



Chapter 1

Well, not to put too fine a point on it, I still think you're full of crap."

Scott smiled to take a little of the sting out, but not that much. They'd dropped out of hyperspace a week back, were running on the new and improved gravity drives, and the old argument had been lit and burning almost since the crew left the sleep chambers. The others were working the plant or attending to ship routine and the two pilots were alone in the control module, staring into the blackness of the Big Deep. Still a few weeks out from their next port, but it was starting to look like a few years.

Tom, whose still-short dark hair had been cropped to his skull before he'd gone into the sleep chamber, was up on his soapbox again, looking kind of like a military-college freshman in free-speak alley.

Scott stroked his blond beard and waited for the reply he knew was coming. Around them, the stale ship air smelled like a gym locker.

Tom didn't miss a beat. "Sure, I'm full of crap. Me and everybody else. But I'm telling you, the bill is gonna come due sooner or later. You can't just keep raping virgin planets, stripping them of everything valuable, and leaving the hulks behind."

"I don't recall that I stuck my dick into the dirt anywhere lately," Scott said.

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't. The Lector, in case you fell asleep during the orientation session, is a tug. We're towing a half-full barge with about fifteen million tons of rendered fish and animal products and the processor that did it to collect more meat on the hoof from the poor suckers on Ryushi, a bunch of shit-kicker cowboys-no, not even cows, they're rhynt boys living on a middle-of-nowhere planet."

"Scott-"

"And," he continued, ignoring Tom, "and the barge, this ship, the cowboys, and you and me are all owned body and soul by the Corp. Talk to old man Chigusa with your raping-the-environment complaints."

"Jesus, you are so damned close-minded-whoa!"

Scott waved his hands over the controls, trying to get a fix on the blip. Here in the middle of the Big Deep, where there was nothing but their vessel and occasional hydrogen atoms to bounce off it, something had just shot past them so fast it wasn't even a blur. And gaining speed like a bitch, too. Okay, yeah, it was a couple hundred clicks away, but out here, that was almost a sideswipe.

"Goddamned cheap fucking doppler!" Tom said, trying to get the computer to adjust its scan. "What the hell was that? A ship?"

"Not hardly. That acceleration would probably turn people into seat pancakes. Nova debris, maybe, old rock spat out by a real big planet-buster blast."

"Yeah? Maybe it's God on His way to the Final Reckoning. Better scrub your conscience clean, Scotty."

"I'm just a grunt, pal, don't blame me for the way the universe gets run."

"Fucking spectrograph missed it altogether." He slammed the heel of his hand against the console. Nobody wasted any money on these ships for such things as decent hardware.

"Like we were going to chase and catch it even if it was solid platinum, right?" Scott smiled. "It's not our job, buddy. One more rock in the dark, who cares?"

Seated in front of the sensor array on Ne'dteseï, Yeyinde watched the alien ship dwindle in their wake. He was Leader; his very name meant "brave one" but he knew the warriors called him "Dachande" when they thought his ears too dull to hear them. That name meant "different knife," and it referred to his left lower tusk, broken in a bare-handed fight against the Hard Meat, the kainde amedha, they of the black armored exoskeletons and acid blood. He smiled inwardly at the name. It could be considered an insult, but he was proud of it. The Hard Meat, save for the queens, were no smarter than dogs, but they were fierce and deadly game. Good prey upon which to train the young warriors. He could have had the tusk capped and reground, but he had left the broken fang a dull stump to remind himself-and any warriors who felt brave or particularly stupid-that only one yautja of all had ever faced the Hard Meat unarmed and walked away. As befitted a true warrior, Dachande himself never spoke of the battle, but let others tell the tale, holding a serious mandible at the embellishments they added in the singing of it. He was Leader of the Ne'dteseï, son and grandson of ship leaders and warrior trainers, and he bowed to no one in his skill with blade or burner. He had taken hundreds of young males out to learn the Hunt and had lost but a dozen, most of whom would still be among the living had they obeyed his orders.

But he sighed at the ship now so far behind him as to be invisible to even the sensors' keen eyes. Oomans flew in that vessel. He knew of them, the oomans, though he himself had never Hunted them. They were tool folk, had weapons equal to those of the yautja, and were, if the stories could be believed, the ultimate pyode amedha. Soft Meat. But with deadly stingers, the oomans. A true test of skill. What were they doing out here? Where were they bound? A pity he was locked into this Hunt, responsible for a score of itchy would-be warriors full of themselves and ready to show off their prowess.

Well. Someday he would Hunt them, the oomans.

For now, he had a ship to fly, Hunts to prepare.

He switched to the electronic eyes that watched the Hard Meat queen in the nest they had made for her deep in the belly of the ship.

The image blossomed on the plate in front of him.

Tall she was, the queen, twice his own height, massive even in the reduced gen-pull of the ship, probably four times his weight. Black as a nest cleaner's hands, gleaming dully under the lights, the queen looked like a giant zabin bug, with the addition of a long segmented tail and smaller supplemental arms jutting from her torso. Her comb rose high like antlers, flat and flaring, and she had two sets of needle-toothed jaws, one nesting inside the other and able to extrude a span from her mouth to grab like pincers. Freed, she would be a formidable opponent, fast, powerful, intelligent. But she was not free, the queen. She was bound in bands of dlex, wound in restraints that could resist the sharpest blades, the hottest fires, the strongest acids. Bound and made into nothing more than an egg-laying captive, subject to the will of the ship's Leader. A conveyer ran beneath her massive ovipositor, catching the precious eggs and carrying them to the packing compartment. There, they were fed into the robot crawler in the sucker ships connected to the Ne'dteseï like leeches on either side. Inside the suckers the robots-treaded machines designed for one purpose-prepared themselves to transport and place the eggs on fertile

ground. Like a mechanical mother, the robots would leave the eggs where they could open and the crab like first stage Hard Meat could find game to infect with the next stage. Those embryos would eventually chew their way free of the hapless host to become drones, the final stage for most of the Hard Meat. Prey, to the warriors he had brought to learn the rules of the Hunt. Stupid but deadly, the Hard Meat would teach the main lesson the young ones needed to know: move well or die. There was no room for error in the Hunt.

Dachande looked at the fettered queen, the fleshy eggs she laid. His own trophy wall on the homeworld held half a dozen of the Hard Meat skulls, bleached and clean, including the one he had killed with his bare hands, as well as a queen, taken during a hellish hunt in which nine already-Blooded warriors had died. He had killed fifty others, but had kept, as was proper, only those he had thought worthy of his wall. They were fierce, but usually no challenge to one such as himself. If he had occasion to face one on these Hunts, he would limit himself to spear or wrist knife. After all, any yautja could burn the Hard Meat; a Leader had to handicap himself. The females smiled upon a brave male more often than they did others; Dachande had never lacked for female attention before, nor did he intend to begin now. He had sired seventy-three suckers over the years since first he had become a Blooded warrior and he was planning on reaching eighty by the end of the next breeding season. A yautja did what a yautja had to do to bolster his line and when his Final Hunt took place, he intended to leave behind a legion of younglings.

He grinned. Any Hunt could be the Final Hunt, that was the Path, but he did not think this would be the one. This was routine; he had led a score of missions such as this one, and he could do it blindfolded, with dull blades and a dead burner in his sleep. An easy run, gkei'moun simple.

He switched off the eyes watching the queen. He should go and release some of the pressure that had built up among the young males. A couple of them in particular were showing signs of preparing to do something stupid, such as challenging a Blooded warrior or even the Leader himself. Young males were not a whole lot brighter than the Hard Meat, Dachande sometimes thought. He could still recall his pre-warrior days when he had known everything, was the bravest yautja ever born and ready to prove it at the slightest provocation. Ah, the days of his invincible youth. Surely there could have been no male who had swaggered more, thought more highly of himself, acted as if he were the linchpin around which the galaxy would someday turn. A creature of destiny, he had thought, different from the other obnoxious would-be heroes who strutted and stood ready to be offended at the hint of disrespect.

He recalled an instance when a younger male had glanced at him with what he thought an inappropriate demeanor, had allowed his gaze to linger a quarter second longer than the galaxy's would-be linchpin had deemed respectful. How he had puffed up like a poison-toad and stepped forward to issue a claw challenge, and that only because death challenges were forbidden to the un-Blooded. How when crossing the empty space between himself and the insolent pup who had offended him, he had been knocked sprawling by a female going about her business. By the time he had recovered, the disrespectful one had gone and the female, if she had even noticed, had also continued on her way.

He grinned, tusks going wide. Such a long time ago that had been, before most of the current class of pups had been sap in their fathers' rods. They would learn, just as he had learned. They were not the gods' gift to the universe. He would see to it. Or he would see them dead. Either way was the Path.

Chapter 2

Dachande walked, slowly down the dim corridor toward the kehrite, the room where the training

yautja learned blade and simple unarmed combat. Many Leaders focused on the importance of shiftsuit mechanics and burners in the teaching of the Hunt, but not he; from long experience Dachande knew that sometimes there was nothing to rely on outside of one's own prowess. To teach anything else would be to risk the death of future warriors, and a good Leader had many students still Hunting.

The measure of a teacher was the life span of those he taught. The longer they lived, the better the instructor.

Dachande inhaled deeply as he neared the kehrite. The musk of aggression was strong in the air, an oily, bitter smell that promised confrontation, but he did not hurry. Being the eldest Blooded on a Hunt had its privileges; no fight would begin without the Leader to witness it.

The winding passageway narrowed to an arched entry in front of Dachande, the walls lined with Hard Meat armor. Already he could hear the clatter of taloned feet and the mumblings of expectation. He stepped through the arch and waited for acknowledgment. Quickly, he located the few students he had picked to cause trouble early on and marked them; Mahnde, the short one; Ghardeh, with the long tress; and Tichinde, who talked louder than any other. Of the three, Ghardeh would be the least trouble; he was but a follower. But the other two . . .

Within a short span, all yautja had turned their attention to him. There were fourteen in all who wore the plain dlex headband of student, plus two Blooded warriors who helped supervise; these two, Skemte and Warkha, were also the navigator and flyer. The ship was fully automated, a single trained yautja could handle it-but it did not hurt to take precautions. Both warriors carried Dachande's signature mark upon their foreheads like a third eye, the etch of Hard Meat blood from their first kill, and they watched him carefully for direction; each sought their own Leadership; both were wise enough to know such achievement would not be through Challenge against him.

One by one, all heads bowed to him. Dachande nodded curtly, never taking his sharp yellow gaze from the group, Tichinde in particular. What he saw did not surprise him. Tichinde had lowered his head but kept his own gaze on Dachande. When he saw that his Leader watched in return, he flared his lower mandibles and raised his head to face him-a sure sign of aggression. It was insolent, but forgivable, were his Leader a patient one; had Tichinde begun the low growl of confrontation, it would not be so easy to allow him to remain unmolested. As it stood, this was a prime opportunity to let the cooped-up young males practice.

"Tichinde!" Dachande made his voice angrier than he was. The yautja surrounding the arrogant youth stepped away from him, tusks opened wide.

"You may show your `skills,'" Dachande continued, his voice threaded with sarcasm, "by a jehdin/jehdin spar with . . . Mahnde. First fall determines the winner."

There were rumblings of disappointment as the young males moved from the match area to line the scarred kehrite walls; with no weapons to be used, both combatants would probably still be alive after the match. Still, the energy was high. Several yautja had seen the look between Tichinde and the Leader, and all could see the disrespectful face of the student now. What would the Leader do about this? How would he respond? Was he weak enough to allow a Challenge to pass, even one so veiled?

Dachande paused until all were in place before giving the command.

"Begin,"

As one, the yautja began to howl and chant as the two young males circled. Dachande watched carefully as Mahnde lunged forward for the first blow, arms raised.

Tichinde blocked easily and countered with a jab to the throat.

Mahnde moved aside, not fast enough to avoid the shot completely. A chorus of guttural hisses filled the room as he stumbled and pulled back. A clumsy response. No one was impressed.

Tichinde shrieked and ran at Mahnde, talons extended for a stab to the abdomen.

The defender, already off-balance, blocked too high. Tichinde hit full on and knocked Mahnde to the padded floor. The victorious youth threw back his head and screamed in triumph. The kehrite pounded with the cries of the agitated students. The match was over.

Too soon. Blood was still too warm; none would be satisfied with such a quick bout.

Dachande looked for a challenger amidst the yowls and clicks of the clamoring spectators, displeased with Mahnde's performance. Perhaps Chulonte, he showed promise . . .

A score of new sounds filled the room as the yautja began to scream in surprise and renewed excitement. Dachande's gaze flickered back to the match area, and he watched in amazement as Tichinde kicked his fallen opponent in the head.

"Ki'cte!" Dachande had to shriek to be heard. "Enough!"

Tichinde kicked again. Mahnde rolled over, tried to cover his face and grab at Tichinde's foot at the same time. The yautja were going wild. Blood was molten; spittle flew as they shook their heads in excitement.

"Tichinde!" Rarely had Dachande seen such disobedience. He stalked onto the match floor and shouted again.

Tichinde turned to face the Leader. He snarled. The young male extended one hand and shoved at Dachande's left shoulder.

Dachande avoided the push automatically.

The clawed hand fell short.

The watching yautja suddenly fell silent, only a few dying clicks and cries of wonder. Tichinde's movement was unmistakable, and since Dachande had attained Leadership, a move that he had not seen. The sign of direct challenge.

Dachande sighed to himself silently. What an idiot this one was. How had he survived this long?

The baked dirt that covered the valley floor appeared nearly lifeless under the searing heat of the dual suns. What vegetation there was appeared stunted, twisted, cooked. The twin stars were hardly an exact match; the secondaries shadows were barely visible, a frail blur next to the deeper charcoal hues cast by the primary. The towering plateaus of dirty tan rock-there had once been water here to cut them so, ran in corridors throughout the basin and offered no comfort unless you crawled among the stones-which no sane human would want to do for all of the venomous forms of hidden life there. Besides the stinging flies

and poisonous snakes, there was a particularly lethal form of scorpion that nested amidst the boulders during Ryushi's nineteen hour day. Even after sundown, the heat rarely fell below body temperature, and without the relief of the cool breezes that sometimes came with desert climate after dark. The air was always bone-dry and the feverish winds that occasionally blew were sharp and unpleasant, the crack of a hot whip. Maybe it was somebody's idea of paradise

But not mine.

Machiko Noguchi ran a delicate hand through her short black hair and punched the scan button. The portable eye panned across the barren wasteland, showing her more of the same. It was identical to almost everywhere else on Ryushi. Besides the few artificial watering holes and the settlement itself, the whole planet looked like a desert prospector's version of hell-rocks, dirt and heat, and no precious metals hidden there, either.

Noguchi sighed and tapped a few keys. As the small screen faded to black, she leaned back in her form-chair and closed her eyes. She took a deep breath and growled softly through clenched teeth. When the opportunity had presented itself, she had not hesitated. Only twenty-nine years old and already offered an overseer's post for the Chigusa Corporation. Prosperity Wells, at the far edge of the Beta Cygni system, very quiet; "Sounds exhilarating," she'd said.

Right. Only her six months of phase-in was almost up and she was so sick of this rock she could vomit. A necessary career move, she kept telling herself.

Well, at least there's air-conditioning . . .

Noguchi stretched her arms over her head and arched her back. Her lunch break was almost over, time to get back to the office. She usually ate with Hiroki, but he'd had a meeting with a few of the ranchers and she had decided to slip back to her apartment and go over a stat report for the company. Might as well let him keep the reins for the last few weeks of his stay. Besides, only in her private chamber did she feel free to relax; to let her feelings show anywhere else was-it was not an option. There was too much at stake for her to be anything but completely professional.

She glanced at the holo-mirror by her door on the way out and nodded at what she saw-cool, composed, detached. Attractive in a typical Japanese way, although that was not important to her. She looked. . . authoritative. The ranchers didn't seem to like her very much, but they would respect her-her honor would accept nothing less.

Dachande felt his anger flare and then, almost regretfully, he let it pass. Half a lifetime ago, such a display of brash audacity would have meant a quick death for the young male; the yautja who would dare to challenge him? Certain thei-de. And grinning all the while he delivered it, too.

But he was Leader now. Not a kind Leader, but a just one. There were others who would kill for such an offense-but these days, he would teach. There was no point in a match you knew you would win. Doubt was necessary or it was but an exercise.

All of this flitted through his mind in less than a second.

Tichinde pushed at him again.

Again Dachande slipped the move unthinkingly. He saw the surprise on the young one's face. And perhaps, too late, a touch of realization that he had made an error. A very bad error.

The juvenile yautja gave up their stunned hush at this new transgression and roared for blood. It did not matter whose.

Dachande reflected no longer. He grabbed Tichinde's hands and held them high with his own.

Tichinde screamed into his face, the shrill sound blended with the cries of the spectators.

Dachande did not pause.

The Leader jerked his head forward. Their skulls met with a dull crack that sent a peal of renewed clatterings and hisses through the assemblage.

Tichinde pulled his hands loose and staggered back, arms still held high, but dazed.

They circled.

A tiny trickle of pale blood ran down Tichinde's face from beneath his dlex band. Without taking his gaze from Dachande, the student reached up and touched the flow, rubbed it between his fingers for confirmation; he did not seem to like the feel.

Too bad.

Tichinde spread his arms wide, back hunched, and screamed. The sounds were garbled with fury, but the inflections unmistakable Nan-deThan-gaun. The Kiss of Midnight.

Tichinde's intentions were crystal: he would kill his Leader, if he could.

Enough was enough. Dachande locked his fingers together and leapt. He landed beside the impudent yautja and brought his double-fist down, hard, into the small of the still screaming Tichinde's back. Tichinde fell to the floor. His lower jaw smacked the mat quite audibly.

Dachande jumped back quickly as Tichinde slowly regained his feet. Aware of his audience, the Leader moved with all the grace and skill he could muster. The motion was nearly perfect and any of the watchers who could recall even a bit of training would be impressed by the flow of it. Which was the point.

New blood oozed from the young male's lower mandibles. The watching students sang out calls of victory for their Leader as Tichinde turned to face Dachande. The cries of derision from his peers were perhaps what spurred the young male into action. With a strangled hiss, the bleeding yautja ran at Dachande, fists extended.

Give him credit for spirit. Credit for brains, no. For skill, hardly. But he was no coward.

Still, it was poor form. Dachande fell to his knees before Tichinde reached him and grasped the student's over-stretched upper body with one hand, his nearer leg with the other. Suppressing a grunt, he strove to make the move appear effortless.

As if the youth weighed no more than a suckling, Dachande stood and thrust Tichinde high over his head.

The howling yautja tried to escape and regain the floor, but his writhings were to no avail. Dachande held the young male high, let out a growl of conquest-then threw Tichinde across the room.

The mob of howling young males split, narrowly avoided the flung body before it smacked into the wall. They chanted triumph for Dachande, harsh sounds of vain-desintje-de; pure win.

Dachande made no chant himself and none was needed. The fallen Tichinde spoke for him.

For a short time, nobody moved.

Finally, Tichinde staggered upright and walked slowly toward his Leader, head bowed. The outcome was obvious, and a further display of aggression would be dishonorable, not to mention stupid. Tichinde stopped in front of him and raised only his eyes to see what Dachande would decide; in such a Challenge, death was not an unreasonable punishment.

Dachande pretended to consider his options as the chants fell to a breath-held stillness and over-stretched tension. There was really no question for him; a good Leader did not have to kill one of his own to prove anything-and to embarrass the young male would tell later in Tichinde's Hunts. He waited because all eyes watched and the hesitation was penalty enough.

After a few breaths-time Dachande tilted his head to one side and spoke. "Payas leitjin-de. " He paused. "Hma'mi-de. "

Tichinde hung his head lower and stepped back, his relief visible. Several young males came forward to touch Tichinde's hair in appreciation of the Leader's compliment. The precise tip of Dachande's head combined with the words indicated both acknowledgment of the student's submission and a respect for his bravery-"Remember God's practice." Tichinde was allowed his life and his name, but with the ritual warning a slap to his embarrassed face. Still, there was no real shame in losing to one who had faced the Hard Meat with nothing but talons and blade.

Dachande almost allowed himself a grin, but did not want to lighten the effect of his pronouncement; he raised his hand and gestured for the students to fall in line for training. Tichinde knew who was Leader, and would not forget it. And if another yautja strayed from obedience . . . ?

After this, it would not likely happen. If it did, there would be more than one "dachande" on ship. His honor would accept nothing less.

Chapter 3

They were still in space, but it wasn't nearly so deep now. The ship's drone had mellowed as the gravity drives slowed them to intersystem speeds.

"Eleven days, buddy boy, and then no more of your dick in my ear for what, seventy-two hours?"

Tom grinned and shook his head. "You wish."

Scott raised his coffee cup in a mock toast. "Here's to pretty girls and sunny days, Tommy." He sipped the watery liquid and grimaced. "Nothing like a nice mug of shit to put a shine on the morning, hey?"

"It's . . ." Tom glanced at his terminal. "Four in the afternoon, you pig. Happy hour."

"Right," said Scott. "Whatever."

They sat in silence for a few moments. Tom worked studiously at one of his crosswords, tapping in words and erasing them at the same rate. Scott gazed into the darkness and tried to remember the words of a poem he used to know. He could probably just look it up in the ship's library, same as Tom and his puzzle, but learning how to kill time was a good trick in their line of work. Nothing to do and plenty of hours to do it.

'Twas brillig and the slithy toves, did gyre and-something-something wabe-all mimsy were the borogoves and the something-bath outgrabe-

"Six-letter word for `saint'?"

Scott thought for a second and then smiled. "Thomas."

"Funny. Like not wanting to fuck over all things great and small makes me some kinda prince. I mean, really-" Tom paused. "Hey, that's it. Prince. You're good for something after all, you pagan asshole."

"You still pissed about last night?" Scott shook his head. It seemed that this debate would never die-but eleven days was eleven days. "Like I said, survival of the fittest. The fact remains that if the human race needs to do something to survive-and the lower orders don't have the power to stop us, we'll prevail. It's not right or wrong, it's just the way things are."

Tom looked up from the monitor, jaw set. "So it's all right to do whatever we want, exploit any ecosystem, as long as we don't run into anything big enough to kick our butts-that's basically it, right?"

"Couldn't have put it better myself."

"That's opportunistic rationalization, Scott. Where's your sense of social responsibility? Didn't your mama raise you right?"

"I was a tube child, thank you very much."

"That must be it." Tom hit the store button on his keyboard and stood. "Now, if you'll excuse me a moment, I have this sudden overwhelming urge to take a dump."

Scott chuckled. "I'm not even gonna touch that one."

Tom slapped him on the shoulder and exited the control module. Tom was all right, he didn't take himself too seriously at least. Scott had been paired up with worse. He felt his grin slowly melt as he turned his gaze back to the deep. Killing time, that was all.

Beware the jabberwock, my son, the jaws that bite the claws that catch-beware the jub jub bird and shun the frumious bandersnatch.

Yeah, that was it. What, he wondered, did it mean? And why was he thinking about it now?

Hiroki's face remained expressionless as Noguchi lit a cigarette at her desk and exhaled a haze of gray smoke. She knew he disapproved, but she also knew that it was not appropriate for him to speak of it; it was, after all, her office now. It was not even a habit, that she was particularly attached to

But wouldn't your father be displeased, Machiko?

Noguchi inhaled deeply.

Hiroki uncrossed his legs on the couch and smoothed his small mustache carefully with one finger. "As I was saying, Ackland expressed some concerns with the agreement. He says that he has the support of the other ranchers, or at least Harrison and Marianetti."

"Well, that's three of the big four," Noguchi began. "Perhaps we should contact the company-"

A small green light flashed from the control panel set into her desk, accompanied by a low tone.

"Excuse me, Hiroki."

"Of course." He picked up a sheaf of hard copy and settled back into a plush cushion.

Noguchi punched up visual and hit receive.

"Mr. Shimura, we have an unidentified incoming at-oh, Ms. Noguchi."

Noguchi smiled slightly at the young man's visible discomfort and waited. He was one of the scan watchers, a low-level company worker.

"I, uh, I have a message for Mr. Shimura. Is he there?"

Noguchi frowned. "Yes, he's here. But you can give me the message, Mason." She glanced at Hiroki, who made a point of being deeply engrossed in the rhyth count report he was reading.

Mason swallowed. "Uh, yes, ma'am. Long range is showing a UFO. It's probably just a meteor, but it's not breaking up, it is going to hit-if it stays on its present course, it'll make planetfall about thirty klicks north of here-open pasture. Make a boom when it lands."

"Any damage likely?"

"No, it's not that big."

"Then don't worry about it." Noguchi stubbed her cigarette out into the pewter tray on the desk. "We can investigate after the roundup. Noguchi out."

The screen went blank. She took a deep breath and then looked at Hiroki. He had set down the file and was watching her, face impassive as usual. At least there was no sympathy. She opened her mouth, uncertain as to what she was going to say; their relationship had progressed to a first-name basis, but that didn't make them friends.

"I-" She forced herself not to look away. "I've been here nearly six months, Hiroki--and still they report to you. The ranchers, even the staff treat me like a stranger. I have done all I can think of to make this job mine"

Noguchi fell silent and waited. Hiroki watched her for a few seconds and then stood and faced her, hands clasped behind his back.

"Maybe that is your problem, Machiko. You're trying to adapt the job to you, rather than adapting yourself to it. You can't run an operation like this and hide from it at the same time, no matter how nice the office."

Noguchi nodded slightly, thoughtful. This sounded like something he had been waiting to say until asked, which made her wonder how long he had been holding his tongue. Still, she needed an informed opinion. The ranchers respected Shimura--no, even further, they trusted him. She had not thought to find out how he had achieved their loyalty.

"There are only one hundred and thirteen civilians on Ryushi," he continued, "and besides the thirty or so company staff, we are dealing with freelancers here--not men and women who jump when the voice of the corporation speaks. They are not drones looking for advancement; they are people with children and homes. Quoting regulations will not get you very far."

Noguchi felt a flash of anger, but she fought to keep it under control. "What would you suggest, Hiroki? That I bake cookies and invite them on picnics?"

"I suggest that when you ask for an opinion, you should consider the advice you receive." Hiroki picked up his sun helmet from the synth-marble coffee table and walked to the door. He paused with his hand on the entry controls and looked back at her.

"Look, I'll be around for another two weeks, and then you're on your own. I will do what I can to help in the meantime." He smiled a little. "I think you will do fine, Machiko."

She stood and nodded at him. "Thank you for your . . . assistance, Hiroki."

"It is nothing. Get out of the office once in a while, get your hands dirty." He opened the door and then grinned easily. "Get some rhythn shit between your toes."

Noguchi sat back down and rested her hands lightly on the black-lacquered surface of her desk. Hiroki's words had stung a bit, but perhaps because there was some truth there; it deserved consideration. Hiroki was, after all, being promoted off of Ryushi. The ones who went up the ladder were generally not those that kept a low profile, as she had been doing.

Perhaps it's time to make some of my own moves . . . Noguchi took another cigarette from the small silver case in her desk drawer and rolled it thoughtfully between her thumb and forefinger. What was the saying?

The journey of a thousand kilometers begins with one step . . .

At first there was only the vision of dark, cracked matter all around, seen through a thick cloud of oily smoke. The electronic eye scanned the pit and then looked up. With a sudden lurch, the tou-dte kalei moved forward, using its segmented pincers to pull itself out of the crater.

It was a large, armored mechanism, the tou-dte kalei, designed to withstand almost any type of environment so far encountered; it was actually modeled after a kind of predator discovered on Than, a world of dense metals and poisonous weather. Something like the Hard Meat, but more efficiently built--it could climb, walk, run, or dive into liquid. And while the robot crawler did not Hunt as the real creature could, it served a purpose that was more important than simple survival; it was the bearer of life.

Dachande switched to the rear gkinmara, another of the rounded eyes that transmitted sensory information. "Lou-dte kalei" was a joke, really, a derogatory term that was sometimes used for a female-literally, "child-maker." Not that Dachande had ever heard the name spoken to a female's face. A warrior who would dare such would not be wise, for an insulted and angry yautja female was not something even a not-too-wise male wanted to create. Assuming the warrior was armed and expert, it might almost be an even match, but Dachande would put his wager on the female. His most recent partner had tossed him across a room during the heat of their mating and that had been an accident.

Mating. Ah, now there was a pleasant thought.

As if in accordance with Dachande's thoughts, the heavy dlex ramp in the tail of the crawler lowered and the machine began its function. An egg, the beginning of the Hunt, made its way gently down the plated ramp to be deposited on the dusty ground.

The crawler moved slowly forward to lay another.

Dachande rolled the control bar on the table in his private chamber. The front view appeared again in the oval monitor's screen; the crawler went toward a high mountain of some unknown material, perhaps the cliff was of tjau'ke or compressed dust. This world was a warm place, but not as humid as some. Twin suns and no freestanding liquid in sensory range. The read on the crawler showed that there were still dozens of eggs to be set; the red lines and smudges of the counter changed with each placement. Each egg was coded and tuned to a reader that would maintain the connection even after the egg hatched and became Hard Meat. They would not leave the Hunt until all the prey had been taken. To leave even a single one behind was criminal.

Dachande had not visited this place before, although the records showed that there had been Hunts here, many seasons earlier. It was listed as wide and spacious, with no antagonists and many hiding places; large, four legged creatures dwelled there naturally, ideal hosts-perfect for training. They would go in fast and dark, that was standard, but there could hardly be anything on the planet to cause them problems. It was but another dry world with little to offer save a place to Hunt. The galaxy was full of such places.

A small tarei'hsan ran in front of the egg-layer, dark in color and spined like an insect of some sort. Its tail curved over its body and ended in a point, and its arms were much like the arms of the lou-dte kalei. The crawler rolled over it, the treads crushing the tiny bug into the mottled ground. Dachande shook his head. Better it should die thus, for stupidity did not further any race and running under tank treads was not high up the scale of cleverness.

He watched as the counter ran slowly backward. They were close to this place, this dust world, but there was still plenty of time for the Hard Meat children to find hosts. The tagged babes should be drones by the ship's arrival, but there was not so much slack that they would have time to colonize. Timing was all.

Dachande smiled. Part of being a Leader was not to seem excited by the prospect of a training Hunt, but in the privacy of his chamber, he allowed himself to feel the warmth of things to come. And somehow, this one felt different-there was an air of . . . something.

He switched the monitor off and stroked his broken tusk absently. He was too old to muddle himself with cosmic questions, but he knew the words of his ancestors: Thin-de le'hsaun `aloun'myin-de/bpi-de gka-de hsou-depayaya--Learn the gift of all sights or finish in the dance of fallen gods.

Dachande cackled and stood up. Philosophy was not his bent. He was a warrior. Let the old ones worry about such things. He was a doer, not a thinker. It was better that way. Almost always.

Chapter 4

Machiko Noguchi couldn't find the green crayon. There was the jade one and the blue-green, but the emerald-green was missing, and it was the only color that would work for the dragon's eyes.

She sighed and carefully dumped out the crayon pack. Things had been going so well until now, it wasn't fair. It was her day off from school and she had received permission to play quietly in her room for two whole hours before dinnertime. The picture of the dragon was going to be a gift for her father; she knew that he had been talking about a promotion for a long time, and that today he had an important meeting with his supervisor.

And the green was misplaced. Her parents had taught her to put things in their place because order was a very important rule; knowing where things were was a crucial ingredient to a successful life. She felt vaguely anxious as she sorted through the different shades-what if it wasn't there? What then?

Machiko spotted the crayon and nodded to herself. She had put it in with the blues by mistake, that was all. It was understandable; she would just have to be more careful...

She heard the front door open and close downstairs as she meticulously shaded in the dragon's eyes-emerald with gold rims. A cool spring breeze wafted in through her open window with the sounds of small children playing down the street. A good day. And it was going to be a beautiful picture, a long-tailed, proud dragon with green and lavender scales and red taloned feet-

Machiko frowned and looked up. Her mother had not called out to her. Mother had gone to the store to buy things for a special dinner, her father's favorite dishes. But Mother always called to her when she returned from an errand. Perhaps she had gone back outside to carry in more things . . .

Machiko stood and walked to the door of her tidy room where she paused and listened. Maybe she had not heard her mother come in after all; the house was very still. She was about to go back to her picture when she heard a noise.

"Mother?" Nothing.

It had been like a heavy sigh, that noise. From down the hall-her father's study or perhaps her parents' room. Machiko was suddenly not sure if it was a good day at all. The silent house was not peaceful anymore, it was-empty.

Bad.

She walked very slowly down the hallway, staying close to one wall. Her feet seemed like lead; with each step, her fear increased. Her mother would have surely answered, wouldn't she? Who was in their house? Should she leave?

Yes. Machiko decided that it would be good to wait outside for her mother to return. She would say that she had heard a noise and her mother would know what to do.

Except the front door . . .

Was past the study. Past her parents' room.

Machiko felt her legs trembling. The back of her neck was damp and sticky, and her stomach felt as if it were made of stone. She took another tentative step and hesitated. And she heard another noise.

All at once, Machiko relaxed. It was her father! That was the sound of his chair creaking back, as familiar a sound as his voice or the clatter of his key cards. She straightened up and started toward his door, smiling in relief. He had come home early, that was all.

"Father," she began, and reached out to knock. "I thought-"

Her words faltered as the door to his study swung inward. She had time to register surprise that he had left it unlatched before she saw him. Before she saw the knife.

And the blood.

Machiko screamed and ran to her father's side, where she pleaded and cried for him to get up, to speak, to stop pretending. She pulled at him for a long time. When he finally fell to the floor, she was drenched in his blood. He opened his eyes and sat up, smiling gently at her, arms spread.

"This is for you, Machiko," he said, and embraced her. Except that now his arms were claws and his head was a dragon's. His forked tongue flickered out as his gold-rimmed eyes began to bleed emerald tears. He pulled back to look at her as she began to wail in terror.

"You are my child," the words rasped from his dragon-face. "Redeem me . . ."

Noguchi sat up quickly, her breath coming in short gasps. She almost screamed before she realized where she was.

"Lights," she called out shakily. Her room glowed gently to life. Noguchi hugged her knees to her chest and tried to breathe deeply. Always the same dream, except she had not had it for a long time.

She had been covered in her father's blood when her mother had found her. There had been no note, only the Death Poem that her mother would not let her read until years later, but the reason had come to light that same night: the esteemed Akira Noguchi, an accountant for the Yashido Company, had been fired for embezzlement. The same man who had scolded her when she had lied about stealing a piece of candy at the age of five, the man who had taught her the value of order. The father who had taught her honor . . .

"Bastard," she murmured, angry. Except her voice didn't sound angry at all. The memories came back so easily when she let them, and now she was helpless to stop them. She had ripped up the dragon picture after the funeral; it had never been finished. The stain on their family's name had eventually faded, and when she was in college, her mother had remarried. She had met her stepfather once. He had seemed like a pleasant man, but she never got past the feeling that her mother had married him so that she would no longer be a Noguchi.

She and her mother spoke occasionally, but any closeness they had once shared was gone. Keiko Noguchi Ueda had never understood how her daughter had really felt. When she had called her mother with the news of her move to Ryushi, her mother had been so proud. "Your father would have been pleased," she had said. Her father.

Noguchi took in a deep breath and closed her eyes. None of that mattered anymore, she did not need to think of it. She was a corporate overseer for a major corporation on a planet far from Earth, and she was good at her job. She would become better in time; she would earn the ranchers' trust and would carry out her position with-with "Honor," she whispered. And try as she might, she could not hold back the single tear that coursed down her cheek.

The Lector had made it to Ryushi a little before local nightfall. Scott knew there would be some hard workdays ahead for the ranchers and The Lector crew, but as pilot, he had minimal responsibilities for a few days. About damned time for a break.

He and Tom stepped off the ramp and into the deepening twilight of the desert world. They were at the edge of a small, dingy town that smelled like manure, straight out of an old Western vid. There was no one to greet them. In fact, the place looked uninhabited.

Scott grinned. "Looks like somebody forgot to organize the parade," he said. He turned to look at Tom-and Tom wasn't there.

Scott spun and looked around. The Lector, too, was gone. Behind him lay only a vast, dusty plain, with mountains far in the distance.

"Tom!" he shouted. No reply.

Scott turned to look at the deserted town. It was almost full dark now, but there were no lights in any of the empty windows. There were only a few faded, almost nondescript buildings, their doors latched against the hot, sandy winds that blew mournfully through the lonely settlement.

Scott cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted.

"Hello! Is anyone here?"

Nothing. In spite of the weather, Scott was suddenly cold. He took a few steps toward the nearest structure and then stopped.

A high, piercing cry came from inside the building. It had the same shrill tone of an animal in pain-except it was angry. The keening wail rose to a fevered pitch, the sound of insanity and hatred. There was nothing human about it.

Scott stumbled backward and fell. He scrambled at the ground, tried desperately to pull himself back to his feet, but he couldn't seem to manage it. He tried to crawl away from the horrible sound but it filled his ears and surrounded him. From behind, he heard the door swing open and the shriek of the creature got impossibly louder.

There was no escape. Scott began to scream. He screamed because he knew what it was, the thing, and he knew that to look at it meant death.

-the Jabberwocky-!

Scott woke up in a cold sweat in a dark room on The Lector, still over a week out from Ryushi. He did not get back to sleep that night.

Under the pouring rain, Yeyinde aimed at the Hard Meat drone with his burner and depressed the control. The running bug howled and fell back in a gout of thwei, limbs clattering.

Behind him the Leader shouted commands to the other students as the hot, harsh liquid splashed down from the sky, obscuring suit vision.

Another drone ran toward him and Yeyinde fired again, excited and anxious all at once. He felt fear clench his bowels briefly, but the cold twist was quickly overridden by heat. The beast in him snarled and grew proud: Two! His first Hunt and there were two in his name!

The threat seemed to fall away as the bugs stopped, their assault. Yeyinde spun around, looked for more to kill. Between the burning rain and the hanging trees of the dto, it was hard to see.

The Leader, `A'ni-de, called out. The Hunt was completed. The yautja cheered and hissed their triumph, Yeyinde's voice among them. He looked through the dancing young warriors for Nei'hman-de, whose blood he shared by the same father. Nei'hman-de was a strong yautja and fast fighter, but he surely did not kill two. Nei'hma-de and he had grown together, play. Hunting as growing suckers-and now they would share their first kill, share the victory of the Bleeding. How could life get any better than this?

"Nei'hman-de!" Yeyinde moved through the rain and called for his mei'hswei. "Nei'lunan-de!"

A talon fell hard on his shoulder. `A'ni-de.

"Neffiman-de is dead," the Leader said coldly. "He did not move properly. Now go stand at your kill for approval."

Yeyinde widened his eyes. "But Neffiman-de is--"

`A'ni-de backhanded him roughly, sent Yeyinde to his knees in the mud. "You question?" The Leader glowered over him, tusks flared.

Yeyinde bowed his head in submission. After a tense moment, `A'ni-de stalked away.

The young warrior stood and trudged through the downpour back to the fallen drones. That a warrior's life was hard, he knew. That yautja sometimes died, he knew as well. Nei'hmande, gone. It did not seem real that it could be.

Unbidden came a memory. Of a time when he and his brother had sat drinking c'ntlip, the fiery brew that fogged mind and body with pleasure. Someday they would be Leaders, not only of ships but of other Leaders. Great would be their fame. Stories would be sung of their Hunts for a thousand years, each of them was certain. It had been as clear as the high mountain air to them. Warriors together, they would Hunt, they would make the females howl in ecstasy, they would father each two hundred sucklings. Much could be laid to the liquor, of course, but he and his brother had truly believed the core of their fantasy. They would be the ones to survive and rise; it would be the other un-Blooded who would fall. Of that there had been no doubt, none.

Only now, it was his brother who had fallen and his own head was hung low after his first Hunt . . .

Yeyinde raised his eyes and saw the results of his prowess. Two bugs lay on the watery ground because of him. And at that moment, he saw the Path; there would no longer be a place for the dreams

of youth in him. Nei'hman-de was gone, but he was alive-and now a warrior. And a warrior did not waste his time looking over his shoulder at the past. Done was done. Regret would not bring back the dead.

Yeyinde held his head high as `A'ni-de traced a claw wet with Hard Meat thwei in the space between his eyes. He ignored the sharp sting as the acid thwei cut into his flesh to mingle with his own blood, blood that neutralized much of the Hard Meat's power. The burning mark was proof of his skill and his adulthood, a jagged etched badge for all to see. Of all the yautja on this Hunt, only he had killed two. Never again would he bow to the kinship of other males; aligning oneself with a loser was not the Path, and any yautja could lose . . .

Dachande awoke warm with pride of the memory. It was long ago and there had been many Hunts since, many of them harder and bloodier than the first. But the first had been where he discovered the truth of the warrior; it was a truth that had served him well. Now it was his turn to pass the knowledge on, to teach it to the young ones who had yet to feel the power of the Hunt, to know the joy of the first kill. It had been a long time since he had felt that newness but the dream brought it back as if it had been only moments past. The Hunt was what a warrior lived for; all else was nothing compared to it. Honor. Skill. Victory. Those were the things of life.

Chapter 5

Noguchi left her apartment early so she could catch Hiroki before he made rounds. The corporation employees' living quarters were all in the same building as the offices and mess hall, along with the community center and central operations; narrow passageways connected this building to the equipment storage and the main garage. To the east and south was open range; the north, mountains, and west was Iwa Gorge, a canyon too deep and long to herd the rhynt-although it certainly kept them from wandering too far in that direction. One less fence to build.

Noguchi walked through the connecting hall and saw one of the geotechs headed toward her, a thin older man with brown skin and very little hair. His name was . . . Hein? Hinn?

As they passed she made a conscious effort to smile and nod at the man. He seemed vaguely surprised, but returned the courtesy, his teeth a sharp contrast to his dark face.

A condescending voice spoke in her head. That wasn't too hard, now was it?

Noguchi made a mental note to check the personnel files that evening. She felt almost embarrassed; six months and she didn't even know the people she was supposed to be working with.

All of that was going to change. Noguchi had started to realize just how little she had seen of Prosperity Wells. She had, of course, spent time learning the layout of the complex when she'd first arrived; it was an efficient setup. A med center with helipad; there were quarantine and holding pens for the rhynt, a transmitter/communications control shack, and a school connected to a rec center. There was also a fairly decent, if very small, shopping mall, complete with two tiny restaurants and a bar. Not that any of these got much use. Only the company people lived in the Wells, although most of the ranchers were in walking distance-if you didn't mind a long and hot hike. If it wasn't Earth, at least an attempt had been made to try to make it look like a town. There were hardly enough people in the gene pool to turn the planet into anything civilized, and even with more settlers, it wasn't likely to ever be a major population center; still, the company had made a token effort to make it look like home.

But besides seeing an occasional holo vid at the rec's theater, she hadn't really been a member of the community. It wasn't her home and she wasn't going to stay here any longer than it took to show a profit and shine in the company's eyes enough to earn a transfer to the next rung on the ladder. But Hiroki was right, she would have to do what was necessary to earn the spot and so far she had remained as insulated as a thermetic bottle.

And The Lector would be arriving in less than seventy-two hours . . .

So I imagine everyone will welcome me with open arms and songs of greeting now that I'm finally ready, hai?

Right.

As she walked between shelves piled high with bike and copter parts, she heard voices from the direction of the open entryway into the yard. She could make out the distinct soft tone of Hiroki's voice among the others; he sounded irritated.

Noguchi slowed her pace to catch the gist of the conversation she was about to walk into.

". . . not the point, Hiroki! The company's making a killing from our sweat and we're getting screwed, right, Ackland?"

"That's the way the Ranchers Association sees it."

Noguchi waited just inside the door to listen for another moment; several ranchers and Hiroki stood in a loose circle several meters away. She could just see the edge of Ackland's heavy rhyth-hide coat, which he wore even on the hottest day. He was a large, opinionated man who had an amazing ability to cause friction.

"I don't even know why I'm discussing this with you," said Hiroki. "Ms. Noguchi is in charge now. You should be talking to her."

A perfect cue. Noguchi stepped forward and through the entry.

"That bitch? She doesn't give a shit about us," said Ackland.

"Maybe if she got laid once in a while-" started one of the other ranchers. Rick Harrison.

"Anybody who tried would freeze his dick off," said one of Ackland's men.

The group chuckled, all except for Hiroki.

Harrison broke off abruptly when he spotted her striding toward them. He coughed suddenly into his hand.

"Ms. Noguchi," he said. His voice was loud.

She held her head high and stared at him. He dropped his gaze, as did the other men. Only Ackland had the nerve to meet her eyes.

"I thought we were in the middle of a roundup, gentlemen," she said, voice cool.

Hiroki stepped in. "We were just discussing the agreement their association has already signed."

Ackland tapped his pipe with the heel of one hand. "That was before we saw what the market was doing back on Earth. If we'd known the price of meat was going to jump like this, we'd have asked for more."

"And if the bottom had fallen out of the market, would you have offered to take less?" said Hiroki.

All eyes turned to Noguchi. She faced Ackland, obviously the man to negotiate with.

"I'll talk to the company and see if I can swing a larger cut for your ranchers," she said. "We want to be fair."

Ackland nodded and tugged at his dirty red beard. He opened his mouth to speak, but Noguchi cut him off.

"But there won't be anything for anyone if your rhynt aren't ready for shipment when The Lector arrives." She noted his flash of annoyance with smug satisfaction. No matter what she changed, Ackland was never going to be a man she enjoyed working with. "I suggest you get back to your jobs."

She smiled at the others as they followed Ackland across the yard.

Hiroki raised his eyebrows at her after the ranchers had reached a safe distance.

"Pleasant man, Ackland," he said blandly.

"Perhaps someday we'll marry," she said, keeping a straight face.

Hiroki grinned.

"Let's saddle up," said Noguchi. She shaded her eyes against the suns and looked out at the open plain. "I'm ready to get some rhynt shit between my toes."

"Words of wisdom," said Hiroki.

Noguchi nodded and then walked with Hiroki toward the hover bikes. Already she felt as if she'd set wheels in motion; and once started, there would be no turning back.

The young males stood in standard formation and watched Dachande expectantly. The kehrte stank of musk and the air was alive with tension. He had made them wait long enough; it was time.

Dachande looked at the heaps of armor and weaponry that Skemte and Warkha had lined up against the wall. "You may collect your `awu`asa'," he said, waving at the armor. "Now."

With passionate cries of excitement, the yautja ran to the piles of equipment and Hard Meat shell, shoving and kicking to get there first. There was enough to suit all of them, of course, but they would fight for the better trappings; the stronger males would get the prime supplies. That was always the way.

Dachande watched as the yautja strapped on the scarred platings and struggled for arm sheaths and masks. Shafted knives were weighed and measured, burners' sights checked. Med kits and multiple eyes

weren't standard for young males' armor, nor were tarei'hsan loops; only the warriors used such additions. There was shift capacity in a few of the suits, but the young males would not need such things anyway; the first Hunt was more a matter of point-and-kill than tracking and hiding. Invisibility was generally reserved for prey that shot back. You had to earn the right to use the better gear, and the prey for which it was necessary.

It was still two nights until landing on the seeded world, but the yautja would need to become accustomed to their 'awu'asa', to feel comfortable with movement and weight. Dachande himself had slept in his armor the first night he had donned it. They had worn the gear only briefly during their training and under strict supervision. For this there were reasons-the main being that a young male given too much power too early was a hazard to himself and others. Turn some of the wet-behind-the-knees younglings loose with a burner even a few weeks ago and there would have been the risk of holes in the ship's hull or bodies piled in the corridors. The ceiling of the firing range had more scars than a ceremonial blood-pig.

Dachande watched Tichinde backhand a smaller male for the mask he held and hiss triumphantly at the gain. The Leader nodded thoughtfully; Tichinde was strong but reckless. Such recklessness could get him killed. Did he survive, however, he could be a great warrior and a credit to his teacher. It was far better to be brave and die than to be cowardly and survive by hiding from the Black Warrior. Songs were not sung about those who showed their back to an attack.

One by one, the dressed yautja held up their shafted knives and howled to each other, pointing their burners to the floor and pretending to fire in mock battle. Skemte caught Dachande's gaze and growled amusement at their fervor. Dachande nodded and echoed the growl. Doubtless each of the would-be warriors thought himself the bravest to have ever picked up a spear and waved it.

The young males were as ready as he could make them. He hoped they were ready enough. If they were not, it was too late. And too bad their successes or failures would start soon on the planet now speeding toward them.

Dtai'kai'-dte sa-de nau'gkon dtain'aun bpi-de. The fight begun would not end until the end; a tired saying but a true one.

The Hunt was about to begin.

Chapter 6

Noguchi rode slightly behind Hiroki through the midafternoon light, their hover bikes setting up whirls of baked tan dust and hot pebbles in their wake. Earlier they had skimmed the inner ridges of the gorge and then circled back to town for a light lunch. Now they were headed out again, toward Beriki canyon, one of the primary, runs for the majority of the herds.

Noguchi had spent most of the morning getting used to the flier's controls; fortunately, they weren't too hard to figure out-stop, go, height and speed adjustments. The trick was to watch for obstacles that might cause problems; jump a big rock too fast and you could find yourself on your back, your scooter flying merrily along without you, at least until the dead-hand control shut it down. Besides basic instructions and a few landscape remarks through the comsets, Hiroki had kept quiet during their ride.

It was the longest she'd spent outdoors since arriving on Ryushi. The heat was incredible, the rays from two suns slapping at them with tangible force. Very winds ruffled the tips of her black hair at the

base of her visor, and particles of sandy dirt kicked up by Hiroki's bike pelted her goggles and dusted her cheeks. Ahead and all around, huge cliffs encircled them.

Initially, it had all looked the same, harsh and unforgiving. But she had to admit there was a sparse beauty to the plains as well. It recalled images of sand gardens that Noguchi had visited in her youth at Kyoto. Here the sand was unchanneled and pocked with planets and rocks. Knee-high stands of beige reeds grew randomly near the edges of the valleys. Stones jutted from the earth in layers of shaded browns and grays. The fractured topsoil was a huge jigsaw puzzle with no end. There was plenty of sand, to be sure, but no order here, no simple zen lines. It was raw chaos. Billions of years in the making, this world, and she and a handful of men and women now held sway over it, masters of all the dry land. It was not hard to believe in manifest destiny out here in the far reaches of the galaxy, that mankind's true role was to minister to and control all things.

Their revving motors had surprised a goodly number of small animals out of hiding. A family of jack-lizards hopped in front of Noguchi's bike near the gorge, headed for cover in the grasses. And Hiroki had pointed out an armored fire-walker and her mate as they slipped through a pile of rocks earlier in the morning. The female was a rosy brown, her smaller mate a faded gray. They had been poking at gravel with their short, pointed snouts, probably searching for snake eggs or beetles.

Noguchi could understand, at least intellectually, why the ranchers had left Earth to make Ryushi their home. There was a kind of freedom to the prairies, a calm serenity to the stark lands. A certain beauty in it all. On Earth, a single living plex could house fifty thousand people in tight, tiny cubicles. On Earth, open land still existed but under so many regulations that just to walk upon it without a proper license might be worth a year in prison. Nowhere on the homeworld was there such vast emptiness as was all around her here. She found herself even enjoying the weather as they neared the southern end of Beriki canyon, the simplicity of a dry wind in her face. She wondered if it was too late for this new understanding to change her standing with the ranchers. Perhaps with time . . .

"We're coming up on one of Ackland's camps," Hiroki crackled in her ear.

"Right." She slowed as they rounded a bend in the gully. There were several dozen rhynt grazing on weeds a couple of hundred meters ahead, and beyond, the large treaded vehicle that Ackland used to check on his herds. The crawler could hold twenty people comfortably and was equipped with a full kitchen and sleeping accommodations for at least six; most of the ranchers had automatic vehicles--AVs--but Ackland's was the biggest.

Of course.

The rhynt themselves seemed to be unlikely meat animals. They looked to Noguchi much like a beast she had seen in a zoo as a child, a rhinoceros. The rhynt were slightly bigger than her memory of the gray-brown Terran creature, and they had a mottled purple and ochre skin. They walked on stumpy, oddly jointed legs that ended in nailed pads, and they had a hooked, beak-like mouth above which were a pair of in-line horns, the greater horn a wrist-thick and sharp cone that jutted straight up in front, the lesser horn smaller and angled slightly backward toward the animal's rear. Ugly brutes, no brighter than cattle, but very tasty when cooked properly.

Noguchi came to a stop next to Hiroki's bike and dismounted, legs still throbbing with the feel of the engine. Ackland and several of his people stood grouped near the AV and watched them approach. Noguchi set her eye protectors up on her cap and patted dust from her clothing as they neared Ackland.

The big man gazed at them with a sneer. "What's the problem, Hiroki? You and the boss lady get

lost?"

"We're just making the rounds-" began Hiroki.

"Yeah, right." Ackland grinned without humor. "What's the real reason? The company shoot down the price increase?"

Noguchi cleared her throat. "You know we can't get through the magnetic interference during the day. I'll contact them this evening."

Ackland scoffed and started to turn away.

"And," she continued, "I'll do all I can to get you a bigger cut."

She wouldn't be talking to Earth, of course, the newly invented subspace radio wouldn't stretch that far, but she could get a response from the corporate sub HQ on Kijita's World. Even though it was lightyears away, the new equipment could shrink that to a few light-hours, effectively only a few billion kilometers. They could get an answer by morning and the sub HQ was empowered to make such niggling decisions.

Ackland raised an eyebrow. "So what are you doing here?" He made no effort to keep irritation out of his voice.

Hiroki remained silent. "We're checking on everyone's progress-seeing if there's anything we can do to help," she said.

The late-afternoon light glinted off of the AV's pitted hull behind him as Ackland looked her up and down. Finally, he nodded.

"Yeah, you can help. You can stay out of our way. The last thing we need is 'help' from corporate paper-pushers."

He faced the young woman next to him and pointed to the shaded monitor built into the AV. "Roth, take some of the boys and run these three gullies. Drive 'em down into the canyon and hook up with Cho's group."

Roth nodded and motioned to two of the men in Ackland's company. Ackland presented his back to Noguchi and Hiroki and punched at the controls set into the monitor's rim. Apparently, they had been dismissed.

They walked back to their bikes slowly. Hiroki placed a hand on her forearm gently as they reached the flyers.

"I'm sorry about the way Ackland treated you," he said.

Noguchi shrugged. "Actually, it's okay. I know how-" she paused, searched for the right word. "I know what kind of an uncaring bitch I've been. I would have been surprised if he had had any other reaction. It is as if I have been in some kind of suspended animation for the last few months. I cannot explain it."

She pulled her visor down firmly and looked to ward Prosperity Wells, about to say something else,

except all thoughts disappeared.

"Wow," she whispered.

"What-?" Hiroki looked past her. "Oh, yes. You haven't gotten out much since you arrived, have you?"

Noguchi barely heard him. The suns were setting, the desert was bathed now in golds and reds. Long shadows stretched from the mountains toward them, and in the cloudless sky, the arrangement of shade and light left her breathless. It was actually the first time she had ever seen the sunset outside.

Her mind couldn't pair the stunning sight with the thoughts she'd had of Ryushi for the past six months; she would have to let one or the other go.

Ryushi was, in its way, a beautiful place, at least here and in this moment it was. Noguchi sighed and watched the sunset, Hiroki quiet beside her. When they finally mounted their bikes to head home, she felt as if a heavy weight had been lifted from her shoulders, one she had not been aware of until it was gone.

Tom scanned the console and spoke without looking up.

"Geosynch orbit in twenty hours, and check on turbulence."

Scott's hands fluttered over the controls. "Some fluctuation, but we can compensate no prob--we can de-couple anytime after orbit is achieved, then it's--"

The magnified Ryushi holo had appeared on the screen.

"Hel--lo Ryushi! Jesus, what a dust ball!"

Tom looked up and nodded. "So it's a tad dry, big deal."

Scott leaned back in his form-chair and cracked his knuckles behind his head. "Yeah, but we're not talking vague thirst here--this is just one big parched hellhole." He watched the vid as it panned the ranges and cliffs of Ryushi. "What kind of mouth-breather would want to move way the fuck out here? Especially when there's still plenty of land available on Nova Terra?"

Tom glanced at the screen and then went back to plugging in data. "Who the hell knows? One man's poison and all like that."

"Yeah, but look at the reads on the native life. This place is poison."

"Ah, I'm sure Ryushi is the perfect home for somebody somewhere."

"Not me," Scott mumbled under his breath. Great place for a nice vacation from the tug, sure. If you were a fucking lizard. Oh, well. He could spend his time in the local bar talking to the women, he didn't have to go hiking around in the sunshine now, did he?

Dachande studied the file picture of the desert world less than a half cycle away. Behind him, the yautja sparred under Skemte's supervision and screamed in blood lust. Soon they would have real

targets.

He watched the gkinmara record and hissed in anticipation.

Perfect.

Chapter 7

At a quarter past three in the morning, Jame Roth leaned against her flyer and watched for Ackland's headlights. The night was hot and free of wind, and stars twinkled faintly over the mountains. Her dog, Creep, lay panting at her feet, occasionally whining at the bulging sack hooked to the scooter's seat. Behind her a hundred meters or so, Travis and Adam watched over a small herd of rhynt, most of them on the ground asleep.

"Except rhynt sleep standing, eh, Creep?"

The mutt raised his head and whined again.

Roth considered herself a practical woman, but something about all of this gave her the shivers. The things she had found in the canyon were, well, odd. Unnatural to say the least. And now the rhynt were acting funny and Ackland's vet had found no cause for the symptoms. She didn't like it, not one bit.

She heard Ackland's AV long before it came into view. The desert was like that at night; it was one of the reasons that she and her spouse, Cathie Doves, had moved to Ryushi. Calm and quiet, far away from crowds and the tame ugliness of Earth. Out here was freedom, and for almost three years, she and Cathie had been happy working for the ranchers. They were even discussing having a child together . . .

She cast an uneasy glance at the bundle and waited for Ackland. He was an asshole, sure, but he was the biggest herd-runner on the planet and it was his money that was going to set her and Cathie up after the sale. This was his responsibility.

The AV came rumbling around the bend up ahead and squealed to a halt in front of her, the headlights almost blinding to her dark-adjusted eyes. Ackland climbed down from the cab almost before the transport had stopped moving. Roth unhooked the sack and started toward him, Creep at her heels. He looked at the rhynt beyond her and walked quickly to meet them halfway.

"I got your message, Roth." He sounded out of breath. "What's the problem?"

"Take a look," she said, and crouched down to empty her find onto the dusty ground. Creep growled at the lifeless things and backed away. Roth speared one of the three creatures with a rhynt-stick and held it up for Ackland to see.

It looked like nothing so much as a huge spider with a spiny tail, a little smaller than a male firewalker, perhaps two handspans. Its long, segmented legs curved under its plated body and its half-meter tail looked prehensile. There were no eyes as far as Roth could tell, but there was a short fleshy tube that perhaps served as a mouth; it hung limply at the head of the creature. The thing was a mottled slate-gray all over.

Ackland took the stick from her and studied it carefully. "What the hell is it?" His voice was thick with disgust.

"Besides uglier than shit? I was hoping you could tell me," she said.

Ackland frowned and set the spider down next to the other two. "I've never seen anything like these things. Where'd you find them?"

"Up at the head of Beriki canyon. There were a couple dozen of them lying around dead." She brushed a long strand of sun-bleached hair out of her eyes and looked over at the rhynt. A few of them lowed mournfully, the sounds quiet in the still air. "That's where we scared up these poke-snoots. They were stumbling around and bumping into each other like they were half-asleep." She rose to her feet and faced Ackland, who had also stood.

"I think maybe they're sick, Mr. Ackland. I thought you should know."

"What did T Stone say?"

"Tests all clean so far."

Ackland tipped his wide-brimmed hat back on his head and then nodded at her. "You did the right thing, Roth." He looked at the herd and then down at the alien things thoughtfully. Roth waited.

"We don't know that there's anything wrong with the rhynt," he said carefully. "And we wouldn't want some dickhead from the company to panic and set up a quarantine, right?" Ackland's speculative gaze turned to her face. "I mean, we've invested a lot of time here-and something like that, well, that would mean that some of us wouldn't get the payoffs that we deserve . . ."

He trailed off, leaving the obvious unstated. Roth chewed at her lower lip and nudged one of the creatures with one boot. Ackland was a greedy man, but he would be a rich greedy man within the week. And she had checked the main herd before she had called him; the only affected rhynt were the thirty-plus head behind her. Something like this could ruin all that she and Cathie had worked for . . .

Roth shrugged mentally, her decision made. This was Ackland's problem now. "I understand."

Ackland grinned and rocked back on his heels, nodding.

"But what do I do with these things?" she said.

"Take 'em to Dr. Revna---but tell him you found them in Iwa Gorge, okay?" He put one hand on her shoulder and squeezed lightly. "You're doing a great job, Roth. There will be a bonus for you when this roundup is over."

As he walked back to the AV, Roth brushed at the place his hand had touched her shoulder. Asshole.

She shoved the creatures back into the bag with the rhynt-stick and loaded it onto the bike for the trip into town. "C'mon Creep." She patted her thigh and the herd dog followed her back to the watch; the rhynt that weren't asleep lay on their sides, panting heavily. Wet ropes of mucus hung from their mouths and trembled with each gasp. Poke-snoots were stupid beasts, but she didn't like to see them this way, like they had swallowed something poison . . .

Noguchi sat seizes on the rounded mat in her apartment and breathed deeply, head down. It was just after dawn, and today The Lector came. She had awakened nervous and wanted to try to relax before

starting the final roundup-but it had been almost a month since her last real practice and she could feel the muscles in her legs groaning from the stretch.

She had gotten her brown belt in karate before she'd left Earth for Ryushi, and had not been far away from black. While there were holo teaching devices that she could train to at the rec center, she had decided to put her lessons aside for a while-at least until she had found a human sparring partner. Holo weren't a bad way to go, but they lacked something. Dignity, perhaps.

But she hadn't made any close enough friends to work out with . . .

No friends, Machiko, close or otherwise. Don't kid yourself.

Right. Most ranchers probably weren't into martial arts anyway.

Her thighs trembled when she stood to form riding, horse stance; her old sensei, Master Ko, would have put her on the floor for letting herself go like this. She ran through blocks and kicks to loosen up a little, and was surprised at the vague sadness she felt at the familiarity of the moves. Homesickness? No, she had left little behind on Earth worth missing. It was . . .

Loneliness. The thought struck a chord within her that she hadn't felt for a very long time. It was the sense of-not belonging. At least on Earth she had worked in an office building with thousands of other employees, had walked through streets full of people; she had been in a karate class. Noguchi hadn't been very close to anyone, but at least there had been that option. And here there was only Hiroki, who seemed to disapprove of her somehow in spite of his smiling facade. Hiroki and a group of ranchers who didn't give a shit if she came or went.

She stopped midway through the fourth form and frowned, sweat light on her brow. What was next? Block-claw or drop to her right knee and clutch-?

She started the form over and went slowly, concentrating this time.

Chop to throat, that was it. For some reason, she felt near tears for having forgotten. Had it been so long?

She ran through the rest of her workout quickly and then kneeled into seiza again, bangs plastered to her forehead. Today would be a nonstop panic, supervising roundup and then preparations for the arrival of The Lector. There were responsibilities to delegate and papers to shuffle. She wished there was someone to talk to, someone to commiserate with over the busy day to come . . .

Well. There was no time to regret her choices now, there was too much to be done. She had practiced smiling and nodding and tonight would be her first gesture of goodwill toward the ranchers, the company approved price increase. She hoped that it would be the start of a new relationship of mutual respect.

It has to be; Hiroki leaves in a few days with the rhynt shipment.

Right. Time to get ready.

Noguchi tripped on the step into the bathroom and knocked her head solidly into the door frame. She cursed and placed a hand on the swelling lump, eyes squeezed shut. Great. The bruise would match her lavender blouse for the party. A terrific start to the day, O master martial artist.

She hoped any other disasters would wait until tomorrow.

Kesar Revna was fascinated. Alien biology was supposedly his forte, but he hadn't seen anything quite like it. He tried to keep up with the UMA reports from Earth, and Chigusa had a monthly online biomed journal that was one of the best; new species were being discovered every day, it seemed. But besides a mutant form of crab that had turned up on Terra Nova a few years back after a radioactive waste mishap, he found nothing in the literature that looked quite like this . . .

"I have to get back to work, Dr. Revna, if that's okay-"

He reluctantly looked up from the examination table at the young woman who had brought in the amazing creatures. She seemed nervous, anxious to be gone; she certainly looked out of place in the lab. Her dusty range clothes and darkly tanned skin didn't seem to agree with indoor lighting.

"Of course," he said. "It's the big day, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"And you say you found these in Iwa Gorge?"

"Uh, yeah. Right." She dropped her gaze to the table and shuddered slightly. "Mr. Ackland said you might want to take a look at them."

"Give Mr. Ackland my thanks. And I appreciate you coming in, I know how busy you must be."

"Sure, no problem. Let us know how things turn out when you get a chance." She turned to walk out and nearly collided with Miriam, the town's human doctor and Kesar's wife, which made her Dr. Revna, too.

"Excuse me, Dr. Revna,"

Miriam smiled. Her tanned skin crinkled at the corners of her eyes. She had her long and dark hair pulled back into a ponytail and she always seemed so tiny and petite she made Roth feel like a rhyth. "Hello, Jame. How's Cathie's knee?"

"Great. Good as new. I'm sorry, I really have to run-"

"That's all right. We'll hopefully see you both tonight."

Kesar had already turned his attention back to the specimen. "What do you make of this, Doc?"

Miriam laughed. "Oh, thank you. No `good morning, my love, how did you sleep?"

Kesar looked at his wife and grinned. "Good morning, my love, how did you sleep? Now take a look at what Roth brought in. I could use a second opinion."

Miriam bent over the table and raised her eyebrows. "She found this on Ryushi?"

"Iwa Gorge, she says. And she also said that there were at least twenty more, dead. I've already tried to cut one of the legs with the Killian, and nothing. Not a scratch."

"You're kidding." Miriam searched his face for the joke. "Any carbon-based animal . . ." she trailed off. "Silicon? Couldn't be and even if it was, that would at least have been marked-" She gazed at the specimen in wonder. "What is it, Kesar? You're the DVM."

He shook his head. "I don't know. There was that Terra Nova mutation, and I heard some rumors about a weird life form found in a mining colony somewhere, but somebody clamped down on that, nothing substantiated. We're going to need to run some tests; and I think afterward, I'm going to take a little ride up to the gorge and poke around."

Miriam frowned. "Alone?"

Kesar nodded. He felt wired. This was a totally new species . . .

"One of us should stay in case of any problems with the herding. Anyway, like you just said, I'm the vet, right? If I can find one of these alive-"

"-it could bite you, Kesar. Perhaps you should wait for a few days. Until someone can come with you."

"Right. I need a guard to protect me from this little fist-sized spider. Don't worry, I'll be fine, Miriam." He patted her hand and smiled. "I'll take a net and watch where I put my feet."

He turned his attention back to the specimen even though he was aware she was hovering there, concerned.

"Hmm. The belly looks a lot softer than the legs. I bet I can incise along this plate line. Could you please fetch me the scalpel kit? Oh, and the Menashe saw? I'll peel this critter, one way or another."

She pursed her lips doubtfully but went to get the equipment from storage. He stooped over the alien again, already lost in thought. Miriam was a good doctor and a good spouse, but she worried too much. This creature was the most intriguing thing he'd come across on this planet so far. Hell, that's why he'd gotten into offworld medicine, stuff like this. To have some new and fascinating creature with his own Latinized name hung on it and then studied in biology classes at prestigious universities was perhaps an egotistical wish, but not an immoral one, was it? Why, yes, this is the first of the many unique Life forms discovered by the galactically famous Dr. Kesar Revna. A minor find compared to his later work, of course, but even great men must have beginnings. Let him stand as an example to you all...

He smiled at the fantasy.

How could anyone fear such a unique find?

Besides, the creature was probably as harmless as his fantasy of academic greatness.

Chapter 8

They landed on the parched world in the bottom of a vast ravine, far from where the lou-dte kalei had sown the Hard Meat eggs; they came in cloaked and during light hours, although the Hunt would not begin until after dark. It was all standard procedure; there were some worlds upon which the natives had developed weaponry and would fight for their skins, infected or not. Dachande had not lived long by

being careless on strange terrain, and the planet had not been used for a Hunt so recently that precautions could be discarded. Especially now, because since the yautja's last visit to Hunt here, others had come.

The Soft Meat, bleeding all over the radio bands for all to hear.

It was a shock to find them here. Given his choice, he would hunt the Soft Meat, a thing he had long desired. They were cunning and they shot back. Soft Meat skulls were highly prized, the centerpiece of a warrior's trophy wall. He would challenge them, were it at all possible. But not with a handful of raw and unseasoned would-be warriors. Not only would it be foolish, it was also against the rules of the Hunt. Dachande could almost smell them, the Soft Meat, and he would like nothing better than to test his mettle against them, but he would not, not this time. He had responsibilities, duties, and to cast them aside for his personal satisfaction would be to dishonor his name. So the ship would remain cloaked, any of his party who might venture even remotely close to the oomans would do so in a shiftsuit, and the Soft Meat would never now how lucky they had been. Reluctantly and without explanation, Dachande caused shiftsuit electronics to be issued to the students. Let them wonder what his motivations were—they knew enough not to ask. He would tell the other Blooded of the danger, but there would be no contact with the oomans on this trip. Was an ooman sighted, the Blooded would order the students to shift into camouflage and to avoid contact. A pity, but that was the way of it. After he finished this training Hunt, his dues would be paid and his application to a Blooded Warrior Only ship would be accepted. Then he would at last get his chance at the oomans. Not here, not now.

In the staging area, the younglings were so ch'hkt-a that they would burn each other if they didn't calm down.

Dachande watched the young males hurriedly don their suits. He stood in the entry and felt the thick anticipation that radiated from them in their frenzied movements. It never failed to please him, to see the young so eager to spill first thwei.

There would be a short practice outside of the ship to test the world's gravity while Warkha scanned for anything unexpected—it was killing nothing other than time, a chance to wear the edge off of the young males' hyper-enthusiasm. Too, the Hard Meat would also be more active after the suns dropped. It was hardly sport to shoot a target curled up asleep.

Dachande turned and walked through the corridor toward the front of the ship. As Leader, he would be the first to set foot on the Hunting grounds, a pleasure that rumbled deep in his gut.

This would be a good Hunt, oomans not, withstanding.

Noguchi took her second shower of the day in the early evening, as twilight fell over Prosperity Wells. It had been a hard day but a good one; all of the herds had been penned except for one of Cho's and that one was on its way.

She stood in front of the holo-mirror in the green linen suit she had worn on her first day in Ryushi and smiled at her wind-burned complexion. After only a few days outside, her face had begun to take on the look of a rancher's. She liked it; it was the appearance of a person who didn't mind hard work, even though she had to inoculate herself against skin cancers and had run a small fever from the vaccine for most of a day.

The Chigusa staff had been setting up tables and portable roasting pits near the shield wall when she had gone to shower and change, but she was surprised at the crowd that had gathered in her short absence. She stepped out of her building and was nearly run over by a group of giggling children. Not

many of those here, children, but some.

The scent of grilled rhyth steaks carried to her along with the sounds of people talking and laughing. Ranchers and their spouses walked past, hand in hand, all headed toward the landing pad. Noguchi joined them.

Hiroki was easy to spot amid the ranchers in his dark dress suit; he stood near the loading ramp, drink in hand. He returned her wave and wove his way through the crowd to meet her.

"You look lovely, Machiko-san."

"Thank you. You look very nice yourself." She gazed wonderingly at the mass of people all around. "Is every person on the planet here?"

"Just about. A few of the staff are watching screens in ops, but other than that . . ."

Noguchi smiled. "A hundred people in one place is now a mob to me. Funny, how perspectives change."

Hiroki nodded. "It is. And I'm glad to see them enjoying themselves. This is their first roundup, everything they've worked for, for three years."

Noguchi looked around at the ranchers, relaxed and mingling in the open compound. It was impossible not to pick up on the mood of excitement and accomplishment. Someone had even fed music over the public address system; couples danced in the deepening dusk while their children ran and played through the streets.

"Come on, let's go greet the ship," said Hiroki. "It's due any minute."

She followed him through the dancing crowd toward the antenna tower. "The home office called," she said mildly. "They've approved the price hike for the ranchers."

Hiroki raised his eyebrows and smiled at her. "Good work, boss."

"Where are we headed, anyway? Wouldn't the best place be"

"The tower is the only place to watch a landing." Hiroki stopped in front of the runged ladder that ran up one side of the transmitting structure and rested one hand on the lowest step.

"Can that thing support both of us?" Noguchi looked at the ladder doubtfully.

"Let's find out, shall we?"

They scaled one story and hit the first landing, then slowly climbed the stairs to the top, five floors up. There was a moderate, warm breeze blowing, and Noguchi looked down to see the miniature people milling about in the night air.

It was easy to forget the pressures of work on such an occasion. Pleasant memories from long ago ran through her head, Nakama festivals with her parents, walks through bonsai forests that made her feel like a giant.

A low rumbling began, somewhere in the sky. The people below watched the clouds for movement.

Noguchi looked up to see the ship, and even so far away, she could tell it was big. Huge. It was hard for her mind to grasp such a gigantic object in the air. She had seen craft like it before, of course-but this one was bigger than the entire rec center and op building combined. It had pusher vents easily twenty meters long and half as wide on either side; there were three loading docks in front, each big enough to admit four rhyth side by side; giant air-pushers swept a benign wind over the crowd as the ship rumbled toward the landing pad.

With a roar that drowned out all other sound, The Lector settled gently. It was quite a trick to land such a tub in atmosphere; the aerodynamics were hardly conducive to such things. The shield wall protected the complex from most of the engine wash, but the sudden gale that hit all of them was enough to whip up dresses and hair and a considerable haze of dust. As the thunder dwindled slowly, Noguchi heard a chorus of laughter and hand clapping.

It was a magnificent spectacle, The Lector come to roost. Well, part of the ship anyway. The rest was still in orbit.

A hand landed on her shoulder. Hiroki. He grinned at her.

"Down to the final klick, eh? Let's go introduce ourselves to the crew."

They started toward the stairs, Hiroki leading. Noguchi cast one last look at the ship and thought about what he had said, the final kilometer. In spite of the mood of the evening, she had felt a chill at his words. Odd.

She brushed the ominous speculation aside and went to join the party.

Scott and Tom stepped off the ramp together into Prosperity Wells. For some reason, the mass of people assembled to greet them was a relief to Scott, although he wasn't sure why. Other crew members filed out past them to shake hands and chat with the ranchers and their families.

"Hey, we're celebrities, man, check it out," Tom mumbled.

Scott smirked. It was true; the locals had gathered around each of The Lector's crew with smiles and backslaps.

"Guess they don't get out much," Scott whispered.

A tall, husky man, about forty TS, with a red beard and a grin stepped toward them. He held out two cups of beer to the pilots. "Ackland's the name," he said, extending his large hand. Tom shook it, then Scott. "I'm head of the local ranchers association. How was your trip, Captains-?"

"Strandberg," said Tom. "But just call me Tom. This is my copilot, Scott Conover. The trip was fine."

"Nice to meet you, sirs. Hope you and your crew are ready to party; we got some nice steaks on the grill-" Ackland leaned closer and lowered his voice. "And we got some fine young ladies looking for dance partners, I'll bet. That is, if you're inclined that way-"

Scott grinned. "You bet. Tom here was starting to look pretty good near the last leg of the trip, if you know what I mean."

Ackland chuckled, a forced and overly jovial sound, and clapped Scott on the back. "I thought so," he started. "You know, I was-

"Can I have your attention, please?" A short Japanese woman in a green suit stood on a chair a few meters away, a dinner tray in hand. "Can I have everyone's attention, please?"

She was pretty, that one. Scott looked her up and down. Nice legs, nice butt. A little shy in the breast department, but Scott had seen worse.

"Who's the babe?" he said quietly to Ackland. Tom elbowed him in the gut. Damn feminist.

"You mean bitch," Ackland replied. "Nitrogen queen. That's the boss."

"I know you're all anxious for the festivities to begin, but first I have an important announcement." The crowd calmed as everyone turned to look at her.

"Loading will proceed as follows-Ackland, you're first on deck. Harrison's next, followed by Luccini and Marianetti. The rest of the assignments will be handed out tomorrow at dusk." She paused, then smiled.

"One more thing. The company gave their answer on the price adjustment-you'll be getting the increase you requested. Enjoy the party, everyone."

She stepped off the chair to the sounds of scattered clapping and hoots of excitement.

"Go figure," said Ackland. "Maybe she's good for something after all."

Scott took a long gulp of beer and then laughed. "I could think of a few other things she might be good at."

Tom rolled his eyes, and Ackland shook his head. "I wouldn't try it. Noguchi probably doesn't uncross her legs to take a shit, you know?"

"Too bad," mumbled Tom. He wandered off.

Scott took another slug and belched softly. "Takes all kinds, right?" he said, and looked into his cup. Not bad for a local brew. He picked out the Japanese woman again and studied her smile as she talked to some rancher woman. Ackland was babbling something about the weather, but Scott watched Noguchi.

Dust ball it was, but the place wasn't a lost cause. He swigged more beer and turned his attention back to Ackland. Anything could happen in three days, no matter what the rancher said. Hell, nitrogen was his specialty . . .

Noguchi walked toward the ops center, the party in full swing behind her. It was definitely a success, in more ways than one. A few of the ranchers had warmed toward her after the announcement, and she had kept up a steady patter of innocuous conversation for at least two hours. Nice people. And she had been doing a good job of nodding and smiling

Although one day doesn't undo six months of stupidity, Machiko.

Right. But it was a start. It had finally hit home that Hiroki would be leaving with The Lector. A vague sadness had come over her, along with a desire to be alone for a little while. He was perhaps her only friend . . .

She walked into operations to see only one person manning the screens.

"Collins, right?" she said hopefully.

The young man nodded and stood up.

"Go join the party, okay? I'll watch things here for a while."

Collins's eyes widened. "Really? Thanks, Ms. Noguchi."

"It's just Machiko from now on." She smiled at him and moved by so that he could pass.

"Uh, okay," he said. "Machiko." He sounded uncomfortable with her first name but he smiled back. He started to walk out and then turned.

"Oh, listen-when Doc Revna gets back, tell him the home office received his report. It's in the tray with his notes."

Noguchi frowned. She had seen Fem Doc at the party, but Revna hadn't been around, had he?

"Gets back from where?" she said.

"Said he was going up to Iwa Gorge to look for something," he said. "He signed out a hover bike a couple of hours ago."

"Today? Bad timing," she said.

"Yeah, that's what I said." Collins shrugged. "But he said it was important. Listen, thanks again."

After he had left, Noguchi sat at the console and gazed at the radar, lost in thought. She hadn't expected much from Hiroki at the beginning, but he had been unfailingly patient with her. His professionalism was top-notch; it would be sad to see him leave . . .

She shook her head and glanced around for something to take her mind off of Hiroki. Doc Revna's report lay in a basket nearby, but she hesitated picking it up. What if it were private information-?

Then he wouldn't have let Collins send it, he would've done it himself.

Brilliant. She picked up the stack of hard copy and leaned back in her chair. What the hell was in Iwa Gorge, anyway? She liked the doc, he was a smart man. She leafed through the papers and settled down to read, with a silent wish for Revna to find whatever it was he was looking for . . .

Kesar trained his binoculars on the sight at the bottom of the gorge and inhaled sharply. His heart hammered in his chest and his hands shook. It was incredible. It was unbelievable.

A dozen or so humanoids stood surrounding a large craft, the likes of which he had never seen. The

ship looked like a cross between a fish and a huge engine tube, it was tinted a strange greenish hue, with a broad ramp set into the ground.

The humanoids were tall; he couldn't be sure because of nothing to show relative size, and the scaler in his scope was malfunctioning, but he would guess two and a half meters, maybe a little more. More amazing, they appeared to be carrying . . . spears.

Revna had stopped halfway down into the gorge, had parked his bike near some rocks twenty meters behind him or so. The adrenaline in his system was screaming at him to go back to the flyer, now. Big aliens with spears did not seem like the kind of folks you wanted to meet by yourself in the middle of the desert. But he couldn't stop looking at the amazing sight.

He hit the full magnification button and the creatures zoomed closer. Tall, muscular, definitely armed. Still too far away to get a good view and it was also too bad the scope's scaler was out of whack, he wanted to get a size on them.

Whatever they were, they were definitely not human. Now here was a discovery that would get his name in the books. Not just a new species of spider or crab, but sentient aliens!

He watched for another half minute. What were they doing here? What were they? A hundred questions formed and tried to rise all at once. Incredible.

He licked his lips and focused on one of the alien faces. Some kind of mask it wore, like the others. Breathing gear?

He would go back to town, get some of the ranchers, some photo equipment-

Kesar blinked. One of the creatures turned and looked at him. It threw back its head, its long, odd braids fell back. A long, crazy howl filled the canyon, echoed off of the cliffs, and beat at his ears, joined by others.

Impossible, he was mostly hidden from view, and he could hardly see them with the scope. They couldn't see him.

But they did. He knew for sure in a second.

When they ran toward him, waving their spears, screaming.

Chapter 9

Dachande spun, tusks flared, as the cries of his brood vibrated through the gorge. Sounds of challenge, of aggression. His gaze followed the path of the running yautja to a place in the rocks where

Ooman!

Warkha spoke behind him, but the words were swallowed in the frenzy.

Dachande gave orders without looking.

"Tell Skemte to prepare flight and gather those you can! Ki'cte! n

He ran, blade in hand. The Hunt would have to be aborted, but the ooman would die first. There was no other way. Dachande cursed mentally and ran faster.

He was almost to the rocks when the noise of a craft starting hit him.

Damn! If the ooman got away, it would bring others!

He saw that at least two of the students had already made it to the place he was headed, Chulonte and another, he couldn't tell-

The small flying craft came over the rise and struck Chulonte at chest level.

A single ooman manned the ship, was balanced clumsily at the controls, hair swept back from an ugly, pale face.

Chulonte scrabbled at the craft to hold on, but the ooman ran the flyer close to a rock face. Chulonte's skull cracked against the cliff and he fell suddenly boneless to the ground, the mint gray-green of his brain tissue mixed with the darker phosphor-green of his blood splattered on the stone.

Cjit! The Hunt had not even begun and already he had lost a student. Damn!

The ooman's craft was turned by the collision. It roared and swerved past Dachande and headed straight for their ship, the ooman's intentions unknown.

The Leader ran back toward the ship. He screamed the death cry to all: kill the ooman!

It would pay with its life for the death of Chulonte.

Revna ran to his bike, his stomach an empty hole. Stark terror made him fumble the starter. His hands shook uncontrollably.

"Start, please, oh, please, start, start-" He heard his own voice and for a moment it sounded as if it belonged to someone else.

The cycle roared to life. Relief rushed through him, cool and welcome. He stepped on the accelerator, hard, thinking only of escape.

And he flew directly into them. He topped the rock formation, his thoughts clouded with panic; turn, turn, fool-

One of the creatures leapt up in front of him. He tried to swerve, but it was too late. The impact jarred him from his seat; he would have fallen except for the reflexive grab at the handles. The alien was huge; Revna caught a whiff of some musky, bitter oil. Its screech was one of pain and fury. It grabbed for him.

Without thinking, Revna veered toward a cliff wall. The screaming thing smacked into the rocks, hard, and then was gone. He tried to regain control of the scooter but the impact had thrown him into a turn. And the controls were damaged, he couldn't turn, the flier responded sluggishly.

ALL right, don't panic, it's okay. He would have to use speed to get past them, have to go so fast they couldn't catch him, couldn't spear him-

Another of the creatures reached for him, but he passed it. Revna smashed on the accelerator all the way forward as a blast of incredible heat blew by him. He ducked, felt his facial hair singe.

The craft didn't want to alter its course. He was going to pass right next to the ship.

Altitude, he had to get high enough so they couldn't grab him!

The repellers still worked, he managed to trim the elevators and start to climb. Five meters, seven, still heading right at the ship but he would clear it-

Another blast of heat, this one splashed the underside of the flier, cooked plastic and metal. The repellers coughed and the craft dropped a meter, sputtered.

That was no spear! They've got guns! Lasers, plasma rifles, Jesus!

He raised his watering eyes just in time to see that he was headed for the alien craft at high speed and that -he wasn't going to clear it.

He was going to hit it dead center---

Miriam---

It was his last thought before the world turned to fire.

Dachande saw the ooman fly at the ship and he ran faster. Most of the students were clear, but at that speed, an impact could cause damage, big damage

The tiny flier smashed into the ship and blew apart in a fireball that shattered both craft. A second later came another blast, bigger than the first. Flame and debris sprayed, scorched rocks, moved boulders, knocked over delicate formations that had stood undisturbed for millions of years. Huge chunks of burning ship flew through the gully as the hunters were blown to the ground by the blast.

After a moment Tichinde stood and looked around at his fallen peers. He waited to hear direction from the Leader, but there were no instructive cries.

Other yautja rose to their feet, dazed. Small pools of mi burned, their flickerings reaching into the dusk, carrying in their fumes the smells of ash and soil and oily death.

The Leader had fallen not far from Tichinde. Several of the others stumbled with him to where Dachande lay.

The Leader was barely alive, his mandibles caked with thwei. Wreckage had hit him, knocked him into dhi'kide, the sleep near death.

A quick survey showed them that Warkha, too, was dead, and the other Blooded had been on the ship that still burned and smoked and looked now like nothing so much as a gutted crab. No one would be leaving this world on that vessel. And it would be weeks, months, years perhaps, before anybody came to look for them Not good.

When all of the students alive had gathered around Dachande, Tichinde counted. Ten of them. No

transport and no elder to tell them what would happen.

"What will we do?" From `Aseigan.

"Dachande still breathes," said Gkyaun. "We could-"

"You are a medic?" Tichinde snorted. "He is beyond the aid kits, look at him. Let him die honorably of his wounds, wounds sustained in battle." He waved at the smoking ship. "The ooman deliberately attacked us and killed our ship. Therefore, we will kill the oomans, that is what we will do. Dachande lives but his time is short."

Aseigan growled. "Who proclaimed you Leader?" His voice was thick with contempt. "You will not lead me. And Hunting Soft Meat is forbidden to unBlooded, even a fool such as you knows this."

Tichinde grinned and pointed his burner at the yautja. `Aseigan took a step toward him, arms high.

Tichinde fired.

The blast blew Aseigan against a pile of smoking rock. The others leapt back in surprise.

"Others dispute?" Tichinde swung the burner in a circle. "I will spill your thwei as easily as I do that of the ooman dogs later! This is not a Hunt, as that dead slave-to-rules thought, but self-defense. We are allowed to defend ourselves from attack, are we not?" Once again he waved at the ruins of their ship.

None of the nine disagreed. They watched him warily, hands close to their own burners. There was a long moment when a Challenge might have come, when one of the nine might have taken it upon himself to raise his burner and try him, but that moment passed. If another would be Leader, he would have made his move and none did.

Tichinde smiled. They would follow him, reluctantly or not.

He raised his staff to the sky and screamed of revenge. When Gkyaun returned from the wreck and handed him the smoldering ooman skull a moment later, Tichinde crushed it with bare claw to the approving hisses of the others. It had killed itself and bravely in the doing, so it could not be a proper trophy. But there would be others to be earned.

The yautja chanted and howled their approval into the night. Tichinde sent them to scavenge for whole weapons and armor.

They were stuck here. So be it. The oomans would be sorry they dared attack the yautja. Sorry they dared to cross blades with Tichinde.

Very sorry.

Chapter 10

The disparity in ratio between the smooth-backed specimens and the single carcass with dorsal spines notwithstanding, I believe the differences between the two types represent sexual indicators-not of the specimens themselves, but of the zygote or "egg" that each carries. As stated above, none of the specimens is equipped for independent life, their sole purpose seems to be nothing more than that of a

living delivery vehicle-an ambulatory penis, if you will.

Noguchi tapped her cigarette without looking at the tray and skimmed back to the top of the page, totally absorbed. This is what Revna had gone after? Why hadn't he told anyone? Why hadn't he told her?

While it is risky to postulate so much from such a tiny sample, we need to know as much as possible about these specimens as quickly as possible. If my assumptions are correct, or even near the mark, we're dealing with only one stage of this organism. The hybrid silicon-carbon cell construction would lead-

'Ambulatory penis,' huh? Conjures quite an image, don't it?"

Noguchi jumped in her chair and turned quickly, heart pounding. A tall man with blond hair and beard stood there, grinning. He swayed slightly on his feet; from the smell of him, he had been drinking. A lot.

She stood and backed away a step. "You're from The Lector, right?"

The stranger took a step closer. "Hell, I fly that bucket!" He belched softly. "Scuse me. Scott Conover atcher service."

Noguchi smiled but inched back a little more. His intentions weren't exactly clear but one thing was . . .

"You're drunk, Mr. Conover."

"Yeah, but not too drunk, if you know what I mean. You're Ms. Nogooshi. I've been watching you-"

"It's Noguchi," she said coolly. "And you can call me ma'am."

Conover laughed and reached out to take her hand. Noguchi tried to pull away, but the pilot gripped her wrist tightly. He leaned close, his alcohol breath moist and pungent. "I heard about what a tough lady you were, the company ramrod, right?" His words slurred together slightly.

The drunken pilot tried to pull her hand down to his crotch. "I got your ramrod right here, ma'am," he stage-whispered.

Noguchi narrowed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Scott couldn't find the Jap girl anywhere; he wandered around - for a while and eventually he heard some guy say that she was watching screens.

"Operations," he said to no one in particular, and stumbled in that direction.

The door was open. He was torn between the desire to march right in and woo the woman and the desire to piss, which had gotten pretty overwhelming. He compromised and peed on the entry frame before his imminent conquest.

She was reading some kind of porn hard copy, he could see that much. Damn, but she was fine! He imagined that small mouth all over him, on his dick and she wanted it, too, he could tell.

They did the small talk thing for a minute or two and she told him she was into being dominant `call me

ma'am'-and the little vixen played chase, backing up, her cheeks flushed with desire.

And he reached out to touch her, to put her hand on his ready-and-willing equipment-and then he wasn't sure what happened.

He must have tripped

Noguchi grabbed his arm above the elbow with her free hand and hooked one foot behind his. She twisted, pushing up and over at the same time, and the pilot went down. She jumped back and struck a ready pose, left foot forward, fists made. It had happened so fast, she was barely aware that she had done it.

The drunk groaned loudly; he didn't get up. Noguchi relaxed slightly, but kept her distance.

Another man stepped into the room, dark-haired, wearing glasses.

"Scott?" He looked down and moved immediately to the fallen man. "Jesus, what happened?" He stared. up at Noguchi, at her fighting stance; realization dawned on his face.

"You next?" Adrenaline still pumped through her system.

The drunk's friend stood, hands in the air. "No, no, I was just coming to tell you that the ship is loaded and that we'll be making our first shuttle run as soon as the inspectors give the rhynt a clean bill of health-" He spoke all at once, in a rush, but seemed to catch himself.

Noguchi nodded. "You'd better have them check out this pilot, too." She looked down at Conover and frowned. "Especially his judgment."

"I'm Tom Strandberg, ma'am. I'm sorry about this, he's the designated drinker on this run." As the man spoke, he bent down and tried to help Conover to his feet. He grinned sheepishly. "Tomorrow it'll be my turn."

With a grunt of effort, Strandberg stood up, Conover half over one shoulder.

"Your turn to drink or your turn to get some of what I gave him?" Noguchi spoke sharply; she knew that none of this was Strandberg's fault, but damn him for excusing his friend so lightly; attempted rape wasn't particularly funny.

Strandberg edged toward the door with his heavy load. "Look, I'll make sure he doesn't bother you again, okay?"

It seemed to be the perfect cue. Conover raised his head slightly. "Damn bitch," he mumbled, and nodded back out.

Strandberg carried the other pilot out without another word.

Noguchi sat back in her chair and felt her heart slow down little by little. If she didn't receive a formal apology the next morning, she would file a complaint with the company.

Maybe I'll do that anyway. Conover certainly didn't deserve anything less, of I-got-your-ramrod-right-here.

She surprised herself by laughing out loud. How classically dumb male. Did they teach lines like that in Neanderthal 101?

Noguchi picked up the papers she had been reading, a smile still on her face. Well, it had broken the tension she'd been feeling.

After she'd read the same paragraph three times, she sighed and put the report down. This was important stuff, but she couldn't seem to regain her concentration after the rush of adrenaline that idiot's advances had created. Besides, it was late. Revna must have gone to the party or just gone home.

She stood, stretched, and yawned. Maybe she wasn't so very out of martial arts' practice after all. She had tossed him without thinking about it. It came back quick enough when she'd needed it.

She made sure that the recorders were all on and pulled her jacket off the back of the chair. She would talk to Revna tomorrow about these "specimens"; from the sound of it, there might be some crucial things going on out at Iwa Gorge-and it was her job to know about it.

It was dark and hot. The smell of burned materials worked its way into that darkness, and with the scent came pain.

Dachande opened his mouth to scream at the young males to fall in line, but nothing happened. He sensed no movement, no sound of the students came to him. He tried to lift one arm to clear his vision, but nothing happened. Only heat and blackness and faraway pain.

And then only dark.

Scott hurt. He rolled his head and opened his eyes, but closed them again immediately. The whole fuckin' planet was spinning. And there was an earthquake or something.

What planet?

"Wha' the fuck?" he mumbled. He opened his eyes again.

"Back to the land of the living?" Tom's face swam into view next to him. They were riding a small cart outside, back to the ship-the earthquake was the rumbling motor. On Ryushi. The Lector. Cowboys.

Japanese babe

Scott focused on Tom's face. "Nogooshi," he said. It was coming back.

Tom grinned. "Scott, you're plowed. Apparently you tried to have sex with the head of the company here, a very capable woman who knocked the shit out of you before you got around to figuring out she wasn't interested." He paused for a second and then added, "And if you ask me, you're lucky she didn't rip your dick off and feed it to you."

"Great," said Scott. He closed his eyes, exhausted. "Nice to have you on my side, ol buddy ol pal."

Scott was almost asleep when the cart stopped. He growled and pulled himself upright. They were back at The Lector.

"Need help?"

"No. Fucking Judas." He got out of the cart okay, but discovered that his legs weren't particularly interested in staying straight. Tom grabbed one of his arms and pulled it over his own shoulder. Scott leaned on him heavily.

"Yeah, okay." He shuffled along next to Tom as they walked onto the second loading ramp. "She can't treat me like that, you know."

"Maybe you want to go back and tell her that," Tom said. "What's with the lights? Prindle's team is getting sloppy, maintenance is going to hell--"

Scott sighed. "Fuck the lights. But you know what I mean, right? I mean, I'm a goddamned star-pilot, you know?" On top of the humiliation of it all, he was getting a huge headache.

Tom leaned him up against a wall. "Hang on a sec, let me get a light."

Scott went on. "Who the fuck does she think she is, you know?" He stared at the floor. Goddamn rhyth all over the place, looked like one of them had thrown up on the floor. He toed the puddle of wet, mucousy goo with one foot and then looked away quickly; that was enough to make his stomach pretty damn unhappy.

"She's corporate," said Tom. "She pulled rank on you." He re-appeared holding a flashlight and reached out to steady Scott with his free arm.

"That's not all she pulled," said Scott glumly. "I think my back is broken or something."

"Who in the hell left this hatch open?" Tom stepped forward and shined the light into the dark rhyth pen.

"You're not listening to me." Scott leaned back on the wall. Fuck the hatch

"Hey, Ackland warned you, right?" Tom's voice had taken on an echo-like quality. He had walked into the pen.

With the last of his coordination, Scott followed him, narrowly missing a renegade doorway. Rhyth puke everywhere.

Tom continued. "But you Wouldn't listen, no. You just had to go mess with the queen--"

Tom stopped short. The flashlight hit the floor and a low hiss filled the room, coming from all around.

Scott shook his head and followed Tom's gaze. There were four. Or seven. Or twenty. A flurry of horrible images: long, dark skulls and dripping razor teeth. Gigantic, black, all arms and legs and spiny tails, hissing. Moving forward.

Reaching toward them-

There was darkness. Not with the cold that she had once associated with the black hours, not with a sense of night or time. It was a stifling darkness that echoed with soft, wet sounds of rhythmic movement-the insistent pulse of body against body, but far from any act of love. It was the black of a huge machine, steadily devouring light, continually working, thrumming. Eating. Building toward the inevitable scream. The darkness was the dragon, calling her name, calling its prey, and there was no escape...

"Machiko?"

Light blared, loud and unwanted. Noguchi started, sat up. She rubbed her eyes. "What-?"

Hiroki stood in her doorway, his hand on the control panel.

The .darkness machine, insatiable...

She shook her head. "I had a dream . . . Hiroki. What time is it?"

"Almost noon." Hiroki smiled apologetically. "I know you were up late last night, sorry to disturb you-"

"What is it?" Noguchi felt the last of the dream slip away as her eyes adjusted to the brightness. She was suddenly aware that she wore only an undershirt, and a tight one at that.

"Doc Revna still hasn't returned, and Mrs. Doc is starting to worry. I've sent out a crew in the copter to search for him, but I thought it would be best if the staff saw that you were in on this, too."

Noguchi nodded. "Thank you, Hiroki. You're right. Give me two minutes to get dressed."

Hiroki averted his eyes politely as she walked to the 'fresher to splash water on her face. Revna wasn't back? He'd been gone-fifteen or sixteen hours, at least. Too long.

She dressed quickly and rinsed her mouth with water. In spite of the cool liquid, she felt hot, her eyes sticky and full of sand. Not enough sleep. Noguchi combed through her hair with her fingers and stepped out to meet Hiroki. She glanced longingly at her bed; a nap later, perhaps.

Doc had probably just had some engine trouble; he would know to stay put and wait for help. Hell, the copter was most likely on its way back with Revna already; nothing to worry about.

Except for the darkness.

She shuddered as they reached the door to the building; her dream

"You okay?"

Noguchi smiled and gave up on the half-remembered image. "Fine. I just -I dreamed it was hot."

Hiroki laughed. "Pure fantasy."

Noguchi smiled again, but felt the shudder deep inside. She hoped the dark feelings were just that, fantasy. She donned her sunglasses and followed Hiroki into the blazing day.

David Spanner had one fuck of a nasty headache. The pressers on the goddamn copter were

incredibly noisy-no, more than that, they were deadly, that was it. He had been sent out because of all of his sins to die by slow torture. Loud torture.

"How about after this we go to the cafe and get some sushi, Spanner? Nice and fresh, maybe the abalone, all squishy and raw, or the octopus-"

"Fuck you very much, Ikeda." Great. Only big party of the year, everyone in town is sleeping it off, and he gets sent to pick up the doc. With the only person in town who wasn't suffering a severe hangover.

His copilot grinned, her smile relaxed and easy. "Or we could have a few cold ones. What do you say? Couple of big frosty quarts of beer, to wash down the snake-roll?"

Spanner scowled. "I could just throw up on you now, save you the trouble of making me."

"No time," she said. "We're almost there."

Ikeda pulled up on the stick as they rounded a cliff and flew into the gorge. Spanner's stomach protested at the sudden dip. He wrapped his arms around his chest and closed his eyes, taking deep breaths.

"You did that on purpose, Ikeda."

"Maybe. Help me look, lush."

Spanner shook his head, eyes still closed. "Uh-uh. You look. I'm just here for the fresh air."

They flew without talking for a few minutes, but it was far from silent. The pressers. It was the goddamn age of science, and no one had invented a decent muffler; what were the techs thinking? Spanner considered jumping. At least it would be quiet . . .

"What the fuck?"

Spanner sat up quickly. They had just come over a low cliff, and on the floor of the gorge

There had been an explosion, a big one.

Huge metallic arches like the rib cage of a giant stretched up from still-smoldering wreckage. The charred ground around the arches were strewn with large chunks of blackened debris-of what, Spanner couldn't tell.

His hangover was forgotten.

As Ikeda started to set down at the edge of the site, he wished he had thought to bring a weapon more powerful than a rynth-stick.

"It's a ship, isn't it?" Spanner scanned the gorge side to side. Lots of places to hide . . .

"Yeah, I think so." Ikeda's eye were wide. "Was a ship. But not any human design I recognize."

She shut off the pressers. The sudden silence wasn't so welcome anymore. Spanner gripped his

rhynth-stick tightly.

They got out of the copter carefully and walked toward the burnt-out shell. It was very quiet. Spanner's fear dissolved into awe as they neared the towering arcs. It was

"Incredible," Ikeda said softly.

Spanner nodded. And from the smell of it, the fire had been recent. Like yesterday, maybe.

"This thing you ever heard of anything like this?"

Spanner looked at her. Ikeda kicked at a chunk of the odd substance.

"Never." She turned and started to poke through the rubble.

"Think of what this means, Ikeda! We're talking intelligent life here, not just some new strain of amoeba! This could be the first real proof, you know?" His brain kicked in to overdrive. Fucking wow!

"Think of the new information! If we could figure out who made this ship, could figure out some way to test this material-" He trailed off, mind alive with the possibilities.

"Why don't you just ask him?"

Spanner twisted around to see Ikeda crouched down by a fallen figure. He stepped closer. "Doc-?" And stopped short.

It wasn't human. Some sort of armored animal, but humanoid form-except this thing was big. Spanner himself stood a little under two meters, and he was probably the tallest man in Prosperity Wells. This guy had half a meter on him, easy. Jesus fucking Buddha.

"Careful, Ikeda."

"I think it's dead," she said, and then watched the figure for a second.

Spanner joined her.

"No, it's breathing," said Spanner. "What the fuck?"

Ikeda shaded her eyes and looked up at him. "You tell me," she said quietly. Her words sounded flat in the hot, dry air.

The initial anxiety he had felt surged back. They were an open target down here. And maybe this guy's friends were nearby . . .

He looked at the steep walls of rock on either side of them and suddenly felt claustrophobic. "Let's get outta here, what say?"

Ikeda nodded and dropped her gaze back to the creature. "Yeah. But help me get him into the copter, first. We'll have to come back to look for Revna later."

They loaded the thing into the copter as quickly as possible considering he weighed about a ton. They

did their best to strap him to the stretcher with the human-sized bonds. It was a tight fit. When they finally lifted, Spanner felt relieved. No way was he coming back later unless everybody in town came with him.

On the trip home he kept his eyes open and aimed at their passenger; his headache had crept back, and it pulsed sharply at his temples as the suns beat down hard in piercing shafts of brightness.

Dr. Miriam Revna was an attractive woman even when she was worried. Which she was—in spite of her calm composure, the lines on her brow and the concern in her smile gave her away. Noguchi felt an instant sympathy for the woman; her attempt to maintain cool and continue functioning in spite of her emotions was a state Noguchi was quite familiar with.

"Is there anything you can think of that might help us locate your spouse?" Hiroki said.

Revna walked over to an examination table and motioned for them to join her. "He went to Iwa Gorge to find more of these," she said, and lifted a plastic sheet to expose some kind of spider. Hiroki frowned and stepped closer.

"They're unclassifiable," the doctor continued.

"Their structure bears characteristics of both carbon-based and silicon-based life forms."

Noguchi nodded. "Yes, I read the report. But what made him decide to look all the way up in Iwa Gorge?"

Revna smiled weakly. "That's where she said she'd found them."

"`She'?" Noguchi and Hiroki almost spoke in unison.

The doctor nodded. "Jame Roth. The young woman who works for Ackland."

"Thank you for your time," Noguchi said. "We will contact you as soon as we know anything, Dr. Revna." She smiled warmly and touched the older woman's hand. "I'm sure everything will be fine."

They walked into the searing heat together and started toward the garage.

"What would Roth be doing at Iwa Gorge?" Hiroki said. "Ackland doesn't have any herds within twenty clicks of there."

"Those things weren't found in Iwa Gorge, Hiroki." Of course! It was obvious once she thought about it.

"What?" Hiroki stopped to look at her.

"Think about it. If you were Ackland and you found some new life form the night before the roundup, would you risk having three years' profit tied up in quarantine? No. You'd say the creature was discovered far from where your herd was pastured."

"But why would he report it at all? The things we saw might not be any threat to rhynt. I mean, if they were like ticks or something, they'd be easy to spot."

Noguchi felt a spark of anger deep in her gut. "To cover his ass. Say his rhynt do come down with

some disease. Maybe the crab things are carriers, they bite an animal and infect it. He's done his duty, right? He reported it, even though they were found a long way from his animals."

Hiroki nodded thoughtfully. "So do we talk to Ackland first, or Roth?"

"Roth. She'd be more likely to admit to something like this than Ackland. Besides, if we go to Ackland first, he might bribe her to stay quiet before we can get to her."

Hiroki smiled appreciatively. "Good thinking, Machiko."

Noguchi barely heard him. "If anything has happened to Kesar Revna, Ackland will be sorry," she said softly. "He sent the doc to chase dust up there. He could have had an accident, hurt himself, and that's a long way from help."

After the ooman craft left, Tichinde and the others moved back to the smashed and burned wreckage to see what they had done.

M'icli-de had wanted to kill them, but Tichinde had held them back; he had a better idea.

Dachande was gone. He'd been dead already, of course, but the oomans were h'ulij-bpe, crazy. In a way, it was fitting. The oomans had taken the old Leader, had left him to be the new one: He was a warrior now, Aseigan had been his first kill. And so he would Lead them to their first Hunt. Later, he would Blood himself, design his own mark, and etch it in place with Hard Meat thwei; and he would also mark the other students as his own.

The ooman craft had surely gone in the direction of their dwellings; and if not, it did not matter. They would go and find the ugly small ones wherever they might be. It was only a matter of how long it would take, and that was not a concern.

They had nothing if not plenty of time.

Chapter 12

Math sucked, and it sucked hard; if Bobby Sheldon had children someday, he would see to it that they never had to do fractions if they didn't feel like it. Because fractions sucked worse than anything. In fact, they sucked shit.

"Bobby?"

He jerked around in his chair and flushed slightly at the sound of his mother's voice. The s-word was totally unallowed, even if he'd only thought about it.

"Yeah?"

"Finish what you're on and go wash up for lunch. You can do the rest later, okay?"

Bobby nodded at his mom. "Kay"

He looked back at the screen and sighed. One-tenth of ten was one. So three-sevenths of twenty was.

Stupid. Why the hell did he have to know this anyway? He tapped the save control and went to wash his hands. He was going to be a rancher, and what rancher needed to know fractions? His dad said that they came in handy for counting heads, but his dad was a rancher and so far as Bobby could tell, Dad had never used that shit.

Bobby walked back into the living room of their small house and looked out the window for Dad. Tomorrow was school day, which he looked forward to as usual; not that class was so great, but it was the only time of the week he got to hang out with the guys. They lived too far out of town for him to go every day, like some of the other kids. Although he'd gone to see the ship come in last night, that'd been cool. He had played spy-tag with Dal and Alan and Hung and eaten about a ton of banana popsicles

Bobby heard his dad before he saw him. Actually, he heard Dax first; the terrier always sounded like a bike out of fuel after a morning's work. Dax padded into view a few seconds before his father and headed straight for the water dish at the side of the house.

"Hey, how's the best eleven-year-old in the world?" Bob Senior opened the door in a blast of hot air and smiled at Bobby. The joke was old, but Bobby grinned; he was the only eleven-year-old on the whole planet, at least for another month. And then Hung's sister, Ri, would have a birthday. Stupid girl.

"What's for lunch, hon?" Dad stood in the doorway and patted his thigh. "C'mon, Daxter, we don't have all day." Dax hurried inside and Dad shut the door against the simmering heat.

Mom walked into the room and smoothed her short blond hair down. She was pretty for a mom, although she was old, at least thirty-six or so. She smiled at Dad and kissed him on his cheek.

"Tuna casserole."

"Tuna! Where'd you get tuna?"

"I traded some of our jerky for three cans of it from one of The Lector's crew." She sounded pleased with herself.

"Good deal. Maybe tomorrow when you take Bobby in, you can see what else you can get."

Bobby followed them into the dining room and listened to them talk about their days. Dad's boss, Mr. Cho, was going to give him a raise; Mom still wanted to build another room onto their small house, a reading room. And there was a rumor that some of the rhyth had contracted a virus of some kind, although none of Cho's got sick.

"It's probably just talk," his father said. "Like that thing about the flies last year. That had everyone going crazy, until the doc declared the whole thing a farce."

"I heard the doc was missing," Mom called from the kitchen. "One of Chigusa's people called this morning to tell us to keep our eyes open. He may have been near the gorge . . ."

She carried a steaming dish into the room and set it on the table. Bobby felt his mouth water; they mostly ate meat and canned vegetables.

"This looks great. Yeah, I heard the same thing, but they've already sent out a copter, probably found him by now. I'll check later, but I doubt they'll need any more help."

Mom spooned the casserole onto their plates. Dax ran into the room and started to whine.

"Hey, no chance, Daxter! You'll get yours later." Dad reached for the water pitcher.

Dax whined louder and went to the front door. Dad sighed and pushed back from the table. "Good timing, Dax; why couldn't--"

He stopped short as Dax growled at the door, teeth bared.

Bobby stood. "What is it, boy? What's the matter?"

Dax continued to growl, and then barked, the sound deep and fierce.

"Bob?" Bobby's mother wore a look of concern. Bobby started around the table, but his dad motioned him back. Dax barked again.

"One of those damned briar-wolves again," his father said, and went to the door. "I thought we'd gotten 'em all." He picked up the carbine that they kept by the coat rack and checked it. And then opened the door.

"Sic 'em, Dax!"

Dax ran outside full speed, his barking a continuous war cry.

Dad stepped onto the porch, Bobby and his mother behind him.

Dax stopped in the middle of the yard and circled, growling. He acted like there was something there-but there wasn't. The dog backed away and edged forward, all the time barking and growling at nothing.

Bobby's eyes widened. There was something! A ripple of-dust and light. Dax flickered like he had gone into some kind of magnifier as he circled again.

Bobby felt his mom's hands grip his shoulders.

"Dad? What-?"

"Both of you, in the house, now!"

His mother pulled him backward, but he still watched. And saw as Dax was lifted off of the ground in a gout of blood. A huge beast-a monster!, appeared from out of nowhere, he held the spear stuck into Daxter!

Bobby heard a dull sound like an ax hitting meat. Dax made one short howl of pain and then went quiet.

"Good God-!" his father whispered.

The monster was tall, masked, inhuman. It shook the dead dog on its spear, sent a rain of red to the ground.

"Be careful, Bob!" His mother almost screamed it.

Bobby was petrified, unable to look away.

"Dax?" He watched as the monster tossed the dog over its shoulder and turned to face his father.

Dad brought the carbine up and aimed. There was a sudden shift and creak from the roof, like when Dad had patched the tiling, like somebody was up there-

-and a ripple of light and dust plunged into his father's skull. Bobby screamed. Dad reached up to clutch at the now-visible metal claws that had worked into his face-

Mom spun him to face the kitchen. Her breath came in short gasps.

"Run, Bobby!"

"Mommy? Is-"

"Run! We have to get to the truck! Out the back!"

He tripped and sprawled on the floor. His mother pulled him up and shoved him toward the rear door.

There was a giant, splintering crunch from the front porch. Bobby and his mother both turned.

The monster crouched in the doorway.

Impossibly fast, it reached for Mom, grabbed her-

And ripped her throat open.

Once again, the sound of meat being cut.

Warmth dotted Bobby's face, turned his vision to red.

He screamed, "Mom!"

He ran. There was no time to think, only move. The flier outside his parents' room, Daddy had shown him how-

Bobby ducked across the hall and into their bedroom. Without a pause, he ran and jumped through the thin plastic window. There was another scream, his-as the window shattered, and there was the bike, within reach-

He hit the ignition button as if he had ridden a thousand times. The machine roared to life, raised up from the ground-

-and behind him was the sound of some evil bird, screeching, hoarse and piercing. Something touched his shoe, still inside the house-

-and the bike lurched forward, pulled him away. There was another, and another of the murdering creatures, all claws and hate. They came out of nowhere, appearing like magic.

They reached for him-

-and he took off, tilted wildly. He aimed the bike east, toward town.

He kept his sweaty hand jammed to the accelerator. Behind him the things howled and screamed, horrible, horrible, Mom, Dad-

There was a noise like gunfire, but hollow-and the wall of rock in front of him to the left exploded, sharp pieces hammered the bike, stuck into his skin, but it didn't matter, it didn't hurt. And beyond that, Bobby knew nothing.

Tichinde was pleased. True, they had lost one but they had faced the deadly oomans and come away unscathed, with two kills. The escaped one would die soon enough, with the rest. It had surely gone to alert the others; they would have to be prepared . . .

Tichinde watched as the other yautja danced and cried over the victory. He himself had killed the second ooman; it had been without weapon, but as dangerous as he had heard oomans to be, that was allowable. Hunt or be Hunted . . .

Dachande would have disapproved. Tichinde flared his tusks in amusement at the thought. Dachande was thei-de; his opinion no longer held meaning. Besides, with no one to hold judgment over their actions, they would take what they wanted; from what he had seen so far, the oomans were not so dangerous as the yautja had been led to believe.

Chapter 13

Roth cleaned the dirt from under her nails with her teeth. It was a nervous and dirty habit; Cathie was always getting on her case about it. But considering the circumstances at the moment, she didn't really give a flying fuck about biting her nails.

The two heads of Chigusa on, world stood over her small table in the rec center and glowered at her. Creep snuffled blissfully by her feet, probably thrilled to get out of the sun; she wished she felt the same.

"Do you know what charges you could face if Ackland's rhynt turn up infected with dangerous bacteria or a virus?" Hiroki had always been an amiable sort, but his eyes flashed with anger. At her. "And you were responsible for sending them to Earth?"

Roth opened her mouth to speak, but was cut off by the Noguchi woman.

"Ms. Roth-if anything has happened to Kesar Revna, you will be held accountable." She leaned toward Roth, expression cold. "How do you feel about that? He's been missing for almost a day now. He might be injured. Or dead."

Roth nodded slowly. She had lied for Ackland, had put her reputation at stake for him-after all, he was the boss. But she wasn't about to get caught holding this bag; it was just a little bit too heavy.

"Ackland told me to," she said quietly. "I realize that doesn't excuse my actions, but I just work for the man, you know?"

Hiroki and Noguchi exchanged glances.

"So Ackland told you to tell Revna that the spider creatures were in Iwa Gorge?" Noguchi leaned forward again, but her eyes weren't as angry as before.

"Right."

"What the hell is going on here?"

Roth looked up, surprised.

Ackland marched across the room, his face sweaty and red.

"Roth? What have you done?" Ackland stopped at their table and glared down at her accusingly. "What's this I hear about you lying to Doc Revna?"

Roth felt raw anger hit her system. He was going to let her take the fall, after she'd worked her ass off for him for three years!

What a surprise.

She stood abruptly. "Mr. Ackland, I've already explained the situation. And I quit. I'll expect to be paid within the month." Roth nodded at Noguchi and Hiroki.

"Please let me know if I can help in any way, and contact me about charges as soon as you've decided." She whistled softly; Creep jumped up to follow her to the exit. Already she could hear Ackland's voice raised in a huff.

". . . I thought a man had a right to be present when his accusers were testifying against him!"

She was glad to get out. Ackland talked big, there would be quite a scene-but he had enough sense to know when he was caught. Hiroki was a fair man . . . but Noguchi? Something about her was pure steel.

Roth would hate to cross that one; nitrogen queen was right.

"So you were planning to try me in absentia? Don't you need a judge to hold trial? Or is that some old-fashioned notion?"

"Shut up, Ackland."

Stunned, he did.

"You've violated company policy and jeopardized the security of this complex and its personnel, Ackland. I figure that's all the legal authority I need." Noguchi was royally pissed, but she kept her voice low. This overblown rancher had the gall to try to screw things for everyone and then cover it up?

"You really think you've got the backing to make charges stick? In case you haven't noticed, you aren't exactly the most popular person in this settlement." Ackland was shaken, she could tell, but he smirked at her.

"You're right, I'm just the new boss." She had to make a conscious effort not to shout. "But Doc

Revna has been here since the beginning, treating the ranchers' stock, treating their families-delivering their babies. So far, he's just missing. But if he turns up dead, who do you think folks are going to side with, you? Or his grieving widow?"

Ackland seemed to shrink a little in front of her. He dropped his gaze to the unlit cigar he held and spoke uneasily.

"Look, I didn't expect the doc to go out looking for more of those things-"

Hiroki stepped in. "But if he did, you wanted to make sure he looked in the wrong place."

Ackland flared again, but his anger seemed weak. "We had no way of knowing whether those rhyth were infected or not! I didn't want to delay the whole operation-"

Hiroki frowned angrily and pointed his finger at the rancher's chest. "Didn't it occur to you that trouble with your herd could be the reason The Lector is still parked out front?"

Noguchi raised her eyebrows. "What?"

"I meant to tell you-" Hiroki started, but she was already headed to one of the wall screens. She punched up a southern compound view and looked in disbelief.

"Those rhyth are going to be hell to manage after standing in the sun all day!" She turned to glare accusingly at Ackland. He looked away.

Noguchi tapped into operations. Collins appeared in front of her.

"Collies-why hasn't The Lector taken its first load back to its orbiter?"

"I couldn't say-ah, Machiko. We've been trying to contact them all day, but they haven't responded . . ."

"Send someone in person."

Collins nodded. "I'll go myself."

"Good. And don't waste your time with Conover, talk to Strandberg. Remind him we're on a tight schedule. Report back immediately, okay?"

"Gotcha."

The screen went blank. At least that was taken care of. She walked back to the table where Ackland had sat down, his face blank.

"If this has anything to do with your little lie, Ackland," she said smoothly, calmly, "I'll see to it that you are put away for it. Until hell freezes solid."

The look in his eyes, defeated and guilty, was exactly what she wanted.

Scott ached all over. It was the hangover, and that Japanese woman, she was responsible

Except he couldn't move his arms. And he was standing up-?

He opened his heavy eyelids and blinked several times. It was dark, but he was inside; there was weak light coming from somewhere . . .

"Tom?" His voice was a raspy croak. God, he was thirsty! He cleared his throat and tried again.

"Tom. Can you hear me?"

No answer. Was he in a med center, maybe? There might have been some kind of accident . . .

He took a deep breath and spoke as loud as he could. "Hello! Where am I? Tom!" His throat protested; it felt like he'd swallowed a bucket of sand.

A slow hissing filled the room. The shadows in the room moved, unfurled themselves from the walls and the dark corners. He could make out

Teeth.

Jesus!

He tried to move, but his arms were pinned.

"Oh, God, no-" His voice was barely a whisper.

The room swam with darkness, and then once again, there was nothing.

". . . the company has billions invested in this project," she continued. "Where the hell do you get off fucking with us? Not to mention possibly endangering the lives of millions, maybe billions of people? You think the quarantine laws are there just for the fun of it?" She was still on a roll and unwilling to doppler down.

Ackland hadn't spoken for several minutes. Neither had Hiroki.

"Well?"

Ackland looked up at her and said nothing.

The tension was broken by an incoming message over Noguchi's com. "Ms. Noguchi, report to the med center immediately. Ms. Noguchi to the med center." Miriam Revna. She sounded agitated.

Noguchi tapped the received button and looked at the rancher. "You'd better pray they've found Revna, Ackland."

"I didn't make him go out there! And if he hurt himself, it's his own fault!"

She hurried out of the rec center and was blasted by the afternoon heat.

Ackland and Hiroki followed; she deliberately walked ahead of them to avoid further conversation for the moment; by the sound of it, Ackland was trying to reason with Hiroki, his deep voice apologetic and contrite.

Asshole.

Noguchi waited at the entry to the lab for them to catch up; if Revna was dead, she wouldn't want to walk into it alone.

The three of them stepped into the lab together. Noguchi saw what was strapped to an examination table, and took in a deep breath, to scream or faint she didn't know. Dragon

Chapter 14

"So much for your precious quarantine," said Ackland softly.

Noguchi closed her mouth. Miriam Revna and two local pilots were looking at a readout on a small screen across the lab.

One of the pilots, Spanner, turned and grinned. "Hey, look what we found!" He pointed at the creature unnecessarily.

Hiroki took a step toward it and then paused. "Is it-alive?"

Miriam Revna stood and walked over. "Yes. It's injured, but not in any danger. At least, I don't think so. Four cracked ribs and extensive contusions in the dorsal region. And it's male, I'm fairly certain."

Noguchi saw what she meant about the maleness. She couldn't miss it.

The thing was a giant, maybe two and a half meters tall. Humanoid, but its head like some sort of mutated crab. It wore armor, and was bound to the exam table by several thick straps of rhyth hide-its long, taloned arms were speckled, reptilian, but not scaled. Noguchi saw the slight rise and fall of its chest. There was a mask over its face. What was it breathing? she wondered.

After the initial shock, she tried to remember what the company's off-planet manual contained on the subject of possible XT encounters; something like "Avoid direct contact until trained personnel arrive!"

Looks like we're going to write a whole new chapter . . .

"We found a ship, too," Spanner said. "It's mostly blown to shit, but we should get a salvage team up there!"

Noguchi found her tongue. "Any idea what it is, Doctor?"

Revna looked at her blankly. "Hmm? I'm sorry, I'm not thinking clearly today"

Noguchi nodded. "Of course. We are still looking for Kesar. I just wondered if there was any connection between this arid those unclassifieds that Roth brought in."

The doctor shook her head. "This creature has a completely different cell structure. No relationship at all. He"-she nodded at the monster-"is more like us than the little crablike things."

Hiroki walked over to a table covered with pieces of the alien's armor. He held up a broken staff tipped with a vicious looking blade. "Quite an arsenal."

Noguchi joined him and picked up a large chunk of dark metal with a strap. She could barely lift it. At closer inspection, it was apparently some kind of weapon, a rifle or a flamethrower. It was damaged.

She set it down and picked up a mask.

"This is stuff you'd pack for a hunting trip. Or an invasion," she said. "This guy's no peaceful explorer."

Hiroki fingered the strap on the odd weapon. "I don't think this is his first trip to Ryushi, either. I can't place the rest of it, but this strap is definitely rhyth-hide."

"Any sign of the Doc?-" Ackland nodded at the pilots.

The slender young woman, Ikeda, sighed. "Negatory. But Iwa Gorge connects with a maze of canyons and arroyos; it'd be easy to get lost. We'll go back out pretty soon."

There was a small shield of some kind with the other weaponry, a plate-sized disk with a strange looking creature etched on it. Noguchi ran a finger over the blackened metallic substance. The drawing was the head of an unknown animal or bug, an elongated skull with sharp teeth and no eyes; she traced the outline thoughtfully. There was something familiar about it.

Was it a dream? It was dark and hot . . .

She looked again at the unconscious alien and shuddered. Maybe Doc Revna hadn't gotten lost

There was a scream from outside, followed by a crash. Noguchi started; what now? She and Hiroki ran to the door together with Ackland behind them.

A flier had slammed into the transmitter building directly across from the med center. There was no fire but a lot of oily smoke; a small body lay on the hot pavement next to the accident. Several others had come out of the op center and were also running toward the scene. Hiroki got there first.

"What happened?" Noguchi called out.

Hiroki knelt by the victim and carefully touched its face. "It's the Sheldon boy," he said.

Noguchi looked down at the child's still, tear-streaked face and felt her heart tighten. So young . . .

The boy opened his eyes and started to scream.

Bobby woke up with a scream. It was hot, the air smelled burnt, and his parents

He sat up quickly and looked around. He was in Prosperity Wells, there were a bunch of people gathered around him and the flier lay nearby, broken.

"Bobby," said a calm voice. Mr. Shimura was next to him. "Are you hurt-?"

"Monsters," he whispered. And he started to cry.

Ms. Noguchi was there, too. She leaned down next to Mr. Shimura and smiled at him. "It's okay, Bobby. You're safe now. What happened?"

He closed his eyes, unable to stop the tears. "Mumonsters killed my dad and then my mommy and then before that they kuh-kuh-killed Dax and we couldn't see them, but then I got away-"

He couldn't say anything else; he wanted to tell them how scared he had been, how there were so many of them, and how Dax had seen them first-but all that came out were loud sobs of terror and sadness.

"Let's get him to the med center," someone said. Gentle hands lifted him off of the burning ground and carried him away. One of his legs hurt really bad and he cried harder.

Cool air washed over him as they went inside, the world dimmed.

"We've got an emergency here, Doc!" the person holding him shouted. Mr. Shimura.

Bobby opened his eyes and looked past Dr. Revna at the medical room. And he started to scream again; just like the tears, he was unable to stop. Fear and hatred and sadness and anger for the thing that they had lying on a table.

"Monsters! Monsters! Monsters!"

Dachande remembered movement after the loneliness of pain, the new pain. Once, he had opened his eyes and seen that he was indoors, in a moving ship. There had been heat and then cool, and strange, animal sounds-

He realized he could see a little, but could not focus. Dark and light shapes folded and formed in front of him. But now his gaze sharpened, just for a second, at the horrible cries of some creature in front of him. It screamed and howled its nonsense language, the thing. It was pale and little, like-

Like an ooman?

Dachande sank back into the quiet darkness. Fear fought to rise in him.

He was caught by monsters.

Chapter 15

Noguchi and Hiroki walked into a room filled with low, nervous chatter and grim faces. The gathered ranchers and Chigusa staff fell silent and looked at them, their expressions fearful and expectant. The rec center was packed, but suddenly a hundred-plus people didn't seem like so many.

Noguchi cleared her throat. "Before we start, is everyone here?"

Mason stood from his seat near the door and read from a piece of paper. "Everyone except Ikeda, both Revnas, three ops people, two of Marianetti's people who are on their way-and the Sheldons. Oh, and the Barkers haven't answered yet."

Noguchi nodded. "Ikeda will be here shortly, and Miriam Revna is tending to Bobby Sheldon-"

A slender blond woman called out from a back corner of the room, her voice tinged with worry. "Is it

true? About the Sheldons?" Noguchi recognized her as one of the garage maintenance workers, a mechanic.

Noguchi took a deep breath; she and Hiroki had discussed how to handle the situation after Ikeda had called in, but it wasn't going to be easy-the Sheldons had apparently been well liked on Ryushi.

"I'm not sure what you've heard, but I'll tell you what we know," she said. She consciously kept her voice low and firm; panic in the crowd would help no one.

"Approximately two hours ago Bobby Sheldon came into town on a flier, alone. He said that his parents had been killed by a group of XT life forms. Just before he arrived, Spanner and Ikeda found an injured . . . being in Iwa Gorge that is currently unconscious in the med center. Bobby Sheldon identified this being as similar to the life forms that killed his parents." Noguchi took another deep breath. "When we were unable to reach Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon by radio, we sent Ashley Ikeda on a flyby. I am sad to report that she just called in with the news that the Sheldon house is in flames, and their breeding stock has been slaughtered.

"We must assume that an attack is imminent."

There was a slight murmur through the crowd. A few people coughed, a few children started to cry softly.

Loren Gaunt, one of the ops screen-watchers, stood and raised his voice to be heard above the uneasy group. "So what are we going to do with the thing in the med center? And what is it, exactly?"

Several others nodded.

Hiroki stepped forward. "At this time, we know very little about the creature currently in Miriam Revna's care. It is a large, humanoid being, unlike anything previously registered in the EXT guide. It is under restraint, and has shown no signs of recovering so far-although Revna doesn't seem to think it's in critical condition

"You mean you haven't killed it?" Gaunt sounded incredulous. "After it murdered Bob and Sylvan?" A couple of others called out agreement.

Noguchi raised a hand for silence. "The creature in the med center was not involved in their deaths; the time frame-

"Fuck the time frame," said Gaunt. "For all we know, that thing was responsible for sending its buddies out to murder them!"

The calls of agreement were shouts now.

Noguchi felt that spark of anger she'd had for Ackland. She clapped her hands sharply above her head and yelled.

"Be quiet!"

The room quieted. An infant howled loudly in the back and was soothed by its mother.

"Perhaps if we all panic and turn ourselves into mindless animals, we'll get out of this situation! Who

else wants to add to the problem?"

Her voice carried well. She could feel her cheeks flushed with anger, and was gratified to see that Gaunt's were also red-he dropped his gaze to the floor and didn't speak again.

Noguchi nodded. She had everyone's attention.

A young boy raised his hand.

"Yes?"

"Is Bobby okay?" The boy was no more than twelve; his voice was high and shaky, obviously upset by the situation. His father placed a hand on the child's shoulder.

She nodded and attempted to smile. "He has a sprained ankle and is in shock, but he'll be all right. Squires has agreed to watch him for a while."

Noguchi motioned at the young teacher who chewed nervously at her lip.

She scanned the room, watched the fearful crowd with a calm eye.

This is bad, but we will handle it. She felt in control; for once, the people of Ryushi looked to her to tell them what to do. She wouldn't let them down.

"If we could hold other questions for a few moments, I'll tell you what we propose. Mr. Shimura is in charge of security. All able bodied personnel will be expected to take a shift on watch, and anyone not on duty will remain within the main complex. First, we'll do what we can to barricade the town with the cargo crates from the move here-" She nodded at Mason. "Mason here will head up that maneuver. Anyone trained on lift equipment will report to him after the meeting. There is a thirty-three-hour curfew in effect as of now; no one will go anywhere alone unless they've cleared it with me or Hiroki, and it will have to be a good reason. Those of you with weapons, please list them with Spanner ASAP Ben Davidson and Jess Jonson have volunteered to show our younger members holoivid graphics at the school this afternoon, so meet with them afterward for specific times."

People nodded; she could almost feel the fear in the room become less tangible. It was a good thing to remember that most crises just needed some organization and clear thinking to be handled efficiently.

Hiroki read from a list the first watch team and then suggested another meeting later, at dusk or when the work was finished, whichever came first. As the gathering drew to its close, Noguchi was pleased to see that order and confidence had been restored quickly after Gaunt's outburst.

Except

Except only a few people had heard what Bobby Sheldon had said. Or seen what the thing in the lab looked like . . .

Noguchi shook her head. It didn't matter. Wishing for other circumstances was pointless.

She took a deep breath and went outside to do what she could.

Twilight was almost there when it occurred to Noguchi that she hadn't heard back from Collins.

Under Hiroki's capable direction, they had set up an admirable line of defense; the house-sized moving crates had been lined up around the perimeter of the compound quickly; with the willing aid of both the ranchers and the staff, the work had been neatly done.

A copter crew had made runs to fetch all of the weapons listed by the ranchers; Noguchi had felt her heart sink at the inventory. Twenty-seven scatter guns, ten pistols earmarked for a police force that had never been needed, and six oldfashioned flare guns. There were also a few hunting rifles and handguns. Not much.

She sat in the ops center hunched over a cup of black coffee that was barely tepid. Her body ached from all of the work; Hiroki had insisted that she take five, and she was only too glad to comply. Hiroki was going to take a team to walk the compound and secure any place they had missed. Around her, four staffers watched screens. Noguchi was exhausted, and there was still too much to do, too many variables to consider

Like The Lector.

Noguchi straightened. The crew outside was just finishing up, and another meeting was coming up within the hour-but had she seen anyone from the ship? That obnoxious Conover-?

"Weaver, have you seen Collins anywhere?"

The tall, dark-haired staff woman looked up from her console. "No. I haven't at least-Downey, have you seen Collins?"

Sid Downey shrugged. "No one's seen him since he went to talk to The Lector's people."

Noguchi sighed and stood up reluctantly. "Any progress?"

Downey shook his head. "The Barkers still don't answer. And Dr. Revna refuses to be moved to the main building other, than that, everyone is accounted for."

Noguchi patted him on the shoulder as she walked toward the door. "Keep up the good work. I'm going to go talk to The Lector folks, see if they've kidnapped Collins."

She almost collided with Hiroki in the doorway.

"Where are you going?" Hiroki looked like she felt. Dark smears of dust painted his face, and his eyes looked weary and old.

"Collins still hasn't come back from the ship; I'm going to find out what's going on with them. But first, I'm going to see if I can talk some sense into Dr. Revna."

Hiroki frowned. "It's not safe, Machiko." His tone was gentle.

She felt oddly touched by his concern, but she was also tired of not knowing what the hell that ship was up to. "Someone has to go; may as well be me."

Hiroki looked at her seriously for a beat and then unhooked his holster strap. He handed the revolver to her, butt first.

"I see you've made up your mind-but take this. It's a 12.5 mm Smith. It belonged to my grandfather. It is loaded with jacketed bullets, for hunting big game."

She stared at the weapon.

He pushed it into her hands. "If you have to shoot something, make sure it has a thick wall behind it these bullets will go right through a rhyth. I'll call the sentries and let them know you're on your way."

Noguchi accepted the weapon gingerly and nodded. She knew how to shoot, of course, it was SOP for offworld execs to take a course. Never knew what you'd run into out on the frontier. For once, the company was right.

"Fine. Have Weaver set up the sat-link as soon as the suns set, and ask them to cut a deal for Marine support." She smiled tiredly. "And thanks, Hiroki. Be careful."

He smiled in return. "You're doing a good job, Machiko."

She walked into the late-afternoon heat and headed for the med center, her thoughts jumbled with exhaustion. There was still a crew of a dozen or so outside, setting the final walls into place. Amazing, that in the space of one day, they'd gone from peaceful town to armed camp. The gun was heavy in her hands. She paused long enough to strap the holster on and settle it on her hip. Still heavy but comforting. She wanted desperately to believe that their measures were needless, but her gut told her otherwise; tired though she was, there was a chilling certainty in her bones that tonight would be a long one, and come morning, things might be very different . . .

Miriam watched the stats on the screen with something like awe; she was glad to have something to do besides worry over Kesar, and the alien was distracting, to say the least, now that Bobby was gone.

Her stomach tightened at the thought of her husband; she had always thought that she would know if he was gone-that deep knowing that two people shared if enough years had passed. But there was nothing; she just missed him; she kept thinking of what he would say about the incredible reads that flashed across the console . . .

"Doctor . . ."

Revna turned in her chair, heart pounding. "Ms. Noguchi?"

The attractive Japanese woman smiled gently. "I'm sorry, we haven't heard anything-"

The doctor took a deep breath. "Then you've come to check on our patient." She tilted her head toward the prone form on the exam table nearby. "He's still not awake, but he's making remarkable progress; his respiration has deepened, and I believe that two of his ribs have begun to heal."

The gentle smile never left Noguchi's face. The obvious sympathy there made Revna want to cry, so she turned back to the screen.

"I'll let you know if he regains consciousness," she said.

"Doctor, I'd like to move you and our `visitor' to the main complex; the security is better there, and-"

"Thank you, no," said Revna. "I prefer to remain here. I have everything I need to look after my patient..." She hoped she sounded collected and normal, but she heard her voice crack slightly on the truth. "Besides, this is where Kesar will come when he returns."

She didn't turn around, but she sensed the Noguchi woman's hesitation. Before, they could have hoped for an accident, with her husband lying injured, waiting for help. But now? Revna could almost hear her thoughts-that she was fooling herself. Kesar Revna had undoubtedly met the same fate as Bobby's parents. He had gone right to where the wrecked ship lay.

Miriam spoke again, her voice firmer this time. "I'm fine, Ms. Noguchi. Really."

"Very well, Doctor," she said. "I'll check back on you later."

"Thank you, Ms. Noguchi. Machiko."

When she heard the door close, Revna finally relaxed a bit. A lone tear trickled down her cheek; she wiped at it absently and concentrated on the task at hand. He would be back soon; and if he wasn't, she would find him somehow . . .

Mason rolled his head and yawned; he and Riley had run out of things to say about twenty minutes ago. The initial adrenaline of the situation was long gone, and their nervous small talk had disintegrated into a watchful silence. At least it wouldn't get any hotter today; the suns were headed down. And in another hour or so, he and Riley would be inside drinking beer and shooting the shit; he pitied the next watch; being out here after dark would be a bitch.

"Hi, Riley. Hi, Mason." The boss lady walked toward them smoothly, a smile of greeting on her lips. Speak of the devil.

Riley nodded back and Mason stepped forward. He dropped his cigarette on the dusty ground and squashed it with one boot.

"Ms. Noguchi," he said politely. "Mr. Shimura said you were coming. I'm to escort you to The Lector."

"Let me guess, Mason-Hiroki ordered you to follow me even if I declined your escort?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She nodded and sighed. "Well, come on then." She stepped ahead of him and headed toward the ship.

Mason glanced over his shoulder to see Riley grinning at him and shot him the finger; smarmy bastard. He jogged to catch up to Noguchi and walked in front of her. This would be a prime opportunity to tell the management what he had been thinking.

"You know, I think we're worrying too much. I mean, look at the size of the complex. You'd need an army to attack, right?" He looked back at Noguchi and stopped at the base of the ramp for her to catch up. She didn't answer, didn't even look at him, really. He might as well be talking to a block of plastecrete.

"I think those XTs are gonna take one look at Prosperity Wells and go back home," he continued. Fuck her, anyway. He stepped into the open door at the top of the ramp and pointed his scatter gun at

nothing in particular; it was dark in there. He took another step inside and then turned his head to call back to the ice queen.

"Just give me a second to get the lights." He edged to the left and groped blindly with one hand. Something wet dripped on his hand.

"Hey," he said under his breath. Another drop of warm liquid splashed the top of his head. Fucking disgusting! Where was the goddamn light switch anyway?

He got the impression of sudden movement overhead-and then there was only pain.

Noguchi stood at the top of the ramp and listened to Mason babble mindlessly. Mason was something of a jerk, that was certain. He stepped into the dark and fumbled for the lights, still chattering away. She turned to look at him

-just in time to see him lifted straight up into the darkness. There was a strangled, wet cry

-and the darkness rushed forward to greet her, a dozen arms and a thousand teeth, all screaming, all hungry.

Chapter 16

Noguchi grabbed for the revolver in slow motion. The single patch of darkness separated into many forms; she fell backward as the dozen or so nightmares came at her.

What-?

She fired four times and stumbled down the ramp without looking. The deafening shots echoed from the walls and in her head and two of the things dropped.

She backed up against the shield wall, revolver extended toward the huge bugs, Jesus, they were half again her size! They came, but slower, their short, twisted limbs reached for her. They hissed and cried out like demented banshees. Double rows of teeth snapped and dripped a clear, slimy mucus.

Noguchi didn't take her gaze off them, even as she heard more of the things come down the ramp.

She was going to die-

She panted shallowly and backed farther up the incline, revolver heavy in her trembling hands.

Another of the bugs rushed forward with a scream. She jerked the trigger again and again. The thing howled in fury and pain and fell-

She fired again, only-the shots were quiet, dull clicks. The gun was empty.

Was there more ammunition on the belt? Did she have time to reload?

Yes. No.

The nightmares advanced; she backed up, her last moment of life. Nothing flashed before her eyes

save the horror coming for her; no memories, fond or otherwise, came to haunt or comfort her. She was in the moment and in this moment, the leading bug cried out and jumped-

-and a hollow thump sounded behind her, as if something had imploded. A rush of heat stirred her hair, and the creature closest flew backward in a rain of hissing liquid, its head gone.

The horde screamed in unison but stayed at the bottom of the wall, their dark limbs clattering on the ground in-anger?

Noguchi risked a glance behind her.

The dragon-?

It was the monster, masked and armored. It held the spear with the broken shaft-except it was whole now, the long pole mended; the heavy dark weapon it held was slightly different-

It wasn't the creature from the med lab. It was one of the others, the killers.

It aimed the weapon at her and fired.

Noguchi felt a cry escape her throat-

-and another of the bugs exploded behind her.

She looked back down at the advancing army and felt a rush of air again behind her.

The monster warrior leapt over her and landed on the pack of seething black bugs.

Noguchi could do nothing but stare.

The dragon fell into battle, its movements so swift she could barely follow them. The savage spear sliced and cut another bug in pieces. Another shot from the strange weapon and dismembered limbs clattered to the ground.

The blood of the dark spidery bugs hissed and melted into the plastcrete; some kind of acid-?

She couldn't tell from the screams which was which. As the warrior spun and hacked two of the bugs at once, a flash of Noguchi's childhood came to her

-Samurai-

More of the bugs came down the ramp, scabbled wildly to get at the warrior.

Noguchi, still unable to move, looked on at the storm of death and battle.

Gkyaun had been sent in to scout, but the Hunting he had found was too good to walk away from. Here was a sickly, pale ooman---with no defense! He had watched as the cowering ooman's small burner died, then as the kainde amedha swarm approached the ooman. It did not seem able to defend itself. Where was its spear? Its wrist knives? This terrified creature was the monster of which he had been frightened as a suckling? It was a joke.

The ooman was thei-de without him; he would save the ugly creature for later.

First, the Hard Meat

Gkyaun's heart hammered with glory as he caught the ooman's attention by burning the first drone. The drone exploded.

The others cringed, drew back, looked upon him with the respect befitting a Blooded warrior. On some deep cellular level, they knew his kind. Knew the danger he presented.

This dtai'kai'-dte was nothing! He could have won in infancy! Yautja would cry his name this night, victor of drone and ooman alike. He would bring the ooman's blackened skull to drink from

He fired again, and was again rewarded with a shower of acidic thwei. The Hard Meat screamed in loss.

Gkyaun howled the war cry and jumped. He landed amid the hissing drones and moved among them like the setg-in, deadly and quick. So easy! He spun and slashed, burned and cut at the same time.

Two bugs fell with one slice of his spear.

A drone from behind lost its head; he gutted yet another.

He was Paya, the conquering warrior! Thwei ran at his feet, the Hard Meat shrank in terror-!

More came at him, a relentless flow of fury and sound. He pivoted, Hunted, his every movement was an arc of doom and pain.

Noguchi gulped air and pushed herself backward, toward the top of the shield wall. The warrior was a dervish of wild energy and prowess-the nightmare creatures fell all around him.

But more monsters flooded toward him. And despite the fighter's speed and strength, he fought poorly; he hadn't allowed for any outcome other than victory. It was as if he were a karateka who had mastered kata, but had never faced an opponent in actual combat . . .

The clamoring dark animals surrounded him, pulled him down. The warrior struggled, but to no avail; one of the giant bugs ripped off his mask with one spidery clawed arm and plunged its razor teeth forward-

Noguchi scrambled backward and to her feet, atop the wall. She ran back toward the complex and didn't look back. The cries of hunger and triumph followed her, told her the warrior was no more.

What were these things? What new disaster had come to visit them?

Chapter 17

The noise came from a million clicks to his right. It was a familiar sound, one he had known for a very long time, back on Earth, from before he knew what it meant.

He felt his consciousness as it rose upward, swam to the surface of a depthless abyss-the knowing

part of him, the tomes of understanding. He fought to keep it from happening, but was helpless to stop it. There was something that he didn't want to know, was terrified of knowing . . .

The sound again. Scott? Scott, are you?

Scott?

Scott was him. The blissful nothing dwindled away as the aches in his body stepped in to greet him, coupled with a horrible, consuming hunger.

"Scott?"

Scott opened his swollen eyes to blackness and took a deep breath. He almost choked on the cloying, wet air.

"Scott, are you awake? Can you hear me?"

He coughed, the minor movement sparking a thousand pains. "Yeah." He swallowed gummy spittle and turned his head toward the voice. "Tom?"

"I think I can get my arm free," the other pilot said.

Scott couldn't see him, but his friend was only a few meters away from the sounds of hurried struggle.

The rest of the nightmare clicked in to place. "Where did they go?" Scott strained to see in the dark room, memories of hissing motion and giant teeth adding sharp panic to his dull and clouded mind. "Tom, did you see them? Where did they all go?"

"Shh! I'm almost out-" A grunt of exertion and Tom's welcome face appeared in front of him, grimy, fearful, pale.

"Hurry! Jesus, where did they go? Get me out of this, hurry, please!"

"Be quiet!" Tom spoke in a harsh whisper and reached for Scott's immobilized hands. The ropes of resinous dark material holding him in place snapped and crumbled to the floor.

Tom glanced over his shoulder every other second, eyes wide.

As soon as one of his arms was free, Scott tore at the weird matter at his midriff and leg-and tumbled to the floor.

He had been suspended a half meter in the air.

Tom slipped an arm around his waist and helped him up, speaking quickly and quietly.

"They were all around us, and something happened outside, I guess; they swarmed out of here like mad bees, and I didn't know if you were here-" Tom seemed to realize he was babbling and cut himself off.

"It's okay, man. Let's just get the hell out of here, okay?"

Leaning on each other heavily, they stumbled toward the emergency hatch. It was hard to see anything, but Scott could make out areas of the dock where the shadows were denser, more solid.

A raspy breath came from one of the darker corners of the room. Scott stopped and turned toward the noise. At first he couldn't see what was the cause-and then he was unable to believe what he saw.

It was one of the creatures.

It was bigger than the others. Its huge, flattened skull was curved downward, its limbs drawn up in front of its dripping jaws. The thing was curled up, a horrible caricature of the human fetal position.

"I think it's asleep," Tom said softly. "It hasn't moved since before all the other ones left."

Scott couldn't pull his gaze away from the dormant monster, the slow rise and fall of the thing's furred body with each slow breath. It was the most frightening thing he had ever seen, like a giant spider-lizard with knives for teeth, deadly, insectile. Strings of sticky goo fell from its jaws, the dim light from the partly opened dock door reflected in the glistening slime.

"Let's go before she wakes up," Tom whispered urgently.

"She-?" Scott shook his head and looked at the pilot, but Tom was already pulling him toward the hatch.

"Yeah," Scott whispered back. He wanted nothing more than to get the fuck out of there. Get help, get weapons; just see another human face. But as they hurried to their escape, Scott glanced over his shoulder to look at the thing once again. Where had they come from? What were they capable of? There was something strangely familiar about them . . .

He did a double take. His heart pounded. The angle of the creature's head seemed to have changed slightly . . .

"Come on!" Tom pulled at his arm.

Scott nodded mutely and followed. There would be time to think about why later, not now, not fucking now . . .

Scott shuddered as they reached the emergency hatch. The thing was frighteningly similar to the picture in his head of the jabberwock, from that old poem.

He had the sudden, certain feeling that this was far from being over with.

Noguchi ran through the deserted streets of Prosperity Wells. There was distant thunder, harsh and unreal

Thunder? She grabbed for the comset around her neck, feeling like an idiot for not having thought of it before; everything had happened so fast.

"Hiroki, this is Machiko! Do you read?" ,

A hiss of static, and then thunder assaulted her ears. She twisted the volume switch in a panic. Not thunder. Gunfire.

"Hiroki! Come in, please!"

"... achiko?" The reception was bad, but it was him. The sound of his voice was music.

"Listen, I'm approaching the south lock. We're in real trouble, you're not going to believe this!"

"At this point, I'd believe anything," Hiroki said. His usual calm was gone, replaced by tension and worry. The sounds of weapon-fire clattered loudly through the coin, blocking out whatever he said next.

"Hiroki? Where are you?" Her thoughts buzzed and clamored loudly as she stopped in the street and listened. Nothing. "Hiroki? Are you there?" Her voice cracked in tension.

". . . welding the inner doors of the west lock. We'll hold them off as long as . . ." Static. ". . . wish we could see what the hell we're . . ."

Noguchi slapped the receiver, hard. "I can't hear you!"

His next words came through clearly. "Get everyone to The Lector," he said. And the com fuzzed out.

"No!" she breathed. "Hiroki?"

He was gone. There had to be another way! The Lector wasn't an option anymore, there was nowhere to go

Noguchi ran toward the main well, where Riley and Mason had been only a few moments before. Riley would still have his weapon, they could

Riley lay facedown in the dust, the late sun shining on the pool of red that had formed around him. The dry soil drank deeply; even as she watched, the blood drained into the earth, leaving a wet stain of crimson mud. A large hole had been punched through Riley's back, the ragged edges raw and meaty. His rifle lay nearby.

She ran to the fallen form and crouched next to it. She pressed numb fingers to Riley's throat and gagged on the thick, metallic scent of fresh blood. No pulse.

"Shit," she whispered. She looked around, eyes wide. The warriors, like the one that had saved her life

She reached for Riley's rifle quickly, stood. And heard a sound right behind her, nothing so much like a sharp intake of breath. It wasn't Riley, that was certain. She turned in slow motion-

-and saw nothing. She let out a sigh of relief. There was a lot to be worried about, but no immediate threat, at least.

That was when the earth rose up, the dust wavering in the dimming light, to knock her to the ground.

Chapter 18

Tichinde led the willing yautja into battle as the light grew shallow on the arid world. The kwei oomans had barricaded themselves behind a heavy door, their stingers on the outside but controlled from within.

Their weapons were hot and deadly, their fire had already taken two of the warriors before Tichinde had decided to pull back and organize a stronger attack. Tricky devils, to hide behind the door and kill from a distance.

There were now only six other students left. They crouched behind one of the ooman structures and looked to him for command. Any doubt Tichinde had felt after watching two of his yautja fall evaporated as he saw the eager Hunters before him; Mahnde and Daec'te had been slow and foolish, but these warriors would go on to the victory Hunt.

"Skl'da'-si, you will be hult'ah and stand behind." Skl'da'-si had the best eyes; they would need sharp vision to watch for any ooman who might be waiting to ambush.

The yautja tilted his head and stepped away from the rest.

"It is time for the Hunt of naiv-de," the new Leader growled. He raised his voice steadily as he spoke the truth aloud to the others. "Time to kill until the pyode amedha trophies sit on our spears, until their thwei flows in our honor and the fight is done. A thousand stories will be sung in our names, for we will conquer!"

Tichinde flared his mandibles in pleasure at the low hisses that came from his warriors. They were ready.

It was Etah'-dte who began the chant of the Midnight Kiss. One by one, the yautja raised their spears and voices to the sky, the screams true and harsh in the dry dead air of the ooman world. Tichinde howled loud and long with his warrior brood; the Soft Meat would die in scores this night, and he would lead the slaughter.

The Hunt was all.

Noguchi scabbled backward on her elbows from her bizarre attacker.

There's nothing there-!

Even as the thought popped into her head, the magnified dust rippled and changed. One of the warriors suddenly towered over her, its thick arms high over its head. The spear it held was pointed at her.

Earlier, in the ship, she had forgotten in her panic that she'd had a rifle strapped on her back. She remembered now.

She swung the heavy rifle up.

Too slow. Time expanded, flowed like thick oil. It took a millennium to thrust the weapon against her shoulder and aim-

Darkness sprang and covered the dragon.

From the main well structure behind the creature, the metallic black bugs shrieked and swarmed and fell on him, their talons fast and sharp.

Noguchi had not seen them there, hadn't heard them come. It didn't matter. She jumped to her feet

and stumbled backward, watched as the warrior hit the ground and screamed horribly. The nightmare insects cried and tore at their prey. A pale green fluid, the dragon's blood, sprayed the dark animals. They threw back their obscenely long heads and screamed.

Fuck this!

Noguchi turned and ran.

Roth stood behind Cathie at the ops panel near the south lock when Ackland shouted from his position near the heavily fortified entry.

"Get ready! Something's coming!"

Roth gave Cathie's shoulders a light, reassuring squeeze before she picked up her carbine and joined the other armed men and women at the door, Creep at her heels.

Her heart thudded dully in her chest as she ran the dozen meters or so. Hiroki's broadcasts had been coming in from the ops console for the last twenty minutes or so. His team was doing their best to ward off the attackers, but they had wasted a lot of their ammo on thin air; the going belief was that the alien creatures had some kind of invisibility cloak. The camera angle was such that only a few of the team could be seen-not what they were fighting.

Roth took a position toward the front of the group and trained her weapon on the reinforced plexi door, arms steady. The tension around her was heavy; they didn't know enough about the aliens, what they were after or what they could do. Maybe they wouldn't be so easy to kill . . .

Reuben Hein, one of the geotechs, was on watch. His face was pressed closely to the loophole in the wall. He held up one of his dark hands for silence as the seconds ticked by.

Roth felt a trickle of sweat run down the nape of her neck; she closed one eye, finger rested lightly on the trigger.

"It's okay, don't shoot!" Hein called. "It's Noguchi!"

Roth hadn't realized how nervous she had been until his words flooded her with cool relief. She and the others lowered their weapons and stepped back from the door.

Noguchi had obviously been in a fight; her clothes were rumpled and dusty, her normally sleek hair was plastered to her head in strings, her face flushed. She walked in quickly and surveyed the situation.

"Did you see them? What the hell are they? How many were there?" Ackland half blocked her entrance, his red face betraying the fear he was hiding.

"Too many," said Noguchi. She turned to the assembled group of ranchers and company people and spoke clearly, her voice one of authority. "Fall back to the inner doors and get someone with a welding torch over here. Seal all of the doors-upper level, too except the east lock. And no one goes in or out without my authorization."

She looked at Hein. "Are we organized enough to get this done without tripping over each other?"

He nodded. "I'll make sure of it."

"Are the children here?"

Loren Gaunt spoke up. "Yeah, they're eating back in the conference room with Davidson and Jonson.

Noguchi exhaled slightly, and some of the tension left her shoulders. She picked out Spanner in the crowd and walked over to him, her revolver extended butt first. "Please load this for me. And get me some extra rounds for it. More of the armor-piercing hunting rounds like it had before."

He took the weapon carefully. "How much extra ammo you think you'll need?"

"Ten speedloaders. And seal those doors ASAP"

She walked back toward the ops panel, not noticing the effect her words had on the group. Ten speedloaders? A low murmur rippled through the room.

Roth followed Noguchi to the back to tell Cathie what was going on.

The Japanese woman stopped near the board and spoke calmly to one of the staffers.

"Downey, do you have that sat-link hooked up yet?"

"Little Cygni's still interfering-but it'll be below the horizon in the next hour."

Noguchi nodded at that and turned to Weaver. "What do you have on the cameras? Can you get me a fix on Hiroki and his team?"

Cathie stepped up behind Roth and grabbed her hand, both of them watching the conversation. Weaver looked up at Noguchi slowly and said nothing; her brimming eyes said enough.

Noguchi threw her comset on the panel and took the one that Weaver held out. She stood behind Weaver's chair and looked at the scant visual.

"Hiroki! This is Machiko, do you read?" Her voice held an edge of panic.

From their position, both Cathie and Roth could see what little there was to see on the small screen. A med kit lay open on the floor, its contents scattered. There was a white cable in one corner of the visual-which Roth realized, with dawning horror, was a human arm. The body of the fallen person was offscreen. Cathie's grip tightened in hers. Muted sounds of gunfire rattled through the com.

"Hiroki, this is Machiko! Do you-"

"Ma . . . iko?" The reception was terrible, but Roth felt her spirits lift slightly; he wasn't dead . . . bzzt. "-you in the tower? Friedman, get down!"

More static.

Noguchi grasped the com tightly, as if doing so would help somehow. She spoke in a rush; it was maybe the first time Roth had seen her with her cool exterior completely blown. The nitrogen queen was terrified.

"Listen, Hiroki! Tell your team to stand by, we're going to open the doors and pull you in, do you read me? Tell your team to stand by!"

Hiroki had backed up so that part of his profile was visible in the screen. He held a rifle aimed offscreen and pulled the trigger uselessly.

"No time," he spoke in a half shout. Onscreen, Hiroki held the rifle up by its barrel, like a club. Static. ". . . team left, anyway! Just . . . and Friedman." Static. "I don't think we've hit any . . . them! Ammo's gone, us, too, I . . ."

He said something else, but his words were drowned out by the sound of breaking plexi. Hiroki held his empty rifle higher.

Someone, Friedman, shouted offscreen. "... they come!"

"Stay safe, Machi . . ." Static.

Roth watched as huge, dark shapes, the alien warriors, swarmed onto the screen. Hiroki brought the rifle down, hard, to no effect. The attacker he had tried to fend off knocked him to the floor easily, as if he were a child. Mercifully, he fell out of the camera's range. But the pool of red that flowed sluggishly into view must have come from Hiroki.

Noguchi made a strangled sound deep in her throat and looked away. And then Cathie was crying, and Roth turned to comfort her as best she could.

The mighty yautja burst through the shoddy ooman defenses with no further losses. There were only two of the Soft Meat still upright, and they fell in the span of a breath. Tichinde himself took out the smaller of the two. The ooman tried to stop him with a dead burner, like a staff-there was no contest.

The new Leader relished the decapitation of the small creature; it had put up a fight, however meager. Its skull would look fine on Tichinde's trophy wall, once it was polished clean of the sickly pale flesh.

Tichinde howled, the head of the ooman dripping thwei from his spear. Perhaps the Soft Meat were not as deadly as the yautja had been told. If this was the best they could do, he and his warriors would have many trophies to take home.

Chapter 19

Scott figured that the ranchers and staff were probably holed up in the main operations building; there was no one in sight as they stumbled through the empty streets toward the structure. Twilight had fallen over the town with no respite from the heat.

Scott felt a sense of deja vu as they walked. Deserted town, lights low, unknown dangers-he looked over his shoulder several times to see if The Lector was still there. He was aware that there was no reason it wouldn't be, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he was in deadly danger and that there was no escape from it.

They were near the first set of holding pens when they heard the shriek.

From behind them somewhere, a long, shrill squeal that seemed to echo in the still air rose in pitch and

then dwindled into nothing.

Not human, whatever it was. Those things in the ship?

Scott glanced at Tom. He had gone a deathly white, his eyes huge in his face.

"What the fuck-?"

Before Tom could finish, the horrible cry came again. Closer.

Gaining.

Scott grabbed Tom's arm and they ran for the nearest holding pen. His gut had twisted at the alien scream; this whole thing was some kind of bad dream, one he didn't want to be in anymore.

I'd like to wake up now, please.

The entry to the pen stood open. They scrambled in just as another long howl came-louder, closer still-and slammed the heavy door shut.

Inside, the dark, stuffy room stank of perspiration and rhythn shit. At least they seemed to be alone.

"What are we gonna do?" Tom managed, his voice nearly a gasp.

Scott shook his head, tried to catch his own breath.

The only light in the large room came through a row of small, dirty windows set high on one wall. Other than the door they both leaned against, the only other way in was through the loading hatch-which was closed and locked.

"We're going to stay here," Scott said finally.

"But the other people must be-"

"Fuck the other people. The other people have guns, you heard the shooting. We don't. Do you want to go back out without a weapon?"

Another scream from outside. Tom's silence was answer enough. They would wait. If somebody wanted in, they could knock and ask politely and if the voice wasn't human, they sure as shit weren't gonna get an open door.

Noguchi sat on her bed and stared at the floor, one shaky hand on her forehead. She didn't feel much of anything; at first there had been a huge sadness, but it had been replaced with a kind of dull acceptance.

Hiroki was dead. He and the others had sacrificed themselves for the rest of the colony, and she had failed to use the time he had bought for them; she had failed at everything.

Part of her mind kept shouting at her: Organize! Get this under control! Get yourself together!

It was the same voice that had pushed her through most of her life, the driver of the strong Machiko

who allowed her to hold her head up. It clamored in her thoughts now, directed her to get up, get up now! and get going-but she let it run itself in circles.

Where was there to go?

Noguchi felt as if she had been sitting there for hours, but she knew it had been only a few minutes. Funny; all she really wanted to do was lie down and sleep until she woke up at home. On Earth, back in the tiny apartment she'd left a million years before . . .

Would that be so bad? Just to give up and wait there until help came, until the damn company sent someone to pick them up? They could probably hold out, just do some heavy reinforcing of the locks and then sit tight. Maybe she could even stay here, in her room. The people downstairs could make do without her. They would figure out something. Hide away, do nothing, wait. Yes, that felt right

"Ms. Noguchi?" A soft voice crackled over her com.

Noguchi felt her stomach tighten at the sound. Why did they need her, it wasn't fair! She couldn't run a battle, she was an overseer for Christ's sake!

"Ms. Noguchi, this is Weaver." The hesitant voice called again.

Noguchi sighed. "Yes, what is it?" It didn't matter, none of it did.

"I'm sorry to interrupt or anything. I thought-I mean, I know you and Mr. Shimura were friends, and I'm sorry to bother-"

"What?" She wanted to feel angry, but there was still nothing.

"There's something you should see. I could transfer it to your screen, it's the feed from the security cam on the southwest side of the tower. It's dark, though I've boosted the gain-I guess there are a lot of lights out over there-"

Noguchi turned wearily and looked at the console on her wall, already sorry she'd admitted to being there. Fuck these people. They didn't even like her. What did they expect? Why did she have to take care of them? Why her?

The screen snapped on.

It was a bonfire. At first, Noguchi didn't recognize that it was a picture from anywhere on Ryushi; she was reminded of old holos she had seen on Earth, of tribal dancing, ritual stuff.

But the dancers were the warriors. The dragons. Well, no, not really dragons, aliens.

There were five or six of them, the creatures who had killed Hiroki and the others. They ran and stumbled and jumped high in the air all around the fire, which was probably built with debris from the west lock. Sparks flew, flame cracked and rose into the early evening sky as the aliens danced and circled. And they carried spears . . .

There was no audio, but Noguchi could imagine the howls of victory. For the spears they held high in the air were decorated with their conquests. As she watched, one of the warriors danced past the cam with one of the black nightmare-bug skulls jammed onto the point of his spear.

And the next warrior-

She quickly looked away, then returned her gaze to the screen. She didn't want to believe what she had seen, but it was true. Fuzzy and distorted by the heat and bad lighting, but there.

Hiroki's decapitated head on the tip of the creature's spear, the sharp, bladed end running through his neck and out of his mouth.

For just a moment, she thought she might vomit.

The alien danced from view, but Noguchi had seen what she had needed to see. The nausea passed. Something new, some new feeling was filling her up. It wasn't sorrow or sickness, although she felt both of those things. No, it was dark and solid and throbbing, like a huge, black machine had started running deep inside, at the core of her being. It was a physical sensation, this feeling, a rumble of newness.

It was many things, but the easiest to understand was the anger. She watched the celebrating warriors and felt the apathy get eaten by the new machine, chewed and burned away, fuel for the thing at her center. It cleared her mind for what she would need to do.

She was going to kill them. All of them. Not just for Hiroki's death or the lives of the ranchers or her career-she felt almost selfish about her reasons, but in the end, it wouldn't matter. They would die because they dared to try her. She was a woman of honor and they stood against her.

Roth and Cathie stood near the table where Spanner sat, Noguchi's gun in front of him. A lot of the others watched also, although there really wasn't much to see. Spanner had already filled eight speedloaders, and was working on his ninth. He fed the rounds in slowly and the metallic clicks were loud in the quiet room when he closed the latch knob. It had been pretty silent here since Hiroki's last transmission.

Noguchi had been gone for twenty minutes or so, which was just as well. Roth hadn't liked seeing the new overseer choke up. Tears would have been okay, but Noguchi had just-swallowed it and gone inside of herself. It was too bad; Roth had seen an iron thread in Noguchi during the setup of the barricades, and had hoped they would all see more of it. Bitch or no, she was competent under stress. Or so they had thought. They were gonna need that, given what they were up against.

Ackland had made a short speech after Noguchi had walked out, about how they were all going to have to pull together and decide what their next move would be. But he was dry-mouthed and scared, he didn't have any suggestions after that, and finally he sat back down. He didn't know what to do, either.

Cathie kept a firm grip on her arm as the silent tension grew. Roth knew her spouse didn't want her to step forward, although she was as qualified as anyone else, maybe more so. She didn't want to lead the colony, but someone would have to. Much as she wished it would have been Noguchi, Roth didn't think she was going to come back.

Spanner continued to load the bullet holders methodically. High velocity hunting rounds, jacketed slugs that would punch through a wall. Someone would need them.

Noguchi stepped into the room quietly.

"Ms. Noguchi--" Ackland looked and sounded confused.

She had pulled her hair back and knotted it tightly at the base of her neck. She wore a fully padded coverall, the kind that the rhyth workers wore during gelding time; the suit was designed to dull impact from stray kicks, and had saved Roth herself from a lot of injuries. She had strapped a carbine to her back and wore knee and elbow leathers, as well as gloves. A comset hung loosely around her neck, and her eyes were cold and hard.

Roth grinned nervously, and felt Cathie's arm slip around her waist. Noguchi was back-and looked like a woman to reckon with.

"Who owns the fastest hover bike?" she said, her voice cool. Cool, strong, authoritative.

Roth said, "I guess that would be me."

Noguchi nodded at her. "Where is it?"

"East lock. Keycard's in it."

Noguchi smiled briefly at her, the expression calm and yet somehow chilling. The nitrogen queen was back, only this time, there was something else under the icy facade.

Ackland laid a hand on Noguchi's shoulder and turned her roughly to face him. "That's it? You're taking off? What about the rest of us?" His voice was heavy with anger, his composure blustery. "I thought you were supposed to be in charge! Where's your sense of responsibility?"

Noguchi took a deep breath. And then she punched Ackland low in the gut, hard.

Chapter 20

The anger rested in her like a dormant but wild animal, waiting to be awakened and used. Noguchi knew she had bigger things to deal with than this overblown rancher who stood fuming, his fat finger pointed at her chest. But she had had more than enough from him. She took a breath and jabbed. It was a reaction more than a decision.

Ackland folded, gasped, and fell to the floor.

She heard the people all around step back; two or three applauded.

"Responsibility?" Her voice sounded strange to her ears, cold and furious. "Hiroki is dead, Ackland! And a big part of this shit sandwich is on your plate! If we live through this, you're going to find out what happens to people who are responsible!"

Ackland was still on the floor, face red, trying to catch his breath. The anger suddenly coiled back to a resting state, left her exhilarated and exhausted all at once. Ackland was an annoyance, but nothing to slow down for.

Like a headache.

She raised her gaze and looked around at the watching crowd. The faces she saw weren't angry, just somber. Maybe Ackland wasn't quite as popular as he thought. The only important thing now was getting

the job done, the job she was responsible for, hunting down the things that had disturbed Prosperity Wells. But not simply for vengeance.

For honor.

Noguchi raised her voice so that everyone could hear. "Weaver, you're in charge until I get back! The rest of you will follow her orders to the letter, is that clear?"

A few of the ranchers nodded. It would have to do.

Spanner had holstered Hiroki's revolver to a rhyth-hide belt with pouches for the extra ammunition carriers. Noguchi smiled briefly at him and strapped it on without another word. No one spoke.

Several of the ranchers and employees followed her down the long hall to the east lock, but she didn't have anything else to tell them. She had an idea, but the details weren't quite worked out yet; she had told Weaver the basics over the com, so help on this end was covered. But judging from how fast Hiroki and his team had been taken out, time couldn't be wasted on planning; she'd have to play it mostly by ear.

Noguchi reached the lock and peered out of the loophole window; the bike was only a few meters from the entry. The deepening dusk was deceptively peaceful-looking, quiet.

Roth stepped up behind her, expression set. "I could come with you," she said softly.

Noguchi considered it, then shook her head. "No. If I don't come back, someone will have to come up with other plans. You'll help most by staying here. Talk to Weaver, she'll fill you in."

Roth nodded. "Let me cover you, then."

"Okay. I'll signal here in approximately twenty minutes; if I haven't called, weld this lock and keep a CDS going to the corporation's sub-HQ. If -you keep backing up and sealing the doors as you go, you might be able to hold out until they give up, or until my idea pans out."

Or they get in . . .

It didn't need to be said. Roth nodded again and shouldered her rifle.

Noguchi opened the door and broke into a run in the hot night air.

The pain had been flowing away for a long time, how long he didn't know. Or where he was, or what exactly had happened. More than once, he had risen from the dark to feel that he was still alive, still nan'ku. There were straps on his body, which conjured images of a snarling dark creature in bands of dlex.

Queen. Kainde amedha.

He surfaced briefly with the familiar image and then decided to sleep a little more. He must still be unwell, although he felt that his strength had somewhat returned. The sickness was sensory; the smells in consciousness were alien, strange. The air was wrong. And he sensed no yautja nearby . . .

Dachande slept, but left his inner eye open and watchful. He would investigate the situation later. Soon.

Noguchi jumped on the bike and stabbed at the key at the same time. Her adrenaline was in overload, her breath shallow. Everything around her had slowed down, but she was at light-speed.

She jammed the accelerator down and flew toward The Lector, free from fear. Death wasn't so scary once decided on; Noguchi didn't want to die, but the odds weren't in her favor. After seeing Hiroki's head on a spear, she had accepted the futility of the situation. She would probably die-but not without company.

There was an overpass ahead, the second-story walkway between the sewage treatment plant and the main well. Noguchi floored the pedal; the shadows there were thick and secretive.

She was halfway through when the dark exploded to life.

The attack came from her left. A high shriek, then something big and heavy hit. The bike tipped, veered toward a wall in the dark, claws ripped, the bike righted-

-and she was back in the open. The creature had fallen off of the unbalanced bike. There was another shriek behind her. She got the impression of great speed from behind, as the thing ran-

Noguchi grabbed for the rifle on her back and circled wide. It was one of the bugs. Because everything had slowed, she saw it in perfect detail as it ran. Long black skull with razor teeth, an impossible body, segmented, black, metallic. There was only the one.

She flew straight at it, a part of her mind screaming at her to get away, fast.

She aimed the rifle . . .

The creature's head blew apart in a spray of blood.

Another jumped out from the heavy shadows, ran at her-

-she hit it, heard the cry of pain and rage. It clutched at the cycle, scabbled up, loomed above her.

There was a meter-thick beam under the walkway, barely visible in the dark. Noguchi ducked low and flew straight at it.

The bug's howl was cut short and the bike lifted again.

Noguchi circled back and headed again for the ship, heart pounding. In spite of the physical reaction, she felt calm. Very awake, but not panicked; she felt in complete control, she knew exactly what she was doing . . .

She slammed on the brakes suddenly and cried out, enraged by her own stupidity.

"Shit, shit, skit!"

Miriam Revna. She had forgotten.

The commas had been out for several hours before Miriam heard the shots echo through the compound. There had been gunfire before, but it hadn't been so close. Several times, she had heard

weird screams, alien sounds.

Miriam held the bonesetter tightly and tried to breathe deeply. She had stood by the door for what seemed like days, and she was exhausted. The patient had not regained consciousness, although his readings had jumped several times, indicating a raise of bodily functions-increased heart rate, blood pressure, temperature. The readings could be wrong, though, probably were; she had never seen a creature quite like it. Neither had Kesar . . .

Kesar.

Miriam closed her eyes and breathed deeper. She didn't want to think about him, not yet. She wasn't ready to admit that he . . . she wasn't ready to grieve.

The two commas in the lab were notorious for fussing out, sometimes for days at a time. They had never bothered getting them fixed-the lab was only a few dozen meters from the main transmitting antenna, not a hassle to walk. No one had tried to contact her, although she wouldn't know, of course. She was scared, and she missed Kesar more with every second.

A hover bike pulled up outside, and Miriam heard running footsteps. Perhaps it was Kesar--

She knew it wasn't somewhere inside even before she heard Machiko Noguchi's voice.

"Dr. Revna! It's me, Machiko!"

Miriam gripped the bonesaw closer and went to the door. She punched the entry button and looked outside, cautiously.

It was the overseer. She wore a padded coverall and held a rifle. Her gaze scanned from left to right as she edged into the lab, facing out.

As soon as she was inside, Miriam hit the control and the door slid shut.

"Machiko, I heard shooting! What happened?"

The younger woman turned to face her. Miriam was struck by the changes she saw in Noguchi's cool expression. Something huge had occurred, something that had made everything different. It was in her eyes, in the set of her mouth

"Things are bad, and they're about to get worse." In spite of the circumstances, Machiko Noguchi sounded calm. "Can you handle a hover bike?"

Miriam shook her head and set the cutter on a table. "No. I never learned. Kesar was going to teach me, but we never--"

"Do you know how to use one of these?" Machiko cut her off, held up the rifle she carried. "I don't have time to get you back to ops."

Miriam shook her head again.

Machiko handed it to her anyway and spoke quickly. "It's a semiautomatic, so it does all the work for you. Just point it at what you want to shoot and squeeze this trigger." She motioned at the crook of the

rifle. "You only have six rounds, so don't waste any on warning shots."

Miriam took the rifle hesitantly and frowned. "Ms. Noguchi, I'm a doctor, not a soldier . . ."

"This isn't war," Noguchi said softly. "This is survival."

Miriam felt tears in her eyes, but wasn't sure why. "Who might I be-shooting at?" The words were strange in her mouth.

"Your patient's brothers. Or something that looks like a two-meter-tall black insect with a banana-shaped head full of teeth." Machiko said. She walked over to the patient and the table of artifacts and picked up the odd shield she and Hiroki had studied before. She held it up toward Miriam.

"The unclassifieds that Roth brought in-Kesar's report said he thought they might transport eggs, or spores, to host bodies. Is it possible that when those spores grew up, they'd look like this?" She pointed at the strange animal etched into the surface.

"It's impossible to say," Miriam said slowly. She felt horribly confused. "Why?"

"Because I've seen some of these things tonight. There were dozens, maybe hundreds of them in The Lector. And I think Ackland's rhyth were infected" she paused-"or impregnated by these things. And they've spread it to all of the herds on the ship. I think our two unclassifieds are connected somehow."

Miriam looked at the etching and then over to the specimen strapped to the table. "Not biologically. They're quite different in chemical makeup."

Machiko nodded. "There's no time to worry about it now, anyway" She looked at the Injured alien. "We ought to shoot that thing," she said. "But maybe we'll need it as a hostage later." She walked toward the door.

"What are you going to do?"

Noguchi turned. "I have an idea or two. Listen, I want you to stay here, okay? Outside is not safe. Keep the door locked. I'll come back for you as soon as I can, but if you haven't seen me within the next hour, start thinking about how you can get to ops. Wait until daylight, and take the rifle when you go. I'll tell the ranchers to watch for you."

And she was gone, just like that.

Miriam set the heavy weapon on the table and stood with her eyes closed for a moment. It was all like a dream, surreal and frightening. None of this could be happening. She looked at the alien creature on the exam table and tried to get her thoughts in order.

Kesar was dead. Thinking anything else was folly. Perhaps the broken-tusked alien had something to do with it, but there was no anger in her heart, only a soft, wishful ache.

"It's so wasteful," she said quietly. "We could learn so much from one another . . ."

There was a sudden scratching sound at the door, a sliding knock.

"Dr. Revna! It's me, Machiko!"

Why had she come back?

Miriam hurried to the door. "Machiko? What happened?"

She hit the entry control and stepped back. "Did-"

Words escaped. The patient-no, it was a creature like the one on the table-

Miriam turned and ran, even as the armored monster clutched for her.

The weapon, table, trigger!

She ran, but the thing screamed behind her, too close.

She was going to die.

Chapter 21

After the initial conquest, Tichinde left the yautja to circle the ooman dwellings and get a feel for where the others might be. There were many in the same structure as the first group, but he wanted to be certain that there weren't more, perhaps waiting to ambush them.

He walked. And heard the sound of machinery behind him, coming closer. Tichinde blended with the shadows as they had all been taught and waited to see what would come. He patted the mesh sack on his belt; there were already three ooman trophies in it; there would be more.

A single ooman drove a small aircraft into view, landed it, then ran to one of the dwellings, a short burner in its hand.

Tichinde pressed the loop control on his shiftsuit, one that he had salvaged from the wreck, to record the language spoken. The tiny ooman shouted and then entered the building at the beck of another ooman inside.

A short span passed and the flyer ooman came out and went away. He thought it was the same one-they looked much alike to him.

Tichinde waited a few breaths and then walked to the same door from which the creature had come. He pushed the loop control on the arm of his suit and listened to the odd language spill from the copier.

There was movement inside. And the door opened to reveal a lone ooman, defenseless. The creature's face distorted in reaction and it howled.

Tichinde ran forward and screamed for blood.

The ooman stumbled back, turned, and ran for a table. A table with a strange burner on it.

Tichinde raised his bladed staff high, ready for the final cut-

-and there was something familiar here, a scent he knew, but it didn't matter because the ooman must

die-

-the ooman raised the burner slowly and fired at nothing, the shot far and wide, then another-

-and Tichinde brought the blade down, prowess and certainty in the fatal cut-

Noguchi heard a shot, then another. It came from the lab, or somewhere near it.

She had stopped at the main control hatch for the front six buildings of the compound and studied the numbers, not certain of the proper codes for what she needed to do. She'd punched buttons, pretty sure that she had gotten it right, and checked her chronograph.

The shots made her jump; they were accompanied by a shrill and primal scream.

Noguchi jumped on the bike, turned it back toward the lab, and hoped she would get there in time.

Dachande opened his eyes at the sound of the yautja death cry and growled softly.

Tichinde. And he pursued the creature, the ooman whose smell had become familiar.

The desperate ooman ran to the table in front of Dachande's resting place and snatched at a burner clumsily. Tichinde towered over it in classic pose, ready to deliver the death blow to the panicked ooman. The ooman who had nurtured him through the dark, what could have been his final moments until dhi'ki-de.

Dachande lifted one of his arms. The strap holding it snapped. He thrust his talon forward and caught the staff right below the blade.

Tichinde's head jerked up in surprise. The ooman fell to the ground.

With a quick shove, Dachande rammed the staff upward and knocked Tichinde backward.

Tichinde jumped up and popped his wrist forward, extended the double bladed ki'cti-pa toward Dachande.

The Leader growled in fury. Tichinde would raise a weapon against him? Had he lost his memory?

Dachande freed his other arm easily and struggled, tried to leap. His lower body was still bound

Tichinde jumped to meet him, ki'cti pa raised to slash.

And the world exploded into a million flying pieces.

The sounds of battle were unmistakable. So was Miriam Revna's scream.

Noguchi stamped the pedal and ducked.

Miriam cried out and fell to the floor as the wall cracked open in a roar of thunder and shattered around her. A chunk of something sharp and heavy gouged her right calf. The pain was horrible. The terror was worse.

The thunder ceased. Miriam pulled herself around a table leg and turned to see what had happened.

Noguchi had come through the wall. The bike was turned on its side and Machiko was propped on her elbows, pistol aimed behind Miriam.

The doctor snapped her head around and saw that the attacking creature was sprawled facedown on the floor. It didn't move, but she could hear its labored breathing.

The patient was still on the exam table, pinned there by one remaining bond across its abdomen. He fumbled with the strap frantically.

"Lay down flat, Miriam!"

Noguchi had her gun pointed at the struggling patient. Her finger tightened on the trigger.

The doctor stood up, right in the line of fire.

"Jesus, get down!" Noguchi's heart pounded.

Miriam didn't even look back at her. She held both of her hands up and walked slowly toward the tethered warrior.

Dachande redoubled his futile attempts at freedom as the ooman came at him. The creature held its odd, clawless hands open and moved slowly. The other, dressed as a warrior, had a weapon on him-but the approaching ooman blocked the small warrior's efforts.

It could be a trick, a ploy to calm him before the Soft Meat ripped him open . . .

But the slow-moving creature was the one that had tended to him; the kicti-pa was unmistakable. If it had wanted him dead, wouldn't it have struck when he was injured and unaware? There was a thick bandage of some kind around his chest-not the work of a Hunter. A healer, then.

Dachande stopped his labors and held still, but kept his body tensed and ready. He hissed a warning to the ooman.

And it leaned toward him, very slowly, and unlatched the restraint.

Miriam unhooked the bond and stepped back, careful not to move suddenly. The creature had growled at her, a foreboding gurgling sound, but didn't attack when she was in reach.

"What are you doing?!"

Miriam kept her eyes on the patient. "I think it's okay," she said softly.

The creature studied her for several long seconds. Miriam held still, not wanting to frighten it.

"Are you insane?" Noguchi was furious. "They killed Hiroki and six others!"

She didn't move. "They did. He didn't."

Miriam was scared, in spite of her intuitive feeling that the creature wouldn't harm her. Intuition wasn't

a lot in the face of death.

The patient moved fast. It slammed one clawed hand down on her shoulder.

Dachande inspected the ooman thoughtfully. This was what he had wanted to Hunt all of his life? It was ugly, but certainly not dangerous-looking. It was stupid, too. Approaching a warrior with no weapon didn't indicate a particularly high intelligence. Or it was incredibly brave and ready to do battle. Small as it was, if it wanted to fight, perhaps it was also mad?

The armed one babbled at the ooman next to him. Dachande got the impression that the defenseless creature had kept him from being killed. The ooman with the hand-held burner lowered the weapon slowly.

Overcoming a lifetime of yautja lore was not a thing he wanted to do-but good warriors stayed open to new information. Perhaps the Soft Meat on this world were different.

Dachande decided. He placed one of his claws on the ooman's shoulder and shook, the symbol of greeting.

The ooman shrank slightly, and the other raised its weapon again. Dachande took his claw away and waited.

After a pause, the tiny ooman stretched itself high and returned the gesture.

Dachande tilted his head at her. Fascinating!

Then it was that Tichinde clattered his mandibles and slowly got to his feet.

Dachande's anger flared. The s'yuit-de! He would die!

Dachande jumped past the ooman and whacked Tichinde's skull. The blow knocked the student to the ground.

Tichinde said nothing, but scrabbled at the pouch on his belt.

Dachande snatched the sack from the idiot yautja and held it up. Trophies.

Ooman trophies.

His rage was blinding. Tichinde had Hunted with no supervision-and had Hunted ooman!

Dachande lifted the yautja by his tresses, the fury boosting his strength. He could smell his own musk, hot and heavy with the desire to kill. He raised one fist and smashed Tichinde in the mouth.

Tichinde tried to pull away, responded with a weak blow to Dachande's gut.

Dachande howled in his face, a shriek of pure disgust and outrage. He struck again.

Tichinde was his student, once. He had broken the rules of the Hunt. There was only so much slack Dachande could give him, even as a Leader. Now the rope must be pulled taut. Now, Tichinde must be destroyed.

It was the law.

It was a matter of honor.

Chapter 22

Noguchi watched in amazement as the two huge warriors fought. The broken-tusked "patient" was the more skillful-and was winning easily.

Myriad half thoughts ran through her mind. The patient was grateful, the other was with the killers, the broken tusk was better, older, brighter perhaps, the doctor was insane, they had to get out

Miriam stood a few meters from the battle, just stood there and watched.

Noguchi ran forward, pistol ready, and grabbed the doctor by the arm.

"Come on!"

The monsters could slug it out to the death for all she cared; they had work to do.

She and Miriam ducked through the shattered wall and ran across the compound. Noguchi steered them toward the main garage, to the east. The med center was closer to the holding pens, but they would need a flyer for what she had in mind and the hover bike was totaled; there would be other bikes at the garage-

Except Miriam can't fly one and they won't carry two people.

Noguchi wanted to scream. Fuck, fuck, fuck!

And on the heels of the panic, she remembered the copter.

The copter!

She ran faster.

Miriam had trouble keeping up; blood ran down one of her legs. The compound was completely dark now. Many of the building lights had been broken at some point, and the few remaining only seemed to add to the shadows. A faint breeze had sprung up, hot and fetid. A death wind, full of carrion stench.

Behind them and ahead, shapes moved and shrieked. It was hard to see what was happening. Noguchi guessed that the two alien races were fighting.

Maybe they won't even notice us-

A giant black bug leapt in front of them from a shadow and raised its strange arms to attack.

Miriam screamed.

Noguchi pointed and fired twice. The first shot was too high. The second tore out the bug's throat.

Blood sprayed.

A drop of the fluid splattered against one of Noguchi's padded suit arms and hissed, ate through the fabric and burned her skin.

Acid, some kind of acid--

The noxious substance ate deep into her flesh. As they ran forward the garage, Noguchi felt her own blood soak into the coverall. She ignored it as best she could; they were almost there.

They reached the garage, Miriam now stumbling badly. Noguchi half dragged her toward the back of the building. The copter was usually kept at the med center, on the roof's helipad; the doctors used it to get to emergencies. But Noguchi remembered that it needed some minor adjustment after the weapons collecting run.

I just hope it wasn't engine trouble

Noguchi laughed sharply as she rounded the corner, a short bark of relief. It was there! She looked around for trouble, but the yard seemed clean.

Miriam stumbled behind her and fell.

"Oh, shit, I can't get up, I'm sorry, Kesar, I'm sorry, I can't---" The doctor tried to hold it together, but she looked close to a breakdown. Her face was the color of dust, her eyes rolled upward.

Noguchi pulled Miriam to her feet and dragged her to the copter.

"It's okay, Miriam, you're going to be fine, okay?" She hoped she sounded soothing. "Everything will be fine, really, okay?"

They reached the vehicle. She opened the door and hustled Miriam in, still talking. "Don't worry, we're going to get out of here, okay? I'll help you fly this thing, just tell me what to do and we'll be fine."

That seemed to cut through the doctor's hysteria. Revna raised her tear-streaked face to Noguchi, eyes wide.

"Kesar always flew. I don't know how."

Dachande didn't want to spend too much time on Tichinde, much as he felt the idiot deserved to die slowly. He had to find the other yautja, if there were any. Find out what was going on, how he had come to this state. It did not feel good, what had happened.

Tichinde fell again. His tresses were matted with thwei, two of his mandibles broken and crushed against his worthless, dying skin.

Any fight the student had in him had fled. He tried to crawl away.

The sight of the yautja slowly inching from his Leader was infuriating. The kwei would die as an animal, a coward, rather than go out like a warrior.

Dachande waited no longer. He snatched Tichinde's bladed staff from the floor and raised it over his

head, aimed it at the base of his student's upper spine.

Brought the sharp blade down-

Shiiink!

Dachande jerked the blade from the body in a patter of blood and then spit on the corpse. The Leader donned the kwei's armor and took his weapons; he left the bandage on his chest. There was some pain there, perhaps the dressing would help. After a second's hesitation, he pulled the recording loop from Tichinde's chest; there might be a use for it later.

Armed and ready, with a fire in his gut that screamed for justice, Dachande stepped into the dark night to find his other students. Perhaps Tichinde had been alone, but he doubted it. Hunting alone was not common behavior to the young.

And if they were here, in the ooman camp, on a Hunt-nothing would stop him from the lessons he would teach them.

"What?"

Revna nodded. "He was going to teach me-"

Noguchi tuned her out for a second.

Okay, she can't do it, we're fucked---

She searched the myriad of buttons and switches on the console and found one that said Eng. She flipped it.

The copter's engine hummed to life.

She tapped her comset. "This is Noguchi in copter'-she looked over the board quickly-"copter one. Do you read me, tower?"

A hiss of static.

And then Weaver's welcome voice.

"We copy. What's happening?"

"Miriam Revna and I are at the garage and neither of us are checked out in a copter. We could use some help here."

Weaver sounded calm. "Okay, we got you. Hit the switch that says Eng."

"Did it."

"Do you see the button that says comp? Punch that."

Noguchi spotted it and did what she was told. A small screen flickered on with program questions. She and Revna both sighed at once.

"Okay, we're on a roll," Noguchi said quietly.

"David, get over here." Weaver's voice was distant, then came back through the com. "I'm going to let Spanner talk you up, okay?"

"Fine. What's the situation there?" Noguchi touched her arm lightly and grimaced at the pain. At least the bleeding seemed to have stopped.

"We're all set for your signal. Everything's locked up, for a while at least. But you should see what's happening in the southwest quad; looks like an all-out war."

"Consider the signal given. Wait until we get off the ground, and then go as soon as you hear it. Good luck."

"Copy that, boss."

There was a pause; Noguchi waited for Spanner to come on and tapped the comset, anxious to get out of there. She turned to look at Miriam

-a dark shape popped up in front of the copter, a nightmare bug. Its teeth dripped and gnashed as it plunged one claw through the windshield.

Scott and Tom had stayed quiet for a long time. The sounds outside of weapons fire and death cries were incentive not to move around much. The monsters were out there and maybe if they stayed under their rock here long enough, they'd eat each other and go away.

Scott figured out that they were in the southwest quadrant of the compound, in one of the two empty holding pens. There were six others, full of bellowing rhyth; their cries mingled with the alien screams.

Harmony a la hell.

"I'm starting to think we were better off in the ship," Tom whispered.

"Yeah, right. Stuck in the spider's web waiting around for dinner. Their dinner."

Scott cracked the door slightly to see if anyone was coming to help. So far, they had seen nothing. Well, no people.

Strange humanoid creatures were at war with the bizarre animals that had taken over the ship. It was too dark to make anything out clearly, but the situation was obvious; between the screams and the weapons, there was one fuck of a battle going on out there. They couldn't tell who was doing what to whom and for what reasons, but it was bad.

Scott was exhausted and he felt like shit. They had been stuck there for what felt like days. He wanted a shower, a steak, a few beers, and a soft bed. No way he was going out there to get it, but it helped to take his mind off of the situation at hand. Which looked like Armageddon. It was all so . . . unreal.

Tom groaned softly and shifted to sit on the dirty floor. He was sick, had been coughing and having cramps for over an hour, but he was trying to keep it to himself; the look on his face expressed enough. Scott looked at his friend, worried, then back out at the bloody combat.

Something screamed piercingly and then was silenced.

"Hang on, Tommy," Scott whispered. "We're going to be okay."

Yeah. Maybe we'll sprout wings and just fly back to Earth.

Noguchi jabbed her leg forward and up and pushed as hard as she could. The bug barely moved, but it was enough. Maybe.

She pulled the trigger four times, fast. The animal's head exploded, sent a spray of deadly blood across the windshield and onto the console. The noise of the gun hit her ears like hard slaps. The plexi material began to smoke immediately and the small compartment filled with a foul and acrid stink.

Noguchi whipped her head around. Nothing else coming at the moment.

"You okay?"

Revna held up one shaky hand and nodded.

Noguchi took a deep breath and strapped herself into the chair. "Buckle up, Miriam."

She ejected the spent shells and slammed another speedloader in before she looked down at the controls and took a deep breath.

"Let's do it, Spanner. What's first?"

The copter rose in a series of sharp jerks before Noguchi turned it toward the south end of the complex. Miriam still wasn't sure what the plan was, but she was glad to get off of the ground.

She felt her injured leg carefully and winced. It was a bad wound. Each second that passed left her weaker, dizzier; she had lost a lot of blood, maybe too much

Miriam applied pressure to the wound with part of her jacket and prayed silently that she and Kesar would be together soon.

Dachande ran through the oddly structured system of ooman buildings toward the sounds of battle. He ached all over and at least two of his ribs were broken, but he put the pain aside for now.

Shattered buildings and other rubble littered the grounds. Dachande hopped over the torso of a fallen drone; its life fluid still hissed on the soil.

He heard burners and screams in the distance, to the left. He cursed mentally and ran in that direction.

The syuit-de! They Hunted oomans, worse, they did so without proper surveillance. It was bad enough to have broken the law; to use poor strategy and tactics only compounded the error.

The other two Blooded must certainly be dead; they would not have allowed this. As sketchily trained as these yautja were, the bugs would be more than just a minor challenge. Armed oomans would be worse.

A small torrent of the Hard Meat appeared suddenly, leapt from the dark shadows to scream at him. Dachande pulled his burner. He was in too much of a hurry for prowess feats.

There were four. They circled him.

The first darted forward, teeth chittering. The outer jaws spread wide, the smaller teeth on the inner rod gaped.

Dachande burned it, the hollow thump of the weapon exploding the drone's gut into bloody bits. Without turning, Dachande took out the second and the third. He shot one, and used the spear in hiju position to disembowel the other.

The final drone screeched, turned, and ran. Unusual behavior, but they sometimes did that when there was a queen nearby. It was not fear, for they had none, but instinct to warn the nest.

Dachande sped on. Perhaps a few of the students would be salvageable. If not, he would have to kill them. Whatever they had stepped into on this world, they had sunk up to their necks in it and the stink was bad. Real bad.

Roth loaded food and water packs into the AVs with the others. With any luck they'd be back the next day, but they had taken almost everything. Most of the ranchers were seated and ready; just a final check and they could move.

Weaver had outlined Noguchi's plan briefly; it was shaky, but there was a chance it could work. Only a few people had protested-Ackland's voice above the rest, of course-but Weaver had shut them up with a few well-chosen words. Roth had liked "or we'll kick your fucking ass" in particular.

Roth stood cover outside the east lock as Weaver directed the last few people to either an AV or a ship loader. The largest piece of machinery, one of the carts that had carried most of the building supplies for the shield wall, now held thirty-seven people. Most of the transmitting equipment was also loaded-they would continue the CDS from the desert.

If they got that far.

Creep whined softly at the sound of one of the children crying. He kept saying that it was too hot outside. Roth silently agreed; she was reminded of the thunderstorms in southern Texas, where she had grown up. The stifling summer air would get even hotter as the clouds pressed down; as a child, she had waited eagerly for the first drops to fall, filled with the joy of expectation. There was a wild feeling in the air that had always made her think of carnivals in the dark, although she didn't know why. And then the rain, heavy and warm-

Weaver interrupted her thoughts. "We're ready."

Roth nodded and whistled for Creep to get on the bike. Cathie was watching some of the children in one of Harrison's AV; they would hook up later.

A low rumble shook the ground with no warning and then grew louder. Roth hopped on a bike and started it up, the sound quickly lost in the rising tremors that beat through the soil. Goddamn if that didn't sound like thunder; Roth hit the accelerator and headed east, the AVs and loaders behind.

Miriam opened her eyes and looked down when the noise rolled over them. There was an ocean of

life directly below them; the entire compound was moving, undulating in a quake of heaving bodies and animal cries.

Noguchi had stampeded the rhyth.

Chapter 23

Dachande heard the rumble and immediately ran for the nearest structure he could climb.

Directly after he had attained Leader, he had taken a group on a Hunt and he had heard the same rumble; it was the sound of many animals running in mindless gry'sui-bpe. The yautja had clambered onto a low rise and watched as a herd of four-legged hosts had stampeded past in front of them. Had they stayed on the low ground, they would have been trampled.

He spotted a ladder bolted to a tall structure and ran for it.

He had not found the students yet, but before he could do so, he needed to avoid being crushed by the stampede. He hoped the students would understand what the sound meant and seek high ground or protection.

He growled in irritation as he climbed the rungs of the ladder. If they paid attention to his lessons, maybe they wouldn't die. If they had not listened, then they deserved to die. That was the way of it. His hope was not all that good.

Considering how well they've learned so far . . .

Dachande climbed as the rumble thickened into an all encompassing roar.

Noguchi buzzed the pens as low as she dared and hoped the locks had opened according to the codes she'd set.

The rhyth had been in the hot sunlight all day without food and a minimum of water. The sound of the copter must have echoed loudly in the pens. It only took one spooked animal to get it going. And as soon as one rhyth jumped forward, the rest followed.

The animals tore through the doors she had unlocked.

Within a few seconds, all of the rhyth joined the stampede, headed straight through Prosperity Wells. Anything small enough to get in their way was trampled, crushed, kicked aside.

The searchlight on the copter illuminated the scene dimly. Noguchi only glanced at the panicked herds; she had her hands full piloting. Miriam Revna cried out in delight.

"They just ran over about two dozen of the unclassifieds!" It was hard to hear over the clatter of hooves and the bellows of the frightened rhyth.

Noguchi smiled tightly and pulled up on the control stick. She wanted to check and see if the ranchers had gotten out-

She veered east. All she needed to see were the lights of the AVs-

Noguchi allowed herself a short rush of relief. The low red and white lights were visible. The ranchers and staff were headed away from town into open desert.

It was working! Her plan was working!

She circled the copter back toward The Lector to make another run on the animals. The colonists were headed to relative safety, and the rhyth were stomping everything in sight. Maybe she wouldn't have to sacrifice anything else.

Of course, there were still the creatures on the ship to deal with-and it was probable that a few of the other kind had survived. But to take out the majority . . .

As they neared the transmitting tower, Miriam sat up straighter and pointed. Noguchi shot a sideways glance at what the doctor motioned at-it was one of the warriors. It had climbed the ladder and was almost to the top-and there were three or four of the huge black bugs clambering up after him.

Miriam saw the broken-tusked warrior nearing the top of the transmitter and pointed. He still wore the cast she had strapped him in for his damaged ribs.

"Machiko, look!"

"What?!" The stampede was deafening.

Miriam shouted louder. "It's my patient! We have to save him!"

Noguchi whipped her head around. "No fucking way! Those things are the reason we're in this mess!" She looked back at the controls.

Miriam chewed at her lip in frustration. How could she make Noguchi understand? It was important, the most important thing in the world right now. She could not have said why.

"He saved my life, Machiko!"

Noguchi opened her mouth and then closed it. "Look, I don't"

"Please! Machiko, he risked his life to save mine!"

The doctor looked at her patient, getting closer to the top now. The dark, segmented creatures were also getting closer.

"Please!"

Noguchi didn't say anything. She veered toward the tower.

I must be out of my mind, that's it, I finally went insane

Noguchi steered the copter toward the tower in disbelief. What the hell was she thinking? Dr. Revna was a nice lady, ordinarily she wouldn't mind doing her a favor, but this-?

She watched as Broken Tusk kicked at one of his pursuers and then stabbed the closest one; the bug

screamed and fell. He refused to give up fighting, she'd credit him that much.

But she could barely fly! Even a trained pilot would have doubts about trying to hover next to a tower. And to save an alien that they knew almost nothing about.

Except it had saved Miriam's Life.

Right.

It would break every rule in her book, to risk their lives on this. And she had about a second to decide.

Below them, the rhynt ran on.

Dachande kicked at one of the drones and then used the spear to take out the gut of another. It fell, still kicking-but there were two others.

He heard a ship over the sound of the running hosts but he ignored it. He had enough to worry about. On the ground, the bugs were no match. But fighting while hanging one-handed and almost upside down.

The metal he gripped let out a high groan; he could feel the structure shift under the combined weight of himself and the drones.

Again the weak substance creaked-and started to separate from the building.

If he didn't think of something, he would be on the ground in a few breaths.

Fighting the Hard Meat and in the path of the stampeding hosts.

The Black Warrior must wish for Dachande's immediate company.

And the Black Warrior eventually won all battles.

Noguchi lowered the copter toward the tower. Which had started to quake dangerously. It was collapsing under all the weight.

"Shit--",

Miriam fumbled around the console for a second and then hit a button. Her next words blared incredibly loud.

"Grab the strut! We'll take you to safety!"

Noguchi winced. The doctor had found the PA.

She lowered the ship a little more. It was hard, but not as hard as she had expected. On the other hand, a series of red lights had lit up on the control panel. She was too intent on the task at hand to figure out what they meant, but she also didn't want to find out the hard way.

"Grab on!"

Noguchi screamed to be heard. "I can't do this forever, Miriam! He doesn't understand"

The copter dipped, and then pulled up again. He had grabbed on to the strut.

Noguchi let out a cry of disbelief. It had worked! Broken Tusk had jumped to the copter!

Now what the fuck are we going to do with him?

And then everything happened at once. A dark shape lunged at them. Noguchi just had time to register that it was one of the bugs before it landed on top of one of the compressors, on the same side as Broken Tusk. It scabbled to hold on, screamed.

The copter tilted alarmingly and Noguchi jerked the controls instinctively upward-

-there was a rending screech of metal as the tower collapsed-

-and everything turned the wrong way as-

-the copter went down.

Chapter 24

They were both sleeping when the stampede hit.

Scott hadn't thought it was possible for him to nod out, but he was exhausted, hung over, and probably coming down with whatever Tom had. There was still fighting outside, but the pen they had holed up in seemed safe. The sounds of battle had almost become a background drone, and had moved away after a while.

Scott had been dreaming that he and Tom were explaining what had happened to them to a doubtful audience of company people back on Earth. They were all sitting around a huge wooden table in a dim conference room. At first, the suits had seemed interested as Tom spoke. Except Tom kept saying all of the wrong things, and every time Scott opened his mouth, nothing would come out.

And all at once, the people started slamming their fists down on the table. One of them, a very tall man in a black shirt, kept yelling, "Liar! Liar!" And the sounds of their knuckles hitting wood get louder, more insistent, deafening.

Scott snapped awake as the table broke.

"Oh, shit-" Tom jumped up and lurched to the door. Even in the dark pen, Scott could see that Tom didn't look too good, pale and strained.

Scott pulled his aching body off the floor and joined him. By now, the noise had drowned out all else. He looked out the crack in the door and felt his mouth gape.

The rhyth weren't running past the pen, at least not the front. But they could see the dust kicked up by the animals to their right, maybe six or seven meters away. The whole building shook as the thick stream of animals tore past, headed north. Tom said something that Scott couldn't catch.

"What?!" Scott couldn't hear his own scream.

Tom shook his head and pointed.

At first, Scott wasn't sure what he was looking for. Tom was motioning at a transmitting tower, two structures away.

Tom finally pointed straight up, and then back at the tower.

Scott looked at the top and felt his heart jump. A copter hovered there shakily. It was involved in some kind of rescue mission; there was a person trapped on the tower, being pursued by-

Scott peered closer. The alien creatures from The Lector.

They watched as the person on the tower-who seemed to be some kind of giant-reached for the strut of the copter and made it. Scott grinned widely as the stranded person made it to the copter in a breathtaking leap and looked at Tom. Tom laughed without sound and clapped Scott on the back.

The excitement on Tom's face melted suddenly into horror.

Scott looked back at the copter just in time to see it spin down toward the ground, toward them. Something had gone very wrong; one of the creatures had jumped on the roof of the copter and the pilot had panicked. They watched as the flyer spun out of control to crash, a few dozen meters past them to the left.

The explosion was loud enough to be audible above the stampede; it was getting quieter, the majority of the animals already gone.

By silent assent, he and Tom opened the door and ran toward the crash, the stench of burning fuel and cooked dirt heavy in the air.

The hot night had just gotten hotter.

Noguchi opened her eyes as the thunder fell to the sound and heat of a bonfire. Above her, the Ryushi night sparkled with stars. She had a sunburn and there was something wrong, she couldn't move

"Miriam?" Her voice was barely audible.

A face appeared over hers, familiar, bearded.

"Conover."

"I should've guessed it'd be you!" The pilot had to shout to be heard over the final remnants of the stampede. "You're lucky to be alive, lady!"

Noguchi remembered all of it at once as Conover unbelted her and half lifted her out of the wreckage.

Broken Tusk, the rhynt are stampeding and the people went to the desert and Miriam--

"Who the hell taught you to fly?" Behind Conover stood the other one, Strandberg. He looked sick.

"Nobody, yet," Noguchi said. She sounded weak, hated that she did. All around them were bits of burning wreckage; the main part of the copter was behind them, still on fire. The flames crackled and danced.

She leaned heavily on the pilot as they stumbled away from the smashed cockpit.

"Where's Miriam?" she said. The doctor hadn't been next to her when she had come to. It was an effort to look around; her neck didn't seem to want to hold her head up.

Strandberg stepped forward and grabbed her other arm.

"Listen, we gotta get out of here! The bugs will be back soon!"

On closer inspection, she could see that Strandberg was sick. He looked like she felt; shaky, pale, nauseous.

The last of the rhyth had gone. Besides a fading rumble, the only noise was the hiss of fire-and somewhere close by, the piercing trill of a nightmare creature.

"Miriam," she said again. "Broken Tusk, Miriam had to save him-"

The pilots ignored her and started pulling her toward one of the holding pens.

Noguchi pushed them away and turned back to the remains of the copter.

"Dr. Revna, the woman who was in the copter with me! I'm not leaving without her!"

Conover's voice was both apologetic and irritated at once. "I didn't see anyone else," he began. And then stopped.

"Oh, Jesus-"

Noguchi glanced at both of the pilots, who stood with looks of awe and terror on their faces.

She spun back around and felt her heart sink.

It was Broken Tusk, surrounded by flames.

He carried Miriam Revna in his arms.

Dachande hit the ground, hard, but shouldered the impact well. It helped that he had the time to jump before the ooman flyer had crashed.

He stood and winced at the tight feeling in his chest; he had probably rebroken what had started mending.

But the host stampede had passed, and the drones were nowhere around, at least for the moment.

Dachande looked around at the burning pieces of material and walked around them slowly. The oomans had been trying to save him; there was no question. And they had probably died for their efforts.

He saw a fallen form on the ground, thrown clear of the wreck. Dachande approached it carefully. It did not move.

The small figure was turned on its stomach, but he knew what it was before he turned it over. It was the ooman who had tended him, then released him. It was the ooman who had tried to save him from the drones and had lost its life trying. There was no question that it was thei-de; thick thwei dripped sluggishly from deep gashes in its face and neck, and its position suggested a snapped spine.

Dachande scooped the tiny body up and paused for a moment, uncertain of what to do with it. Now that the animals were gone, he heard sounds of ooman language from somewhere near; past the largest part of the burning flyer, just a few paces away.

The other oomans would want it. For such a brave being, they would want to properly care for it before it's u'sl-kwe, final rest. It was no warrior, but it had a sensitivity that Dachande had never seen before, except in the smallest of children.

He carried the ooman to the others. There were three. One he recognized as the armed ooman from before. The other two were bigger, but unarmed. They held very still as he approached.

The small warrior held no weapon against him now; it ran toward him, the hold of its body frantic.

Dachande could see that it was not an attack. The warrior reached him and then gently stroked the face of the dead one that he carried, its composure one of sorrow.

It repeated something over and over as it touched the dead face. Dachande suddenly remembered the animal loop on his forearm, and tapped it quickly.

The ooman's language babbled back at it. The warrior looked up at him and then motioned for him to set the corpse down.

Dachande did it gently; the ooman had shown him respect. He would do no less for it in its death.

Noguchi stared in shock as she heard her own voice spill out from behind the creature's mask.

"I'm sorry, Miriam."

She pointed to the ground and then back to Miriam's body. Broken Tusk carefully set the doctor's body down and then stepped back.

Noguchi knelt over Miriam, could already see that it was too late.

That's okay, Machiko. Someone-else you cared about, someone who depended on you, dead. No big deal.

Just because it's your fault.

She allowed herself one second of pure grief. Her head dropped into her hands, and she let out a soft moan of despair and sorrow. The pain was sharp and cruel, the guilt tremendous and stabbing. And she didn't have time for it.

Noguchi stood slowly and took a deep breath. The pilots kept their silence, in respect or

embarrassment she didn't know. She turned to look at the warrior, who also gazed at Revna's broken body; his odd mask flickered with strange shadows.

"It's time to put an end to this," she said quietly.

Broken Tusk stepped toward her and put one clawed hand on her shoulder. Noguchi did her best to return the gesture, although she couldn't quite reach.

It looked like she had an ally, at least for a while.

Chapter 25

Scott and Tom followed the Noguchi woman through a deserted alley in the dark town. Scott wasn't sure where they were headed, but Noguchi moved with certainty.

He glanced over his shoulder from time to time, wary of the huge alien that brought up the rear. They had left the dead woman behind, soaked her corpse with fuel, and set it ablaze.

After listening to Noguchi's summary of what had happened in the last twenty-eight hours, Scott hurried to talk to her.

"Are you saying that they"-he tilted his head back at the giant "let those bugs loose on a populated planet so they could hunt them?" He kept his voice low.

Noguchi nodded. "Just a theory, but it fits. Except

I don't think his kind knew there were humans on Ryushi. And from his actions, they weren't supposed to be shooting at us. We haven't been here that long, and it looks pretty certain that they were here before."

Her voice was edged with dry sarcasm when next she spoke: "I imagine we would have remembered if they'd visited recently."

Tom stumbled behind them. Scott stopped and started to turn back, but the giant stepped forward and set the pilot back on his feet as if he weighed nothing.

Tom nodded at the creature, waved a hand, and moved to join Scott and Nogushi.

She continued talking. ". . . and I imagine our presence probably screwed up their plans."

Scott raised his eyebrows. "Screwed up their plans. Oh, that's great. I feel so much better knowing that this whole fucking mess was an accident."

Noguchi shrugged. "Hey, at least he's on our side."

"Until he gets hungry," Scott mumbled under his breath.

Noguchi stopped at the end of the alley and waited for the giant to catch up to them. She kept her revolver barrel pointed up.

"Okay. The stampede started just around the corner here; we're going to walk through its path and see if there's anything left alive that shouldn't be."

Swell.

Scott looked around for some kind of weapon. Besides a few small rocks, they were out of luck. They'd have to stick close to the woman.

The giant hefted a large spear and seemed to wait for Noguchi's signal.

"Go."

The alien and Noguchi crouched out into the open compound, weapons ready.

Scott's heart raced; he looked over at Tom, who shrugged. They stepped out together to join the other two. It wasn't as if they had a whole lot of choice here, now was it?

"Holy shit," Tom said.

Scott forgot his fear for a second or two.

The stretch of open ground was littered with dozens of bodies, rhynt, bug, and giant alien. Large patches of soil were eaten away to reveal charred black splatter-like stains, as if the blood from the corpses was toxic. The rhynt were cut or blown open, chests shattered, throats slit. The black bugs were mostly crushed, so also the giants.

The only light was from a sole street lamp that hadn't been broken or shot out. The resulting mix of dark and death and shadows was forbidding, ominous. Ugly.

"When you kill something, you don't fool around," said Scott.

Noguchi wasn't listening. Her gaze darted from side to side, her revolver still up.

The giant's head was cocked to one side, his stance ready. The two of them moved forward slowly.

The pilots stayed close.

The four of them made their way cautiously down the ravaged street, stepped over torn bodies and corpses smashed down deep into the cracked earth. Apparently this was where the fight had ended.

After a moment of tense silence, Tom whispered loudly to Scott as they followed their armed escorts.

"Do you think the stampede got them all?"

Scott started to reply, but stopped short. He had heard something behind them—the cry of a bird, perhaps, a chattering sound

Behind one of the storage buildings, sudden movement. Scott felt his mouth go dry. He had heard it before

"Run," he said, hardly able to get the word out. "Run. "

Dachande heard the Hard Meat and spun around. He sprinted past the two ooman strangers toward the threat, staff forward. He was dimly aware that the small warrior was right behind. It shouted something at the other two.

They came in a single-file stream, flowed from around a structure, ten, maybe twelve. Dachande leapt to greet them.

Two arrived first, angled in from the sides. Dachande spun, swung completely around, cut them both through their midsections in one strike. He didn't watch them hit the ground; there was no need-they were dead and all he need do was avoid the throes.

He extended his kicti-pa and slashed through the throat of the next drone nearest, to his right.

The drone's death cry was garbled through its own thwei.

A split second later, he jabbed the staff point through the jaws of another, twisted the sharp blade and dug a hole through the top of the skull. The weapon's metal was proof against the Hard Meat's thwei, but there was no time to hesitate and enjoy the kill-when you fought the ten thousand, you did so one at a time, but you also had to do so quickly

He thrust the spear's butt back, hard, and knocked one behind him down, then turned and slashed its gut. Digest this, foolish creature!

The kicti-pa blurred again, jammed backhand into yet another Hard Meat chest. The drone howled, fell, did not die but did not rise again. Acid pumped into the dark air, pooled, smoking.

Dachande jumped forward, stabbed the throat of yet another, and then spun to meet the next. Death fell all around his feet as he and the Hard Meat danced.

Noguchi heard what sounded like a bird and turned; Broken Tusk was faster-he ran past the two pilots toward the main storage shed. He was eager and if he had any fear of the dark monsters, it was not apparent.

"Follow the tower around to the east lock!"

She would just have to hope that the pilots listened. She hurled herself after the warrior.

Several of the bugs streamed from behind the shed and toward Broken Tusk. He stepped in to battle without hesitation. Too many of them, ten, twelve. She aimed at one of the bugs-

-and it was dead before she fired. She took aim again-and again, her target had fallen already.

She took a step back, transfixed by the swift movements of the giant warrior.

Here was no inexperienced novice; every step was measured, every strike timed and sure. Within the space of a few seconds, most of the bugs were down, dead or dying. She had enough training to recognize a Master when she saw one. This one's skill had been gained in battle, against deadly enemies.

Broken Tusk whirled and jabbed, crouched and slashed with precision and confidence. Never a misstep, never a hesitation. He was no dojo tiger, covered in padding and fighting for points.

Wherever he had come from, they had a martial arts more complex and dangerous than any she'd ever seen. It was like a choreographed dance-

Except we don't have all day.

She aimed and fired several shots, then aimed and fired again. The last two shrieked and stumbled. Broken Tusk hesitated, confused perhaps, then finished them both with slashes to the gut.

"Sorry." Noguchi ejected the spent rounds and slapped in a loader. "But we've got to go."

Broken Tusk stared at her for a second, then raised one claw-in understanding or camaraderie, she couldn't know. She returned the move, then started toward the east lock.

The warrior caught up to her easily, then slowed and strode at her side as they rounded the front of the ops building toward the lock. He made thick growling noises, strange, but somehow not threatening.

Ahead, the lock was open. Conover stood by the control panel inside, face pale.

Noguchi heard now familiar chirping noises behind them, not far.

"Hurry!" Conover shouted.

Noguchi and Broken Tusk ran through the entry together. The door slammed down.

A second later there were several thundering crashes. The metal door shook as the nightmare creatures threw themselves at it, but it wouldn't give.

Noguchi collapsed against the frame and closed her eyes. They were safe, at least for the moment.

Safe-and fucked. They hadn't gotten them all.

The plan hadn't worked.

Chapter 26

So what's the plan?"

Noguchi didn't answer. She continued to take deep breaths, her eyes closed. The giant alien stood at her side, still enough to be a statue. Its face was turned to watch the woman, but the odd mask it wore covered most of any expression it may have had. Given the faces of some of the dead ones who'd lost their masks in the stampede, Scott was just as happy about that. Ugly bastards.

He stepped away from the door and started to pace. He was feeling pretty goddamn tired of not knowing what was going on.

"Look, lady, I realize that you're under a lot of stress, but you do have some idea of what we're going to do, don't you? The stampede didn't work out quite the way it was supposed to, obviously. Now if I were you, I'd start worrying about what-

"What?" Noguchi had opened her eyes to reveal an icy anger. "If you were me, you'd worry about what?"

He shut up. Then, "Well, shit. What next?"

"Lay off, Scott." Tom sounded bone-tired.

Scott looked at his friend and felt his anger spark higher. Tom looked worse than he had before. Whatever he'd picked up was making him really sick. The younger pilot had fallen into a chair and rested his head on a console; his body shook.

Scott stopped in front of Noguchi and lowered his voice. "My friend is sick, okay? We have to do something."

Noguchi smiled softly, humorlessly. "No shit. But unless you or your friend come up with some brilliant revelation, I suggest you shut up; I'll listen to you when you've got something to say."

She closed her eyes again.

The spark fizzled. She was a cold bitch, but he didn't have any ideas to contribute. And he sure as fuck didn't want to lead this little party.

"Right. Sorry, okay? I don't feel so good. It's been a bad day."

Noguchi nodded, then walked toward an ops panel. "The colonists made it out safely, that's something. We've got power here, and supplies; we can hold out for a while here and come up with something."

"There's a screen still on over here," Tom said.

Scott and Noguchi both walked over to where the ailing pilot sat. The giant remained at the door, motionless.

Across the top of the small console was a series of numbers.

"That's my code," said Noguchi. "It's a hyperstat from the corporation substation! The ether driver got through."

She leaned in front of Tom and punched a few keys excitedly.

Scott blinked. Ether driver? What the hell was that? Some new equipment the company was too cheap to put on their ship? Shit.

He read over her shoulder.

Attn: Machiko Noguchi, Prosperity Wells/from BAE-683 Takashi Chigusa, New Osaka. re: possible XT specimens. Take steps to preserve all specimens of species described in Revna's report; nearest Marine ship will enter area at approx. 5/14. Keep BAR 683 apprised. Await further instructions.

YFNT677074/TC

Noguchi slammed her fist against the screen and stalked over to a chair. She plopped down and put one hand to her forehead.

"Five weeks," she said softly. "All we have to do is survive for five weeks."

As if on cue, there was another slam to the lock. A creature screamed, the sound muffled through the thick metal.

"And preserve for them `all specimens,'" she said. She laughed. It wasn't a funny noise.

Christ. Don't lose it, lady. We need you.

It was looking hopeless. Noguchi had never felt so frustrated in her life, or so angry. There was nothing she could do

"Well, fuck this!" Conover had started pacing again. "I say we scam out of here and join the colonists!"

She looked up at the red-faced pilot and shook her head. "Yeah? And how long before the bugs run out of food and head into the desert looking for more?"

Conover dropped his gaze and said nothing.

"I don't know about you two, but I'm tired of fucking with all of this. I want to finish this, and I want to finish it now." She wasn't sure how, but there had to be a way-

Conover snorted. "Sure, great. You gonna burn down the whole complex?"

Strandberg coughed loudly. "That wouldn't work, too many of them would"-he coughed again" would get away. It'd have to be something fast."

Noguchi started running off possibilities in her head. Maybe they could formulate some kind of bomb, or gas-

Conover jerked his gaze at Broken Tusk. "Why don't we ask the hulk over there? Maybe he's got a death ray or something."

Strandberg shook his head. "I'm serious. I think Ms. Noguchi had the right idea with the stampede, crush them like bugs-" He broke into a fit of coughing.

Noguchi looked at Strandberg with sympathy; he really didn't look well, and he had at least tried to be helpful-

The pilot had regained his wind and raised one hand weakly. "Something big enough to take out the complex and the ship at once-"

Conover interrupted angrily, "Forget it! I can't even believe you'd bring it up!"

Noguchi stood and faced the asshole pilot. "Don't hold out on me, Conover! If you know something that might stop those things-"

Strandberg started coughing again.

Conover glared at her and jabbed a finger in her general direction. "Look, I have some shares in this little investment along with everyone else! There is nothing we can do, okay?"

Strandberg tried to stand up, and fell to the floor. His coughing suddenly turned to hoarse choking sounds, and he spasmed and convulsed, clutched at his chest.

Heart attack or epileptic seizure

Noguchi took one step toward him and felt a hand on her shoulder. Broken Tusk. He hissed and hefted his spear.

Conover rushed to his friend's side and then stepped back at the sight of blood on Strandberg's abdomen.

"Tommy-?!"

Noguchi gasped. The convulsing pilot screamed again and again. And at the same time, there was the sound of ripping, shredding, the sound of flesh parting--

A creature the size of Noguchi's forearm burst through Strandberg's chest in a spray of red. Dripping with blood and slime, the animal looked surreal, its head dominated by rows of teeth. It coiled its long, flesh-colored body in the frame of Strandberg's bloody rib cage and screeched at them.

And jumped

Chapter 27

Dachande watched from the door as the oomans battled verbally. Although they did not give off a musk, the anger was clear. He imagined they were worried about their deaths and the proper manner of them, not an unreasonable concern in the situation. There might not be any witnesses to carry the tale to their friends and relatives, no one would know if they had died bravely or not, a concern to any warrior, of course. But in the end, they would know, just as he would know. All beings died, later, sooner, no one escaped the Black Warrior. But-if it happened in battle, did you meet the gods with blood on your blade, your laughter at Death still echoing around you? That was the thing; that way lay honor.

He had counted five of his students crushed into the soil on their way here, their weapons destroyed or missing. There was no way to know if there were more still alive, but he guessed not. He was vaguely disappointed in their performance, but they had been served with what they earned. Especially if they had followed Tichinde. The nature of would-be warriors was to obey the strongest among them and Tichinde had been that. Unfortunately, when a Hunt needed strategy and tactics, strength did not make up for stupidity. Even a good teacher could fail and that rankled, but one worked with what one was given.

Dachande watched the ooman debate with interest; the small warrior was in charge, and the other disagreed with whatever the small one wanted. He waited to see if there would be physical combat, but for some reason, the larger ooman did not strike. Dachande guessed the small one must be a Leader to merit such respect. He decided to support the warrior; from its actions so far, it was surely braver than the others. Certainly it stood in better balance, it flowed better.

When the third ooman fell and went into z'skvy-de, Dachande moved. The oomans had no experience with such things and did not recognize the eruptive phase. The small warrior stepped forward, but he stopped it, quickly explained the situation, and stepped past.

The larger ooman stood in his way. He pushed it aside and reached the ooman host just as the kainde amedha lunged forth.

The newborn creature snaked across the floor and almost made it under a table before Dachande lifted his spear and brought it down, hard.

He could feel the young drone's back snap beneath the weapon. Hot intestine squirted, blood hissed.

Dachande stepped away and looked at the oomans. He waited.

Scott couldn't seem to catch his breath. He was sprawled on the floor next to Tommy, where the giant had shoved him and Tommy was

"Oh, Jesus, no," he whispered. His voice sounded faint, far away.

Tommy still quivered all over. His fingers clenched and unclenched, and then nothing.

The giant had squashed the alien parasite quickly and neatly. It was over, that fast. And Tommy lay next to him, the slick innards of his body exposed, his eyes open.

Scott turned away and dry-heaved a few times, the retching bringing only sour spit. And then he understood.

He sat up stiffly and put a hand on his stomach. And coughed. And started to cry:

Noguchi grabbed someone's coat off the back of one of the chairs and draped it over the dead pilot. She shuddered and stepped back.

Conover's shoulders shook with grief.

Noguchi looked up at Broken Tusk, who watched mutely, and then back at Conover.

Broken Tusk had known. Her theory had panned out. For what that was worth at this point.

She crouched down next to the crying pilot and put a hand across his back. She kept her voice low, but didn't hesitate.

"I'm sorry about your friend, Conover. But I need your help right now, okay? Before Strandberg---"

She cleared her throat and started again. "He was about to tell me something-something that could wipe out the bugs; I need-"

Conover turned his tear-streaked face up to look at her. "You don't get it, do you? What happened to Tommy-that thing that was inside of him. We were together on The Lector. That means I've got one of those things inside of-"

The pilot's face crumpled in despair. He buried his face in his hands and started to sob loudly.

Noguchi let him cry for a moment, then patted him gently on the back. She felt like a real bitch for what she was about to say, but there was no way around it.

"You're not dead yet, Conover. We still need your help."

He continued to rock back and forth. "Leave me alone. I'm doomed, I'm a dead man."

Noguchi stood up. "Maybe if you help us, I can help you."

Conover looked up at her and wiped his eyes with the back of one hand. "Are you a doctor? You gonna perform surgery and make me all better?"

Noguchi shook her head. "No, I can't do that. But you can have a shot at revenge-" She took a deep breath. "And I can make it quicker, easier for you."

The mixed look of pain and self-pity and gratitude on the pilot's face made her stomach clench. Conover was an asshole, but he didn't deserve to die for it. If she had one of those things inside of her . . .

"Okay," he said quietly. "Fuck it. Yeah, okay"

Scott sat at the terminal, his eyes gritty and his hands trembling. He was going to die. He was going to die. The thought was a repeating loop in his mind, a horrible and constant statement of looming black truth. He was pregnant with a monster, he was going to die-

Scott shook his head and finished the sentence he had typed onto the screen; almost done. His stomach hurt, and with each second, it got worse. He coughed into his hand and tapped a few more keys. Real, or in his mind?

"Everything you need is on the disk," he said. His voice sounded dead, too.

Noguchi nodded. She sat next to him and watched carefully as he worked.

"Thanks, Conover."

"Scott," he said softly. It suddenly seemed very important that she knew his name. Because he was going to die.

"Thanks, Scott."

He felt a few more tears trickle down his face and into his beard. It had been like that for the last twenty minutes. Knowing you were about to die was bad, very bad.

"It's going to be tough getting in," he said.

"We'll find a way."

Scott nodded and glanced at the giant. It was back by the door, spear at its side.

"I don't doubt it," he said. He coughed, the painful spasm filling him with dread. He took a deep breath

and coughed again. It was getting worse.

He smiled weakly at Noguchi. "You know, if this works, the company's gonna be really pissed."

She straightened slightly and then laughed. She seemed surprised by the sound. So was Scott.

You can still make a pretty woman laugh, Scott.

"Fuck the company," she said.

"Yeah."

On a sudden impulse, Scott grabbed at a piece of paper on the console and a pen. He made a quick sketch, studied the drawing for a moment, and then added a few more details.

He folded the paper in half and handed it to Noguchi.

"It's a going away present," he said. He coughed and pressed one hand to his stomach. He tried not to think about it-

You're going to die-

"It's a map of the ship," he continued. "I should have thought of it before."

She slipped the paper into a chest pocket and nodded. Behind them, at the door, the shrieks of the alien bugs had gotten louder.

"Sounds like every bug in the place is trying to get in," he said. "Well. All but one of them. It's already in."

"We're ready to go." She stood.

Scott nodded and coughed again. He was going to die.

A kind of calm slipped over him, a sense of unreality that made him feel far away from all this. It didn't matter, not really. He should be scared, had been scared, but now, in this moment, he was somehow floating above it, watching himself as if he were someone else. It was a done deal, end of the line, and while he had never dreamed it would happen this way, here it was and what choice did he have?

At least he had helped. Maybe it would even make some kind of difference-he wouldn't be around to see, but at least he wouldn't be in pain, and the damn repeating line would end.

The giant alien walked over to meet them when Noguchi stood. It gestured with its spear at Scott.

Noguchi's voice came from the creature: "I can make it quicker, easier for you."

Noguchi held up one hand. "No. I made the promise, I'll do it."

The giant seemed to understand. It stepped back.

"Weird," said Scott. He coughed-and with it came an odd nauseous feeling. Like he had swallowed

something alive.

"Just do it, okay?"

Noguchi held her pistol up. "Close your eyes, Scott. Count to three."

Scott closed his eyes. He sensed the barrel of the weapon behind his skull and he clenched his eyes tighter. He was afraid. But he was ready.

"I'll remember you," said Noguchi gently.

"One. Two-"

The warrior looked away from the fallen ooman and stood still for a moment. Dachande said nothing, but after a short span, he growled a time reminder at the standing ooman and motioned at the door. The Leader had done what a Leader had to do; there was no cure for an infected host and the larger ooman's death was quick and honorable. It had not fought or tried to run.

He moved to the dead ooman, judged where the unborn Hard Meat embryo was, and raised his spear. Looked at the remaining ooman.

The ooman nodded and turned away as Dachande drove the spear downward. Felt the blade hit the harder substance of the embryo. Felt it struggle to escape the point, then give up.

He pulled the blade free, hammered the shaft of the weapon with his free fist to shake the blood from it. Done.

The other ooman walked to join him. Glanced down at its dead comrade, then away. It looked tired. It motioned at a side entrance with its weapon and nodded at Dachande.

He nodded back and followed the small warrior to crouch by the entry. The drones still scabbled madly outside the main door, but there were no sounds outside this one.

The warrior raised its burner. Dachande readied his staff.

The door opened.

Chapter 28

Roth yawned and glanced at her chrono for the third time in fifteen minutes. They were out in the middle of nowhere in a quick and dirty makeshift camp and she was watching the darkness for monsters. Monsters.

Life sure wasn't what you expected, at least never for more than a few minutes at a time.

The suns would be coming up soon, which meant her shift was about done. In the dim predawn light, she leaned against Ackland's AV and whistled softly for Creep. The mutt had wandered over to stand watch with Leo, an older Chinese man who always seemed to have candy in his pocket.

After a few seconds, Creep padded quietly through the maze of vehicles to join her. She scratched his

head.

"How's Leo, dog? Still awake?"

Creep whuffled softly and sat down, tongue hanging out.

"I heard that, Roth," a voice crackled in her ear.

"You been feeding my dog crap again, Leo?" Roth spoke quietly. Most of the camp was still asleep, except for her and five others. On any normal night, they would've swapped jokes and insults, maybe taken turns napping. But the day before had been too long and too frightening. The shift had been tense and silent, and except for one false alarm when a few stray rhyth had wandered into camp, uneventful.

Leo chuckled. "Yep. You don't give him anything good; if I were him, I'd be hungry for something besides soypro in a can, too."

"You'd make a good dog, Leo."

There was a short pause and then Kaylor came online. "Sorry to interrupt, folks, but shouldn't Noguchi be here by now?"

Roth sighed. "Yeah, we know" Kaylor had a bad habit of stating the obvious.

Leo cut in. "Maybe someone should go back . . ."

He trailed off. No one replied. Roth concentrated on the twins suns as they sneaked up on the far edge of the desert and began to lighten the clear sky.

Twenty minutes later, the door to Ackland's AV banged open.

Roth jumped. She had been lulled into a trance by the silence and purity of the early morning. Asshole.

Within a few minutes, the camp was up. Bleary-eyed ranchers and their children stumbled out into the almost-cool air and trotted off to relieve themselves behind various rocks and low shrub.

Roth shouldered her rifle and rubbed at her eyes.

Sleep would be bliss, but she wanted to stay awake for a while and watch for Noguchi.

"Jame?" Cathie walked over with two cups of coffee.

"Thanks, hon. Get any sleep?"

Cathie smiled. "An hour or two, at least."

She handed Roth a mug and kissed her lightly. "I figured you wouldn't be ready for bed quite yet."

Roth motioned with her head at a small group of people who had gathered by Luccini's AV, Ackland and Weaver among them.

"What's the deal?"

Cathie shrugged. "Ackland's being a dickhead, what else?"

Jenkins arrived and took over from Roth. They nodded at each other.

As soon as the shift was covered, Roth and Cathie walked over to join the circle; several other ranchers had also stopped.

". . . and I think it's suicide!" Ackland looked blustery and irritated, as usual; Cathie was right, he was a dickhead.

"What's suicide?" Roth asked.

Weaver's cheeks were flushed. "Oh, nothing. Ackland is being a coward, that's all."

"Bullshit," said Ackland. "There's nothing we can do until the Marines show up, that's all! If one of you wants to go back and get killed, that's fine by me!"

Paul Luccini spoke up. He didn't talk much, but people tended to listen when he did. "The Marines might take a while, Ackland."

Cathie stepped in. "In the meantime, she could be hurt, or in need of help."

"Those are the chances she took when she accepted the job," said Ackland. His voice was now patronizing and slow, as if he were addressing children. "The Chigusa Corporation is responsible for the safety of the colonists, not the other way around."

A red haze seemed to settle over everything for Roth. She took a deep breath, tried to control it, but something snapped while Ackland spoke.

"You bastard!" She stepped forward and poked him in the chest with one trembling finger. "You can't shove this off on the company! You had me lie to Doc Revna about where we found those creatures! And it was your idea to sneak those rhynt past quarantine!" She took another step toward him. "I'm ashamed to admit to my part in it, but I take responsibility for my stupidity! What's your excuse?"

Ackland held up his hands, as if to defend himself. "Hey, look-you know what a hardass Noguchi is, right?" He searched the assembled ranchers for support. "I was just trying to protect my investments. Our investments."

Luccini spoke again. "Fuck the investments. I've got a family."

Several others chorused agreement.

Weaver glared at Ackland. "You can say what you want about Noguchi, but when it came down to it, she risked her life to save all of us-including your ass!"

Ackland opened his mouth, his fat face angry-and then closed it again. He turned and walked away.

"He'd better pray she's still alive when this is all over," Cathie whispered to Roth.

Roth nodded. The rush of adrenaline was gone, had left her exhausted. She caught Weaver's gaze.

"Are you looking for volunteers?"

Weaver considered it for a moment and then shook her head. "No. Not yet, anyway. Machiko told us to wait, so we'll wait. If she'd not here by late afternoon, though . . ."

"Right. Let me know, okay?"

Roth and Cathie walked over to a makeshift table that had been assembled and stacked with trays of rolls and a couple of pots of coffee.

"Do you think she's still alive?" said Cathie.

Roth started to say no, but then thought better of it.

"If anyone could survive that place right now," she said carefully, "it'd be her."

Dawn had come.

Broken Tusk stepped past her, out into the open compound, and then motioned for her to follow.

Noguchi crouched outside of the door and pointed left, then right with her handgun. It was clear.

She could still hear the screaming bugs around the corner to her right; they continued to slam into the main door, apparently unaware their prey had escaped.

Noguchi and Broken Tusk circled to the back. From behind them, Noguchi heard several loud cracks as the door finally gave up the fight.

Looks like they got tired of waiting for us to let them in-

Broken Tusk glanced back at her.

She pointed forward and he moved on.

Noguchi covered the rear as they headed to the other side of the ops building. They hurried, but didn't run. She took her cues from the warrior; he had dealt with these things before, and he stepped cautiously.

In spite of the situation, part of Noguchi could appreciate the dawn. The compound was illuminated softly by the early light, so unlike the Prosperity Wells she had known, harsh and glaring. It seemed tranquil and cool, like a dream

-or a memory

Pay attention here, Noguchi. Daydream when you don't have to worry about being eaten.

Good thought, but a little late.

She didn't see the thing until it was almost on top of her.

Dachande heard the splintering of the weak door behind them as they circled. He wasn't sure of what the ooman warrior had planned, but he knew what he needed to know and it was simple: kill everything

that got in their way.

The ooman pointed past him and then turned its back again; it watched for threats from the rear.

Dachande glanced upward and then went on. They should step a little faster. The drones would run through the ooman structure quickly, and then come back out. They were stupid, but good at finding live meat.

Dachande heard a cry from above and looked up again, too late.

A single drone howled and jumped, its long body twisted in the air. It landed behind him. In front of the ooman.

Noguchi spun. The hellish creature reached for her. She whipped her arm around, tried to aim, no time, fired

Missed.

The nightmare bug towered over her, shrieking.

Slime dripped from its metallic jaws. Its huge mouth opened, exposed a set of inner teeth, razor sharp.

Noguchi stumbled backward as the inner jaws snapped forward and smacked into her chest.

Something ripped. Hot pain seared her skin, blood flowed-

-she shoved the gun like a punch as the creature prepared to leap-

Before she could pull the trigger, the bug convulsed and shuddered wildly. A thick silver blade had suddenly appeared in the middle of its segmented torso. The thing's acid blood sprayed across the dusty floor, flowing toward her.

Noguchi passed out.

Dachande speared the drone in the back and then tossed the body across the ground. It wasn't dead yet, but it would be.

He spun, searched for others. He could hear the attacker's cry answered from structures all around. They would be here in seconds.

He scooped up the ooman and ran.

He had not had time to study the ooman dwellings properly, save the tower he had fallen from the night before-but the two larger oomans had been in one of the buildings nearby, he was sure of it. With luck, it was still safe. And the warrior had seemed to want them to head in that direction.

The warrior weighed almost nothing, hardly more than his staff. It made a low sound of pain as he pounded the dust. Speed was of the essence; he could not fight with it in his arms. The drone had clawed open the ooman's soft armor, armor now soaked in thwei. Red blood unlike his own. How different they were.

He heard screams from where he'd left the dying bug; it had been found.

Dachande ran faster.

She was flying.

Noguchi opened her eyes and blinked hard. Her abdomen felt shredded and her head ached.

Broken Tusk carried her. They ran through the compound, incredibly fast. Something had happened, she had been attacked-

She lifted her head slightly and panicked for a split second before she realized that the gun was still clenched in her fist. She winced at the pain in her chest and belly and closed her eyes again. Broken Tusk had saved her, but there was nothing she could do until he put her down.

From somewhere not so far away, the nightmare creatures howled.

Dachande saw the open entry to some long, low structure directly ahead.

The drones hadn't spotted him yet. He ran to the building, scanned the interior quickly, and ducked through the ooman-sized door.

It was empty. He set the warrior down carefully and then closed the door. He fumbled for a minute with the latch mechanism, and finally smashed the door hard enough to drive it into the frame. It was a flimsy barrier, the drones would get through it in seconds-but they didn't know where he was, not yet.

He turned to look at the ooman, and was surprised to see it sitting up. It still held its small burner-not aimed at him, but not down, either.

He approached it carefully and crouched down next to it to study the wound. The ooman seemed to protest at first, but relented quickly; it lay down.

He pulled the soaked padding away from the warrior's body and touched it gently. The ooman moaned.

"It's not going to kill you," he said. The ooman didn't reply.

He tried again. "No thei-de, understand?"

It didn't understand. It babbled for a minute and then fell quiet again. Frustrating.

Dachande lifted the rest of the weak armor away from the warrior's chest and then hissed, surprised. If ooman anatomy was anywhere similar to yautja, this warrior was a female; he hadn't thought of it before. It had a pair of what were obviously milk glands.

Stupid! Of course it's female!

Yautja females were bigger than males; it was apparently the reverse for oomans. It had never occurred to him. That was stupid; simple mistakes like that could lead to bigger ones, fatal ones.

It also explained why this warrior was smarter than most of the yautja he taught. Females of any

species were usually smarter than the males.

Dachande assessed the wounds; minor. There was a fair amount of blood, but it had already stopped flowing, and most of the acid burns had been slowed by the armor.

He used some of the torn armor to stanch the wound and then sat back on his heels and studied the ooman. It watched him, curious perhaps.

They didn't have much time, but Dachande thought they could spare a few seconds.

He pointed at his chest and gave her his honorary name. "Dachande."

The ooman shook her head.

"Dah-shann-day." He stretched it out.

The ooman tried, but couldn't make the right sounds. Dachande shook his head.

She reached out hesitantly and touched his shortened mandible. The new style masks covered only the nostrils, leaving the fighting tusks bare. She said something in her own language, then repeated it.

Dachande tilted his head. It wasn't his name, but she seemed to understand the meaning. "Brr-k'in dusg?"

The ooman exposed her teeth and then pointed at herself and spoke.

Dachande tried. "Nihkuo'te?"

The ooman shook its-no, her head.

He looked at the creature for a moment and then named her.

"Da'dtou-di." It was the feminine of "small knife." A brave name, and it suited her.

Da'dtou-di pointed at herself and did her best. "Dahdtooudee?"

Dachande hissed with pleasure. It was a start, and it was enough; it was all the time they could waste on pleasantries. Should they survive, they would talk later.

He stood. "Da'dtou-di," he said, "we must go."

The ooman got up, staggered slightly, and then nodded. She was all right.

Dachande turned and walked to the door. He listened.

The drones had run past their structure and were assembling elsewhere. Which likely meant their nest was close by.

The Leader waited for Da'dtou-di to join him, feeling older than he'd ever felt before. His bones ached. He had been on many Hunts, dangerous Hunts, but for the first time, the outcome was not obvious. There were more drones here than he'd ever fought, and where there was a nest, there would

be a queen-the drones could do that, change to female when no others were around. And a queen was not an easy kill.

He sighed deeply. If his Final Hunt were not today, it would be soon.

Noguchi got to her feet carefully and fought off dizziness. Broken Tusk started to reach toward her, but she nodded and held up a hand. The wounds weren't as bad as she'd feared; the light-headedness was more exhaustion than anything else.

She joined Broken Tusk at the door and held her handgun ready. Her new name rang through her thoughts, Dahdtoudi. If someone had told her a year ago that she'd be fighting XTs with an alien warrior, the fate of a hundred people on their shoulders, she would have laughed for a week.

As it stood, she allowed herself a tight grin. It was actually pretty funny; she'd laugh later, if there was time. If she woke up.

Noguchi motioned at the door, then pointed toward the south, where The Lector sat. Broken Tusk tilted his head to one side in agreement.

Next thing you know, we'll be talking philosophy.

Broken Tusk growled something at her and then pushed her back from the door slightly. He had jammed it.

Noguchi stepped back and watched as the warrior took a deep breath-

-and the door flew open to expose one of the warriors, a twin to Broken Tusk, holding a spear, its arms raised to strike.

Chapter 29

Noguchi reacted without thinking.

She dropped her weapon to chest level and fired into the warrior's belly until her gun ran dry.

The warrior fell backward. Its strange gun discharged harmlessly into the air with a hollow thump and an eye-smiting flare. The spear it held in the other hand fell and clattered on the door stoop.

He had not had time to scream.

Broken Tusk jumped in a split second later, but it was done.

A low, guttural gurgle came from the dying warrior's throat, punctuated with a spew of thick, greenish, milky, almost glowing fluid.

Blood.

Broken Tusk hefted his staff and brought the weighted end down on the warrior's skull. The head split with a dull, wet crack.

Broken Tusk's posture indicated anger and sorrow, his huge shoulders tensed, head bowed. She had killed one of his people. Would he be angry with her?

Noguchi scanned the immediate area for other dangers and then looked at Broken Tusk again.

He was much more adept than the one she'd shot had been.

It dawned on her.

It would explain the difference in prowess, the difference in behavior

Broken Tusk must be the commander.

Dachande was disgusted with himself. He had been so intrigued with the ooman female, so intent on opening the door, he had not scented the yautja.

It was Oc'd jy, one of his less adept students. The dead yautja's attack had been, as it seemed with all of their moves since they arrived, stupid. "Look before you shoot" was one of the cardinal rules. If you aren't sure of your target, the burner stays cold, the spear does not fly. Shooting a brother warrior accidentally was the height of bad manners.

And quarter-wit Oc'd jy breathing his last on the ground would surely have killed them both if Da'dtou-di hadn't fired first. No doubt of it. He was embarrassed that his students were so inept.

Dachande clattered a respectful appreciation to Da'dtou-di and then cracked Oc'd jy's head open. That his thick skull could no longer be any Hunter's trophy was a disgrace, and one he had earned. Too bad he had not broken Tichinde's. Ah, well. It was not likely anybody on this world would ever find the dead student, save for scavengers.

Dachande took a deep breath and frowned slightly. The yautja's musk, the h'dui'se, was weak, covered with the stench of dried feces and blood. At least that explained his inability to detect the student before . . .

He snatched the burner from the ground in irritation. A Leader should not make excuses; in Hunting, they did not matter-you died or you did not.

At least he had a decent weapon. Dachande checked it over and growled. Four more fires; not much, but better than his spear alone. Tichinde's burner had been empty.

He glanced at Da'dtou-di, who studied him carefully. He did not know contempt on an ooman face, but she probably felt it.

Da'dtou-di motioned again toward the nest as she finished reloading her weapon. Dachande tilted his head and stepped forward, slinging the burner over one shoulder. She was right; now was not the time for recriminations. He could dwell on his incompetencies later.

Maybe.

Noguchi pointed at the ship, only a few structures away, fifty or sixty meters.

Broken Tusk moved again to the fore position.

They edged forward, Noguchi careful to check the roof.

They made it past the south end of the pen they'd been in before the first attack.

Broken Tusk walked into the open space between two of the pens.

Noguchi backed toward him cautiously.

He hissed a warning.

Noguchi spun, handgun extended.

Broken Tusk crouched, hissed again, his arms spread wide, spear pointed at the sky.

Two of the bugs sprinted toward them from the shadows of the alley, joined by a third. Then a fourth. And a fifth.

Dachande counted them quickly, then stood. Only five.

As the first two rushed to attack him, he sidestepped and thrust the bladed staff out.

The closest one caught it in the throat; it screamed, collapsed, hit the ground.

The second rammed its head directly into the durable blade; the top of its head sliced neatly from its body. Acidic blood fountained.

Da'dtou-di fired her burner from behind him, the sounds loud and sharp.

Two of the running drones fell. Four of five.

Dachande stepped in again to take out the last.

It seemed not to see its fallen siblings. The creature ran straight at him, shrieking.

Dachande hopped to one side as the creature neared, spear held to the other side-

-except the drone hopped and matched his move.

And hit him, running full speed.

Noguchi aimed past Broken Tusk and fired. The first two shots missed, but the third took out one of the black bugs, still a dozen meters away.

She trained and fired again, this time right on the target. A second fell, its corrosive blood sprayed and began to sizzle and eat into the nearest wall.

She tried for the last, but Broken Tusk was in the line of fire. Noguchi turned quickly, alert to other threats.

From The Lector or close to it, she heard what sounded like a hundred of the nightmares. They

shrieked and howled and pounded the earth, but none came into view.

Noguchi spun, just in time to see the fifth bug barrel into Broken Tusk and knock him down.

Dachande felt ribs snap as the drone tackled him. He'd lost his spear-

The snarling bug drove its head downward, opened its mouth, exposed its inner jaws-

-he plunged his fist into its mouth.

The alien gagged and bit down. Dachande felt the dagger teeth pierce his arm but he drove his claws in deeper, dug deep into softer flesh-

The drone jerked its talons away from Dachande's throat and clutched at its own. The Leader brought up his other fist and slammed the bug's neck, hard.

The drone spilled to the side.

Dachande let the weight of the creature pull him over to land on top of it. He grabbed for the burner, that sent a shooting pain through his side-and brought the blunt end down on the bug's slender throat.

The drone let go of his arm and died.

Broken Tusk staggered to his feet and retrieved his spear. He turned and jogged toward her. His arm was dotted with green spots where the thing had bitten him.

If he felt any pain, Noguchi couldn't see it. She covered him until he reached her, and then turned toward the ship without her pointing to it.

He knew that much, and she had figured it out on the way.

They were going to where most of the creatures called home.

Dachande ignored the jabbing pain as they edged closer to the nest. The drones would surround their queen now, protect her. They made it past the second and third structure with no more attacks.

Da'dtou-di paused for a second to reload her burner. Dachande glanced at her thoughtfully.

She was the prey he had waited most of his life to Hunt. They were small but powerful, obviously more intelligent than the yautja had thought, and as brave as any warrior he had Hunted with.

Of course, Da'dtou-di could be an exception; she was obviously trained better than the other few oomans he had been in contact with. The kind one that had died, for instance, it was not trained to Hunt, and had been blind to the danger he could have represented.

He would have enjoyed Hunting oomans. But he was proud to Hunt at Da'dtou-di's side. This would be a tale to tell for generations to come . . .

The ooman saw that he watched her and raised her fist into the air. She exposed her teeth again at the same time, probably a sign of aggression.

Dachande still wore his mask, but he raised his arm also and then clattered, as loud as he dared, the Kiss of Midnight.

Kill or die. He was ready.

They crept into the open space in front of the shield wall as quietly as possible. Ryushi's suns beat down on the nearly lifeless compound. It seemed like hours ago that Noguchi had been thinking of how beautiful the town was. Not now. Especially since the heat of midmorning had taken on the cloying stench of rot and decay. A lot of bodies-humans, aliens, warriors-must be cooking in the hot sunshine.

The Lector seemed deserted from the outside. A lone dead rhyth lay on the ground in front of the ship, its intestines ripped out. It must have staggered from the stampede to die there . . .

Noguchi figured the bugs had nested in the ship, and that they waited there now, grouped to attack. Their actions reminded her of a bee colony, the way the drones of a hive lived only to feed and protect their queen.

She shuddered slightly at the thought; she wouldn't want to meet with whatever those monstrosities called "mother."

The distance to the ship slowly dwindled as they crossed the compound. Noguchi's heart thumped louder with each step. She stifled an urge to go back to the empty holding pen and study Conover's map for a while longer.

Like five or ten years.

Broken Tusk walked cautiously, but not too much so; Noguchi figured he knew something she didn't. That wouldn't take much.

As they neared the main loading entrance, her worries about what they would do if the door was closed vanished. The middle steel entry was halfway open as it had been when she and Mason had gone in-

Another pleasant thought. They reached the bottom of the ramp and Noguchi looked up into the black interior of the dock; the metal door was raised horizontally, exactly the right height to let the bugs come and go.

The bugs didn't seem too smart, but she wondered. Conover had spoken of one that was much larger than the others, that had slept near them when they were captives.

Queen?

She might have stood there for a lot longer, but Broken Tusk growled at her. Noguchi took it as impatience. She took a tentative step onto the ramp.

From somewhere inside the blackness, a low hiss.

Noguchi took another step, gun ready for the fast thing that moved. Broken Tusk was by her side, his weapon also out. He had slung the spear over his back.

The dark lock stirred, shadows shifted. She heard the clatter of alien movement, and then silence.

Broken Tusk moved in front of her. She let him.

They were halfway up the ramp when a sudden flurry of motion in the dark ahead of them surprised her. She fired into the dock, twice.

The gunshots clapped loudly in the still air. Whatever had moved wasn't moving now.

Broken Tusk made a few guttural sounds and then walked without hesitation to the top of the ramp. He turned and motioned at her to follow.

Noguchi joined him and peered inside. Nothing, at least nothing she could hear or see. It felt empty, too. But there was alien spoor all around. An odd, wet-metal smell. What looked like meaty chunks of slaughtered rhyth-or human.

She edged inside, adrenaline pumping. On the dark floor there were several of the unclassifieds that the Revnas had dissected, their spiderlike bodies curled and motionless. Dark shapes lined the walls. She looked closer and then shuddered. The Lector's crew, at least some of them, with chests ruptured, webbed like flies in the nest of a demonic spider. Some of them had not died easily, from the expressions locked on to their dead faces.

Where-?

A jagged hole at the rear of the dock answered her. The edges of the torn metal looked melted, scorched. All around it were bizarre formations of shiny black material. It stretched and hung in thick ropes, appeared both organic and deliberate.

It seemed twice as hot as outside in the burning sunlight with the humidity added. Noguchi took a shaky breath and then moved into the darkness. Broken Tusk walked ahead of her to the hole and waited.

She heard a chittering movement come from deep inside the ship somewhere, and steeled her nerves as she approached.

They were going to have to find the control room. Which meant going in, navigating a labyrinth of corridors, climbing two flights of steps, and unlocking a locked door.

Broken Tusk watched her for a second and then stepped into the hole.

Noguchi prayed silently to anyone listening, and followed him.

Chapter 30

Dachande went first.

He crouched down immediately and searched for life, sweeping back and forth with his burner. Nothing moved.

Da'dtou-di slipped in after him. He ignored her for the moment; she could take care of herself. What she lacked in skill, she made up for with intelligence; it would have to be enough.

He scanned the long dark corridor through the eyes of the mask. More of the alien spittle secretion, te'dqi, lined the steep walls. It was a brittle substance, but could provide camouflage for hiding drones.

The lenses showed nothing. He glanced at Da'dtou-di. Her sickly pale skin seemed whiter than before.

"Nothing, he said.

She babbled a short reply. The words were nonsense but the tone was watchful and ready.

They crept forward.

Da'dtou-di stumbled behind him. Apparently oomans didn't see well in the dark. She followed closer.

At the end of the corridor, another door, open. Dachande heard the kainde amedha as they skittered somewhere beyond. He ducked his head to get through the portal and discovered that he would have to move in a crouch through the next hall; the ooman ceiling was lower here.

Dachande had gone into three nests before this one. But always with fully stocked burners and at least a handful of armed yautja with him. Not to mention that he felt like a month old Jet turd-his side ached from the drone attack and each deep breath burned somewhere inside. From his experience and the way he felt, the wounds were fairly serious. Well. Nothing to be done about it.

He wasn't afraid, Blooded warriors seldom were in battle. But he accepted that dying could come easily here. He hoped it would come with honor. The real pity would be that there would be no one to tell the tale. No one except a small ooman-assuming she survived as well.

They moved forward in the thick dark.

Noguchi tripped on something and caught herself before she fell. There was virtually no light. Every dozen paces or so, a small dim emergency torch set high into the wall illuminated just enough to make it seem darker. She could make out her own weapon and Broken Tusk's back; beyond that, nothing.

The warrior seemed to be able to see better. He must have done this a dozen times, and he obviously knew something about the aliens' behavior-

Noguchi felt her gut clench at the sound of movement ahead somewhere. She gripped her weapon tighter, her eyes wide and semi-blind.

They stepped into a second corridor, the air grew muggier as they progressed. Their footsteps were oddly muffled by the strange alien material that lay thick on the floor.

She should be in front, she knew that; Dachande had looked at the map Conover had given her, but his understanding of it couldn't be clear. Then again, he could see better, and was stronger-

As they neared the end of the second hallway, Noguchi heard another alien chitter, close.

From behind them.

Dachande whipped around at the drone's cry and pointed his burner.

Da'dtou-di had also heard it. She fired at the bug as it ran for them.

The shot from her burner hit the drone in the shoulder and spun it around. It didn't fall.

Dachande aimed his burner at the screaming creature. Light and heat spewed in a tight beam.

The drone's back exploded outward in a spray of corrosive blood and cooked entrails.

Footfalls. He spun. Two drones attacked from the front.

Dachande turned, got the first with his bladed wrist, a sharp slashing jab to the bug's throat.

The second clambered over its falling brother and reached for him. Dachande knocked it down, used the burner as a club to crush its jaws. Blood hissed over the durable metal and dripped to the floor, ate holes in the hard material.

Da'dtou-di inhaled sharply and fired past him, at a third drone.

And missed. The Hard Meat turned and sprinted away from them, down the third winding corridor, shrieking an alarm to the others. It was too stupid to be afraid so it must be a sentry.

Dachande cursed. Behind him, he was pretty certain Da'dtou-di did the same in her own language. He didn't need a translator to understand that.

Well, it just meant they'd have to hurry. He had hoped to make it farther . . .

The Leader picked up his pace and hit the hallway at a jog, Da'dtou-di right behind. Ahead, the Hard Meat waited.

She was terrified but ready. This had to be done or else the colonists would die-

And you, too, Machiko.

No shit.

At the end of the third hall, the corridor came to a T-junction. Noguchi pointed for Broken Tusk to turn left; she hoped she'd remember the rest as they came to it.

She moved blindly behind Broken Tusk. There would be a rung ladder on the right pretty soon-

-a bug hissed behind her. Noguchi turned and fired. The shots were deafening in the closed area. The alien's dying screams were quieter.

This was getting old real goddamn fast.

She turned again, just in time to see a bolt of hard light come from the warrior's weapon, accompanied by an echoey thud. It acted as a strobe, showed them a nightmare of dark limbs and shiny teeth.

More screaming.

Noguchi breathed the stifling air shallowly. Her body twitched and jumped as she searched the

darkness for the ladder. Her chest had started to bleed again.

Maybe she was already dead and didn't realize it.

Maybe they were in hell.

Dachande felt the ooman slap him on the back and turned.

Da'dtou-di pointed up, her face distorted. She seemed disturbed, as far as he was able to read her expression.

He eyed the flimsy ladder and then started to climb; the narrow rungs allowed him to take three at a time.

Dachande reached the top and looked down at the small warrior. She swung her weapon in an arc; dull light glinted off the small metallic burner.

He looked up again, reached for the floor of the next level-

-a clawed hand dropped down to cover his own. The black talons etched into his wrist, raising small fountains of his blood.

The drone bent down and hissed into his face.

Noguchi looked up just in time.

The bug leaned toward Broken Tusk and opened its jaws.

She aimed and squeezed. The AP bullet went into the alien's mouth and out the back of its head. It fell

Dachande stood up and hit the first drone to come at him with the weighted staff. It dropped, still alive but out of the fight. There was nothing behind it, at least for a few seconds.

He turned to cover Da'dtou-di on her climb, at the same time her weapon fire stopped.

A drone leapt at her, knocked her back against the ladder.

Dachande felt pure rage. He jumped from the second level, staff in front of him---

-and landed on the drone.

Like that, tarei hsan?

The drone did not. So he killed it.

Noguchi was dizzy. Broken Tusk stamped the life out of the bug that had grabbed her. He tucked her under his arm and ascended the rung ladder easily.

He set her down first and then pulled himself up after her. Noguchi reloaded her gun and then covered him, but the last few hissing shapes that were below

The ooman paused midway down the hallway and then pointed at a doorway with odd figures scrawled on it. Ooman language.

She spoke something. Dachande hit the animal loop on his suit to record, in case it might later be helpful. Da'dtou-di motioned at him and then again at the door.

She wanted him to stay here?

Dachande growled, but Da'dtou-di was adamant. It was important to her.

It had been a long time since he had trusted another in battle. And now he was being asked to trust an ooman, not even an un-Blooded yautja!

She held up her clawless hand again and then backed away a few steps.

Dachande tilted his head at her.

Da'dtou-di spoke again and bared her teeth at him. And then she turned and ran ahead. He could take her head off with a swipe of his wrist blade and yet she showed him her teeth. Brave Little Knife. If she risked his wrath it must be important to her indeed. Well.

This was her kind's ship. She surely knew things about it he did not. She must have a plan.

Dachande stayed.

He tilted his head, which she thought meant affirmative.

Noguchi felt a rush of relief. She didn't want to part with him in this hot, deadly maze, but she'd need a clear path to get back. She only had maybe a dozen rounds left. It did not matter how good the ammo was if you were out of it; she hoped Broken Tusk had more for his weapon.

"Hold the fort," she said, and grinned tightly. She was scared and she hurt, but it felt powerful to be doing something. Something that might kill the infestation in her town . . .

You hope.

"I'll be back when I'm done."

With that, she turned and ran. And prayed that he would be there when she got back.

If she got back.

The second ladder looked empty, but she couldn't see the top. The strange alien formations were thicker here, looped around the rungs and covered the wall.

She checked behind her again and started to climb, revolver in hand.

A drop of odd, warm goo smacked onto her arm. Then another.

She looked up.

Da'dtou-di hadn't indicated if she wanted the door he guarded open, but Dachande opened it anyway. The ooman wanted him to watch it for some reason.

It was locked, so he pounded at the frame with the end of his staff until it cracked.

It was a tyioe-ti, an escape pod, small but large enough for the two of them. He stepped in and surveyed it quickly. Not a nesting area. Three oomansized chairs and a panel of controls. He'd never be able to squeeze into one of those tiny seats to fly this craft.

He turned and stood at the entry to wait for Da'dtou-di. And he heard a resounding crash from the direction they had come from, followed by a low, scratchy hiss.

Dachande tensed. It was a sound he had heard before.

A queen. Heading in this direction.

Was it the one they had brought on their ship, egglayer of their prey? Or had one of the drones shifted hormones and metamorphosed into a female?

Not that it really mattered, just at the moment.

He waited.

Noguchi looked up and stopped breathing.

One of the bugs had leaned down from the third level, its long, misshapen skull right above her. Another drop of slime fell from its jaws

She brought her pistol up and rammed the barrel into its mouth. She jerked the trigger again and again.

The creature didn't even cry out. It fell past her with a clattering thud. It was a small miracle that none of its acidic blood splashed onto her.

Her hands shook as she topped the ladder. Surely there would be another at the top, waiting to tear at her, to rip out her throat

Noguchi pulled herself up and on to her knees. The platform was coated heavily with the dark alien material, but otherwise empty.

She jumped to her feet and ran down the hall. At the end was another tee. Without hesitation, she took a right and continued on. The hot, sticky air made it a struggle to breathe. It smelled like rotten mushrooms in here.

It wasn't until two more turns in the twisted corridor that she realized she had gone the wrong way.

Dachande took a deep breath and waited. There was no doubt that it was the queen, or that she was headed toward him.

Drones were target practice, but a queen egglayer

No lone yautja had ever survived combat with one, unless he had a burner. Once, a dozen Blooded

warriors had taken one down with only blades and spears, but the queen had killed nine of them before she died.

Metal creaked and groaned from below. At least he still had a fire in his burner. Two of them.

A crest of shiny black appeared at the top of the ladder . . .

Dachande pointed and fired.

Missed.

The Hard Meat ducked and screamed, but was uninjured He took aim and waited for her to come up.

Nothing happened for several beats. Dachande remained ready.

Suddenly she howled and a dark shape sprang into view at the top of the ladder.

Dachande fired, his last shot.

The head of the creature exploded.

He roared in triumph and threw the empty burner at the bubbling mess. The useless weapon skipped over the platform and disappeared. He had killed her, had Hunted a queen and killed her! The stories of their intelligence and skill had been wrong, she had been an easy target

The queen hissed again and the crest of her unmistakable skull rose into view.

Dachande's eyes widened. But he had blown her to pieces-!

Decoy. She had sent a drone to take the shots; he had been tricked.

But how could she know that--?

It didn't matter. The deadly queen was alive, and she was coming.

S'yuit-de!

He watched as two huge talons screeched across the metal platform and pulled the grinning monster into view.

Noguchi didn't bother with the map. She knew where she'd fucked up.

There was a second of initial panic. She'd actually left him there to wait for her, stupid, stupid-!

Noguchi brought it under control and turned back.

She was almost back to where she had taken the wrong turn when one of the nightmare creatures leapt out of nowhere to land in front of her.

She pointed and fired several times. The snarling animal shrieked and fell.

Behind it was another. She pulled the trigger again, and it toppled on top of the other. There were no others.

Idiot! Your ammo!

A cold hand clutched at her heart. The gun was empty.

She ejected the spent shells and loaded the final rounds, hands shaking harder now.

Six rounds.

Noguchi came to the tee and ran straight. For one terrifying moment she felt totally lost, but then she saw the door. Yellow and black lines, just as Conover had said.

She aimed as carefully as she could and blew the lock off of the door. Bits of plastic and metal spewed and stung her face and hands. The door opened to reveal a room full of panels and screens. This was the central computer room, according to what Conover told her. The ship's brains.

Noguchi slammed the door behind her and ran to the second chair.

Second chair, straight on, disk slot next to red and black strip

She hit the transmitter's power switch and waited for the panel to light up. She took Scott's disk from her pocket and held it tightly. The seconds stretched like minutes. Hours. Eons . . .

There was an empty coffee cup on the console in front of her with "Conover" stenciled on the side. She felt a stab of pity for the pilot; he had died bravely.

The screen glowed to life with a stream of numbers and letters at the top. She carefully inserted the disk into the slot and pushed the lock button.

The computer hummed and blinked. Noguchi felt her breath catch.

If this doesn't work, you're dead -

A light flashed: Dir .received / pil. S.Conover, 93630/navigational complete.

She slapped the board. "Yes, yes, yes!"

It had worked.

She turned just as the door burst inward.

Dachande straightened his back and took a deep breath. If this was to be his Final Hunt, he would die fighting. Combat against a queen with only a staff-it was an honor. He would fight and he would lose but that was the only choice.

From the way Da'dtou-di had gone he heard her weapon crash several times. He tuned it out. She would have to complete her mission alone.

The queen was huge, twice as large as a drone. Her arms were longer-she had a second, smaller set

protruding from her chest-her crown sleek and branched almost like antlers. Her double jaws held more than two rows of shiny teeth. And being female, she would know how to fight.

She moved toward him slowly. Her long, pointed tail dragged across the metal floor.

Dachande raised his staff and held it out slightly, legs spread wide. If she came at him like he thought she would, he would get in at least one clean cut.

The queen towered in the corridor, bent almost in half to move.

Dachande held steady. He said, "Come, Hard Meat. I killed your children. Come and join them." An unlikely boast and neither could she understand it, but smiling into the face of Death was said to sometimes unnerve even the Black Warrior.

A sudden noise behind him called for his attention, but he didn't take his eyes from her.

She swung her head to look past him and hissed.

Dachande's eyes flickered. Was there someone-?

The queen leapt-

Noguchi blew the bug's brains across the hall with two shots.

The dark jellied mass splatted against the corridor wall and ran down in clumps.

She jumped over the corpse and into the passageway. She sprinted for the tee.

It was over, or it would be soon. The barge was going to fall like a meteor, like an atomic-powered meteor and when it hit, it would take out what was left of Prosperity Wells. And the rest of the alien brood. There wouldn't be anything remaining here but a smoldering crater.

The escape pod should get them far enough out of town-

At the turn to get back to the ladder, the corridor beyond exploded into motion.

Noguchi let out a cry and then aimed at one of the bugs that sprang for her. The bullet knocked it down, still shrieking.

Two shots now, only two left-

Noguchi reached the top of the rung ladder down to the second level. The ladder was twisted, torn loose from the wall. Shit-!

"Broken T-!"

She stopped. Below her, the warrior stood. And faced one of the nightmare creatures, a giant, huge, it filled the entire corridor!

At the sound of her voice, the monster looked up and hissed, a horrible, raspy sound that chilled her to the pit of her soul.

-Queen-

It spun and lashed out at Broken Tusk as Noguchi aimed her handgun at it.

The impossibly long and heavy tail crashed against the warrior's chest. His spear flew and he was knocked flying.

She heard the sound of the impact from where she was. Broken Tusk smacked against the door he guarded and bounced off it. His blood seemed to glow against his dark armor. He didn't move.

Noguchi fired, her chest tight. The queen screamed and turned toward her.

The bullet missed.

Without thinking, Noguchi jumped to the second level, revolver in front of her. One shot left. One chance.

Her knees buckled as she hit the platform, but she didn't fall.

The queen shrieked and started for her.

Noguchi prayed that one bullet would stop her-

-fired-

-and the monster fell backward, screamed, and thrashed on the floor. Chest shot.

Not dead, but down.

Noguchi ran to Broken Tusk. She dropped the empty weapon. The nightmare queen's tail lashed out and would have knocked her down if she hadn't jumped.

Broken Tusk took the lash again in the chest. Blood spattered.

Noguchi kicked at the door to the escape pod and stumbled. The inner hatch was open.

The queen screamed, a piercing howl. Her death chant, Noguchi hoped.

She bent over the injured warrior and got one arm under him. With strength she didn't know she had, she lifted with a grunt-

-and he slid with her into the pod.

Sweat ran down her face. She pulled again, and his feet cleared the door.

No time, no time

She half fell into a chair in front of the panel and searched frantically for the control.

Behind her, the alien screamed again in pain and fury.

Broken Tusk groaned and rolled toward Noguchi.

Noguchi found the button, right in front of her. In her panic she had missed it.

Movement behind her. A scream that sent hot, charnel, rotting air across her back.

She half turned, hand on the button

-and the queen was there, her head in the pod, her huge claw came down

-and embedded in the warrior's shoulder.

Broken Tusk screamed.

Noguchi slammed the door's override button.

The thick metal door closed. The grinning head seemed to rush at her--

-and then toppled to the floor as the pressure door, designed to seal the ship against hard vacuum, crunched the exoskeleton of the monster's relatively thin neck and beheaded the queen.

Her disembodied hand was still buried in the motionless warrior's back.

Noguchi hit the next button.

And they were free of the larger ship, flying.

The pain was bad, but Dachande let it happen.

He didn't understand it for a moment. It. Something. Da'dtoudi, was she here? Had they killed her?

He felt oddly weightless for a short time

---flying--

And then the floor rose up and slammed against him.

There was a burst of new pain. Gravity returned, with more aches than he'd ever had. He was hurt, badly hurt.

Then a rush of hot, clean air. Light assaulted his eyes. His breathing mask was gone. Too much of the planet's combustive oxygen flooded into his lungs. He couldn't last more than a few hours breathing such potent air.

He coughed. Warm liquid ran down his throat, but it still felt raw, wounded.

A shadow moved over him. He was lifted slightly and pulled.

He growled in pain but couldn't seem to form a protest. The air blinded him. He was outside.

He opened his eyes slowly and focused on the face that hovered over his.

Da'dtou-di!

He felt a burst of pride. She had survived, had helped him.

Dachande started to speak and coughed again. More pain.

He reached for the loop on the arm of his suit, but his fingers had grown clumsy.

Da'dtou-di placed her fragile hand under his and moved it for him.

Noguchi's throat felt tight. There was a stone in her chest, heavy and painful. Pale blood covered the warrior, his breathing slow and labored. He was dying.

They had made it. The pod had landed with a jarring impact somewhere in the east desert, far from Prosperity Wells; the chute had opened at least. But ...

Broken Tusk raised a shaky hand toward his other wrist, but couldn't seem to maneuver it well. Noguchi guided it for him.

It was the recording device. She felt her eyes brim as her own voice spilled out.

"Hold the fort. I'll be back when I'm done."

Broken Tusk grabbed at the alien claw, still embedded in his shoulder. "Hang on," she said. "Help will be here soon, the colonists will come-" She faltered and choked. Then gave him what she felt he needed. "We did it. We killed the bugs. The queen. You and I" She waved her hand, feeling helpless.

He pulled the queen's claw loose and looked at it.

She pointed at it, nodded, made a throat-cutting gesture.

He understood. She was sure of it, because he nodded in return. Then he grasped one of the long, spidery digits and snapped it off, groaned with the exertion. Hissing blood dripped from the finger.

Broken Tusk then motioned at the mark on his face, a jagged bolt between his eyes. He motioned at her and then at the scar again.

Noguchi nodded and leaned closer.

Da'dtou-di had to be Blooded. It was his responsibility, as Leader.

Dachande tore off one of the queen's fingers. It hurt to move, to breathe, to live, but this was important; it was all he had left.

Da'dtou-di came closer, closed her eyes. Something wet splashed on Dachande's face; he ignored it. It was time.

The warrior dipped one claw into the alien blood and then spat on the claw. His own blood mixed with the alien's acidic ichor. That was part of it. His blood would partly neutralize the potent chemicals

from the Hard Meat. Moving with great care, he reached out and etched his mark into her pale skin, on the forehead, between her eyes. He managed to keep his hand from shaking long enough to draw his symbol.

She hissed in pain, but didn't move. She was brave, Little Knife. She had helped him and they had killed the queen. That was something to take and lay at the feet of the Black Warrior.

Dachande dropped his hand, exhausted. The animal loop played again, some ooman speak from long before. It didn't matter; he had been ready for a long time and now was the moment. He had no complaints.

He wished he could talk in her language, teach her what he could-be brave, Hunt well, respect your Leader. But she already knew most of that. The rest, she would surely learn. She was Blooded now, and somehow she would learn. Even though they had only been together a short time, he knew all about her.

The best student he ever had.

Tears fell before Broken Tusk even touched her. She started to wipe at her eyes, but then closed them instead. The dying warrior was going to give her his mark, she understood what he wished. She leaned down.

The pain was short and burning. A trickle of green blood ran down her nose.

Broken Tusk dropped his hand, and her voice spoke again from the loop, softly this time.

"I'll remember you."

Noguchi lowered her head and started to sob, the first real tears she had cried in a long time.

Behind them, a light appeared in the sky. A ball of flame plummeted through the Ryushi sunlight, headed for Prosperity Wells.

Noguchi glanced behind her as the explosion thundered through the desert. The air around her compressed suddenly. Fiery air washed over them with the sound, the roar and rumble of it.

When the sound died, the town was gone. As quickly as that.

She turned back to the warrior. Buried her face in her hands and rocked slowly, back and forth.

Dachande had stopped breathing. Like the town, he was gone.

Epilogue

Dahdtoudi woke up early on the morning they came.

It was first light on the open plain that unfolded in front of her small home. She yawned and stretched as she climbed out of bed and glanced out the window. The air felt different somehow, electric.

Only two years before, she would have disregarded the sense of change as nonsense, superstition. But "quiet" didn't start to describe the experience of living on a world where she was the only human; she had

developed a feel for Ryushi, the way an athlete could feel her body and its fluctuations. The air was different, no question. Something was going to happen.

Something.

She pulled on a coverall and slipped on her boots. She pulled her shaggy hair into a knot at the back of her neck as she walked into the tiny kitchen for a glass of water. The new well between her home and the near cliff was clean, the water sweet. No more riding twenty clicks for a shower at the old well, either.

Dahdtoudi drank the cool water slowly and thought about the day ahead. Yesterday, she had run through forms, so today was weight day. Also water day for the sheltered garden in the glassed shed behind the house. Tomorrow she would ride the east sector and check for visitors . . .

She finished and set the glass in the sink. It was feeding time first.

Dahdtoudi walked outside and almost tripped on Creep. The dog jumped and wagged his tail, excited to see her.

She scuffed the dog behind his ears. "I'm excited, too, Creep. It's been what, six hours since last we met?"

Creep barked happily and followed her to the rhynt pen. He ran between her legs and almost knocked her over.

"Dumb dog," she said fondly. He barked again.

She couldn't look at the mutt without thanking Jame and Cathie silently. Creep had been good company, had kept loneliness from getting too big. They had acted as though it would be best for the dog, to be able to run free-but the gift had been for her, too.

"Good morning, kids."

The three rhynt that she kept turned their heads slowly to watch her approach. Spot, Milo, and Mim. They weren't as good at conversation as Creep, but they were tame. They also acted as transport; she had a flyer, but eventually her fuel would run out, so she saved it for emergencies. Keeping them as pets made it harder to eat meat, but it was a matter of survival. Besides, she only had to hunt once every two months or so ...

Dahdtoudi dumped some grain in their trough and scratched Mim behind her leathery ears. The beast snorted and started to eat as if she'd been starving.

"Should have called you 'pig,'" said Dahdtoudi. The rhynt ignored her.

She walked back to the house and sat down on the front porch to watch the sun rise. There was enough light for her to see the queen's skull, bleached by the hot sun where it perched on her roof. Her trophy, hers and Broken Tusk's.

Creep lay down next to her and nuzzled her legs.

"What's different today, dog? Something is different."

Creep glanced at her and then rested his head on his paws. She patted his side and smiled.

They had been here alone for almost two years. After Broken Tusk had died, she had joined the colonists for the long wait. It had taken nearly two months before help had arrived, and by then her decision was made, was firm. Was irrevocable.

At first a couple of the ranchers had argued with her, but they soon gave up.

The company hadn't tried to change her mind at all. She could have been charged with something, however trumped up the charges would have been, but the final word was that "her actions had been dictated by necessity." Her executive contract had been quietly bought out, which was fine by her. Chigusa was worried about liability and declared the whole thing a write-off. The old man wasn't stupid. He gave her a permanent, official position as a "caretaker," and pulled his interests out of the Cygni system. He never threw good money after bad, so it was said, and he was superstitious about staying on a world so cursed as this one. The galaxy was full of worlds and the old man owned hundreds of them. He would never miss this one.

Only Roth and her spouse and Weaver had seemed to understand why she wanted to stay.

So the colonists had gone to start over again in the Rigel system, and she was left alone to start over on Ryushi. And she had been happy. For the first time in her life, there had been no dragons. There was only peace.

"Everything I care about is right here," she said softly.

Creep sighed, most likely bored. She'd had a lot of time to replay conversations and events in her mind, and the dog had suffered the same stories for two years.

A flash of movement in the morning sky caught her attention. For several seconds she thought she was seeing things; it had been so long . . .

The flash grew brighter and brighter. She watched its progress as it ripped through the air, the sound far away. Creep sensed her excitement and sat up, whining softly.

The object fell gracefully in an arc to land to the west, maybe half a day's ride by rhyth, maybe less. Dahdtoudi Noguchi stood quickly and tried not to get her hopes up.

Probably a meteor, that's all . . .

But she didn't really think so. She went to get ready.

Seven hours later, she dismounted Milo and moved through the harsh sunlight toward a small stand of rocks. She carried her binoculars and carbine; the company had left her with plenty of supplies.

A thin stream of smoke still rose from where the object had landed, in a small valley set among a stand of steep rock walls.

Dahdtoudi slipped between the rocks silently and propped herself up on a baked stone. She scanned left to right until she picked up the smoke

A small vehicle on treads buzzed across the cracked dirt, maybe a hundred meters away. She zoomed in, her heart hammering.

Behind it was a trail that extended beyond her range of vision. A trail of spheres, oval-shaped

Dahdtoudi lowered the viewer and stood for a moment. She rubbed absently at the jagged scar between her eyes, faded white now.

"It won't be long," she said. She would make them understand, tell them of Broken Tusk's bravery and skill. And how everything had gone wrong . . .

Milo gazed at her. She stretched her sore muscles and then mounted him for the ride home.

The Leader sighed inwardly at the yautja assembled before him. They were as ready as he could make them, pumped and hungry to kill. They stood in line next to the ship, their burners loaded and blades sharpened.

But he also had orders to seek after Dachande's group on this Hunt, an extra pain he could have done without. That ship had never returned.

He had known Dachande. Old broken tooth had been a good Leader and a strong warrior, but something had gone wrong, and those in charge wanted to know what. As they always did when it was not they who had to determine it.

Vk'leita shook his head as he reviewed the young yautja. He had Hunted with Dachande, he respected him, as had many, but he was surely dead, and dead was dead, all that mattered was the way of it. More than a long cycle had passed, probably too much time to ascertain much of anything. The dead from that trip would be sun-grayed bones scattered by the local scavengers by now.

He nodded at the other Blooded, Ci'tde. Ci'tde would take the group on the initial scouting trip. The Hunt would start in earnest after the light fell away.

The Leader stayed at the ship and ran through some practice drills while he was alone. Young males took a lot of energy to train, and he relished the time away from them. Besides, he would have to check the ui'stbi, the geography, for remnants of recent Hunting. He could do some through the ships' gkinmara, but much would have to be done on foot. He was looking forward to stretching himself, covering ground, loosening up the ship-stale muscles.

He finished practice and then sat on the ground to clean his armor. The yautja would not be back until the suns had passed through their high point, so he had plenty of time . . .

Behind him, a sound of movement.

Vk'leita was on his feet instantly. The sound had come from the other side of the ship. He snatched up his burner and started toward the sound.

He reached the front of the ship and let out a warning hiss.

Nothing.

Suddenly a small figure stepped into view. Vk'leita pointed at the creature and almost fired--

---he lowered the burner uncertainly. The creature was no yautja, it was the size of a child-but it wore armor and a wrist blade. The creature moved slowly toward him, hands out.

Ooman!

The Leader raised his weapon again. The sickly, pale, ugly face of it

It stepped closer and tilted its head to one side.

He could have fired. Had the other yautja been there, he might have, that was the proper response to a threat. But this small creature did not seem particularly threatening, even though he knew the stories. And neither did it seem to be afraid. If anything, it carried itself proudly, almost as if it were a warrior. Oomans were supposed to be cowards, sneaky, deadly when cornered, but seldom stand-up face-on fighters. And it made him curious.

"Who are you?" said Vk'leita.

The ooman pointed at itself. "Da'dtou-di."

Vk'leita flared his mandibles. The creature's accent was awful, strange, but he understood. Female? An ooman female? The name was "small knife," feminine form

Going against a lifetime of training, the Leader re-slung his burner and moved closer. This bore investigation. The ooman stood still.

When he was a few paces away, he stopped and eyed the ooman carefully. It wore tresses like yautja, and carried the weapon; its pieced-together armor was part warrior-he recognized the Hard Meat shell-and part unknown.

The ooman motioned at itself again. "Da'dtou-di," it said again. It reached up and touched its face.

The Leader peered closer. It had a mark on its head. It looked like-no, it couldn't be. He took another two steps and bent to stare at the ooman. It did not flinch as he practically stuck his mask in the thing's face.

The mark-

It was Blooded! A Blooded ooman! That couldn't be! It was not possible. But there was the mark, right there! and, and-the mark was-

Dachande's.

What the unholy pack?

Vk'leita growled. "You know Dachande? Where is he?"

Da'dtou-di shook her head and then pointed at him. She touched her own face again, now where mandibles would be if she were yautja. With one of her fingers, she mimed a break.

As if a mandible were broken. Dachande.

"Go on."

The ooman used her hands as teeth and made tearing movements with them. Then motioned "Dachande" again. Thei-de. Dachande was dead.

Da'dtou-di moved closer to him and then cautiously reached up to rest her tiny hand on his shoulder. She greeted him.

Vk'leita tilted his head, fascinated, and returned the gesture. This was unheard of. He was standing here as if he had a brain listening to a packing ooman talk to him in sign language, telling him about the death of a Blooded warrior. She was ooman, but she called herself Da'dtou-di in the warrior's tongue. She bore Dachande's mark, no way around that, no warrior would tell an alien what that mark meant, much less how to apply it, not under any circumstances. And she had come to him to speak of Dachande's death. But something else, too . . .

"Hunt?" Vk'leita asked. "You've come to Hunt with us?" He unsheathed his blade and made jabbing movements in the air.

Da'dtou-di tilted her head and exposed her small teeth. She raised one arm into the air and threw back her head. A long, strange cry came from her, of aggression and eagerness, he guessed.

The Leader listened to the eerie sound and then circled the ooman. She was little, but moved well; she carried the marks of a warrior, and she had known Dachande. He studied her thoughtfully.

This was unprecedented, but there was really only one option. She was Blooded. However it had come to be, there it was. The rules of the Hunt had never been stretched so much, he was sure of that. But what could he do? He was a warrior, he had his code and he had lived his life with it too long to deny it now. He would let her Hunt with them. Perhaps they could exchange languages, and he would learn Dachande's fate. Perhaps she would choose to leave with them, to return to their home and teach them ooman ways, surely that would be a great victory, to have found an ooman warrior?

Well. Perhaps covered much of the galaxy, didn't it? Who could say?

The Leader raised his own arm and howled. After a moment, Da'dtou-di joined him.

There was much that they could teach one another.