely those plant forms that have had such..." Helva hesitated, not wishing to upset the tenderhearted with the word "fertilizing." "... unexpected freedom will wish to retain it?"

"What needs to be restored will be. It is a long and painstaking process and we have much to occupy ourselves in the normal course of our daily routine," the Helvana said.

One of her escort pulled at her sleeve.

"Yes, of course, and our eternal gratitude to you should have been spoken of first," Helvana said kindly to the woman. "We are once again in your debt, Ship Who Sings, and once again have no way to repay your watchful guardianship."

"If I said I only happened to be in the neighborhood, would you believe me?" Helva asked gently.

There was just a hint of a sparkle in the Helvana's eyes as she caught the irony.

"Let us then hope that we have not caused you an unnecessary delay," the Helvana said.

"No, you have not," Helva replied more graciously. Perversely, she really didn't want to destroy her reputation among the cloisters. "I will not be late arriving at my destination." Since she wasn't expected at Regulus, that was no lie. More worldly remarks must be made however. "I shall apprise the Fleet that they may stand down from the alert I sent out. I shall report the demise..."

That rattled them all but the Helvana raised her hand and the startled expressions of dismay were silenced.

"Let not death be part of the message. Merely that the... emergency has been dealt with," the Helvana said with great dignity.

"So it shall be said," Helva replied solemnly, though she was in honor bound to inform the Fleet that the Kolnari were well and truly annihilated. "If I may suggest it, I would feel better if you let me have the satellite beacon replaced: the one that the... recent visitors blasted from your skies so you will not be further interrupted." Once the fate dealt the Kolnari invaders was known, no one would dare land on Ravel. "May I attend to that detail for you?"

"There is a small group of our Marian Circle on Vega III," the Helvana said. "If you would be good enough to inform them that... a replacement satellite is required, they will attend to the expense and installation. You need not be troubled with such a detail."

"It would not trouble me," Helva said. "But I will inform your sisters in religion of the need and your continued safety. No debt exists between us, wise and good Helvana. I was here when I was needed as I was at Chloe. That is enough."

"So be it," the Helvana said, bowing her head in acceptance while the others murmured the same response. Then, with firm gestures, she led the delegation to the airlock, standing to one side as each made proper obeisance to Helva's column. This took long enough so that Helva was getting fidgety. She adjusted her nutrient flow to account for the recent stress.

The Helvana hesitated after she made her deep bow.

"We shall pray for your lost partner," she said, and inclined her head in the direction of Niall's cabin. "May you be comforted in his loss by another as worthy to hold his position as Niall Parollan."

She was gone, leaving Helva so stunned that she couldn't speak.

"Pray for me, indeed!" snapped Niall's crisp voice as he strode into the main cabin.

Helva closed the airlock with a clang.

"How did she know that piece of gossip?" Niall went on, "And let's get off this planet. Gives me the creeps, all those women weeping over Kolnari. Much less me."

Somehow Helva went through the necessary routines to lift her ship-self as adroitly as possible. The plaza was clear of all save the Helvana and her delegation, backed up against the main building, forming an orderly triangle on the steps, with the Helvana at the apex. From her stern sensors, Helva saw the upturned faces as the faithful watched the sight of their Ship ascending once again into the heavens from which she had come to succor them.

"They never will believe you were 'just in the neighborhood,' you know," Niall said, but there was an odd quirk to his lips. "At least that wise one won't."

"We were," Helva replied, more involved with figuring out how the Helvana had known of Niall's death when the woman had been no farther inside the ship than the airlock and the lounge. What astonished her even more was that the Helvana's blessing did comfort her.

Once clear of the system, Helva sent out an All-Points saying that the emergency was over and that she

could report the extermination of the remnants of the Kolnari fleet; full details would be presented at Regulus on her arrival there. She did not give an estimated time, though she encountered several picket forces making all possible speed in obedience to her summons. She knew they were disappointed about losing a chance to gain fame and promotion fighting the last remnants of the Kolnari but she advised them that the Ravellians were not people interested in having quests. Ever. She could, and did, patch across the tapes she had taken of the disastrous Kolnari defeat. Obliquely she kept her word to the Helvana while still satisfying Fleet Intelligence. What she didn't realize was that her reticence only added to the glamour surrounding her living legend.

She met up with the escort five days out of the Regulus system, two squadrons no less. And with a Commodore on board the Nova Class flagship.

"Commodore Halliman reporting, ma'am, as escort for yourself and Niall Parollan," was the initial message and there was the happily grinning Commodore, in full-dress uniform, on the bridge of the battle cruiser. He glanced around, expecting to see Helva's brawn.

"I bring back the body of my scout, Niall Parollan, Commodore," she said more calmly than she expected she could. The Helvana's prayers were working?

"I hadn't known..." The Commodore was patently shocked, and she could hear a murmur run around the bridge at such news. "My condolences and apologies. You have sustained a great loss. Was he a casualty of the Kolnari action?"

"Niall Parollan died quietly in his sleep. The diagnosis was total systems failure caused by extreme age," she said. She went on before she'd be asked the time and place of death. Stasis provided no clues. "He requested the ceremonies due his rank and service, Commodore," she went on, smiling inwardly at Niall's idea of a reward for putting up with her for so many years.

"Only his just due, ma'am. We shall proceed with the arrangements immediately... if that is your wish."

"It is," she said with a gentle sigh. Actually, that program hadn't been such a bad idea at all. It had given her time to become accustomed to the fact of Niall's death. Death, Death, where is thy sting? Grave thy victory?

"Our deepest sympathies," said the Commodore, and saluted with solemn precision. Behind him she saw others come smartly to attention and salute. "The NH-834 made inestimable contributions to the Service."

"Niall was a paragon of partners," she replied. "You'll forgive me if I resume my silence." She really didn't mean to misrepresent any facet of her recent history, but there were certain details she intended to keep hidden in her head.

"Don't think that's going to get you off the hook of explaining the Kolnari defeat, my pet," Niall said. He had been propping up a wall just beyond the view of the one screen she had activated to receive the Commodore's call. "And will I have performed my part there in true heroic form?"

"What else? I'll not have you go to your grave without every bit of honor due you. And you did perform your designated role on Ravel. You stayed out of sight."

"Not entirely, evidently," Niall said with a wicked grin, wagging a finger at her.

"If you mean that Helvana woman's little surprise remark, forget that. A lucky guess, since she would have known I'd have to have had a brawn with me somewhere."

"She knew me by name."

"Maybe she can talk to the dead. And you are dead, you know. Can't you stay down?"

"Why should I? Miss my own obsequies? How can you ask that of me?" He pressed one hand against his chest in dismay.

She laughed. "I should have known you'd pull a Tom Sawyer."

He laughed, too. "Why not, since you have provided me the ability to watch? I've always wanted to hear what people thought of me."

"You won't hear any candor at your funeral. It's not good manners to speak ill of the dead, you know. Besides which, I do NOT want Psych checking my synapses for fear I've blown a few by concocting your holo program."

"No one will see me, my love, I assure you," he said.

She had intended to delete the program totally, even the petabytes that had once stored it, when she reached Regulus Base. Now she changed her mind. He had the right to see the ceremony: all of it from the slow march with his bier, the atmosphere planes doing their wing-tipping salute, the volley of rifles, the whole nine yards of changeless requiem for the honored dead. This time, she was not mourning the sudden, unnecessary death of a beloved partner: she was celebrating the long and fruitful life of a dear friend whom she would also never forget.

When the burial detail came to collect the mortal husk, the stasis in the coffin replaced that in which she had held his body intact during her long journey home. Regulus officialdom turned out in force, from the Central Worlds' current Administrative Chief with every one of his aides in formal-dress parade uniforms to the planetary Governor in her very elegant black dress and fashionable hat, to the parade of mixed armed services as well as whatever brawns were on the Base, and all the brawn trainees. The service was just long enough. A little longer and she'd have believed the fulsome eulogies about the man they mourned, who was sitting in the pilot's chair and watching the entire show with the greatest of satisfaction. She'd remember that as the best part of the whole show.

"I wouldn't have missed this for the damned Horsehead Nebula we never did get to," he exclaimed several times. As Helva was parked where her cabin could not be seen from those either on the ground or on the raised platform for the dignitaries, he could peer about, wisecracking and reminiscing as he chose.

She did, as she had done before and as it was expected of Helva, the ship who sings, let the heavens resound with the poignant strains of the service song of evening and requiem. But this time her tone was triumphant, and as her last note died away across the cemetery and all the bowed heads, she deleted Niall's holographic program.

They left her alone until she had decided she'd had enough solitude. She ought to have held off deleting Niall a few days longer, but there was a time to end things, and his funeral had been it. Then she contacted Headquarters.

"This is the XH-834 requesting a new brawn," she said, "and you'd better arrange a time for the Fleet to query me on that Ravel incident. I want it down on the records straight. I want a top priority message to the Marian Circle Cloister on Vega III that Ravel needs to have its warning satellite replaced. The Kolnari blew the old one out of space."

"New brawn?" repeated the woman who had responded to her call. Her brain had gone into neutral at being unexpectedly contacted by the XH-834.

"Yes, a new brawn." Helva then repeated her other requests. "Got them? Good. Please expedite. And, as soon as you've informed the brawn barracks of my availability, patch me over whatever missions are currently available for a brain ship with my experience."

"Yes, indeed, XH-834, yes indeed." There was a pause through which Helva heard only sharp excited words clipped off before she quite caught any of the agitated sentences. Surprise always gives you an advantage.

She laughed with pure vindictive satisfaction as the brawn barracks erupted with people hastily flinging on tunics or fixing their hair or adjusting buttons. The scene brought back fond memories as the young men and women, all determined to win this prize of prizes, raced to be first aboard her.

They had not quite reached the ramp when she suddenly became aware of a hazy object. The outlines were misty, but it was Niall Parollan, striding to her column, laying his cheek once more against the panel that covered her.

"Don't give the next one any more grief than you gave me, will you, love?" He started to turn away, his outline noticeably fading. "And if you ever use that Sorg Prosthesis with anyone else but me, I'll kill him! Got that?"

She thought she muttered something as she watched his image drift to the hull by the forward screen, not towards the airlock. Just as she heard the stampede of the brawns outside, he disappeared altogether with one last wave of a hand that seemed to flow into the metal of her ship-self.

"Permission to come aboard, ma'am?" a breathless voice asked.

The End

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